



K I N G D O M *of* I N K

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hourly: \$65

Jack Salvatore is an author, screenwriter, ghostwriter and story editor based in Los Angeles. He's pitched in writers' rooms helmed by Emmy-winning showrunners and regularly contracts out to production companies and development pods to polish their original concepts into screen-worthy properties. In an effort to keep his USC Screenwriting Degree honed, he's also spent every Sunday for over a decade devoted to his personal writers' groups where he helps elevate working writers' material in his off-hours.

Jack's most passionate about character and story; he believes impactful moments hit hardest when experienced through the eyes of a character whose hopes, fears and motivations are fully realized for the reader. His elephant memory, love of research and eye for detail will ensure no dot in your story goes unconnected and that your audience is living your journey with you, breath for breath. When he's not playing detective in the hallways of his client's memories, Jack loves to cook, travel and get yelled at by his Peloton instructor.



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Oasis

(Fiction Excerpt)

Jack Salvatore

Gentle lapping roused me from sleep like a freight train. As my eyes fluttered open, I was greeted by the usual dreadful sight: palm trees overhead, warm white sand under my skin and a puddle of blue sunk in the center of all. I had long ago made peace with the fact that the shadows changed positions throughout the day, yet the source of sunlight would never be apparent. The sky was pitch black, just like any and all space just beyond the tropical greenery framing my little oasis.

How strange and pleasurable it was to hear, well, any sound. For as long as I could remember, there was no wind to rustle the palm fronds. No current to pull the tide up onto shore's edge and to usher it back home again. But today was different. Today, a bottle had washed up at my feet.

Moving through molasses after a nap that had lasted longer than I could recount, my hands fumbled for the cool glass. It was frosted, rough to the touch and when I held it high, it cast a shadow from within that made it clear something had been placed inside.

My first thought was, "Where did it come from?" The body of water before me was finite, no larger than a swimming pool. The vessel itself was pristine and unmarred, which struck me as odd considering it must've been caught on the floor of the pond for some time and just now found its way to the surface. That was the only explanation that made sense because any other implication turned my blood cold. As far as I had been aware until that moment, I was completely alone.

I sunk my teeth into the spongy cork and yanked it from the bottle with a satisfying thunk. The scrolled parchment inside had uncoiled, so I had to work my finger inside to free it from its prison, careful not to crumble it in the process. I delicately unfurled it, one of the brittle corners flecked off as I did. In deep-red

calligraphy were two sentences. Unsigned.

“Didn’t want to wake you. Come find me.”

I wish I could say excitement was my first response to learning I was not alone. Fear crept up my throat and squeezed my brain as I wondered how long I’d been observed from that pitch darkness beyond the shrubs and sand. I questioned my new neighbor’s intent. Why didn’t they want to wake me? Why not let me know I’m not alone?

I left the oasis several times, in all directions. Walking on flat blackness against a sky of equal dark never got any less disorienting. After a few hours of putting one foot in front of the other, the only way I could tell how far I’d gotten was to look back to see how much tinier the smattering of palm trees appeared against the great, big nothingness. The smaller it looked, the further I’d gone. However, I never found the courage to descend so far into the dark that I lost sight of it. Only once, sometime before my last nap, had I walked for so long that it became an infinitesimal blue pinprick against nothing. One foot further and I would have been lost in blackness forever.

It had been an eternity since I’d known hunger, thirst, or any discomfort. The hundred or so times I’d tried to drown myself resulted in my waking from yet another nap. Even were I to have been lost in that eternal void, there was no threat of death. But I never took that last step. As much as I had come to hate this place, it was familiar. The idea of being completely alone, feeling in the dark for something, anything, with no way to define up, down, left or right, horrified me.

I picked a direction that felt right and stared into the blackness beyond the palm fronds. If I was wrong, I’d be doomed to wander in the inky nothingness from the start.

“It must be a test,” I thought to myself.

My new friend was trying to see if I was capable of following their breadcrumbs. Then and only then, I decided, would I be worthy of their presence. Maybe if I found them, I’d get some kind of answer to what it all meant: this place, this void, my presence in it.

As much as I had come to know this place, it was time to move on. Paradise though it may have been by some definition, it offered me nothing new. I decided

today would be the day I took that extra step.

My brain went haywire. Yes, there was the possibility that whoever wrote the message was long dead. Once I was out in it there would be no way back to safety. The more I thought about, the more I came to the conclusion that progress began at the end of comfort, even if that meant never being able to return.

With a deep breath, I crossed onto the flat back. Dregs of white sand trailed me for a few yards before thinning out. I told myself that this time I would hold off as long as possible before looking back.

It took the whole day of trudging through that disorienting blackness with no reference point in front of me to see how much or little ground I covered. After what was probably the thousandth time I told myself I'd look back after the next ten steps, I caved. My home had become a pinhead of light in the pitch dark. I drank in my one last look. In that pinhead was all I had ever known.

I turned my back on it and continued into nothingness.

Your Mother Called (Memoir Excerpt)

Jack Salvatore

It was a beautiful, clear blue sky kind of day. Mornings like this always made me wonder if volunteering for the service to get away from my Mother was a good idea. On the one hand, the Vietnam Conflict had shown no signs of slowing for close to fifteen years by the time I joined up. On the other, well you've read my previous chapters, right? Either way, it was a tough call so I decided to let the Staff Sergeant finish his spiel before I made up my mind once and for all.

"This is the infiltration course. It is a LIVE-FIRE exercise," Staff Sergeant Oxenham screamed so loudly his voice strained and his face turned red.

He looked a little like a sweaty turnip. That New Jersey heat baking the humidity out of the sand must've been getting to him. We'd just hiked ten miles out to get to this sweltering obstacle course in the middle of nowhere with our rifles and fifty-pound rucksacks. After this drill, our reward would be camping here for three nights. Basic training at Fort Dix lives in all the worst parts of my memory.

The Staff Sergeant emphasized certain words either for dramatic effect or to give himself a second to think because he'd forgotten what came next in his speech. I was reasonably certain most of these guys who made a living yelling eighteen-year-olds through obstacle courses repeated these routines so much they just memorized the vibrations their mouths made in their skulls. All that to say, if this guy was as dumb as some of the other instructors I'd had, he'd hidden it well. That didn't mean he wasn't still a mean S.O.B.

"We will be SIMULATING," he marched along, "REAL combat conditions!"

My exhausted mind knew there'd be five minutes of preamble before he got to the point of whatever fresh hell awaited us, so I caught a few beats of on-my-feet, open-eye sleep. There was even hope for a few extra seconds if he caught someone with a gig line out of wack and a dress-down ensued. At this point in

my boot camp experience, I'd run twenty thousand miles (that estimation is based on feeling) and spent half a day in a tear gas chamber, so I knew whatever awaited me and my fellow recruits today would not exactly be a walk in the park.

Our boots sunk into the ground the longer we stood at attention. We had to adjust our stance every few seconds to avoid the mud going past the ankle line. Damp earth rose to my nostrils as a half-handful of bored-looking Privates splattered hose water all over the half-mile tangle of dirt, sandbags and barbed wire stretched before us.

The Sergeant pointed at two small, black rectangles sunk deep into a bunker at the far end of the field.

"The M60 has an effective range of twelve HUNDRED feet," he hollered as he splashed through the ample black water that rushed to meet his boots. "It fires a BALL PROJECTILE with an average muzzle velocity of THREE THOUSAND feet per second."

I had a premonition that today was going to be special the second I felt my socks go from dry to sopping. The gist of the drill seemed to be that we would be on the ground crawling while thousands of rounds of live ammunition ripped over our heads to desensitize us to being shot at. While that was happening, the sandbag bunkers flanking either side of the course would randomly explode with simulated grenade bursts. We'd start on our bellies and would have to flip over onto our backs at some point, using our elbows and boot heels to dig into the earth and worm our way forward the whole time.

"If you stick your butt up too high, it WILL get SHOT OFF," he stopped to scream in one Recruit's face for no particular reason. I was glad to be in the back row.

"If you stick your knee up too high, it WILL get SHOT OFF," Oxenham's voice continued to strain. "DO I MAKE MYSELF CLEAR?"

"Yes, Staff Sergeant!" I screamed with thirty other voices.

I don't remember anyone blowing a whistle or screaming "go," but before I knew it, I was on my belly in the muck feeling the gritty mud between my coarse military-issue shirt and skin.

Little red and white bursts erupted from those pitch-black bunkers in staccato succession as the thunderous machine-gun fire slammed echoes across the

distant trees.

I pressed forward, one elbow-to-knee at a time. The mud, razor wire and topography made this half-mile seem much longer than I'm sure it was. The barbed wire kicked my claustrophobia into high gear each time my scalp or back grazed it when I hoisted myself too high. Every three seconds or so, a grenade would pop off in the bunker to the side, spraying fine grit in my eyes. Not to mention, I was right in the middle of about forty other sets of limbs and boots kicking up mud all around me. Between the high-velocity sand, grenades, machine-gun fire and the ever-occasional accidental boot to the face, I was very much awake at this point.

Because there were so many of us, we'd hit a bottleneck getting to the end of the course, so that left me idling in traffic waiting for my turn to crawl forward. Ahead of me was a double-apron barbed wire fence. It sort of looked like a traditional triangular tent, but instead of canvas, the sides were made of barbed wire. I would have to flop onto my back and backstroke through it with my rifle clung to my chest to avoid any dirt or debris jamming the barrel. This, of course, meant all that sand and mud would be scooped up by my collar and deposited down the back of my shirt. Did I mention I don't miss this?

I had wiggled about halfway through the barbed wire when I heard my name.

"Sarosky," a terrifyingly deep voice bellowed, "Sarosky, where are you?"

I yelled over the explosions and gunfire to signal my location and tucked my chin down to get a look at who was screaming for me. Bright blue sky and barbed wire was all I could see until Captain George Carter (our Company Commander and Oxenham's superior) marched his way over to me, tipped his captain's combat helmet back, and hunched over me, his hands on his hips. From where I laid, this guy looked like a nine-foot-tall khaki giant.

"How's your cough?" he barked at me.

My fellow recruits and I all kind of did a double-take at the situation. I was confused as all hell.

"Fine, sir?" I went hoarse trying to scream over a grenade explosion.

Our Company Commander had driven his Jeep ten miles from base, out to meet us in the middle of nowhere and trudged right into the line of fire to address me. I and the recruits all around me wondered what would be so urgent as to

possess this man to walk into the machine-gun fire because it hadn't stopped. Was this man impervious to bullets? Were the gunners in the bunker somehow able to shoot around him? He didn't seem to care one way or the other, which raised more questions.

Between bursts of fire, I heard him say, "Your Mother called. She's worried about your cough. You need to go to the infirmary after this exercise."

A few things dawned on me at this moment. First, we had been lied to about this being a live-fire exercise. Second, my Mother had called the Army to check in on a cough and raised enough hell on the other end to scare our Company Commander.

I'd been on leave the weekend before and one my friends stayed at the house with us. He'd just had a few teeth pulled and left some blood on one of the upstairs pillows. I happened to have a bit of a cough the same weekend, so my Mother assumed I'd coughed up blood and was on a mission to ensure my good health in her unique way.

I just want to emphasize this again to let it all sink in. My Mother put the fear of God into a man who'd seen active combat to a point where he felt compelled to get in his Jeep and drive ten miles to handle the situation. He didn't send an aide or someone ranked below him. He handled it personally.

After the obstacle course, I hopped in the Jeep and got shuttled ten miles back to the infirmary where I was promptly given two aspirin for my alleged tuberculosis. The whole experience got me out of having to bake in that New Jersey hellscape for three full days, but also left me with a lot of time alone in the barracks to think about how far Mom's reach could extend when motivated enough. Would she figure out how to dial Korea after I was to be deployed?

Only time would tell.

Iceland: Proposing by a Volcano (Travel Blog Excerpt)

Jack Salvatore

For as many months as I'd taken to plan my proposal to Christine, I only had two hours to execute it. This became alarmingly real the second she went to go dump our stuff in the foyer of our rental house and I was alone by the car. I was using the brief moment of solitude to transfer the ring box from the boot in my luggage to my puffy jacket pocket when it hit me: I was going to have a fiancé in about ninety minutes, assuming she said yes.

It was our final night in this wonderful country that had brought us so many unforgettable memories and I'd done a pretty good job of throwing her off my trail since I'd saved the best for last. We'd spent the day driving four hours from Kirkjufell, the iconic mountain that sits on the western peninsula of the country, back to our home for the night in Selfoss.

As I'm sure you've come to realize from my other posts, Iceland is a road-trippers paradise. Everything there is enormous, including the distances between towns. But, damn, if those rides aren't some of the most soul-affirming peaceful moments I've ever experienced. It was all blue skies with the occasional cotton candy cloud, open road, rolling green pastures with a sheep every few miles and distant lava rock formations bigger than any of the California mountains I'd known (Yosemite, aside). I didn't realize it until the last day, but I'd completely stopped biting my nails, something I did a lot when I was stuck in the car for hours-on-end in any other circumstance.

My favorite part about the drive into Selfoss was the giant green hill that led into the valley as we approached from the west. One minute we were a hundred stories up over the town, looking into the valley below and the next we were on one of the steepest inclines downward headed straight for it. This beautiful little hamlet was nestled in a wide trench left behind by a glacial river. Every now and again, like a fairy tale on another planet, plumes of white thermal exhaust would spew up from the ground and carry with them that rich sulfur smell I'd

somewhat come to appreciate.

I'd coordinated with our photographer (Ann Peters of Your Adventure Wedding. Thanks Ann!) to meet at a waterfall by a volcano about two hours northeast of Selfoss. This took a lot of planning on my part and I want to take a quick beat of shameless self-congratulation, because I had to time out our day (in secret, mind you) three months in advance, coordinate when we'd arrive in Selfoss, pick a dramatic enough photo spot within striking range of a town I'd never visited in my life, call her parents during lunch to ask their permission (time zones, ugh!) and meet a stranger at a set of coordinates in the middle of nowhere.

My story was that we were going to meet "a personal tour guide" who was going to give us a private sightseeing experience around a waterfall. Maybe I didn't cover my tracks so well because Christine's response was definitely something like, "Oh you just know a guy? In Iceland? Mmkay." To my credit: there are a bunch of websites where you can contract a local for unique tours and photography sessions, so my lie was couched in truth, to some degree. That said, I probably could have done better, but give me a break.

After we dropped off our stuff at the rental property, we realized we had no food for the night. All of the restaurants in town would have closed by the time we returned from our "hike," so we scrambled to the local Bonus grocery store (their logo is hilarious, look it up) to grab some bread, smjör, mjölk, ice cream and dry soup with instructions I ended up guessing when Google Translate failed me.

We got held up in line behind a man buying a lamb and beans sandwich. I must shamefully admit that curiosity got the better of me and I had to try this before we left, so I picked one up at a gas station before arriving at the airport the next day. It was weird. Iceland is not a foodie part of the world is all I'll say on that topic (their national dish is shark meat left to rot in the sand, so... you do the math).

We dropped our groceries off and I mapped our way to the coordinates Ann had sent me. The timing of it seemed like it was going to work. I played it cool as nerves shot through every fiber of my being. I wasn't worried about whether or not I'd be making the right decision, but it was a little surreal to plan something for eight months that then got carried out in a matter of minutes. It didn't give me a lot of, "Oh wow, I'm actually doing this," processing time.

We arrived exactly on time and I saw the mountain Ann had sent me in our clandestine back-and-forth. There was just one problem: it was about two miles

from the road and my coordinates had led me to a highway with no turn-off. The rental we'd purchased was all-wheel drive, but I wasn't about to turn off onto craggy lava rock and rip up the underside of the car. Plus, it's illegal to drive off-road in Iceland. The cops don't have much else to do there because the crime rate is next to nothing, so they will fine you.

So, I did what any level-headed individual would do: I panicked. Part of my arrangement with Ann was that she was going to cover up the side of her vehicle that read "YOUR ADVENTURE WEDDING" upon arrival to maintain the facade. Once we got to this waterfall, we'd still have to walk a little bit to arrive at the actual shoot spot, and I wanted Christine's reaction caught on camera. This meant that I didn't want to call Ann, lest I get a voicemail such as:

"Hi, thank you for calling Your Adventure Wedding..."

After a few minutes driving up and down this lonely stretch of highway, I caved and called. It went to voicemail. I did the "excessively loud pretend cough" thing to cover up the first few seconds of her greeting, which played out exactly as I'd assumed. Ann didn't answer, probably because there were as many cell towers out here as there were people: zero. As I placed the call, Christine saw someone turn off the road a mile or so ahead of us. We followed that lead.

I'm going to take a minute here to be the voice of reason whenever part of you wants to save a few extra dollars on the rental car insurance for the week you're in a foreign country. Buy the insurance. Just do it. Your peace of mind alone will be worth its weight in gold.

Why do I bring this up? Because once we turned off the road to head in the direction of the mountain, the pavement gave way to rocks. Big ones. I misjudged the height of one of these little guys and drove over it like I would any other rock. This stubborn little piece of earth's crust snared something under our car and crunched into it. It was so loud I stopped and it continued to make a horrible, grinding screech every time I lurched forward. We bit the bullet and committed to driving over it. It sounded like a thousand nails on a chalkboard followed by a deep, hollow thunk. The noise was... harrowing. I got out and checked for any leaks or dislocated parts, but all seemed fine. Suffice to say: we had gotten the insurance when we first rented the car, and I regret nothing.

Fortunately, Ann found us right as I'd landed myself in this predicament. She helped move the boulder out of the way, we exchanged hellos, and both got back in our cars. Christine had no idea what was going on. To her, it looked like a

random stranger had helped get a boulder out of the road, said hello to me then led the way for me to follow her. I had so much going on in my head I forgot to tell Christine that Ann was our “guide,” until she asked.

We arrived at Þjófafoss (Thjofafoss, thief waterfall) and the thunderous boom of metric tons of water falling ten stories hit us immediately. The air was cool with that kind of mist that sprays into the air near a gargantuan moving body of water. It was a perfectly clear day with a mountain in the distance to the north and an ice-capped volcano to the east.

Ann, who was supposed to have been at the site “taking pictures in the area” prior to our arrival, changed her plan a little to make sure we found the site. When she found us on the dirt road, it’d been because she realized the coordinates she sent led me nowhere and since I was late, she assumed we were lost. She’d left her post to drive back up the road to find us, but now that meant she was arriving at the falls the second we were, so she needed to get back to the place where she’d set up for the picture.

Again, what this looked like to Christine was that our private guide didn’t even say hello to us, slung a camera around her shoulder and paced off over the lava rock without so much as a word to us in introduction. I played it so cool by pointing over the edge of the cliff, twenty stories down into the lake below and said something incredibly clever like “Oh look, is that a... no. Never mind, oh let’s go over here!”

Christine was confused but followed after me on the jagged, porous rocks as I kept mumbling about things she couldn’t see that didn’t exist.

The last part of the puzzle that I realized I’d never hashed out with Ann was “Where should I stop and pop the question?” This waterfall was enormous, and Ann was about a hundred yards away from us up on a ridge, but there sure as hell was no “X” on the ground to denote where I should stop for her angle.

So I kind of kept walking until I decided I was in the right spot. I found a clearance close enough to Ann’s line of sight, worried briefly about whether or not I needed to take off my beanie since this would be memorialized for eternity (but it was cold), found my knee, popped the question, Ann got the shot, and Christine said “What?!” then, “Yes!” then, “Thank you!” which I constantly remind her is not something she needs to thank me for because she’s wonderful and deserves the world. I was able to breathe a sigh of relief. All in all, it was a pretty damn magical experience.

On a final, hilarious note, Iceland is a surreal place because no matter where you are, no matter how remote it may seem — there will always be another tourist around to get in the way of your picture. Þjófafoss was no exception. Here I was living my major life event moment, having driven five miles off the beaten path to arrive at a waterfall only the locals knew about and when I stood up to kiss Christine, I was face-to-face with an old European lady sporting a big, fluffy '80s haircut staring at us with incredulity for getting in the way of her shot of this waterfall. For reference, we were the only other people at this place, it was about as big as six football fields stitched together and all she had to do was take one step to the right to not have us in her frame, but who am I to judge? I think she saw the angle Ann was getting and decided that was the only one to be had, so I took it as a compliment.

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