



Spiral

Volume 1, Issue 2
Summer 2008

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Requiem Draconum

by Timothy Sullivan

Where did all the dragons go?
Are they vanished into dreams,
Slain by valiant knights,
Asleep beneath the earth,
Flown beyond the stars?

Where did all the dragons go?
We have killed them, you and I.
For how can creatures of wonder
Stand before our disbelief
And not fall to that word “myth?”

Where did all the dragons go?
We have banished them to dreams
There no longer are places that
We have said, “Here there be dragons”
And thus there are no more.

Where did all the dragons go?
They flitter in the eyes of children
Who are not so foolish as we.

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The Closet-Door Blues

by Julieanne M. Lopresto

There was a portal to the underworld in his closet. It wasn't a separate door, or anything. There was just an opening—a window—into a red world so unlike his own. When the blue closet door was closed there was no sign of it, no unearthly noise or preternatural glow—just a normal closet door, for, after all, it was a normal closet.

The lower demons and imps that came scabbling out from the small gap between the floor and the door wouldn't torment him or scare him in the night. In fact, they played with him. They became the models for his drawings, and, with their simple magics, they made the images move, little Beelzebubs dancing across the page, waving at him impossibly from their two-dimensional world. They helped him build with his blocks, aiding him as he constructed fantastic models of cities that he had seen in his short life—New York, Boston, Chicago, Pandemonium—which all looked more or less the same, except to him. The demons helped a little, though, making sure that his wooden blocks, when set at in the right angle, would look exactly like the Statue of Liberty or making the plastic ones occasionally catch the light in such away that they appeared to reflect hellfire.

His mother, the “artsy” type (although now heavily suburbanized), considered his stories of demons and sprites to be grand inventions, not delusions, and encouraged them. Fearing that the dreaded Institution of school would purge her son of creativity, she kept him home until she absolutely had to, enrolling him in the nearby public school a year later than was the norm.

He wasn't exactly scared of school; he just preferred staying home with his friends. The other children had their own closet-dwellers to play with, why couldn't they do the same, so *no one* would have to go to school? The demons glanced at each other out of the

corners of their beady eyes and found that no one had the heart to tell him that not all children had worlds in the backs of their closets. One of the braver ones, from the Eighth Circle, stepped forward sheepishly and said, in a tone that he hoped was reassuring (for demons have little time to practice being reassuring), that he might not find that everyone had the same thing in their own closets. He told him that they might find the contents of his closet unusual, just as he might find theirs odd. The demon retreated back into the ranks, and the boy considered this.

“Then I’ll just have to ask them what they have,” said he.

The demons didn’t like the sound of this.

His first act at school the next day, barring putting his backpack in his new cubbyhole, was to go up to the nearest boy and ask him, “What have you got in your closet?”

The other boy blinked at him for a second and then, in his best schoolboy voice, said, “My shoes and my shirts and my games and some stuff I stole from my brother and a toy *robot* that *lights up* and . . .” He realized that he had run out of things to say before his mouth had. “That’s it,” he added with a little shrug.

“Nothing *alive*?”

His classmate blinked in that stupid way again and said, “I don’t think so.”

They regarded each other.

He leaned towards the other boy, narrowing his eyes. “You,” he intoned, “are *abnormal*.”

“Kay,” said his classmate, and went on his merry way.

Many of his other classmates were similar to this first boy, answering his question with a litany of things that he usually kept elsewhere in his room. One boy, a bespectacled waif with tousled hair, fearfully told him that there was a monster in his closet. He went to the other boy’s house the next day, armed with a flashlight and a letter ensuring his safety from one of the more important demons who knew him personally. He found no monster living in the back of this boy’s closet, just an overly fuzzy blue sweater that was hanging by one sleeve from a shelf above, giving the illusion of something living when mixed with a breeze and moonlight. Upon discovering this, he

turned off his flashlight with a sigh, exited the closet, shook his head at the other boy, and left without saying another word.

At night, after he had retired to his room, his friends would creep silently out from behind his door. Little did he know that every day, while he was out, his companions would confer amongst themselves, wondering if they were doing the right thing by keeping their boy (for they did think of him as theirs) in the dark. Each day, they would come to the conclusion that he needed to be told he was one of the few children with creatures in their closets, but when they saw him each afternoon, they would exchange half-glances and agree, silently, that this was a lesson he needed to learn himself.

He had almost given up.

Most of his classmates were quite peculiar, he decided. He was very close to writing them all off as freaks of nature, until one day he happened to sit next to someone new.

It was a little girl. You might think that this particular boy, attended by demons on a regular basis, would be more accepting than other boys his age. But he wasn’t. He, like all the other boys in his class, spent his time on one side of the room. All of the girls, this one included, spent time on the Other Side. On this fateful day in question, they met in the middle. She was drawing a picture. The boy, being of “artsy” stock and curious by nature, leaned over her piece of paper. When she noticed what her new neighbor was doing, she crouched over her drawing, covering her whorls and splotches of color with her freckled arm and long blonde hair.

The question (which was now the Question from being asked so many times) poked him in the ribs and asked politely when it was going to be said. The boy didn’t want to ask a *girl*, but the Question was a forceful one and jumped out of his mouth before he could stop it.

“What?” she asked.

He knew the Question wouldn’t leave him alone if he refused to comply, so he asked it again.

She stared at him for a moment, her green eyes narrowing in confusion. The boy began to regret what he had done and internally cursed the Question. Then . . .

Then a most unusual thing happened.

The girl pushed her hair over her shoulder and straightened up. She picked up her drawing and held it up to her chest, as a proud child is wont to do when displaying her artwork. What once seemed to be random patches of blue, yellow, and pink was now in focus. It was a brilliantly colored angel, flying through the clearest sky the boy had ever seen.

"Him," said the girl. "And tons of others. They come out sometimes, and play with me. Why, what about you?"

"Demons," replied the boy, feeling slightly inadequate as the girl had visual aids and he did not. He felt as if he needed to paint some sort of picture, as the girl had, but he only possessed words. Wishing he could use the crayons, he said, "Red ones."

The girl's eyes narrowed again. She turned away, clearly unimpressed by the conversation.

Seeing as he had finally found his only normal classmate, the boy desperately wanted to keep talking to her. He tried to put together a good sentence in his head, failed miserably, and said the first thing that came to mind: "What color is your closet door?"

"Pink," she replied, without looking up.

"Pink's a girl color," the boy responded without thinking. "*Mine's* blue."

The girl sat up again and turned towards him. "Blue's *ugly*," she said. "If my closet door were blue, I'd get my daddy to paint over it."

And with that, she took up her crayons and left, abandoning the portrait of her closet-dweller on the table.

So one day turned into the next, as days often do. The next day became the one after that, and so on, and so on, and before the boy knew it, a week had passed.

He kept the drawing with him. He'd stuffed it in his backpack when he was sure that the girl wasn't watching and flattened it out again when he got home with his heaviest books. He tried to pin it on his wall, but it didn't look quite right, the angelic figure juxtaposed with the fiends cavorting about his bedroom. So he put in a folder and placed it back in his bag, taking it to school each day, and

stealing glances at it when he could.

He didn't want to talk to her. She was a girl and, therefore, forbidden. Off-limits. Bearer of cooties, source of scorn and ridicule ... a boy couldn't be friends with a girl. It just wasn't done.

The demons were less than impressed with the fact that the only other child in his class who had things living in her closet had angels, but they were even more upset when their boy told them that he was never going to talk to her again. It was at that moment that the demons decided that their boy needed to know the truth.

The truth they were imparting wasn't that few closets are actually portals to other worlds; it was the more universal truth that it didn't matter what other people thought of your friends, but what you thought of them that was important. So you could hang out with demons or angels, boys or girls, and it would all be the same, as long as you were happy. One of the braver demons told him that he should return the drawing and ignore what people said about him.

The boy responded by saying he would need to sleep on this.

The demons let him do just that—he was a growing boy, after all. Anyway, he had promised his friends that he would talk to the girl the next day. And, as he was a man of his word, he did just that.

He found her at recess, alone, drinking daintily from a juice box, with a wistful expression her face, watching another group of little girls jump rope. He drew the folder from his bag, slowly and haltingly explained why he had kept it, and apologized for insulting her closet door. She took the folder in her small hand and examined her artwork with the air of an appraiser. The girl nodded at him and moved her bag so he could join her on the bench. She then mournfully accepted his apology and issued her own.

"That's all right," the boy said. Then, thinking himself rather clever, he twisted the demons' moral from the previous night to fit the situation, and said, "After all, it's what's *in* the closet that matters."

She giggled lightly at this, and then said, "You're weird."

He smiled back at her. "No, I'm normal," he answered. "And so are you."



Quiet Moments

by Daniella Sanchez

Untitled

by Frances Visintainer

One stop too early, on the bullet train
I clung with sweaty hands to metal poles
Another day of work; a grey refrain

The path I tread each day, sunshine or rain
The seventh stop, and then, a minute stroll
One stop too early, on the bullet train.

A girl, with skin that shines like gold, or grain,
Steps on; I've never seen her here before
Another day of work; a gray refrain.

Where does she go? Where points her weather vane?
My narrowed eyes search out her ticket's toll
One stop too early, on the bullet train.

My eyes, this cannot be! Declares my brain,
There is no place called "Wonderland" I know,
Another day of work; a grey refrain.

I stare. Her ticket – is it fake? A feign?
"Stop Eight." It reads. Stop Seven, once my home-
One stop too early on the bullet train.

Her eyes, they say, as blue as pouring rain,
This wonderland is yours – but will you go?
I will! I shout, but I get off again
One stop too early, on the bullet train

And from that day, all I have known is pain
The answers to 'What If?' I'll never know,
One stop too early on the bullet train,
Another day of work; a grey refrain.



Untitled

by Rachel Sciulli

Last Call

by Matthew Castleman

Eleven o'clock in the Sanctuary Taphouse. The crowd's starting to pick up a bit. The countertop's shining and the glasses are as clean as can be expected, given the water I've got to work with in this rusty old city. I survey the clientele from behind the bar like an antique dealer. All the characters in this town show up here.

A young woman sits in a corner, cradling her drink like a wounded bird. She's got an expression on her face that says she's waiting for someone she knows and loves to walk through the door, and knows they never will. She scarcely even notices anyone else. I can almost hear the thin strains and tinkling piano keys of the sad song playing in her head.

A guy walks in the door, a bit wobbly. His hair's swept back dramatically and I'm not sure how well his turquoise sport coat complements his khakis. He's just made a lot of money gambling on a horse, and it's practically digging escape tunnels out of his pockets. A pair of card sharks in the corner look up, smelling blood. They exchange a quick glance before closing in, their plan already well-rehearsed.

A red ember briefly lights up a dark back corner, illuminating a single very sharp-dressing man with frosty eyes that track a slow arc around the room before he exhales the smoke into a cloud that obscures him again. He's the top enforcer for a local syndicate, whose name is – I swear on the roof over my head – Thomas Gunn. I often wonder if that's a coincidence or if it influenced him in his career choice.

I pour a few drinks and the door opens again. A few mugs in cheap dark suits look like they're here on business. One of them walks up to the bar, retrieving something from an inside pocket. He presents IRS credentials to me, leaning on the bar with his elbows.

Looks like he hasn't shaved in a couple of days, and his tie's hanging off his neck like a noose waiting to be tightened. "Help you, sir?" I say, trying not to let either pity or amusement into my voice. The man lets out a tired sigh, and my senses tune in. Spend enough time behind a bar and a five-acre field of spearmint can't hide an underlying tang of whiskey.

"We're looking for a woman. Flora Townsend. Know her?" I give it a moment's thought.

"Can't say I do. Lovely name, though." That gets a toneless grunt and a labored reach into another pocket. He pulls out a photograph.

"Look familiar?"

It does, and I suppress my initial reaction. Something's not quite right about this g-man. I hold the picture up to my face to hide a quick glance to my left. Yep, she's gone. The lonely woman in the corner really was expecting someone. How about that. I hand the photo back calmly.

"Haven't seen her. Sorry I can't be more helpful. What'd she do?"

"Tax evasion," says the shabby agent in a bored voice. He turns around and walks out, signaling his underlings with a nod. Definitely something off about them.

The night goes on, patrons come and go, and I wonder about the lady's fate. I send home a few customers who've retired a few too many. Some hide it well, and others don't, like the man who attempts to chat up my phone booth. He goes out the door quickly. Can't afford to have people like that hanging around; scares away other customers. And I'm very protective of that phone booth.

It's about an hour later when my buddy Gerry Anders walks in, looking busy and worried. He's a new homicide detective, clean and good-hearted. His open sport coat sways slightly over his black T-shirt as he makes his way quickly to the bar. "Matt!" He says, sounding slightly out of breath. "Do you know who Flora Townsend is?" That gets my attention.

"She seems to be a popular conversation topic tonight," I say. "What's going on, Gerry?"

"Witness to a gangland murder. We've been trying to find her

for days to put her in protective custody, but she bolted as soon as she got word that some mob heavies were after her."

Damn. Why do I have to be right so often? "They came in here about an hour ago disguised as IRS agents. She was here, too, but she must've slipped out as soon as they arrived. I sensed something amiss and kept my trap shut. Anything else I can do?" Gerry's eyes focus slightly past my head as he tumbles the new information around in his mind.

"Just stay here, and keep your eyes open. If Flora or the goons come back, get a hold of me as soon as you can."

"Good luck," I say. He nods with a frustrated half-smile and hurries out. This city could use more cops like him. After he leaves I commit a very undignified act as a bartender and pour myself a drink. I could use one on a night like this, and my clientele don't seem to care. I own the place, so it's not like I can get fired. In fact, I better make it a double.

Twelve thirty in the Sanctuary Taphouse, and something foul is afoot in the city. I'm pacing behind the bar when the most popular young lady in town walks in again, and glides her way over to me, trying not to show how panicked she obviously is. My heart leaps to see her safe. I vow to myself that she'll stay that way. "Flora," I say, hushed, "I know what's going on. Are you all right?" She shakes her head, what little blood remains in her face forming an adrenaline blush.

"I've been running all over the city trying to dodge them, but I can't. I think they followed me back here." I think for a moment, then start to pour a drink to take any undue attention away from us. I discreetly slip a key into her glass.

"Go out the back door," I say, pointing inconspicuously. "Carver Street and Thirteenth. The inn there is run by a friend of mine. Ask for Hannah Sinclair. Show her the key and tell her Matthew Reinhardt gave it to you. You'll be safe there." She looks into my eyes like she's checking them for tripwires.

"Why do all this for me?" Understandably, not in a trusting mood.

"Because there are few enough beautiful women in this city as it is without one of 'em getting shot. I hear it ruins your complexion."

For the briefest moment she actually smiles, then nods.

"Thanks," she almost whispers. She casually walks down the bar and downs her drink, catching the key in her teeth. Then she ambles to the ladies' room before slipping out the backdoor quickly and silently. Smooth as silk.

Seconds later a much more animated-looking trio of hand-me-down IRS men barge through the door. The leader looks around wildly, then steps up to the bar, "Where is she?" I shrug. He tugs a .38 loose from under his arm and points it roughly my way. "I ain't kiddin' around, bartender. We know she's here."

I give him a tight smile. "Can't help you, pal. Now, if you or your men would like something to drink – well, something more ..." He brings his fist down on the bar, rattling the glasses. The other patrons have cleared away by now, and squeeze into the corners, eyes on the newcomers. The leader signals to his men, who pull their own heaters. One blocks the door.

"All right then. I dunno where you've got her stashed, but until she comes out, nobody gets in or outta this joint. And if I wait too long, well, my hand might just start to get tired. Got me?" I spare a glance to the far corner. Thomas Gunn's still here, and he very slowly moves his hand to his coat. He'll help, but only if I make the first move.

Like many barkeeps of legend, I keep a shotgun under the bar. In fact, I have it set up on a little stand, pointed forward and everything. Big boss here is standing in just the right spot. All I need to do is get the trigger pulled. With the speed of a glacier, I ease my hand down toward waist level.

"Ah-ah!" He warns, punctuating with a jab of his gun. "Hands on the bar." Damn. I comply, a blank expression on my face.

I just knew that foot pedal I rigged up would come in handy some day.

The Seven Deadly Sins: Greed

by Daniella Sanchez

How it shines and sparkles and glitters,
This lovely treasure of mine:
Rubies and diamonds on the floor littered;
How it shines and sparkles and glitters —
The gold as it drops to the table with a pitter-
Patter pattern that to my ear is like a chime:
How it shines, and sparkles, and glitters.
This lovely treasure of *mine* . . .

Capture the Moon

by Ma'ayan Plaut



To Three

by Stephen Burrows

Ah, demon child! Demon mild!
 Thou lovest blood and death.
 Share my despair - then, lady fair,
 do take away my breath!
 For by the heart which keeps my life,
 I love thee - love thee - love thee.

Ah, gypsy lass! Ye bonny lass!
 Thou dancest o'er the flowing grass.
 Melancholy sweetly lies within thine eyes,
 within thy heart. Thou knowest not
 how good thou art. I know, and so
 I love thee - love thee - love thee.

Ah, elven maid! Bright elven maid!
 A light thou art to all who see -
 A life so bright 'twill never dim.
 And if thou dost, then fie on him
 who makes it so! For by the sun
 which lights the day, and by the stars
 which guide our way,
 I love thee - love thee - love thee!

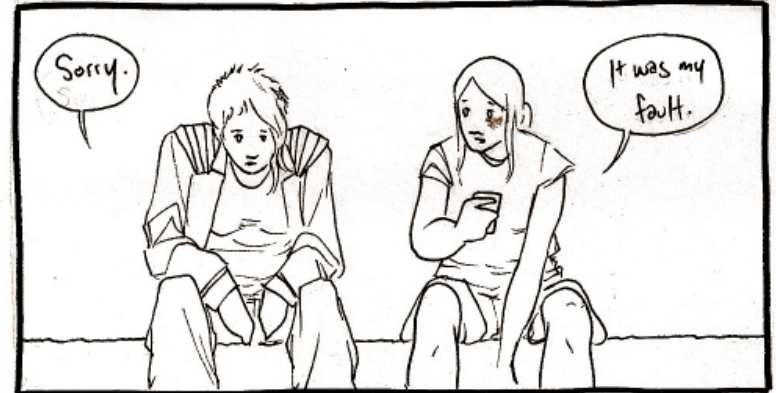
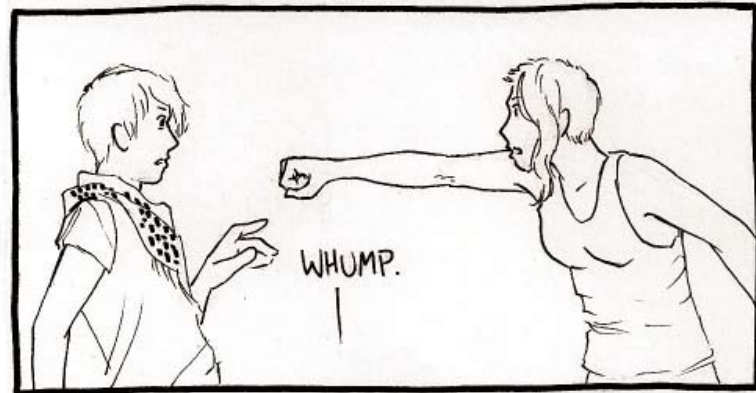
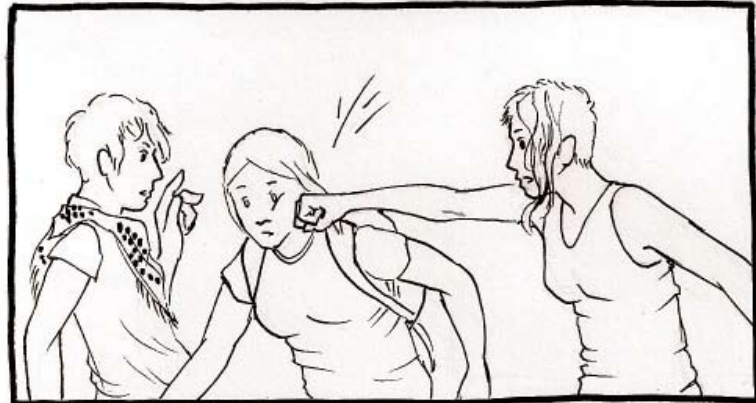


Endir

by Anonymous









Teach Me?

by Frances Visintainer

Love might be splendid,
 But this is more than that.
 Consume me, and make me scream.
 Tear my throat out, the way you always do.
 Kill me sweetly,
 For tomorrow I will beg
 Again
 For the pain.
 This is why you Have me.
 For even if you didn't want me -
 And you do,
 Or if you could forget me -
 And you can't,
 I would still lay bleeding at your feet
 And that is a beauty that even you cannot resist.
 So take my hand,
 And show me again-
 Teach me, again-
 What it means to love,
 To die.

The Seven Deadly Sins: Anger

by Daniella Sanchez

Raging like fire
 And burning with the passion
 Of a thousand thousand suns,
 As wild as the stormy midnight sea
 And as unrelenting as a driving wind,
 It eats away at the hearts of men,
 Muttering twisted lies with a knife-like tongue,
 Filling them with the hatred of a child
 Forever punished,
 Oft forgotten,
 Never forgiven.

Untitled

by Bryn A. McDonald



Voice Message

by Thalia Harris

Baby, what I'm about to say may be a little flirty
 Actually it's past that, it's to the point of sounding dirty
 Just thinking about your bare body before my eyes
 Causes me to sweat and my temperature to rise
 A twitch starts to occur in my hips
 Every time I think about your luscious lips
 I want those lips to give me tingles of pleasure
 The root of all our intimate endeavors
 I'm not too prude or too shy
 To let you unbutton my shirt or unzip my fly
 As I speak, my panties are the opposite of dry
 That's why I'm calling to ask you to stop by
 It'll be just like having a grinding dance
 Except it'll be skin to skin, not guarded by pants
 I'll do whatever I can to take you on a body and mind trip
 Entice you using my tongue's tip

My hands exploring your unique texture
 Your hands traveling along all of my curvatures
 Our lower bodies fitting together like a perfect puzzle
 Rocking so hard the sheets start to ruffle
 And as we do this, not caring about the time
 I'll be screaming your name, since you made me forget mine
 Your body is the only candy I wanna lick
 I'm lost in your strength, you feel so...thick
 Playing me soft, then hard like a conga drum
 Making me hit a high note right before I come
 I begin to quiver, my mind gets all hazy
 As I feel you starting to rush through me

If you're here tonight, it will be made known
 That every part of me can really be blown
 So now that you know I'm in the mood to bone
 Come to my house as soon as I hang up this phone.

reel lif of punctuation

by Sean Hanson

iam closeminded and disconcerting)

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we're lihving
 the reel life of puñctua±tOn



Mirror, Mirror

by Daniella Sanchez

The Trick Rider

by Stephen Burrows

The peanut gallery visitor closes his eyes
and still he can see her arms legs body imprinted
on his vision like a flash-bulb. If only, he thinks
without knowing it, she were coughing
blood onto her shimmering lace sleeves
and the ringmaster's face
were twisted savagely as he lashed her
horse in circles over dirty straw.

If only these were the days
when a ringmaster would take the frailty
of a rider and bend it over
his splintered table
beneath a single
swinging bulb
in his peeling
painted wagon.

And if the rider would only show her distress,
perhaps the peanut gallery visitor would charge down
valiant, sword drawn, and rescue her instead
of sitting in the peanut gallery crying within
without knowing it.

Babel Under Ice

by Ian Burns

Translated from the original European by Ian Burns, Special Envoy to the Jovian Moons. Thanks are owed to the D'enlin Antiquarian Museum for the loan of the tablets.

And so it came to pass that in the reign of King Churlaktet¹ the devil came to the king in his dreams. He spoke to the king of his strength, of his dominion throughout the seas and his sway from the deeps to the wall of heaven². The devil inspired his vanity and pride, so that Churlaktet should think himself as one of the gods. And it was so, and by the king's order temples were raised throughout the deeps praising him as Churlaktet the God Among Men.

And the devil was pleased with his work, and so returned to the king's dreams, whispering of those who laughed at him and refused to bow before his idol, of heretics and traitors throughout the seas. And the Emperor was enraged at the injury to his pride, and commanded the deaths of all who would not worship him.

And the devil was pleased with his work, and returned again to the King's dreams. The devil whispered of the jealousy of the other gods, for who among their many could command such an earthly realm as his? And so Churlaktet in his madness commanded that all who worshiped the true gods³ renounce their worship or die. It was as he commanded, and there was much suffering among the faithful. The temples of the true gods were torn down, and many thousands who continued their worship were put to the spear.

1 Churlaktet: an emperor who according to surviving records reigned from 1343 to 1395 AD, Gregorian Calendar. Other nation's records indicate an empire in the southern abyssal plains, roughly the size of Texas.

2 It is crucial to remember that until First Contact, the Europeans had never seen the stars.

3 Refers in this context to the Vernan Pantheon. A varied group of gods headed by Kelman, who commands all currents and is responsible for the all important tide.

And the devil was pleased with his work, and returned to the king's dreams one last time. He whispered that the King was greater than all the gods, for what resistance had they mustered against his defiance? He whispered that the gods had no power to oppose one as mighty as he, for even the rifts and currents had been mastered and defied by his people. He whispered that one as great as the king might break through The Wall of Heaven at the edge of the world, and take by force his rightful place as King of all Gods. The King heard these words, and commanded that an army of slaves be raised to the wall.

For a thousand pulses⁴ the slaves labored. The stuff of the wall defied the blasphemy, for being hard as stone yet it would not sink and vanished when brought away from the cold of the wall lest it be used for some other purpose. The slaves toiled constantly, for the wall would heal like a living thing if left alone. Yet they were driven by cruel masters who heeded not their suffering, and the work progressed.

And when the thousand pulses had passed, a great cut had been made deep into the wall. It was as though a mountain had been hollowed out, an upside-down valley a thousand cubits from rim to rim. A grand road spiraled up the inside that his armies might march to make their war, and his armies were vast/ As that pulse past his soldier assembled across the face of the wall, and their hordes stretched away to the horizon. Standards waved, and trumpets throbbed. The weapons were carved of the finest obsidian and the armor of shark bone. The work had reached it's end, mere feet of ice separating the world from heaven, and King decreed that he should be the one to break the final seal.

And so Churlaktet climbed up the great road with his elite guard following behind. On that pulse King Churlaket raised his ax and broke the final seal that separated the world from Heaven, and it seemed the power of man had truly triumphed over the gods.

Yet at this affront the gods would suffer Churlaktet's insolence no longer. At the breaking of the seal the Gods unleashed their fury, and Kelmen, Lord of Currents, drew the waters all together. A great

4 The European 'day' is measured by the gravitic tides of warm water caused by it's rotation around the primary.

vortex drew all through the rift, and it's call was irresistible. The vortex roared and shook the world, and from the wall to the deeps all was madness and confusion as the wrath of the gods swept all away. And when it was past the King and his armies had been swallowed up by the current, their blasphemy and pride gone forever. Thus is the fate of those who would play as pipsqueak gods, and of those who would follow them in their pursuit of their ruin.

Snowbound (opposite)

by Becky Strauss

What Do You See?

by Bryn A. McDonald



Elias Artista

by Stephen Burrows

Nobody knocks at the door; still, we sit, still
as our candle flames in the heavy air
and the ice that seals our stone walls, still
we wait. Seven times we heard a knock
and three found a man hunched
in the rain, begging to join us – was it you,
returned at last to reteach us? We hoped,
but each was just another
who had forgotten your quick
silver secrets.

One to a hundred, we say, one
to a thousand. The six-pointed star,
the sun, the moon. Still, we are wrong,
longing to be rarified to phoenix ashes.
Come back to us – the meal is cold
and we have forgotten how to eat.



by EJ Landsman

Shadows

by Edward Allen Underhill

Prologue

Please go away." It was barely a whisper. The boy pulled back farther beneath his bed. "Please just leave . . . just leave . . ."

In the darkened doorway, two matrons stood watching with folded arms. "Is there ever anything there?" the younger one asked quietly.

The older matron shook her head. "No. Just empty air. Perhaps the new headmaster will be able to find out what's wrong when he arrives."

"They say he's a church man," the younger one said.

The older one nodded.

A furry head poked out beneath the boy's chin and rubbed against his face.

The older matron frowned irritably. "I certainly would like to get rid of that animal," she said. "It's a mess."

"Why haven't you?"

The older matron sighed. "It's a vicious thing, for one. It won't let anyone get close to it." She shrugged. "Besides, without it, the doctor is afraid the child might lose his sanity altogether."

The younger matron folded her hands. "Perhaps the new master will know what to do," she said.

A tear ran down the boy's cheek.

"Well," said the older matron, turning away, "he is a man of experience."

Part One: A Dark and Stormy Night

*The English Countryside, outside London
October 1897*

It was too warm for a dark and stormy night in the autumn. But wasn't this warm rain running down his cheek? It was too warm for rain in the autumn.

No. It was too warm because it wasn't rain. It was blood.

It was blood, trickling down his cheek, and down his neck.

"There. See?" Soft breath ruffled his hair. A hand touched his cheek.

He slowly opened his eyes. He was shaking too hard to breathe.

The spectacles were very close. For a moment, in the bright candlelight, they glinted so brightly that he couldn't see beyond them. Then the face tilted downward, and the glimmer vanished, and he could see into a pair of empty blue eyes.

The hand slipped down his neck, wiping away the thin trickle of blood as it went.

"You don't want that to happen again, do you?" The voice was soft. Barely more than a whisper. "You should stop talking about demons and ghosts, don't you think? You don't want to get me in trouble, do you?"

The hand slipped down to his shoulder.

"Think of the other children. You don't hate them, do you? What would everyone do if something happened to me? Or the matrons? You don't want to see all of your friends out on the streets, do you?"

A tear slipped between his lashes. Like this, it ran toward his ear.

"I didn't think so." The soft breath came closer. "Good boy."

He closed his eyes, and tried not to think about the spectacles, or the breath.

Or the hands.

He tried to breathe . . .

Crash.

The clap of thunder was so loud that Amos might have rolled straight off the wagon and into the mud—if there hadn't been someone in his way.

"Ouch!" She jerked and then turned around, rubbing her back. "Oh, look who's awake."

Amos sat up, rubbing his head. "I hate hay wagons."

The girl folded her arms and glared at him. The glare was in no way diminished by the piece of long grass poking out from between her lips. "Well, whose fault is that? Train tickets cost money. Maybe if you'd actually *make* some from time to time, we wouldn't be sitting on a bunch of damp hay in a thunderstorm." She sneezed and rubbed a finger beneath her nose. "Amo-*chan*, I think I'm catching a cold!"

Amos sighed and stared up at the canvas covering the hay wagon, keeping them dry with moderate success. "You can't catch a cold. You're over two hundred and you haven't figured that out yet?"

The girl tossed her head, sending her straight black hair bouncing. Then she glanced at Amos from the corners of her eyes and dropped her hand. "Amo-*chan*? Is something wrong? You look ..."

He started, looked at her quickly, and smiled. "Mm! No! Of course not."

She sighed. "Somehow I don't believe you."

He shrugged. "Since when have you ever believed me, Nettie?"

"Someday I'm going to make you give me a better name than that one," she said irritably. She took the strand of grass out of her mouth. "Say, was it that dream again?"

Amos flinched. "What dream?" he asked carelessly.

She narrowed her eyes. "What dream, eh? The one you have that you never tell me about." She jabbed at him with the strand of grass. "I can tell because you always look the same when you wake up. If it was a different dream, you'd look different."

He wrinkled his nose. "Don't poke me with something that's been in your mouth!"

"You'd better actually make some money this time." She stuck

the grass back in her mouth. "Then maybe I'd have something else to stick in my mouth besides this twig. Scholar, you call yourself? Aren't scholars supposed to teach at universities?"

"Teaching would be dull," Amos said with a sniff.

"And you'd never get a job, with your age and your reputation, but of course you'll leave out that part."

Amos shivered. "I hate thunderstorms when it's this cold."

Nettie rolled her eyes. "Really? Just the other day you were saying how much you loved thunderstorms. Something about finding them dramatic."

Amos glowered. "The other day I was sitting in a nice warm parlor that didn't have a leaky roof."

The butler let the curtain fall and turned around. "Madam, there is an arrival."

The tall woman wrapped in a silk kimono rose from the living room sofa and went out into the entryway. Mrs. Ainsworth was married to a very wealthy man, who traveled the world in his business ventures, and often brought her very nice things from abroad whenever he returned home. She was at her happiest now, because he was off on one of these ventures, and not at home. Or at least, she would have been at her happiest, if not for the troublesome little thing going on at her estate.

She pulled aside the curtain at the window beside the door. Her eyebrows rose, ever so slightly.

At the bottom of the hill, two figures were clambering off a hay wagon. They looked up the steep hill as the wagon rolled away. They looked at each other. And then they started climbing the narrow, winding path toward the house.

Mrs. Ainsworth let the curtain slide back into place. She studied herself in the hall mirror, patting at the complicated arrangement of curled hair on her head, patting at her jeweled necklace, and straightening her kimono.

"Madam would like me to answer the door?"

She looked at the butler, who had reappeared in the hallway. "No, James, that won't be necessary. I'll do it myself."

The butler looked slightly puzzled, bowed, and left.

Mrs. Ainsworth swept to the front door and pulled it open.

There was a slightly awkward silence, since one of the two people standing on the porch had a hand raised, about to knock.

Mrs. Ainsworth took one look at the two people on her doorstep and wondered whether she really should have trusted the maid with finding the appropriate person to take care of her estate's little problem.

Assuming these were, in fact, *those* people, they were slightly disappointing. One was a girl, about sixteen or so, with straight black hair that didn't even reach her shoulders and slanted dark eyes. Her plain brown dress and her boots were both slightly worn, and she was clasping a battered suitcase.

The person next to her was a slightly-built young man, barely taller than the girl. In fact, he could have passed for the same age—it was only based on the maid's previous information that Mrs. Ainsworth knew he had to be several years older. His brown hair was matted flat from the rain. Several strands hung over his eyes. His eyes were, perhaps, the only really noteworthy thing about him. They were a rather strange color, more like amber than anything else. He was wearing a suit that was in only slightly better shape than the girl's dress. The shirt wasn't exactly white, the collar wasn't exactly stiff, and the ribbon tied in a bow around it wasn't exactly red.

He didn't look like exactly anything. Perhaps, Mrs. Ainsworth thought, least of all someone capable of taking on her problem.

Nevertheless, she gave him a polite nod and a polite smile, and held open the door. "Mr. Christopher, I presume?"

Amos stepped quickly into the hall. "Yes." He sighed, looking rather happy to be out of the rain. "Mrs. Ainsworth?"

"Indeed." She eyed the patch of floor they were dripping on. "Would you perhaps like some hot tea? I could explain the situation over that. And perhaps you could introduce . . ."

Amos jumped a little. "This is my assistant, Nettie," he said quickly.

Nettie curtsied. "Pleased to meet you, ma'am. Thank you for inviting us here."

"Please, take a seat in the parlor." Mrs. Ainsworth held out a

hand. "Allow me to fetch the maid to make tea." She disappeared down the hall.

Nettie dropped her pleasant expression and turned a glare on Amos. "Assistant, my foot! Why didn't you just say 'slave labor' and be honest for once?"

Amos gave her pale grin. "We can't scare the nice lady. And I never said you *had* to come."

"Ehhh?" Nettie stuck out her lip. "If I didn't come, you'd never keep a single job! Am-*chan*, you're terrible with people!"

Amos gave a tired sigh. "You injure me, Nettie. I am perfectly good at negotiating with people."

"By 'negotiating,' you mean 'manipulating,' 'tricking,' and 'swindling'?" Nettie folded her arms. Then the glare disappeared. "Neh, Amo-*chan*, did you see that kimono?"

Amos considered. "Do you reckon her husband got it while traveling?"

"So expensive . . ." Nettie sighed. "I wish I could have a kimono like that. I never got one. Ever!"

Amos looked doubtful. "How could you remember what kimonos you got? It's been a while since you were there."

"I remember," Nettie sniffed. "One hundred years is nothing. Just because *you* can't remember what happened last week . . ."

She quickly fell silent as Mrs. Ainsworth reappeared. "The tea will be here shortly," she said, floating past them to the parlor. "Please. Sit down."

They wiped their boots on the mat and followed Mrs. Ainsworth into the parlor. She settled herself in a chair and they sat down on the sofa across from her. Nettie looked longingly at the fire in the hearth, at least ten feet away.

Amos shrugged out of his drenched jacket. "Well, Mrs. Ainsworth," he said, "what seems to be your trouble? Nettie spoke with a maid who said you had an . . . interesting occurrence."

"There is a church on this estate," Mrs. Ainsworth said. Her voice was as smooth as the silk of her kimono. Nettie swallowed, wondering why her voice never sounded like that. "It's quite a ruin, actually—been there for hundreds of years, I should imagine. Nobody lives there, naturally. And yet recently there have been sounds

coming from it. The servants reported it at first, saying when they were outside they heard voices—screams and groans. I thought it was silly servant talk. But I was taking an evening ride out there a few weeks ago and heard it for myself. It's really rather frightening." She laid a hand on her bosom.

Nettie almost rolled her eyes.

Amos nodded seriously . . . and then gave Mrs. Ainsworth his most dashing smile. Amos wasn't the most drop-dead handsome man Nettie had ever seen, but he did manage a fairly dashing smile. "I'm sure it's nothing I can't fix, Mrs. Ainsworth," he said. "Tell me, can you think of any incidents that might have brought this about?"

Mrs. Ainsworth blinked her long eyelashes at him.

The tea arrived, brought in by a young maid about Nettie's age. She set a tray on the low table between the sofa and the chair and poured the tea into three teacups. Then she curtsied and left.

They picked up their tea.

"What kind of incidents are you referring to, Mr. Christopher?" Mrs. Ainsworth asked.

"Well . . ." Amos took a sip of tea, and winced. Nettie sighed. He'd forgotten to put sugar in it again. Did he assume that it naturally got there, if she didn't do it for him? "For example, have there been any deaths lately? Of anyone working on the estate, or nearby? Or . . ." Amos set the teacup down. "Is anyone particularly unhappy? Has anyone seemed strange?"

Nettie dove for the teacup and spooned sugar into it. One of these days, Amos was really going to give himself a cavity.

Mrs. Ainsworth looked into her tea. "Well, in fact, my dear husband only recently acquired this estate from his grandfather, who passed nearly a year ago. We finally settled in several months ago, and now that I think about it, the servants have been reporting strange sounds ever since we did."

Amos reached for his tea again, picked up the cup, and stared into space.

Nettie waited for him to take another sip.

Instead, he set the cup back down again and rose from the sofa. "If it's all right with you, Mrs. Ainsworth, I think I'd better have a look at the place now. Can you tell me where it is?"

Nettie's eyebrows jumped.

Mrs. Ainsworth blinked. "Very well. I can certainly point out its direction."

Amos looked down at himself. "Er, if you wouldn't mind . . . would there be an overcoat I could borrow?"

Mrs. Ainsworth looked him up and down. "I suppose you could borrow the butler's," she said and swept out of the room.

Nettie stood up. "You're really going to go out in that storm?" she whispered. "What, are you crazy?"

Amos frowned. "Something's not right. I don't know why . . . but I don't entirely trust that woman."

Nettie sighed. "Because she's toying with us? I could have told you that from the beginning. She's one of those twits who likes to play with people who don't have her amount of money."

"Mm," said Amos.

Mrs. Ainsworth reappeared, carrying—rather distastefully—a black overcoat. She held it out. "All you have to do is go around the house to the back and walk straight from there. The church is a bit up on a hill. You'll see it easily enough. It's right on the path."

"Thank you." Amos took the coat and put it on.

Nettie put a hand over her mouth to keep from laughing. It was several sizes too large for him.

Mrs. Ainsworth looked at her. "Will your assistant be going with you?"

Amos shook his head and gave Nettie a pleasant smile. "I think she ought to warm up by the fire."

"Very well then." Mrs. Ainsworth turned. "Best of luck, Mr. Christopher." And once again she swept from the room.

Nettie put her hands on her hips. "I'm not going with you?"

"No." Amos tucked his hands in the coat pockets. "You've been eyeing that fire since we got here."

"You don't think that's just a bit dangerous?"

"Eyeing a fire? I don't know. It might burn your eyes, I suppose?"

"Going by yourself, pinhead."

Amos shrugged. "It's probably just some pissed off spirit of an old geezer. Nothing to worry about." He turned away.

"If you get into trouble, you know I'm going to kill you," Nettie said.

Amos waved at her and disappeared into the hallway. A moment later, she heard the door open and close.

She stood nervously for a moment, glancing around the parlor. Then, when she was sure no one was going to come back into it, she dove for the hearth.

Amos reached the back of the house—it was more like a mansion, and it took enough time just to walk around it—and stood looking into the darkness. Lightning flashed. Silhouetted in the bright white light, on top of a small hill, was an old stone church. It would be a walk to get there, but not too much of a walk.

Amos took a breath and started down the path.

It wasn't long before the overcoat was soaked and rain trickled off his hair and down the back of his neck. The hill was steeper than he'd thought in the dark, and when at last he reached the top, he leaned over his knees for a moment to get his breath back. Then he looked up.

Rearing above him was the old stone church. It wasn't particularly large, almost more of a chapel than anything else. The roof was gone. Only the stone walls stood now, covered in moss and lichen. Amos straightened up, frowned a little, and touched his chest. Then he pushed back his sleeve and inspected a string of tiny bells around one wrist.

He looked back up at the church. His frown deepened.

He dropped his arm and started toward the church.

Before he even reached it, the rickety front door opened and someone stepped out. Amos jumped.

It was a girl, wearing a cloak against the rain, a bonnet tied around her head.

For several seconds, she and Amos stared at each other.

Then . . . "Sorry," Amos said quickly. "I didn't think anybody was here."

"Excuse me." The girl curtsied. "I was just checking on this place. I feel I must check on it, especially on nights like this one."

"Really?"

The girl smiled a little shyly. "It was on a night very much like this one that the old master passed away, you know."

Amos stiffened.

"I suppose the mistress didn't tell you." The girl looked up at the church. "It's a bit sad, after all. The old master used to come up here often, because he liked this old place. One night he came up here during a storm. He slipped and hit his head, perhaps on the altar."

"So it was an accident, then?" Amos swallowed. "Did you work here?"

The girl turned back. "Yes. I'm the only one of the old staff that's still here."

Amos said nothing.

The girl gave him a smile—it was chilly, somehow—and said, politely, "If you'll excuse me . . ."

Amos nodded.

She walked past him . . .

. . . and a sharp icy pain speared through his chest.

He grasped a fistful of overcoat. His breath caught. Something jingled faintly.

The girl continued on her way down the hill.

Amos looked down at his wrist. The string of bells around it shook.

He winced, straightened up, and turned around. "I'm going to guess you had some special attachment to that old man!" he shouted.

Thunder rumbled.

The girl turned back. "Really?" she said mildly. "Why would you say that?"

Amos reached into his pocket and pulled out a silver chain. "You'd have to," he said. "For his spirit to take over you like that."

The girl closed her eyes. "Be gone from here," she said. She opened her eyes, and they glowed bright red. "Unless you want me to make you."

Amos held up the chain. A flash of lightning illuminated the silver five-pointed star dangling from it. "You no longer need to be here, spirit," he said. "Please leave this place in peace."

The girl stretched out her hand. In a shower of sparks, a burst

of red lightning exploded from her fingertips, racing through the rain toward Amos.

He clapped the silver pentacle between his hands, steepled his index fingers, and murmured a word. The streak of red lightning disappeared in a shower of blue sparks.

Quietly, under his breath, his eyes closed, Amos whispered. A glow crept from the pentacle between his hands, spreading around the silver chain, glowing brighter and brighter, until the hillside was illuminated in a soft white light.

Amos murmured one last word, and opened his eyes.

The girl screamed. From her open mouth, black smoke puffed out. It rose from her fingertips. It enveloped her, and then it slowly melted away. She collapsed.

"Amos!" Nettie appeared from the darkness, climbing up the hill. She stopped beside the girl, looking down at her. "It was her?"

"In a manner of speaking," Amos answered. He tucked the chain back in his pocket, looking over his shoulder at the old church. "What did you come here for, Nettie? I told you to stay inside."

"There's something wrong," Nettie said, kneeling down beside the girl. "I was talking to the butler. He said the mistress never ventured into the church, but the servants who did couldn't approach the altar. He said there was something there."

Thunder rumbled. When it died away, they heard something jingling faintly.

"Can you get her inside?" Amos asked, glancing at his wrist.

"Is she all right?"

"She will be. Maybe a bit fuzzy on a few details, but that's not necessarily a bad thing."

Nettie narrowed her eyes at him. "*Am-chan*, are you going to do something stupid?"

"I never do stupid things," he answered, and started for the church.

Nettie sighed. Then, with a faint pop, she turned into a sleek black jaguar. She managed to scoop the girl onto her back and started back down the hill for the house.

Amos carefully pushed the old door aside. It creaked on rusted

hinges. He stepped over the threshold. It felt even colder inside the church than it did outside in the rain. Rotting wooden pews lined the narrow aisle, filled in with grass and weeds.

He walked quietly down the aisle, almost on tiptoe.

A flurry of flapping startled him. He ducked as a swarm of bats flew from the rafters, circling around him for a moment before swooping through the door into the night.

Lightning flashed. Through the broken windows, he looked up and saw the altar.

The altar itself was stone and unadorned, but behind it loomed a huge carved stone tablet, large enough for a person to fit inside, easily. Holding his breath, Amos cautiously went forward until he stood just in front of the altar.

He reached out a hand.

The air sizzled and his hand stopped, as if it had run into something. He pulled back. A shield. A force field.

He squinted at the stone tablet. He wasn't fluent in runes—he really should have studied them more—but he could make out enough. Enough to know this was a seal . . . and if it was a seal, there had to be something inside—something powerful, or the seal wouldn't have been written in old runes.

Amos frowned, studying the runes. It took him entirely too long to figure out even a fraction of the details written—long enough that by the time he realized what might be inside, he was shivering.

He pulled the silver chain out of his pocket.

Thunder rumbled.

He clasped the pentacle between his hands and closed his eyes.

The air around the altar and the tablet glowed faintly blue.

Amos shuddered, but not because of the cold this time.

With a faint hiss, the blue glow disappeared. Amos's knees turned to jelly, and he leaned a hand against the altar, gasping for breath.

Then he looked at his hand. If he could touch the altar, it meant the shield was gone.

He swallowed. With a faint clink, he laid the silver chain on the altar, setting his hands, palms down, on top of it. He closed his eyes.

The dust surrounding the altar and the stone tablet rose into the air. It started to sparkle.

And then the sparkling faded, and the dust settled.

A few cold raindrops slipped through the leaky roof and trickled down Amos's neck. He coughed, glaring up at the stone tablet. "Don't give me trouble now," he muttered. "That should have done it. You know it and I know it, so quit being a pain."

He closed his eyes again.

The dust rose. It sparkled. The ground beneath his feet moaned, deep and long . . .

"By this star I free you," Amos whispered, "by this star I bind you. Free from your prison, move to my side . . . and I name you—"

A distant scream interrupted him.

Amos started. The glow around him disappeared. The church was plunged into darkness.

"Amo-*chan!*"

Amos whirled around. "Nettie!"

Her cry was distant, floating up from farther down the hill, mixed up in the rain and the thunder. "Amos! Look out! It wasn't enough! She's coming for you!"

The door banged open, with so much force that it peeled off its rusted hinges, bouncing off the wall and clattering to the floor. In the doorway stood the servant girl, surrounded by a deep red glow. Her bonnet was gone. Her hair tumbled loose, whirling around her head like a halo.

"How . . . ?" Amos whispered.

"Weak little human." The voice was no longer high and pleasant, but deep and distorted. "You thought one little dose of your silly power would be enough for me?"

Behind Amos, one dust particle winked.

The girl's eyes glimmered red. An icy pain shot through Amos's chest. He grasped his shirt.

A tiny golden glimmer appeared in the center of the stone tablet.

The pain in Amos's chest sent him to one knee.

The girl floated toward him, several inches of air between her

feet and the ground.

Uneven lines of golden light skittered across the face of the tablet. The stone started to crack.

Amos didn't know what brought the name to his lips. Maybe it was just that it was still floating around his mind, and with the pain in his chest, he couldn't think clearly. He looked up at the girl . . .

"Sirius," he whispered.

Nettie finally arrived in the church doorway. "Amos—" she began, and the words died on her lips.

Behind the altar, a rift ran down the center of the huge stone tablet. The church rumbled. The ground shook. A shaft of blinding golden light stabbed from the rift, growing wider and wider. Then, with a sharp *crack*, the tablet split in two. The pieces tumbled to the ground.

Bright golden light rushed to fill the church. Wind swirled up from the ground to the rafters. Amos felt something brush lightly against his skin. He whirled around, throwing up a hand to shield his eyes.

Dozens and dozens of pure black feathers rustled around him, sparkling at their edges.

The wash of golden light faded a little, and Amos could see the figure standing on the altar. He was tall, slender, dressed in a flowing black robe. Black hair whipped around his thin, ashen face.

Two black wings sprouted from his back, covered in black feathers.

He looked up. His eyes glowed icy blue.

Nettie's hands crept over her mouth. "That's . . ." Then she saw the blast of lightning. "Amos!"

Amos looked around. A streak of red lightning shot from the girl's fingertips, racing toward him . . .

In a rush of black feathers, one large wing curled around him. He heard a crackle, and then silence.

"Who are you?" Amos could hear the spirit's voice, deep and groaning, even though he could see nothing beyond the wing. "This place is mine! Leave it!"

"I am Sirius."

Amos gasped. The voice was behind him, above him . . .

"A daemon?" the spirit demanded.

The wing slowly lowered. "I am Sirius," the voice said again. "And as I have been named, so I shall serve."

An inhuman shriek shattered the air. Another streak of red lightning raced toward them. Amos dove out of the way.

The figure on the altar swept a staff from what had, a moment ago, been empty air. On the end was a glowing golden sphere.

Amos hit the floor and rolled, coming to a stop halfway under one of the pews. He looked up.

The lightning collided with the sphere on the end of the staff. In a shower of sparks, the lightning disappeared.

The figure on the altar whirled the staff once over his head and then leveled it at the girl in the aisle.

"Wait!" Amos pushed himself up and skidded into the aisle between them. "Don't! You don't need to kill her. She's still alive."

The icy blue gaze fixed on him. The staff slowly lowered. The wings folded.

Amos took a breath and turned around, clapping the pentacle once again between his hands. He murmured a word.

Wind rushed once more through the room. The girl screamed.

Amos's feet slipped on the ground. He forced the words out, around the stabbing pain in his chest.

His hands were shaking. His feet slipped again.

A hand fell on his shoulder.

He looked up. Standing above him was the tall figure wrapped in the black robe. His grip was strong.

Amos took another breath and closed his eyes.

Blue light rushed from the floor, whirling around the girl in a cloud. Smoke billowed from her in great rolling waves. The screams grew higher and higher, until it was only her voice.

And then, at last, the smoke faded. The light faded. The screams faded. She sank unconscious to the ground.

Amos lowered the chain. He barely realized he was shaking. He turned and looked up. "Sirius," he whispered.

"You called me, didn't you?" His voice was soft and low. "And since you have broken my Seal, I am yours to command."

"I didn't think it would work," Amos said.

The blue glow disappeared from Sirius's eyes. His wings slowly melted into nothingness. He looked down at Amos. "I am Sirius. You gave me that name. And with it, you set me free." His eyebrows rose. "What is your name?"

In the church doorway, Nettie frowned.

"Oh!" Amos jumped. He stuffed the chain back into his pocket, coughed, and quickly held out his hand. "I'm Amos Christopher." He shook Sirius's hand emphatically. "Nice to meet you."

Nettie rolled her eyes. Then, with a faint *pop*, she turned into back into a jaguar and padded toward the girl's motionless figure.



Takeoff

by Becky Strauss

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