



**THE HIDDEN
PEOPLE**

KIT FENNESSY

BLUE VAPOURS PUBLISHING

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*“In there stepped a stately raven of the saintly days of yore;
Not the least obeisance made he; not a minute stopped or stayed he;
But with mien of lord or lady, perched above my chamber door –
Perched upon a bust of Pallas just above my chamber door –
Perched, and sat, and nothing more.”*

~ from ‘the Raven’
Edgar Allan Poe

At the beginning of time, God paid a visit to the first of his creations, Adam and Eve. They received him with great joy and showed him all of their possessions, including their beautiful children. God saw that their children were lovely and full of promise.

“Are there other children I have yet to meet?” God asked Eve.

“No,” Eve replied.

Eve lied to God because she had not finished bathing her children and she was ashamed to have the Almighty see them, so she hid them.

Of course, God knew she was hiding the children and rebuked her. “What you hide from my sight, I will hide from yours,” he said.

~ from ‘Hildur, Queen of the Elves, and Other Icelandic Legends’
As Retold by J.M. Bedell

VINLAND

ANOTHER LIFE...

Hillary was alone, in complete darkness.

It was cold.

It was always cold here.

She was having “the dream” again. The recurring nightmare.

There was the noise that always came at the start. A very low thump, in the distance. A sound that meant she was going to die.

Again.

It was coming for her.

The wind began to stir, and she could feel the earth under her bare feet. It was moss-covered rock, cool and damp. She wiggled her toes. She could run, but which direction should she go? It was so dark. She might end up running into a rock.

Or into it.

The low thump sounded again. A thump with the edge of a roar to it. The hair on the back of her neck was bristling ten times worse than anything LeBray could do to her. Had there been a flash of light over to her right? A surreal glow in the dark; not the sun, not a flame – a quick green glow that may have been imagination or the trace of light in the back of her eyes. Then darkness.

She turned slowly where she stood, hands in front of her, groping blindly.

There it was again. The thump, finishing with a soft roar, like an explosion underground, and then the falling of smaller stones raining out of the air. The flash had been there too, throwing the large crater she was at the bottom of into relief. It came from over the crest to her left, and was approaching her position. Fast. She’d better get moving.

There was a thump. A crack. And then a rumble...

The rate of the beat was increasing. It was getting closer. Hillary scabbled across the crater, the stones and moss undulating unpredictably. A bright flash of light appeared from behind, casting her silhouette up the shallow valley in front of her, her thin shadow stretched and writhing up towards a starless sky.

Thump, thump.

It sounded like footsteps. Doom-laden footsteps, gaining on her.

It had seen her. It was coming.

She stumbled up the slope, remembering between flashes of light where the largest boulder had been. Perhaps if she got to that, she could hide, make herself invisible. Her breath was coming faster.

The lights continued to flash, followed by the explosive steps of what sounded like a giant chasing her down. The boulder. She'd make it if she got to the boulder. Hillary rushed behind it, chancing a quick look behind her. There didn't seem to be anyone there.

She crouched in the dark behind the massive rock and the thumping stopped.

But she was not alone.

The enormous stone behind which she hid began to stir. A thick gray hand the size of a tow truck tray came out of nowhere, snatching her up. What she'd thought was a gray boulder, the size of a small cottage, was alive. Sly blue eyes lit up in the night. She was dangling upside down by one ankle. A tongue like a slab of granite lolled in a cavernous mouth below her, green gums and small yellow teeth like an killer whale's covered in goop waiting to receive her.

She'd been running away from one monster, and hidden behind another.

If this is my time, let it come, Hillary thought as she was lowered towards the rock monster's jaws, smelling its rank breath. *Just make it quick.*

There was a blinding light, and then a really

impressive explosion shook the entire room, flexing the floorboards.

Hillary sat bolt upright in bed in a lather of sweat. Her hands were clutching the sheets to each side of her body. The sound of a car alarm – set off by the percussion of the electrical storm outside – bleated into the night, while a police siren droned in the distance of mid-town Manhattan.

It's only a dream.

There was no rain yet, on a warm night, with solid high clouds. Sheets of lightning had been lighting up her room, penetrating her closed eyelids.

Hillary pushed a strand of her long, frizzly red hair behind one ear and turned on the light beside her bed, swinging her legs down to the floor. Those thumps, that approaching boom might have been her heart beat.

A dream. It's a dream. You have never been eaten by a troll. Never. God, I must be crazy...

The rain came later; ponderous, slow drops, announcing the front, before a deluge that included hail. The thunder rolled on through the night, sounding like gods tossing rough boulders down a bowling alley in the heavens.

She didn't know it, but Hillary Maynard-Keynes was wrong. About everything.

ÍSLAND
(Two Months Earlier)

A RIFT BETWEEN WORLDS

Heavy clouds plowed across a dark Arctic sky, heading towards mountains and glaciers, to sift their snows over the feet of ice below. The only sound to be heard, beside the scrabble and stumble of one man's tread over loose stone, was the moaning voice of a gale.

The clouds rolled back to reveal stars, their lights a million souls that had gone before, watchers over the frozen land. The nearest star of all, the Sun – huddled below the horizon to keep warm – was about to cast its spell; the Aurora Borealis.

Electric fields spread through the night, in spectacular greens, purples and blues, a curtain of light shimmering like a hundred thousand rainbows. Aurora was putting on a good show over the small island nation of Island.

The footsteps stumbled again. Dressed in a sealskin cloak, a man slipped his way across an unstable hillside of lava scoria, throwing up a pungent mix of basalt and sulfur dust. Over the crest it was blanketed in deep snow, but here on the lee-side of the volcano – out of the wind – the mountain had enough heat to keep the stone bare.

Monoliths loomed dark about the landscape in the newly cast moonlight; evidence of past trolls caught in the sun. Not in some fantasy. Here. The lone figure moving up the slope knew trolls were real. He'd hunted them.

But now he was the one being hunted; and not by any trolls.

Thor Thorson looked twenty-eight years old, and was dressed simply under his thick cloak, as you would have seen a farmer wear in centuries past, with an uncollared, cream-colored woolen shirt, gray britches, and boots made of sealskin.

He'd been known as Thor Thorson – but that was a long time ago. His father had been called Thor too,

making him Thor “Thor’s son”. But he was the only one who still clung to the memory of that name. For the last few hundred years, he’d been called Thistledown.

You know, I always rather thought Wolfsbane, or Clatterclaw would have been a better choice when they re-christened me, but there’s no accounting for taste...

A sextant banged against his thigh, swinging from a leather strap around his shoulder. The summer solstice was three months away, and the signs should be there by now. Thor lay at the crest of the peak, black shale poking through his thick clothes. Resting on his elbows, he swung the bronze instrument from his side. The cool metal warmed against his face as he measured angles and distances between the stars and planets. Through the gauze of the Northern Lights, a bright point of light was emerging. It was the arrival of a comet. *Their* comet.

Thor allowed himself a half smile.

‘The opening of the gates...’ he whispered.

On a peak above Thor, another figure stood quiet and still. The slight figure leaned against a standing stone. He was dressed all in black, so was well camouflaged; an observer unobserved, listening and not being heard. The wind whisked up the valley, blowing his dark hair back. He tightened his collar.

I should intervene, Windflax thought to himself.

Thor showed up bright against the dark volcanic rock, with his pale cloak and mop of blonde hair. Windflax’s slight and pointed face was tense around a mouth that scowled. He’d deliberately kept a long lead on his observation. He wasn’t as big as Thor, but was sure he had his measure. His target hadn’t seen him, yet.

I’ll have to take him.

‘What are you doing, Thistledown?’ Windflax’s voice was sudden, intended to shock.

Thor turned to see a silhouette moving toward him, a

pale face framed in dark hair appearing through steam rising through a volcanic vent. The expression betrayed caution, but the body was relaxed, ready to spring.

‘Ah, you know, nothing much. Bit of weather, checking my horoscope. You should give it a go. I hear there’s big things ahead for anyone born under the sign “ass-wipe”.’

‘Don’t you call me an ass-wipe.’

‘Well don’t call me Thistledown,’ Thor said.

‘You should relish your privileges.’

‘My name...’

‘Thistledown is your name,’ Windflax snarled. ‘How else could any of us pass between realms unless our power names are spoken?’

‘Nobody ever says “Thistledown” on the other side,’ Thor said.

Windflax bowed his head forward, his voice becoming gravelly. ‘Well, you’ll never return to them unless someone does.’

Thor’s brow lowered. He subtly changed his position, hands propping, tensing muscles, his chest pushing slightly out as he braced for an attack. Windflax was visibly changing.

‘You can’t reunite with someone who’s already dead, you know,’ Windflax said. ‘I don’t care what the legend says. If she was your true love, you’d never have let her die in the first place.’ Windflax’s face had begun to visibly stretch, sprouting fur. ‘No wonder the King has us guarding you,’ he said, his voice becoming less easy to understand. ‘Give me the things you stole and return with me... to... the keep.’ Windflax could barely talk by now.

‘There’s no need for violence,’ Thor said.

Windflax fell forward onto his paws. ‘Too late,’ he just managed to say before his throat changed completely. Snarling, he launched himself at Thor.

On another part of the island, the door to a groovy set of modern, minimalist apartments opened, and a man wearing a thick red snow jacket and black beret stretched and yawned under the bright white lightbulb of his entrance hall as he prepared to leave for work.

There was an enormous arrangement of dried flowers beside the door, a gift sitting on the hallway table. He had to squeeze past them to get out. A “secret admirer” had sent the flowers, and Piers Flöter kept them ostentatiously on display; not because Piers cherished the attention of stalkers – far from it – but the dead flowers impressed the few guests he’d had over, and they lasted nearly forever.

He continued yawning as he made his way out into the sub-zero temperatures, stomping the few yards to his car. The miraculous lightshow going on overhead continued, but Piers was almost dead to the spectacle. Instead, he scraped frost off his windshield. He’d seen it all before, the frost and the light show. He was still half asleep and was making an early start – for Piers had pressing matters on his mind.

He was, after all, the director of the upcoming Icelandic Midsummer Arts Festival.

His small and cheerfully bright red Fiat started on the third go, and he took to the road, just the center of the tarmac cleared of snow by the plow, leaving wide shoulders for cars to squeeze past one another. The car’s headlights lit orange poles planted in the powder at the side of the road showing where the edge was. It was a familiar route; first past an industrial scale hydroponic farm – lit up like a Christmas tree in the night – where most of the frozen island’s vegetables were grown. Then he took the bend in the highway that, to an outsider, would seem inexplicable.

The road crossed a broad, flat plane, but bowed out and back again for a mile, a huge curve built to bypass an enigmatic rock.

The original roadwork construction crew had reached this particular stone during survey, and their machines had broken down. The Fairy Minister, an actual role in Ísland's otherwise rational government, had been called and, after consulting the "Huldufólk", determined that the road had to be diverted. The change had added millions of kroner to the project, but kept everyone happy.

It was like that here in Ísland, Piers reflected, as he took the huge and improbable sweeping curve of the bypass. Science and reason should prevail, but he was working with a strange and mysterious people. The inhabitants of Ísland were almost completely unlike those in his original home, Norway.

As he drove through the darkness, Piers noticed something on his jacket sleeve. It was pale and lightly textured, like a tuft of fur; seeds from the dried flower arrangement in his apartment's entrance. He brushed the lint off with one hand, affording the motion a quick glance.

'Thistledown,' he said quietly to himself, identifying the pollen and driving on, not giving it a second thought.

Unknown to Piers – as he drove off through the dark, under the Aurora Borealis and a descending full moon – something strange was happening to the rock that had caused such a fuss to the highway's builders.

It was opening.

*

As the large black dog launched itself at his throat, Thor fainted backwards, rolling onto his back and lifting his feet. He felt a satisfying crunch as his boot sunk into the stomach above him, just connecting with the edge of its rib cage. There was a yelp. The dog was thrown over and past him, followed by a thud and the skitter of stones.

In a heartbeat, they were both on their feet, eyeing each other. The wild dog Windflax had transformed into had matted, black fur, and was almost the size of a wolf. Saliva dripped from its jaws, and it growled low as it paced sideways, head down, shoulders hunched, keeping its eyes fixed on Thor's, looking for an opening to attack.

But that moment never came.

Instead, there was a sudden crack, like a small thunderclap. Floating in the air next to them, only a few yards away and framed in blue light, a portal into the other world had opened. And it was widening.

The opponents' eyes locked on the bizarre sight, momentarily forgetting their struggle. The tear in mid-air made a sucking sound, as wind channeled into it, driven by a difference in air pressure between the worlds it was connecting.

Before he had time to think, Thor ran toward the gap.

Windflax, noticing the move too late, followed at a bound, barking savagely. His jaws were wide, ready to bite, canines bared as they swung back for the strike, Thistledown's heel nearly in reach...

A second sound – like a thousand electricity plants starting up at once – deafened the wild dog. Windflax was frozen in mid air, at the leap, surrounded by a purple electric force field that pulsated around him, paralyzed but for the movement of his eyes. He watched Thistledown slip through the rift, helpless to stop his quarry getting away. Thistledown was entering

a place that was flat, with snow everywhere, another part of the island.

A stately female figure entered the edge of Windflax's vision. The dog's eye strained to see her, his brown eyeball pivoting in its hair-framed socket.

Her long gray-blond hair was tied back with a silver band. She wore a loose cape of an almost perfect blackness over a shining dress that trailed to the ground.

It was the Queen.

Queen Haettia of the Huldufólk reached through the energy field that enveloped Windflax, her hand tousling his ears.

'Sorry to do that,' Haettia said with a regretful sigh, looking after Thistledown through the crack between worlds. She paused, weighing her words. 'He needs our help you know. He'll be a babe in the woods in that other place. They'll eat him alive. And he does so want to be re-united with his one true love. I've got to go, to protect him.'

She pulled the hood of her famed cloak, made of shimmering raven feathers, up over her hair. Taking one last look at the levitating Windflax, she gave him a parting smile. 'You stay here. We need someone around to keep my husband in line.' She started to walk away, and added as an afterthought; '...there's a good boy.'

She stepped through the portal after Thor Thorson – the ordinary man who'd been re-christened Thistledown by the Huldufólk and had lived with them for centuries – back into his own realm.

*

Thor stood at the side of a modern plowed roadway with orange poles to either side, alone in a field of snow. The comet was moving to the west. He'd have to go in that direction too. But what lay that way? Greenland?

Or the West-West isle that many thought to be a rumor;
Vinland?

I must find a boat.

Behind him, a raven flew to the top of the rock, that door between worlds, the crack closing with the sound of grating stone. Her husband would not be stopped. He could pass between worlds, just like her.

In the shape of a large raven, Queen Haettia took off and flew overhead in a gentle arc, testing her wings.

VINLAND

MYTHOLOGY

The floor of the small, tiered theatre was covered in a gray plastic carpet that gave off a smell of glue. Individual seats, with desk armrests, formed a ring around a central media console. The room had two dark-framed windows that looked out onto other buildings.

The majority of her students were already there, making notes on their laptops, nodding as she came into the room.

‘Shall we begin?’ Hillary said, eyeing the clock which was at five past the hour. Hillary sat on a desk in the well of the room, swinging her legs in their blue jeans, examining her charges. Kids, the lot of them, some not particularly caring about the topic, taking a cross-curriculum subject. Still, others were mad for the topic, including her.

‘Myths, Madness and Mayhem 101.’

Hillary had been reading fairy tales and ancient Greek myths, studies of Aztec Indian gods, and the ‘Tales of the Arabian Nights’ for as long as she could remember. When she’d gone to college, she’d pursued her interests and become an expert on people and their fantasies.

‘Today we’re going to be talking about the defining line between fantasy and delusion,’ Hillary said, pushing the distraction aside. ‘For example, what’s the difference between a religion and a myth? Anyone?’

Silence was the only reply. Her students avoided her eye.

A sudden flurry of activity at the window caught her attention. A raven had landed and perched on the ledge outside her lecture theatre.

Hillary adjusted the loose scarf around her neck with nervous, pale fingers.

The raven had feathers that were so dark they were almost green; as though light was falling into them.

She shook her head.

I should be better than this.

But... that's THE raven, she thought back to herself. The same one that followed me down the street. Right there.

'There's no right answer,' Hillary heard herself say, as though on automatic pilot.

The large black bird, with a dangerous looking beak and pale eyes, seemed to be staring straight at her. It was the kind of thing that could put you right off your game, if you weren't careful.

The room was a Mexican standoff of not-looking... except for that damned bird, which couldn't seem to get enough of trying to make eye contact with her.

A dark-haired boy, his fringe growing down over his face, put his hand up.

'Is it that a religion is a system of belief, while a myth is something that's been disproved or shown to have been made up?' he asked.

'Not bad,' Hillary said. 'I prefer to think: "Religion is a myth that a whole lot of people still believe in."' "

Academics who did a long suit in studying the mind, whether it was in English or Psychology, were in pursuit of their own demons, as Hillary well knew. She'd worked with enough professors in both fields who were nuts, and every one of them was trying to achieve therapy through study. Hillary had enough self-knowledge to know she was superstitious.

But the raven was staring at her, she was sure. Hillary tried to ignore it. Since the window was sealed, it couldn't get in. She had nothing to worry about, really. But the way it stared, with unblinking eyes, craning its head and not leaving was... disturbing.

'People are desperate for meaning in their lives,' Hillary said. 'Things seem so chaotic and disordered, they'll grasp at anything to give their existence structure

and meaning.’

‘Like with astrology and star signs?’ a girl in the front row asked. She looked a bit like a rabbit, with an Alice hair-band and rimless glasses. She was wearing a pink sweater, over which a small silver crucifix was draped.

‘Why not?’ Hillary replied. ‘Astrology and astronomy aren’t a million miles apart, either. There’s an alignment of the planets right now which new-age spiritualists are making a big thing of on social media...’

The raven at the window started pecking at the glass.

‘... and the same celestial event has been taken up by scientists on chat forums to get those all-important internet hits and build an interest in their field. But what is astronomy, the science, really, except another search for meaning? Even if it is to explain the beginning of the universe?’

The raven started cawing mournfully. It was too much. Hillary walked over to the window and drew the blind.

‘Alright, let’s hear some examples of different mythologies from around the world at work, and how they try to explain things,’ she said.

The bird flew to the next window. Hillary drew that blind too.

‘Everyone, Hoffenmeyer, Chapter Three. Stuart? Would you like to start us off?’

*

An hour later, she checked the clock. The class had whisked by – once she’d gotten over her paranoia about the raven behind the closed blinds.

Even if she hadn’t quite forgotten it.

‘Alright, that’s it for today,’ Hillary said, ending a conversation about peyote induced visions and shamanistic rituals. ‘I’ll be in on Tuesday and Thursday

mornings for advice if you need any help with your assignments...’ The room began to empty. ‘...but please fill out the schedule on my door. Don’t just turn up thinking there’s nobody else for me to see.’

The girl in the pink jumper said “Take care” as she left. She was rosy-cheeked from a heated argument she’d been involved in about organized religion.

Hillary turned to collect her things when a voice behind her purred;

‘Hello Hilly.’

She felt ice run through her veins. It was LeBray. There was no mistaking it. He had one of those extremely plummy accents.

Michael LeBray was English, and never stopped talking about his days at Oxbridge, or whatever the hell the place was called. “St Ninnian’s College”.

Hillary forced a smile as she turned to face him. LeBray was important. He held her tenure at the university in the palm of his hand. But that wasn’t the reason for her constant adverse reactions to him. Hillary guessed it was just that he was one of the most unusual people she’d ever seen.

Not in his dress sense. If anything could be said about his wardrobe, it was that it was super-conservative. All of his suits were well-worn, double-breasted numbers that ranged in color from dark blue to brown. He habitually wore a tie with the image of a grim reaper on it resetting bails on stumps (“a souvenir from Lord’s”), and had the occasional handkerchief protruding from a breast pocket when he was trying to make an impression.

There was no handkerchief in his pocket today.

His hair didn’t necessarily make him look like a freak, either. It was thinning, died jet black and swooshed over to one side – in an almost Hitler-esque fashion, you might have argued if you wanted to be critical. But it was softened by it being slightly too long and foppish.

No.

His face was the disturbing part. He must have had a hair-lip as a child, a cleft palate that had been sewn back together. The stitch marks down his upper mandible had formed a curve that was disturbingly feline.

Hillary pictured him as a cat, a familiar, working at the whim of some witch.

‘How are things with the undergrads?’ LeBray asked.

‘They’re having trouble getting across Eisenberg, but they’re OK. I’ve got one or two earmarked for the panel.’

‘Ah yes, that’s part of the reason I dropped in,’ LeBray said. ‘Have you given any more thought to your thesis?’

Hillary started shoving things into her bag, firmly.

‘Geoffrey missed the point... entirely,’ she said, gritting her teeth. ‘How can you focus on one field? I’m talking about the human condition. Everything’s relevant. Indigenous cultures, Christianity, Oriental mysticism...’

‘It’s too broad for a PhD,’ LeBray said.

Hillary turned and slung her bag over her shoulder, holding her thumb and first finger up, almost at a pinch. ‘I am this close, this close to handing in my synopsis... I just need more time.’

‘More time?’ LeBray said, eyes to the ceiling and walking toward the windows, trailing one hand along the backs of the seats. ‘Don’t we all need more of that?’

‘If I could have an extension...’

Michael LeBray stopped at the drawn blinds and looked at her with eyes that were all sympathy. ‘You know I’d like to, but your funding’s running out. Did you get my note about the scholarship?’

‘I’m not going, Michael.’

‘But this is a once in a lifetime chance,’ he said. ‘An all expenses, three-week-research trip to the Arctic circle...’

‘What the hell do I know about Nordic mythology?’ Hillary said. ‘I’ve been working on Aztecs. I’ve written over a hundred thousand words. Maybe, maybe, if it was to South America...’

‘Here.’ LeBray wrote on a card. ‘Visit this bookstore. They’ve got stacks on it. Take my advice, Hilly. Things are being shaken up around here, and, well, I don’t know how to put this...’ LeBray rubbed one hand on the back of his neck, appeared to make a decision, and let it all spill out in a rush. ‘This subject is being cut. You’re going to need to produce some research if you want to stay. I can’t make it any plainer. There’s a grant you can practically have, if you won’t be pig-headed. Just take a gift from the gods, would you?’

Hillary took the card, turned on her heel and walked out, her face flushed. It felt like a threat, but he was helping her, and she knew it.

But all that work down the pan? It’s galling. I can’t do it.

Michael LeBray watched Hillary’s retreating back, with a sad little droop of his shoulders. He turned to one of the windows and raised the blind. The raven was still on the ledge outside. He leaned down to it and spoke through the glass.

‘I hope you’re right about her, your Highness,’ he said. ‘We’ll look like bally fools if she’s not the Chosen One. Me especially.’

‘Craak,’ the raven replied.

‘Are you sure about giving her my old book? I mean, I know what the Miacantütiffalon says, but I could end up a laughing stock. I might even lose my position...’

‘Craaaaak crooook.’

Michael LeBray held his hands up in self-defense. ‘You know I’ve always done as your Majesty has required.’

‘Crook craaaaaaaaaaaaa...’

‘What’s that?’ LeBray said, leaning closer to the

window. 'It sounded like you said you'd arranged for them to meet?'

The raven bobbed on the spot and continued to croak. LeBray straightened up in surprise. 'They're going to meet... in the nether regions?' he asked, his voice rising sharply.



Kit Fennessy lives and works in Melbourne Australia,
but wrote ‘the Hidden People’ on research trips he took to New York and
Reykjavik to study the Huldufólk.

This novel is dedicated to
Jane E. McPhee-Fennessy
“*She Who Must (usually) Not Be Named*”

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*

If you enjoyed this book, other works by
Kit Fennessy include:

Tales of the Dark

and

The Floatation Tank

You should probably read them too.