

Playing God

By Erin Pettit

The street was desolate. The windows of the store-fronts were all smashed and broken glass was littered across the sidewalk. Hasty messages were scrawled across walls in bright spray paint. Most were messages to loved ones; hoping they would be reunited at some later time in a place that wasn't abandoned, but still alive. It was a fleeting hope at best. One, written in an electric orange simply read, "God help us, we are damned". The irony was completely lost on a lone woman who came walking alone down the centre of the road. Her eyes were glazed over, fixed on some non-existent point in the distance. The street was empty; abandoned long ago. The only noise was a car alarm wailing in the distance.

The woman laboured on, devoid of all emotion. In her right hand she held limply a bloody tire iron. As she walked past one of the shops, a noise caught her attention. She blinked dumbly and turned to see a small television in the window of an electronics store. Somehow, the thing had managed to stay intact and was still running. The footage was an old news story. The sound crackled, and a wavy gray line moved across the picture. Even so, the woman was able to recognize the faces in the picture. On the left was an iconic talk-show host, but that's not who caught her interest. She was more concerned with the man on the left, Dr. Timothy Cagley. The grip on the tire iron strengthened considerably.

"Many of those who oppose your experiment are claiming what you are doing is a perversion of nature; they claim you are trying to play God. What do you have to say to these people?" The charismatic host asked with a grin.

The good doctor sighed, and leaned back in his armchair with a grin playing across his face. He crossed his legs and interlocked his fingers placing them behind his head. Clearly he had to answer this question many times throughout his career. "What I am doing is revolutionizing science. I am taking evolution into my own hands. This could change genetics forever. And well, if people want to think of me as a god in the process, I have no qualms with that."

The woman roared in a rage. She took her improvised weapon and brought it right through the screen of the television. She didn't stop there however, and continued to savagely beat the television until it had been thoroughly and irrevocably destroyed. After a minute, her white-hot rage began to subside. She took a few shallow deep breaths, her ears ringing. Then she noticed she could no longer hear the car alarm in the background. In fact, a new sound crept up on her, filling her with more horror than the voice of Timothy Cagley ever could.

Down the street, the sharp *clip clop* of footsteps could be heard heading towards her.

There was not a time that Dr. Timothy Cagley could remember when he did not know what he wanted to do with his life. Well, that's not entirely true; he wanted to become rich and famous. How he got there was all in the details. Luckily, God had gifted him with an enormous brain. He excelled in the fields of mathematics and science all throughout school. He was a

freshman in college when he turned fifteen, and it was only a few short years before he had earned his full PhD in genetics.

But then he was left in the wake of his career. By this point he still didn't have a plan of action. He had job offers coming in from everywhere. There wasn't a school that didn't want him as a professor. Labs around the country no, the world, wanted his help in various fields such as pharmaceuticals and bioinformatics. However Dr. Cagley wasn't interested in these offers. As a professor he would be stuck behind some desk dealing with snot-nosed brats who would never fully appreciate his genius. Working in a lab, anything he accomplished would be in the name of some big corporation. No, this was not the path he had in mind for himself.

Taking matters into his own hands he began a search. With his brilliant mind, he was sure he could accomplish any task he set upon himself. He just needed to find a niche to be filled. Possibly something that didn't even exist yet. Yes, that was it. He would create something so brilliant the world didn't even know they needed it yet. It was a long and arduous search; creativity was never one of his strong suits. In fact, it was in one of the most unlikely places that he found what he was looking for: fairy tales.

Yes, it was here in the world of fiction that he discovered what he could create. With this idea not only would he become famous, but he would earn enough money to buy a series of private islands simply to house his enormous piles of cash. It was here he decided he was going to create a unicorn.

It was brilliant really; he wondered why no one had thought of it before.

"Probably because it can't be done," he thought to himself with a guffaw.

But "can't" wasn't something that was going to stop him. He was Dr. Timothy Cagley god damn it, and if he set out to create a unicorn, it wouldn't be long before they were a reality.

Violet Speck was a very privileged little girl. Her father was a wealthy business man who took it upon himself to dote upon his daughter any chance he got. Violet was only seven and already she had amassed a collection of useless things that those living in the upper-middle class of America could only dream about. There was a major theme to all of her things too: horses. She adored all things equestrian. At one point, she even loved unicorns. She had a collection of stuffed unicorns that was taken away in a fit when she discovered they weren't real. So she settled for the next best thing: horses.

So it's no surprise that when Mr. Speck heard about Dr. Timothy Cagley's venture, his interest was piqued. After some careful research, he discovered the doctor's glowing track record. Still slightly sceptical, he went to talk to the doctor himself. Despite his delusions of grandeur, the man didn't seem off his rocker. He was quite together, and a confident young man. His doubts gone, Mr. Speck was quick to invest in this new opportunity. It also ensured that if he was successful, he would be first on the list to get a unicorn for his little angel.

On the day of its unveiling, press from around the globe flocked to Mr. Speck's opulent abode with cameras trained on the trio. Dr. Timothy Cagley was ecstatic, but bags under his eyes told the tale of nights spent toiling over his creation. Mr. Speck stood beside him, wringing his hands in anticipation (for the doctor insisted that everyone see the unicorn for the first time when he unveiled it at his house). And the last person in the limelight was little Violet Speck, who was bouncing up and down small blonde curls flying akimbo. She had no idea what was in store, but she knew she was getting a present.

When everyone was in position, Dr. Timothy Cagley himself brought in the unicorn, and an audible gasp spread through the audience. The beast was stunning. It was much taller than a horse, and its white mane seemed to shimmer in the sunlight. Out of the corner of your eye, you would swear it was radiating every colour of the rainbow. Its eyes were amber; the colour seemed to swirl around its pupils. And finally, the piece de resistance, the horn: It was a beautiful pearly bone that swirled around itself, ending in a blunt tip. Simply put, it was the most magnificent beast anyone at the press conference had ever seen. Violet squealed with delight, and ran up hugging its legs shouting something high-pitched about having a real live unicorn.

It took a moment, but the press recovered, and soon the scene was spotted with flashing lights from cameras and Dr. Timothy Cagley was flooded with questions.

“Is it real?”

“How did you create such a miracle?”

“What's its name?”

“Is it the only one?”

And the most important question of them all, “Where can I get one?”

With that, the world had caught unicorn fever. Dr. Timothy Cagley and his team of crack scientists were hard at work, and he never quite stopped beaming. Orders came in from around the globe. There were calls from families just like the Specks, those who owned and collected horses simply must have one, zoos were asking for a special deal, and scientists wanted their own specimen to have and study.

From the moment Violet Speck saw her unicorn, she was enchanted. She absolutely adored her creature. Suddenly, she insisted her room decor change. All of her horse paraphernalia was gone in a flash replaced by stuffed unicorns, unicorn wallpaper, unicorn bedding, and even unicorn slippers and pajamas. She spent all day in the stables brushing Misty, talking to her, singing to her, riding her, and feeding her. She was hooked.

So about five months after Misty had arrived at the Speck manor, when their trusty stable-hand arrived for the morning and found Misty lifeless on the floor, you can imagine that things got quite hairy. Dr. Cagley was on the phone almost immediately; he was never far away when Mr. Speck was calling.

The doctor arrived to Mr. Speck was fuming, while Mrs. Speck was holding back an indignant Violet who was furious she was not allowed to see her precious Misty. Her face was

red and she was howling at the top of her lungs; a strategy that usually got her what she wanted. Mr. Speck ran up to Dr. Cagley and grabbed the front of his shirt with his fists snarling in the doctor's face.

"Now you listen here," he said, spittle peppering the doctor's face. "I want this fixed NOW!" Dr. Cagley, being no fool, didn't argue and simply went into the stable on Mr. Speck's command. He knelt down by poor Misty who was in fact, alive. However, her breathing was shallow and faint and her heart was beating erratically.

It took some convincing, but Dr. Cagley finally convinced Mr. Speck to let him take Misty back to his lab to run some tests. As the unicorn was loaded up into his van by a couple of lab technicians, little Violet wailed completely inconsolable.

"Why do they hafta take her?" she cried. "She's mine!"

Mr. Speck glared at Dr. Cagley while gently patting his daughter on the head. "She just needs to visit the doctor for a while sweetie-pie," he said lovingly. Then he charged Dr. Cagley and hissed, "Fix this. Quickly." With that he led his daughter back up to the house.

Serena Owens was enjoying a peaceful cup of coffee as she looked out her window at the beautiful scenery outside. She was a park ranger at Yosemite National Park and this time last year she didn't have time to sit around and drink coffee while sitting in introspection. Usually the park was flooded with people, and many were turned away for lack of campsites.

"Next year, be sure to book ahead," was the most commonly uttered phrase. But this year, the area was absolutely dead. Serena had been working here over the winter, and got stuck here with another staff member, Paul. Others had been here, but they had left in hopes of greener pastures so to speak. They had taken a walkie-talkie with them, but after a week they had lost all contact with the lodge.

As per usual, Serena was eagerly tuning the radio trying to find a station that was still broadcasting. There hadn't been any new news in weeks. She turned it back to the emergency broadcast station, which was still constantly streaming instructions for anyone who might be listening: stay indoors, do not go outside under any circumstances, and if all else fails, pray.

She sighed defeated and flicked off the radio. More often than not Serena found that the emergency broadcast inspired fear and panic rather than comfort her in any way.

Suddenly, she noticed something different in her morning routine. Normally she enjoyed sitting in listening to the birds. She had become quite adept at identifying bird calls, and actually began to enjoy watching them. When she finally got to sit back and relax, she understood what drew people to birding, even if she thought they were the most disagreeable people in the world.

But this morning the forest was silent. The sun was still rising, and the sound of birds singing should have been deafening. She put down her coffee and strolled closer to the window, as if she would be able to discern why they were so silent this morning.

Then it emerged from the woods. Serena stood agape. It was the first unicorn she had ever seen, and she couldn't believe it. Sure it was the only thing that had been in the news the past year, but she chalked most of it up to hype.

The great beast snorted and stamped an impatient hoof on the ground, looking around impatiently. Serena backed away from the window slowly, her arms shaking. She ran back to the counter where her two-way radio was sitting silently.

She picked it up, and almost forgot how to use it. She fumbled with it for a moment, and finally pressed down the button. "Uh... P-Paul?" she stammered into it. A static filled response came back a moment later. "Geez Serena, I know we're the only ones up here today, but you could still show some professionalism," came back a deep male voice. Serena didn't even react to the words, they barely reached her ears. Her eyes were still transfixed on the unicorn milling about outside her window. "We have a situation." She responded slowly. "I'm up at the main building... with a unicorn." Serena's call was met with radio silence. Paul was already on his way back up to the main stay.

Dr. Cagley placed the precious Misty on his operating table, illuminated by bright lights. His team hovered around her, taking samples, measuring vital signs, trying to come up with the source of her ailment. Finally, he found the solution. Not that he would admit it, but there was a problem in the gene sequence. The way he had spliced everything together, it seemed the lifespan of these creatures was not as long as he would have hoped.

Soon enough, he found a solution. He took to one of the unicorns in the lab. He had kept a few around for additional tests. Of these, two were completely fine (these were the youngest) and the other had recently succumbed to this mysterious illness. Knowing what a precious commodity Misty was, he decided to test his serum on Subject B, as he had named the beast. He took a vial of the serum and carefully injected it into Subject B. The vial contained a virus that would re-sequence the genome, giving the unicorns' stronger hearts so that they would live more than two months.

Within twenty-four hours Subject B was standing, neighing, and eating hay just as she used to. He began to mass manufacture the serum. He sent it out to anyone who had already received a unicorn. He gave a dose to Misty and the others he had in his lab as well. Soon enough Misty was back on her feet, and he delivered the beast to Violet himself.

The little girl jumped up and down, hugging the unicorn's legs and stroking it lovingly. "Misty! Oh she's even more wonderful than before!" She giggled.

Mr. Speck shook Dr. Cagley's hand with a smile on his face, but his grip was cold and firm.

"Best not be having any more trouble then, hmmm?" he hissed at the doctor.

"Of course not," Dr. Cagley said, maintaining his smug persona. But, as he walked away he hastily took out a handkerchief wiping sweat from his brow. He looked back over his shoulder

to see the unicorn being led by the little girl into the stable. Mr. Speck was staring daggers at him.

Dr. Cagley collapsed in his chair with a sigh. He reclined leisurely in the expensive leather upholstery. The ornate chair was completely impractical, but Dr. Cagley enjoyed its comfort. Furthermore, he felt a sense of superiority when he sat down in the chair; it was the chair a trail-blazing scientist such as himself deserved.

It had been a month since Misty had her episode. There had been no further problems but the doctor and his team had been busy ensuring that every unicorn was given the vaccine. Furthermore, new orders for unicorns came in every day. Already they had sold thousands.

He had been quite stressed out for the past month, and he was finally able to relax and find a moment for himself. For a moment, he saw everything he worked for: his career, his fame, slipping out of his grasp. Really, he thought to himself, he should have known better. He created a goddamn unicorn. There was no problem he couldn't solve.

In fact, now that he was rich and famous, he could solve any problem. He began contemplating the next issue to tackle. Perhaps he would resolve world hunger; or maybe space travel would be enterprising. Dr. Cagley was interrupted from his reverie by an insistent knock at the door.

"Come in," he called, moving his chair back from his desk. The door was slightly behind him and his chair did not have the ability to swivel.

A nervous woman came running up to the doctor, pushing her large glasses up her nose. "Dr. Cagley, come quick. There's an emergency. It's Subject B." With that she ran back to the door, not looking to see if he was following.

"What? Caroline!" the doctor yelled, fumbling to get out of his chair which was still a bit too close to his desk. The woman didn't answer; she was already gone. When he managed to get up, he moved quickly to the lab where the unicorns were housed. He felt his heart jump in his chest, something was seriously wrong. There hadn't been any problems with the unicorns since the serum was circulated. He took a deep breath, reminding himself he was Dr. Timothy Cagley – there wasn't a problem he couldn't solve.

Two of his assistants were standing at the entrance to the enclosure hesitantly as Subject B whinnied and reared back, pounding against the wire mesh cage. The other two unicorns watched from their respective cages, alert and on edge.

"What's going on? Did something spook her?" Dr. Cagley asked, staring at the creature his eyes wide with horror.

"N-no," said a shocked assistant. "She just started-"

"Well something had to have started it!" he shouted, opening the padlock and entering the enclosure. "Was there any strange behaviour before she started acting out?" He asked his voice quiet. He raised his hands in front of him and slowly made his way towards Subject B who

was snarling and jumping. One of the assistants looked away in fear, covering his face with his hands.

Caroline spoke up, “She has been acting quieter as of late; less energy, not eating as much. We just assumed-“

“Assumed? Why did no one report this to me?” Dr. Cagley hissed. He closed in on the unicorn who he managed to trap in a corner. She was staring at him, eyes wide in fear, foam frothing from her mouth. She continued to scramble backwards away from the man.

Dr. Cagley finally rushed at Subject B, who snapped at the man. He gasped as the unicorn nipped at his arm, but with his free hand he still managed to inject the beast with a hidden sedative he had been holding. The unicorn’s eyes rolled back into its head and it slumped down onto the ground. Caroline came into the enclosure, inspecting the bite on the doctor’s arm. “We didn’t think it was significant; we’ve been busy enough and you’ve told us repeatedly not to come to you with trivialities.”

“This,” Dr. Cagley said, gesturing to the unicorn, “is not a triviality. Now find out what’s wrong with her. Run every test you can think of, and notify me when you find *any* anomaly. I have some phone calls to make.” He stormed into his office, slamming the door.

Dr. Cagley pushed his team to work through the night. He was determined to fix this problem before anyone else became aware of it. However, try as they might, they couldn’t figure out what could be causing the unicorn so much stress.

It was around one in the morning when they heard a noise from where Subject B was supposed to be sedated. Dr. Cagley was holed up in his office and the assistants were the first to hear it.

“What was that?” one asked. Everyone shrugged, sleep heavy in their eyes. Caroline did a quick head count.

“Everyone is here... did someone screw up? When the last time Subject B’s medication was checked? Maybe she’s awake,” she said, crossing the room. She opened the door to the lab, and let out a piercing scream.

The next morning, little Violet Speck arose with a bounce in her step. As she did every day, she skipped out to the stables to brush her precious Misty. However, when she got there the stable was in shambles. The door was hanging on one hinge. She called out hesitantly to Misty as she stepped over a broken cross-beam. Tears started to stream down her face. She shrieked Misty’s name, desperately searching for her poor unicorn.

Then she heard a noise, distant in the back of the stables. She nervously crept towards it.

“Misty?” she asked, her voice shaking. The stable was dark but light trickled in from the broken ceiling. Violet climbed over more pieces of wreckage towards the sound. “Misty, is that you?” she said, and as she peered over the door to the stall, she let out a blood curdling scream.

There, indeed was Misty. But she had transformed. As Dr. Cagley's team had discovered all too late, the serum issued to the unicorns a month back slowly mutated their genome; but there were some side effects. Misty's fine white coat was now black and purple. She had grown at least a foot taller, and her once dull ornamental horn had expanded to a razor sharp point. Her now fang-like teeth were busy ripping the tendons out of the neck of the family's prized horse Daisy.

As Violet screamed, Misty turned her attention towards the little girl. Her eyes were completely red, glazed over with an insatiable hunger. Violet tried to run. She stumbled backwards, tripping over a broken piece of the stable, landing flat on her back. In an instant Misty was on her, her great hooves crushing her collarbone. Violet screamed one last time as Misty's powerful jaws closed on her throat.

Paul arrived in his jeep a few minutes after Serena called. The unicorn's attention was soon focused solely on him and the strange machine. The terrifying beast began ramming the doors with its horns, puncturing it in various locations. Paul looked terrified as the jeep rocked back and forth.

Finally, the unicorn rammed into the side of the car and it flipped on its side. The unicorn threw its head back and whinnied, a terrible blood-curdling howl. Paul quickly climbed up and out of the jeep, fumbling with a shotgun. The unicorn was quicker, as his torso appeared from the door; it jumped up with its front legs on the car. The whole vehicle shook, and the shotgun fell out of Paul's hand.

Serena sat in the cabin, watching frozen with fear. They were quite under-equipped at this outpost. Paul had gone out this morning to make the rounds; ever since the reports starting flooding in about the rogue unicorns they had to be constantly vigilant. He had taken the only shotgun they had. Serena had never felt more helpless.

Paul screamed; it was two parts fear, one part frustration, and six parts defeat. He stared straight on as the unicorn met him face to face. It gave out a great bellow of triumph and reared its head forward. Its sharp, jagged horn split his stomach in half. Serena looked away feeling nauseous. She didn't need to look to know the unicorn was now devouring her companion, she could hear it from where she stood.

Shakily she got up, not wanting to waste anymore time. They had another jeep parked out back. She grabbed the keys from the rack and snuck outside. She slid into the driver's seat and she fumbled with the keys. Her eyes kept darting about fearfully expecting the unicorn to appear from around the corner at any moment.

How long did it take to eat someone? Would it come after her regardless? Leaving Paul there, sticking out of the window of the jeep with his stomach-

Stop. Serena took a shuddering breath trying to calm herself. Thinking like this would get her nowhere. With new determination, she slid the key into the ignition and started the car. She

sighed with relief as the car started with a purr. She threw the car into reverse and flew away from the cabin as fast as she could.

Serena didn't know what to do. It had been a week since Paul had died, and she had yet to see a single living soul. She made it to the city, only to find the place in ruins. Windows were smashed, blood was everywhere. There were signs of panic, pain, and death. She left as quickly as she had the cabin in the woods.

Finally she decided she was going to make it right. She hadn't survived for nothing. Since this whole horror started, there were rumours of people trying to contact Dr. Cagley. No one knew where he was. There were news reports that he had fled the country; though Serena didn't believe that. There was nowhere left on Earth that was safe anymore.

It had all happened so fast. There were unicorns everywhere, and every single one of them had been injected with the doctor's serum. As soon as news got out that the unicorns had turned, it was too late. Every single unicorn had become a vicious monster, hell bent on eating anything that moved. They were nigh unstoppable. The authorities had advised people to stay indoors, and not to approach any unicorn if you saw one. But usually if you saw a unicorn, it was the last thing you ever did. No one knew how to kill them; no one thought it could be done. Everyone just ran and hid as the unicorns killed everything in their path. Serena had only survived this long by avoiding major population centers.

So Serena did the only thing she could think of, she sought out the doctor. He was famous enough; everyone knew he had a strange, secluded lab in the middle of nowhere. She was going to find the lab and find Dr. Cagley. She was going to make him fix this mistake.

For months this idea was all that kept her going; the idea that Dr. Cagley was still out there somewhere, hiding in fear of his abominations. The idea even made Serena smile a little; the idea that this bastard was cowering in some dark hovel.

Finally, she found it. She found the infamous lab. It was in terrible shape; the roof was made of Plexiglas, but had been smashed in, in various locations. The door was ajar when she arrived. The keypad for enhanced security had been smashed, and wires were hanging out of it.

She made her way through the deserted lab, glass crunching underfoot. The walls were covered in blood and the smell was ungodly. All around her lab equipment was smashed to bits. Off to the side she saw a mangled wire cage. As she moved forward, she had to cover her mouth. She retched, but nothing came up; she hadn't eaten all day. There were two bodies slumped over on the ground. The torso of one had been picked clean, but the face still remained, frozen with a horrific expression made even more obscene by the rotting skin. The other body was missing legs and a left arm. It was lying face down, and Serena tried to avoid looking at it as she stepped over the bodies. One thing was clear: neither was Dr. Cagley, so she moved on.

At the back of the lab was a door that had been hacked to pieces. There was no other place to go so Serena made her way there. She pushed the door open and saw into the office. There was a large wooden desk in the middle of the room, and there were papers scattered everywhere. The office once had ceiling to floor glass windows that looked out over the country-side. The view was still stunning, but one wall of windows had been completely shattered. There was blood all over the floor, marked with both hoof and foot prints. In the middle sat an ornate leather chair with a slash down the middle where the stuffing had poured out.

Serena looked out over the country-side, crying silently. She had come all this way, and there was no doctor to be found. She had come up empty, and now there was nothing left for her. The world was an apocalyptic wasteland and the only hope she had been holding on to just slipped from her grasp. She let out a roar and fell to the ground sobbing.

After a while she got up, she left her jeep behind and walked towards the nearest city.

Still standing over the shattered remains of the television, Serena Owens looked over her shoulder to see a unicorn heading towards her at a leisurely pace. She slowly stood up facing the great creature and brandishing her tire iron. The unicorn stopped and stood looking at her almost quizzically. Then it threw its head back, letting out a roar. Its teeth gleamed in the sunlight, stained red with blood.

She cried out in response and rushed forward. The unicorn took off at a gallop, meeting Serena head on. She swung her tire iron back over her head preparing to cuff the beast over the head, but she was too slow. In an instant, the unicorn's horn had rammed itself through her stomach, and the unicorn tossed its head back sending her flying through the air like a rag doll. She crashed down on the pavement and felt a couple of ribs crack. She coughed, spraying blood across the sidewalk. Her vision was blurry; she looked up to see the unicorn bearing down on her. And it was the last thing she ever saw.