

# ELEGANT LITERATURE

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## MADNESS AND MONSTERS



#025

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Madness and Monsters

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# ABOUT ELEGANT LITERATURE

## MAGAZINE & CONTEST

Elegant Literature is a magazine focused on publishing new writers. At its inception, there were few publications—if any—that only accepted work from aspiring talent and also paid professional rates.

We aimed to change that.

As far as we know, Elegant Literature is the only short fiction magazine willing to turn down work from famous authors. No Stephen King's or George Martin's here. This policy gives unpublished authors a significantly less competitive market to submit work to, increasing their chances of publication.

Our goal is to help discover new voices in fiction, and publish talented beginners from around the globe.

Elegant Literature publishes work from all genres, and readers can always find a free copy of every issue on our website.

Each issue of the magazine also corresponds to our monthly contest. One of the stories in the following pages has won the grand prize. But we don't reveal who it is in the table of contents. It wouldn't be fair for readers to skip over the other works.

We encourage you to read and enjoy each piece in the order presented. They have been curated intentionally. Please, discover the winner naturally.

The list of honourable mentions relates directly to the contest.

If you read something you like, please consider connecting with and supporting the author.

[Click here for more information about submitting to the magazine.](#)

[Click here for more information about entering the contest.](#)

Happy reading!

**WHAT IT LEARNED FROM THE  
ONES IT TOOK**  
RORY KRANZ

*A bargain with the Dunes comes with two stipulations:*

*1. The lost soul must come willingly*

*2. The Dunes do not give back what they take*

The day at the dig site was hot and long. I spent most of the time in the pit under a jewel-bright sky, narrowly avoiding the sand tossed around by the diggerdrone.

As the shadows grew longer, Amira darted out of our tent and descended the ladder to join me. Behind her, the sun dipped to brush the peaks of the endless dunes.

“Juri, I need to speak to you,” she said. She clutched what looked like several diagrams.

Callum, the team’s nepotism baby, lurked nearby under the pretense of examining a stone embedded in the sand. On the opposite side of the pit, Bea tinkered with something on the underbelly of the beetle-like drone. It twitched and hummed in response to each prod, and I caught a whiff of burnt metal on the wind.

“Can it wait?” I asked. “We’re close to wrapping up for the day.”

“No. I don’t think so.” I noticed the way her hands shook slightly as they held the papers.

“Okay,” I said. “What is it?”

She knelt and spread the diagrams out in the sand. The first two looked to be complex charts of the dunes. In the first, various arrows seemed to indicate the direction of sand movement. The second showed a geological cross section, with various layers labeled sandstone, bedrock, and so forth.

The third diagram was something else entirely. In it, a honeycomb structure sat beneath the earth with a thin tunnel leading from the structure to the surface. Amira pointed at the first two diagrams.

“Do you notice anything strange about these?” she asked. I shook my head.

“No.”

“You know what digger wasps are?”

“I haven’t heard of them, but I can guess,” I replied. Amira pointed at the third diagram.

“They’re wasps that build their nest underground, like this.” She turned back to the first two. “Even for me it took a while to notice, but there’s something not quite right with these.” She leaned closer, practically glowing with anticipation.

“The way the sand moves in the windstorms doesn’t match the supposed sediment layers. It moves as though there is something big underground. Something that would disrupt the natural flow. Just like the digger wasps.”

When it hits evening in the dunes, the temperature drops abruptly. I thought I had grown used to these sudden fluctuations, but at Amira’s words I felt the air chill as never before.

“Like a nest?” I said. Amira nodded.

“Exactly like a nest. Except much, much bigger.”

I was silent for a long moment, considering this. If there were tunnels underground, a nest of sorts, that would mean that the people who disappeared might not be gone at all. An odd sinking feeling began in my stomach.

By this point most of the crew had finished and left for dinner. Only Bea remained, shepherding the last pieces of equipment into their proper containers. I waved her over.

“Do we have contact with any of the other expeditions?” I asked.

“The Arshack crew,” she counted on her fingers, “the Space Center crew, aaaand... North UMBER.”

“Radio them,” I instructed. “See if they’ve had any incidents.” Bea unstrapped the pinwheel radio from her belt, flicked a switch that set the circle of antennae spinning, and pumped in the coordinates. The radio crackled to life.

“This is Institution to North UMBER. Come in North UMBER.” Static crackled in response. Bea repeated herself and waited another moment. Still no response. She punched in the coordinates for Arshack. Also no response. The sinking in my stomach turned to nausea.

“Try Space Center,” I said. Bea nodded. We waited a full five minutes, listening to the static crackle into the silent evening air.

“There might be something wrong with the radio,” Amira suggested.

“I checked it this morning,” Bea said. “It’s in perfect working order. I was in contact with the North UMBER crew about the storm system just this afternoon.”

“They didn’t mention anything out of the ordinary?” I asked.

“No. Nothing.”

*The Dunes often wonder:*

*1. What it means to be human*

*2. Where did you go and why didn’t you stay?*

I was woken in the night to the sound of canvas being pushed aside and hands on my shoulder. Amira’s face floated above me like a pale moon.

“Callum is gone. I saw him outside when I got up for water, he didn’t see me. He walked out into the sand and kneeled, and then, I don’t know what happened but he just vanished. It was like he was...” her face screwed up in disgust, “swallowed by the sand.”

I slid out of bed, reaching for my boots.

“Go wake Bea up,” I said quickly and quietly. “Tell her to meet me by the mess hall. Be careful not to wake anyone else, I don’t want a panic.”

When I stepped out of the tent, it struck me how bright the moon was. With no trees or foliage to obscure the light, it washed over the entire landscape like a silver balm. The rise and swell of sand—warm amber in daylight—turned to icy slate under the moon’s impassive watch.

*When the Dunes wake up in the morning they:*

*1. There is no morning in the Dunes*

*2. Sometimes wish there actually was a morning, so that they could hear if the birds really did chirp like people said*

I remember walking out to where Amira said Callum disappeared. It was just North of the camp, aside one of the smaller swells. I remember Bea handing me a flashlight and pointing out a small divot

in the sand. I remember the rough texture of the rope as I tied it to my belt and the sweet dusty smell of the night air. And next I remember... nothing.

I woke up alone and in darkness. I fumbled blindly for anything to hold onto, anything that would tell me of my surroundings. I felt a cool, sandstone wall. Something brushed against my foot—the flashlight. I picked it up and clicked it on.

It was a tunnel. I knew at once that Amira was right. Something about the curvature of the walls, the oddly waxy scent of the air, this was a nest. Several other tunnels branched out from mine, one slanting upwards and the other down and to the right.

A sob came from the tunnel that pointed downward. My head felt as though it was filled with cotton, but even in this state I recognized Callum's cries. I stumbled down the hall, trying not to slip on the loose, sandy floor. Around the bend, Callum was huddled on his knees. He appeared to be grabbing at something on the floor. He lifted his head and the flashlight lit upon his face. My heart thumped in my chest. Hair slicked with sweat and grime, tears and snot and blood dribbling down his chin, gleaming milky whites of his eyes.

"She shouldn't have done it," he babbled. "I told her not to. I told her."

"Told who what, Callum?" I tried to keep my voice steady. He lifted something off the floor and I caught the distinct scent of rotting meat.

"What is that?" I aimed the flashlight at the thing he was holding.

It was a head. The remaining bits of flesh on the skull were oozing with gangrene. In his lap was what looked like a rotted hand. There was a ring on one of the fingers, the metal sunken into the bloated skin.

"I gave her that ring," Callum sniffled. "A promise ring." He devolved into more sobbing, pressing his lips feverishly against the severed head. As he sobbed, I swore I could hear a faint shuffling sound, like two pieces of paper sliding against each other. I tried to focus on it, but the rotting smell was making me dizzy. I leaned against the wall for support.



“Callum, we have to—” The flashlight seemed to be growing dimmer and Callum began to sound like he was underwater. Was it in my mind, or was the shuffling growing closer? My vision went black before I could decide.

*Something that has been on the Dunes’ mind:*

*1. It’s lonely when the millions of things around you are all just you. Because even if there are many of you, they’re all you, and so you are alone.*

When I woke, there was no sign of Callum. The scent of rotting meat was gone, replaced by the dry, dusty smell of the tunnels. The shuffling was there again. This time it seemed to come from many directions at once. The flashlight was miraculously still in my hand. I clicked it back on.

It took everything in my willpower not to scream. They stood all around, faces pressed only inches away from mine. They were humanoid but not human. Thin and dust-colored, with no facial features, only a blank canvas. Despite the lack of eyes, I knew each and every one was looking at me. There must have been several dozen of them, they filled the entire hallway.

“Where is Callum?” I asked. They did not respond, only stared. I pressed my back as hard as I could to the wall, trying not to move or even breathe.

“I would like to leave.” Again they did not answer. I tried again.

“Why do you take them?”

It was the question that plagued every researcher at every university and institution I knew. Not the how, but the why. This time, I received a response. The voice seemed to come from all of them at once. It sounded like sand through an hourglass.

*“To learn.”*

“Learn what?” No answer. “What do you learn from the ones you take?”

*“It does not matter.”*

“I think it does,” I said. They stirred at this. A few of them moved

closer.

“Nevermind,” I continued. “You don’t have to answer. But I would like to leave. I won’t bother you, I won’t come back.”

More of them shuffled closer until I could feel the papery limbs nearest me brush against my own skin. The flashlight flickered and went out. I squeezed my eyes shut. Then, nothing.

*And now for the most important question, what did the Dunes learn from the ones it took:*

- 1. It’s not important.*
- 2. Next question.*

I woke up in my own bed. My boots were still on my feet and the flashlight rested near my chest. I could hear the sound of the digger-drone outside. I sat up and clicked the flashlight. It was dead.

I stumbled outside. It was early morning and the crew was at the dig site. From the side of the pit, Amira caught my eye and waved. Bea flagged me down and gestured for me to join her. I approached and looked into the pit. To my shock, there was Callum. He looked up at me and smiled widely, teeth flashing in the sun.

I mentioned the experience of last night to Bea and she laughed as if it were a good joke. Amira looked at me in confusion when I mentioned the digger wasps. I know most would say it was only a nightmare. I was tempted to believe it as well. But as I approached the crew I could smell it in the air. The same dusty, waxy scent from the tunnels.

A year later, when people began returning from the desert, they said it was a miracle. All the people we thought were gone forever, returned to us. I knew better. I remembered what the creature said to me in the tunnel. And now I knew the answer to the question.

I knew what it learned from the ones it took.

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## RORY KRANZ

Rory is a Minnesota-born writer living in the UK. They are a pagan witch who enjoys the stranger side of fiction, and never stopped loving monsters, fairies, and all things in-between.

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