

ISSUE 01 / SPRING 2020

WINCE

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Letter from the Editor, March 23, 2020

I recently read a book about mummies -- a rather morbid subject, but one I've found fascinating for years. Although the subject matter was compelling, it was an uncomfortable read. The audience, I discovered, was not people who were out-and-proud about their morbid interests. The author assumed that readers would find the subject matter weird and the people who study it morbid and off-kilter. It was watered down, self-conscious.

This is how I feel much of the time when I read about whump, even in fan spaces. I love explainers, reviews, recommendations by trope. I crave hyper-specific genres, so I often turn to Tor.com or the Barnes and Noble blog for lists of the best new space operas or hopepunk books or whatever it is I'm into at the moment. But no one's publishing lists of 2020's hot new whump books. I enjoy websites like Mythcreants and The Mary Sue for writing about how important concepts intersect with genre fiction, but there's nowhere I can go to find essays about how ace-spectrum people experience whump or how people in the medical profession navigate their work and their interest in hurt/comfort.

It's not that people aren't writing about these things -- the Tumblr whump scene has been going strong for half a decade. People write excellent meta, post recommendations, write medical explainers, host contests and challenges and recommendation lists. But if you want to read excellent nonfiction or juicy fics on Tumblr you have to filter out a lot of gifs, asks, side conversations, and irrelevant posts. These are staples of community and I don't intend to devalue them. But 30+ years after this community began, 20+ years after the internet came around, and 6+ years since our community blossomed on Tumblr, I began to wonder why there wasn't a dedicated space for excellent writing about whump.

When I wrote the submission guidelines for Wince, I wanted to link to essays by other people. They're out there, I discovered, but they're scattered. They're often tonally unpleasant for whump lovers. They tend towards two extremes: placating explainers for non-whumpers and articles that strike a similar tone as that book I mentioned above, assuming the readers are non-whumpers and putting us, the whump-lovers on the defensive. I struggled to find examples of interesting long-form nonfiction written by whumpers, for whumpers. Wince is meant to be a home for that disparate, rare genre.

Whump is a dissonant love. On the one hand, our vocal love of pain and comfort in fiction is seen as deviant, even by many of us. On the other hand, the media sends us constant signals our favorite tropes enjoy a wide audience. The prevalence of hurt, peril, and worry is widespread in trailers, in publicity materials, in romance novels. This bolsters my belief that interest in hurt and comfort is not a morbid interest, it is a human one.

All that is to say: I'm proud to bring you the first issue of Wince. Issue #1 features a range of nonfiction -- a personal essay, a book review, and two fandom-focused pieces, along with some whumpy original fiction. I hope these works entertain, validate, and educate without alienating. Thank you to the creative trailblazers who submitted to a new, niche publication. I hope their work encourages more authors to write the essays and stories that will fill the pages of issue #2.

The publication date of the summer issue is dependent on variables out of my hands; however, I am hoping to publish another batch of excellent, whumpy writing towards the end of August. I hope, dear reader, to find your name in the submissions pile.

Happy whumping!

Ari, Editor

PS: Much of this issue was assembled before the Western world began shutting down due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I hope this issue finds you safe and well. If it finds you ill or self-isolating, I hope it keeps you company.

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A Brief Introduction to the Whump Community Directory by justwhumpythings

What is the Whump Community Directory?

The Whump Community Directory is a database of whump blogs on Tumblr, created by the community, for the community, and based at [@whumpcommunity](#). You can create an entry for your whump blog so others can find you, and browse the Directory to find new blogs to follow.

How can I use it?

Do you want to find whumpers who share your fandoms? How about new sources for whump gifs? Looking for femwhump, or whump in languages other than English? Need whump writing advice? You can use the Directory to find blogs with all of these!

Anyone can find blog entries within specified categories by using Filter Views. There are a number set up already for potentially popular queries, or you can easily create your own. You can also use a good old fashioned search to find text strings within any field, such as a fandom or character name.

How can I join?

If you have a blog that you would like listed on the Directory, there is an easy form to fill in which is linked from the [@whumpcommunity](#) blog or on the Directory itself. You are free to provide as much or as little information as you would like.

The Facts™

With the entries submitted to the Directory so far, there's lots of interesting (well, to some of us, anyway) information that can be extracted. So here's a little summary of the insights we've got.

(Stats correct as of March, 6th 2020.)

Thus far, there have been 171 blogs listed with the Directory! I'd like to thank you all for participating and I hope that as time goes on we can gather more whump blogs together and provide a really good resource.

How long have we been blogging about whump?

One of the data points people can volunteer is the date their whump blog was created.

A number of people insisted their blog was created in the ~future~ (don't worry, I made the same mistake at first, it's an easy one to miss).

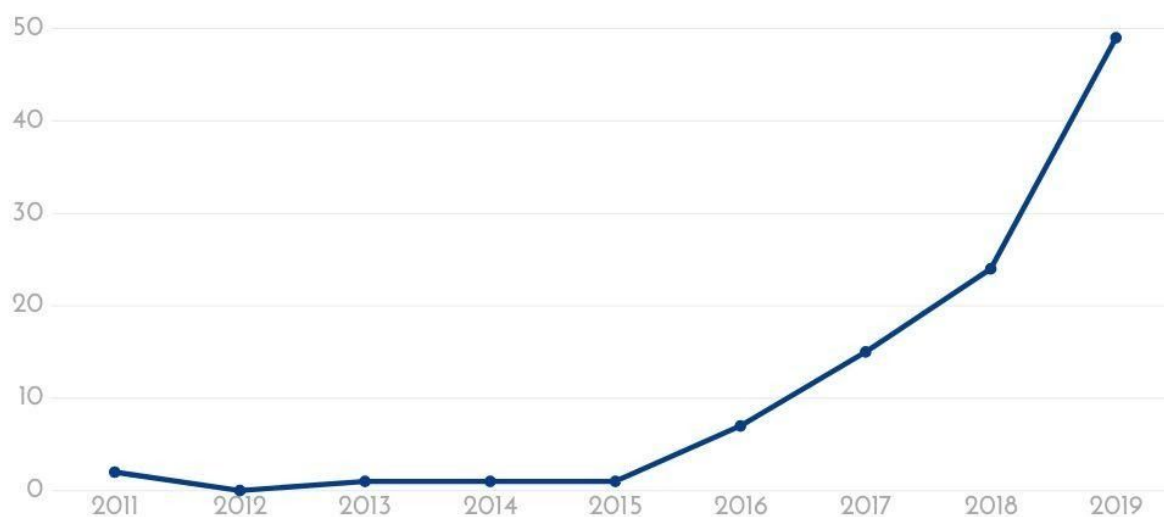
Otherwise, of those who provided dates, they tally as follows:

Year	Number of blogs created
2011	2
2012	0
2013	1
2014	1
2015	1
2016	7
2017	15
2018	24
2019	49

These data match my observation that around 2016 was when the whump community really started kicking off on Tumblr, and we've only been growing and growing since then!

Also, special shout-out to [fyeahvulnerablemen](#) for having the oldest still-active whump-only blog. You're a legend, Jo.

NEW BLOGS BY YEAR



How are we blogging about whump?

87.6% of respondents indicated that their blog was primarily for whump. We are a dedicated lot.

Another blogger consideration: main blogs vs. sideblogs?

Obviously, there are benefits to both options - mainblogs allow us to communicate directly with each other via asks and replies using the names we are familiar with, but sideblogs are better for those who use Tumblr for other purposes and just want a neat little section to store all their favourite whump.

In any case, the main blog / sideblog split was pretty much even: 47.6% whumpy on main, 52.4% sideblogs.

What whump do we blog about?

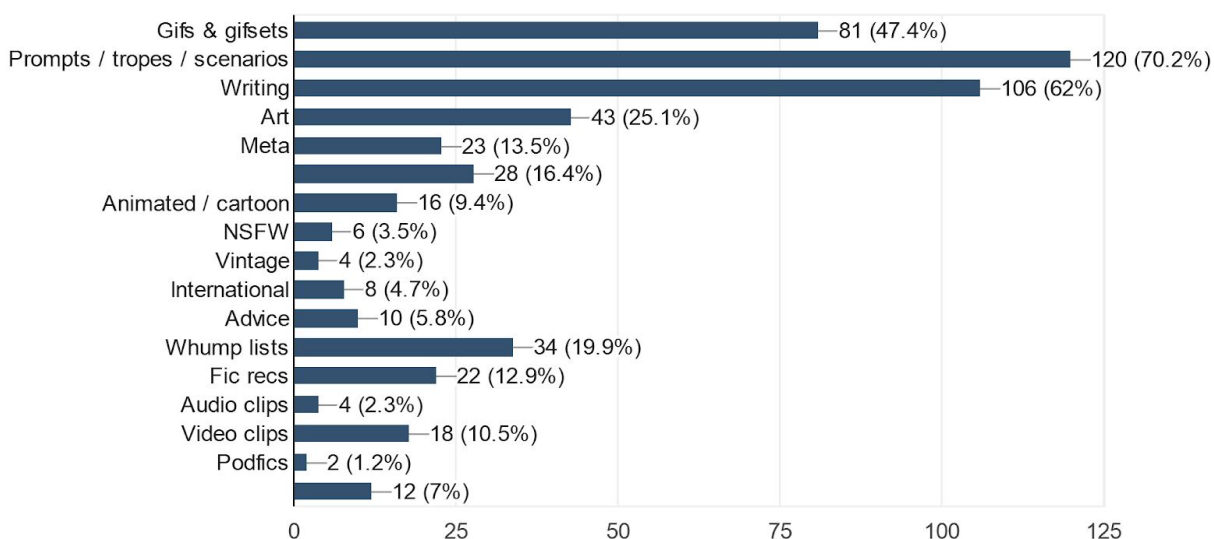
Now onto the *really* fascinating stuff: what are our folks interested most in?

70% considered the main content of their blog to include prompts / tropes / scenarios. The other two most popular content types were Writing (62.4%) and Gifs (47.6%), both far above the next most popular main content (Art; 25.3%).

Popular occasional content types were Art, Fic recs, Gifs, Whump lists and Advice.

What is the main content type(s) of your blog?

171 responses



In terms of who we're all whumping, the stats were as follows:

- 64.5% (109) blog about Fandom-based whump
- 50.9% (86) blog about OCs
- 43.2% (73) blog about generic characters

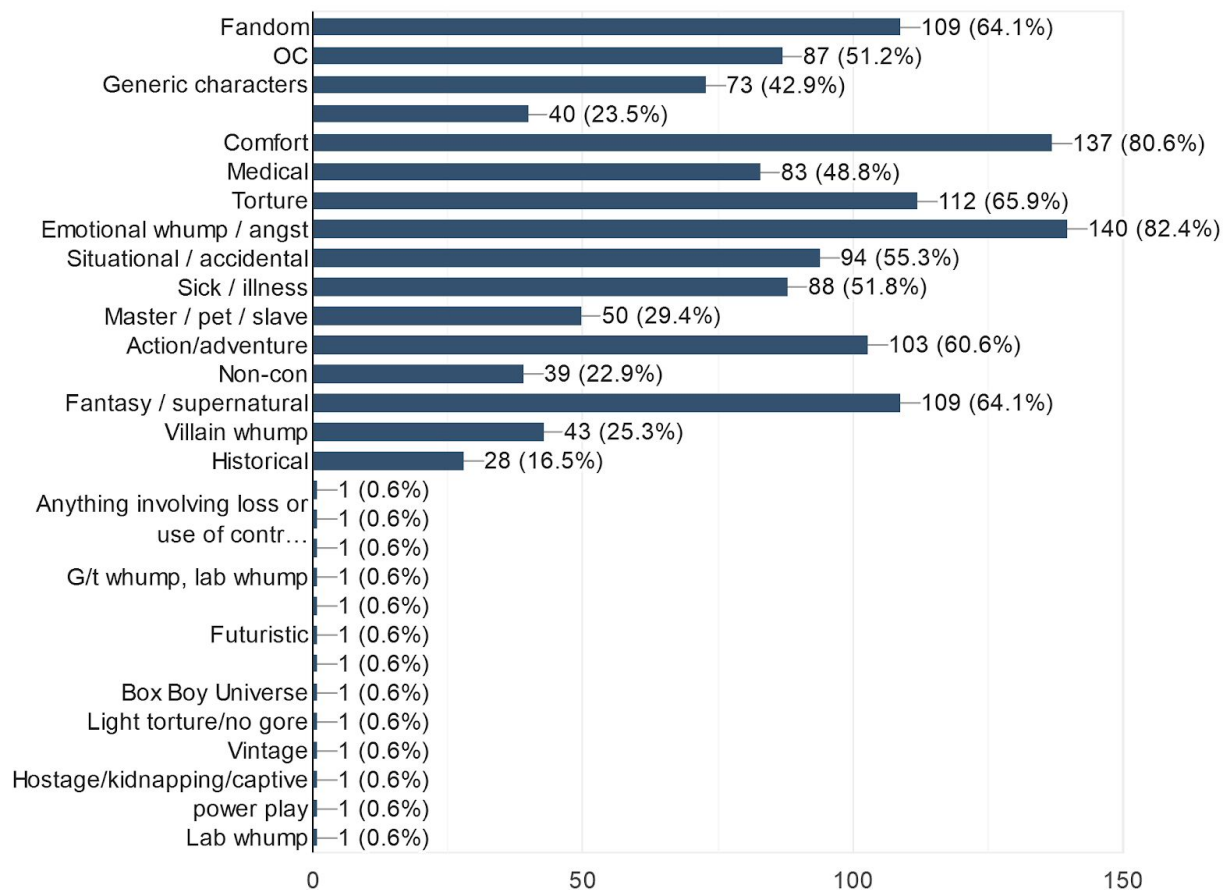
And good news for all the whumpers out there interested in whumping female characters: there are at least 39 of you! 23.1% of whump bloggers indicated they are interested in or blog about femwhump / womp.

There are a wonderful and wide variety of types and sub-genres of whump enjoyed in this community. Of the categories offered in the Directory, the most popular types of whump were:

1. Emotional whump / angst - 82.2% of blogs
2. Comfort - 80.5% of blogs
3. Torture - 65.7% of blogs
4. Fantasy / supernatural - 63.9% of blogs
5. Action / adventure - 60.4% of blogs
6. Situational / accidental - 55.6% of blogs
7. Sick / illness - 51.5% of blogs
8. Medical - 49.1% of blogs

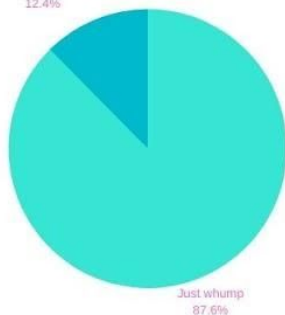
What types of whump do you blog about?

170 responses



WHUMP BLOGS: THE STATS

Whump+others
12.4%

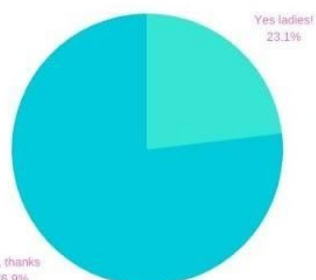
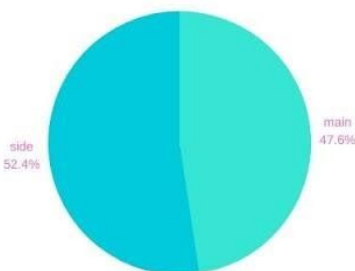


JUST WHUMP?

87.6% of respondents indicated that their blog was primarily for whump.

MAIN BLOG OR SIDE BLOG?

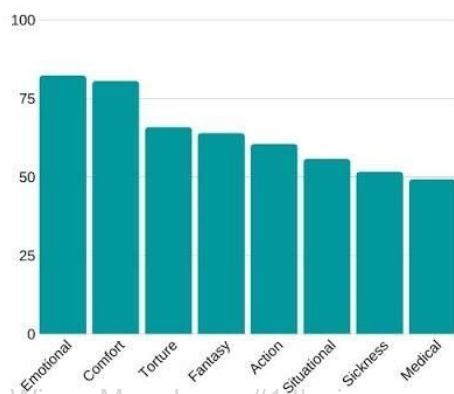
47.6% whumpy on main, 52.4% use a sideblog.



FEMWHUMP?

23.1% of whump bloggers indicated they are interested in or blog about femwhump / womp.

WHAT DO WE BLOG ABOUT?



Wince Mag, Issue #1 || wincemag.wordpress.com || wincemag.tumblr.com

Where are we whumping?

Finally, one of the great things about our whump community is the opportunity to connect with people all over the world and explore whump from sources we might otherwise never have had access to. The International category on the Directory allows bloggers who cover non-English-language whump to let it be known. Thus far, that includes Russian, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Russian, Turkish, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Finnish, German, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and French-Canadian whump! Maybe in time, we'll be able to spread the love of whump even further.

And that's the end of the statistics (you can wake up now). If you'd like to see more, you can download your own copy of the database in your preferred spreadsheet format to analyse, or just send an ask to [@whumpcommunity](#) and I'll happily respond with what information is available.

Where next?

I'd like to see the Directory continue to grow in the future with more entries for new and old whumpers alike, just as I hope this community will expand ever further, remaining an oasis of joy and whumpiness in the blue sea of Tumblr.

Yours with love,

[justwhumpythings](#)

About the author: Hello, my name is Sarah and I'm addicted to whump. Kidding! Mostly. I've been running [justwhumpythings](#) on Tumblr for nearly four years and whumping my faves for as long as I can remember. I also now mod the Whump Community Directory. I never really dreamed I would meet other whumpers and the community brings me joy every day!

Review of Martha Wells' *All Systems Red* by haich-slash-cee

“Is it even legal for one scifi novella to be this whumpy?” I asked aloud, studying my recently finished copy of Martha Wells' *All Systems Red*. I had casually started browsing the book, then ended up reading the entire story in one sitting. Yes, it's one of *those* books.

The protagonist of the novella series is a machine-organic hybrid (called a SecUnit or Security Unit), an AI who privately refers to itself as “Murderbot”. The series follows Murderbot's missions across planets and spaceships. Murderbot would prefer to binge-watch entertainment serials, not interact with humans (humans are very stressful for Murderbot) and definitely not get attached to the humans it has to protect. But, the best laid plans of mice and men and depressed rogue SecUnits, as they say.

The series starts with *All Systems Red*, where Murderbot is assisting a crew of scientists as they explore a planet. In the opening pages, Murderbot rescues the scientists from an alien hostile trying to chomp on them. During the process, Murderbot has to de-mask and reveal itself to be more than just the robot that the humans assumed it was. Now, much to the horror of Murderbot, the humans are *worrying* about their SecUnit and want to *talk* to it about its *feelings*. Murderbot cannot deal with this.

What the Murderbot can deal with is injuries, sort of. The SecUnit can heal and regenerate much quicker than humans. Murderbot often takes blows while trying to protect humans from alien life forms, hostiles and other dangers. This means quite a lot of gore and body horror in the book, mixed with casual horror from Murderbot, such as in this passage:

“So, I'm awkward with actual humans. It's not paranoia about my hacked governor module, and it's not them; it's me. I know I'm a horrifying murderbot, and they know, and it makes both of us nervous, which makes me even more nervous. Also, if I'm not in the armor then it's because I'm wounded and one of my organic parts may fall off and plop on the floor at any moment and no one wants to see that.”

As the book continues, the exploration team begins to uncover something strange about the planet and their mission. Along with the unfolding events, Murderbot (rather unwillingly) reveals its hidden inner life to the human crew. One of my favorite scenes is when one of the humans, Gurathin, finds out that the SecUnit has been watching seven hundred hours of an entertainment serial since the mission started. The team doesn't believe this. Then a crew member gets a plot point from the serial wrong, Murderbot starts fan-arguing (despite itself), and the crew realizes their SecUnit really has been watching the serial. All seven hundred hours of it.

In terms of hurt/comfort and whump, there's a slew of physical things thrown at Murderbot, as mentioned -- inhuman injuries, the AI unit being shut down or forced off-line, even an incident with invasive malware and self-sacrifice. What I liked most was how *nice* the cast of characters is. The worried

humans bring a marshmallow-goopy emotional comfort, an excellent complement to all the things happening with Murderbot. The emotional care really rounds out the book and is pleasing to read. As the story progresses, the humans and the SecUnit bond (despite Murderbot's intentions of this not happening). Without spoiling too much, we have this classic line near the end, directed at a physically-compromised Murderbot:

"Shut up," Mensah snapped. "You shut the fuck up. We're not leaving you."

Yessss! So good!

As a meta-aside: the out-of-context, sincere reviews for the Murderbot series are also excellent:

"I love Murderbot!" — Ann Leckie, author of Ancillary Justice

"We are all a little bit Murderbot." — NPR

"Endearing, funny, action-packed, and murderous." —Kameron Hurley, author of The Stars are Legion

I've read the series and I still did a double take at some of the blurbs.

Featuring a diverse human cast; critiques of capitalism; commentary on gender identities and being human (especially in later books); loads of hurt/comfort and whumpiness (especially in the first book); and occasional bouts of humor -- *All Systems Red* and the Murderbot novellas are a fun read. You can catch up just in time for the next book, *The Network Effect*, a full-length Murderbot novel coming out in May 2020.

Editor's Note: *If you just can't wait for Network Effect, Martha Wells' name has popped up elsewhere on lists of [whumpy books](#) for her Stargate Atlantis tie-in novels and for her Books of the Raksura series.*

Stigma Surrounding Whump Interest: Summary of Results by Renée Nielsen

(Originally appeared on Tumblr [here](#).)

Here is the summary of results from the survey on “Stigma surrounding whump interest”!

A brief overview:

- The survey had 843 respondents
- The mean age of respondents was 20.7 years (standard deviation: 2 years)
- The majority of participants in the survey reported experiencing low levels of self-consciousness in regard to their whump interest within the whump community, and high levels of self-consciousness outside of the whump community.
- Raising awareness of whump interest is complex, and may not necessarily help lessen the stigma

Thanks again to everyone who participated in the survey!

Introduction/summary of research

This summary of results is from a research project undertaken by Renée Nielsen, a student at IPU New Zealand Tertiary Institute, as part of an assignment for the paper Research Skills 1 in the School of Global Studies at IPU NZ Tertiary Institute.

The focus of this research is the stigma surrounding the whump community.

The research investigates the impact of the stigma surrounding the whump community (i.e., the perception that the type of fiction people consume reflects a person’s character thus causing people interested in whump to be potentially perceived negatively). The aim was to raise awareness of the stigma and determine where improvements could be made to help lessen the impacts of the stigma experienced by people with an interest in whump.

This survey was part of this research.

Summary of results

Biodata

A total of 843 responses were collected during the period of surveying.

Of the 97.8% of participants who did give an indication of their age, the mean age was 20.67 years with a standard deviation of 2.02 years.

Table 1

Biodata of the respondents

Demographic Variables	Frequency (n = 843)	%
<i>Age (years)</i>		
Under 18	208	24.7
18-24	396	47
25-34	174	20.6
35-44	35	4.2
45-54	7	0.8
55 or above	0	0
Prefer not to say	23	2.7
<i>Gender</i>		
Non-binary/agender	184	21.8
Male	67	7.9
Female	559	66.3
Prefer not to say	33	3.9
<i>Religion/Faith</i>		
Religious	255	30.2
Past, not present	155	18.4
No	308	36.5
Prefer not to say	125	14.8

Whump Interests

The majority of respondents (90.2%) showed high levels of interest in whump.

The three most common whump scenarios were hurt/comfort, angst and emotional whump. The three least common were hurt no comfort, sickfic and other.

The three most common reasons participants had an interest in whump were because of a general interest, character development and for the thrill/adrenaline/tension. The three least common reasons were due to kink, trauma processing and other.

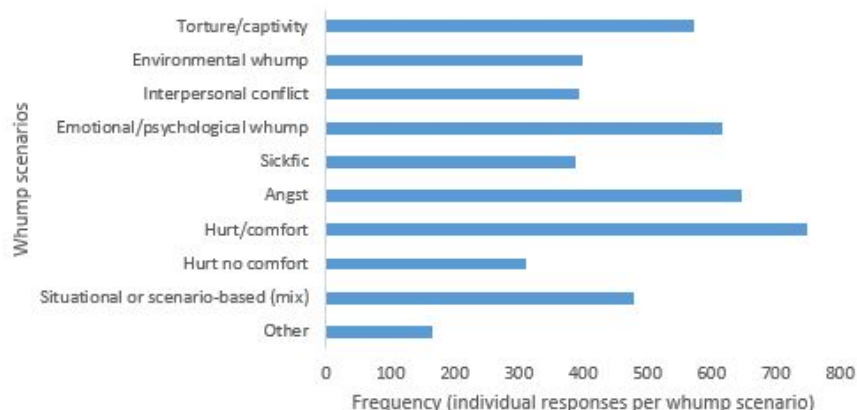


Figure 1. Levels of interest in various whump scenarios.

Feelings re whump interest

Half of the participants (50.1%) had known about their interest in whump for a long time. Just over a quarter (26.5%) said they'd known for a few years. Over a tenth (12.8%) said they'd found out recently, and the remaining said they were not sure (5.9%) or were not aware (4.7%) beforehand.

In regard to the main reaction participants primarily felt after becoming aware of their whump interest, 21.7% reported feeling somewhat self-conscious, 18.6% reported having no worries, 18.1% reported feeling concerned about what others might think. 14.9% reported feeling isolated, and another 11.9% concerned about themselves. The remaining participants felt ashamed, not sure or other.

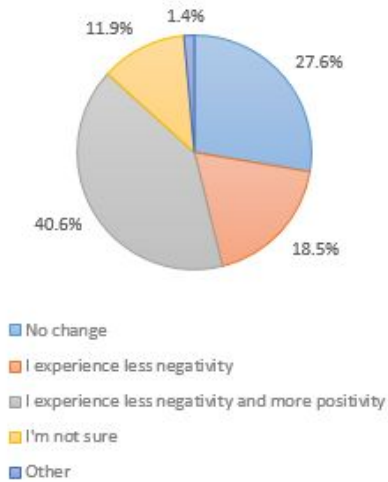


Figure 2. Change in participants' levels of self-conscious after becoming aware that interest in whump is a common shared experience among other people.

More than half the participants (59.1%) reported feeling less negatively after becoming aware that interest in whump is a common thing, with 40.6% reporting they also felt more positively. Others experienced no change (27.6%), were not sure (11.9%) or other (1.4%).

Awareness of whump interest

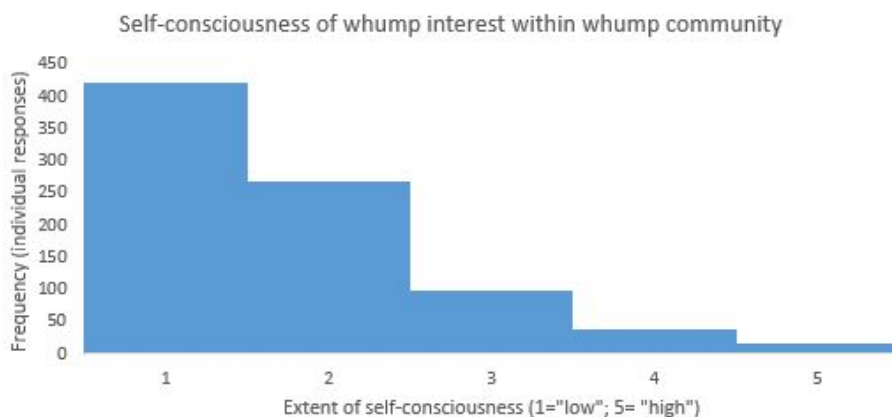


Figure 3. Likert scale representing extent of self-consciousness participants experience within the whump community. Value range from 1 meaning “unfazed” to 5 meaning “extremely self-conscious”.

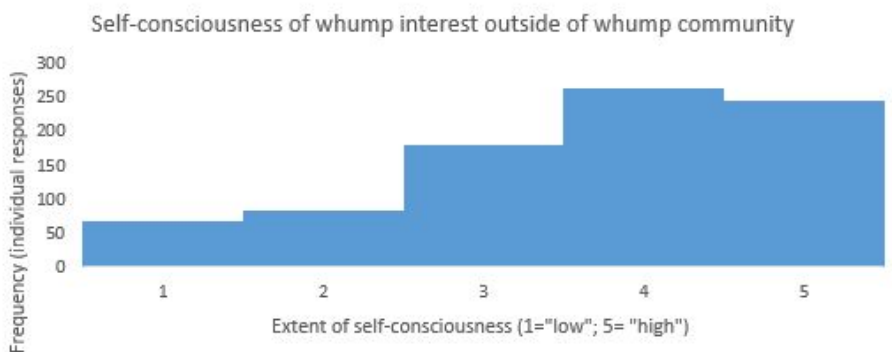


Figure 4. Likert scale representing extent of self-consciousness participants experience outside of the whump community. Value range from 1 meaning “unfazed” to 5 meaning “extremely self-conscious”.

These results illustrate a notable difference in self-consciousness in regard to their whump interest experienced by people with whump interest within and outside of the whump community, with the majority of participants experiencing relatively low levels of self-consciousness within the whump community and high levels of self-consciousness outside of the whump community.

On asking whether or not raising awareness of whump interest would lessen stigma: 30.2% of participants said yes, 42.7% said they were not sure, 8.2% said no, 16.6% said they thought it would have adverse effects, and 2.3% said other.

Main points from optional open-ended question

Of the 843 participants, 133 (15.8%) responded to the optional open-ended question at the end of the survey that left room for additional comments. Almost half of the comments (48.9%) mentioned some aspect of awareness (on a personal or wider scope) (21.1%) or some aspect of shame/self-consciousness/conscientiousness/judgement (27.8%).

Re stigma

There were several comments mentioning how their discussions and or research on whump interest have been halted by fears of repercussions on personal life relationships, reputation and career. These comments show that the stigma itself has prevented research and discussion from being undertaken in regard to whump interest.

14 respondents (10.5%) to this optional question stated that they do not experience the stigma surrounding the whump community.

Re whump interest

Respondents identified two major centres of interest that make up the whump community: kink and hurt/comfort. Many comments had, or mentioned awareness of, the assumption that whump interest is primarily kink-orientated (that is, orientated around fascinations of sexual attraction). There were many comments in which the respondent mentioned that they are asexual or aromantic asexual, and that their interest in whump is in the hurt/comfort side.

This highlights that raising awareness of whump interest is complex, and that in order to raise awareness of whump interest and lessen the impacts of the stigma surrounding the whump community, awareness would have to be raised in other areas first.

Conclusion

This research investigated the extent to which the stigma surrounding the whump community is experienced in order to raise awareness of this stigma and determine what might be necessary for the negative impacts of the stigma to be lessened.

Key findings in this research include that people do experience negative impacts of the stigma, that raising awareness of whump interest would be complex and that lessening the stigma would involve increased awareness, understanding and research in a wide range of areas first.

Recommendations

More research is needed in this area of study.

Contact

If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact me (email s2190239@ipu.ac.nz or Tumblr [@callaei-researches](https://www.tumblr.com/@callaei-researches)), or my supervisor, Hayati Jalal (email ahayati@ipu.ac.nz).

Thanks again to all the participants who took part in this research!

Follow This Research

If you would like to follow any further research in this area, you can get updates when it's happening by following the Tumblr blog [@callaei-researches](https://www.tumblr.com/@callaei-researches). This is a blog I have created specifically for any more research I will do in regard to whump interest or related.

The next research project will most likely be in September-October 2

About the author: Renée Nielsen is a New Zealand university student currently studying at IPU New Zealand Tertiary Institute. She is also the author of the "[Kindall K](#)" series, an independently published thriller/action & adventure novel series. Her favourite stories typically feature whump, hurt/comfort and found family. She likes coffee, winter and long nature walks.

No Less Beautiful by Athena Ryals

When I was seven years old, I had a secret. I would sneak down to the computer my parents kept in the office, an ancient thing with a clunky keyboard and a screen that went back several inches until it pressed against the wall behind the desk. We were allowed to use it to write documents, make art in the “paint” program we had, and practice flying on the flight simulator. (My father was insistent that all of his three daughters would be in the Air Force. That dream, unfortunately for him, has been thoroughly killed.)

I say “sneak” when referencing my adventures with the computer that was truly there for my use because I knew I was doing something that was somehow taboo: I was writing stories that I found so exciting, it embarrassed me.

I couldn’t understand why I found the parts of stories that seemed to be bad so exciting. When people got hurt, when they screamed and cried, when they collapsed in their friend’s arms, desperate and scared, I felt something that I couldn’t explain. I’d rewind parts of movies to watch them over and over so I could keep feeling that fluttering inside that came every time I saw those special things. I’d push my siblings to watch an entire movie just so I could see the good scene at the end when the hero collapsed and nearly died. I’d repeat episodes of shows where someone would cry, truly cry.

And so I decided to make those stories for myself. My first one was about a unicorn who was captured by...it doesn’t really matter who, honestly. They were bad people intent on hurting my character. They tied her up, shipped her off, sold her at an auction like a slave. She made friends with another girl in the story (self-insert fic, much?) who was also in danger. Over and over again they escaped and were captured, set free and reclaimed. Then, when I couldn’t stand the tension any longer, the captors took the girl and hanged her. The unicorn had to save her. It was the best thing I had ever read in my entire life, and it was mine.

Then I put those stories, and the feelings that came with them, away. I knew somehow that what I was doing was wrong, that no one else in the world liked these things, and there was something wrong with me for liking them. I pretended I didn’t like what I like. I kept watching those good scenes in movies.

When I was 16, I felt like my life was a waking nightmare. Awash in the most horrendous cocktail of hormones a human can expect to experience over the course of a life, I trembled at the violent, delicious scenarios I had rattling around in my mind. I struggled for months over writing these things. I knew, once again, that there was something wrong with me. I wrote in my diary over and over that if anyone ever found out about my secret thoughts, if anyone were to ever read the things I enjoyed, I’d be

committed for insanity. Oh well. I started to write again.

For months I was obsessed with my two imagined characters, David and Nia. Every night I would imagine them dodging bullets (and taking their fair share, of course), getting captured by the bad guys, getting tortured for information, nearly dying in each other's arms over and over. I wrote the stories out. I read them and reread them, making notes and tiny corrections, reveling in the rediscovered feelings those things brought me: the excitement, the joy, the unabashed pleasure of seeing these characters be hurt, and mended, and hurt again. After about a year, I put them away again. It was something I needed to get over, I told myself, and I'd get over it by burying it.

Years passed. College took all my time and although I still felt that desire for the intensity of violence, the vulnerability of the fallout after, it was on the back burner. Life after college was even busier.

I fell into a well of work, school, work, volunteering, more work. I was pursuing a new career. I had nothing but work. There was no room in my life to be creative.

Then, last year, I felt like my life was on the brink of falling apart again. Planning a small wedding for myself and my husband blew up into a several-hundred-person nuclear war that forced me to juggle four families across four countries (and two continents) and all their feuds and squabbles and actual human suffering. It drained me. It consumed me.

I started to write.

At first it was a spiteful little moment to reclaim something that was entirely mine as I was being bled dry by the people who demanded my time, energy, and love. I'll do something taboo, I thought. I'll do something secret, just for me.

I got a Tumblr and felt around for friends. What I found was a community thousands-strong of kind, sweet people who liked the same things I did. I was astounded. There were people out there who liked the same movies I did, the same stories, who liked the violence and torture and hard recovery that I felt so secretly, morbidly drawn to. There were people like me out there. And they weren't sick, they weren't bad people. They were good people, who understood boundaries and the consequences of the traumas people face. I edited and polished my David and Nia drabbles and put them online. It felt like getting naked in front of a hundred strangers. This is what I made, what I like.

And that was ok. It was welcomed. Loved.

Two weeks after I found this community, I found a writing challenge: Whumptober. It was a simple 31-day challenge to write something every day for a specific prompt. I figured I'd try one or two. Ten years prior I had written a drabble where David saves Nia from the main villain, who had tortured her for 24 hours before he got there. Maybe it's time I use this challenge to write that scene, I thought.

Thirty-one days later I had completed a fic tens of thousands of words long. I had bled my heart out onto the page. I had gone farther with the violence than I ever had before. I'd liked it. And other people had, too.

In the Whumptober challenge I had also written a few vague drabbles with nameless characters, just a little scenario of rescue after torture. It got a huge response. I decided to continue it.

That fic turned into the longest story I've ever written. It took me deep into the psychology of trauma. Each one of my characters became a facet of who I am and who I want to be: the snarky, bitter one. The earnest healer. The sweet and innocent child. The fearless hero. The traumatized warrior. The nurturing friend. I pulled from my own experiences to write the pain and frustration of long-term recovery from an unimaginable stressor. I knitted together these characters' experiences and learned to open their hearts up for catharsis, for healing. I wrapped up that story. I started another.

And still I felt that shame. Still I felt that deep, nagging darkness that made me want to hide it all away. On the one hand, I've written a story I'm really proud of. On the other, I can never share this with most people I know. It's been a journey to accept this thing about me that is strange but no less beautiful than anything else. It's been hard to see that the judgement of others is not a reflection of who I am, but of what they project onto me. It's been hard to feel that rejection from friends I want to share this with, but can't.

I have friends here, though. I have friends who understand what it is to find pleasure and joy in the intimacy of pain, the vulnerability of loss and recovery. The intensity of relationships born from trauma. I'm so grateful for the people I've met, the people I can talk to every day, the people I can go to for support and humor and love. I've found something that helps me accept myself. I've found something beautiful.

About the author: [Athena](#) is a long-time writer and lover of whump. She works on the ambulance as a paramedic and draws from her experiences with a search-and-rescue and SWAT team to make her field medicine and rescues feel as real as they can. When she's not writing she's spending time with her husband and their cat, hiking the beautiful Colorado mountains, and journaling. She's overjoyed to have found a community that loves all the terrible, wonderful things she does.

Minds of Men by Evelyn M. Lewis

The Senate meeting that day was indeed short, as Cirios had promised. Around noon guests, bureaucrats, and even a few Senators began emerging from the front doors of the white-columned building.

Kate stood aside, by the neatly-pruned shrubs, until she spotted her uncle.

“Kate!” he remarked, flashing a baby-kissing grin. Cirios made his way across the pavilion. “I hope I haven’t kept you waiting too long. Early dismissal, just as I suspected. Ah, takes me back to my schoolboy days.”

Kate nodded tightly. “So, you said you knew of something that might help my magic. What did you have in mind?”

Yesterday she’d come so close to finally doing magic. So close. But she’d failed again. Born with a psychic disability, Kate had been driven to try other forms of magic, even getting a human tutor, a sorcerer named Andris. But yesterday she’d failed him as well. She was running out of options, and was interested in anything Cirios had to offer.

“It’s a bit of a... er... technique, really, an experimental technique. Why don’t you come with me?”

Kate began to follow him along the front of the Senate building then around the side.

“There’s a door back here,” he said, by way of explanation, “that leads more directly to some of the offices and meeting rooms where I often spend time with my interns, or doing work after hours with the other Senators. Come on.”

“What’s your technique?” asked Kate, giving a skip to keep up.

“Ah, yes. Well, I’ve been doing a little research on the side, into... *opening the mind*, as it were. You know that the Germane is one of my areas of special interest. I believe I can help you become who you were meant to be – I mean to access the Germane, the interior light of Inaden—without resorting to the inferior human forms of magic.”

“How?” asked Kate, but Cirios just shook his head. “Wait.”

He would not answer further until they had come all the way round the building, and entered through a small white door in the back. There they ventured down a soft carpeted hallway, rich and elegant, but empty.

As they passed the doors, Kate noted small bronze plaques bearing titles:

Committee on Energy

Committee on Commerce

These were large, decorative doors. However, they walked on into the dimmer areas of the building, which smelled faintly like dust and were bathed in the sort of deep quiet that suggested they'd sat a hundred years or more walked by only the stray Senator and janitor. The committee names grew more obscure. In some of the doors there was a tiny glass window through which she could see the diminishing size of the offices, some only a tiny one-chair and single desk affair.

Committee On the Conservation of Lepidoptera

Committee For the Promotion of Religious Orthodoxy

Committee For the Promotion of Peaceable Human-Elf Relations

It was at this last one that Cirios stopped and drew out a key ring from his robe pocket. He opened the door with a tiny key. "Ah, here we are. Come on in."

The room was larger than the other offices, and different. It had no visible desks. Instead it was hexagonal, with dark, wood-paneled walls, and a closed-up closet in the back. There were inset faux columns at each corner and the floors were stone – like a luxurious conference room, but bare.

"Conference room," said Cirios, echoing her thoughts. "Sorry, let me pull out some chairs."

He opened the closet, and a faint yellow light came on inside, while Cirios disappeared. "Let me help," said Kate, moving up.

"No—no, no," he waved her back a little too hurriedly. "It's fine. I've got it." A moment later he dragged out a folding chair and a straight-legged, cushioned seat, hastily kicking the closet shut behind him.

He pushed the cushioned chair towards her. "For you."

Kate was beginning to feel a little nervous, but took the seat. He still hadn't told her what his "method" was, and she felt rather strange about being here with him alone. She found herself thinking wistfully about getting back to her mother and the team.

"Now then," said Cirios, sitting on the folding chair nearby. His voice echoed strangely into the empty conference room. "About your magic."

She nodded.

"Magic is important to us, Kate. It's a part of our religion. It's superior to the tacky human imitations and substitutes, and to the feeble contrivance they call "science". Any attempt to blend that sacred art with technology can result only in the most profane and blasphemous inventions."

Kate blinked, curling her fingers on the armrests.

"Once you learn to value—truly value—ah, but let me start at the beginning. You know the story of the creation. You know how it was that Inaden took the magic from creation and placed it in the Heart, which

he set at the center of the planet, in the First Temple. Then—humans. The humans, in their attempt to reach the Heart, drove Inaden to fling it across the universe and into the unknown. And since then, ever since that day, from all mankind has flowed a disgusting stream of evil, and corruption, and every vice and wickedness.”

He paused, closing his eyes. “This taint has even reached as far as some of the elves—who are and should be Inaden’s only unfallen creation. And yet... there are some of us... who still work to safeguard the borders of Achetia. To keep the human evil out. And to purify what lies within.

“Although so many in this country—and even some within my own party—have become tangled up in association with humans, there are those such as myself: the select few who remain pure. And I believe that you, being raised in Dralina among humans, may have acquired certain... deficiencies.”

Kate focused again on him in a split second, her subdued disagreement turning to outrage. “Hey—”

“Not a judgement upon you, personally, my dear,” mused Cirios, holding up a hand. “It’s an unfortunate by-product of time and place. I think you have better things in you. If you were to... perhaps... purify yourself... I believe you could re-awaken your potential.”

She couldn’t hide her disgust, but he ignored it. “What are you talking about?”

“By offering yourself in service to the unfallen,” said Cirios, rising to his feet and holding out a hand. “What do you say?”

It wasn’t until this word, *unfallen*, that Kate fully understood.

The Unfallen. Cirios, her uncle and Senator, was a member of the terrorist group that had been sending death threats to her mother’s human ambassadors.

Her eyes widened, but she stiffed him for the handshake, instead pushing herself up from the armrests. “No thank you,” she said, her voice rising in pitch. “This isn’t what I came for. I—I’d like to go home now.”

Cirios’s hand did not move. Instead, his brow furrowed, and Kate felt an invisible force throw her back against the chair.

“Hey!” She struggled, but was held fast against the sturdy wooden chair. Indeed, struggling caused a cramping pain, as though—as though she were holding *herself* to the chair. It was like her own muscles were locked in place and wouldn’t obey her. “Let me go! You bastard! Let me go, you asshole!”

Still not speaking or breaking concentration, Cirios went to the closet. Kate spit forth a steady stream of curses and obscenities as he brought forth a roll of tape. *Whatever he’s about to do—talk him out of it.*

“For hell’s sake,” she gasped, though constricted lungs. “This is crazy. What do you want from me?”

He pulled off a strip of tape with a *zip*, still concentrating too hard on mentally holding her in place to answer back.

“You’re an idiot,” she told him as he tied her wrists down, and then her ankles to the feet of the chair. “Here? Right here in the Senate building? You’ll never—get—away—with—it.”

As he finished, the pressure on her body released suddenly, and she took a giant gasp of air.

“I think I will,” said Cirios. “As you can see, this place doesn’t get much traffic. I have the only key to this room.” He flashed the same beatific smile he’d given her on the way in. “And who’s going to question Senator Dynetius, pillar of the community?” He reached out to stroke her chin.

Kate lunged to bite his fingers, and he jerked away hastily. “Oh, right. One last thing.” He placed a wide strip of tape over her mouth. “Just to make sure you don’t call for help.”

Kate immediately tried to spit the tape free and give him a cutting reply, but it seemed fixed with something beyond glue—maybe a trace of magic? She couldn’t be sure. She growled in anger anyway, to make sure he knew how she felt about it.

Cirios backed away, slowly at first, but faster when he seemed assured that she couldn’t get away. He opened the door. “Sit tight, darling.” And then it shut behind him and Kate was alone in the hexagonal room, around her the echo of the key turning in the lock.



Mrs. Dynetius was already putting dinner on the table (a hot roasted bird, steaming with yellow spices) when her son came in.

“Why hello, Ciri,” said the elf woman. “Why don’t you sit down and eat with us?” She gave a gesture to Juliana Riley, and to Daniel and Cass, the human diplomats from Dralina.

Daniel looked up with suspicion, wishing he could read minds too.

“Don’t mind if I do.” Cirios stripped off his coat and hung it over the back of his chair, then pulled off a pair of gray gloves and tucked them in his pocket. He had two gold rings on his left hand.

“Where have you been today?” asked Riley. “I thought the Senate got out early.”

“Certainly did,” said Cirios, taking a slice of breast onto his plate. “However, I had some calls to make—literal and metaphorical. Spent some time in the office. You know how it is. Politics is a dull but demanding mistress.”

“Mm-hm. Have you seen Kate anywhere today?” Riley was almost casual, but her direct gaze betrayed

her.

“Kate? Why no, I haven’t. Why do you ask?”

“I haven’t seen her around at all today. I thought she was with you.”

“With me?” Cirios shook his head in amazement. “You know I wouldn’t have time for that, Juli, I’ve been busy all day.”

Riley frowned and stabbed her plate voraciously.

“But that is terribly concerning. I wonder where she could have gotten off to?”

Daniel had to admit, he didn’t sound *entirely* sincere.

“I’ll keep both eyes peeled for her, Juli,” Cirios said in a reassuring tone. “I promise.”

“Well that’s very kind,” snapped Riley, pushing her chair back, “but I need to go look for my daughter. I’ve been sitting around long enough. If you know anything, Cirios, anything that you’re not telling me, anything at all, I swear I’ll hang you from the rafters.”

“JULI!” snapped Mrs. Dynetius in horror.

Riley didn’t respond, but grabbed her own coat from the closet and stalked out the door.

The rest of the meal was finished in stony silence.

Cirios wiped his fingers with his napkin, dabbed his lips, and stood up. “Well then,” he said. “Thank you for the meal, mother. That was truly lovely. And now I’m afraid I’ve got to leave again. I have some business to attend to, and I won’t be back until later tonight. I hope to see you all at the hearing tomorrow.” With that he picked up his coat and made his exit.

After the table was cleared, Cass and Daniel sat on the couch. “What if the Unfallen got her?” Cass asked when Mrs. Dynetius was out of hearing.

He put his arm around her. “Probably not. I’m sure Riley will be back with her soon.”

“But... it could be Cirios. You saw how he was.”

He hesitated. He didn’t trust the senator at all. But there was more to it than that. He looked away from Cass. “And how do we know she’s not on his *side*?”

“What? Daniel, what are you talking about?” Cass drew back, trying to see his face.

“You heard what he offered her.”

“No, I didn’t hear anything.”

“Well, I did. I overheard it at the Dam Kasha. They were talking together and he was saying all this stuff about the superiority of elves, whatever. And he told her he could cure her disability. Help her with her magic, you know. All the stuff she really wants. She might—”

He dared a glance and Cass was staring at him in utter shock and horror. “Daniel! How could you believe something like that about Kate? She doesn’t believe any of that stuff. She’d never betray us like that.”

“But—“ he squirmed, reddening. “You know what she did to us. At the palace. She doesn’t really *care* that much. If she did—”

“Yes, she does!” Cass cut him off. “You never *talk* to anyone, do you? Why don’t you listen? Open your eyes! She absolutely beat herself up about it for weeks! Even though it wasn’t her fault, it really, objectively wasn’t. If she had been captured there, back in the palace, where would we all be? A pile of bones on Tanoth, that’s where. All three of us.”

Finally her words had found the mark. Daniel winced. He couldn’t argue, all he could do was try to sit up straight and take it like a man.

“Now you knock it off. Quit being a dumbass right now and help us find Kate.”



Kate couldn’t produce very much noise and soon found that the energy spent wasn’t worth it, so instead of struggling she sat, listening deeper and deeper into the Senate building. She heard her heartbeat and breathing, nose whistle and all, close at hand; the silent echo of the stone-floored conference room, and then far away in the halls, the silent cushion of the carpets and the deep creaks of the building settling in for the night. There was, once, a footstep, directly overhead. Kate gave a muffled yell and tapped her toes on the floor. It was all she could do. The steps soon passed without incident.

It was later, much later, when she began to hear the approach of muffled voices and footsteps, from along the hall on the same level. They came closer and closer, and, realizing they would soon pass by her door, she began struggling again, in more earnest than ever before. She rocked the heavy chair with a resounding *clop, clop*.

And then the footsteps stopped. The voices grew louder, outside the door, all speaking over one another, and then a *key* turned in the lock and Kate’s heart flipped over with the realization that this was not rescue.

Cirios walked in, smiling, followed by Tychus and two other elf men she didn’t recognize.

“Here she is, gentlemen.”

One of the other elves whistled. “You really did it, huh?”

“Juliana’s daughter. She has a psychic deficiency. She can’t use telepathy. Or block telepathy, for that matter. You can try it if you don’t believe me.”

“Looks just like her mother, too,” remarked Tychus. “That bitch.”

Cirios approached her and ripped the tape off with a hard jerk.

Kate had been waiting for this moment. She immediately began a continuous earsplitting shriek, as loud as she could manage.

“No, no no no no nonono. Never mind, shut up shut up.” Cirios raised a hand and she felt her jaw snap shut hard, almost biting her tongue in the process, and then her voice died away. She took a deep breath and tried again, but it was as though the air was sucked from her lungs every time she tried to yell. She wheezed, dizzy from sudden loss of oxygen.

Tychus stepped up, and Cirios moved aside for him. The sharp-nosed man put his hands on his knees and bent down, looking into her eyes. She could feel a light pressure in through her own eyes and she closed them, resisting, but *that’s not how it works. Idiot. He really was right about you, amazing.*

Are you reading my mind? Read this, you son of a bitch. Kate took the opportunity to impress upon him a variety of unflattering titles.

Tychus withdrew quickly. But the next thing she knew, his fist crashed into the side of her head at full force.

Kate froze, stunned, as her brain flowed back into place like treacle.

Tychus shook out his hand. “Gah. Almost as good as the real thing.”

“Whoa whoa whoa, whoa!” Cirios interjected, throwing an arm between Tychus and Kate. “What are you doing? She can’t have any marks on her if we want this to go off as planned.”

Tychus shrugged. “All right, all right. She’ll be fine, look. I didn’t even hit her face. No marks.”

“Bring it out, Dynetius,” said one of the other elf men, who had long hair tied up in a knot. “I haven’t seen your machine yet and I want to know how it works.”

“Patience, Michelos,” replied Cirios, but he walked over to the closet and threw open the doors.

Kate’s eyes widened to look inside, and Cirios took the golden opportunity for another pinch of mind-reading. “It’s your lucky day, Kate. You’re going to do so much for the cause.” *I’m not doing shit for you.*

“Oh, you will. Let me explain what you are going to do.” He chuckled drily. “You’re going to help us rid this planet of humans. You see... there are some people who think this vote might actually go in your mother’s favor. People *like* her. She’s so pretty, and popular, the widowed daughter of Dynetius the Elder, so mysterious and well-spoken. Imagine if she got her way! But that simply won’t do. Now imagine if a member of the Dralinian emissary were to spoil their welcome in some way, such as, for example, by committing a heinous crime? I was thinking I’d have you kill somebody.”

What was he *thinking*? Was he going to frame her for a crime? She tensed against the bonds, once again wheezing as she tried to speak.

“Yes, it’s funny how the telepathy only goes one way, isn’t it?”

Get out of my HEAD!

Cirios laughed. “Darling, you have no idea how much worse it’s going to get.” He turned aside to

the closet, where, at first, all Kate could see was chairs. “To answer your question, Michelos, I developed my invention for use on humans. I’ve never used it on an elf before, but she doesn’t have psychic abilities, so the effects should be more or less the same. I don’t think she’ll be able to resist the mind control.”

Mind control. Kate struggled again, forced to digest the wretched truth. *No. That’s not possible. He can’t make me DO anything.* And yet, sure as he could read her thoughts, she knew that it was possible.

He would take her body and use it to kill someone. And after that the best case scenario, not the *worst*, but the *best*, would be a world where everyone knew her shame; where everyone knew that she was too weak to stop him. Everyone would know who she was, a walking opportunity, born a plaything to those stronger than herself.

She felt sick to her stomach. There had to be a way to stop this. She couldn’t escape, she’d tried that. Maybe she’d have had a chance to talk him out of it, if she *could* talk. She panted heavily.

From deep within the back of the closet, Cirios brought forth a curious object.

It was a glass sphere sitting upon a narrow rolling stand, at about hip height. Inside the glass sphere was a crystal. Kate knew these crystals -- they were used to store psychic energy for use in technology, usually. What was unusual about the device, however, was not the crystal, but the large number of cords and wires attached to the bottom of the sphere, hanging down off the edge of the stand.

Cirios rolled it closer. “Though humans don’t have the capacity to resist mind control,” he explained, “there is a drawback to their lack of psychic involvement. Their brains are simply not designed for telepathy; the human skull is quite impenetrable. This presented a problem for me, in trying to figure out how to bypass the usual channels. For other elves, of course, we simply use the door to the brain, which is opened using the window to the soul—”

With this, his eyes lit on hers, and she seized her moment.

Let me talk.

“You’ll scream again.”

I won’t. Promise.

He must have judged that she was telling the truth, for her ragged breathing suddenly gripped the air again. She spoke.

“So that thing. Magic and technology, huh? I thought you were against that. Profanity or something like that.”

“Sometimes these things must be done for the greater good,” said Cirios smugly, although the other Unfallen looked doubtful. “Is that all you wanted to say?”

“That and *screw you*.” Then she started to scream.

Cirios shut her up again quickly.

“Why’d you do that, Ciri?” asked Michelos.

“She promised,” Cirios grumbled. “I swear it felt sincere.”

I changed my mind. Kate hoped he could feel her smugness. Being chaotic had its advantages.

“At any rate. I’ve tried to get to a human’s mind by sheer brute force, but it turns out that kills them. I needed to bypass the skull -- that is to say, the human’s dense outer wall -- which explains why my invention is more invasive than the standard psychic amplifier.”

With this, Cirios began to demonstrate. He picked up the end of one of the wires and brought it towards her left temple. Kate squirmed away, fear and hate rising stronger inside of her.

“This will be easier if you keep still.”

There’s no way I’m going to just LET you do this, you piece of...

“Have it your way, then.” He didn’t bother with the psychic mumbo-jumbo this time, just grabbed her hair – she tensed at the pain – and secured the sensor to her left temple with a piece of tape. The cords dangled about her shoulders.

He moved around to place the second one on the right, then dusted his hands. “The next two go on the eyes.”

Oh no. I won’t be able to see. I won’t be able to see.

“That’s right,” he said, and once again she was forcibly reminded that he could *hear her thoughts*, he knew she was afraid, there was *no privacy no privacy, block him out, you can do it, block him out now*.

She concentrated.

Close the doors, the doors, close them. She did what her mother had told her, picturing herself putting a distance between herself and Cirios, pushing him away with a hand, shrinking him on the horizon.

“I think she’s trying to block me,” said Cirios, voice full of amusement. He now stood behind the chair. “Anyway, the eyes.” Kate’s heartbeat rose into her throat. The last thing she saw was Michelos, Tychus and the other elf leaning in to get a closer look. Then she felt Cirios’ fingers on her chin, pushing her head back towards the ceiling, and he pushed the cold, round metal pieces, the size of a coin, down over her eyes. The stretch of tape, a tight pressure as it was wound about her head, and the light died.

This was so much worse. She could hear them moving all around her but she didn’t know what they were doing. Kate bared her teeth.

“And the final two...” his voice moved position as he spoke. “...are placed directly on the brain.”

Then he grabbed her chin again. She struggled, but his wrist was pressing into her throat and she choked, then something went up her nose.

Kate tried to scream. She could still breathe, but whatever it was, (*the wires, the sensors*) had gone all the way up and up into her sinuses with an unbearable tickling and then – she was going to sneeze, or throw up—and then *somewhere* else and she could still sort of feel them but it was duller and heavier *I'm going to throw up I'm going to throw up*

She gagged.

“Just like that.”

Kate twisted and thrashed, but only succeeded in jostling the wires, and creating a keener awareness. Her heart *wouldn't* slow down, not while this *thing* was *touching* her. She felt herself shaking like a leaf.

And then Cirios was in her mind.

It was true that he was not the first person to ever be there uninvited. Andris had been there, once, but his scope had been limited to Envisionment; the light skim of the visual cortex. Compared to Cirios, Andris had been imperceptible, delicate, and chaste.

Likewise, her mother's touch was gentle and subtle, having at least the ease of familiarity, even when it wasn't strictly desired. And her father had always been polite. He had always knocked, as though on the bedroom door of an isolating teenager, and waited for admission. Even that he did rarely, which Kate regretted – he had felt like it was rude to telepath with her when she could not reciprocate. But the truth was that elves were meant to use telepathy, and her own disability made it all the more necessary for others to come to her first.

But if her father had knocked politely, Cirios had kicked down the door. He was not like a person in her mind, not really. She couldn't read *his* thoughts, or perceive his features. He was a mute force and an alien presence, like a heavy thumb. And she couldn't escape, because it wasn't coming from outside. It was at the very center of her consciousness, and the more she shrank into herself, the more it followed her, down from the surface thoughts and impulses, to feelings, to memories, knowledge, beliefs—

And she fought anyway. It was instinctive, she had no choice. Physical pain could be suffered, but not this kind of violation.

“I'm going to have her kill the Speaker of the House.” His voice was distant.

“Is that all?” Tychus.

“Is that not ambitious enough? I'll be able take Candis's place.”

“Selfish.”

“What do you want, Tychus?”

“I want Juliana Riley dead.”

“Fine. She can kill either of them. Both. I don’t care.”

No. Deep within the recesses of her mind the flame of anger, which had been momentarily subdued by fear, flicked white-hot. Before, it had been the selfish anger of wounded pride and humiliation. Now it was something else. *I’d rather die*, she thought, and meant it. The surge of emotion was so strong and clear that she felt even Cirios recoil briefly; the momentary lightening of weight.

She’d always been stubborn, and now every fibre of her being that she had in her was turned toward that stubbornness, mobilized like a standing army.

And it was working. It was *working*. But she was nowhere near *serene*, or *cerebral*. Maybe it wasn’t about being serene or cerebral at all. *Magic requires a certain clarity of purpose*. Didn’t Andris say that once?

That was all in the split second before Cirios returned in force and smothered thought in a blanket of emptiness.

Yet those words returned. *Clarity of purpose*.

Suddenly it came to her, the only thing that she could do.

She did it immediately, without hesitating, before Cirios could react. Kate ripped her mind in half. She severed it down the middle, a deep tear, a bleeding wound, with the ferocity of desperation.

Two battlefields. One was his. One was hers. The front half, an empty plain from which she beat a calculated retreat. The back was hers—her castle, her fortress, and between them, an invisible wall – not only could he not *see*, he didn’t even know what she’d *done*.

Kate crouched behind the wall, silent, waiting. The grass rustled under an empty sky. Abandoned standards flapped in a gentle breeze.

“Ahh,” Cirios sighed. “I’ve got it now.” The pressure on her mind eased, and instead, she felt a smooth, persuasive draw. The plans and intentions flowed into the empty space. She would take the knife. She would walk out to the Senate floor. She would hide under the desk marked Daphne Candis. She would wait until the morning came, until the Senate opened for the vote on aid for Dralina. She would wait until Candis came to the desk. And then she would stab her to death. It was simple, so simple, and easy.

“You’ve got it now. Tell me what you’re going to do.” He loosed her voice.

“I’m going to stab Daphne Candis.”

“And?” said Tychus.

More instructions quickly slipped into her mind.

“And when J-... mom...” she wavered.

Cirios clamped down.

“And when Juliana Riley comes up to me, after that, or... or before, or any time, I’m going to stab her too.”

“Excellent,” said Cirios.

The tape came off her eyes first, with a rip and a slight pulling of hair. She squinted at the brightness. He plucked the sensors from her temples. Then, at long last, the cursed wires came from her nose, with a ripping feeling like her brain was being pulled out by an embalming hook. Her voice finally free, Kate squawked.

“You’re fine,” said Cirios scornfully. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to kill Daphne Candis and Juliana Riley.”

Cirios and Tychus nodded, satisfied, the other two Unfallen members looked impressed and mildly intimidated.

Cirios then reached into his robe and, from a scabbard near the hip, pulled forth a long silver knife. It was clean and polished, with a worked hilt in a design like rope. He sliced through the tape on her wrists, left and right, then knelt and cut free her ankles.

Then he stood up again. He turned the knife around, handle-first, and proffered it to Kate.

Kate closed her fingers around the handle of the knife. She pushed herself up by the armrests. Her knees were stiff after so many hours, and they still trembled a little, but she stood, looking Cirios in the eye, unafraid to let him see the white vacuum that was her mind.

Then she plunged the knife into his chest.

About the author: [Evelyn M. Lewis](#) is a 24-year-old writer from the Pacific Northwest. She is the author of yet-unpublished book *Shades of War*, and its sequel, *The Toxic Element*, from which the preceding excerpt is taken.