

## Wild Hope

by Laura E. Goodin ©2020

Tully spent years trying to wring even a thin, damp smear of magic out of the lumpen world and its dreary chain of causality that went inescapably back and back to the Big Bang. But all the wardrobes were solid at the back, and even the most intriguingly otherworldly of the sticks and stones Tully encountered in forest grottoes never turned out to be wands or gems; they were only ever what they seemed.

Still, Tully kept on the lookout. Occasionally something would happen that gave them just enough hope: a coincidence a shade too unlikely; a moment of not-quite-telepathic connection; a glimpse of someone's true and glorious nature, freakish and terrifying and wonderfully powerful – as if causality had gotten distracted and let something slip for a second.

Youth grew into middle age. Knees crackled, new hairs sprouted in a cruel mockery of the hirsute energy of puberty. Tully never really noticed when they stopped looking for magic; when the search made the dismal shift from hope to wish. They merely became slowly aware of a dull acceptance of their lot, and they wondered how they could have been so idiotic as to expect anything else. Kids. Well, it was fun while it lasted.

Out in the wide world, effect followed cause, with every step leading into distress and chaos as the universe unravelled. All other rules that humankind had superimposed – honor, integrity, simple courtesy – fell away in the face of the frantic need to survive, the panicked unreason that fought to force meaning on disintegration. Only the relentless march of cause and effect remained.

Tully, old now, stood amidst the confusion. They were wrapped in a long, tattered oilcloth coat and their shoulders were hunched to drive their hands deep into their pockets. There was nothing to be done. They turned from side to side to watch people scurrying past, wrapped and masked against cold and pestilence. Parents struggled under the squirming weight of sobbing and bewildered children. Spouses staggered by, trying to help each other even as they themselves stumbled. A person old and confused pushed a walker, moving inch by agonizing inch and wailing because there was no familiar face to explain and comfort.

Tully made fists inside their pockets. Their knuckles struck against rough, unexpected objects, one in each pocket. They grasped the objects and drew them out: a weirdly twisted and mottled stick; a black pebble with glinting flecks across its surface. They stared at the objects as their fingers grew cold.

“Do it,” whispered the child that Tully had been.

Why would it work now? It had never worked before. All those sticks, all those pebbles, all those moments of wild hope, all to fade away into resignation.

“Do it,” whispered the child, its voice tight with suppressed glee.

And then what? What use could it possibly be? Tully was powerless, powerless.

“Do it!” shrieked the child. “Do it, do it, do it!”

Tully raised their arms and began to twirl in a stiff and clumsy circle, tapping the stick on the pebble in time with their steps. Their hands grew warm as light began to spill out from between their fingers. The frightened figures heard the tapping and paused in their flight; some drew near to watch. Too weary to twirl like Tully, they nevertheless swayed with the beat for a minute or two. Tully reached out with the stick and tapped everyone who got close enough. When they moved on, they stood a little straighter, held their children more securely, steadied one another. Those who were alone sought out others to walk with. The ones who were weak found an arm around them, a voice to cheer them. It wasn't a cure for the evil that raged about them, but it was something almost as good, and maybe just as useful: a glimpse of their own true and glorious nature, freakish and terrifying and wonderfully powerful.

Tully twirled and tapped, and at last sank, exhausted, to the frosty ground. As sleep overcame them, they were conscious of someone tucking a blanket around them. The child that Tully had been murmured, “See? Magic.”

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