

HALFLING

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## Abstract

*Halfling* is a feature length screenplay following Azra, a young girl who embarks on a journey across a dystopian future-land to protect her people and ask for help from the Grim, a people she has been taught are monsters.

The following document is an exploration of *Halfling's* themes, my inspiration for the project and my journey through its development. It will also hopefully shine some light on the decisions I made while writing, and provide some context for both story and characters within *Halfling*.

## Acknowledgements

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## ***Halfling*: Story, Structure, and Meaning**

“The writer who is a writer is a rebel who never stops.”

- William Saroyan

While it's absolute cliché to call a completed project a labour of love, it doesn't make the statement any less true. This truly *was* a labour of love.

Marie Rickard, my faithful supervisor, can attest to the endless pages that found their way to the trash throughout this process. It's been a hell of a learning experience.

As I filled my toolbox and worked my way through the gruelling drafting process, I also learned key lessons about myself as a writer. This has been an expected but welcome addition to completing my MFA. *Halfling* has been a great project to cut my fledgling writer-teeth on, even if I did take the bumpiest, most labyrinthian road possible in doing so.

### **Early Years: The Development Period**

The only thing I was ever sure about during the first year or so of *Halfling*'s development was that I wanted to write about a girl coming of age.

I wrote a précis, but I didn't really know what I wanted to write about. What was the world of this story? What kind of story would it be? I didn't really know. I had some ideas before I came to York, but my love affair with them was over. I was

absolutely stuck. The original précis followed a group of witches through an intensely cliché world which still makes me cringe to think about to this day. In the summer of 2011, Marie suggested that the story-world might be an apocalyptic one. That the witches were outcasts living in the mountains. I did not realise this at the time but these suggestions laid the early groundwork for *Halfling*.

The original story was quite different: Azra had to guide her younger brother to the safety of the outcast Witches when they were banished from their old home. A second revision had her searching for her father. A third had her bringing help to Colm, her surrogate brother. And then finally, the story evolved into Azra searching for help from the Grim, from those who had been deemed both outcasts and monsters.

During this development period Marie suggested I should read various fairy tales to start giving myself a firmer grasp on story structure. I broke down ten different fairy tales into beats, then attempted to write my own story using this newly acquired knowledge. I aimed to step away from my tendency to write long, elaborate sentences. To focus on the bare bones of a story's structure. Unfortunately, the story got away from me and I still ended up writing a long, complicated story that went on for pages and pages. Despite this, I still had a much better idea of how to approach story development.

One of my main worries was finding a way to anchor the audience/reader to the world instead of assuming that they would accept what was going on. It took me some time, but I eventually realized that this anchor was Azra herself. As I outlined

the story, I tried to remind myself that she was the character through which we discover and understand the world. Even with this new understanding, I still found it difficult to make concrete decisions about the actual story. I became engrossed in the finer details of the world rather than the story that might evolve within it. I wrote relentlessly about back-story. So much so, that I became pretty confused. I lost any clear idea regarding what the story was actually about. While it was pretty terrifying not knowing what I was doing, this development work *was* helpful in terms of understanding the minutiae of the world and its meaning to me.

## **Guardians vs. Grim**

Just prior to our thesis presentations in second year, I began thinking about the Grim and Guardians more closely. That they were a group of two opposing people—those who had freedom, and those who were denied it absolutely was a concept that had its clutches in me and helped to form a story around Azra.

The Grim are a group of outsiders on the fringe of society. For this, they are banished and scorned. Blamed for the state of the world. However, while they are outcasts, they are also free to live the way they want to. While they were initially a group who had no ties to Anem, it became clearer to me that the Grim would undoubtedly have a connection to them: that Ivan was responsible for their mutation. That the Grim made a decision to seek their freedom out, even if achieving it meant they would be hunted down by Ivan and the Guardians.

On the other hand, the Guardians are military men and women who are

under Ivan's full control. They have no agency, no free thought, no inner emotional life. Their suppression is achieved through implants Ivan introduced to their bodies to create a disciplined group of soldiers. The Guardians are loosely based on a meeting myself and a group of students had with a veteran during my undergraduate years. He had fought in Iraq and spoke about his mind closing down on him. About how he became his gun, and his gun became him. It was the only way he could survive. I don't think I'll ever forget this conversation.

## **Dystopias**

*Halfling's* world is a post-apocalyptic one, and I drew on my experiences with stories set in dystopian novels and video games as influences. As clues for ways to step into *Halfling*. One of my favourite books, *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, follows the journey of a father and son after a nuclear apocalypse hits the planet. The sparse language and the way the characters explore and travel through this burnt out world were inspiring. As were games like *Dishonoured*, which is set in a fictional fantasy world inspired by and based on late nineteenth century London and Edinburgh. Looking at the way the writer created believable lore in the world helped me develop my own.

During my undergraduate years at UWO, an amazing professor of mine engaged his students in conversations about nuclear war worries, military influences on media driven propaganda, the oppression of women, the affect of war on both everyday people and soldiers, and both dystopian and utopian societies in a

post-apocalyptic world. These four years were extremely formative for me, so it's no wonder I'm so interested in what the future of our world might look like. The world in *Halfling* has a decidedly science-fiction slant in looking at what the future of our own world could look like, but it was still informed by and based on *this* world. And while the world of *Halfling* is decidedly dystopian, I tried to introduce elements of a utopian society in the Haven, the Grim's home. It's easy to assume that a world facing some kind of apocalypse would be a dangerous one without hope. I've tried to suggest that it is our actions that shape the future that it is possible to pull ourselves out of a situation if we work together, no matter how dire it is.

## **Complicated Villains**

I love writing villains who are not strictly evil, ones who believe that their actions are entirely justified and are the heroes of their own stories. I read *Vicious* by V.E. Schwab and was inspired by the way that Victor Vale and Eli Evers (both narrators of the story) explore the nature of good vs. evil. Victor doesn't know if he's the bad guy or if Eli is. He struggles with the decisions he makes: is he doing these things out of a need for vengeance or because Eli is killing anyone different, anyone extraordinary? On the other hand, Eli puts his absolute faith in God. He believes he is on a mission for him, and that the bad things he is doing will be for a greater good. Neither character is absolutely good, but this creates an interesting dialogue between them. It is no accident that Victor employs the help of his friends and succeeds, while in contrast Eli trusts no one and uses the people around him.

In *Halfling*, Ivan is tortured by his loneliness and the mistakes his own creators made. For example, with their ongoing experiments with the human genome. He is also torn by his love for Lady Mariel and his hatred for the way humanity has treated the world. While Dr. Lingard's existence is only referenced and hinted at a few times throughout *Halfling*, I imagine that he instilled a sense of responsibility in Ivan, in his creation and surrogate son. As a result Ivan felt responsible for his father's legacy when Dr. Lingard died. He felt that he was the caretaker of Anem and the rest of the world. When the people fight back, he sees them as ungrateful, as naive children who will never grow up enough to inherit the world and take care of it. And so they must be annihilated and replaced with those who will. Ivan must protect the world and finish his father's work. To him it is the greater good.

While Lady Mariel will finally rescue Anem, she has kept quiet for so long she can be considered an antagonist. She actively tries to make the Miners' lives better by providing them with kitchens and with fresh produce from the greenhouses, but she doesn't really stand up for them. When Ivan provides her with an adopted son, Zachary, (one of the latest in a series of children) she holds her tongue even though she suspects Ivan is planning something. Only when Ivan directly threatens Zachary does Lady Mariel actually do anything tangible to help shape the future in a positive light.

We can't really blame her for acting this way. Lady Mariel is in a difficult position because she has an allegiance to Ivan but is at the same time afraid of him.

Her lack of response in the first section of *Halfing* and prior to the story's beginning makes her a compromised character. That said, I love providing characters with the the possibility of redemption. Ivan is far too egomaniacal for redemption when offered it by Hester and by Lady Mariel: he believes in the new race of cyborgs, and that they will be better for the world than the humans currently living in it. It is his undoing. Lady Mariel, on the other hand, does take steps toward her redemption. She is complicit in Ivan's actions through her silence, and because she ignored previous warnings from Elle, her previous incarnation. On the other hand, Lady Mariel contacts Elle and helps to rescue Azra and Rin, which makes her partly responsible for the safe rescue of Anem's Miners. However, this doesn't make her a hero. I wanted Lady Mariel to be only partly heroic because of my desire to explore a complicated villain.

## **Influences/Inspiration**

There were also specific influences that helped me pull my development work into the barest bones of a story: about a girl traversing this post-apocalyptic world and about the struggle to overcome a genius scientist's skewed view of the future and his plans for genocide.

1. Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro's *Delicatessen* (1991) helped me construct an alternate reality based on our own world. *Delicatessen* is set in post-apocalyptic France and is largely a character driven film that takes place in a

tenancy building. While *Halfling* isn't really a character driven film, I was inspired by the way *Delicatessen* introduced a host of interesting, diverse characters and how the narrative convinced us to believe in this world. It was definitely a good launching point.

2. As per Marie's request, I broke down the structures of ten fairy tales. These were mostly Grimm tales, but I also looked at some of Angela Carter's phenomenal *The Bloody Chamber*, which is a collection of re-imagined fairy tales. Though my screenplay does not follow fairy tale structure, these stories have shown me how fantasy worlds and simple narratives go hand in hand.
3. I also read Madonna Kolbenschlag's *Kiss Sleeping Beauty Good-Bye* on Marie's suggestion, which explores fairy-tales and their meaning on a philosophical level. It was helpful! For example, due to the *Goldilocks and Search for the Perfect Family* chapter, I started to think about Lady Mariel and Ivan's relationship with one another. Kolbenschlag writes:

“The kind of relationship they [men] require is, so often, not one of mutuality but a one-sided, disproportionate need for ego reinforcement.” (Kolbenschlag 120)

This quote made me think about Ivan's position in the community, and what his motivation might be for keeping Lady Mariel around as his mouthpiece. Kolbenschlag's book informed my creation of Ivan more than I could have

guessed at the time. Ivan's desire to have a submissive, supportive partner stems from his need to have his ego reinforced.

Kolbenschlag's further discussion about the evolution of female relationships cemented my desire to do something different with *Halfling*. I didn't want to fall into the same fantasy genre tropes about a boy and his journey with a group of allies. Kolbenschlag writes:

“Like the mythic figure of Eurydice, we will be tempted by nostalgic and pleading voices to turn back to the security of the old roles, but to succumb is to immobilize not only one's own soul, but society itself.”

(Kolbenschlag 121)

While the second edition of this book was published in 1988, it doesn't make this sentiment any weaker. If anything, with all that has gone on in the last thirty years, this sentence is even more valuable now. The war on women is still very strong. In America, for example, many organizations still fight for proper health care, equal pay and safety from men who think they have the right to a woman's body, future and life choices. Azra, Lady Mariel, Elle and Hester are strong, capable female characters. Some are physically strong, or rely on their wits, or on their emotional strength and their desire to do things right. I strongly believe that the stories we tell one another reflect the way we view women, and the way that women view themselves, and, while the sentiment might be a little naive, I will continue to tell stories about diverse, multifaceted women for this reason.

4. While I don't pretend to understand the science, my general interest into the positive and negative results of genetic experimentation in our own world led to interesting speculation regarding where things could go wrong in our future. I decided to play with that as a basis for my world. While many of the first few drafts of the thesis project had Ivan actively working as a crazed geneticist, and much of this is no longer specifically present in *Halfling*, this background informs Ivan's character arc from brilliant geneticist to troubled mass murderer.

There are also numerous mutated animals throughout *Halfling*'s world that are a consequence of nuclear fallout. I did this to bring the world more fully to life.

5. The mixture of my love for both sci-fi and fantasy stories (particularly coming of age stories) was also a powerful influence on *Halfling*. These genres and narratives are ones that I generally read the most. A lot of Young Adult (YA) literature is unabashedly adventurous with both their world-building and characters. I've taken a few cues from these stories, and it also helped to watch an adaptation of *The Hunger Games* (2012) to see how they established a new world and characters without taking a long time to do it, and to establish context and back story without the use of overt exposition. These stories also gave me ideas for how to bury themes below visual storytelling

and how to focus on a character's journey rather than clobbering readers over the head with messages.

6. Books on writing were a great help! Actually learning my craft (believe it or not) has helped me to keep moving forward with the thesis project no matter what. The most helpful among these books were Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird* and James Scott Bell's *The Art of War for Writers*. I really needed them during the thesis project as I tended to get in my own way, and it helped to take a step back and reflect with these books from time to time.

Lamott is a very wise woman. I read her book several times over the past few years during this project. One of the most helpful passages is the one she wrote on intuition, which Lamott very humorously refers to as “broccoli”. She writes, “if you're lost in the forest, let the horse find the way home. *You* have to stop directing, because you will only get in the way.” (Lamott 114) And when she's right, she's right. This statement resonated with me at various points in this journey, but I don't think I really understood this message until draft six. I fought with my intuition; I wrestled with it and forced it to sit in the corner until I'd beaten a working draft together. It turned *Halfling* into an inorganic, weirdly shaped thing. Lesson learned: listening to your intuition is a fantastic tool if you know how to use it, and I will be wielding this skill in future projects.

Another little nugget which got me through the seemingly endless drafts came from the same chapter. She wrote, “Don't look at your feet to see if you

are doing it right. Just dance.” (Lamott 112) Essentially she means just write. To not think about what you've written until you reach the end of the first draft. When you reach the end of the draft, *then* you can look back to see if you've done it right. Whatever *right* actually means. I used to have major control issues with my writing (who *doesn't?*) and reading *Bird by Bird* helped provide me with perspective. The book reminded me to step back and look at the project, and not at myself.

## Themes

Themes were a little bit of an obsession for me during the earliest development stages. When I was asked by my committee why I might want to write this piece, the themes definitely took over. Part of this was because I was so indecisive about my narrative.

As a result, my original precis turned out to be a mess of ideas that I might want to go back to in the future, as were the treatments, outlines and character journey breakdowns that followed. I suppose I was confused about the nature of a creative piece of work at the academic level. I kept thinking: shouldn't the thesis project say something? Should it tackle real world issues? Of course, looking back *now* I know the answer: not at the expense of the story. Messages and themes have to develop organically. A word of advice for any writer reading this: try not to have a specific message in mind before you write because it will lead you down a very long, messy path.

Once I gave the story room to breathe, there were a few themes that revealed themselves to me.

### The Past & Memory

Lady Mariel knows about her past incarnations, the other “sisters” Ivan created before he replaced them with improved Lady Mariels. She has to keep this a secret from Ivan to protect herself, however. If Ivan was aware of her knowledge, it would put her in danger. He wants a submissive, supportive partner. While Ivan

can try to reboot and rewind Lady Mariel's memory, he cannot escape his own memories. Ivan is terrified by the remembrance of the past Mariels—of the ones he created and then discarded once they refused to be who he wanted. Replacing them with newer, more improved models gives him greater control. Of, at least, the appearance of control. It helps him to pretend the past Lady Mariels never existed.

His actions have consequences, and Lady Mariel learns from her sister's pasts. When Ivan tries to wipe her memories he doesn't realize that Lady Mariel has already seen this coming, and prepared for it. In this moment, Lady Mariel partly redeems both herself and her sisters and uses her past as a learning tool. I also wanted Lady Mariel's memories to be what brings her back to herself in the final act. Since memories and experiences help to create a person, a cyborg should react no differently.

Ivan's development was a fairly clinical affair. Dr. Lingard created him to be an instrument rather than a human being, despite the fact that he was programmed to evolve on a sentient level. While Dr. Lingard functioned as a surrogate father to him, he didn't show Ivan much care in his early years. As a result Ivan craves affection and love, wants his makers to approve of him, and cannot understand why those around him do not admire him. He is a man who turns cold and aggressive toward those who willfully push him away. As much as Ivan deserves his ending, I do feel for him. I wanted to introduce some elements of tragedy in this story and have the reader feel something for Ivan when he dies.

Tomin, the mercenary Grim, has been working for Ivan for a good decade now

and has done things he doesn't agree with because Ivan has promised to cure him. While he's been misled and manipulated by Ivan, he is still responsible for his decisions. In the end he does desire redemption, and this is why he rescues Azra.

Objects from our own contemporary society, such as the starchart book, the farmhouse, and the junkyards, are meant as contextual elements to place us clearly in this dystopian future, one that takes its cues from our own. They also serve to remind both the characters and readers that there might come a time when the things we take for granted no longer exist, and perhaps as a result of our own actions. While clearly not meant to be an overt argument in this thesis project, there are instances where my worries creep in about a future ecological disaster as a result of global warming, overuse of Earth's precious resources, or even as a result of nuclear warfare. I suppose this is my own warning that we could destroy ourselves. It's far from the first or last time I'll wonder what the future of this planet could look like. One of my first aims with *Halfling* was to position the story as a message for us all: we have to fight for our planet. We should unify. We should challenge our preconceptions, our societies and our own apathy. Just as Azra is awakened to her true surroundings and begins to fight for her people, so must we.

I tend to have an obsession with people's personal histories and this has led to my curiosity about how we are formed by past events and how they transform us for better or worse. Ivan, Tomin and Lady Mariel embody just a few ways in which we might react to our memories and pasts in both good and bad ways.

## Nuclear Warfare/Genetic Mutation

As I've already mentioned, my interest in possible futures for the world tends to crop up in a lot of my creative work. The aftermath of nuclear warfare or widespread disease has fascinated me for years.

Conducting research into genetic mutation for the Grim was a little upsetting in places. It was necessary for me to understand some of the biology behind it, while not being a scientist myself. The same goes for nuclear winter. I read a number of articles detailing the kinds of climate and landscape changes that might occur, and what the results of radiation poisoning might be. It gave me a better idea of how long it might take for ground and air radiation to fall back to acceptable, survivable levels. None of this research has specifically made it into *Halfling* itself, but it did help me get some idea of what the world might have been through before Anem existed, and how the Grim might have evolved when they fled to the woods.

Despite everything that changed in this project, the concept of mutation was always present. What I learned was how to focus on mutation strategically as I developed the narrative.

I found it much easier to bring the Grim to life than the Guardians, who were pretty much cardboard cut-outs before Marie suggested that the Guardians might have been genetically modified to become superhuman soldiers. It served to add another layer to the ongoing battle between Grim and Guardian. Both are mutated, just in different ways. Incorporating the mutation of animals also transformed the outside world for me. It made it real to me, rather than this wishy-washy world I'd

not yet really defined. And while being specific with my language and choices is something that still has me running scared, I am learning that it is far easier to world-build when you actually *do* summon the courage to make these decisions.

## **Family**

Family is an important theme in *Halfling*. One of the most important examples are Azra's relationships with Jacob and Colm. Colm is like an older brother to Azra. She has relied on him for protection and advice since her mother died. They look out for one another. Colm looks after all of the other kids in the Orphanage and leads them on food stealing operations in the greenhouses. Azra, in turn, helps out by reading stories to the children before they go to bed. This family unit works to keep the children as safe and happy as they can be in the mines of Anem. This sense of loyalty Azra learns in these relationships with Colm and the other children. It both helps and hinders her as she travels to the Haven. Tomin betrays her trust, but there are others like Elle and Rin who more than earn her trust and deserve her loyalty.

Azra is quite close to Jacob, but he's more of a mentor figure than her friend. She goes to him early on in the script with an injured Miner, Rufus. She and the others in Anem Below know they can trust Jacob to keep quiet about this arrangement. While neither the reader nor Azra know that Jacob is her father until Act Three, there is still enough of a connection between them to establish him as a father figure or mentor. He teaches Azra about the outside world: to read a few

simple words, about the stars, trees, rain and animals. They share an insatiable curiosity about the outside.

Colm, on the other hand, is terrified by the thought of being outside, although he would never let Azra know. He wants to protect her, but it is his reliance on “old” ways and Guardian propaganda that is his undoing. He reveals their hiding place when he argues with Tomin and loses his life to the Black Rats. By this point Azra has lost both her brother and father figures. She is now alone in the world.

When she sees the mother and child working together at the Haven, Azra is suddenly reminded that she has no real family. Indeed, there are very few familial units in Anem Below as most of the children have been orphaned due to accidents in the mines. Azra hasn't been confronted with a desire for a “normal” family before this point, because she has lost Colm and Jacob, her surrogate brother and father. She doesn't think she'll ever see home again, let alone Jacob, and she doesn't want to even think what the Black Rats might be doing to Colm. When she later discovers that Jacob is her real father, she can't handle knowing she had the opportunity for a real family but is now denied it. A final way I explored this theme was the way that Ivan and Lady Mariel were in conflict over Zachary. The child provides them with an intense, emotional bond. It complicates Lady Mariel and Ivan's relationship. She can't step too far from Ivan's control because she wants to protect her son, and Ivan doesn't want to scare Lady Mariel because he wants her to become his lover. This was his plan from the beginning. That they refer to one another as brother and sister was Lady Mariel's idea to try warning Ivan away from expecting anything

more from her. It was something Ivan went along with so he would have some kind of connection with her. They are fairly content with the arrangement they have. However, once the pressure starts to build on Ivan, he becomes less grateful and more frustrated with her, leading him to try and wipe her memories to start anew with her once more.

## The Process

It was quite frustrating pulling the various strands of my thesis together into a cohesive whole. One of my major issues was doubt. Doubt about my characters and my plans for them, doubts about the narrative, doubts about my abilities to build a believable world. *Doubt, doubt, doubt*. It's often considered a writer's worst enemy, but on the bright side it at least makes us work harder. Makes us push harder to succeed.

While developing *Halfling* was a difficult birthing period, I realize that writing its multiple proposals and treatments helped me narrow the story down each time.

In fact, it wasn't until I really let go of my fear of failing that I wrote anything that truly resonated with me. I was frustrated with myself and the work. One thing that really helped me during this moment of difficult conception was to step away from the thesis for a few months and work on other projects. This gave me some perspective. Time away let the thesis breathe. During this time, I was also part of a writing group that met once a week to share and edit each other's screenplays. As a result, I wrote two features which gave me more confidence in my writing.

When I returned to my thesis, it was clear that there were still major problems with the narrative. In part this was because I hadn't really decided which genre I was writing in. Was it a fantasy? Science-fiction? Although there may be other stories out there that skilfully mix elements from the two genres together,

this story was definitely not one of them. Pulling out some of the fantasy elements and grounding the story into a more realistic world helped me pull *Halfling* together. For one thing, I altered my original idea that machines were in charge of everything in Anem. My new idea was a few cyborgs were controlling the Miners without their realising it. Things were now coming together, but there was still a long way to go.

## Teething Pains

Before I came to York, I had not finished a single feature screenplay and I really didn't know what I was doing. I'd written a few short films and edited scripts on set with actors, but I'd never written a screenplay as a literary form, a complete work. And while I'm still learning a great deal about the screenplay form, I can't really believe how far I've come as a writer since my first year.

While the next pages explore the general journey I took as a writer developing *Halfling*, I will touch more explicitly on character development in the following section.

### First Year

My first year was a fairly difficult one. Trying to retrain the brain to think in a different way about the approach to story structure was tough. Eventually I started to understand what writing a screenplay required, but the way I wrote was another matter. My sentences tend to be long and wordy (as you can probably see) and I was far more comfortable writing prose and poetry. I can't count the number of times Marie asked me to focus on my visuals, to write in a clear but evocative way. I'm definitely not there yet, but the more screenplays I write, the clearer things become! I have come a long way since first year.

I think now that part of the reason why I wrote complicated sentences was because of my inability to put diverse ideas together. How could I write clearly when I didn't really know *what* I was writing about, if I didn't really know what I

was trying to say?

After presenting my thesis ideas to the department in the graduate seminar second year a few people suggested I refocus my idea. Mike Zryd pointed out I probably had enough material and scope to write a TV pilot but that it probably wasn't suited to a feature in its present form. These were really good things to hear. For example, there were still many strands of story that were totally unrelated to Azra. In hindsight this was pretty foolish, but it was a lesson I needed to learn as a fledgling screenwriter.

Anem itself was part of the simplification process. I had originally conceived of Anem as a copy of a city Ivan had already tried and failed to run. But then I concluded that it didn't make much sense for Ivan to have moved to another place just because he failed to create a functioning city. He would have utilized the resources already there, rebuilt from the ashes of the old city rather than move to another place.

Further, Anem was originally made up of three districts located at a great distance from one another in a large province, but this was still too unnecessarily complex. I was trying to play with too many characters and settings in one feature. If I'd been writing a novel, this would have been acceptable, but this was a screenplay, a form that needed to be written with a view to audiences seeing it in one sitting! Transforming Anem from the three districts into a single city inside a mountain was a giant step forward in my visual development of the world and in simplifying the narrative. I confess it initially felt like a step back. Making elements

of the screenplay simpler often felt like a step back to me, but this was just another lesson I had to learn. Making something more complex and convoluted doesn't necessarily make it better!

In earlier drafts I'd used a narrator to introduce and establish Anem to readers. My idea was to jump into the story straight after this passage, but the affect was that it stalled us from getting to Azra's story. On rewriting the beginning, I saw that it was far more effective to establish Azra first and then to slowly build up the world around her. It forced me to work more simply. To make actual decisions about my world. Another lesson learned: introduce your world through *character*, not through endless exposition!

## **Second Year**

In my second year, I took a hard look at the story with Marie and pulled everything out that wasn't working or didn't feel right. I had to start being honest with myself about the narrative as a whole and stop clinging to certain scenes or sequences because I liked them. I broke out a new pack of index cards and a sharpie and I went back to bare bones. I focused on Azra's story and ignored any subplots. Once I did this, I realised there were indeed scenes and characters holding me back. For example, staying in Anem for so long meant there was less room for Azra's journey. I needed to get out of there faster! It was a scary but exciting moment when I realised this. I wrote a new draft focusing on Azra's story, then returned to outline again focusing on Ivan and Mariel's arc. I wrote another draft, and another,

and another. And after each draft the world and the characters became clearer to me. I began to see what was holding me back, and what I could change to push an emotional moment even harder or to twist a character's arc so that moments I'd set up actually paid off.

## **Lucky Number 8**

By draft 8 I'd constructed a pretty convincing world. It seemed to be the lucky draft where story elements started to click into place. The addition of the farmhouse sequence, for example, was only a small moment, but it gave both the reader and Azra some context for the world they were currently journeying through, a reminder that there had been something before all of *this*. The past is something that most of these characters are either escaping from and or are fascinated with. The moment when Azra sees the photograph of the girl on the swing is probably one of my favourite small moments in the script. In that moment Azra sees an example of a girl she might have been if she'd a family and a home of her own. If the world had been different. It's a fascinating dramatic juxtaposition to me to see Azra in a moment of danger while the girl in the photograph is so carefree.

By this draft, Anem itself was much more fleshed out. I'd given some of the Miners actual personalities and goals. I fell in love with the Giant Miner who tells Azra stories about dragons to spark Azra's imagination, and with Rufus who stands up for his fellow Miner only to be punished for it. When Rufus has an opportunity to help Hester and the Grim fight the Guardians it's a moment of victory for him. A

pay-off for something I'd set up in the opening pages. It felt as if these were real individuals to me now rather than just a mass of people on the page. I also rewrote other groups throughout *Halfling* to bring them and the world to life, but the Miners were my main focus.

The other thing I now focused on was making it clearer where places were located geographically. It sounds simple but I had not considered making my world more palpable. For example, having the Junkyards located directly above the sewers (where the Black Rats lived) led to the Junkboys sending Azra into the sewers on a task for them. Learning how to connect sequences that were previously twenty pages apart and to be more visually precise helped to push things forward, to keep the stakes high, to keep the pace moving. And to avoid the dreaded endless banter between characters, or what Marie refers to as “tea & scones”!

Creating a specific living level in Anem Below where the Miners lived, slept and ate also helped to humanise them in ways I hadn't previously been able to accomplish. It also gave me a clearer idea of the physicality of the mines by having them on a completely separate level from the Miners' homes.

I also began to understand the basic rules of cause and effect. Sometimes there were things I'd set up in the script but hadn't bothered to pay off and vice-versa. I looked at these things, made a list, and then approached the next draft looking at the bare bones of the script. It helped me to see elements in characters I had started developing, but had not yet explored.

One example of this was in the opening pages where Rufus is attacked by the

Guardians because he stands up for the female Miner. While other drafts ignored any kind of pay off to this moment, I now used it to explain Jacob's closeness with the Miners and his relationship with Azra, and to provide Azra with a moment of agency, to show her care for others and a bit of her recklessness. It made much more sense having Jacob supply first aid to those who were attacked by Guardians in secret, rather than having him as a main Doctor for the Miners (one of my original aims for his character). This tells the viewer that he is on the side of the Miners and can be trusted. It also introduced a closer connection between Jacob and Azra: seeing her in his space and having them share the secret of helping Rufus when they have their first scene together shows their closeness and helps us to understand why she's so dedicated to making it to the Haven.

A final, but major part of the work I carried out in draft eight was making sure the script story was credible. I made sure events unfolded in an organic way and that characters reacted or said things that made sense for their character, the setting and the situation. Much of the latter part of these revisions were wrapped up in touching on cause and effect, on set ups and pay offs, but there were a few moments in the script that forced me to look more closely at character. For example, Jacob sends Azra out into the dangerous Wild Woods on a journey that could possibly end up with her dead. He doesn't know she is his daughter until the reveal in Act Two, and part of this reveal is wrapped up in an emotional blow for both Azra and Jacob. Even though Jacob doesn't know she's his daughter, they are still close enough that I needed to look at why Jacob felt she was a good fit for the job, why he

felt confident enough to send her out into danger. The solutions were surprisingly simple: I focused on Azra's small size and the escape tunnels being tiny, the fact that Jacob trusts her more than anyone, and that Azra looks up to him and wants to prove herself to him. This was accomplished with a couple of well placed lines. And by sending Colm with her as the trustworthy, strong and protective older boy also helped justify this story point considerably.

## **Dialogue Woes**

I had major problems with dialogue throughout the writing of *Halfling*. At first I thought that dialogue had to reflect exactly what was going on in the scene and set up the next goals for the characters.. What their next tasks were. It was all exposition! I wasn't a complete idiot, but I was overly worried about readers not knowing what and why things were happening. Bad move. Part of this related to a lack of confidence in my own work, and part of this was simply because I didn't really know what I was doing yet. I had to rethink the way I wrote dialogue. To write story moments in a visual way. Though I had acquired a few dialogue skills because of Marie's Story Editing class, I learned that there was still so much I didn't know about writing effective dialogue. I think this is going to be something I will need to continue intensely focusing on throughout my future career.

Marie kept urging me to edit my dialogue down to focus on the visual aspects of my story and to avoid my usual “tea and scones” moments. While this made sense in terms of reducing the amount of banter between characters it was difficult for me

to let go of the dialogue I'd already written. It was like a security blanket. I resisted. A lot. Marie suggested that as a first step I should look at one very small scene: the one where a giant bird swoops at the children. There were 5-7 lines of dialogue in the original scene. She asked that I revise the scene into a visually focused one, and by doing so I managed to cut all those dialogue lines down to a single one. And the scene worked! It was a pivotal moment for me. Now that I knew I could do it, I attacked my next set of revisions with newly found confidence.

### **The Last Three Drafts**

The last three drafts were mostly concerned with fine-tuning language, transitions between scenes and more fully developing Ivan and Lady Mariel's arcs.

By Summer 2014, Azra's journey was really working. Now it was time to make sure both Lady Mariel and Ivan's arcs worked. I went back to the top of the script and planted references to Lady Mariel and Ivan's pasts. That Ivan had a creator and father, Dr. Lingard, that the scientists in Anem were altruistic, that Lady Mariel worked with the people in Anem Above to grow food and other plants in the greenhouses, and that Lady Mariel had had previous children who died from *mysterious* illnesses. By placing these hints or having scenes perform two or more tasks, I was able to bring life to these previously flat characters and their arcs while avoiding making the script the length of a novel. For example, when Ivan visits Lady Mariel at the greenhouses on page 40, we see her ending a class with the children from Anem's school. He hands her the foxglove seed and hints at both

Anem's past and his own worries for the future. By the end of the scene, Lady Mariel is surprised that Ivan has returned to his reliance on synthetic, genetically modified plants and we learn about Jacob's influence on both of their lives. Ivan is annoyed and upset that Lady Mariel isn't excited by his surprise for her. While he craves her affection, his disgust for Jacob's impact on her destroys what might have been a sweet moment between these two characters.

I found that as I wrote about Lady Mariel's investigation into Ivan's involvement with her children's deaths, I was beginning to reveal Ivan's coldness and brutality to others in Anem. I tried to link it to Lady Mariel's slow withdrawal from her brother. Now when he finally becomes violent, it's more believable. We learn that this quiet and calculating scientist has been suppressing anger and hate for so long that now he has no choice but to react when everything around him begins to fall apart.

Endings are probably one of the hardest things for a writer to accomplish, especially for someone as indecisive as me! One of *Halfling's* endings had a group of Grim and Miners gathered together in front of the Shrine Tree heralding in their newly formed agreement. It felt a bit trite, and not really true to my voice or the tone of the script. Once again, I needed to pull back to Azra. What would she want to do for the people in Haven to thank them? It had to be something I'd already set up, and it had to be organic and in character. One late night I was lying in bed trying to sleep and suddenly the idea for a scene appeared to me: she would be helping the other children. She would be teaching them! Her arc now becomes one

from naive child, eager to learn and to help, who told stories to the children in the Orphanage, to a girl who was more savvy and aware of the world around her who would want to share her knowledge. She and Rin would work together to teach the Grim children about the stars, about the constellations. I imagine that in this world's future, this class might inspire one or two of the children to look to the skies and imagine "*what if?*" one day, and in turn inspire a whole host of ideas and technologies in the race to the stars. Does this suggest that one day all of this might happen again, that the world is a cyclical space where the same advancements and mistakes might occur over and over again? Perhaps, but more than this, I believe that the lessons Azra and the others learn and share might serve as a warning to those who might try to follow a similar path to Ivan's.

## Characters

*Halfling* suffered from having far too many characters throughout the early development stages and for the first few drafts. Some characters I cut early on because they were useless to the story, and others I altered to suit the story a little better. Sometimes, it was hard to let go of some of these characters because I'd put so much work into bringing them to life, but it was particularly freeing once I cut them away. Some characters even ended up serving two purposes, having a single character take the place of two. It's actually quite astonishing to look back at the first drafts and see the drastic differences between them and the final project draft.

### Azra

I'd first aimed to have two POVs in this feature: one from Azra's perspective and one from Colm's. *Halfling* would have followed Azra's journey to rescue Colm, while we watched Colm struggle back in Anem trying his best to escape Lady Mariel's clutches. But it was confusing having two POVs. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but I think this attempt only served to muddy the waters for me. Who was my protagonist? Whose story was this? It *was* Azra's all along, but I lacked the courage to see this until much later.

Earlier on, Azra was meant to rescue Colm from Mariel's clutches, but the story suffered from "The Chosen One" trope. Azra had been written as a saviour in this story line, but she wasn't. She couldn't be! She was a child, and she needed to be treated more like one. She needed to be less in control. She needed to flounder,

make mistakes, and try to fight her way through the story, but not turn into a fantasy cliché warrior. Keeping this distinction in mind helped to give her character emotional grounding. When the inciting incident sends her and Colm fleeing for their lives toward the Haven, Azra is absolutely out of her depth. Colm takes charge from the moment they step outside Anem. Azra looks to him for guidance at first, but when he begins to make mistakes or pretends he knows what he's doing she summons the courage to start questioning his lead. For example, when Colm leads them out of the Woods because he thinks he knows a better way to the Haven, he ends up turning them around and taking them straight into danger. It's the first time Azra's seen him flounder. From then on, she puts more reliance on Tomin, who does know how to traverse the world around them.

When I first started writing Azra's character, Marie pointed out that I had created a gun slinging, adept warrior, and that I was writing myself into a corner. This was a young inexperienced girl! I needed to realize that Azra had been sheltered in the mines for her entire life and it would make no sense to have her become a warrior so quickly, even under the careful tutelage of Tomin. I raised Azra's character, actions, and dialogue so that they would be more believable for a teenage girl. And when that still didn't work, I made Azra even younger. And I discovered that it was easier to introduce this world through a younger, more malleable character. She could now be a child with curious, wondering eyes. Writing her character was even easier when I removed Colm from the story earlier, because it gave Azra more of an opportunity to grow from a naive child to someone brave

enough to make difficult choices and put herself in danger for her people.

I had to learn to listen to my inner voice. Listening to Azra was a huge turning point for me as a writer. I'd avoided her, as I often do with my main characters, because I was afraid of making the wrong decisions and have the characters lack credibility. Looking back, I'm surprised how often I avoided making decisions. I hope it's something I won't do in the future.

## Colm

In an earlier version of *Halfling*, Colm was to become the new Elder of the society. In this role he would have been responsible for taking care of the people, and it was awarded to him on account of his ability to problem solve and diplomatically take charge of the situation around him. However, this also made him too perfect with no potential for conflict, and his arc took up a lot of space in the script.

Colm also had far too many issues with Tomin throughout most of the later drafts. These characters engaged in unnecessary banter because they disagreed about everything (more tea & scones). It slowed the draft right down. I didn't want to get rid of Colm, but I knew he was holding Azra's story back. He was taking over while she needed to grow. This particular revision was especially scary as almost every draft had revolved around Azra and Colm going through the entire story together. It also meant a complete reoutline, which was pretty terrifying but absolutely necessary. The lesson I've learned here is to follow your fear: if it scares

you, you're probably doing the right thing. *Probably*.

The best option I had was to kill Colm off. This genius little twist was suggested by Marie, and my brain latched hold of the idea and wouldn't let go. It meant completely restructuring Acts Two and Three. Although it was a lot of work, it was well worth it. Colm's death forced Azra to grow up quickly. It gave her an emotional drive. She'd seen her best friend die in this struggle, and she wouldn't let his death be in vain. She had to try and help the Miners back at Anem if she could. Killing a main character off is not a particularly traditional thing to do in these kind of stories. Usually if a main character dies it happens somewhere near the climax to give the hero that last boost of strength. To push the hero to make the hard decisions. Killing him early on meant Azra had to take charge of her life so she wouldn't always rely on Colm. I also wanted Colm's death to be a kind of warning to her: that this world is *dangerous*, and that she cannot expect to rely solely on other people to make it through.

The next problem was deciding where exactly to kill him. Marie suggested using his death as a surprise—as an unexpected emotional punch. Originally he died just after they came across Tomin, just before the 40 page mark. This was partly to avoid the endless and tiresome struggle between Colm and Tomin. It worked, but the pacing of the script suffered because of Azra's grieving period. To pick the pace of the story up, I needed to give Azra little to no time to respond to Colm's death so I moved this moment to the Black Rat sequence. Now the story worked organically. Not only did Azra have to push forward and keep moving

through the sequence, much as Frodo does when he loses Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring*, she has to follow Tomin quickly out of the sewers into the safety of the outside world. Only then can she begin to process her friend's death. Keeping the danger high pushes her to the relative safety of the Junkyards. As a reader, I might have expected Colm to die midway through Act Two or even in Act Three, but I didn't want to follow this trope. I wanted his death to be a surprise—a shock—so that the reader felt the same way as Azra. So that both she and the audience felt all at sea.

Marie suggested that Colm's death should not just be a payoff, but a turning point in Azra's journey. Her suggestion sparked a slight change in the children's relationship. I made Colm a little older than Azra, putting him on the cusp of adulthood, which turned him into her older surrogate brother. His reliance on Guardian propaganda leads him to believe that the Grim are truly monstrous and the Guardians are only protecting them, and the way the children in Anem follow his lead transformed him into an arrogant boy. This causes some necessary friction between the characters, especially when Tomin proves he knows the outside world better than Colm. It becomes a learning lesson for Azra: that she should trust in her own intuition and that she shouldn't rely on the propaganda of the Guardians to understand this world. Colm's death signals the end of Azra's reliance on him, and the death of Anem and its misinformation.

Now that I'd sorted the problem of Colm's death, I needed to provide Azra with space to grow and allies to help her to the Haven. Which is where Tomin and

Rin came in.

## **Rin & The Junkboys**

Rin was a pretty late addition in *Halfling's* development. He didn't turn up well until the eighth draft but he fit right into the world. Writing his character taught me more about stepping away from a reliance on dialogue. As the Junkboys were also Grim, I wanted this Junkboy ally to be mute due to a birth defect. This would not only push me as a writer, but would make it a challenge for Azra to communicate with him. She suffers from lack of confidence in herself, so having someone like Rin who isn't stronger or better, but is an equal, gives Azra someone to share this journey with. Someone she *can* rely on. Rin's muteness also makes him an outsider in his own group of people. That both Rin and Azra are outsiders in different ways brings them together, and hopefully endears them both to the reader.

## **Tomin**

While my aim for Tomin's character may have flip-flopped a little, I always intended for him to be working for Ivan in some way. I just didn't know *how* to have him do this, or how and when to reveal his betrayal. In an earlier draft he redeems himself so that he can return to the Grim, but it felt cliché. In the final draft he earns a bit of redemption before his death by saving Azra, but I didn't want to provide him with an absolute salvation. I hope it's telling that Tomin doesn't say a thing when Ivan reveals his betrayal to Azra. He is now deeply ashamed of his work

for Ivan. Although we don't see it in this script, I imagine he's done a great deal he isn't proud of in exchange for this make believe cure-all for his mutation. In an earlier draft, he was actually an ally of Azra's for the entire script but there was no conflict. It just didn't fit organically, and the more I tried to twist his character and the narrative to make it fit, the less believable and more cliché his arc became. He had no real purpose other than to make Azra feel safer. His betrayal keeps the chase between the trio and the Guardians fast paced and ongoing, and when he is left behind, Azra is reminded that not everyone in this world is entirely trustworthy. She is reminded that her path is a struggle, a fight to make the right decisions, or even to know which decisions *are* the right ones.

## **The Grim**

The Grim were not physically present in the original story until Act Three, due in part because of the sheer number of sequences I had written in Acts One and Two. But this posed a problem: how do I keep the tension high when we don't see the Grim until pg 90? When I decided to kill Colm off and began restructuring the script, I aimed to include moments with them throughout the story. These moments had to be fraught with danger so that Azra always seemed just on the cusp of completing her goal.

By including moments with the Grim at various points throughout the script, it is far easier to understand them as a people and to accept them in this world. On of our first moments with them are as fighters. They are clearly soldiers who know

the land well, use it to their advantage, and can actually hold their own against the Guardians. And when Azra arrives at the Haven we see a different side of them in a nurturing space they have created for themselves. We see that they are spiritually aware, democratically organized and hard-working people.

I went back to the drawing board while developing the eighth draft and reworked the Grim into quasi-bohemians. They lived in huts and off the land. They had a shrine to remember the dead that had been lost to Ivan and the Guardians. They talked together about things and respected democratic decisions. If some of the Grim wanted to make their own choices, much as Hester does when she pledges help to Anem, there are no major consequences as long as the Haven and its people are still protected from harm. It made sense to me that they were a democratic people, that there was a central council who voted on decisions based on people's concerns, and that there was someone who was generally in charge but also listened to her people. They had to be the antithesis of Ivan's approach to Anem. They had to present a different way of living in this dystopian world, and had to suggest another solution to the problems of Anem and in opposition to Ivan.

On a more general level, the Grim are representative of both Ivan and his team's impact on the world, and of humanity's impact on the world. They are disfigured, grotesque, strange to look at but they are also survivors. They have made their way in the world without the guiding hand of the Guardians or Ivan, without the military or fanatical scientists. Escaping Anem when their people first began showing signs of mutation, and setting up their own camp and their own

culture makes them strong and gives them someone to rally against. And while the Grim are first introduced as monsters, they end the script as heroes, and as an example of a way forward. They are not a perfect people; I didn't want them to be preachy or overly good. Tomin and some of the other Grim aren't *good* people. They're just people: they make mistakes, or they only think of themselves. Uniting the hardworking, steadfast Miners and the Grim together in the end is the best possible outcome for the people, but that's not to say that there won't be any trouble ahead for them. I wanted to suggest that surviving is a struggle, though a worthwhile one.

### **Lady Mariel, Ivan and Cesse**

In my first few outlines Lady Mariel was my original antagonist. I thought that she might have been poisoning the people to try and sway them to support her, and then I realized that she was misguided and controlled by her aides, Cesse and Ivan, but this still felt too clinical. There was no emotional connection, no true conflict between the characters on the page. It took a long time for me to figure out that having one of these aides as her sole controller, and maybe even her creator and tormented brother, would be more of an emotional hook for readers. Giving Ivan an actual narrative arc helped me to understand his character a little more. I gave him goals, and a pretty solid back story and once I'd wrestled with him a bit and established him as the one truly in charge of Anem, this turned Lady Mariel into a figurehead. A mouthpiece for Ivan to use for his own needs.

One of Lady Mariel's original aides, Cesse, was a cyborg who assisted Ivan. He was a little like Ivan's surrogate child, but his presence in the new narrative didn't make much sense. His presence provided Ivan with an existing child, with a project, which would have turned his other cybernetic children into an unnecessary complication. Cesse, while interesting to me from a writer's perspective, was cut out of the story to make the narrative and Ivan's arc simpler. If I'd been writing this project as a novel, he might have been an additional character to explore. He might have been someone to challenge Ivan's preconceptions, but it made more sense for Lady Mariel to do the fighting back. She is, after all, Ivan's representative, his mouthpiece. To have her turn against Ivan and use the power he provided her with is a true betrayal and is evidence of Lady Mariel's conviction to protect the Miners as best she can.

Ridding the story of Cesse also made for some interesting interplay between Ivan and Lady Mariel. While I am proud of the work I have done on *Halfling* as a whole, I am most proud of Ivan and Lady Mariel's relationship and arcs. They have been challenging characters to write, and have taught me a great deal about using subtext in a careful, deliberate way.

## The Future

While this is the strongest draft of *anything* I've ever written, I'm of the belief that nothing is ever really finished. I'm looking forward to more feedback from both my committee, and from other storytellers both in and out of the industry to push *Halfling* even further. I'm astonished when I look back at the development of this project and of my growing abilities as a writer. Being able to track my improvement, over the past six months even, and to actually see this improvement is a wonderful feeling of accomplishment.

As I embark on new projects, I have no doubt that my experiences at York and with this thesis project have helped me build enough confidence to pursue my future career with both assertion and ability.

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