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## The Words in the World

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## The Words in the World

### Cover Page Footnote

First Place: Student Creative Writing Contest.

# The Words in the World

by Luke A. Wildman

## FIRST PLACE: STUDENT CREATIVE WRITING CONTEST

Luke A. Wildman was raised in Nigeria, and currently studies professional writing at Taylor. He published a short story with *Havok* magazine and received an Editor's Choice Award for his eventually-to-be-published manuscript *Days to Destruction*. Follow him online at [lukelawwildman.blogspot.com](http://lukelawwildman.blogspot.com). His author page on Facebook may be found at: <https://www.facebook.com/luke.a.wildman.writer/>

**Author's Note:** This story is an excerpt from a longer project I'm working on, titled *Song of the Searching*. It's the story of Alp searching across a magical world for his sister, told from the perspectives of those he meets along his journey.

### I: The Expected Guest

The magician sat in his marvelously comfortable den, sipping a mulled cider and reading by the helpfulness of the blazing hearth. His favorite reading chair had drawn itself up by the fire.

Outside, the wind howled. It was a night to freeze any little bodies that happened to be caught in it. Yet it didn't dare penetrate the magician's den, which was scooped or carved or molded from the base of a great tree. Some said it was *the* great tree. There was no chimney, but the smoke inside did not pool. The walls were only bark, but the fire did not catch them, except where it had been told to stay. Those walls were crowded with bookshelves that were crowded with many things that were not only books, including no less than three human skulls and a small stuffed crocodile, whose name was Charlie.

The magician set down his leather-bound journal—which was scribbled in runes that bore no resemblance to pentagrams—then checked the time and asked the teakettle to kindly boil itself. A guest would arrive soon. The guest had a little body, which would be half-frozen from his wandering through the woods.

The magician looked at the door. Any time, now. Any time at all.

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The guest would come stumbling up through the frozen woods, his feet dragging small furrows in the snow. Those furrows would lead back south. His red cheeks would sting with cold, his breath would puff from his lips in staggers and gasps, and his skin would have a crusty, flaked appearance. The guest, whose name had always been Alp, would spot the ruddy glow of firelight through the trees. It would entice him to stray off the path.

So he would come, thorns clutching at his garments, sleep trying to wrap itself around his mind. But finally he would reach the door of the magician's den, and . . .

*Ponk, ponk.*

\*

. . . numb knuckles politely knocked on knotted bark.

"Come in!" the magician called.

The door swung open. Alp stood there, hesitating a moment before the threshold.

*"Ahem.* Fateful prophecies have long foretold this meeting," the magician announced in his gravest of voices. "Come in, young Alp! You'll catch your death of cold."

Alp stepped inside, and the door shut behind him. He didn't appear the least surprised at the magician knowing his name. That was somewhat disappointing, but from everything the magician knew about Alp's character, he was a most *unusual* boy.

"I have just been reading all about your adventures over hills and oceans," the magician said, holding up his journal. "You haven't yet told anyone your full story, but someday you will, and this book contains all the truest stories ever told. It has a full accounting of everything that's happened to you since you left the river valley, searching for your sister. And now, Alp. Let us talk."

Alp tilted his head. He had flaxen colored hair, and the plainest brown eyes.

"I know it's a lovely place, your valley," the magician said. "I've seen it, although that was back when it was still being molded from fire and rock. I hear it has a lot of sheep, now. I cannot abide sheep. Can't stress that enough. More than their stink, it's how they blindly follow anything that cares to lead them, even from cliff tops. Only one lamb has ever truly been worthy of being led to the slaughter, and I, for one, am very glad that he did."

"Please, sir," Alp said, "I am only trying to—"

"Yes, yes," the magician said. "After we finish, if you survive,

I will send you on your way. You will continue seeking Ara, the golden-headed sister. But for now you must rest. We have a Perilous Task ahead of us, the sort of task which is fated to happen on any adventure worth having. If you complete it I will offer you wisdom for the road, but you'll need all of your strength to reach that point. Tea and fruitcake, Alp?"

Steam from the teakettle suffused the room with a delicate, mind-swaddled-in-wool sort of smell. It was the smell of confusion and sincerity. Alp shook his head at the offer of tea.

"If you enter through that door," the magician said, "you'll find a cot prepared for you, and fruitcake. Enjoy the fruitcake."

Alp nodded and left the room. The magician turned his eyes back to his journal, where he was currently reading about Alp's future adventure with the giants. That would happen in a few weeks' time, assuming they survived tomorrow's task.

The magician enjoyed his tea and his book very much. He had to, because, as he well knew, the next day was scheduled to be the end of the world.

## **II: The World's Last Day**

On the last day, the magician cooked eggs for breakfast. Sunny side up for the boy, over easy for himself. They ate quickly, the magician mopping up the last salty yoke with a corner of his fruitcake, then chewing it thoughtfully while he smoothed the crumbs from his beard.

"Well, my boy," he said to Alp, "it's time we were off. Button up your coat, please."

Alp turned toward the coat rack, and the magician quickly snapped his fingers. His own nightclothes unfurled into long, purple robes, the silk feeling smooth against his spindly shoulders. His red sleeping cap stiffened into a peaked, conical cap, a foot tall with a silver bell jingling from its tip. Then the magician stretched out a hand and pulled his wand from thin air. He was ready.

"Come, my boy."

The door opened before them. Together, they stepped out into the cool darkness of the pre-dawn hours.

Four wild stags waited outside, harnessed to a rickety sleigh. They snorted and stamped in the snow.

"We must hurry, Alp," the magician said. "We have all the time in the world, but I'm afraid that isn't very much."

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Once they'd clambered up, the magician cracked his wand over the antlered heads. Away they whirled.

Snow swished beneath the runners of the sleigh. Branches whipped at them, only just seen before they had to be ducked. This felt like galloping through a void of utter blackness, with even the stars and the moonlight obscured by the trees. Breath trailed from the stags' mouths, like smoke from a locomotive's chimney.

The sky slowly lightened. It changed to the colors of a drink mixed by Apollo. Purple, translucent wisps of cloud became swirled with gold, and beneath them formed a glaze of richer, creamy-pink clouds, which bubbled over the edge of the world. Finally, like a live coal in the bottom of a glass, the sun himself smoldered up, orange and glorious.

The world's last sunrise was spectacular.

"Please, sir," Alp said, huddled on his seat of the sleigh. "What do the words mean?"

The magician raised an eyebrow. "Words, dear boy?"

"The words I see in the sun," Alp said. "And I saw them on the hills where my friend Mr. Gough kept his sheep, and in the ocean with the sea monster. And they were written on the ice where the giants carried their friend who had died. But none of my friends who I traveled with could ever see the words. Only me."

The magician blinked. Surprise was very rare for him. After thousands of years of living in this world, it had given him most of its secrets. But this boy, this child . . . he had seen something that even the wise seldom glimpse.

"You have seen the mortar that sticks our world together," the magician said. "If it ever goes away, or if we every *pretend* that it's gone away, everything we know will fall apart."

"The world is stuck together . . . with words, sir?"

"*All* worlds, Alp. *All* worlds are made through words. The words can be glimpsed in all things, sometimes smudged or twisted till they mean something horrible, but always there, and always more honest in the beautiful, aching places. The lonely cliffs by the sea. The quiet sunsets. The innocent promises of lovers."

Alp shook his head. "But if the words can sometimes be broken, then how can we know when they're true? None of my friends seem to really know. Mr. Gough the shepherd told me that it's always bad to lie, but Hali the highwaywoman said that you sometimes have to lie to protect other people. I travelled with Captain Drakesley over the ocean, and he usually lied, but it always made him less happy."

“Well . . .” the magician began, but Alp wasn’t finished.

“And . . . and my sister accidentally lied to me,” he said. “I think she meant to tell the truth when she said that she loved me and wouldn’t ever leave me. But then she went away with the gypsies, and I am trying to find her again. Does that mean she lied, even without meaning to? And if it does, then how can I know that *any* of my friends aren’t accidentally lying when they promise that they love me? How can I know when the words are true?”

The magician shut his eyes. He had the distinct impression that Alp had never spoken so much at once in his life. He tried clearing his mind, but instead heard the sounds of the world: the swish of sleigh runners, the creak of branches, and the sighs of the wind as it fled the coming apocalypse. The apocalypse they were hurtling toward. It smelled like dust and death.

“Even the wisest could never explain why your sister left,” the magician said. “Humbly speaking, I *am* the wisest, and all I can say is that most people need help to be shown the words. Most people cannot see them on their own, as you and I are capable of. They also need explanation, because the words you see in this world are only glimpses of the truth in another world, not the whole truth itself. Only beautiful paintings of it.”

When he opened his eyes, he saw Alp watching him.

“Sometimes, Alp, people worship the places where truth is found, rather than the truth itself. And sometimes even when they know the truth, they still decide to ignore it. But *you* can see the words because you are the sincerest boy in all the world, and people who are very sincere are always shown the truth. And because you are so sincere, that is exactly why I need your help.”

Alp remained quiet, and the sleigh drove on.

A few minutes later, they broke out onto a flat, open country. The dry grass was studded with boulders, and its color had been dusted away by the snow. The sky above them was big and gray and empty, but not so much as the landscape that the magician knew they would soon gaze upon, if ‘landscape’ was the correct word for it.

The land rose, but not into the gentle slope of a hill. It all rose at once, curving up like the edge of a food platter. Grass gave way to only rock, and then at last they slid to a halt. The magician dismounted to thank the wild stags, and thought about offering them lumps of sugar, but decided against it. Saving their world should be payment enough for their giving him a ride. If he did manage to save the world, perhaps *they* could offer *him* sugar.

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At last, Alp and the magician stepped forward and peered over the rim of the world. The gray sky above them darkened, becoming the *lack* of sky. Just an empty, starless void. And far, far beneath them, the world simply ended.

Broken stone stretched away forever. Almost forever.

The stone was pitted. It wasn't brown, red, gray, or any other color; it simply was no color at all, even in the places where the sun's rays died upon it. The magician glanced behind them and saw what he'd expected to see: although it was still dawn, the sun was coming up on the wrong side of them. That made it *sunset*, rather than *sunrise*.

"Sir," Alp said, "what is that?" He pointed a finger toward the void. The magician followed his gaze.

A darkness swelled inside the void, building into a storm. It could only be likened to an enormous sandstorm, although of course there is no sand in that place. There is nothing, and any living thing that enters it should die soon after. A few creatures *have* entered it, over the ages. Monsters, the sorts which devour worlds. But those are long dead, their skeletons strewn thousands of miles away from each other, twisted into ridges of ancient bones. No, this storm wasn't a monster. It was the end of all things.

In the sandstorm, lightning flashed. There wasn't any wind, but the darkness whipped about as if shaken by a gale. And from the heart of the darkness, a face gazed out. The face of a man.

"What is it, sir?" Alp asked. He didn't sound properly afraid.

"Squint your eyes," the magician told him. "Look very carefully, and out beyond the void, you can see the faint rim of another land. There, you see it? It looks like the headland of an island, glimpsed across a foggy sea. That is the place where the world that borders *our* world begins."

Alp gazed with stoic innocence. "I didn't know there were other worlds, sir."

"Oh, yes. And they're all connected, although you and I could never reach them. Not by crossing this void on our own, at least. You see, when the alchemists first built the worlds at the request of the gods, they built all worlds to be accessible from all others. But the evil of the worlds became too great, and so the gods had to separate them. They placed gulfs between the worlds, which are not meant to be crossed. That is the space before us. But sometimes things not physical can seep between the worlds, and in the world next to yours, the world you are looking at, a very wicked man recently did something that his world isn't large enough to contain. It is coming, and it trying to cross

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the void to reach us. If it does, everything will end. Any attempt to stop it will be too late.”

“But sir,” Alp said, looking up at the magician, “my sister and all my friends are in this world. Will they be destroyed as well, if the storm reaches us?”

“I’m afraid they will.”

Alp and the magician both looked at the storm, and they saw it massing further. Its lightning grew wilder, its darkness blacker.

“Then we have to stop it,” Alp said.

“I hoped you would say that. That is why I have brought you here. We have one way of stopping it: with *magic*.”

“Mr. Gough doesn’t like magic.”

“That is because he is shepherd,” the magician said, “and most shepherds do not understand what magic *is*—they are only frightened of what it *does*. But magic is just truth that’s allowed to fulfill its purpose. To do magic, a person must speak the words which hold the world together. Now, Alp, do you have the flute that your sister gave you?”

Alp didn’t look surprised as he withdrew the small reed flute from his coat pocket. He held it loosely, as if it were a delicate friend.

“Good,” the magician said. “Now, I want you to play me a song. It must be the sincerest song that any little boy has ever played, played by the sincerest little boy in all the world. Can you do that?”

“I *think* so, sir. At least, I can try.”

“We will have to hope it is enough. Now, play. You play, and I will speak the words that may forestall this apocalypse. Than that, we can do no better.”

For a long moment, there was only silence. Then Alp blew into the flute, and a note quavered out, high and soft. Beyond the north, the storm began to move, sweeping over infinities of rock in the space of heartbeats. Alp played harder, and the song formed. It was pure and sad. A love song of Absuland, ancient beyond time. The magician listened for a moment, then raised his arms and chanted words of power:

*Devil, devil, do not trouble,  
Skies to burn and land to rubble,  
Dead-earth will our green-land make,  
Sun will scorch and land will bake.*

The magician’s chant didn’t fit the tune that the lost boy played. Yet somehow their two songs melded, becoming one as the storm

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surged toward them:

*Eye of World and Soul of God,  
Raise your thunders, hear our song.  
Blowing winds as reed flute sings,  
Halt the death of wicked kings.*

Behind them, in the midst of the sunrise that was also the sunset, the colors began to swirl. A new storm formed, forged of pink and gold and flaming orange clouds, boiling together and sluggishly drifting north. The new storm they'd created drifted over the edge of the world.

*Put an end to devil's trouble,  
Let glory boil and bubble!*

At the magician's cries, the new storm picked up speed. It raced over the empty void toward the coming apocalypse. The apocalypse raged toward it.

*Devil, devil, do not trouble,  
Skies to burn and land to rubble,  
Meet the scourge with lightning, God,  
Let this end be now forestalled!*

The storms met. In the heart of the void, death beat against the sunset. Lighting flashed from the apocalypse, trying to smite the colors of salvation.

It was terrible.

It was beautiful.

Alp stopped playing, his fingers hovering above the flute holes. The magician lowered his arms. This was the end of all things, and they were fighting the apocalypse with a song. How appropriate.

Up until now the battle had been nearly silent, but now, from out of the void, there rolled a single, low, reverberating note. It swept over the world, shivering the pines of the nearby forest. It travelled farther south, rippling the ocean waves, and then, on the hilltops of Aldea, it frightened Mr. Gough's sheep where they grazed. The sound continued until every rock and blade of grass was shaken to its core. Then, after raising dust in the distant desert beyond Ridia, the sound stopped.

The darkness was gone. The world was saved.