

Lorelei

by Kevin Hunter

"I don't want to hurt you. Please let me in. I am bleeding. Can't you see?"

It was all things considered a particularly odd sight, which Annalise did not know how to handle. Before her, in flesh and blood as far as she could see, a nearly naked man, stood, partially wrapped with her favorite towel, which was left on the balcony, now wet from the snow—clearly and regrettably not reusable; and he was enveloped by great white wings like from a fantasy, even begging *her* for help. The old, grey bearded man wanted to be inside *her* home. She was understandably out of her depths while not entirely sure this wasn't some sort of wonderful hallucination, though she would not describe it in that way.

He carried from a short black chain a dimly lit lantern, which was quite large—enough, that his back arched against its weight, having him resemble a gargoyle, or hunchback—and was brown and whose dying flame, though protected by thin sheets of glass on its five sides, flickered in the light winds. He was rather short, pale; somewhat veiny. His large wild beard obstructed much of his face—though the rest was pocked with holes and acne, barely appealing to the eye. His facial hair was greasy, dirty, scraggily, unevenly covering his face, rising up to his nose, nearly enveloping his thick neck and filled with ice. In his pale translucent skin veins scurried, running currents of blood back and forth, resembling blue worms which rose and fell up then down his arms like panicked bolts of lightning, shooting across his body with every sudden twitch.

"I'm never—" Annalise began.

Meaning: she was never *afraid*. Of course that would have been a lie, both to the old winged man and to herself. She stopped speaking so she wouldn't say it fully, as it wouldn't count if she didn't finish her thought. Nevertheless, with the little of it he got, he noticed Annalise's voice was light and shaking, and knew there was enough to proceed if he so desired.

Annalise wiped her eyes, stepping closer in disbelief. She had watched him for some time from behind her window, having heard his hard fall on her balcony and already noticed the cuts and lesions on his body which presumably came from said tumble. Lacerations across his arm and legs, deep cuts bleeding like tree sap in the cold air, the old winged man barely kept his back straight. The metallic tinge of blood was thick in the air as he fidgeted in his spot—Annalise could almost taste it.

Inhaling like a bloated fish—in other words, making herself seem larger—Annalise rummaged behind her back in the darkness, producing the white safety kit she brought, taking out a case of bandages she lifted from the medicine cabinet.

“There!”

Annalise opened the door, throwing the equipment on the floor at his scrawny, chalky feet before quickly slamming the door shut.

If this were an Angel, she thought, they were not as she had been led to believe.

For all his magic, his bluster, his wings, he oddly enough reminded Annalise of her recently deceased father, Richard. Mainly, there was a certain quality in the way this odd man spoke, a richness. His voice was angry but beneath the desperation Annalise sensed a familiar pain she would later understand as the feeling brought on by the harshest struggles in life and by the witnessing of death. It was the kind of pain shared by those experienced in having sections of their hearts dissected like frogs, crammed into the pregnant earth along with the casket, bones, ash and tears-shed. This strained, experienced voice was the only aspect of her father which Annalise remembered distinctly. Lately, his memory faded more and more; so it was good to be reminded of even that.

“I can't do anything with this!”

He prodded her, loudly, impatiently pushing the bandages aside without glancing at them.

“I *only* need to be warmed!”

His whines, louder, were sure to wake up the neighbors!

So loud he begged, Annalise imagined her sleeping mother's waking temper. Already she could hear her:

"Annalise!" Martha would say. "Can't I rest without all that noise. Don't you see I'm sick!"

Guiltily, Annalise wondered if Martha's temper might be worth enduring if enduring meant she might hear her mother's voice again. Martha lied on Annalisa's bed in Annalisa's room, having not spoken to her daughter in nearly two whole weeks time—presumably, Annalise had assumed, punishment for Annalise's having recently run away from home, lost for an entire night. While at first Martha simply ignored her daughter's voice or touch in particular, soon very little of anything would register. Before long Martha no longer went out, watched her favorite shows; no longer showered, only eating out of habit. She no longer changed her clothes, taking little care for her own well-being, which led to a cough which became a sneeze, which became an ache, which became a state of lethargy and distress, until all Martha could do was lie in her bed watching cartoons with Annalise until all hours of the morning, Annalise sat silently in the corner. On this day the morning had come without Martha, however, she instead continuing her slumber.

Therefore, Annalise decided against waking Martha. After all, two weeks could quickly become a month; and her mother needed the rest. Annalise stomped her feet, shaking her head slowly, deliberately back and forth. She lifted one finger to the center of her mouth.

"Shhhhhh...!"

"I'm sorry...I—"

The winged man laid his body gently against the glass of the balcony door.

"—Is there someone else inside? Sleeping...maybe?"

"My mother...is sick. In bed."

There was a sense of hesitation in Annalise of which the winged man, again, noticed.

If he so desired it, he thought.

"Go and get her—" he whispered, then.

"I can't..."

"Why?"

"She won't listen to me and I'm being punished and I don't want to get in more trouble..."

Annalise took pity on him. It was cold enough just standing at the door. In her home country, Richard would scold her for leaving the door open, letting the winter wind and snow into the living areas.

Barely visible beneath mounds of snow, the winged man's feet were rigid like stone. Annalise, herself safely behind closed doors, could barely feel her toes, wiggling them for both physical and emotional comfort.

"*Even* if you tell her about me? My *appearance*—"

He meant for his wings to spread gracefully about the balcony; yet they spread like an old grandfather clock, the hands slowly aching, twitching, skipping their way into position.

"—Are you not..."

His great wings were white, tattered and torn at the ends like broken strands of hair. They were not cleanly white, dirtied as tire stained snow. Old and decrepit, his wings held up with great effort being not equally raised, one drooping lower than the other. Each wing was thin, bony; seemed ill equipped for flight. What must have once been luminary feathers fell from his person, tipped in blood from his wounds, dirtying the cleaner snow beneath him.

"...impressed...?"

He smiled, rather awkwardly, Annalise noticeably quiet.

His dilemma was that he *could not* get inside without permission; would scarcely last much longer in the cold as it was possible for even *him* to die. Though he was great in size and stature, clearly mystical by his wings (and at least his theoretical ability to fly and float) he was not so dissimilar from the girl. Bones rattled with the cold winds—blood ran through his veins. He had desires, wants, felt loneliness, despair; and despite his wings, ability to fly and otherwise never-ending life he was irrationally fearful of many things, yet also irrationally hopeful for much as well. He knew he

was at this moment warmed by the once familiar human dread of death, more specifically the sense that one could never judge its time of arrival, only sensing its inevitability. It had encroached on him before along his arduous journey; but never was the feeling as close as it were now. That lingering mortality was the only true constant of all forms and stages of life and notlife. Death was always near—at least some form of it—and the dead were always eventually forgotten, their memories defaced. Nevertheless, the night was still cold, its reach fully extending to the lesions on his back.

He checked his lantern: the fire was still visible but less so than earlier.

He knew to be quick about it yet was hesitant. Lorelei could wait only so long. With each passing day his recollection of the contours of her face, waned, increasingly; as did the sound of her voice, its timbre; as did the quality of her touch; the creativity of her thought.

If he were inside, he could think.

"Please," noticing Annalise's silence.

"If she won't give it, *you* can. All I need is *your* permission."

"*My* permission?"

"Can you help me?" she said to the man.

"With what?"

"Can you make her better?"

"If you invite me in..."

"She can't see; hear—is always in bed. And is getting worse."

His wings perked like dog ears.

"All I need is your permission..."

He reached his hands to the door, his grin obscured by his thick beard.

She opened it.

"Annalise..." whispered the old winged man, gently but greedily.

"...Let me inside now so I can be warm. Then, maybe I can help your mother."

His hand reached for hers. They were small hands. They were frigid. They were rough. They were Lorelei's. Within them were answers to questions he had not yet asked. Indeed, something had

happened to Annalise, her situation was abnormal. It was before he had ever fallen on her balcony and it made him sad and tired of it all. It also made it easier.

His drooping wings, he held up with one arm; with his other, the sheet which hung clumsily from his wiry body. The process took an energy he barely possessed, his body arching as he made the effort. He thought he'd heard his Lorelei whisper over his shoulder, warning, urging, protesting him from the center of his being; though it was only the cold winter wind, as he remembered it always to be. Lorelei was far away, always further away than before, like fading clouds in the rolling mist of time. Annalise could not be helped; he decided now for sure. Still he entered the apartment, making sure to cover the lantern with his wings, watching as snow fell against the balcony windows casting shadows against the carpet floor that seemed to dance like hellfire....

