

MELTDOWN

by Meredith Russo

Rhea slammed her Economics textbook shut and opened her blinds to reveal an insultingly beautiful spring afternoon, more certain than ever that she already knew everything she needed to. Maybe not everything, technically, but close enough. She couldn't change a tire and she had to look at a reference photo whenever she sent snail mail because she always forgot where the stamp was supposed to go, but she *was* only seventeen, and she knew the important things. She quoted Howard Zinn in history class, Judith Butler in sex ed, and Sagan when they tried to "teach the controversy" in biology. And now they were trying to teach her something as basic as supply and demand even though she already had a firm grasp of Marx and Smith. It was as asinine as the day was idyllic.

She spared the window another glance and bit her lip as a breeze set the mottled copse of beech trees behind the shed to swaying. The idea was normally sacrilege, but really, there was no need to study today. What did most girls do with a free Saturday? Thoughts of EDM blasting over a car stereo while unwashed bodies grind in abandoned warehouses (movies had led her to believe this constituted a party) made her stomach turn. She opened her bedroom window, closed her eyes, breathed in cut grass and honeysuckle and a far off barbecue,

listened to the song of cardinals and children's laughter, and decided some light recreational reading on the patio was just the thing.

Then the crow flew down like a blot of black wax, landing on her windowsill with a sibilant rustle like a book left open in the wind, its talons clicking as it found purchase. They regarded each other for a moment, the crow turning its head back and forth to fix each of its iridescent black eyes on her before she reached up and slammed her window shut. The bird beat its wings and jumped back, croaking with what Rhea imagined a less rational mind would call indignation—but that would be stupid, because it was just a bird. It was a *smart* bird, certainly, as Rhea knew corvids were capable of simple reasoning and tool use, but a bird all the same.

Except that wasn't true and she'd suspected as much for a long time. She ran to her dresser and pulled out her favorite red cardigan, tossing everything on top of it aside in an uncharacteristic disdain for order. The mess would be an unwelcome disruption of her routine later, but for the moment her mind was elsewhere. She remembered the first time she saw the crow: she'd been fourteen and ecstatic as she marched out of her Nashville endocrinologist's office after her very first shot of puberty blockers. Her mother had screamed and she looked up, angry at the assumption that she was changing her mind about Rhea's transition, only to see a

black bird the size of a cat perched on the hood of their mother's station wagon. It had cocked its head and clicked its beak almost playfully.

The first time would have remained an odd story and nothing else, but then she saw it again. She was at a family reunion feeling rattled but pleased with her grandparents' reaction to her coming out, when the thing practically crashed into her potato salad and hopped over, inches from her face, twisting its head around and chirping darkly like one of the raptors from *Jurassic Park* (which Rhea hated for its many inaccuracies). She'd known it was the same bird because of the chip in its beak, the feathers missing from its left wing, and the web of scars running up its right leg, all details she didn't know she'd memorized until being confronted with them once more. Her mother didn't get as close a look though, and was thus freed from the implications of a bird following her daughter two hundred miles east, opting instead to nickname Rhea "Elvira" and pretend nothing was wrong. From that point forward it only appeared when Rhea was alone, watching her from branches as she biked to school and tapping on her window at night.

There was a rational explanation, of course. Perhaps it had some form of cerebral neotony that caused it to imprint on her like a baby would, brain damage from one of its previous injuries. Perhaps she had accidentally fed it once without realizing and now it thought of her as an easy meal. And yet somehow, despite her

approach to everything else, she couldn't bring herself to research the problem. She would open her laptop, click the search bar, and poise her fingers over the keyboard, only to decide she had better things to do. Right then, for example, getting someplace with lots of people and no points of avian ingress seemed incredibly important.

She slung her messenger bag over her shoulder and hurried downstairs, prepping to yell, "Hi mom bye mom" as quickly as possible before making her escape, but instead of the usual scene of her mother singing pop songs off key while working on a craft project, Rhea found her on the couch with her knees pulled up to her chest, eyes wide as she chewed a knuckle.

"Mom?" Rhea said, taking the final steps much slower. Her mother gasped and jerked back but then relaxed. "What's the matter?"

"They took the power plant," she said, her haunted expression returning.

"What?" Rhea said. She turned to the television and saw the nearby nuclear power plant from above, the idyllic view of its surrounding forests and the spring sun reflecting off the river marred by pillars of smoke rising from various buildings, while armed figures flitted in and out of cover. She could just make out the sound of gunfire over the anchor's reassurances that as yet the assailants hadn't shown any interest in approaching the main reactor. "*Who?*"

“That goddamn militia!” her mother said, driving the heel of her hand into her knee. The screen flashed to a video of a man in his early thirties with a thick, tan beard, thinning hair and large, wild eyes just visible through his aviator sunglasses, his mouth moving silently as the anchor spoke over him. His name was Boston Morris, and he headed a right wing militia with ties to something called the Church of God. He and his followers were suspects in almost a dozen cases of arson related to black churches and abortion clinics around the South, but had thus far evaded capture. There was a moment where, almost transfixed by his silent face, Rhea could have sworn he turned, looked directly at her, and smiled, but when she squeezed her eyes shut and reopened them his gaze was once again directed offscreen. “If they weren’t white they’d’ve been dead months ago, and now look! Look what’s happening!”

“Will you be okay if I leave you here?” Rhea said. She agreed with her ex-hippie parents on almost everything except their aversion to what they called “chemicals”, but they brought a dogmatic intensity to political discussions that made Rhea uncomfortable and often brought her to the brink of overstimulation.

“You can’t go out right now!” her mother barked. She clutched a pillow to her chest and gestured to the television. Rhea rolled her eyes.

“It’s fine,” Rhea said.

“But you’re...”

“It’s *fine*,” Rhea said. She rubbed her eye and shrugged. “They’re half an hour away and this is Chattanooga, not the sticks. It’s not like the streets are choked with roving packs of KKK Nazis waiting to beat up anything different.”

“But—”

“The Bean’s only four blocks away,” she said. She pulled out her phone, holding it out like a peace offering. “I promise I won’t leave except to come back here, and I’ll keep my phone on the whole time.” Her mother stared for a long moment before closing her eyes, taking a deep breath, and nodding.

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“You should go in and say hello,” Breanna said. He cocked his head left and right and chewed at a loose thread in his ratty black sweater, drawing a slap from the waif in the denim jacket next to him.

“And *you* should stop preening while you’re in this shape,” Athas hissed, her eyes darting up and down the street, though nobody seemed to have noticed. “If you wanna look like a human, *act* like one!”

“Bigot,” Breanna said, his voice low and croaking.

“Can you not?” Athas said. She squeezed her eyes shut and rubbed the bridge of her nose. “This is already a hell of a day, can we just leave the poor girl to read in peace? Focus on the task at hand? For *once*?” Athas gestured with a sweep of her arm to the girl in the coffee shop window with the messy bun, the angular face, and the eyebrows knitted together like whatever she looked at was the most important thing in the world. “We’ve no reason to think they’re even aware of her, and I don’t wanna scare her if I don’t have to.”

“I just think a little care is warranted now more than ever, considering what she is.” he said with a shrug.

Athas at him and grinned, wide and mocking. “What she *might be*,” Athas said. “And I’ve never known a crow to be careful. What’s your angle?”

He scratched the scar running from his upper lip to just under his eye and looked upwards in a show of innocence.

“Whatever,” she said. “People watch all you want, but Tintreach hasn’t been seen in hours and *someone* has to find him.” She stomped into a nearby alley and, with a burst of wind and a flash of light, disappeared.

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The sun was setting when even the low tinkle of The Higher State of Bean's indie rock started making Rhea feel like she was being electrocuted, which was her signal to get back to the quiet sanctum of her room so she could wind down. The power plant had been all anyone wanted to talk about, and with the trouble she normally had filtering out unwanted stimuli it had been almost impossible not to eavesdrop as people shared new developments with each other: the National Guard had been called in, apparently, and while gunfire had ceased the militia were now in entrenched positions with hostages, though Boston himself hadn't been seen in hours. Rhea had hoped this would have wound down by the time she got home, and as she unchained her bike she grimaced at an evening of her mother yelling at the television while her father played Janis Joplin too loud with his office door closed and pretended the rest of the family didn't know he was smoking weed on the roof—all of which, *especially* the smell of weed, would push Rhea's overstimulation into meltdown territory.

The only course of action, it seemed, was to creatively reinterpret the promise she made. She told her mother she wouldn't go anywhere except the Higher State of Bean, but so long as she was on her bike and didn't stop she was *technically* in transit, wasn't she? And, from a certain point of view, one had to stop somewhere to have gone there, right? Her parents were insistent that you

hadn't technically been to a city unless you left its airport, for example. She nodded as she mounted her bike and took off down Market Street toward the glass palace of the Tennessee Aquarium, sure that her reasoning gave her at least plausible deniability. Once she was in motion she immediately felt better.

Something about the rhythmic rocking of pedaling and the wind hitting her like a cool blanket, muffling out any sound that wasn't the rattle of her bike, washed the grime of excess stimulation like sand under rain. She turned toward Walnut Street and then toward the Tennessee River, hoping that after a few laps across the walking bridge she would be tired and calm enough to retreat to her room and fall asleep immediately.

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Athas stepped through the opening her spell tore in reality and found herself on the upper rail of a bridge overlooking the river that bisected the city. A gust of wind blew her pink hair into her eyes and mouth, temporarily blinding her, but thankfully a familiar pair of talons dug into her shoulder and her friend's beak pulled her hair back.

“You really should put it in a ponytail or something,” Breanna said. His voice was only audible between her ears.

Athas squinted against the wind and scoffed. “Or you could stop summoning me to unreasonable heights without warning,” she said. “Now, what’s the emergency?” The crow jabbed his beak left, where Athas could just make out the girl in the cardigan pedaling her bike onto the long wooden bridge, and then down, where a group of young, scruffy looking men slouched around a bench just beneath them. Athas closed her eyes with a sigh and, when they were open again, the real world had faded to dark blues and blacks and the men beneath her glowed gold and red. So they were magically active as well, which didn’t *necessarily* mean anything, but the black silhouettes of handguns and assault rifles just beneath their jackets told a different story.

“Shit,” Athas said, and then repeated it a few more times. “What do we do?”

“How should I know?” Breanna said, moving his wings in what looked like a human shrug. “I’m just a stupid crow. I know my place.”

“Not the *time*,” Athas said. She bit her fingernails and fiddled with the assortment of talismans and foci she had stuffed in her pockets, running a desperate mental inventory of what she could possibly even *do* here: she was only sixteen, still two years away from being trusted with a spell that could actually harm

someone, and even her mothers' most potent magic could never stand up to the lethal spells Tintreach and his disciples supposedly knew, not to mention regular old mundane lead. She could call her sisters, ask for backup, but they were all looking for Tintreach, and wasn't that more important? He was a real, actual danger, he was going to kill people, and this girl was just the subject of a batty old prophecy. Everybody knew prophecy was barely even actual magic, right? Everybody knew they were wrong as often as they were right, and Athas's great grandmother had already been a little touched. And then there were the *personal* implications for if the prophecy turned out to be true, which was maybe a little selfish to dwell on at a moment like this, but all the same the pink-haired witch wasn't sure she was ready for that kind of commitment.

“Tick-tock,” Breanna said. He pulled at a strand of her hair and she swatted at him, earning an angry croak and a tightening of his talons. He was right, though. She was only a few yards away from the men. They made a show of acting casual but even from this distance Athas could see them tensing up. It was now or never. Athas uttered an incantation under her breath, pointed at the ground a few feet ahead of Rhea, and with a flash like lightning and a sound like a window opening on a plane a hole appeared a few feet ahead of her bike. She didn't notice until her front tire fell in, at which point she made a sound like an angry duck, pinwheeled

her arms, and disappeared into the void. A cry went up from below and Athas looked down to see the men with weapons drawn, scanning in every direction for the source of the magic. She cupped her hands around her mouth and screamed, “Better luck next time, assholes!” then fell backwards into a portal of her own just before bullets and spells started flying.

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Rhea’s face hurt, as did her left leg from the knee down to the ankle, as did her hands, which felt as if they’d been scraped raw on concrete. But that wasn’t right, was it? The bridge was wood, and if she’d fallen off or through it she would have been wet (and dead). She opened her eyes and saw two things which made her groan: one, her bike lying a few feet away with its front wheel hopelessly bent, and two, a huge, empty parking lot with what looked like an abandoned shopping mall looming nearby. She crawled to a sitting position and just when her thoughts began to approach coherency a hole tore itself open in the sky and a pink-haired girl in torn leggings, combat boots, and a button-covered denim jacket floated to the ground next to her. And, before she could process *that*, a crow flew through the opening just in time for it to shut itself again, croaking angrily as it landed on the

girl's shoulder. Rhea looked closer and of *course* it was her crow, scars and all. Of course it was.

“Sorry for the rough landing,” the girl said. She clearly wanted to project an air of toughness, but as Rhea rose unsteadily she realized she was almost a foot taller than her. That, combined with her squeaky voice, undermined her air of authority pretty significantly. Or it would have if she hadn't just descended from the sky like Jean fucking Grey. “I was in a hurry.”

“Uh,” Rhea said. The girl glanced down with a look of confusion and Rhea realized she was flapping her hands like they were wet and she was trying to dry them, something she did reflexively when she was close to freaking out.

“You probably have questions,” the girl said. Rhea ground her teeth and nodded, trying to center herself and push back the wall of static that was building up in her head. The girl crossed her arms and sighed, which didn't really help things. “I don't have time for questions. I'm sure my friend won't mind dealing with you while I take care of some important business.”

“But—” Rhea said, but the girl was already gone, disappeared through another hole, leaving only the crow behind. It landed on the pavement, clicked its beak a few times, and then, in the blink of an eye, a lanky, scruffy man who looked to be in his mid-twenties stood where it had been. Rhea looked at the sheen of his

shaggy black hair, at how his eyes were solid black, at the scars on his mouth and his hand, and as much as she wanted to resist it doing so her mind connected all the dots. She tried to say something, she wasn't sure what, but all that came out was a squeak.

“What do you think?” he said, turning with a grin and framing his face with his hands. “Better than the beak? Worse? Be honest.” She didn't respond, just worked on downgrading her flapping to less conspicuous finger twitching in her pockets, and he deflated a little. The air of mischief in his face never completely went away though. “Sorry for ruining your potato salad back in the day.”

She blinked.

“And may I just say, those pills *have* been kind to you. You people used to rely on mare urine and hash, and this seems like a huge improvement.”

“...thanks?” Rhea said. She didn't ever remember her dreams, and she'd never dreamed of the crow before, but it was always best to double check. She pulled her phone out of her bag, checked the screen, looked away, and then checked it again.

“What're you doing?” he said.

“Reading is more or less impossible in a dream,” Rhea said. She pursed her lips and put the phone away again. “And even if you *can* read, the text never stays the same if you look away from it.”

“And?”

“I suppose I’m awake.”

“Which means?”

“You’re a shapeshifting crow and that girl was some kind of magician,” Rhea said, her voice flat. It seemed insane. It seemed like something she never would have accepted, but she considered herself a scientific, rational person, which meant she couldn’t bring herself to ignore concrete evidence when it was in front of her. She *should* have been excited by her exposure to something previously undocumented, but the static grew louder and she decided her curiosity had its limits.

“Good!” he said. He took her by the arm and led her to a nearby bench, where she sat and he squatted with his feet beneath him and chewed his thumbnail, looking for all the world to Rhea like a bird cleaning its feathers. “That’s the first hurdle cleared. Usually getting a zero to accept all this is a whole *thing*, and we don’t have a lot of time.”

“Zero?” Rhea said. Her lip curled. “And what did you mean by ‘you people’?” He laughed and squeezed her shoulder, which only made the wall of static stronger. How had he been watching her all this time without noticing she hated being touched?

“Sorry, crows aren’t very good at tact. I meant, you know, transgendereds.”

“Transgender,” Rhea said. She tapped her feet and rocked a little, hoping the motion would help calm her down. “Or trans. It’s an adjective, it doesn’t function as a noun or a verb.”

“If you say so.” He shrugged. “And a zero’s somebody who can’t do magic.”

“It sounds like an insult.” He cocked his head and shrugged again. Each time he shrugged it made her want to shove him that much more. She groaned.

“Take it how you want, but we really do need to hurry.”

“*Hurry* then,” Rhea said through clenched teeth, her leg shaking more violently than before. He tilted his head in the other direction and looked her up and down, his eyebrows rising.

“You okay?”

“I’m autistic and I’m running out of patience,” she said.

“You got it,” he said with a mocking little salute. “There’s light magic, and there’s dark magic. One’s good for healing and learning and gentle manipulation and one’s aggressive and direct and good at controlling and hurting things, I’ll let you guess which is which, and they move in cycles. When light magic’s at its strongest you get, in general, peace and growth and progress, so I think you can infer what the other side of the coin is. The coin’s starting to flip again, and my friend Athas and the rest of her coven are trying to minimize the damage as much as they can. Can’t allow things like world wars in a world that has nuclear weapons, you know? There’s a dark magician in your area who’s been causing trouble lately, we call him Tintreach but I think you call him Boston—” Rhea’s eyes widened at this, “and we suspected he was looking for you, which turned out to be true. Following so far?”

“Why would he want me?” she said.

“Because you’re the first true Sibyl in a millennium, which is why I’ve been pestering you these last few years.”

“...and a Sibyl is?”

“A person who unifies light and dark magic, whose very being absorbs any magic cast on them and strengthens their life force because their soul is part man and part woman.”

“Then that’s not me,” Rhea said, her face darkening. “You said I’m a zero.”

“Sibyls generally need a trigger to wake up,” he said, and then he grinned ear to ear. “Which is why my friend Athas doesn’t want the prophecy to be true.”

“Okay,” Rhea said. “But I’m also not ‘part boy’. I’m a girl.”

“But you weren’t always.”

“Yes,” Rhea said. She clipped her words and spoke slowly. “I was.” He shrugged again and Rhea wondered if he was this flippant all the time, and how the pink haired girl hadn’t strangled him yet.

“Maybe the people who wrote this stuff down had it wrong,” he said.

“Maybe the magical tapestry holding the universe together doesn’t care about political correctness. It works the way it works: only *transgender people* can be Sibyls, and the prophecy named you.”

“*Possibly*,” the other girl’s voice called from nearby. Rhea turned with a start to see her emerging from another portal, her hair whipping around her face like she was caught in a thunderstorm. “Tintreach seems to think it’s you, as does my familiar, but I have my doubts.” The crow waggled his eyebrows and gave Rhea a knowing look.

“Why don’t you want the prophecy to be true?” Rhea said.

Athas's cheeks turned deep red and she crossed her arms. The crow barked a hoarse laugh and leaned close, speaking in a conspicuous *sotto voce*.

"Because supposedly," he said, "she and the next Sibyl are destined to fall in *love*."

"Breanna..." Athas said. Her eyes narrowed dangerously.

"And the trigger for the the Sibyl's awakening?" He bit his lip like a gossip preparing to share the juiciest news of his life. "*Their first kiss*."

"Oh," Rhea said. She looked from Breanna to Athas, a wave of warmth climbing up her neck, overpowering even the wall of static. The other girl held her eyes for a moment and then looked away again. "*Oh*." Breanna cackled and Athas just sniffed and rubbed her nose. "I'm not sure she's my type." Breanna fell to the ground at her feet, clutching his sides as his laughter ratcheted into hysteria. Athas stamped her foot and growled.

"Enough!" She walked over and kicked her familiar in the shoulder before addressing Rhea. She couldn't seem to make eye contact, which was just fine for Rhea. "You and your family need to get as far away as possible. Call them and arrange someplace to meet that isn't your home."

The static returned in a rush as Rhea remembered exactly what was at stake. She called her mother first, and with each ring past the third a sense of dread

crawled up her spine. When it went to voicemail she hung up and dialed her father, but he didn't answer either.

“Something's wrong,” she said. Athas stopped in the middle of dressing down Breanna and turned. “They always answer their phones. *Always*. We have to do something.”

“No,” Athas said, grunting as she pulled Breanna to his feet and brushed him off. “*We* have to do something. Me and my sisters. *You* have to come with me somewhere safe and wait this out with my familiar.”

And that was it. With that last drop of frustration the static filled her, cracked her, and began to overflow. Where it had been white and black it became red, purple, and yellow. She wanted to bang her head on the bench or the concrete. She wanted to hit herself. She wanted to scream. What she did instead was shoot to her feet, grab Athas by the shoulders, and kiss her. The last thing she noticed before she moved beyond noticing anything was a faint sound of thunder and a thousand little shocks crawling up her body.

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“She's doing well for someone with no formal training,” Breanna said.

Athas spotted the crow a few yards away, perched on one of the power lines running from a utility shed to the power plant itself. She threw a pebble at him and he took wing, cackling until a beam of hot, white light cut just a little too close for comfort. Athas winced against the light and dodged to the side as a piece of rubble fell from the sky.

“Doing well” was a bit of an understatement. Tintreach’s men hadn’t understood what was happening when they first teleported past their fortifications (Rhea’s idea, and after her little light show nearly leveled that shopping mall Athas hadn’t been inclined to tell her no) and by the time they figured it out they had already pumped her full of so much magic that she glowed white and hummed at a frequency that made Athas want to cover her ears. When they finally switched from spells to traditional firearms it was too late, and any bullets that didn’t melt in a stray arc of the magic roiling off Rhea like a Tesla coil left a wound that healed as quickly as it appeared. Athas followed a safe distance behind the girl as she made her way through the complex surrounding the power plant, melting walls and hurling Tintreach’s men through ceilings, her hands in her pockets and her feet shuffling.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Breanna said. He landed on her shoulder, puffed his feathers, and shook a cloud of plaster dust into her face. She coughed and shoved him away.

“What would you do with a penny? I buy you everything you need.”

“I owe a magpie a favor,” the crow said as he hopped across the ground and landed on a prone form in fatigues.

“What did I say about eating people!” she said.

He looked up at her and bobbed his head in a way she’d learned to interpret as rolling his eyes. “They’re not people if they’re dead,” he said. “Besides, this one’s as alive as the rest of them. Either these idiots are supremely lucky or our girl hasn’t lost it completely.” He fluttered to perch on a nearby fence and watched as Rhea held out a hand and sent a forklift hurtling into a trailer. “You avoided my question.”

“Not a question technically,” Athas said. She took the pulse of a guy who’d been thrown through a window and checked him for any life threatening wounds. Breanna’s groan filled her head and she couldn’t help but smile.

“You sound like her,” he said. “I heard that happens when two girls fall in love. Soon you’ll have the same haircut, and by the time you get married you’ll pretty much be the same pers—”

“Oh my god, stop!” Breanna hopped up and down and cackled, but then froze and looked across the fence, tilting his head from side to side.

“You might wanna see this,” he said. Athas ran through the hole Rhea had left in the fence, easily fitting through the taller girl’s silhouette, and found Rhea, her long hair whipping in a wind nobody else could feel, staring up at a nearby rooftop. Athas followed her gaze and saw Tintreach, his hair a mess and his sunglasses cracked, holding a middle-aged woman in a tie-dye dress with the same wavy hair as Rhea, a gun to her head and an insane smile on his face.

“Congratulations on making it this far, *freak*,” he said, his backwoods drawl dripping with disgust. “But one more step and—” Rhea held out a hand and threw him in the air. Whatever he was about to say shifted into an indignant howl until she snapped her wrist and brought him crashing to the ground. She repeated the process over and over until he groaned, went limp, and dropped his weapon. Athas walked to Rhea’s side with her mouth hanging open, staring in disbelief at the man who had terrorized the South, and the magical community in general, for over a year lying in a heap on the pavement.

“That’s probably all of them,” Rhea said, her voice like a choir.

Athas turned and looked at her full-on for the first time since they arrived. The last people who’d really known how Sybils worked from first-hand knowledge

had died centuries ago so there was no way to be sure, but it looked like she was running out of juice, her shoulders sagging and the glow of her skin beginning to fade.

“Do me a favor and grab my parents?” she said. “I think my dad’s nearby.”

“You got it,” Athas said. She started to open a portal when Rhea touched her shoulder, the point of contact feeling like a nine volt battery on a tongue.

“And I apologize ahead of time if I pass out.” She locked eyes with Athas and the pools of radiance that had replaced the girl’s rich brown eyes gave her chills. “I think I might pass out.”

“That’s...” Athas ran a hand through her hair and laughed, afraid she probably looked crazy. “That’s fine, dude. That’s completely fine. You earned it.” She moved to open yet another portal when Rhea touched her shoulder again, and this time when Athas met her gaze she looked anxious, which was sort of bizarre coming from the glowing avatar of destruction she’d been only moments before.

“What’s up?”

“Do you like Thai food?” It was still hard to tell where Rhea’s pupils were pointing, but Athas was pretty sure they darted away.

“Excuse me?”

“Because there’s a good Thai place in town.” She rubbed her arm, accidentally detaching the shredded sleeve of her cardigan. “I could take you if you want.” Athas blinked twice, slowly, and then felt a grin spread across her face.

“Are you asking me out?” She heard a screeching croak and looked over her shoulder to see Breanna lying on his back, wings spread, rolling back and forth, apparently paralyzed by laughter. When she returned her attention to Rhea the girl was staring at her feet, lightly tapping her temple with a closed fist.

“Sorry,” she said. “It’s a totally inappropriate time, and my mom’s right there—” Athas looked up and saw Rhea’s mom staring down at both of them, eyes wider than should have been possible, sitting perfectly still. “And I melted down and I shouldn’t have kissed you without permission--”

“Yes.” Rhea’s eyebrows shot up and her eyes snapped back to Athas’s. “Yes, let’s get Thai. That sounds nice.”