

Spiral

Volume 2, Issue 2
Spring 2009



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Glamour

by Daniella Sanchez

Song maker, faerie king,
Dancing master of the ring,
Your haunting music knows no bounds
Both through the air and from the ground,
Your glamour charming mortal men
Who then are never seen again.
Young maids and children join your dance
As you ensnare them in a trance
But though you try to hold them there
As all the senses you ensnare
Your magic will escape from you
And dissipate like melting dew
When morning finally comes.

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Concordance

by Julieanne Lopresto

Her name is Kathleen, but she is almost always called Agent Ingram. Wearing dresses is unusual for her, but here she is, on Earth, in a dress. Life takes you to strange places sometimes.

Standing next to her is the only familiar person in the room. Jasper. She has known him practically since birth, and she is one of the few people he trusts. Every now and then, one of his long fingers touches her, delicately, on the waist or on the arm, and he keeps his mouth in a thin, shut line, not letting a single tooth see the light.

“Jasper,” she whispers. He gives no indication that he hears.

“Agent Ingram?” There is a man at the door of the Main Ballroom, where they are supposed to be. *Showing off the oddity*, Ingram thinks. She nods and smiles politely. “And this must be Mr. Concordance,” the man continues. “But who else could it be?”

Jasper mimics her polite smile as best he can without parting his lips.

“Go right ahead ma’am. Sir.” They enter, and the light of the room strikes Jasper’s red eyes. He closes them slightly.

Ingram can remember the first time she stepped onto the dull moon that was Aizel 3, known as “Kans” by the inhabitants of the planet below. The Concordance Base unfurled behind her, and the dull, gray soil lay beneath her feet like something dead. It was cold, there.

She had never been off Earth before. Why would she have to be? She was a naturalist; things off-world weren’t what she studied. But she was here, for a special project.

The Aizelr were a distant race, but were peaceful with the humans who came to their world. They had no problem with what they were attempting to do; many years previously, they had done something similar with the Beast of Kans. There were still specially bred troops that existed on Aizel for sport hunting—why would they care about humans taking one specimen?

Ingram had read documents on the Beast—the Gladikanr—and looked forward to seeing them.

What she hadn’t expected was seeing the group—Pride? Troop?—run at sunset through the gray desert. They ran on something akin to all fours, fingers splayed, tips supporting their weight. A few at the front and

the sides ran bipedally next to them, keeping watch at their full, inhuman height.

There were children—two females and a scrawny male. He was their target. At the time that she was watching them, Agents from Concordance were already tracking the group of Beasts, watching to see where the nomadic species would lay down for the night. Ingram would not be able to watch what was going to happen, but she knew:

The Agents would act as wolves, waking them up with loud flares in the middle of the night, knocking the creatures into animalistic confusion. They would scatter, and the slow, weak child would be captured and brought back to the Concordance. Separated from his more boisterous sisters, he would grow strong enough for their purposes.

It occurs to Ingram now that the Gladikanr running across the surface of Kans, unknowing of the fact that they would be lacking one of their own by the morning, were the first sight of any alien life she ever encountered. She had known about extraterrestrials for her entire life—humankind's first meeting with life that did not originate on their planet had occurred years before her birth—but they rarely came to the small, blue planet on which she was born. They occasionally visited the moons of the outer planets, those colonized by humans, but seemed loath to set foot on Earth. She had never even been to Earth's satellite until recently.

To think—she is back on the planet of her birth with an alien life form, one that she has raised since childhood. Jasper Concordance, the first alien to be given citizenship of a country on Earth—a real Resident Alien. There was some outcry about that fact—few, isolated bundles of insulated people who still claimed that humans were the pinnacle of existence, the Higher Power's finest work, and no attention should be paid to those false beings who lived on other worlds.

They were placed there, they said, to test our faith. And so Jasper had to pretend to be human, at least just for tonight. His prehensile tail is wrapped around his leg, hidden as best as he can. His mouth remains closed unless he needs to open it, and he avoids the hors d'oeuvres, lest the State's elite surrounding them see the ungainly way he eats.

Most importantly, once inside, he keeps his long fingers coiled like pale, skinny snakes, his hands thrust into his pockets, pretending as hard as he can that he isn't able to kill every last person in the room with those quivering fingertips.

They don't have nails at the end. No claws, no fingernails. That, strangely, is the first thing Ingram noticed when she examined the boy's hands. The

fingers, even at his young age, were already just a few inches shorter than the length of his forearm. He didn't seem to know what to do with them yet, and mostly kept them limp by his sides. He had been dressed in extra clothes that had been lying around Concordance. His limbs were long for a human child's, but the jacket and trousers that were forced upon him were still just a little too long.

She took care of him, making sure he drank and every now and then combed the black thatch of hair on his head. He seemed tired and weak, and it was rare that Ingram was not inside the room that was given to him. During one of these brief times, she was handed a folder and told to read it whenever she could.

"Project Jasper?" Ingram read from the label of the file. Her superior shrugged, and she returned to the scared young boy in overly-large clothes, still gripping the folder in her hands.

"Jasper," she said again. He did not look up.

The folder did not contain information on the creature that she had just began to think of as Jasper. He had not been around long enough for that, yet. There was space in the folder for her to add information about the young Gladikanr as he grew.

There had been studies of the Beasts before she had arrived at the Concordance. They had tracked the tribe that Jasper had been stolen from. It's lucky, one of her coworkers said, *they don't track by scent, but by sight. Otherwise, well, we'd be fucked.* She smiled at this weakly, trying not to think about those fingers and what the folder said they could do.

Gladikanr, it said, also known as the Beast of Kans, feed first on the heart of their prey, which is ripped out through the chest. It is unknown why this is their first target, but there are those who believe that there is a certain pseudo-religious significance to the act. Whatever the reasoning, a young Beast's first taste of meat must be a fresh heart, extracted by the juvenile itself. Whether this has any influence on a Gladikanr's future behavior is not yet determined, but it is surmised that this act lays the framework for all future kills a Beast will perform in its lifetime.

Jasper doesn't know what to do with himself.

It's not just that he's out of his element at the event, but that he physically doesn't know what to do with himself. He never does; there is too much of him. Ingram watches as his tail flicks from being limp to curling tightly around his right leg; he hunches and rolls his shoulders like his jacket is too tight even though it is custom made. Despite his stoop, he is easily the tallest person in the room.

Being. Tallest being.

Luckily, few come to talk to him. Most that approach them direct their

statements to Ingram. Jasper occasionally nods or shakes his head in response to questions; for anything that requires more than yes or no, he looks to the woman next to him and places a long finger on her back and Ingram answers for him.

When they are alone, they don't say much of anything. Both of them are out of their element here. Jasper stays close to her while she scans the faces in the crowd. One stands out to her; she's seen him before, in an image on a computer screen earlier that day.

"That's him," she says. She doesn't even need to point out which one; Jasper knows exactly who she is referring to. Jasper gives no indication that he can hear, but she thinks she can feel his pulse quicken through the fingertips that rest on her shoulder.

The creatures were known as Oull, or Oullkanr. Most in Concordance cannot imitate the exact rolling 'ou' sound that the Aizelr made, so they mostly just called them Oh's. There had been attempts to classify them in the past; they were more docile than the Beasts and so they had been captured before. An expert in Concordance laughed when Ingram asked what the findings were and said that they "are serval-deer-fox-rat-binturong things." Ingram did not have a clue what a 'binturong' is, but laughed along; it seemed natural to do so. They were one of the three creatures that the Gladikanr mainly hunt, but this one was the easiest for them to capture.

It was docile. Ingram realized that it was young, probably no more than a yearling. Jasper was then estimated to be about seven—prime time for this to occur.

"You have to be there," she was told. "You're the one he's bonded to. He looks to you for guidance. You're pretty much his mother."

(Ingram feels shame about this later in life, that she has a brief moment in which there is *nothing more in the universe that she does not want* than to be the Beast's mother. In her present day, when she looks upon Jasper's sleeping form, she does feel something very like motherly affection.)

When the small Oh was brought into the enclosure she could not help but marvel at its beautiful and alien appearance. Its glossy brown coat was punctuated with long white spots and two curling horns grew between its vulpine ears. Its paws were elongated, pretending to be hands but were thumbless; its whiskers twitched with what? Fear? Could it smell Jasper and knew what his presence meant?

Ingram felt something like regret towards this creature. Her brain was telling her that *this is natural—what's supposed to happen*. Something else was beating loudly inside her chest, clenching tightly with every breath. A door behind her slid open and Jasper entered.

He was on all fours, fingertips touching the ground, moving fluidly

and easily. Ingram had been in the habit of watching him move: when he stood upright, he was awkward, frequently speeding up and slowing down as if he had no control over his limbs. He moved at this moment as if he had unlocked a secret knowledge of what to do with himself. His knees were bent backwards, just as his species had evolved to do while on all fours. His eyes were focused, red irises small and sharp. His mouth was open, with his skinny, forked tongue peeking out as if it had a mind of its own.

There was barely anything that resembled a struggle. The room was small and Jasper was fast.

It was still alive. Jasper pinned it down with one hand, fingers splayed to encompass most of its chest. There was a large gap between his first finger and thumb; Ingram didn't need to watch to know what happened next. The fingers on Jasper's right hand plunged through the Oh's flesh like it was nothing at all. There was a tearing noise and then there was a heart in Jasper's hand.

This was the beginning of everything; until this moment, no one had known if Jasper would be a success or not. Other projects had begun. They had failed. He had succeeded when no other had. Their only problem was now Ingram.

Having seen what her charge was capable of, Ingram retreated from him. His eyes were brighter now; he was more precise in his movements, though he still tended to stumble when walking on two legs. This was pointed out to her: "Look at the good it's done him. He's going to be healthier now."

And she saw the good. She blocked out what she had seen and set about her next task.

In the present, sipping champagne, Ingram closes her eyes and tries not to see blood curling around long fingers. She must stay focused, now. Jasper is closing in.

After Jasper began eating meat, he grew like a weed. Soon, his clothes were too small for him, trousers slowly receding towards his knees and shirts leaving his stomach exposed. He tugged at the end of the orange fabric, making Ingram wonder if he felt something close to self-consciousness.

"Ingram," she said, pointing to herself. "Jasper," she added, laying a hand on his chest.

Jasper nodded; he understood, he just wouldn't respond. Or did not want to. She was not sure.

"Can you say that? 'Jasper'? Can you?"

He seemed to consider for a moment. He nodded again.

"Then why don't you?" she asked.

“Don’t want to,” he said, slowly and sibilant, lizard’s tongue slurring like a six year old.

And so he could speak.

When Jasper was fifteen, he was sent to kill for the first time. This was his purpose. Ingram was terrified. Their target was on a nearby planet—Ingram tries to think back to that day, but fails to recall where it occurred—and they arrived there in a matter of hours. It was simple enough for the two of them. Locate. Track. Corner. Kill. Cleanup. They were trained for this.

Ingram had not been trained for Jasper’s distance and silence on the journey back to Concordance.

“He’s not ready,” she later told her superiors. “He’s still practically a child.”

“He needs to learn, he needs to do it, and most importantly, we need him now,” she was told. “If you or he should fail, we will see that you end up like Projects Opal and Onyx.”

Ingram swallowed, and nodded. She had read the reports. It was time to return to Jasper and make him capable to do this again.

The man was a traitor to the State; he had organized and funded a small militia that had attacked a government building two years previously. There was nothing but a few fragments of information linking him to the event—not enough to charge him in court. His group believed that the State was oppressive; secretly, Ingram was inclined to agree with him—they lived in a state that sent an alien assassin after men who opposed them but were impossible to implicate. However, this was her job, and she was loyal to Jasper even if she wasn’t to her country.

They are trained to do this. Their two sets of eyes watch the man without him or any of the partygoers noticing that he is being watched. He leaves his group of similarly suited men and makes his way towards the back exit, towards the restrooms. Ingram steps forward. Jasper joins her in following the man’s path to the door. Ingram settles in with a group of people, one of whom she vaguely knows from somewhere. Jasper slips away and Ingram notices that his jerky, awkward movements are getting more fluid, that his stoop is becoming much more similar to an animal walking on all fours. She can not see his eyes, but she imagines that they are bright red and focused ahead as if there isn’t anything else but the target and Jasper.

There was a brief adjustment period. Ingram watched as her charge eyed his long fingers occasionally, realizing what power they held. He had taken life before, in the form of animals but he, having been brought up

around humans, realized that this was something different. “Does it,” she asked him, “make you feel bad? When you kill someone?”

Jasper thought. Slowly, he shook his head. “Feels...like normal,” he said. “Just...” he was seemingly at a loss for words, and shaped his long-fingered hands into a basket-like structure, holding together something that didn’t exist. There are no words in which he can describe how it makes him feel, or at least he doesn’t know them. It makes him feel more real, to have a beating heart between his fingers, and eating the flesh of something that he had murdered himself fills him more than any food could ever fill her.

“He’s not human,” she was told. “You have to remember that. Once again, you’re forgetting that he isn’t the same species as you. Just because you dress him up and teach him English doesn’t mean he’s not a Beast anymore.”

Ingram could not tell if her fellow Agent had called Jasper a beast—a base creature good for nothing but slaughter—or a Beast, a Beast of Kans, exactly what he is. She tried to wrap her head around this distinction and, in a way, is still trying to.

That night, though, she went into his room like she did when he was a child and spoke to him, telling him stories both real and imagined.

The man is in the men’s restroom, washing his hands in the gilded sink. Jasper says his name, memorized earlier that day. He turns to the Beast and jerks as if he has been shocked. Only then does Jasper take in his gray hair and wrinkled face. “You have committed crimes against the State,” he says, words he has said to others in the past. The man’s cheeks go pale.

“I was framed,” he says. “There’s no proof, you can’t do anything! You can’t do—”

It is too late for this, though. It became too late the moment that Jasper began to follow him. Jasper lunges towards him; the man outstretches an arm in defense. The arm rips off as easily as a sheet of paper is torn in two. Jasper narrowly avoids a spray of blood on his shirt.

The man’s eyes are wide; Jasper’s fingers break through his ribcage, almost without a sound. He pulls and the vital organ is ripped from the man’s chest before he has a chance to die.

The heart gives a feeble beat in his fingers then stops for good. Jasper opens his mouth wide, revealing three rows of iridescent shark’s teeth, and bites deep into the muscle, eating it in two bites.

The body has slumped to the ground. Jasper surveys the scene: besides the missing arm, open chest, and look of shock on the man’s face, he looks perfectly normal. The scent of blood is in the air; Jasper is hungry, and the heart wasn’t nearly enough to satisfy. Besides, Ingram told him to make sure there was no mess. There doesn’t need to be any panic before they

could get out.

He fetches the man's arm from the corner of the room, makes sure the door is locked, and considers what he wants first.

Jasper was dressed in a custom made suit. It was stain-retardant and black, except for the shirt, which was a crisp, new white, guaranteed to stay that way permanently, no matter what happened.

"You look very smart," Ingram said to him. "Perfect for a party."

His wide mouth curled into a sheepish half-smile, exactly the expression he had a few minutes later when his photo was taken for his new passport.

Jasper and Ingram have known each other for seventeen years. They are all the family that each of them has, though Jasper knows no other kind of family and Ingram has been slow to realize this. They were about to change, though. Working—doing what they do—on Earth was a sign that they were becoming more respected by the State.

And, perhaps, more needed. These were hard times, after all.

"Ready to go somewhere new?" Ingram said to him.

He nodded, and she placed her hand briefly in his large palm.

The bathroom is almost cleaned when there is a knock at the door. Jasper sits up with a start. His jacket hangs over a stall and his sleeves are rolled up past his elbows. His fingers are still bloodied.

"Jasper." It's Ingram's voice. Jasper's heart stops beating furiously and he takes a breath.

"Wait," he answers. His lizard's tongue snakes out, curling around his first finger on his right hand. He cleans the blood off and repeats this process for the other four digits. He unlocks the door and lets her in.

She surveys the scene. "That's your jacket?" she asks.

He nods, and points to a pile of clothes beneath a sink. "His are there." There is no trace that there was ever a man in this room, except for these clothes and the blood on Jasper's left hand.

"Good," she responds. "I'll handle the clothes, you finish up cleaning."

There is a bag in her purse. She opens it, and places the clothing inside it, sealing it once she is done. Within an hour, the acids in the bag will have devoured the clothing and any other traces that there was ever anything inside it. She makes it as small as she can and hides it inside Jasper's jacket, deciding to put it in the bin in the women's bathroom once they are ready.

Jasper's long fingers roll down his sleeves. The tips converge like a closed flower to straighten his tie. They leave the event fifteen minutes later and the man who greeted them informs the two that he hopes to see them again.

They were making their way to Earth for the first time, journeying to the State gathering where they would have their first Earth-based mission. Jasper's hands were in his lap, and his long fingers held a small card—his passport. It was nothing but a picture of him, his name, and data embedded in the very fibers of it. Jasper Concordance, it read. A nail-less forefinger danced over the two collections of letters.

"Concordance," Jasper said, forked tongue tasting the word that had been transformed from his place of residence to his surname. "It's...a word. It means something?"

Ingram nodded; the word had lost all meaning to her, though. She is from Concordance, of Concordance, and, now, the caretaker of Concordance.

He turned his wide face to her, asking better than his airy voice could. "A lot of things, as I recall."

He was still staring at her, his inverted eyes locked on her very human ones.

She sighed, and thought briefly of what a child he still was. "It's a Biblical term, as I remember. Don't know what it means in that context, though." She wrinkled her nose, trying to recall. "It's also a genetic term. Regarding how two things are similar. Twins, I think."

He nodded, once.

"And...harmony," she added. "It means harmony. An agreement between things." She was stumbling over meaning now.

This was good enough for Jasper, though. He smiled at her and turned his attention to the window next to his seat. Earth was looming large in the view.

Ingram reached over, intending to run her fingers through his black hair, intending to go back to before this moment. She imagines them back on Kans, back in Concordance.

Ashes and Memories (opposite)

by Laura Blum-Smith

Beast

by Daniel Kessler

Morning came
When the beast
Hungered. We
Fed him medium
Dogs, two kettles,
Several children.

Night came: how
The beast craved sun.
We locked him up.
His ashen whiskers made
Like whispers at the poles.

Next morning he cried for what,
We did not know. The Beast was
Tired not dead so we threw him
Hot felines through his cavities straight through
And watched him weep and swallow them.

That night the beast was dead. We
Killed him. His sprawlings caught, Stinking Cockleburs to the bars.
In the end we made peace to each other and pulled the incisors
And sold them.

Next morning the beast had risen
Onto four legs. Out the cage, whiskers shut,
Was not the beast. We watched close
And some of us stroked its neck. Then we left it.



Red

by Jim Mattingly



Alexander Black made a decision. He didn't know when, or how, or why, or even what it was, but there was one tiny *tick* when Alexander Black's life became a beautifully arcing downward spiral. After that moment, Alexander Black fought for his life every day, struggling for food, for shelter; Alexander Black dreamt of small luxuries you take for granted. For example: You live in a world without Red.

Here is a group of nine men, sitting at a table in a spacious conference room, none of them friends. This one, dressed in the same dark grey uniform but with more gold trim and a silver insignia on his chest, thinks he has power. He addresses the rest from a seat in front of a large plate glass window. The city skyline is visible in the moonlight.

"We've been assigned a target. Assassin from outside, very dangerous. I'll brief you on his method, something I bet you bastards have never seen outside of—"

The window explodes, shards scattering across the room. The captain falls, a splintered hole visible in the back of his head. The others startle; one yells, "What the hell was that?"

Each soldier reflexively draws a taser, inwardly curses for its impotence, then instinctively heads for the door. Just as they approach and it starts to open automatically, another shot strikes the control sensors hidden in the wall next to it. The door freezes, trapping them.

The soldier at the door calls out, "Override, now!" Another quickly kneels, presses two pads on a box at his hip, then whispers into his uniform's lapel. The first continues, "Distress, unknown assailant, CO gone." The kneeling soldier turns back to his lapel, starts to speak, but shots hit first the box then his jaw and he collapses.

Two others lift the massive table, throw it across the room so its legs crush into the walls, forming a shield. As they try to follow, two more shots send them to the floor, one each to the back of the head.

Silence – the five remaining soldiers disappear behind the table, then no sounds issue. Blood pools from the casualties, threatening to spill out the open window.

Five shots crack the night; five explosions scatter down the table.

Silence.

The door slides open, but no one comes through.

A small anchor flies through the window, trailed by a rope; a man follows soon after. He approaches the captain's body, kneels, takes a sealed envelope from its jacket with gloved hands. He takes the insignia, throws it out the window. He draws out a small red canister, opens it, throws it behind the table across the room, trailing a clear liquid. He produces a lighter, ignites the liquid, exits down his rope. The anchor slides away a moment later, just as a fireball engulfs the room, bursts out into the open air, and spreads the ashes of nine soldiers on the city's wind.

"TC class first, Black, Alexander. Request bounty special."

Alexander Black stands facing a crude city monitor. Four squares appear, each with a name and number, all in black and white.

The third square reads, "Honesty No-ID Treason 1m k." Black stares at it for a few breaths, then turns his attention to the fourth, a new addition. It reads, "Unknown Outsider No-ID Murder 500k k." Black pauses, touches the new square, and more text appears; Black reads only the words "Nine counts murder, soldiers all." He closes his eyes, exhales slowly; he touches the top of the monitor and it winks off.

Opening his eyes, Black says, "Request bounty general."

Ten squares this time, but Black looks only at the first. It reads, "Darius Finch ID-511 Red 1000k." He touches it and starts scanning the readout.

The monitor is the only light. Black stands alone in a dimly visible circular room with other monitors all around the wall, save for a space in front of the only door. On the wall opposite the door is a bright red time display showing 5:57.

The display changes to 6:00; another man enters the room, touches a panel on the wall. Globes in the ceiling slowly light up, cuing an electronic voice to start repeating "Welcome Thief Catchers. Choose consoles in an orderly fashion" every thirty seconds. He doesn't see Black, even as he walks to a desk in the center of the room and turns to face the door. Just as he sits, a crowd of men enters the room, and cacophony follows.

Black says nothing, flicks a switch on his monitor, and leaves.

Later, outside, Black leans on a mailbox, waiting. His coat is folded over one arm, his bag slung over his shoulder. Behind him, a sign on a window reads "City TC." He holds an unsealed envelope, papers visible within. He watches the traffic; several hundred cars move past each minute, every window is darkly tinted, every engine roars. The morning sunlight glints off their polished hoods, spreading golden light. An alley next to the thief catchers' office holds strong, maintaining shadows. One of them separates and moves onto the sidewalk next to Black.

"You are reviewing changes in Finch's profile." The shadow is a man, bearded, wearing a heavy coat despite the heat; his voice is foreign, laconic. He stands with his back to Alexander, looks in the thief catchers' window. Black smiles, continues watching traffic. "He was logged leaving his building with two capitals."

The shadow smiles also.

"I'm going after him tomorrow morning." Black puts the envelope in the handle of the mailbox's lid. "Meet me here at five."

"Farewell, Alexander."

"Yourself, Victor."

Black turns and walks away; Victor takes the envelope, returns to the alley, and disappears.

"Morning, Black."

"Jackie."

"What can I do for you?"

"Tell me about Red."

Jackie sighs, her gaze low. "You're asking me so you can tell me."

"Double-checking with you, if you prefer."

She gives him an upward glare. "Red is a stimulant." She brings her hands up to her head, wiggles them by her ears. "Makes you crazy, and too much makes you violent."

"The official file says it reduces inhibitions."

"More like it makes you more intuitive, makes you run on instinct." Black nods. "Go on."

"It increases the speed of almost everything your body does – heart rate, respiratory rate, metabolic rates. Your muscles twitch faster, your eyes focus faster, neurons fire faster. It's not always better in every case, but you get the idea."

"Story goes that it increases blood pressure too—causes ruptures."

"If you take enough. That's where the name comes from – red eyes, red skin, red footprints. That's how it kills you, too."

"The LD-100."

"The death penalty, a capital. About eighteen grams; if anyone takes that much, they're dead within an hour, but they're likely to kill and rape everyone they find before they die."

"And Finch had two."

"Probably for trade." She takes a deep breath, exhales. "Red isn't exactly recreational. It's addictive, sure, but it's used more as a deterrent, like a bomb. The City doesn't move on anyone who has a death penalty."

"So a capital is valuable only if the City knows it's there."

"Or if rival bosses know it's there." Jackie smiles. "That's a more likely purpose. The problem with showing it to the City is that eventually Alexander Black will hear about it."

Black's face doesn't change. "How long does it take to move two capitals?"

"If he's got two, he's probably trying to move it already."

"I'll have to stall him until tomorrow."

"You called Victor?"

A pause.

"Thank you Jackie."

"Bye Black."

Alexander Black stands outside an apartment building, cloaked in shadow. Across the street, Darius Finch steps out of his car, followed by three enormous men. Black has his taser in his right hand, his bag held fast in his left. Finch steps inside a dark restaurant; two of the men turn and stand on either side of the door, the third follows Finch inside.

Black approaches nonchalantly, eyes on the menu posted outside. The chef is baking lasagna, but there is only white wine. The place is clearly not genuine.

The man on the left says, "Can't go in."

The man on the right says, "Place is closed."

A few violent seconds later, Black steps inside, asks to be seated to dinner for two, his friend is running late, sorry. The host eyes him with a pecu-

liar horror reserved for those who win entry with two impossible victories and ask politely to be seated.

"You'll have to wait, sir, we're still clearing tables."

Black eyes the place: Finch is sitting with his guard and two other men such that only Finch's hands are visible behind his guard, the others can see the door. Aside from this one party, the restaurant is pristine and empty.

"How about that booth over there, next to those gentlemen? Looks fine to me."

The host turns, looks, turns back with a pained smile. "Please wait just a few minutes, sir."

Black leans in. "If anything gets broken, it's on me."

"You'll be killed!"

"Don't count on it."

Black takes a menu, walks to the booth next to Finch, sits so he's staring right at him, opens his menu. He hears the other two men speaking quietly, can't make out their words. The big man next to Finch leans down, ready for an order to take out the interloper, but Finch doesn't notice Black. Finch is busy with his lasagna.

A waiter approaches Black wearing a nervous smile, places a glass of water in front of him.

"Tomato soup."

"How would you like th—"

"Cold."

"What sort of drink wou—"

"Leave."

"We don't have th—"

"Leave."

The waiter stops, slowly understands, walks away.

The big man watches Black very carefully, waiting for a familiar phrase from Finch, but Finch is now pouring himself a second glass of wine. The other two men notice the big man's gaze, stop talking, turn to see Black, faces curious but angry. His heart drops in fear, but Black smiles grimly at them, nods curtly in greeting.

Finch notices the lack of talking, looks up. His eyes graze Black's as he turns to the big man, whispers something that makes him frown. He nods goodbye to the others, and he and the big man leave through the back door. The two men turn back to their food, muttering. As soon as Finch is outside, Black sidles out of his booth and strides toward the front door, every inch of his back singing trepidation for the knives or bullets that may come. Black hands his menu to the silent host, glances at the two men still seated at the booth: They stare back, angry, memorizing his face.

Black breaks into a run when he gets outside, curves around back.

He sees Finch's car turn onto the road, doesn't catch its number. The back door flies open, the two men step out, but stop short when they see Black. One draws out a military pistol, fires it at Black. A cloud of White flies all around him, but he closes his eyes, turns away inside his coat, exhales; he receives none of it. Before the next shot, Black flees, discarding his White-covered coat. Smiling crookedly, the men let him go. Inside, the waiter holds a bowl of cold tomato soup, wonders when the customer will come for it.

Alexander Black stands in his room, checking the contents of his bag. Satisfied, he loads it, moves to the door, hesitates. He moves to his bed, kneels; he takes a rectangular box out from the frame. Slowly, Black opens it, lifts out a knife with a twelve-inch blade. Testing its weight briefly, he exhales, slips it into his bag.

"You have a plan?"

"I'm going to pull the system, get Finch's location."

Victor shrugs slightly. "Simple plan."

"He'll have muscle with him, and he'll probably be somewhere highly sensitive."

Victor and Alexander stand outside the thief catchers' office, facing away from each other. Alexander carries his bag, Victor a briefcase.

"Muscle's easy."

"I'll try and tag Finch, get the capitals off him."

"And I'll cover you."

"Simple plan."

The road is quiet – the city hasn't woken up yet, and no cars pass by. The office is dark, but Black unlocks the door, steps inside. Victor paces idly. A moment later, Black returns with a printout and a small monitor, says, "Northwest."

They walk in opposite directions, meet at the northwest corner of the adjacent northwest block. Black scans the monitor, says, "North." They go on like this for nearly an hour, closing on Finch, never crossing a sensor or logging in the City.

Finally, the monitor indicates Finch is inside a hospital. Black and Victor circle the building, find no muscle, no lookouts.

"Someone hit him already?"

"He's hiding. Knows someone's after him, knows hospitals have security."

"I go in, the building goes on full alert."

"The ambulance loader doesn't have a sensor."

Victor's face turns dour. "They check patient IDs."

Black looks at the windows on higher floors. "You've got your grape?"

"Of course."

"Third floor and above, the windows don't have security."

Victor scans the adjacent rooftops, points with his chin. "I'll go in there. Third floor."

"Meet me in the lobby."

Alexander Black checks the contents of his bag, charges his taser, finds the handle of his knife. Stepping inside, the cool air blasts him; Black thinks it must be less than fifty degrees inside, colder than City standard. In the small grey entryway, the sensor floats over to him, flashes a light in his eyes. It clicks a few times, slightly worrisome, but Black knows it's checking his weapons against his thief catcher ID. It floats away, and Black steps into the lobby. He hears another, deeper click behind him, but doesn't think much of it.

The lobby is a tall room: The ceiling is forty feet on the left side, thirty on the right; skylights in the slope throw sunlight on the mirrored left wall, soaking the room in light. A few people are seated in a reception area on the right side, in front of a desk where two nurses watch monitors. Black sits in a seat on the end such that he also can watch them; he scans them all quickly, sees no familiar faces or forms.

One of the monitors starts flashing a red exclamation point, shifts view to a different camera; the camera's number indicates it's on the third floor. Black sees Victor entering a stairwell, but the camera is panning away from him; it zooms in on a man lying on the ground, visibly agonized, yelling something into his lapel. He's bleeding from somewhere under his shirt. A doctor approaches, the flashing exclamation point disappears, the yelling man points to the stairwell. Black reads the phrase "No ID!" on his lips.

Alexander Black knows now that this will not be a good day.

He stands, heads for the stairwell. Two people approach the desk, complaining that the front door is locked. Hearing this, Black turns, sees that one of the nurses at the desk is eyeing him. Black glares back for a moment, feeling a spark of familiarity, then strides to the stairwell.

He pulls open the door, and on the other side stands Darius Finch and his remaining healthy bodyguard.

The bodyguard throws a fist into Black's chest, knocks him to the floor. He approaches, goes to stomp on Black's chest, but Black twists away, dodges, and stabs his taser into the bodyguard's thigh. He falls, Black's taser going under his leg.

Black gets to his feet, tries to find Finch, sees that the smug nurse is lifting a phone at the desk. Now, Black recognizes him: One of the buyers from the night before, the one with the military pistol. Black reaches into

his bag, pulls out a heavy ball bearing, spins, throws it through the phone. He advances as the nurse draws the pistol, then throws another bearing and knocks the pistol away, damaging it. The nurse backs away in fear, but Black leaps over the desk, tackling him from behind.

The nurse says, "You're trapped, Black. You're finished."

Black says nothing, handcuffs him to his chair, puts tape over his mouth.

The civilian crowd tries to leave through the front, but the door is locked. Panic rises. Two security guards step into the lobby, seeking the source of their troubles.

Finch falls backwards through the stairwell door, followed by Victor, holding his briefcase like a cudgel. Finch coughs, spits blood. Victor starts to speak, but one of the security guards fires a taser gun; Victor deflects the bolt with his case, ducks back through the door.

Black raises his ID. "TC first class! Finch is in my custody." The crowd exhales; clearly the thief catcher has the situation under control.

The guards advance, one points to the stairs. "What about him?"

"He's all yours." The guards disappear up the stairs.

Finch tries to run; Black trips him, pins his arms. "The capitals, Finch."

"Screw you, Black."

"Finch, this isn't—"

Victor kicks open the stairwell door, briefcase in hand, the two guards unconscious on the floor behind him. "Black, he dropped the capitals upstairs!"

Finch laughs bitterly. Black curses, kicks away from Finch, bolts past Victor up the stairs. Victor yells, "Second floor hallway!" Black charges out onto the second floor. A sign reads, "Rehabilitation." The floor is silent. He stalks the hallway, right hand in his bag, fingers on the hilt of his knife. He expects the rehab ward to be busy, is unsettled by the silence. A camera slowly pans back and forth, diligently watching the hall.

Black hears a thud behind him, turns: At the end of the hall, an automatic door is trying to close on a dead man's legs. Black approaches slowly, his heart rate suddenly much faster. He can hear his own breath; it's too fast. He's nervous. He recites the effects of Red in his head, knowing already that somewhere in the hospital, there's someone with two death penalties in their system. People are dying, and Black tells himself he could have stopped it.

He reaches the door, forces it open with his foot. The body is missing much of its throat; blood pools on the other side of the door. Black freezes. Not twenty feet away, facing the opposite direction, stands a massive, over-muscled man wearing stretched and torn and stained clothing. His skin is a

shimmering dark red; bloody footprints mark his passage. He bleeds from the scalp, from under his fingernails. His wrist carries a white wristband with red diamonds, marking him a patient for Red addiction.

The hall is full of bodies, some writhing, some still. There is silence. Black feels his heart drop, his heels pin him to the floor. A camera slowly pans towards the bloody man, freezes; it makes a clicking sound and a small red light turns on. The bloody man jerks his face towards it, leaps, tears it off the wall, crushes it in his hands.

Black spins on his heel, charges back through the hallway towards the stairwell. There's a roar behind him, a crash, but the bloody man doesn't see Black. Downstairs, Victor holds Finch's wrists down with his boot, glares at the uneasy crowd. The skylights suddenly go dark; steel covers slide into place over the exterior doors and windows. Faint lights turn on, shining weakly in the darkness.

Black's voice is cold, his breath ragged. "We've got a crimsonhead. The City saw it and we're sealed in until it's dead." Finch laughs again, this time painfully. Victor stares at Black for moment, then removes his coat, silently opens his case, starts assembling the rifle held within. The civilians' faces go pale; Black whispers, "Hide." They leave hurriedly.

Victor is calm. "Thoughts?"

Black's voice shakes. "We've got to kill it."

Victor smiles. "Simple plan."

Black kneels in front of Finch. "Do you understand what you've done, Finch?"

"Get off it, Black. I haven't done anything."

Black growls, throws a fist across Finch's jaw, knocking him out, heaves him behind the desk; he imagines he can hear loud and painful screams from upstairs, but the room is silent.

"We've got to stop it."

Victor locks a magazine into place. "Of course, but I can't stay afterward." He smiles ruefully. "You'll have to accept the medal on my behalf." Black's face softens into worry. "The City handles crimsonheads by sealing them in, pretending they don't happen. It'll wait for hours before it lets anyone inside, and they won't expect any survivors. We won't have any help."

Victor checks his sights, flicks the safety. "We can handle it."

Black draws out his knife, a mirror, drops his bag. "Think so?"

"Black, remember something." Victor hefts a belt of bullets, puts it over his shoulder, kicks his briefcase away. "I'm a professional." They move to the stairwell, Black in front. The only light is the red glow from signs marking emergency exits, now useless. At the door to the second floor, Black nudges the door with his foot, slides the mirror through; the

hall is clear. They walk down the hall, Black resolute, Victor's face growing progressively harder as he scans the bloodshed.

Victor touches Black's shoulder, points at a crater in the ceiling near the automatic door. Blood drips down. Black imagines he can hear children crying out, but the hall is nearly silent: Black can hear the crimsonhead's shaky breathing.

Victor's voice is steel. "Lift me." Black kneels, lifts Victor's foot; Victor climbs into the third floor hallway. Black reaches up, ready to climb, but instead Victor raises his rifle, fires down the hall three times, backs away from the hole.

Black's stomach drops as the crimsonhead leaps over the hole; he turns to run towards the stairwell. Kicking towards the door, then up the stairs, he hears more gunshots, hears the crimsonhead roar and hears Victor roar back. He is fearful but wishes for pride, wants to know his friend can take care of himself.

When Black bursts out onto the third floor hallway, Victor is on his back, pushing himself along the floor; he fires twice at the crimsonhead. It leaps, but Victor rolls to one side, takes off running toward Black as it lands behind him. The crimsonhead is perforated, bleeding profusely, but it runs towards Black and Victor, raises its arms.

It's fast, covers ten feet in a blink; Black ducks, barely avoids a clawing hand. He kicks and rolls behind it, brings his knife and mirror around to guard his throat just in time; another blow crushes the mirror into Black's shoulder, breaking the glass. As it rounds on Black, two more shots ring out, impossibly loud in the close quarters, and the crimsonhead roars, jumps straight up and crashes through the ceiling, disappears.

Black curses, gets to his feet, moves away from the hole. Victor reloads the magazine. Watching the ceiling, breathing hard, Black asks, "What is it doing?"

The thing roars upstairs, a man screams in agony, a woman in horror. Calmly, Victor replies, "Killing."

They charge up the stairs to the fourth floor, Victor in front. He kicks the door open, looks to his right, then left; he raises his rifle but doesn't fire as he walks backwards down the hall.

Victor says something, sounds alarmed, but Black doesn't hear it over the crimsonhead's dilapidated breath. It lurches past the door, and Black gets a close view: Its face is scarred and mutilated; its mouth is inhumanly wide, its jaw hangs unhinged, its tongue writhes in a red pool. Its eyes are bloodshot, unfocused, and it smells of iron. Black freezes, and it doesn't see him. It holds a male doctor's upper body in its right hand, the lower half in his left, drops them both in front of Black.

Black waits longer than he wants to; after it moves past, he steps out

into the hall, looks for living souls: To his left, a female doctor is standing in front of a glass door, holding a crowbar; a sign in the room beyond reads, "Children's Ward." Behind the glass stand dozens of children, none appear older than ten or twelve; all stare out, motionless.

Looking right, he sees the monster leap and Victor kneel; in that instant, Black feels pressure deep in his gut and behind his eyes. The moment is terrible.

The crimsonhead lands behind Victor, thrusts a hand into his back; Victor growls, tries to twist away, but it lifts him by the head, clawing his face, throws him to the floor at Black's feet. There's a cracking sound; the monster roars.

Black stares at his friend, not yet processing the moment. Victor curls inward, hands making fists, his face a mask of bloody agony, and Black knows Victor is dying.

The crimsonhead advances, suddenly leaps. Black's mind clears, he feels only anger and adrenaline; he steps forward, lowers his head, closes his eyes, draws his knife in an arc above his shoulder. He feels the shock of impact, a warm splash on his arm, but nothing else. He whirls, knife ready, sees the crimsonhead crash into the floor, a long and ragged wound across its chest. It slides along the floor, stops at the doctor's feet.

The moment is heavy with fear; the thing thrashes once, twice, then the doctor cries out, swings the crowbar's point into its head. It goes still. She sobs, collapses, covers her head with her arms.

The children stare.

Black feels his heart loose; he wants to drop to the floor, wants to give up, but his friend is dying: Even with the monster down, this fight is far more important. He runs to the doctor, kneels, takes her shoulders.

"Doctor." His voice is urgent, pleading, but she only rocks herself. "Doctor, I need bandages." She points to a cabinet in the children's ward; Black leaps over the crimsonhead, pulls the door open. The children are silent, but the room is stifling, too hot. Black moves past them, wanting to talk to them, too fearful for Victor to take the time. They only stare, some of them shaking.

He pulls open the cabinet, draws out an armful of emergency kits, runs back to Victor. The wounds on his head are shallow, superficial; the wound in his back must be more severe, more important to stop first.

"Victor, can you hear me? I have to cut your shirt." Victor doesn't speak; his eyes are wild, bloody, unfocused. Black takes scissors out of a kit, cuts the shirt away to see the wound in Victor's back; Black turns away, convulses, forces himself to turn back. Black sees what he guesses are intestines in the open wound, doesn't know what to do to stop the bleeding.

He screams now, desperate. "Doctor!" She looks up, eyes full of tears.

"My friend - this man is dying! Help him!"

She stands, shaking, walks towards Black and Victor; she takes a scanner out of her pocket, flashes it over Victor's face. When it doesn't return a result, she asks, "Who is he?"

Black roars inside, wants Victor to survive, wants him to be safe from the City, knows that it's already too late for both. He feels defeated, doesn't want to make the choice. He looks down, sees Victor's eyes are rolling back, sees his convulsions growing weaker, and the conflicts click into place; Black's choice is clear.

"He's Victor Roske, an outsider with no ID. Help him."

The doctor looks at Black, suddenly sharp-eyed. She gestures to wait, runs past the crimsonhead into the ward, past the staring children, returns with a fabric rolled around surgical tools. She goes to work, but Victor soon becomes still; she occasionally whispers "He's alive; he's still alive." Black sits against the wall, defeated, starts to drift away.

Hours blur by. Other doctors and hospital staff wander through as word spreads that the monster is dead. The wounded receive care. The dead Red addict's file is retrieved; he was a new patient, didn't know his own name. A third party checked him in the night before. Black knows that when he investigates, those names will lead back to Darius Finch. Black wants to go downstairs, beat Finch into stillness, but stays with Victor as doctors struggle to keep him alive.

The outside barriers recede and sunlight returns; Black fades into the background as City and military personnel come in, retrieve Finch and his men. A full squad of nine soldiers goes to Victor's room; their captain makes eye contact with Black, lets him stay without a word. Doctors continue working under their watch. Victor survives; he loses an eye, a hand, his liver, most of his stomach, part of a lung, and he's comatose, but he survives. When he's stable, the military carts him away while the Captain speaks to Black.

"Your ID."

Black offers his left wrist. The Captain leans down, scans it with his eye.

"You are Alexander Black, the thief catcher?"

"Yes, sir."

"Some witnesses have reported that you coordinated your capture of Darius Finch and your defeat of the Red overdose victim with Victor Roske. Do you affirm or deny this claim?"

Black senses the question is loaded, pauses before answering. "I affirm it. He was instrumental in subduing the overdose."

The Captain's face doesn't change. "Other thief catchers might release

someone who helped with such a difficult situation, citing common good. I am satisfied that you thought correctly and subdued all criminals regardless of affiliation."

Black wants to strike, holds himself still, calms his rage. "It is my duty, sir."

"Dismissed." The Captain waits for Black to leave.

Black pauses, smolders inside. "Thank you. Sir."

Alexander Black leaves the hospital, doesn't retrieve any of his equipment, bursts out the front door. He walks directionless for hours until night-fall, sits on the side of the street in a strange part of the city.

Black sits all night, waiting for forgiveness, never granting it.

"TC class first, Black, Alexander."

The monitor lights up, displays a message: "Bounty credit 501000k."

Black doesn't move. He whispers, "Victor, I didn't know."

Minutes later, when the red clock shows six, the clerk walks in, turns on the lights, isn't at all surprised to see Black.

"Good work with the assassin, Black. How'd you manage the guy who murdered all those soldiers?"

Alexander Black says nothing; his eyes burn the clerk into silence.

As the crowd pours in, Black stands alone, slowly turns off his monitor and walks out.

Black sits in his empty room, leaning against the wall. His head is tilted back, his eyes are closed; his arms are extended over his legs, hands clasped around a black circle with a golden light.

"I didn't know."

Wind of the Western Skies

by Laura Blum-Smith



Coming Back

by Bryn A. McDonald

He couldn't move; he couldn't stop them. The man was coming again. He was almost here. He couldn't scream for help; he couldn't move. The man reached out. His hand came closer. The man's skin brushed his own. His mouth opened in a silent scream.

He jerked awake. His muscles still twitched, and his breathing was fast and irregular. He shook his head and rubbed a trembling hand against his eyes, trying to come back from his dream. He untangled himself from his bed sheets, running the shaky hand through his coarse, untidy hair. The feeling of cold sweat on the back of his neck made him reach up and brush it away.

He slid from his bed, dropping a couple of feet before he touched floor. His roommate snorted and mumbled sleepily, "Blake? . . . What time is it?"

"Go back to sleep," Blake replied, checking his roommate's clock to make sure the alarm would go off. He grabbed a towel and wrapped a bottle of shampoo and soap in it, before shuffling toward the dorm showers.

The shower water felt cool against his skin, brushing away the physical remnants of the dreams. Trying to get the deep rooted feeling out of him, he scrubbed his arms and chest but it didn't help. They never really went away. Just when he thought they were gone, he'd have them again. At least some nights he knew he would dream. Those were the nights after stressful days.

He turned off the shower water with a twist of his wrist, stepping outside of the two-by-two stall into the deserted bathroom. A blast of cold air assaulted him. It felt like frost had crystallized on his wet body. The hairs that had stood up in objection to the cold air felt like needles on his skin.

He wrapped an overused white towel close around him, shuffling to the partially opened window. After climbing onto the windowsill one-handedly, he reached up to pull the small window closed. It wouldn't move.

He hated this school with its half-broken buildings, exaggerated rules, and unmanageable classes. But what else was to be expected from a school for hopeless children with academic gifts. It was part juvenile detention center, part magnet school. It was a four year residential school for close to two thousand students, all of whom were academically gifted, but also had other, less than desirable, social traits.

He kicked the wall, remembering too late that he wasn't wearing shoes. "Fuck!" he gasped as his foot made contact with the wall. He'd be limping through at least his third class.

Blake grumpily walked back to the shower stall, still feeling like a human-sized ice cube. He picked up his things before returning to his room where he dried off, got dressed, and pulled himself back onto his bed.

He stared blankly at the floor for a few moments. With forced thoughts he cleared his mind before dragging a sketch pad towards him. Three hours later, when it was time for the first class, the paper was covered with the image of a sprawling hardwood forest.

Third period, Population Biology. A class of forty, plus one teacher who didn't really count. Dr. Levine didn't pay attention to you unless you were in one of her research classes. She, like the last one hundred people Blake had passed, didn't notice his limp. Or if she did, she didn't care. It was almost gone by now, anyway.

It was lab day, and Dr. Levine had decided to "mix things up" by as-

signing random partners. Blake was one of the first people to the list posted on the wall. Next to "Blake Ballard" he read: "Adria Callaghan."

He only knew two people in that class and "Adria Callaghan" was not one of them. He sighed, damn Dr. Levine. He turned, moving away a step or two so that more people could get to the sheet of partners.

"Who's Adria Callaghan?" he called over the heads of the crowd. He had trouble wrapping his tongue around the last name, but he thought he had gotten it right. "Adria?" he repeated, still rather loudly.

A blonde haired girl who was right in front of him cringed away from him and said meekly, "I'm Adria."

"Oh." Boy, did she look like a mouse when she cowered like that. "I'm Blake." He stuck out a hand for her to shake. She looked at it a moment before shifting her books to offer a hand in return. She shook his lightly for a moment and let go quickly.

She stood there, obviously waiting for him to take the lead. "Err, right. Lets go then." He turned and walked to the door, parting the crowd in front of him roughly. He paused when he was outside the door, expecting to have to wait for her, but she was right behind him.

They headed for a lab table at the back corner of the room. Adria pulled out her lab book and, looking at it asked, "Have you counted flies before?"

"Umm, no." Her hair was reflecting brightly. It brushed the top of the lab table when she crouched over her book like that. Her hair moved; she was flicking it away from her face to look up at him. He noticed for the first time that her eyes were bright blue. *Like sapphires*, he thought dumbly.

"Do you know how to sort guys and girls?"

Flies? "No."

After a moment of looking through the microscope at a pile of flies and pushing them around with a cheap-looking paintbrush, she stepped away. He stared at her. She blinked at him.

"Look in it," she told him. He was partially amused and partially annoyed at her bossiness. She had been acting so mousey before. The amusement won over. He looked down the microscope and got a brief introduction at how to tell male and female flies apart.

After half an hour of sorting flies—Blake thought he might dream about *flies* tonight—Adria asked him, her voice oddly turning meek again, "What happened to your leg?"

"Huh?"

"You, uhh . . . you were limping earlier."

"Oh. I . . . I kicked a wall." He expected her to laugh, but was surprised when she just nodded.

"I punched a wall the day before yesterday."

He looked at her hand—she was left-handed—and saw a yellow-brown

bruise over two of her knuckles. She was wearing a Celtic-looking ring on her forefinger.

He didn't know what to say, so he reached for another vial of flies. His hand brushed her arm. She jumped, and stepped wide away. He blinked at her. "Sorry."

She shook her head and focused again on the lab.

Four class periods, a second skipped meal, and a debate club meeting later and Blake was trudging across the second floor of the school. At the very center of the main building—renamed the Tower by students—was a circular classroom with no windows in the wall. It sat about forty students in uncomfortable metal chairs. That was where Blake was going.

As he walked further and further into the Tower, he walked slower and slower. He saw the door to room 001. As he reached for the door handle (even the door didn't have a window) he paused.

His father had called during lunch. The principal had called him and recommended Blake attend the meeting. He could tell everyone it was a Book Club, that's what all of the other members did. Blake's father had ordered him to go.

Blake sighed. His mother called it "reaction formation," a term she had picked up in one of her support groups. Blake gathered that when a person—such as his father—had unacceptable emotions or actions, he replaced that with the direct opposite. It wasn't so much that his father was sorry about what he did to Blake, as it was his defense mechanism.

Blake tried to shrug off the feeling that the grey-haired man was standing at his shoulder. Instead his thoughts just focused more on his father. Blake screamed and slammed his arm against the wall, fist clenched. He rested his forehead against the paint-chilled stone wall. He kicked it, feeling the tingling sensation spread through his leg again. He slid down the wall into a crouch, before turning, leaning his back to the wall, resting his elbows on his knees. He ran his sweaty hands through his short, thick hair.

"Hey, you. You ok?" A girl with black hair braided down her back walked up to him cautiously. She had a slight New York accent.

"Yeah, I'm fine," he lied, pushing himself up with his arms.

"You here for the Book Club?" she asked, motioning to the door with her head.

"Yeah. . . . Yeah, I'm here for the club," he said, and followed her through the door as she opened it.

There were only two other people in the room when he went in. A masculine looking, brown haired girl who was sitting with her elbows on her spread legs near the center of the room and a blonde, curvy girl in the back.

There was a skylight in the room, the only window and only large enough to cast a square of light two feet on each side. The sunlight pooled against the part of the wall farthest from the door. The blonde girl was crouched in a chair, legs pulled up and around her, sitting in the middle of the sunlight. She had a small, paperback book she was reading. She shifted, throwing her hair over her shoulder as she turned the page. Blake realized it was Adria.

He noticed that her movements had stilled and saw her looking at him from the very corner of her eye. He quirked an eyebrow and went to drag another chair against the circular wall, a fair distance away from her.

The black-haired girl looked around the room and pulled up a chair next to Blake, apparently deciding he was the safest bet. They talked a little about their pasts. Blake smiled bitterly as the girl—Raven—told him this was a “short term thing only” for her.

He looked up and realized there were now about ten people in the room. He was one of only three boys. As he was looking around, a tall, pretty woman in a pinstriped power suit walked through the door, closed it, and locked it. She smiled. Her teeth were white and straight.

“Just so no one unexpected will bother us,” she told them. Her voice was deep and sweet. She walked to the center of the room. Her steps were long, the sound of her heels was sharp and short, her hips swayed rhythmically. Blake got the impression of a learned ease and confidence in her—it didn’t feel natural.

She told them to all come closer. They did so, their chairs making screeching noises across the floor. Blake saw Adria look longingly up through the sunlight beam before unwinding herself from her chair and pulling into the newly formed circle. Her finger was still stuck in her book as a place marker. Blake ended up between her and Raven. He looked at Adria’s book. *Dealing with Dragons* by Patricia C. Wrede, he could see. He looked at her. She had curled into a ball again and was carefully looking at the square tiled floor.

The woman started talking, and Blake saw Adria’s eyes focus as she came back to the small circular room. The woman said that they weren’t here to share stories or to feel like they were put on the spot. This was merely a support group. They could talk about whatever they wanted, though most children found talking about emotions helpful.

Her voice rolled over Blake’s consciousness like shadows of clouds. He’d hear her for a while, talking about the healing process and human’s intrinsic need for comfort; but then he would zone out, not listening to her talk of children’s increased need for support.

The boy across from him ran his hands through his hair constantly, pulling at it between his fingers. When he looked up, catching Blake’s eyes

for a moment, Blake could see his eyes were red and dry, mouth open slightly with a look of shock. *Death in the family*, Blake assessed.

Raven flicked her braided hair behind her, taking fast notes on a pad of paper. She had said she wanted to be a psychologist, after all. Blake sighed quietly, mentally shaking his head. He couldn’t understand why anyone would want to spend her entire life around people like this; Blake felt it was hard enough dealing with his own problems.

His attention flicked to a wispy girl next to the moderator. The girl was wearing long sleeves. She pulled the cuffs down, holding them over most of her palms before crossing her arms, the inside of her arm facing her body. *Cutter*, he guessed and watched her until she shifted again, her shirt collar falling slightly to the side, revealing several thin red lines. There were two kinds of cutters—at least that Blake had met. There were those who did it for release, and those who were screaming silently for help. The fact that the girl was here implied that she was the latter.

Blake’s focus fell back on the woman as she asked them all to share one thing that they were thankful for. Blake rolled his eyes—what a typical “get to know you” question.

“Trees,” Blake said simply when the eyes turned to him.

After the next girl, who was thankful for God (Blake had a convenient attack of coughs at that moment), was Adria. “Books,” she said in a breathy voice, eyes fixed on the tile-work again. “You can get lost in other worlds. Anything is possible.”

Blake heard someone laugh on the other side of the circle, and he glared. *At least be polite enough to try to pretend it wasn’t a laugh*, he thought.

Most of the people there were thankful for “family” or “nothing bad now.” Blake wanted to scream. He ran his fingers through his hair as he thought, *How am I supposed to talk to these people if they’re all so shallow and flat?*

Blake looked at the clock over the door. Only thirty eight minutes and thirteen seconds left. He sighed. If there had been a wall nearby, his head would be running into it repeatedly right about now.

The days passed. The “Book Club” met the same time every day Monday through Thursday. Blake was open and honest. Most of the other students ignored his existence. He kept his comments short and to the point, never straying from the topic assigned by the woman. He wondered what their guesses were for why he was in there.

He’d slouch into the room after school—after the first meeting, he was regularly the first one there—and scrape a chair across the laminate floor until it was in the center. He flop down into it, posture horrible and face grim. He had decided that this was cruel and unusual punishment, not to mention double jeopardy. Didn’t he have to deal with his problems enough, having

to live, however briefly, with his father? But on top of that, it was his father himself who made Blake come every day, every week.

Close to exactly three weeks after Blake's first meeting, he came in and saw that someone was already in the room. Her hair was rimmed in sunlight again. Blake looked at Adria and then, with specific movements, sat down next to her. She blinked at him as he did, and then smiled.

She was so pretty, her peach lips full and curved upward, the smile framed in her white skin. The sun shone golden on the back of her head. If he'd been religious, Blake would have said she looked heavenly. He realized how little he knew about her. She was in two of his classes, he saw her after school practically every day at the Book Club, and she had continued to be his lab partner in Biology. He wondered how it was she remained so mysterious. He blinked and smiled as he realized people probably thought the same of him: the silent boy who was obviously here for a reason, but no one could figure out why.

Blake watched Adria as she returned to reading her book (this week it was *Eye of the World* by Robert Jordan; she went through at least a book a week). Whispers around the school said she was mentally ill, living in a world with centaurs and sorcerers. Supposedly she'd often asked people if they believed in alternate universes or whether they ever believed in the mythical. She'd requested room changes because she couldn't live with the three girls she'd tried rooming with already.

He didn't know if she was insane or just lost in a world that was easier to deal with than this one. He decided he didn't care. She was the only other one here that didn't seem to be *looking* for something. Something he doubted the rest of them could really find, at least, not where they were looking.

He wondered what made her so mysterious. There was something soft and graceful about everything she did. It made her stick out in the world of people rushing awkwardly to classes. But that wasn't what really made her weird. He didn't know what it was.

He started as the woman entered, power suit pressed as always, and heels clacking on the hard floor. Today's opening get-to-know-you topic was "comfort."

Blake, with a shrug, said, "Repetitive movements." A boy and a curvy girl laughed behind their hands. He rolled his eyes and said clearly, "Like ocean waves or a massage or the way a tree dances in a windy day." The silence got a little deeper in the room before the woman asked, "Would you mind telling us why, Blake?" It was the first time she'd pressed him for anything.

"You can get lost in the movements," he said immediately. "At first you realize nothing matters except the feeling, over and over. And then your mind unwinds and you calm down. And in that quiet you can think about

things, really think about them, and realize what the truth is." *Or at least I can.*

She nodded and turned her eyes to Adria, letting him off the spot. Adria said, as she usually did, "Books." There were shiftings among the other people, and Blake imagined that many of them were rolling their eyes.

He continued to watch the small blonde girl as the people after her gave their answers. She loved books so much. He wondered what their appeal was for her. He wondered how she found the energy to love them so much.

A movement in the corner of his eye caught his attention. He turned sharply in time to see a burly boy flash open a pocket knife. The students around him were gasping and shrieking, standing up and running. Blake felt lost at what had happened, but even without the details, Blake felt his heart speed up. The boy was looking over to Blake's side of the circle, he glanced over at Adria who was frozen in her seat, looking like an animal caught in a light.

Without thinking, Blake leapt out of his chair, grabbed Adria around her waist, and dragged her out of her seat. The boy followed, his eyes flat and dark. Blake carried Adria out of the door, hearing her paperback book fall to the ground with a distinct thump. He could feel her ribs beneath his arms, and he wondered if she could breathe with him holding her so tightly to his body.

Others, who had been closer to the door, had already opened it on their rush to run out. He rolled to the left side of the door, and dropped his arm. She seemed to still be stunned, so he picked her up again, arms under her waist and knees. He rushed to a stairway at the end of the hall, throwing the door open wide with his back. He went down a flight, and turned into the space under the staircase. He set Adria down, sitting next to her.

Her breathing was rapid, and after a moment she shuddered and pulled herself away from him, into the corner of the stairwell closest to the stairs, where she'd be least likely to be seen. Her back pressed to the corner, she pulled her knees up to rest her forehead on them. Blake watched the quick rise and fall of her back as she breathed and cried, shock fading into fear.

They stayed under the stairs, breathing fast as an alarm was announced for an emergency. They stayed together, surrounded by cold cement until the alarm stopped. They stayed for half an hour longer before Blake stood up and offered a hand up to Adria. They stood and walked out.

That night, his dreams started getting worse.

Supposedly, an administrator had talked the boy down before he had hurt anyone. He was sent home immediately and the school had to attend an assembly where the staff talked to them about the situation. Luckily the only

students who had come in direct contact with the incident were those in the Book Club already, so there was no need for extra students to join the traumatized group in their daily meetings.

Blake stood leaning against a wall, hands stuffed down pockets, shoulders against the wall and hips pressed out. He watched the people walk by with a level eye, hearing whispers about who the next to crack would be. A few days later the rumors started suggesting some names repetitively. Blake smiled as he heard his own name and Adria's get tossed around with three others.

In Biology class that afternoon, Blake flung himself into the chair next to Adria. Off handedly he said, "Half the student population has a bet on which of us is going to crack next. I think we should be getting royalties."

She laughed, the sound coming from deep in her chest. He felt his stomach clench and he turned, smiling at her. She was smiling crookedly, still laughing, though more lightly now.

Throughout lab that day, they cracked jokes back and forth, laughing behind their hands so that Dr. Levine wouldn't see. The jokes continued after class, and the two students started walking counter-clockwise around the campus's edge. The jokes morphed into a competition to come up with the most interesting way to have a mental breakdown.

He glanced over at her and realized some of the mysticism was melting away from her personality. He smiled, hands stuffed deep in his pockets.

On Saturday, Blake found her after breakfast. They went walking again, talking easily; neither broke the unspoken rule to not ask questions that they, themselves, couldn't answer.

He decided that now was a good time to ask her to explain her interest in books. She smiled, softly and slightly uncertainly. She searched the sky for a few moments before replying, "I can get lost in a world so different from this one, and defined by someone else. I don't have to do any of the thinking, I just put myself in the place of the main character and watch to see what happens." She looked back at Blake. "If that makes any sense at all."

He nodded. "It does."

They had wandered into a corner of the campus, where a collection of tall, healthy trees stood. Adria's eyes moved quickly, skimming the tree-tops.

"The trees are talking to me," she said quietly.

"Yes, they are," Blake replied, smiling. The sound of wind through trees had always relaxed him. He got lost in the sounds.

"They're telling me to come play with them." Her voice was higher than usual her eyes sharper. She tilted her head as she smiled at him, pulling

at his hand. "May I go play, Blake? May I?"

He laughed and nodded at her enthusiasm. Her hand slipped from his and she ran to the trunks and skipped around them.

He followed her. With a leap, he grasped a lower branch of the closest tree. He tugged himself onto it, balancing in a crouch. The wind which ruffled the trees played across his face.

"Yessir. . . . Two, sir," Blake heard Adria say at the base of the tree. He looked down and saw her staring at the tree's trunk. "When can I come back again, sir?"

Blake's smile slipped before he let himself drop into her game. He slid down from the branch, landing beside her. "We'll come back tomorrow and dance with the trees. How does that sound?"

Adria's eyes slid to focus on Blake. She blinked tightly, shaking her head slightly. She threw her hair back from her face with a flick. "Yes, Blake," she said quietly.

He walked back to the path, letting her follow before they started circling again.

One Friday, while Blake was eating dinner, his parents called. With the cold quiet of apathy, they told him they were getting a divorce. They both were going to file for sole custody. The decision would go to the courts. Voice cracking, he replied flatly, over and over again, "Right. . . . Yeah. . . . Ok."

He might end up living full time with only his father. He shivered at the thought. When his parents hung up, he went to take a shower. This time the water was hot and strong. Blake let it pound over him, trying to beat the thoughts from his head.\

When he came back to his room, his roommate said, smiling over his monitor screen, "You were in there so long I thought you were trying to drown yourself." Blake laughed with him, dressed, and left the room in a hurry.

This was the type of event the "Book Club" was for, the support group. Blake grimaced. He couldn't talk to any of them. Most of them were independent, they dealt with their hurts on their own. Most of them couldn't deal with the pressure, the overload, of knowing someone else's problems in addition to their own. Most of them didn't care about anyone else.

He started. Most of them weren't like Adria. He changed directions in mid step and rushed to her dorm complex. She wasn't inside, the girl who answered the door said. Blake nodded and sat down against the wall next to the door, a pooled shadow in the darkness.

Adria came by about ten minutes later, arms filled to the brim with books. He jumped up and she stepped back suddenly.

"It's just me," he said, wondering if she'd recognize his voice.

"Oh! Hey, Blake," she said, shifting her books.

His voice cracked and he asked, "Do you . . . do you have time? I need to talk."

Her voice was anxious as she said, "I don't think I have time, I—" She was looking at his eyes, and he stared deep into hers. She must have seen something because her voice changed and she said, "Sure. Can you wait long enough for me to put my books down in my room?" She was anxious again, but this time it was directed toward him.

He nodded and she said, watching him, "I'll be right back out."

As always, they walked around the edge of campus. The air was warm and there was a light breeze. Blake looked up through the trees and saw stars, more than he could usually see this far into a city. They talked lightly for a while, but he could tell she was on edge, waiting for whatever it was he had asked her to come away to talk about.

He slowly started telling her everything that had happened to him. He told her how he had felt, he told her his worries, he told her the hurts. He faltered several times when she gasped, but he kept going. He figured that if he was going to push her away, he might as well get everything off of his chest first. But she stayed with him. She asked questions gently, and walked next to him at the pace he set.

After half an hour of circling the school, they sat down next to a tree. She folded her legs close to her body and wrapped her arms around her legs. He leaned his back to the trunk, knees close and elbows resting on them. He placed his head in his palms, still talking. He faltered, feeling tears leak down his face.

"Blake?" she whispered softly. He lifted his head from his hands and turned to look at her.

With soft, gentle fingertips, she brushed his tears away. It was the first time she had touched him of her own accord. He looked at her, his thoughts forgotten for the moment. The harvest moon above them had turned her hair pale orange, her eyes were bright, watching him. He felt a strength in the way she held herself.

He leaned toward her slowly, watching her. Her hand trailed down from his cheek. He could feel her palm, warm where his neck met his shoulder. He moved his head closer to hers. Her lips were parted slightly, her chest rose and fell heavily, a bell on a chain around her neck tinkling lightly with the movement. He brought a hand up behind her. He touched her back softly, felt the cotton of her shirt before pressing gently against the skin underneath. She started, pulling away and standing up.

There were tears in her eyes now, her hands were shaking. He stood up quickly, walking toward her, but she stepped backwards.

"No," she gasped, "I can't. Blake, I can't."

He looked at her, confused. He didn't know what had happened. He didn't want to hurt her, though, and he nodded, stepping back from her. "I'm sorry."

She shook her head. "It's not you, it's just that I—" She stopped and shivered.

"Adria," he whispered, stepping closer slowly. "I'm not going to hurt you." She nodded and looked at him again. She reached out a quivering hand towards his cheek, but started pulling back before she had touched him. He reached out, quickly but gently, and held her wrist. He pulled her palm to his lips, kissing her hand gently. She sighed.

He sat down on the ground again, pulling her softly after him. She sat down, and he laid his head on her leg, looking at her to make sure she didn't disapprove. Her eyes were on him, open, just watching. He placed her hand on his chest and looked up at the stars.

The next day, he waited for her outside of her last class. She walked out of the classroom with her head down, books drawn tightly to her chest. He called out her name and she turned, eyes wide. She relaxed and smiled happily when she saw Blake.

He smiled in return. They walked to her dorm, so she could set her books down, before starting to circle the school again. Blake led, changing things by going in the opposite direction from usual. Her eyebrows came together for a moment before she nodded and followed.

He needed her, he realized suddenly. He needed her graceful assurance. The way they talked, back and forth without lag, let his thoughts slip away from the darkness they might have sunken into. And she certainly kept him from insanity from boredom. He kicked a rock off the path. Who would have thought that this sometimes meek girl would turn into his grounding post?

"What?" she asked suddenly, turning to look at him.

He glanced at her in confusion. "I didn't say anything."

She frowned. "No, you did. I know you did. I heard—" Her eyes slid past him, out of focus, looking far beyond him. "Oh." She tilted her head, and pulled her hair behind her ears. After a moment she turned back to the path and crossed her arms behind her back.

Blake turned; there wasn't anything on his other side, just an empty street.

"Are you ok?" he asked

"Hmm? Oh yeah, Blake. I'm fine." She smiled widely without turning to look at him.

He wondered what had happened. Confused, he cautiously tried to

start a normal conversation. She picked it up quickly in her usual fashion. She seemed to be the same again.

Two weeks later, she came looking for him. She was a mess: her t-shirt was too big, her jeans were grass stained, her hair was pulled back into a sloppy tail at her neck.

“Walk with me?” she asked him. He nodded and she started for the main building. They walked to it and then up the stairs to the roof. She sat on the floor of the roof, carefully redoing her hair. He knelt beside her.

“I . . . have a secret I’ve never told anyone before.”

“You can trust me.”

She nodded. “Do you trust me?”

“Of course.”

She stood up and took her hand in his. Following her, they walked to the edge of the roof. She looked at their positioning and switched sides with him, pausing before wrapping her right arm around his waist. He put his hand on her waist, but she moved it to her shoulder.

She looked at the horizon. “Close your eyes.”

He closed his eyes and after a moment he felt her arm on his waist pull him forward. His eyes flew open. “Wait! What’re we doing?”

She blinked at him, nervous. Her hand slid from his waist and she muttered, “Never mind.” She tried to walk out from his arm.

He hung on, using his other hand to put her arm around his waist again, and hold it there. “No, no! I’m sorry. I just . . . I didn’t think you were suicidal is all.”

She smiled. “I’m not, not really.” Her smile dropped. “You have to trust me.”

He nodded and closed his eyes again. This time when her arm guided him forward, he walked with her. With each step, though, he felt ahead to make sure there was a floor to stand on.

After close to a minute of walking like this, he heard her whisper, “You can open your eyes now.”

His eyes fluttered open against the bright sunlight and he looked out over the rooftop. Except, there wasn’t a roof to look out over. They were on a cliff, looking down at a tree-filled valley. There was a castle in the distance. He turned around. Adria looked different. Her eyes were lavender colored, and her hair had a blue tint. She was wearing a richly embroidered medieval style gown.

“You look different,” was all he could say. She smiled, then laughed. Her teeth were rather pointed.

“You should see yourself. Your hair is solid black and really fluffy. Your ears are pointed. And your hands—well you can see them.”

He looked down at his hands and saw sharp black nails. He flipped them over and rubbed them together. He had thick padding on his palms. He looked down at his clothes. He had a sleeveless tunic over a pair of tight pants. A belt was wrapped around his waist and his tennis shoes had been replaced with knee-high boots. His shadow in front of him caught his eye.

It was small, about the size of a soccer ball, and fluffy. It had a tail. It pounced his foot. His shadow pounced his foot.

Adria laughed, she must have been watching him. “Shadows turn into animals that represent the type of person you are. And you start to take on characteristics of that animal, too. I’m surprised you don’t have a cat’s tail in addition to the fur and claws.”

His eyes wide, he turned to look at her shadow. As much as his shadow was too small for him, Adria’s was too large for her. It had a spiked tail and a long neck; there were wings, too. “Uhh, so what’s yours?” he asked.

What looked like a shadow of smoke came out of her shadow’s mouth. Its head turned towards Blake.

Adria blushed. “Umm. I think it’s a dragon, actually.”

Blake’s eyes got wider. “Your spirit animal is a dragon?”

She laughed. “I guess you could put it that way.” She started shrugging out of her dress and Blake blushed and looked away. He heard her laughter again. “There’s a shift underneath. It’s easier to move around in, so I usually only wear that,” she explained.

“Oh.” Blake turned back to look at her. Her arms were bare, and he could see tiny scales that covered the backs of her arms and shoulders. They were white, but reflected blue and purple light.

She smiled and reached out a hand to run through his hair, before coming down and brushing his ears. Her touch felt weird, and Blake lifted a hand to his own ear, feeling it very pointed and tufted. He laughed. He reached out a hand to touch her scales, looking up at her and asking, “May I?”

She nodded, and he ran his hand across her arm, feeling the scales hard and smooth, the edges sharp. His hand moved to her shoulder, feeling the even smaller scales as they interlocked. His hand came behind her head. He brought his head close, watching her eyes. They danced with purple light and she leaned in to bring her lips to his. They kissed and pulled away. He looked at her, how happy she looked, and pulled her close again, pressing his tongue gently between her lips. He jumped pulling away, a cut on his tongue sharp and painful.

She laughed, managing to look apologetic at the same time. “Sorry . . . teeth.” She grinned again, showing off the pointed teeth. He laughed, and sucked on his tongue before pulling her close and kissing her on the lips again.

"Where is this place, anyway?" Blake asked.

"It's called Ereadhain. Would you like to see more?" He smiled at her eagerness and nodded.

She walked up behind him, crossing her arms across his chest, like a siren. He felt her hug him close and heard a whooshing noise. He looked over his shoulder and saw wings unfurling from somewhere on her back. Then, suddenly, they were in the air.

They didn't stay in the air long, but long enough for Blake to think he must be tripping on something. He'd seen unicorns, and dryads, and a real dragon, and the castle they passed had been emptying of finely dressed men and women as they went by. Everything seemed straight out of a fairy tale.

After close to fifteen minutes of flying, Adria set Blake down on the soft bank of a river. She hovered for a moment, rising and falling half a foot with every beat of her green wings. Then she propelled herself two feet forward, closing her wings and falling into the river with a large splash.

Adria's body went completely underwater and after a moment she came spiraling out of it, the spray showering Blake a second time. He laughed and slipped out of his boots. She splashed him as he tested the sun-warmed water.

He crouched at the edge of the river, ears pricked forward and eyes wide. He bent his knees and leapt forward. He landed squarely on Adria, curving his hands carefully over her shoulders and wrapping his legs around hers. He knocked her knees out from under her and she fell with a shriek under the water.

Blake let go and surfaced again, running his hands quickly over his hair and ears to flick the water off of his fur. She came up after him, swimming off backwards away from him, before kicking water at him. They continued splashing each other until the sun was starting to drift down behind the horizon of trees.

"How do we make sure we're back on campus in time?"

Adria looked at him, confused for a moment. Then she blinked, realizing why he was asking. "Time here is a little bit faster than over there. In order to be on campus before sunset, we only have to leave by the time it's completely dark over here."

"Ah," Blake replied. "And I bet there's a wonderful story behind you finding that out, isn't there?"

Adria bit her bottom lip, something flickered in her eyes, and she shivered. "'Interesting' might be a better word," she told him in a monotone voice. After a moment, she started wading toward the shore.

"Adria?" he asked as she reached the bank and stepped heavily across the sand, her water soaked clothes sticking to her skin. She paused, not turning to look at him.

"Adria?" he repeated. He started walking toward her. With a jerk, she turned around, a slight smile on her face.

"Should we go back soon? You're probably tired. . . ."

Blake finished walking to her, hugged her, and said, "Sure. And aren't you tired, too?"

Her smile widened. "I could stay here for the rest of my life." The wistful sound in her voice made Blake certain of this statement.

Still in the hug, she brought her arms tightly around him and kicked off from the ground. She flew them both back to the cliff top.

She slipped back into the medieval gown before wrapping an arm around his waist. With her other hand, she brushed his face, closing his eyes. They walked forward again, and when Adria told him he could look, they were back on the rooftop.

They stayed up on the roof until the sun set, coloring the sky purple and red.

Adria took Blake back to Ereadhain every day after school. Each day she flew him farther away from the cliff. He loved how happy she looked as they caught glimpses of water nymphs, as she cautiously stroked the golden fuzz of a young griffin, and as they swam awkwardly with a pod of mermaids. And she was happier on campus, too. She relaxed around Blake and talked more freely with him than she used to.

He was starting to fall in love with the land. Each time he came back to the world, his cat characteristics were increased. He soon had whiskers and he noticed that he could see better at night—when they stayed late—than he thought he should be able to.

One Friday, about a week later, she took him to the flatlands in the west, hoping to catch a glimpse of unicorns. They stayed late, the thumbnail moon was about the only light they had. But it was worth it; she was smiling widely, and her cheeks were flushed as she picked Blake up to fly back to the cliff.

When they landed again, there was a group of five men waiting there. Adria stepped quickly in front of Blake, her wings folding back to her shoulder blades, in the same way her legs folded close to her when she sat in chairs.

"Hello again, Adria," the man in front said. He was tall and muscular. His eyes were red and his hair black. He had no animal characteristics. He was definitely human. He had a whip at his hip. He took a step closer. "It's been so long since you've played with us."

Adria was shivering, leaning backwards, but trying to not move, as she'd only push Blake backwards off the cliff.

"Who are they, Adria?" Blake asked.

The man looked at Blake, laughed and, looking at Adria, asked, "Is this your knight in shining armor come to rescue you? I don't think he'll be very much help." He stepped forward, pulling the whip out.

Blake pushed Adria aside, catching the cracking whip with his hands, slicing through it with shining black claws. A second man came at Blake with a long cane, while the first man leaped at Adria, pinning her to the ground. Blake saw him punch her once before she got an arm free, at which point Blake had to focus on his own fighter. He left three neat scratches across the man's face before he got the cane from him and knocked him out.

He looked around and saw two men holding Adria to the ground while the leader ran a hand down her body. Blake ran at him, swung the cane like a bat, and hit the man over the head. The wooden cane snapped, but the man fell to the ground with a heavy thump.

Blake threw the wooden pieces aside, then leaped on the next man, clawing at his neck. After a moment, he felt Adria's hand on the collar of his shirt, pulling him away, and then they were running for the rock face at the other end of the opening from the cliff.

"Close your eyes," she yelled, still running. He closed his eyes, feeling only her hand on his arm. And then they were walking again, and then they were stopping, and she told him to open his eyes.

They had come back to the roof.

A teacher approached Adria the next day, first thing in the morning. "Where'd you get those bruises from?" the teacher asked Adria, glancing suspiciously at Blake who was hovering at Adria's shoulder.

Adria gingerly touched her black eye. "Oh, we were up on the roof last night." Adria's voice was bright and cheery. "Me being a clumsy oaf, I tripped on my own feet. The, uh . . . roof railing broke my fall."

Even Blake couldn't tell she was lying; her voice was thick with mixed amusement and disappointment in herself. The teacher laughed, patted her arm—Blake saw Adria flinch—and told her to feel better soon.

After they'd moved a good distance away, Blake asked, "What really happened last night?" He'd avoided asking her for an explanation the night before—Adria was too shaky and distraught for him to make her think about the incident again, so soon.

She stopped walking. After a shuddering breath, her reply was: "You were there. You saw what. . . . You saw."

"But who were those men? How did they know you?"

Adria walked over to a bench and sat down. She buried her head in her hands before saying through her fingers, "The big one, the leader, is Bitten. When I was looking at Ereadhain one of the first times I went, I stumbled

into their camp. Bitten . . . pinned me and started . . . playing with me. They let me go when I was too bruised to be any more fun to them. But someone must have followed me, because later they'd show up where I entered the world." Adria shrugged. She lifted her head and smiled tiredly at Blake. "That's one of the reasons why my parents sent me here—they thought I kept getting into fights."

Blake stared at Adria in horror. "How often are they there?"

She shrugged, losing eye contact. "About one in four times I go, I'd guess."

"Adria!" Blake gasped. He almost reached for her shoulders before he remembered her space issue. He was horror stricken. He couldn't understand why she'd keep going back when she knew she was going to get hurt. "Why . . . why do you keep going back?"

She turned to him, eyes wide. "Blake, it's . . . it's my world. It's where I belong."

That was the first moment that Blake felt he couldn't understand the short, pale girl beside him.

The semester changed and Blake and Adria ended up with no classes together. Blake kept coming to Adria to take her walking around the school, but she would always have to slip off after less than an hour. It seemed that she had more work to do than usual, and that she wasn't getting enough sleep, and that she disliked staying outside in the cold weather, and she was trying harder than usual to deal with her newest roommate, or her parents.

Blake felt her slipping away from him. He was forgetting what about her had shone so brightly in the sunlight.

One day, he didn't go find her after her last class. He had to know if she would come looking for him, or if she was gone completely. He sat on the cold concrete sidewalk, in plain view of most people. She didn't come looking for him.

After waiting for an hour, Blake raised his body up slowly, hearing parts crack and feeling muscles cramp. His cold hands were stuffed deep into his pockets. He walked back to his dorm with his head down and feet dragging.

That night, his roommate shook him awake at about two am. Apparently Blake had been screaming so loudly that it had woken up his normally dead asleep roommate. After a moment, Blake had calmed down enough to slap a smile on his face and say, "Must have been a nightmare. Probably a good thing I can't remember what it was about."

His roommate nodded and fell back on his bed, asleep and snoring in minutes. Blake sat on his own bed, shaking, still feeling the hands on his

body mixed with dreamed bruises and the feel of ropes.

Warm weather finally came. The windows in every classroom were thrown wide open, as the school didn't have air conditioning. Everyone had arrived at the Book Club that day before Blake even looked up. Adria was sitting across the circle, *The Wind Singer* by William Nicholson clutched in her hand resting on top of her jeans.

Since the day that Blake stopped coming to find her, Adria had kept far away from him at the Book Club. He hadn't once seen her look at him. He arched his back, stretching, and told himself that it didn't matter.

The room was stifling, no one could figure out how to open the skylight, so it acted almost with a greenhouse effect. With a start, Blake looked over at Adria, stopping in the middle of fanning himself with his shirt.

The blonde girl was wearing long sleeves and pants. He couldn't believe her. Sure she liked being warm, but it felt like a rainforest; Blake doubted that she wanted to be that hot.

He couldn't concentrate the entire meeting, he kept looking back over at her as if she would suddenly disappear while he wasn't looking.

When the meeting ended, everyone stood up and trudged to the door. Blake followed in similar form, keeping Adria in sight, but not reach. She left the room and then left the building. Blake rushed up to her and grabbed her wrist.

He led her to a deserted side of the building. He turned to face her and pulled her shirt sleeve up. Her arm was covered in bruises.

She yanked her arm from him, pulling the sleeve down again and looking away.

"You can't go back," he whispered, desperately.

She looked up sharply at him. "Do you remember what it's like?" she asked. "There were dragons, Blake! Real dragons! There were unicorns and talking animals. It was what I've always dreamed."

"But they hurt you there," he whispered. "Please, come back."

"I'm here now, aren't I?" she asked bitterly.

Throwing caution aside, he gently grabbed both of her arms. "Come back here," he touched her forehead, "and here," he placed his hand on her chest, over her heart. She looked up at him, startled. "You always think about being there, and so you never really come back."

He felt her body shake.

Adria started seeking Blake out and going for walks again. She adamantly refused to pay attention to his warnings and questions about why she kept going back. Somehow they easily slipped back into the friendship they'd had before, though Blake felt cautious, as if it would break again if he said

the wrong thing.

He asked one day if he could go back with her again to Ereadhain. She looked at him, uncertainty in her face, but she nodded, and they turned to the main building.

As they stepped along the roof, Adria took hold of his elbow, and they walked forward. He opened his eyes as bright light hit his eyelids. This time she didn't have to tell him when they were there.

He looked at her, it was the first time he'd seen her smiling since the last day he'd come to Ereadhain. The scales he'd seen on her before reached down to her hands now, and brushed her neck softly. She looked odd, shimmering in the sunlight. He shook his head.

"You're beautiful," he whispered. Her eyes widened and a blush colored her high cheeks.

After a moment she cleared her throat and started walking down a path to the left. He followed and soon found himself in a small clearing. The wind whistled through the trees and he could see bright blue berries on the other side. He smiled at her and passed her, going to eat some of the ripe berries.

Soon he realized that Adria hadn't followed him over. He turned, saying "Adria, you should have some; they're wonderful." He stopped suddenly as he realized that there wasn't anyone in the clearing.

He felt his heart speed up in his chest. "Adria!" he cried into the silence of the forest. "Adria?"

There was no answer. He couldn't hear anything, no rustle of leaves, no whisper of breath. She was gone without a trace.

He rushed over to the side of the clearing that he had left her at. Scared that she was missing, he rushed back along the path, hoping she was back at the cliff. He turned and turned again and . . . realized he was lost. "Damn-it!" He slammed his fist into an oak tree's trunk and he felt the bark dig into his skin.

He'd failed her. He could have protected her, but while he wasn't paying attention the men must have come and taken her away. Tears leaked down his face as he screamed, "Adria!" But of course she didn't answer. He shivered and decided the best thing to do would be to try to go back to the cliff, because she would come back there eventually.

It took him at least two hours of wandering, but he finally found it. His tears had stopped, but his heart was still racing. He sat on the ground and tried to force his thoughts to calm, like he did after a bad night. His eyes slid closed, and his breathing slowed. He felt the pounding of his heart fade to a steady beating.

Breathing in deeply through his nose, he smelled something odd. He turned his head, letting his nose follow the smell. Apparently his cat senses had gotten even better. He knew what the smell was, it was the men. It

smelled of sweat and leather. He could feel anger and malice.

Blake scrambled up and walked in the direction of the smell, speeding up as he grew more confident that he wouldn't lose it. Five minutes later his ears pricked forward to collect the sound of sobbing. He ran as fast as he could, bursting through trees and bushes which caught at his skin, tearing it viciously.

He slid to a halt as he suddenly burst from trees into a permanent-looking campsite. Adria was staked to the dirt floor in the very center. The leader—Bitten—was sitting straddle on her, one hand on the back of her neck, the other holding a nasty looking knife. There were three other men that Blake could see.

The closest man came at Blake with an axe. Blake glanced around, terrified, and saw a javelin. The long stick felt awkward in his hands, and he didn't dare throw it in case he missed. Blake crouched as the man came closer. At the last minute before the axe fell, Blake leapt forward and hit the legs of the man. The man fell backward, caught off balance. As Blake stepped past him he smelled alcohol.

Blake picked up the recently discarded axe and stepped forward to the other two men—Bitten was still amusing himself with Adria. The two men looked at each other and the one on the right whispered to the other before taking off running to the back of the camp. The one remaining yelled something at him, but turned back to Blake, wisely deciding he shouldn't leave his back exposed.

Blake glared at him, leapt to the right, swinging the axe awkwardly. As soon as he landed, he leapt again, landing behind the man. Blake didn't have time to be astonished with his cat-like agility, but quickly struck with the broad side of the axe, hitting the man's head. He fell like a rock.

That left Bitten. Blake turned, hatred filling his entire being. The man had finally stood up, smiling sarcastically at Blake. Behind him, Blake could see Adria. Her clothes were ripped and hanging off her in patches.

"You should not have touched her," Blake whispered, malice in his voice. The man laughed.

Blake leaped at him, claws coming across from above at the man's head. They were blocked by the knife, as a fist from the man came up from below and caught Blake's stomach. Blake fell backward, winded.

He stood up quickly and rushed at the man. Blake feinted the same blow as before, at the last moment twisting his wrist to knock the knife out of the man's hand.

That done, Blake leaped at him. His claws found skin in the man's chest, and all ten nails went into Bitten. The man screamed and Blake bit his neck, feeling sharp teeth slice through skin. Blake stepped back, spitting blood out. The man looked terrified at him, and took off running.

Blake collapsed onto his knees beside Adria. Up close he could see that her hair was a mess of twigs and leaves. She had scales missing, and the rest were dirt streaked. The wing on the opposite side from Blake was unfurled and limp. Blake could see way too much blood for his liking.

She was breathing sharp and fast. Her eyes didn't focus on him and she was mumbling. He sliced the ropes tying her to the ground and picked her up gently, holding her close. Glancing around to make sure there were no obstacles in the way, he went running out of the camp.

Adria was muttering, shifting suddenly to look in front of, then behind Blake. "No, no I don't want to." She sounded so young, like a child who was scolded. "Please don't. I don't want to." Blake was starting to worry about her. "No, no. I'm not a bad person. . . . I'm sorry! I'm sorry. Please don't punish me! No, no, it's not like that."

Blake had reached the cliff. He closed his eyes and walked forward cautiously. His hands hit wall. He hadn't gone back, only walked into the cliff face.

His breath hitched as he wondered what had happened. Was it only Adria who could open it? "He told me I couldn't! I didn't want to. I'm sorry I was bad! Please, please, I don't understand what you want." Adria sobbed into Blake's shirt, pawing at his chest with loosely clinched fists. The ring on her left hand caught the light and sent it sparking off again.

On a whim, Blake shifted, waiting until her flailing arms came back, and gently caught her wrist. She tried to jerk it from his hand, but he tightened his grip. "Please don't punish me! I know I did wrong. I know it's my fault. I'll go away, just don't hurt me."

Blake pulled the ring off her finger and let her wrist go. "No, don't leave me. Don't leave me alone again!" Adria shrieked.

He slipped the ring onto his smallest finger—it barely fit. He backed up again, closed his eyes, slipped his own hand over Adria's struggling head, and walked forward. After a few moments, longer than he had walked before, he opened his eyes and saw the school.

Adria was still struggling in his arms, and he set her down gently. She curled into a ball still crying and begging. Blake sat beside her. He pulled her head to his chest, wrapping his arms around her stomach, trying to surround her by curving his shoulders.

She struggled, and he held her tighter. Her movements were so weak and slow. It felt like she wasn't trying at all, but the way she was calling made it seem like she had nothing left.

"Adria, I'm here. I'm here. It's me, Blake."

"Blake? No, you can't be Blake. Make him go away now. I don't want him to lie. No don't say you're going to leave me with him!"

"Adria," he tried to sound comforting but he was worried about her

and his voice shook slightly. "Adria, it is me. I'm here; I'm real. Hear me, feel me. I'm here. Come back, please. Look at me?"

Adria was shaking her head slightly, looking around nervously.

Blake brought his head close to her ear and whispered, "Adria, my dragon, I'm here. I'll keep you safe, just listen to me."

"Blake? Blake?"

"Yes! I'm here."

"He is Blake!" Her voice turned shrill again. "He's not the man. Don't tell me he is, I know he's not!"

"Adria, listen to me. I'm here. There's no one else. You're back at the school. I'm here."

"Blake?" She paused, and then suddenly her eyes slipped to his face and focused on him. He smiled, and stroked her hair with one hand. She looked at him, terror on her face, before collapsing onto his chest and crying. He held her and stroked her while she did, not saying anything just letting her relax.

Adria looked up, her eyelashes thick with tears. "I'm not insane, Blake. . . . I'm not, am I?"

Blake wrapped his arms tighter around her, trying to send the message that he wasn't invading her space, that he was holding her to let her feel him there.

Adria struggled weakly against his arms for a moment before letting her head fall back onto his chest, her thin hands grasping his shirt.

"They told me I'm schizophrenic. But I'm not." Her voice was desperate as she sought his confirmation. She looked up at him, her eyes bright as she searched his. "They're real, Blake. I hear them, and they're there. You've seen them. I'm not crazy." Her head fell to his chest again. "I'm not. Tell me I'm not."

He held her closer, arms warm and tight around her shoulders and across her back, feeling her back jerk with her ragged breathing. He didn't know what to say. Yes, he had been to the other world. But then what had just happened now. She was talking to people who weren't there. He tightened his arms around her before whispering into her silken strands of hair, as they clung to his face, "I don't know. I have seen some, but . . . there are times when I can't go with you. Sometimes I'm not where you are."

Her breathing hitched and he continued to hold her as she cried again, in shuddering sobs. He couldn't explain it away; he couldn't keep her trust and tell her what she wanted at the same time. The sound of her muffled wails drifted up to him, pulling at his guilt and making large drops fall from his own eyes onto her shining hair.

Some time later he started whispering in her ear again. "I am your knight. I will always be here for you. There is magic in this world too." He

kissed her on cheek, and turned her head to kiss her mouth. "As sappy as it sounds, love is magic. And I love you. I need you. I need you here with me."

She wrapped her own arms around him, eyes closed and relaxed. "I need you, too," she whispered.

He told her, "Welcome back."



Of Sirens and Silkies

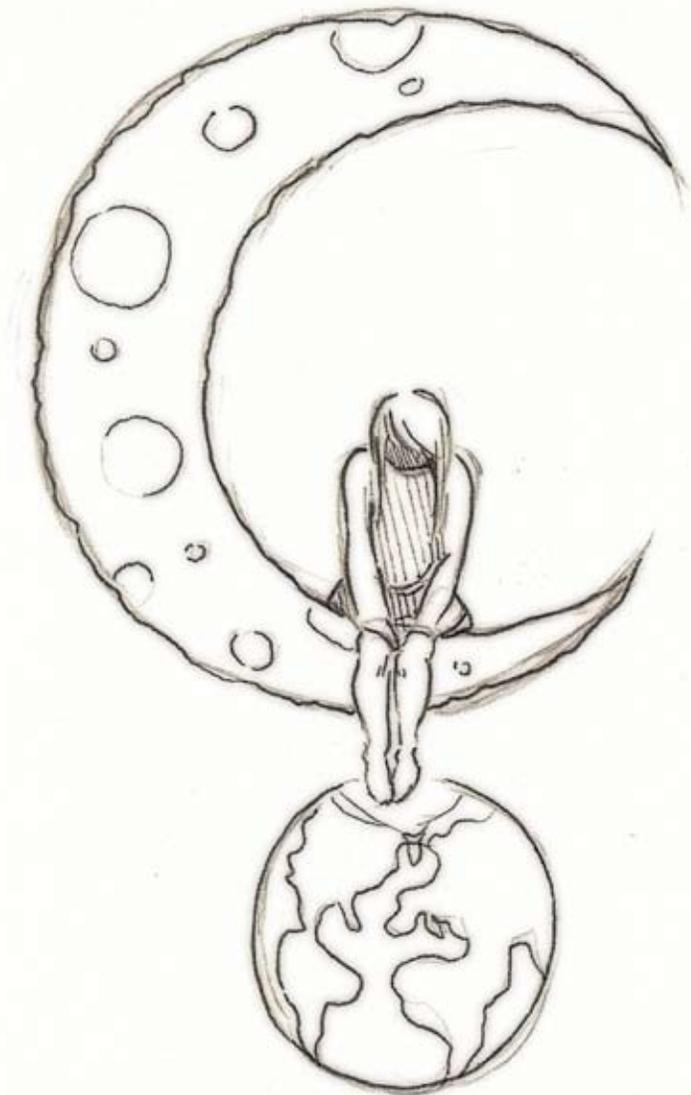
by Bryn A. McDonald

there's a girl on the moon
and she's been lost up there for years.

by Daniel Kessler

It was her birthday when gravity reversed.
Waving past the window counting
cloudy white heads that jumped the fence that
fell in when so many jumped it.
And she went with the stars, the hundreds,
migrating East the orbiting blue.
She is easy to find if you know her rotation.
Times you spot her tied by the wrist
to a strawberry zeppelin, kiting the surface
in search of home. Others she waits
her feet in the emptied out oceans.
But the waves place in like atoms:
disperse (just once) into novas like rains
that drop, deliver Sospita.
Rockets and stars have gone over.
Tears of Saint Lawrence, seven cycles and
in two hundred years will be statues
(commemorating) the time
the moon buggy came, photographed
the rock, flew off the sand and there she
waded after, by second becoming smaller.

She's twelve now inhabiting the left eye.
We give baskets in
brown cardboard. There's enough.
Soon she'll have grown and be able
to pick from the lunar branches
and bathe all her own in the lunar waters
and orbit, too, and levitate in the cradle of space,
(fearless) too. With milky ways on top.
The forests and cities and oceans
out there.



by Sam Conroy



by EJ Landsman

Shadows

by Edward Allen Underhill

Part Four: The White Sorceress

A fiery explosion ripped through the warehouse. Amos landed behind one of the beams braced between the floor and the ceiling, and kept rolling, before he could stop himself, until he finally got a hand against the floor.

A wave of heat and smoke billowed over him.

"My dear Mr. Christopher!" The low throaty voice echoed in the rafters. "Why don't you tell me exactly why a certain daemon seems to be hanging around with you? You don't really want things to get dangerous, do you?"

Amos coughed. He was shaking, and he couldn't seem to stop. He pushed himself up, blinking tears from his eyes in the slowly clearing smoke.

Sirius. She knew about Sirius. Why? How?

Who was she?

He staggered as another deep pulse of pain went through his chest.

She wasn't a demon. She wasn't anyone possessed by a demon.

He leaned against the closest beam and looked around. The fireball seemed to have vanished without leaving any damage behind.

Maybe that would be true . . . if she conjured another one . . . maybe there was a chance . . .

He leaned cautiously around the beam. The woman had her back to him. She was looking up, looking around the roof of the building, as if she was waiting for something.

Even in the dim light, he caught the faint glimmer of silver on the floor. It was almost twenty feet away.

He drew a shallow breath, winced, and ran.

As if she didn't even have to look, the woman whirled a hand.

Amos felt it. Her hand, as if it had grown in size, a giant invisible hand that he couldn't see, but he could feel, wrapped around his body, stopping him in his tracks.

* This piece is the fourth in an eight part series. Please read the last three issues of *Spiral* for the other parts.

She turned. A crack of light from the ceiling caught a glitter in her glassy eyes.

Then Amos was lifted off the ground and hurled backwards into the air. He felt the hand let go, twisting him around . . .

He landed on his face.

For a moment, he couldn't breathe at all. Then he gasped, and his breath came rushing back.

"I'm terribly sorry, Mr. Christopher."

Her voice was floating toward him—floating *up* . . .

He got an arm under him, shaking.

A deep, dull pain raked through the right side of his head.

He reached up a hand. His fingers came away with blood on them.

"I don't have the best aim in the world . . ."

He slowly started to push himself up.

The floor moaned.

He froze.

He wasn't on the first floor. He hadn't fallen far enough. He was on the rickety balcony of half-rotten wooden planks that formed a partial second floor.

Below him, the woman sighed. "You know, all this formality is getting tedious. Why don't I just call you Amos?"

Amos carefully straightened up. His knee nearly buckled under him, but he caught himself in time.

There had to be a stairway, a ladder, something.

Through a gap in the planks under his feet, he could see the ground . . . maybe it was twenty feet below him . . . maybe it was more . . .

"Are you going to tell me where that loyal sidekick of yours is?"

Amos turned to look down at her, staring up at him from the first floor. He backed farther away, farther into the shadows of the rickety balcony. He only needed to get somewhere where this woman couldn't see him. He couldn't do anything remotely powerful without the pentacle, but he might have enough time to do something . . . something small, just to be a diversion . . .

"No," he said. "I don't know where he is."

"That is not really an acceptable answer." She raised her hand. Her long white sleeve glimmered.

Amos looked up in time to see the fireball form on her hand. He threw himself sideways.

The crackling fireball went spinning past him, so close that he could feel its heat on his face.

With an explosion, it slammed into the rickety floor planks.

This time, it didn't disappear. It burst into a bubble of rippling flames,

licking around the dry planks. Thick black smoke curled into the air.

Amos coughed. He had to move. He had to do something.

But everything was starting to blur into a reddish haze, and he could barely breathe around the pain in his chest.

She wanted Sirius.

He wiped blood from his eye and tried to push himself up.

He heard a creak. And then a crack.

The boards beneath him gave way.

When he hit the floor, far below him, he lost track of everything. It couldn't have been for more than a moment. Then he was able to breathe, gasping, and he could see again. The balcony and the smoke and the flames swam above him.

He tried to focus. Sirius . . . this all had something to do with Sirius . . .

His eyes widened, and he forced himself to move . . . just enough to roll over, curl up, and put his arms over his head.

Fiery, smoking planks clattered down around him.

He couldn't stay here. The entire balcony could come down.

He pushed himself up and staggered away from the smoldering wood around him. For a while, he could barely see. And then he was past the smoke and the fire, and he saw the woman in white standing in front of him.

There was the faintest hint of a smile playing around her lips.

She held out a hand. Another ball of flames collected on her palm.

And then several things happened at once.

A second wave of pain shot through Amos's chest. He stumbled. His vision swam.

Somewhere, high above him, there was a *crash*. A rustle.

And then an enormous force hit him from the side.

Instead of hitting Amos, the fireball came up against the glowing end of Sirius's staff.

It crackled, fizzed, and then puffed out.

The woman in white smiled. "Well," she said, "you always did have a secret love of dramatic entrances."

Amos slowly pushed himself up, again. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he wondered vaguely whether he should even bother. Based on recent patterns, something would surely knock him over again soon enough.

In the end, it didn't matter, because Amos couldn't get up anyway. He got as far as leaning on an elbow, blinked away a haze of sweat, dust, and blood, and looked up.

Standing in the center of the floor, breathing heavily, wings out and staff raised, was Sirius.

The woman in white looked up toward the ceiling. "I guess I really

shouldn't have put plunging straight through a roof past you . . ."

Amos forced himself to focus and looked around for his silver chain.

"Although I have to say you're a little later than I would like . . ."

Sirius lowered his staff, barely. "You are not a demon."

Her eyebrows rose. "No. But I thought you knew that."

Sirius said nothing.

The woman laughed—an empty, hollow laugh. "What type of game are you playing at? You can't possibly mean that you really don't remember who I am? That's rather an insult."

Sirius gripped his staff tighter. "What do you want with Amos?"

"The little pipsqueak over there? Nothing!" Her eyes narrowed. "But . . . he's the one that unsealed you. My, my. So weak, and yet he actually broke through a Seal made by the great Demon Hunter from the East. He found you and broke your Seal, something even I could not do."

Sirius's hands slipped on his staff. "Who are you?"

"That's a rather complicated question." A thin smile lifted one corner of her mouth. "Then I was known as the White Sorceress. Names get boring after a few decades; it's not as though I've particularly held onto one." Her empty blue eyes focused on him. "Don't you remember? The cities we destroyed, the magical battles we won, the demons we killed, the people we killed . . ."

Something flashed through Sirius's mind—quick, bright, and painful. A face—the face in front of him—when the hair had been rich and dark, the eyes a less glassy shade of blue . . .

"And now here you are. And here I am." A fierce smile split her face. "Let's see how much you've changed, shall we?"

She raised her hands above her head. Between them, a whirling white light appeared. She swept her hands through the air.

"Sirius!" Amos cried.

Sirius moved his staff too late. A streak of lightning sizzled through the air, catching him in the chest, and hurling him backwards. His wings beat, and he rose above the fire slowly spreading through the warehouse. A second blast rushed toward him. His wings beat again, carrying him sideways, and the streak rushed past him.

"Have you really forgotten what you were?" the Sorceress shrieked above the crackle and hiss of flames. "You were mine! Bound to me, to my orders! Connected to me!"

Sirius whirled his staff. A third bundle of lightning bounced off its glowing end, spiraling away into the air. An invisible force grabbed him, jerking him, and sent him spinning away across the length of the warehouse in a tangle of feathers and useless wings.

Amos forced himself to move. He pushed himself up on shaking arms

and pulled himself slowly, painfully, toward the chain still lying on the floor. Sirius hit the far wall. Something else flashed through his mind: a low, throaty voice, sharp nails breaking his skin . . .

"You could have stayed with me forever!" she screamed. "When I found a way to avoid death, when I was no longer really human, you could have stayed with me! You would have stayed with me!"

A man with dark eyes, a wizened face, a silver chain . . .

A silver chain . . .

The edges of a stone tablet sliding together in front of his eyes . . .

Sirius flapped his wings, rising higher. He whirled his staff above his head and swept it through the air, sending a bolt of blue lightning snaking toward the Sorceress.

She swept it away with a hand.

"You expect to defy me? You expect to win against someone like me?" Her long white dress glimmered orange in the firelight. "You can't fight what you are!"

She swept a pale hand through the air and a second invisible force slammed into Sirius, hurling him back in the other direction. Again his wings caught him. But before he could recover, a blast of lightning hit him in the chest, propelling him backward into a beam.

Amos's fingers finally closed around the chain.

Another blast slammed into Sirius, and another, and he tumbled to the ground. Stray feathers scattered around him.

"Weak." The Sorceress slowly walked toward him. "You're weak without me. I've searched these years for you—these hundreds of years—putting up with this disappointing world. I meant to free you from your Seal, so you could be mine again. But now you've forgotten."

Sirius looked up.

"You're weak and useless. Useless to me. You really have forgotten."

Sirius knew, somewhere, that he should be trying to run. But he couldn't make himself move, or start to get up.

And maybe he didn't want to . . .

The Sorceress was still out of reach of the fire's heat or the billowing smoke. She raised her hands above her head, and between them, a white sphere began to swirl . . .

Amos pushed himself up and ran.

The white sphere swirled faster, and then stretched into a stream—a crackling white stream—and rushed toward Sirius.

Amos skidded in front of it.

Bang.

A giant white explosion shook the warehouse. The boards over the windows blasted outward in a crash of splintering wood. The ground shook.

Several holes ripped up through roof.

And then it faded. The sudden wind died away, the light faded, and the smoke slowly cleared.

The Sorceress lowered her arm from shielding her eyes and looked up. Her eyes widened.

Glimmering in front of her was a large, round force field, a glowing blue shield nearly ten feet wide and just as tall.

Sirius blinked smoke from his eyes. "Amos?" It was barely a whisper.

Behind the shield, Amos's feet were braced against the floor, his hands clasped up at its center, his head hanging down. He hadn't even had time to steeple his fingers. He was leaning against the shield, the silver chain dangling from his hands.

His foot slipped.

Sirius's breath caught.

A crack ran through the shield, and then it shattered, erupting into hundreds of tiny sparkles that spiraled away into the air.

The chain slipped through Amos's fingers. For a moment he swayed, and then his knees gave way and he fell backwards.

"Amos!" Sirius choked.

The sparkles slowly dissipated in the smoky air.

Amos opened his eyes.

"Amos!"

A voice, close to his ear. Sirius's voice. Sirius had caught him. They were sitting on the floor—he could feel Sirius's heartbeat behind him, and one of Sirius's arms across his chest, the other around his waist.

"Oh, good," he whispered. "You're all right."

And then he fainted.

"Well." The Sorceress's footsteps echoed hollowly above the crackle of flames. "Isn't he just the stupidest person you've ever met?"

Sirius didn't look at her. He couldn't. All he could look at was the gash on Amos's forehead, trickling blood down the side of his face. He had called Amos a sack of flour when they had flown to the cliff near the lake. But he was so thin . . . so small and slight . . .

"I thought even he would be smarter than this." The Sorceress's footsteps stopped. "You do realize what you can do now, don't you?"

The silver chain was still twined in Amos's fingers. It must have gotten tangled there.

"He's unconscious. He can't even put up a fight."

Sirius's eyes turned slowly to the hem of the white dress in front of him.

The flames had reached the drier walls of the warehouse.

"Don't you want your freedom?" The glow was turning the white dress

dimly orange. "You know how to gain it, don't you? It wouldn't work if anyone else did it. I couldn't do it. But you . . . you can kill him, and break your contract."

Sirius's eyes rose to her face.

"He didn't put a real binding spell on you." Her glassy eyes glowed orange, too. "You don't have to do every tiny thing he tells you to. It means you can still kill him. You can't run away from what you are, Sirius: a daemon. Not one of the *possessed* kind, not one of the harmless *silly* demons, but an Old One, a powerful one . . . one that wasn't meant to exist with humans."

Something flashed through Sirius's mind. But it wasn't something he'd lost.

It was a small, round, smiling face, bobbing pigtails, and small hands, holding out a teacup.

"You are meant to exist with me, someone who has transcended the ties of human existence, someone who can be with you forever. You remember me now, don't you? The way you were mine?" She knelt down in front of him. "Humans and those like you cannot exist together. What you are feeling . . ." She smiled. "Do you think it's real attachment? You barely know what you are, what you used to be. But I can tell you. I can show you. You can go back to what you were, with me, the way you were meant to be."

Sirius's eyes turned back to the silver pentacle and the chain still wound in Amos's fingers.

"It's what you want."

The roof above them creaked. A wooden beam cracked, and a piece of flaming timber fell from the ceiling, hitting the floor with a crash.

The Sorceress didn't blink. "You don't have a lot of time." It was a barely a whisper. "You can feel the smoke in your lungs . . . It will kill him faster. And if he dies that way, you know the contract will be binding forever. You'll never be free."

A second timber crashed from the ceiling.

"There are no answers here. You don't want this. This is nothingness, emptiness."

Sirius held out a hand, turning it palm upward. Sparkles glimmered gold, slowly materializing into his staff.

The Sorceress straightened.

Sirius turned the staff slowly. The sphere on its end glowed in the firelight.

The Sorceress stepped away.

Sirius looked up. There were holes in the roof, high above him—the one he had made crashing through, and those made by the explosions. They were flickering mirages in the rolling black smoke, but he could still see that

the sky outside had turned dark—dark and clouded . . .

He looked down . . . turned the staff over in his hands . . . until the sphere rested against Amos's chest . . .

The Sorceress smiled.

The sphere started to glow red.

Flames roared up the walls.

Sirius looked up.

Then he swept his staff through the air, swinging it around, and a streak of red lightning exploded from the end, blasting straight toward the Sorceress.

Her eyes widened. She raised a hand.

Sirius gripped his staff, held Amos against him, and pushed off.

A bright red explosion shook the warehouse, but Sirius was ahead of it, flying straight upward. He shot through one of the holes in the rooftop and out into the sky beyond.

On the warehouse floor below, the red light slowly faded. The Sorceress lowered her hand, peering upward through the flames clawing toward the ceiling.

"You do remember," she whispered. "There's no turning back."

She closed her eyes, smiled, and, with a snap of her fingers, melted away.

It was raining. A cold, lonely autumn rain, where the sky turned much darker, and it seemed like night had rolled in, even though sunset was still hours away.

Sirius landed on a rooftop, when he could fly no further. He touched down and his wings folded. For a while, he stood, panting. Then, at last, he was able to turn and look back.

The city looked so much different in the dark and the rain.

The burning warehouse was only a faint orange glimmer in the distance.

Rain trickled off his hair and ran down into his eyes. He turned away and looked down.

He was still holding Amos in his arms—one arm under his shoulders, the other under his knees. Amos's hair was much darker now that it was wet. It made his face seem even paler. The silver chain was still tangled in the fingers of one hand.

But it was going to slip free soon.

Sirius leaned Amos against him, holding him with one arm, and with his other hand, he managed to tug the chain free. It was slippery with rain and blood. He couldn't think of anything to do with it, so he just let it slip over his hand, dangling around his wrist.

He tightened his grip on Amos again. His wings unfurled.

But he couldn't move. He couldn't see enough to move. A jumble of words, pictures, people, and places was in the way, streaming through his mind . . .

A burning city . . . a wide-eyed child . . . flashes of colored lightning . . . the soft touch of cold hands . . . an old, wrinkled face and dark eyes . . . pools of blood . . . the edges of a stone tablet sliding closed in front of him . . .

Suddenly, he felt Amos's weight in his arms again.

He closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he could see the rain.

He spread his wings, stepped off the roof, and glided into the air.

It felt like an eternity of flying, through endless cold rain, over a city that was silent and dead, as if every living person had disappeared while they had been in the warehouse. The landscape below blurred in and out of focus, until sometimes Sirius wondered if it might fade altogether.

But somehow, it kept coming back.

Then the strength gave out of his wings.

He glided down onto the street, stumbling as he landed. And then he started walking. One foot in front of the other, over and over again.

Until, at last, he looked up and saw, rearing above him, a familiar apartment building.

He stood for as long as he could. Then Amos slipped out of his grasp. Sirius tried to hold onto his wrist, but his fingers slid away, and he landed, gently, on the pavement.

Sirius wavered a moment longer, and then he collapsed, face first, on the pavement beside Amos. The silver chain slipped off over his hand, landing on the cobblestones with a faint clink.

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