



Spiral

Volume 1, Issue 3.2

Fall 2008

Part 2 of 2

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An Oberlin College Publication

Letter from the Editor

As you may have noticed, this edition of *Spiral* is somewhat different from the others: we've printed two magazines this module instead of the usual one. Let me take a moment to tell you why.

First of all, and most importantly, we received almost 100 submissions this module. Not only did we have more submissions, but we accepted more than we ever have before—more than we were physically able to print in one magazine.

Of course we didn't want to cut out any of the pieces we accepted. Though we considered saving some of the pieces to publish next module, this was impractical for several reasons. Not only will we continue to receive submissions from you, but how are we to determine which pieces to print this module, and which to save? (This would be particularly difficult since we've started to establish serial pieces: see *Captain Marie Baban*—from Spring 2008—on page 32 and *Shadows*—from Summer 2008—on page 40.)

So we decided to publish two magazines this module. Two separate, but complete magazines. The one you are holding now contains all of the pieces the staff deemed to be more fantastical in nature. The other magazine contains our other genres; this module featuring science-fiction, erotica, and other genres. Though we hesitate to decide genres for the pieces, we needed some sorting method, and this was the best we could find for dividing the magazine in half. So please take our labels with a grain of salt.

And now, I leave you to your reading pleasure. Make sure to grab the other magazine, but don't feel like you must read them in any particular order! And please continue to submit your amazing genre-fiction pieces!

—**Bryn A. McDonald**
Editor-in-Chief

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The Family Jove:

The Hermeneutics of Flight

by Julieanne Lopresto

It wasn't a family reunion—just a visit this time. Only one small section of the extended family was descending upon his parents' home, leaving his mother and father considerably less stressed. Still, fear remained in Simon Aphrodine's hollow bones, just as it did whenever the family came to the house. He jumped at every noise from the driveway and at any unexpected voice calling his name, for the impending meeting, for the first time, was centered around him and him alone.

His mother hardly noticed his fear, and, when she did, she attributed it to her son's already nervous nature. His father, who could hear the rapid beating of his small bird's heart at twenty paces, laid a hand on his shoulder and bent to his level, saying *At least Grandmother isn't coming this time* with a smile. Simon imagined Grandmother's wrinkled visage and shuddered, goosebumps raising on his arms as his father patted him on the shoulder sympathetically.

There was no postponing the visit, though, and his uncle—his mother's brother—his aunt, and their two children were fast approaching from the mystical land to the south that his mother called the City and he had never seen. In the days before the intended time, Simon spent most of his days in his room, by the window, listening to his siblings run about the house. His mother had forbidden him from playing inside with his siblings inside for fear he'd break something. His mother conveniently forgot that his brother could set the house on fire if he so chose (and almost had, by accident. Multiple times), and his older sister frequently played with the metal objects around the house, bending and shaping them into strange toys for her own amusement. There was nothing else to do but wait—he didn't go to school, and probably never would. Marta, Thad, and Marie would all go once they got good enough at hiding what their mother called

their “strangeness” from “normal” kids. Simon’s “strangeness” happened to be more external than the majority of the family’s, save for his uncle.

His mother had decided on his visit in the first place, perhaps thinking that learning a new skill would toughen up her timid son, or perhaps because she realized what was probably the truth—that her son would never take the initiative and learn to fly by himself like her younger brother once had. When Dahlia Aphrodine had finally noticed that her son’s wings had grown golden brown pin-feathers yet he still failed to try them out, she had called up Flynn Jove, her brother, and convinced him to come up *post haste*. Flynn had tried to tell her that *the boy will learn to fly in his own time, we all do* but it was to no avail. He was to come Upstate with his family in two weeks’ time to get his nephew off the ground before that weekend’s final hours.

The days seemed to go slowly as he waited. Golden leaves lazily fell off the trees that surrounded the house, and his mother, equally lazily, attempted to raise the two older children out of their summer-induced stupor and half-heartedly teach them basic math and penmanship. It would be Simon’s turn to join the kitchen-cum-schoolhouse next year, but, for now, he was free to do as he pleased. There wasn’t much to do currently, pleasurable or otherwise, except wait. There was always the wait.

Friday eventually came, but that’s what Fridays always did. There was still the sound of a car, so rare at their house, and the presence of four other people to wait for. Surprisingly, despite his endless, stomach-churning expectation, it was Marta who was the first of the children to greet her aunt, uncle and cousins.

His father was already there, having heard the car long before anyone else had. There were two unfamiliar children crowding around him, one with long red hair and the other with short brown. Marta was more interested in her aunt, Philomele, who had just extracted herself from the driver’s seat of the car. The other two Aphrodine children ignored everyone and stole their cousins away from their father.

The passenger door opened, and out climbed Flynn Jove. Simon tried to suppress the urge to attach himself to his mother or to

run away and join the other children. His uncle was shorter than his father and his aunt, about the same height as his mother. He had sandy blond hair with a nose that reminded Simon of a beak. He closed the car door with a slender hand and pulled the lapels of his brown coat tighter, even though the weather was hardly enough for a light jacket. When he turned to the side, a slight hunch in his back could be detected, and Simon felt that he alone knew this was a sign of the concealed wings.

He knew this was not the case, because they were all of the family in that household. They were Joves and Aphrodines but, as a whole, along with other small units like theirs spread across the world, they were known as Artemisians, and they all knew what the other members could do. He had never been able to meet anyone who was not a member of his family, but he knew that the rest of the world was different from them.

“Normal” as his mother called them. As opposed to the family’s “strangeness”.

He stood to the side as the adults unpacked the Joves’ belongings from the car. His father brought the first load—two small bags, just the kind that two small children would insist on packing themselves—to the house, and Simon expected his uncle to follow. Flynn, however, came to him. “Hey, sport,” he said happily. “Ready for all this?” No, thought Simon. He shrugged. Flynn ruffled his hair and moved on to his mother. Simon was wearing a grubby t-shirt with the neck torn wide and cut low on the back so his wings could be free. As he watched his uncle with his expertly covered back walk over and greet his mother, he pulled them close to himself, suddenly feeling oddly exposed. He realized he didn’t know a thing about how the only other living winged member of his family existed day to day, or how he had when he had been Simon’s age. Had he been able to go to school, meet people who weren’t Artemisians, and be what his mother would call “normal”? Clearly he was able to exist in every day life now. *He’ll teach me that, too*, thought Simon and, for the first time, he looked forward to the days ahead.

“Of course, we’re talking about moving to the City when the kids are old enough,” said his mother. You could hear the capital letter

in her voice. "When Marie's twelve or so," she added, listing the age when most Artemisian children began going to school.

The family had assembled themselves in the dining room—one of the few rooms in their home that belied the house's age. The ceiling was high and raftered, and the old wooden floor creaked even when tiny, light Simon walked upon it.

"That's lovely," replied Philomele. "It'll be nice to have more family close by." The way she sounded reminded Simon of how Marta acted when she lied to their mother about what happened to her favorite silver necklace.

Flynn shifted slightly in his seat and, again, Simon was reminded of the wings he knew his uncle was somehow hiding. "Not to sound like a hypocrite, Dahlia," he said slowly, "but that may not be a good idea." He shrugged his shoulders and Simon imagined wings.

His mother went from nothing to haughty in less than a second. "And why not?"

"Four children? All of whom—one more than the others—need space to run around and, well, be themselves." Simon knew that he was referring to their "strangeness" again, specifically his.

"You do fine with two, and Simon will be fourteen by then. We will cope," replied his mother, with a slight lift of her nose into the air.

There was a slight pause as his aunt and uncle glanced at each other.

"Dahlia," said Philomele, "we're actually considering moving away. In a few months or so. The only reason we're staying there now is Flynn's job."

"We thought that we'd wait until the next reunion to share the news," added her husband. "But I suppose now's as good as any other time."

"We're expecting a third," added Flynn, a huge smile breaking across his face, despite the minor argument. "Just found out last week."

His father grinned back, offered a *congratulations* and a handshake to his uncle, but his mother immediately went into a frenzy while Simon and his siblings tried their hardest to comprehend why

another child would be something to celebrate. "You can't know what it'll be, yet," said his mother after she had attacked both Joves with her sudden burst of affection.

"No, it's too early," Philomele interjected. She divined part of the remaining question and continued with, "Ellery, for a boy. Old-fashioned, but it works in our family, I think. My dad was a little annoyed that we named Billie after your and Flynn's father."

"For a girl: Lilith," added Flynn. "After Lilith Melampa Ares—a common ancestor of ours. *Many* generations back, of course," he was sure to say. Artemisian marriages were carefully watched, but common cousins occurred in every pairing.

"I suppose this means you won't have one of each any more," said Simon's father.

"I suppose," repeated Philomele. "Billie is going though a pretty big 'boy' phase right now," she added and ruffled her (then) son's hair, which was the same color as hers and a bit too long for a regular six year old boy. "We'll have to cut this soon," she said, referring to the locks. "That is, if we're going to still have one of each for the next eight months."

"You don't want one of each?" said the child belonging to the hair. "Look! I can be a girl again. Watch—" he smooched up his face. Not much occurred. "—see?"

("Not at this age," said Flynn in a low voice to Simon's father. "I hope she loses her flare for showing people her shifts before puberty sets in." Simon ignored the words he didn't understand but latched onto the change in pronoun and regarded it like a strange insect that had flown in though the window.)

There were no other life-changing revelations for the evening, so the conversation slowly trickled back to normal over the second helpings and desert. Marie and Daphne had bonded, while Bille, now that she had chosen to be female again, decided to be friends with Marta. Thad, missing his one-time male companion, settled himself by continuously pestering the two older girls, leaving Simon alone as usual.

The youngest male of the Aphrodine clan amused himself by attempting to make his ice cream into soup. He barely noticed the outside world until he heard his father say his name, followed by a

Ready for the big day tomorrow?

His father occupied a different slot in his mind than most adults—they were big, difficult and distant. Somehow, his father seemed big, difficult, and rather close. It was easier for him to react and respond to him than to most others.

“No,” he finally admitted.

Flynn’s face changed abruptly from his contented smile to something Simon couldn’t quite read, then was restored, almost too fast for anyone to see. *Almost*. “You’re not excited? At all?”

Simon glanced at his father, who cocked his head slightly. Simon quickly shook his, more at his father than at his uncle. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Flynn glance at his wife with the same expression as before, then shoot a glare at his mother, who abruptly left the table. Flynn whispered something to Philomele then left as well, sparing a moment to lay a hand on Simon’s shoulder.

“I think it may be time to let the children loose to play,” said Philomele. “Edward?”

“Oh. Yes, of course.” Simon’s father responded after a beat, tearing his eyes away from his son. “Go on, kids. Enjoy yourselves.”

Predictably, the others ran away from the table without a second thought. Simon, slightly reluctantly, followed.

He crawled out of bed at about his usual time—too early for any of the other children to be up, and, on the weekends, the same with his parents. He made his way out of his room and walked quietly down the stairs, turning into the kitchen with the hopes of scrounging up something to eat. The kitchen was usually empty at this time but on this day, which was already proving to be strange, his uncle had chosen to rise early as well. Flynn was already fully dressed and had a small basket in hand. “Morning,” he said, as if nothing was unusual. “I was told you got up early, so I thought we’d start early. Sound good?”

Start what? thought Simon, but instead he asked, “What’s in there?”

“Hmm? Oh, in the basket? Some snacks and things. I thought we’d have a picnic. Just to start us off. A picnic and a chat.”

Simon hadn’t had very many picnics in his short life, but he was

reasonably certain that they were, for the most part, held outside. Flynn, however, seemed to have different opinions on the matter, and lead his nephew up the stairs. “I used to spend so much time up here as a kid,” said Flynn when they were done climbing. “And...in here. Follow me.”

Simon did as he was told and found himself in his room. He began to speak, but was cut off: “Uncle—”

“This was my old room.” Flynn placed the basket on Simon’s bed and then deftly opened the persnickety window with one hand. “It’s a little smaller than I remember,” he said. In a fluid movement, he grabbed the basket, placed it outside on the roof, and then attempted to follow it. “Won’t work like this,” Flynn muttered, more to himself than anyone else. He sighed, and then shucked his coat. His back was to his nephew, and all Simon could see was a normally shaped man wearing a button-down shirt. “You get so used to it,” Flynn, who was unbuttoning the shirt, added, this time directly to Simon. “Hiding. You forget what it’s like to be in a place you don’t have to, with people you don’t have to hide from.” The last button came through and off came the shirt.

Simon would think on this day often later in his life, and this moment always stood out differently in his memory. He was sure he hadn’t imagined the fall sunlight streaming in through the window, nor the breeze that followed it and caressed his cheek. The slight creaking noise that he heard when his uncle spread his white-feathered wings—now that—*that*—he may have imagined. “Out we get,” said Flynn, and he slipped through the window just as he must have done when he had been Simon’s age.

“Come on,” he said, and Simon, who had never climbed out onto the roof before, followed him as if he was born for such a task. His uncle didn’t spread out a cloth, nor did he lay out any of the food. He merely sat down, pulled an apple out of the basket, and began munching on it. Simon stood on the slightly slanted rooftop and shivered, even though the morning air was comfortably warm. “Sit down,” his uncle said cheerfully. “Have an apple. You’re hungry, right?”

Simon nodded. Flynn grabbed another apple from the bag. “Sit down,” he repeated. Simon sighed, and slowly, carefully, crouched

down onto the roof and sat. His uncle handed him the apple. They sat in silence and ate for a few minutes.

“So, how,” said Simon. It wasn’t a question.

“How what?” asked Flynn.

Simon spread and folded his wings by way of answer.

“How do I *hide* them, you mean?”

A nod.

“Hm,” was the initial response. He took an apple slice and ate it while he contemplated. “It really didn’t happen until I learned to fly. And fly well, not just the basics. When flying became as easy as walking, I was able to fold them tightly enough and long enough that they could hide.

“It’s not *fun* to do it, but it’s necessary. Practice and you’ll get better at it, same as with anything. The good thing about us Artemisians is that we’ve been hiding so long we’ve practically evolved to do so. Most really noticeable gifts, like us Aluli—winged ones—have either died out or are exceedingly rare nowadays. We’re just a throwback, I guess.” Flynn glanced at his nephew. “You want to go to school eventually, right?”

Simon nodded, saying nothing, though he wanted to ask about gifts that had died out and wished to inform his uncle that, yes, he knew that his middle name was Alulus and recalled all that the name entailed.

“Of course you do,” said Flynn, and Simon twitched, wondering if, somehow, his uncle had heard his train of thought. Flynn, of course, was not Marie, and couldn’t have. “Daphne and Billie already wonder about the world outside our home, even though neither have accepted the idea that people are supposed to look pretty much the same every single day. That’s why we’re considering moving here. More space to wander around in, even though we have a pretty big place by Manhattan standards. You may go later than your siblings, and you’ll need to get some phony medical excuse for getting out of gym and things like that. I did it, and so can you. Artemisians: we’re adaptable. Remember that.”

Flynn stood up without hesitation, his bare feet firmly planted on the roof as if he was born to be there. “Remember I said I spend a load of time up here as a kid? I fell off a couple of times. It’s how

I learned to do this: falling off and figuring out how not to die.” He smiled and gave a small chuckle, both of which disappeared when he saw how Simon had reacted to the word ‘die’.

“I didn’t, did I?” he said.

Simon shook his head and his uncle spread his wings.

“Watch,” he said.

Flynn then stepped off the roof.

Simon wanted to look away but obeyed his uncle and watched. There was nothing for a second—absolute silence and Simon’s heart skipped a beat. Then—then—almost as he’d given up hope—there was a great noise, like a gale force wind blowing through a tree. His uncle appeared again, swooping upwards away from the noise that had exploded a second before. The great white wings caught the early morning light as Flynn Jove rose towards the sun.

“It’s your turn now,” is what his uncle said after he landed back on the rooftop.

“I...I can’t,” said Simon.

“Of course you can. You were built for this. Look at us.”

Simon had been doing nothing but looking at his uncle for the past two days. He saw the same features reflected in himself: the strange, aquiline nose, the dainty bones, the small frame, broad shoulders... and, of course, the wings. “Okay,” he answered. “O-o-okay.”

He copied what Flynn had done: inched to the edge, wings spread. His arms lifted, too, almost as a reflex: a child trying to fly. He allowed himself to breathe, then jumped.

And just as he thought that he was going to hit the ground, they caught it—his wings caught the air somehow. It felt as if two giant hands had grabbed them and held them steadily aloft. He wasn’t scared at all—he was safe. He was held in the air as gently as a child by its mother. And why shouldn’t he? He was a creature of the air, after all. Every part of him was built for this—his bones, his muscles, his limbs.

Simon! a voice was saying. *Simon! Simon!* He paid it no mind. In fact, he barely registered anything until the sickening crunch reached his ears.

“Too *low*,” said his uncle. “Philomele! Edward, get Phil!”

Simon tried to ask what was going on, but all that came out of

his mouth was a small cry, like that of a weak and newborn bird. He pushed himself up as best he could, only to see his left leg crumpled and twisted beneath him, clearly broken. It was only then that everything—pain, crunch, ground—came together. There was a figure coming towards them, blurred by what had been, until that moment, the mysterious tears in his eyes.

Flynn, to his utter shock and horror, laughed, and through pain he managed to focus in on his uncle and hear as he said, “It’s the hollow bones. Always got me, too. It’s lucky my mother was a healer, and, anyway, that’s how I met Phil.”

“You crashed into a tree, as I recall,” said Philomele, smirking slightly. Crouching down to Simon, she laid her hands aside his twisted leg and the pain *vanished*. He watched as his leg unbent from its strange angle and aligned itself before his eyes, like magic.

“And that’s what your aunt does,” said Flynn. “Here, I’ll help you up. We probably should rest for a few hours. Just because your bones are fixed doesn’t mean your leg knows it’s better yet.”

It was true. He was assured that he was entirely healed, but there was a lingering pain in his bones. His leg refused to hold his weight, so he was couchridden until the afternoon. He contented himself with watching his siblings and his cousins play outside. He could scarcely tell which of the brown-haired children was which; identification became slightly easier when Daphne decided that her hair should be bright purple for the day and changed it, much to the delight of her youngest cousin.

“You should be right as rain soon,” said a voice. “I’m sure you want to be out playing with them.”

It was his aunt, who had been checking up on him periodically. “No,” he answered, truthfully.

“Not really into running around then, are you? I guess I was sort of the same, when I was a little girl. Weird, huh? One would think that I, the girl who couldn’t ever get hurt, who would heal herself in an instant, would be getting into all sorts of mischief.” Philomele sat down near the couch’s left arm, near the soles of Simon’s feet. “I guess I knew I was invincible and saw no use in trying to get hurt. Or whatever the point of roughhousing is; I never really

understood it.”

“I get hurt easily,” said Simon. “I’ve broken all kind of bones, but not my legs ever. Grandma fixes them for me all the time.”

“Flynn and Dahlia’s mother,” responded Philomele. “It’s useful to have two of us so close to where so much of the family lives.”

Simon had a dim idea of what went on in the outside world, but in this foggy picture, there were people dressed in white called doctors who fixed you when you were sick and broken. Very few of them, he imagined, had ever treated a small boy with wings. Very few of them, he went on to muse, could heal in an instant with a touch. He put the idea of white-clad men out of his mind and flexed his leg muscles.

“You should be fine now,” said his aunt. She rose and offered him her hand, which he gratefully took. It seemed like something, be it strength, warmth, or something unknown, flowed from Philomele into him, and he solidly stood for the first time in four hours. He was sure that if she ever released him he would fall, and he gripped on to her tighter. “Do you want to try again?” she said. “Flynn will understand if you don’t.”

Simon was torn like he had never been before. Every muscle in his body held two thoughts, that of fear, pure, inescapable fear, the kind that he had lived with every day of his short life, and that of the surging rush, the power they had held when they had been responsible for bearing his small body aloft in flight.

“I want to talk to him,” he said.

“Okay,” said Philomele. “Let’s go.”

They found him in the kitchen with Simon’s mother. They were quiet when they entered, his mother standing by the back door with her arms folded across her chest, and his uncle staring fixedly out the window.

“Flynn,” said his mother.

His uncle said nothing.

“Flynn,” repeated his aunt.

An interested grunt came from his uncle.

“Simon wants to talk to you.”

Flynn looked up from the table. His eyes flicked first over Simon’s mother, then to his wife, then slid slowly down to Simon.

“Right. Let’s go, then.”

Philomele laid her hand on her husband’s back, and Simon imagined that some of the *whatever* that had flown into him when she had taken his hand flowing into his uncle. It seemed as if he needed it even more than Simon did at that moment. They walked back to the living room and his aunt settled Simon back down on the couch that he had been lying on before. Flynn still stood in the doorway, just where his wife had left him. Philomele finally released Simon’s hand. She walked to her husband and whispered in his ear and, just for a second, Simon wished he was born with his father’s gift instead of his uncle’s.

His aunt left the room and, Simon noticed, did not go back to the kitchen. Flynn walked over to the couch and sat down. The two were silent for a few minutes. Simon stared down at his leg and recalled the twisted, bent shape it had been in a few hours previously. His uncle sighed.

“I didn’t want to come here, Simon,” said Flynn at last. “I’m going to be honest with you: when your mother asked me to come here, I refused at first. She beat me down and practically forced me to come here. It’s nothing against you, don’t worry. You’re my nephew and I love you, but I’m of the opinion that you have to do this yourself. For me, it was a part of growing up. There was no one around to teach *me* how to fly, even if my parents had decided that I had to be taught, as well. We’re the only two in our family right now.

“Your leg,” he added, “was kind of the last straw. For both of us. Your mother...” his uncle trailed off and furrowed his brow. After a moment he resumed with, “She brushed it off. It technically wasn’t a huge problem, because of Phil, but it’s the principle of the thing: you broke your leg. She blamed it on me in one breath and then said you were perfectly fine in the second. I sometimes think that...” Flynn shook his head, and apparently decided not to voice what, exactly it was he thought.

“Anyway, I wanted to ask you what you wanted. You’ve been quiet about this whole thing, even though I know you’ve had your reservations. You’re a pretty terse kid, you know that? I wish we had someone like you around the house with Bill and Daph. It’d bal-

ance things out nicely.” He chuckled, and Simon managed a small smile. “What do you want, then?”

“I,” Simon Aphrodine whispered, “don’t know.”

“That’s good,” replied Flynn Jove. “I’d be more worried if you did.”

The truth was that Simon was just beginning to learn what he wanted. It was a slow process, begun that morning on the roof, slowly progressing to when Philomele had asked him if he wanted to try flying again, and growing steadily though the rest of his family’s visit. In the few hours that remained of the weekend, he roused himself and managed to play with his cousins and siblings, if just to get his mind away from the strange brewings that circled around the adults and the stranger thoughts that were brewing in his mind.

Sunday came and went, and with it went the family Jove. The children were forcibly plucked from their peers, while the adults went easily and quietly. Their silent departure seemed to wash back into the Aphrodine household, leaving even Simon’s usually loud siblings taciturn. Simon took this opportunity to sneak out the back door and traipse out into the woods behind the house.

The trees that grew behind the ancestral Jove homestead could hardly be called ‘woods’, but to the children that had grown up there for generations, sheltered from the outside world, they seemed large and wild. Simon had never been too far into them, but had been far enough to know about the treehouse that he and his older siblings had discovered one day. They had no idea about its past; they had never mentioned it to their mother. She, who rarely went out beyond the neatly trimmed lawn of their back yard, would not have remembered the day it was built, even though she had been present. Simon had missed a window of opportunity, as Flynn Jove and Phil Artemisia, the girl who would become Philomele Jove, were present at its construction and had fond, if not child-friendly, memories of it.

But Simon had no knowledge of any of this, and would never. It would occur to him, later, to bring up his experience that Sunday to his uncle, to mention the treehouse and the significance it held for him, but decided that it was his own personal memory, something

that he would share with the next winged child born to Artemisian parents. Maybe, if only to impart the same lesson that his uncle had given to him. He climbed, using bark, branches, and crudely nailed wooden handholds, ascending slowly and carefully because old fears die hard. He reached the landing and pushed himself up and into the house, allowing him a minute to catch his breath before he moved.

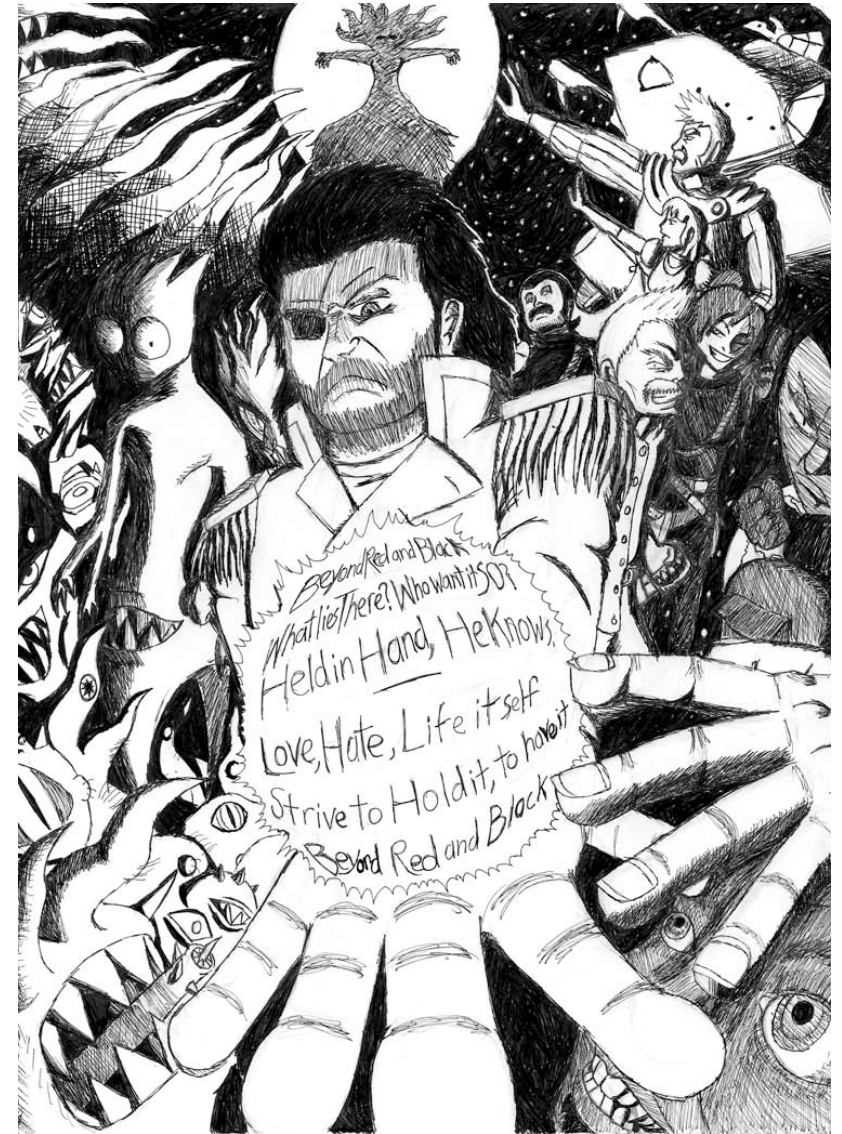
He rose to his feet and walked to the small window, clambering out of it, entirely unlike the fluid motions his uncle had made in his room the previous day. Once out, he stepped onto a branch and, from there, onto the flat roof of the treehouse. Slowly, steadily, he walked to the edge of the roof.

He spread his wings.



Eyebird

by Alyssa Zullinger



Beyond Red and Black

by Jeremy Ledgister

First-Born

by Stephen Burrows

Mirrorshadow -

I have birthed you
from the ink that flows my veins.

Now choose! - and

Raise your hand when I

Raise mine, and

Pare your nails when I

Pare mine, and

Smile, and

Frown, and

Don't Reach Down, just

Part your hair and Say your prayers.

- or must I shatter you?

Mirrorshadow -

I have formed you
with this living quill, my hand.

But still! - you

Go before me through the

Night, and

Soar above me in our

Flight, and

Lead me

to what

I Forbade;

Must I disown you, maverick child?

- or must I love you?

Akasha's Prelude

by Alyssa Zullinger

a.

This is the day Akasha dies.

(In some versions, she turns to ice.)

A taxi by the curb like a lemon in the rain

with one door open, *rush to it,*

papers over head, brush inside trailing water.

Spearmint leather seat, stranger man at the wheel
says, "Hey Akasha."

Hello Dev. Nice trap you have here. Let me out.

I'm not marrying you.

b.

Neha says, sharp henna eyes:

Be grateful.

You're lucky

anyone would want you, you're so old.

You're lucky

no one

has told him.

c.

In one hand: Papers that smell like ink.

In the other: Papers that smell like cloves.

Cloves and ink merge so Akasha can open the door

to her office,
which smells like coffee and fabric.

Akasha writes meticulously
(between sips of Starbucks.)
Every letter
is three embroidery stitches
above the line.

The clove papers will go in a clanking metal box
like a time capsule.
CDs last 100 years.
Paper lasts five hundred.

d.

Akasha is
(coffee grounds,
tongue on burlap,
breath freezing over)

Caroline says
*love how you smell like coffee
and sleep all at once.*

This girl is vanilla ice cream,
the real stuff, with freckles.
Akasha stirring silently
a spoon, a million harsh sentences,
a million yearling truths.

This is the morning after
in the kitchen
of her parents house:
Mother's acrid face cream
and Mother holding her fingers,

eager blowtorches for eyes:
The new boy, Dev!
I talked with his mother,
You're getting married!

e.

Inhaling spearmint,
Akasha towels a wet clump of papers
with her shirt, wiping away water
and ink.

This is the day Akasha dies.
Although, as some will tell you,
she frosts over; walks out into the rain
and becomes a cold sculpture, ice
that will never melt.

Pivot Points

by Jenna J. Lindeke

There are times when you decide with your head;

The whirl of parry and feint stumbled to a halt as my saber wrenched free of my grasp and clattered to the floor of the practice room. My heart pounded in my ears and my lungs ached against my ribs. Not even any of Father's officers had challenged me like that before. I glanced at where my sword lay but knew better than to retrieve it. Instead I backed up a few paces and bowed to the black-clad GryphonRider, the victor.

As I anxiously stared up at him, he let out a panting chuckle and cracked a smile. In spite of myself, I smiled back. "Well, young Hkurashi," he said in heavily accented yet crisp Illissenni, "I have decided what report of you to send back to WarClaw Fortress. That is, if you have not changed your mind."

"Sir," I stammered, almost not daring to believe that I was about to break out of the mold of my family. I wouldn't fight in the never-ending skirmishes of the islands around my home, but I could fight to end those wars for good. "Sir," I repeated, "I would be honored to join the ranks of the WarRiders."

"I'm glad to hear it, boy," he replied warmly and laughed again, "Because I've never met a fourteen-year-old as quick with a blade as you."

And others that you decide with your feet.

Only three days after my arrival at WarClaw Fortress, home of the WarRiders, I already had my first classes. And I was late. "If all the halls of this massive building didn't look identical, maybe I wouldn't be so lost right now," I muttered under my breath and hurried along. The faster I searched the sooner I'd find it. I neared the end of a corridor and briskly rounded the corner, careening blindly

into another WarRider. She yelped and we both fell tangled to the ground.

Breathlessly, I searched for the words to apologize, but my Old Speak failed me. Instead, I pulled myself up on the wall and offered my hand to her. She wore white, the uniform of the lowest ranking paired WarRiders and her skin was almost as pale. Both her complexion and her chestnut brown hair were far lighter than mine or anyone I had known back home.

She accepted my hand and stood, thanking me in what sounded like Old Speak, the fortress common language. Cursing my language skills, I just nodded. Apparently catching my confusion, she held a hand to her chest and introduced herself, "I am Karanala BronzeCrown, White HartRider."

Imitating the gesture, I replied, stumbling over my title, "Hkurashi, Gray Rider."

Karanala chattered for a moment, but the only word I caught was "Faenmist," a large country to the east. She finished and studied me quizzically.

She must want to know where I'm from. "Listah of Illesseni Isles," I replied. That seemed to satisfy her. With a smile, she seized my wrist and led me away through the maze of corridors.

Sometimes it's you that does the choosing;

I knew that Karanala always came early to stretch before endurance training in the morning, so that's when I chose to approach her. She already sat sprawled out in the dewy grass, loosening up. Unfortunately, she heard me coming and threw a glance over her shoulder. "What do you want Hkurashi?" she demanded sourly. "Do you want to make a fool of the klutz in the sword ring again this afternoon?"

Thankfully I understood Old Speak much better than I spoke it. Shaking my head, I sunk down into the grass in front of her. "No," I pronounced carefully, "My Old Speak very bad. You very good, but sword not good." I cringed inwardly. *That was awful.*

"I noticed," Karanala replied shortly, but I could see her pointed ears perking up curiously.

"I help you, you help me," I proposed, "and we get better."

"You're serious about that?" Karanala asked, leaning back on her hands.

I nodded, "I serious."

Karanala laughed a bell-like laugh, her blue eyes dancing. For half a second, I thought she would refuse. "Then we both have a lot of work to do," she said with a smile, "I think you might be as bad at Old Speak as I am with a sword, and that is impressive."

"Good," I smiled back at her, "When start?"

"When do we start, you mean?" Karanala cheerfully corrected me, "I'm free for an hour this evening before dinner."

But sometimes you're the one being chosen.

Night after night I stood out in the central commons of the fortress, collecting dew with the grass and watching the unpaired unicorns, pegasi, and deer-like Harts file back to bed down in the Mount Hold shelter. Nearly every morning at breakfast for the last week, Fe'sae FierceWyng would ask, "No mount yet? I would have thought you'd have impressed a dragon like my Therse by now, what with fighting skills like yours." He would go on to remind me that I was getting dangerously close to the fortress record of three weeks before pairing with a mount.

What I didn't tell him is that I hadn't spent my nights down in the caves with the dragons and rocs, or in the pens with the gryphons and hippogryphs. Every night I watched the harts lope across the grass, hoping that one would finally find me worthy, like Kimira chose Karanala. Call me stubborn.

-You certainly are stubborn, young one,- a male voice filled my head suddenly. I jumped and whirled around to find a hart stag with a rich ebony-colored coat staring at me.

"I—I," I stammered, left speechless.

-But so am I,- he continued, deep brown eyes unblinkingly fixed on me, *-We will make a good pair; SkysEye.-*

"SkysEye?" I let the sound of it roll over my tongue, "Then that means...?"

-It means that your stubbornness has born fruit, Hkurashi SkysEye,

White HartRider,- I heard amusement in his mental voice, *-I am Siw-corb.-*

There are times when you should let it all out;

"I still can't believe your younger brother had the nerve to mock your swordsmanship," I seethed as we waited for our turn at the sword ring. "Look at him, he has no style. Power and muscle, sure, but anyone with any agility could get around that." One last time, Karanala's brother Feshod swung formlessly at his instructor in the ring before us.

"He's still only yellow rank," Karanala huffed indignantly, "He has no right to call out a Green Rider. Even if I am his older sister. He got a lucky swing in."

I glanced at her out of the corner of my eyes and teased, "But Karanala, you do have a lot to work on. Maybe defense against that should be our lesson for today, hm?"

"I'm only taking that from you because I like you," grinning, she retorted and jabbed me in the side with her elbow.

I absently pushed her back, watching Feshod approach his gear on the other side of the ring. Already, I could feel a stupid grin spreading across my face. "Karanala, watch this," I whispered, tilting my head in Feshod's direction.

He stowed his sword and reached for his water canister. Screwing off the lid he tipped it to his mouth and a frog sprung eagerly onto his face. He yelped, voice cracking, and flung the open canister down.

"Oh, you didn't..." Karanala laughed and put her hands over her mouth.

I burst out laughing, leaning on the fence for support.

A second frog dizzily hopped away from it. Seething and wet, Feshod turned towards us and yelled, "Karanala!"

"This time, I swear it wasn't me," Karanala called back and collapsed in a fit of giggles.

Slapping my leg, I couldn't stop laughing. "That's what I call justice," I managed to speak between peals of laughter.

Feshod scooped up his gear and stormed off while his instructor

ignored us completely. I think he was laughing too.

And times when it's best to stay quiet.

I found Karanala back in her favorite part of the orchard, sitting facing away from me on a wide stump. Her shoulders trembled. *She must be giggling about something or other.*

I couldn't have been more wrong.

I quietly padded closer, but she must have sensed me coming. Pivoting on the stump, she cried, "Oh, Hkurashi." Tears cut trails down her cheeks, flowing freely from bleary eyes. Those midnight blue eyes.

Almost before I knew what I was doing, I squeezed onto the stump next to Karanala and wrapped my arms around her.

"Ed," she sobbed onto my shoulder, "Ed. He's gone, Hkurashi."

"I know. I know," I repeated softly. "He's gone to fight for freedom on Misahm. It's his duty, like any of us." I already missed Ed-vesud BayWing, but I couldn't help that sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach; Karanala missed the GryphonRider for different reasons. Maybe I always knew but didn't want to admit it to myself.

She sniffed and unceremoniously wiped her nose on the back of her hand. "He said . . . he said," she stammered through her tears, "that he's only ever thought of me as a cute little sister." She sniffed loudly again, "He didn't even . . . even . . ."

My own heart ached while I held her close enough to feel her heart beating against my chest.

"I thought I loved him," Karanala managed to get out at last.

"I—" I began but it got caught in my throat. *I love you, Karanala.*

"He's gone," she murmured.

Silently, I cradled her and let her cry herself out.

Sometimes your decisions are made for you;

I numbly watched Davin SilentStrike, the Hart Councilman, stroll back down the rows of tables and out of the mess hall. I'd been

called to the war on Fenyae. Fighting in wars of injustice like this was what every WarRider lived and waited for. And yet, I had hardly been at WarClaw for four years. Green Riders typically didn't get sent onto a battlefield until they were much closer to Blue rank. This war was different. They were scrambling for enough non-mages like me to send overseas, so Davin told me.

I came to WarClaw so I could fight for people like the Fenyans. To stop the slaughter that the Nasatites called war. I picked at the food in front of me without eating it. *I should be thrilled to be picked as worthy to go to battle so young, but I don't feel ready to leave the fortress yet. And I'm not ready to leave —*

I didn't even see Karanala coming until she slumped down on the bench across from me, carelessly dropping her plate and mug onto the table. Cider and peas sloshed out onto the table. I looked up in surprise but she wouldn't meet my gaze.

"Hey, Karanala," I said lamely.

"Hey," she replied half-heartedly and drank a long draught from her cider.

I took a deep breath. *With her, nothing is simple.* "Are you okay?" I ventured.

"Hku, I don't know what to think," she started, finally looking up at me, "I just ran into Davin on my way in here."

"He told you then?" I asked. *He does know that the two of us are close.*

"You knew?" Karanala asked and tilted her head to the right.

"Well, I just saw him too," I stammered.

Karanala sighed, "I just can't believe that they'd pick me, of all people, to send over to Fenyae."

"Wait, what?" I straightened up.

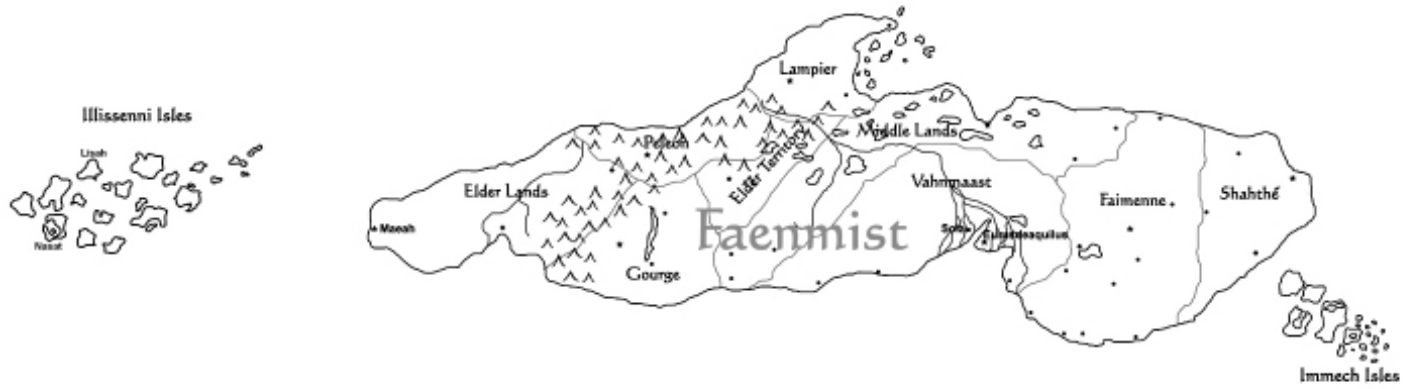
"I'm going to work with the language team on Fenyae to learn the native language and help with communications," Karanala explained dejectedly.

"I thought you'd heard—I mean, I'm being sent too," I said. At that, she straightened up as well. "Though, I'm assigned to one of the scout patrol wyngs."

A smile crept across her face and she reached out for my left hand that rested on the table. Claspng it in hers, she said, "I don't

Jancarmsa

The Known Lands



Ludae Sea



Resanon Sea

Note: This map was charted before the discovery of Fenyae.

know why they would want two Green HartRiders like us in something of this scale, but I guess they could use all the help they can get." She looked away, "Anyway, knowing that you'll be on the front too, that makes me feel like less of a misfit."

"Let's just not get ourselves killed, okay?" I smiled back at her.

And sometimes the choice is yours alone.

"SkysEye, CopperSun, follow me and prepare your weapons!" Kade WindRunner yelled as he and his Hart bounded ahead of me in the underbrush, a blur of bay and purple. "The rest of you, break east, head for the edge of the village."

I bent low to Siscorh's neck and clasped my safety harness to his saddle. The last thing I needed in a skirmish was to be thrown from my mount by an unexpected twist or leap. I fell into line behind Krai CopperSun while Siscorh lengthened his strides.

-The word is that the enemy has breached the defenses around the village but a wyng of GryphonRiders gave them a bit of a scare and they appear to be on the run.- Siscorh informed me.

-Thanks for the update,- I thought back at him.

"Do not engage until ordered," Kade yelled back at us. I still neither heard nor saw any sign of the attackers.

-A group of villagers has been taken prisoners, captors head northwest,- Siscorh updated.

Suddenly a female voice I had never heard before screamed into my head, *-They've got Karanala! She's injured! No, unconscious!-*

"Kimira!" I cursed out loud. I suddenly felt faint, dizzy. *No...*

-Please, Hkurashi!-

"Permission to break form and pursue?" I yelled. Panic griped at my chest.

"SkysEye?" Kade asked.

"One group of Nasatites broke off and took prisoners," I stumbled over my words, my heart racing, "Karanala BronzeCrown's mount Kimira said that they have Karanala prisoner. She's hurt."

"BronzeCrown?" He asked, "One of the translators?"

"Yes! Permission to break form and pursue?" I screamed ahead at my wyng leader.

-Hurry, please!- Kimira sounded frantic.

"Go!" He agreed at last.

Siscorh broke a hard left and we dashed off into the forest.

Sometimes those stupid, split-second decisions are the right choices after all;

"Fenyae is free," Davin SilentStrike announced to our little gathering of HartRiders, "The war is over."

I whooped and hollered along with the crowd of WarRiders around me, throwing my hands in the air. Almost forgetting her broken arm, I seized Karanala into a victorious hug. She grinned and cried, "We did it, Hku!"

"Well done, HartRiders," Davin commended, smiling for the first time I had seen in nine months. "As you all know, our own SkysEye and BronzeCrown played no small part in this."

I released Karanala and we both scrambled to straighten up and smooth our uniforms as all eyes turned on us.

"And I'm sure you all would agree with me that these two young Green Riders are deserving of their Blues."

Everyone, including Karanala beside me, cheered. My jaw hung open, speechless. *Fifth-year Blue Riders?*

Still smiling, Davin continued, "We will make slow march back to the port at Andris from where most of us will return to WarClaw Fortress for debriefing and reassignment. You are dismissed. Celebrate responsibly."

Karanala grasped my right hand weakly with her left and exclaimed, "I can't believe this! We really did it!"

"What will your little brother say to this?" I laughed.

As the crowd of HartRiders filtered out of the tent, Davin approached us. "Well done you two," He said warmly, "You never cease to surprise me, although there have been times I wished you wouldn't."

"Thank you, sir," I bowed.

I saw Karanala suppressing a giggle out of the corner of my eye as she followed my bow.

"Unfortunately, you two will not be among those returning to WarClaw," he said. "I am sorry to say it, but you, Karanala Bronze-

Crown will remain stationed here with our consulate to continue the language work you started. Hkurashi SkysEye, we need as many Illis-senni-speaking riders as we can get on our delegation to Nasat. It has been requested that you accompany our diplomats straight to Nasat."

It had to come one day...

"Yes, sir," Karanala said and bowed respectfully.

"Will I be traveling to Andris then?" I asked.

He nodded, "We leave tomorrow morning." After a curt bow, he turned and marched out of the tent as well.

Karanala squeezed my hand and put a determined smile on her face, "Let's go celebrate, Hkurashi."

And sometimes you wonder over and over if you made the right choice.

I looked down at the letter in front of me and bit at my thumb.

We accept your request for resignation of your post as Nasat Delegation Escort. We understand and respect your conflict of interests on the Illis-senni Isles. You are granted three weeks for leave and travel before returning to WarClaw for a new assignment.

Short, but sweet, and exactly what I had wanted to hear two weeks ago when I composed my own letter. But now, I wondered, where could I possibly go from here? Admitting to a conflict of interests could hurt my chances of appointments in the future. *How much longer could I be stationed here anyway? Is it worth this mark on my record to get away from this tension?*

-What's done is done, Hkurashi. Stop debating and start planning how we're going to get off this island,- Sisorch said tersely. *-I think you've forgotten what it's like to have fun. A year of those Nasatites constantly insulting your people on Listab really took it out of you.-*

-Fine,- I thought back at him, *-So how do we use our three weeks off?-*

-What are you asking me for? You already know.- Sisorch replied.

And sometimes it's not a decision at all;

I waited quietly outside the small house. The air of the village, free

from the fear of war, was far sweeter than the last time I stood there. From inside the lazily ajar door, I heard a familiar voice speaking in an unfamiliar tongue.

The door swung fully open and Karanala stepped out, squinting into the sunlight. She wore a long blue dress in the style of the local woman while her long hair hung loosely around her shoulders. If I didn't know better, I would have thought her to be just a normal girl.

Karanala was anything but normal.

She gasped and put a hand over her mouth, frozen in place. Suddenly, her eyes lit up and she laughed. "Hkurashi! Why didn't you tell me you were...?" she stammered. Blushing and giggling, she ran at me and threw her arms around my shoulders.

I'm not sure if I kissed her or if she kissed me, but really, it didn't matter.

It's fate.



Goblin with a Net
by Alexander Ogilvy

More of the Many Tales in the Lives of Captain Marie Bahan:

“The Dancing One,” ⌘ “Bahan Meets Weaver”

by Alyssa Zullinger

Some things about Weaver, I only knew in my sleep. Sunday morning the week after the incident at Hospital, I woke up and knew she'd whispered secrets to me that I'd already forgotten. They darted away from me like prickly fish while my alarm clattered a dented rhythm on the floor. My single plan for today was to visit Therese. She was staying in the Blue, on the edge of the city.

I left the apartment, out onto the outdoor stairs, with a lazy grey dress on and a glazed scorpion tied to each earlobe. They were Therese's favorite earrings, especially on me. I hadn't bothered with my hair; my eyes were so sunken, I figured I might as well go with the wasted look. Traffic wasn't too bad at 1 PM. It was cloudy out, and on the radio there was some news report about Gavin Dennis or Barret Arjun from Congress, I could never remember which was which, and then some timbrel-jangling rock music. It only took half an hour to get to the Blue, that short baby blue house squished between the tan houses out on Quarter Street. It was our hospice for when you were sick or bleeding or crazy. Four people lived in the house permanently: Francine, a doctor who used to work at Hospital; her husband Jim, a shaman, the only one of the four who was never ridden; Graham, a med student who, on my last visit, had stood around looking useless; and a therapist named Acacia.

Acacia answered the door in a blue dress and jade cross necklace. She was in her forties, with slightly creased walnut skin and grey traipsing into her hair. I didn't trust her; I could never tell what

* This piece is the continuation of a piece begun in Volume 1, Issue 1.

she was really loyal to.

“Acacia,” I said. “I'm here to visit Therese.”

She filled up the doorway, watching me through narrow eyes. “Bahan. Good afternoon. Therese isn't here.”

I spoke through a static field of adrenaline: “She's not?”

“Graham had a premonition yesterday. Wolf chose to move Therese elsewhere.”

That's when I learned why they kept Graham around, and that I shouldn't trust him, either. “You can't trust precogs,” I'd told Therese once. “No one can manipulate you better than a precog can.”

“Where is she?”

“Find Graham and ask him about it. I have to return to a client. Come in,” she added, before clacking out of sight down the hallway.

“Hey, Graham!” I yelled to the house.

He appeared on the landing above, blonde and confused, his face becoming less perplexed when he spotted me.

“Come down here,” I said. “Tell me where Therese is.”

“I don't know where she is.” He descended the polished wooden stairs.

“Why not? Dr. Acacia said you did.”

“Her rider never said,” he told me, shaking his head. “He walked her out of here in under ten minutes.”

“Wolf,” I corrected him, leaning into his face. “Why did they leave? What the fuck did you all do?”

“Nothing -”

Someone shrieked, so loudly it made my ears ring.

“She's awake,” Graham muttered. “Excuse me.”

I followed him as he speedwalked down the east wing of the house to a door he eased open. The room was hot and prickly. On the bed inside there was a writhing blue lump, which turned out to be a girl of no more than twelve thrashing about in her sheets, her skin paled the color of dogwood bark. I peered over her with Graham, as he asked her questions she didn't answer.

“Bahan,” he said, finally noticing me next to him. “Can you help me with her?”

“What do you need me to do?”

Now I'm going to tell you a different story. An earlier story. This story takes place when I was fourteen.

A lot of things were different when I was fourteen. I lived with my mother in a fancy apartment; I was still going to school, week-days; and I was an Atheist. I wasn't a very good Atheist; I tried to do as my mother taught me, to believe in a cold, impartial universe. But ever since I was tiny I was always that type of person who frequently encounters things, little things but potent enough, to convince me otherwise - things like feeling the energy around people, and in me; or seeing a woman standing in the hallway, when I got up in the middle of the night to use the bathroom, who was too dead to stand.

Snow had started falling that year, and I had begun attending Church services in secret, sitting in the back pew early on a Sunday morning and fluffing my hair into a black cloud to hide my face.

"Good morning," said the white-haired lady who sat next to me, and had taken to recognizing me despite my precautions.

"Morning," I murmured. I turned a page in the bible from the shelf in front of me. My project was to read it all here in the church; I wouldn't dare bring one back to the apartment, and risk my mother finding it. Today I was just skimming, though. The world was rocking gently this morning - I thought it must be the cold that had me dizzy.

"It's brilliant to see you taking such studious interest," the woman commented. She'd guessed I was Atheist.

"Yeah," I said.

I remember a lot of things, but I don't remember the sermon, or the prayers that day. I know I sat in the pew next to the old woman, who smelled like dried lilac, and felt up and down the thin, thin pages of that bible with my thumb while something bubbled under my scalp, my skin, and pounded blood against my skull. Every once in a while I looked over at the woman, or up at the priest, to see if they had also noticed that the church was slowly spinning on its axis.

"Up," someone whispered.

"What?" I whispered back, aggravated. My head seemed to have expanded to the size of the entire sanctuary. I looked up. Many

static-pudding people flowed up the aisle, toward the doors. The service was over.

"Hey, is there something wrong?" the old woman asked.

"No," I said, standing slowly.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

"I'm Melody," she said, holding out her hand.

I gave her hand a single shake. "Marie."

"A good Christian name."

I shrugged. "I think I was named after the scientist."

"Well, Marie, I would like to invite you to my neighborhood Bible study group. This neighborhood, in fact," she said, gesturing toward the exit. "We meet Thursday nights."

"Oh. I don't think I could." We began to move toward the doors.

"Your parents?"

"My mom would lock me up if she found out."

"We can make something up to tell her," Melody suggested, grinning at me. "Tell her you have a book club. Bring home some nice secular books."

"Oh. Maybe." We hit the cold. I had never taken my jacket off. "Bye." I turned to walk home.

"See you next Sunday!" the old woman called.

I had a forty minute walk between the church and home, and that was when the sidewalk wasn't this icy. I'd had to find a public church far enough away that my mother wouldn't drive by and see me walking out of it. Today, I paused every couple minutes of the walk, looking around just to confirm that we weren't having an earthquake. By that point, of course, I knew I was becoming sick. I distracted myself by watching the snow flurries and repeating a line in a passage I wanted to memorize, which had been underlined in the church bible I'd read out of:

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."¹

On my fifth repetition, hurrying toward the crosswalk while it

¹ Romans 8:28

was still clear, I slipped. I was ready, my palms spread out, to catch myself on the black road. But before I could, there was a flash of orange, and something slammed against my side, cracking through my chest.

Someone murmured something, but I hadn't been listening.

"What?"

"You have had a collision with a car," said an unfamiliar voice. I cringed away from the pain as it continued, speaking from the darkness, "I'm going to heal you. But we should talk first."

"Jesus?" I murmured.

"No. You can call me Weaver. We have met before in dreams."

"We have?" I rarely remembered my dreams.

"I have been preparing you for a partnership between us. I will weave you back together, and forge the beginning of our partnership."

"Oh," I hissed, gaining the impression that my shoulder blade had been crushed into shards and out through my skin. "Okay."

All of us know what it's like to begin that relationship, and we know the birth of one of our kind when we see it. Whatever the contract, whatever was wrong with the girl, the entity had finished fixing her. Now she surrendered her body to the entity to fulfill her side of the bargain, and the entity would soon be within her. Her thrashing was not unusual; the mount's body often reacts violently like that, the first time.

"Get her water," Graham said, restraining her limbs.

When I came back with a glass, the girl had settled down and Graham was humming. It was a song I'd heard too many times on Therese's favorite radio station: "Love, I have a plan, a plan to win your love."

"Bubblegum music?" I smirked and handed him the glass.

He spoke quietly as he stroked the girl's hair: "I listen to everything. Every song has meaning. The songs that come to me tell me about the present and the future."

"I see." I sat on the squeaky cot next to the girl's legs.

"This is Wedad." He paused, eyes closed for several seconds. Then he said, "My rider tells me her partner is 'the dancing one'."

"Great." I glanced at the girl. "Now tell my why Wolf left."

He pursed his lips. "I was checking on Therese and began to sing. I'm trained not to think about the songs that come out, so, I didn't notice at first. Wolf was halfway out the door on Therese's legs before I even realized. It was a metal song about anarchy and the world going off the deep end."

"And what does *that* mean?" I asked Graham.

All the while I could hear Therese saying, "You don't have to worry about me. That what Wolf's here for."

"I believe it means something like our governor's going to be forced out of office. I think Wolf overreacted."

"Mm."

"He doesn't play well with others," little Wedad murmured, eyelids flickering.

"Is she going delirious?" I said, sliding to my feet. Graham pursed his lips again and placed his hand on her forehead.

"No," the girl sighed. She reached toward me with pleading eyes, and I gave her my hand to take. She pulled herself up off the pillow and drawled, "Get out here, kid." Then she jumped to her feet, and I blacked out.

Now, I hate this part of the story. I don't like to tell it. But you need to hear it.

I was not unconscious, but awake in a black ocean.

I thought of blinking, and ripples rolled through the universe. The ocean was hot; I knew this heat. This heat was the heat I had felt as I woke from my accident, as I told the people gathered around me I was fine, and then was too dizzy to stand up without help. This was the heat that I felt when Weaver came to ride me, as she had done thrice in our first year together, and never again until now. I pushed against her strong presence in confusion; she always felt a bit like silk, and a lot like pea soup fog. She had given me no warning or communication. Was she reacting to Graham's fortune-telling, as Wolf had done?

Every once in a while I felt my legs or fingers moving. I eventually felt a rush of excitement, building and building and then subsiding, and suddenly I was crouched on the floor, looking out at a bright, blurry wall. I stood slowly as the room came into focus.

On the beige carpet in front of me, there was a motionless body. It was Gavin Dennis or Barret Arjun from Congress. I could never remember which was which. They both had the same wavy brown hair, bunched against the floor and against the wide-eyed, wide-mouthed face.

"I'd escape if I were you."

Little Wedad stood to my left, pointing a syringe toward a half-open door.

"The dancing one." Cold spread up my scalp. I couldn't understand. I realized how close to the body I was and hurried backward. "Please tell me what's going on," I demanded.

"Your role is played. You've got the choice to leave before the police come." The dancing one used Wedad's hands to fiddle with the syringe.

"Is Wedad coming?"

"Her part isn't finished yet."

"Why are we here? Is he dead?" I glanced again at the limp congressman.

"I'll make sure in a minute. Oh, Weaver said to tell you thanks."

An alarm sounded outside, the clatter-clatter-clatter of police bells. I stumbled out of the room and down three hallways I had never seen before. At the glass-doored exit, two cops, a man and woman in green, were halfway in, but backed up as I burst outside. The air tasted like mint.

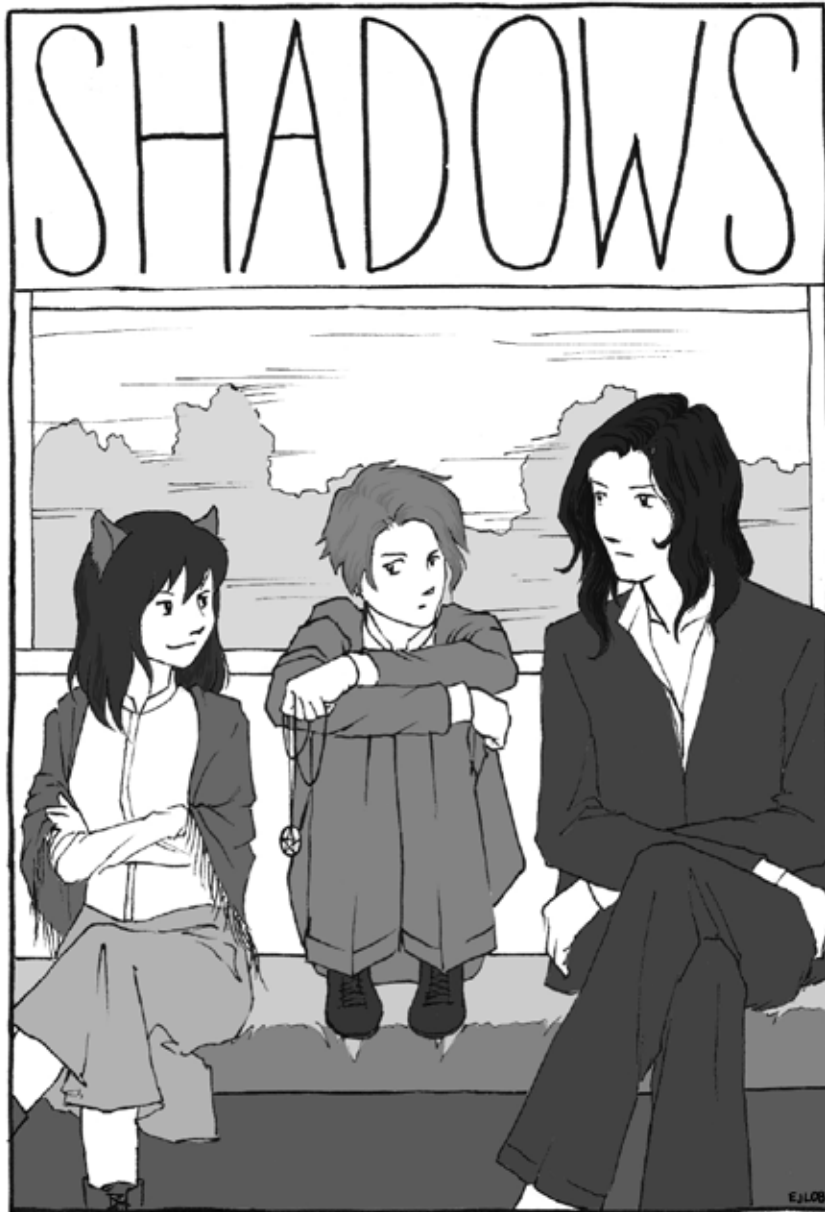
The man spoke to me in the dazzling sunlight: "We got an emergency call from this building. Can you tell us what's going on?"

"It's horrible. It's too horrible," I said. Then I lurched past them and threw up in the ash tray on top of a trashcan. "Down the hallway to the left," I murmured, the uniformed woman supporting me as I devolved into dry heaving. I gasped, "I'm fine. Go. Hurry." The two cops entered the building, and turned the left corner beyond the glass door, and I bolted down the sidewalk. And so I escaped, just as the dancing one had told me to.



Who Lives Alone?

by Bryn A. McDonald



by EJ Landsman

Shadows

by Edward Allen Underhill

Part Two: The Landlady's Niece

“**A**mo-chan!”
Amos turned. He grinned innocently.
It didn't work.

“Get away from the pastry stand!” Nettie barked.

Amos raised a hand.

“No!”

He tilted his head.

“No way!”

He opened his mouth.

“Never!” Nettie pointed an accusing finger at him. “Get that hand back where I can see it! You aren't going to swipe anything while I'm around! It was *you* who said we had to save money for clothes and someplace to live!”

Amos sighed. “Yes, I did, but —”

“You already had lunch. You don't need cakes.”

A tall slender figure appeared at Nettie's shoulder. “I have discovered a place that looks promising.”

“A place with food?” Amos asked brightly.

He got a strange look. “You told me to look for a place with clothing, not food.”

Amos rubbed his hair. “You have to learn to take a joke, Sirius.”

Sirius raised an eyebrow. “It wasn't funny.”

Nettie patted his arm. “It's all right. Amos's jokes never are.”

As it had turned out, a hay wagon heading back in the other direction had been harder to find, and Amos, Nettie, and Sirius had spent most of the previous day trudging through the countryside in search of the closest town. Amos complained that Nettie might as

* This piece is the second in a eight part series.

Please read Volume 1, Issue 2 for the first part.

well turn into a horse for him, but Nettie huffily replied that a horse was too big for her to manage, and, even if she could, there was no way she'd carry *him*.

After that, Amos turned to Sirius, hoping to convince him (with a pitiful enough expression) to sprout wings again and carry him, but Sirius merely returned a blank look. Daemons who had been sealed for hundreds of years, it seemed, forgot how to take hints.

Finally, in the evening, they arrived at a town. Amos started for the nearest hotel, but Nettie insisted they find something else—it would be better to save the money for later.

“Cheap hag,” she muttered. “She didn’t pay us nearly enough for all that trouble. As if it would have hurt her to take a bit more out of her wallet! She could have given a million without putting a dent in her fortune.”

So they spent the night in a stable instead, and Amos spent the next morning picking straw out of his hair. Now it was nearly noon and they were patrolling the town for some cheap transportation—and some new clothes for Sirius.

As soon as they joined the crowds filling the town’s streets, heads started to turn. It might have been because Sirius was tall (Amos and Nettie barely came up to his shoulder). It might also have been because he was wearing a strange black robe.

Amos, however, suspected there might be another reason for the stares.

It had probably been some time since such a good-looking stranger had passed through town.

Sirius’s eyes—now that the glow had faded from them—were deep, deep blue, and secretive. His face still looked a little too pale, especially surrounded by his dark hair, which was rather longish (yet still somehow managed to hang perfectly right), but his high, chiseled cheekbones only made him more handsome.

On top of that, Amos guessed he must be at least three hundred, but he didn’t look out of his twenties. In fact, without the glow in his eyes or his wings, he could easily pass for human—except that his hands tended to be slightly cold.

Sirius led the way down the street, the crowd parting to let him through. Amos and Nettie had to hurry to keep up. Amos kept dart-

ing little side glances at Sirius—he’d been dying to ask him questions. He had tried a couple times, too, but Sirius had either been silent, or given short, vague answers that Amos couldn’t understand. Sirius pulled up, quickly enough that Amos nearly ran into him.

They were standing in front of a small shop. There were dresses displayed in the window. Amos supposed that was a good sign.

Nettie’s eyes melted. “Oh, look at that!” She ran up to the window and danced.

Amos and Sirius looked. In the window was a white dress, printed with tiny pink flowers, covered in frills, and edged in lace.

“Oh, my,” said Amos.

“It looks,” said Sirius, “rather like the frosted things on that stand.”

Amos cleared his throat delicately. “Nettie? Remember that we’re here for other clothes?”

Nettie’s face fell. She sniffed. “As if I didn’t know that.” She pushed open the door of the shop and stalked in.

Amos and Sirius glanced at each other and followed.

A little bell jingled over the door. The store was small and cozy inside, and darker than the sunny outside. They had to pause for their eyes to adjust.

A round woman bustled out from behind the curtain at the back. “Good morning! How can I help—oh . . .”

Her eyes went straight to Sirius. And her face took on an expression not so different from Nettie’s regarding the dress.

Amos noticed.

Nettie noticed, too. Then she noticed Amos’s face. No client would ever see that expression, but Nettie had seen it plenty of times. She knew what it meant.

“Can I help you?” the woman asked Sirius.

Amos bobbed in front of her with a harmless grin. “Yes, we need a suit for this fellow.”

“I see.” The woman smiled at Sirius. “Well, allow me to show you our nicest selection . . .”

Amos waved his hands and laughed a little. “Oh, thank you, but I’m afraid we really can’t afford that . . .”

Nettie covered her eyes.

"You see" — Amos's face fell — "our house recently burned to the ground." He sniffed. "And the fire took our good mother and father with it, and most all of our savings."

"Oh, is that so?" The woman looked concerned.

Amos wiped a finger below his eye. "Indeed." His voice trembled. "We need to find jobs, but we have so very little right now, and —"

"Oh, you poor dear!"

Nettie lowered her hand.

The woman pushed straight past Amos and grasped Sirius's hand. "And your hands are cold as ice, poor thing. Well, we can't let you catch cold." She gave them a sly smile. "I think I have just the perfect thing for someone as handsome as you, young man. We'll negotiate the price later. We have plenty of customers in here the rest of the time, after all. Just a moment . . ."

She gave Sirius's hand a final pat and bustled away into the back of the store.

Sirius looked down at Amos. "You have a bad attitude."

Amos steepled his fingers and grinned.

Nettie sighed. "Don't tell him that," she said. "It actually tends to please him."

In fact, the woman gave them the suit for free.

"I didn't have to cry," Amos said as they wandered away down the street.

Nettie smiled up at Sirius. "How does it feel?"

Sirius inspected the sleeve of his jacket. He touched the open collar of his white shirt. "Not too bad," he said. He looked down at his pants and shoes. "Rather less itchy."

"Well, with the extra money . . ." Amos grinned. "We can take a train home!"

Nettie's eyes widened. "Really?" She jumped up and down. "I love trains. I bet you've never seen a train, eh, Siri-*jan*?"

"No," he said. "It would seem times have changed from what I remember."

"What do you remember?" Amos asked.

Sirius looked at him, but Amos was studying the ground.

Sirius reached out a hand.

Amos flinched, but Sirius only plucked one last tiny piece of straw out of his hair. "I do not."

"Do not what?" Nettie asked.

"Remember. Where is this train?"

"This way!" Nettie grabbed his hand and tugged him toward the station up ahead.

But Amos hung back, his hands in his pockets, watching them. It wasn't anything. It didn't mean anything. Probably.

And even if it was . . .

His hand tightened around the silver pentacle in his pocket, and he hurried to catch up with the others.

They bought tickets for the next train for London. Nettie bounded onto the train at once, but Sirius hesitated on the platform, studying the engine.

"I see," he said at last. "It is powered by a demon?"

"Not exactly," Amos said, giving him a push. "And you might want to keep your voice down. Maybe the last time you saw daylight, demons were an everyday occurrence, but not anymore."

They found empty seats about halfway down the train. "Where are we going?" Sirius asked as they sat down.

"Back to London," Amos replied. "And an apartment. Or something. Eventually."

Sirius blinked. "There is other business first?"

Nettie glowered. "No. *Amo-chan* just lost our last apartment, so now we have to find another."

"You lost it?" Sirius frowned. "Where did it go?"

"It didn't *go* anywhere!" Amos said irritably. "It got a bit expensive."

"The rent was three months overdue!" Nettie said. "Because you're a feckless spendthrift!"

Sirius looked down at Amos.

Amos's shoulders sagged. "It's not always my fault, you know."

The train jerked and slowly started away from the station.

They soon left the town behind, gliding into the countryside. Nettie pulled some knitting from the battered suitcase. Sirius stared

at the car around him. Amos tried to stay awake, for a while, but eventually the exertion of two nights ago—not to mention all the walking afterwards—caught up with him, and he dozed off against the window.

When he woke up, some time later, Sirius was gone.

Amos started.

Nettie looked up from her knitting. “He just went to look around, you know,” she said quietly. “You don’t need to get all worried.”

“Which way did he go?”

“Down there.” Nettie pointed.

Amos took off his jacket and left it on the seat. “I’ll be back.” He tucked his hands in his pockets and wandered away down the train car in the direction Nettie had pointed.

He crossed into the next car, but there was no sign of Sirius. He went through four cars without finding him. Just as he was beginning to wonder whether Sirius had in fact disappeared, he opened the next door to find himself at the very back of the train. Instead of looking into another car, he was looking onto the little porch at the end of the caboose. And standing at the railing, his fingers wrapped loosely around it, was Sirius.

Amos stepped out onto the porch and let the door close behind him.

Sirius turned. The wind blew his long dark hair into his face.

Amos came up beside him. “That’s a pretty sunset.” He nodded at the horizon the train was slowly leaving behind.

Sirius turned back to it. “I haven’t seen one for some time. At least, it feels that way.”

Amos looked at his hands. “You really don’t remember anything? Before you were sealed?”

For a while, Sirius was silent. Then he said, “No.”

The train wheels clacked against the tracks.

“What do you do?” Sirius asked.

Amos blinked. “P-pardon?”

“Are you an exorcist?”

“Oh.” Amos rubbed his hair. “Sometimes. I guess. I mean, not officially. But I do it. When I can. Or, when people . . .” He gave up.

“Yes.”

“What do you do . . . officially?”

“I’m a reporter. Theoretically.”

“And you live with a familiar daemon?”

“Well, I guess I should have realized you’d be able to tell she wasn’t human.” Amos looked back at the sunset. “I met Nettie... a long time ago. She didn’t have a contract then. She’s not really ... Well, I’m not even sure how powerful she is. Rather harmless, I think—more of a shape-shifter. But, at any rate, she’s been with me ever since.”

Sirius looked at him. His fingers were twined around the railing. They were very slim hands.

“I guess I’m a demonologist of sorts,” Amos said. “When I can, I write my articles about things like that. Except sometimes people don’t particularly care for them, since I’m not trying to prove that things like demons and ghosts don’t exist.”

“You know they are there. Even when you can’t see them.”

Amos shrugged. “It’s not so special, really. I have these.” He held up his hand, revealing the string of tiny bells on his wrist.

Sirius didn’t look at them. “Those won’t tell you any sort of intentions.”

“Smart, aren’t you?” Amos ran a hand over his eyes. “A long time ago, I was in an . . . accident, I guess. A demon attacked me. One I couldn’t really handle, at least not at the time, and I got a scar.” He touched his chest. “I guess it wasn’t such a bad thing. It tends to flare up when there are demons around—especially certain kinds.”

“It isn’t hurting now?”

Amos smiled a little. “No. I guess that must be a good sign.”

Sirius meant to wonder what kind of “good sign” Amos might be talking about, but instead he only found himself realizing that that smile hadn’t had anything behind it.

“Well,” he said, “I suppose I will stay with you for a while. As a thank you for unsealing me.”

He waited for a response. It was, after all, meant to be a test of sorts, but Amos just continued watching the sunset. After a while he started to whistle—badly.

Sirius winced.

Amos stopped abruptly. "Look."

Sirius followed his gaze. The sun was sinking below the horizon, turning the sky around it gold and red and purple.

"You'd better not write an article about me," Sirius said.

"No?"

The innocent tone convinced Sirius this was exactly what he'd been planning.

"No."

"Well . . ." Amos glanced at his nails. "What would you do about it?"

"I'm not immediately sure. I might have to . . . think about it."

Amos blinked. "Really?" he said with a little laugh, rubbing the back of his neck. "Well, then . . ." He coughed. "Perhaps I'll, er, think of something else to write the article about."

"Good plan," said Sirius. He paused. "Where, exactly, are we going to live if you got thrown out of your last apartment?"

"Now that," Amos said, "was a mild misunderstanding. One which will easily be fixed, upon our return. We have money, don't we?"

"I see. And this will fix the . . . misunderstanding."

Amos glanced at him sideways. "Positive attitude, Sirius. You're supposed to support me!" And he turned and walked back into the train car, whistling.

"YOU EXPECT TO BUY ME OFF? WHAT DO YOU TAKE ME FOR? STUPID?!"

Amos and Nettie cringed. Behind them, Sirius blinked.

"That's not *exactly* what I meant, Mrs. Maloney," Amos said delicately. "I was only noting that there have been certain"—he coughed—"misunderstandings, but I believe we can work them out, and I have money to offer you for the first rent right now."

The large round woman on the porch put her hands on her hips. Her beady dark eyes narrowed. "What makes you think I haven't already let the apartment out to someone else, hmm?"

Amos tried to smile. "You only kicked me out last week. You can't have found another tenant already."

Mrs. Maloney raised an eyebrow.

"And . . ." Amos swallowed. "I know you like me." He tilted his head. "Come now, Mrs. Maloney, admit it. You don't actually think I'm all that bad . . ."

Mrs. Maloney reached out, planted a finger in Amos's chest, and gave him a push.

He teetered for a moment, and then, with an indistinct squeak, lost his balance altogether and keeled over backwards.

There was a soft *thump*.

Amos groaned. "That, Sirius," he said with effort, "is when you catch me."

Sirius looked down at him. "You deserved it."

"POMPOUS AIR-HEAD!" Mrs. Maloney barked. "Barging in here like you deserve that place! Think you're going to manipulate me, eh? I don't think so! You can just keep moving, before I really get violent!"

Nettie put a hand over her face.

"Auntie?" said a quiet little voice. "Why is there a boy lying in the mud?"

Nettie dropped her hand. Sirius looked up.

Peeking around Mrs. Maloney's skirts was a pair of large blue eyes in a heart-shaped face. "That doesn't look very comfortable. You should get up."

Amos squelched.

"I'll help!" The skirts swished, and a little girl bounded onto the porch, her blonde curls tied up in two pigtailed, wearing a bright blue dress with a white collar. She leaned over and held out a chubby hand.

Amos took it.

"You'll pull her down with you," said Sirius.

The little girl planted her feet and tugged. Of course, Amos mostly relied on his own effort to get back on his feet, but once he was upright again, he leaned over and held out his hand. "Thanks very much," he said. "What's your name?"

Sirius's eyebrows rose. He glanced at Nettie.

"Emmeline," the girl said, shaking Amos's hand.

"That's a pretty name," said Amos. "How old are you?"

“Eight and three quarters.” Emmeline clasped her hands behind her back and inspected Amos’s clothes. “You’re all muddy now. You should come inside so you can clean up, right, Auntie?” She looked up at Mrs. Maloney.

Mrs. Maloney grunted. “Very well.”

Emmeline tugged Amos inside. Nettie and Sirius followed. Mrs. Maloney shut the door—rather loudly—behind them.

Sirius looked around. They were standing in a narrow hallway, with a stairway at one end spiraling upwards to a second and third floor. But Emmeline pushed open a door in the hallway, leading them into a simple but cozy parlor.

Mrs. Maloney sighed. “Emmie, why don’t you run and put the kettle on for tea?”

Emmeline nodded and dashed away, disappearing through another doorway.

Mrs. Maloney fished about in a chest in the corner until she found a sheet. She spread it over the sofa. “Sit there. But get mud anywhere else and you’ll be cleaning it.”

Amos, Nettie, and Sirius carefully settled themselves on the sofa. “Is that your niece, Mrs. Maloney?” Nettie asked.

“Yes.”

“She’s visiting?”

“No.” Mrs. Maloney sat down in a chair across from them. “She’ll be living here with me now. How I’ll manage with a child around, I’ve no idea, but there’s nowhere else for her to go.”

Amos, who had been inspecting one muddied sleeve, looked up.

“Her parents died just over a week ago—some sort of carriage accident, out on a country road.” Mrs. Maloney gave Amos a suspicious look. “When she helped you up today was the first smile I’ve seen out of her since then.”

“That’s terrible,” Nettie whispered.

“Yes. I would much rather she smiled at someone who was less of a moron.”

Amos sighed.

Emmeline came back into the room, haphazardly balancing a tray with a tea set on it. She set it down on the table. “Here you

are!”

Mrs. Maloney patted her shoulder. “Thank you, Emmie. Now run along and play outside while we talk.”

Emmeline’s eyes widened. “No, Auntie.”

“Emmie, come now . . .”

“I can’t go outside. I might hear them!”

“Hear who?”

“*Them*, Auntie. Mummy and Daddy . . .”

Amos, reaching for a teacup, missed.

Mrs. Maloney sighed. “Emmie, we’ve talked about this before. It’s not—”

“Would you like company?” Nettie stood up suddenly. “I’ll come outside with you, Emmie-*chan*.”

Emmeline looked up. “You’ll play with me?”

“Certainly!”

Emmeline hesitated, then grabbed Nettie’s hand and dragged her out of the parlor.

Amos made a second, more successful attempt at picking up a teacup. “She hears her parents’ voices?” he asked casually.

“It’s just because she misses them.” Mrs. Maloney waved a hand. “It only ever happens when she’s alone. The stories children make up . . .” She glared. “Don’t think you’re going to distract me! As soon as you’re through with that tea, I’m throwing you right out that door again!”

“What exactly do these voices say to her?”

Mrs. Maloney raised an eyebrow. “What are you, an expert suddenly?”

“I’m only asking.”

Mrs. Maloney sighed. “She won’t always say, but usually they want her to come find them. She’s barely slept since they died. She says her mother and father are lost and they want her to come find them.”

Sirius glanced at Amos. Amos was frowning into the steam rising above his teacup. After a moment, he said, “They never found her parents’ bodies, did they?”

Mrs. Maloney stared at him. “Now how in God’s name did you know that?”

Amos began to smile.

Sirius had a nasty feeling he knew what was coming next.

"Mrs. Maloney, what would you say to a little deal?" Amos set down his teacup. "If I can get Emmeline to stop hearing her parents' voices so she can actually sleep, you let us live here again. Without rent for the first two months."

Silence.

"Uh-huh." Mrs. Maloney folded her arms. "What are you now, a con man?"

Amos shrugged. "It doesn't hurt you, does it?"

"It could hurt my Emmeline."

"I won't need to lay a finger on her, don't worry. But seriously . . . it could help, and it certainly couldn't hurt, now, could it?"

"What exactly are you up to, you little wiseass?"

Amos smiled blandly. "Why don't you leave that to me? Do we have a deal?"

"Forget it."

"Oh, well."

Mrs. Maloney fidgeted. She sniffed. "Fine. If you can pull it off, you can stay, but you don't get two months off paying rent."

"Two months. That's the deal."

"One month."

"One month and only half rent for the next."

Mrs. Maloney narrowed her eyes.

Amos narrowed his back. "That's my final offer."

"Fine." Mrs. Maloney rose. "Now get out of my parlor. I'm not going to have all the patience in the world. And try any funny business, and I'll have your head on that platter."

Amos gave her a slightly convalescent grin. "Right." He stood up. "Sirius?"

They excused themselves from the room and went back down the hallway to the door. Outside, Nettie was sitting on the porch steps with Emmeline.

"Well?" she asked.

Amos grinned. "We'll have our place back. Shortly."

Nettie's shoulders slumped. "Neh, Amo-*chan*, what did you do?"

"So," said Sirius, "by exorcising these spirits from this place so they stop haunting that little girl, you are going to win us, so to speak, a place to live?"

"You know," Amos groaned, "I really wish one of us knew how to drive a carriage. It sure would have been more comfortable than this."

"The sack of flour has no right to complain," said Sirius. "The one carrying the sack of flour has the right to complain."

Amos pointed. "There. That's it."

"Luckily," grumbled Sirius. "Much farther and I would have dropped you."

"Don't joke about that," Amos said nervously.

Sirius glided toward the cliff, flapping his great black wings to clear the treetops, and set them down on a narrow dirt road that wound around the cliff's edge before plunging away back into a deep forest.

Amos quickly pulled free of Sirius's grasp. "I guess it's easy enough to see how an accident could happen on a road like this." He walked to the edge of the cliff, pausing to inspect two deep grooves in the dirt, and then leaned over.

Sirius's wings folded. He came up beside Amos. "There's a lake," he said, looking over the cliff's edge.

Amos nodded.

"They could have fallen down there and no one would stand a chance of finding them."

Amos nodded again.

Sirius looked at him. He had changed out of his muddy clothes, into—as he had complained—the only spare ones he had: brown corduroy trousers, a slightly grayish shirt, and a worn sweater that was a little too large for him. (Nettie was back at Mrs. Maloney's working on getting the mud out of Amos's suit.)

Amos turned away from the cliff's edge without meeting Sirius's eyes. "I should get to work."

He walked back to the dirt road and pulled the silver chain from his pocket. The pentacle glimmered a little, even under the cloudy sky. He clasped it between his hands, steepled his index fingers, and closed his eyes.

A cold breeze swirled dead autumn leaves up around his knees. The bells around his wrist tinkled.

Sirius felt something. He turned.

Hovering in the air, several feet beyond the cliff's edge, were two faint glowing outlines. The faces leered, mouths open and laughing, arms misshapen and dangling. Where there should have been legs, the shapes merely disappeared into thin air.

Amos opened his eyes. He drew a shaky breath . . . and it caught. A spasm crossed his face.

The chain slipped in his hand.

Sirius looked at him and then whirled back toward the spirits, sweeping a hand through the air.

Amos's fingers curled into his sweater.

White sparkles collected around Sirius's hand, and then he was holding his staff.

Thin laughter echoed around the cliff face and two sizzling, shimmering explosions of green light flashed from the spirits' gaping mouths, racing toward Amos.

Sirius pushed off in a rustle of feathers. The globe on the end of his staff glowed blue. He spun it through the air and the two spheres bounced away with a loud *crackle*.

"Amos!" Sirius's wings flapped to hold him in the air. "Get a grip on yourself already!"

Amos's face was pale, but he forced his hands together around the silver pentacle.

The air around the two glowing outlines turned golden and crystallized into a solid, as if it had turned to glass.

Amos swayed, but by the time Sirius landed beside him, he was steady again.

The two spirits struggled, but they couldn't break free of the spell. Amos closed his eyes again, whispering words that Sirius couldn't catch, and then, in a gentle rush of wind and smoke, the misshapen figures faded.

In their place, when the smoke faded, were two softly glowing human figures, hovering just beyond the cliff's edge.

Amos opened his eyes and lowered his hands.

"Is she safe?" the woman asked, her voice echoing back from a

great distance, or the bottom of a lake.

Amos smiled, barely. "She's safe. I promise."

Sirius looked down at his hands. The left had closed around the right—the one that held the chain—but it was still shaking.

"It was all I thought," the man murmured. "Just, 'I wish I could see her again, to tell her it would be all right.' Will you tell her?"

"She already knows," Amos said quietly.

The woman smiled. "Thank you." Her familiar blue eyes were smiling, too. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight," Amos whispered.

They began to sparkle, to blur, to fade . . . Surrounded by a rising white mist, they smiled one last time, and then they disappeared. The sparkles lingered for a moment longer, before they too blinked out.

Amos closed his eyes, but a tear slipped between his lashes anyway.

The staff disappeared from Sirius's hands. He looked at Amos. Neither of them said anything.

Then, finally . . . "What's wrong?" Sirius asked.

Amos quickly drew a sleeve across his eyes. "It's nothing."

He turned away. Sirius watched him as he crossed the road to the edge of the forest, bent down, and picked a small white flower that bloomed beside one of the trees. He walked back across the road to the cliff's edge, and held the white flower out.

Sirius took a step forward. "It may never reach the lake if you let it fall like that."

Amos looked back.

Sirius came up beside him. "I'll fly it down to the surface, if you would like."

Amos looked at the flower.

"It was familiar." Sirius held out his hand. "Is that why it hurt?"

Amos placed the white flower on his palm and looked away.

"It's all right." Sirius spread his wings. "I wasn't really expecting an answer."

Feathers rustled, and Amos's hair blew into his eyes, and Sirius was gone.

Strictly speaking, of course, an apartment originally designed for two would have been slightly crowded with three. But, as it turned out, Mrs. Maloney had a larger flat available—which Emmeline happened to know about, and Emmeline was difficult to say no to, especially when she smiled and talked about amusing dreams she'd had, and eagerly related how she was sure Sirius was going to be her new favorite playmate.

Not that Mrs. Maloney stopped glaring. She always had a glare reserved for certain people. "Don't let this make you think that I like you. I don't. In fact"—she waved her dishtowel at Amos—"I disapprove of you whole-heartedly." And she stormed away. "Egotistical self-centered dough-head."

It took a few days for the flat to look a little more like home.

"I am finished."

Amos, Nettie, and Emmeline all simultaneously tilted their heads to the left.

"Siri-*san*," Nettie said doubtfully, "that's all you're going to put in your room?"

"It's pretty!" said Emmeline.

"It's crooked," said Amos.

Sirius glowered. "No one asked you."

"That was my mummy's favorite kind of flower!" Emmeline said, smiling. "It makes me happy that you put it on your wall, Sirius!"

Amos, Sirius, and Nettie looked at her.

"Oh, I almost forgot!" she cried. "I was going to make tea!" And she scampered out of the bedroom.

Nettie looked again at the white flower Sirius had framed and hung on the wall of his new bedroom. It was the only piece of decoration. "Sirius," she said quietly, "did you know?"

Sirius said nothing. He only looked at Amos.

Nettie followed his gaze. "Amo-*chan*?"

Amos smiled mildly. "I'm sure I don't know what Sirius knows." He turned for the doorway.

"Did you know?" Sirius asked.

Amos hesitated, one foot above the threshold. He turned back.

"It's a very common flower," he said with a shrug. "I'm sure it's lots of people's favorite." And, with another faint smile, he disappeared from the room.

Nettie and Sirius listened to his footsteps receding down the hall.

Then Nettie sighed. "Well, I suppose I should go make sure Emmie-*chan* doesn't accidentally break any china. I can't trust Amos to supervise her." She left the room.

Sirius stood for a while in silence, listening to the distant sound of voices in the kitchen. Then he turned and looked at the little white flower on the wall.

It was a little crooked.

Sirius turned and walked out of the room. There would be plenty of time to fix it later.

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