

Flame Child

by Veronica Nail

He stands on the front porch, blowing on his numb hands to keep them warm, the cold so intense that it makes his eyes water and the hairs in his nose crackle as he inhales and exhales. The door flies open suddenly and he is met with a barrage of profanities, blows showering down upon his back and neck. He bolts, covering his disfigured face with his hands, cloudy blue eyes unseeing as he trips over stones and dead tree roots, over rusted nails and twisted car parts and puddles glistening with an iridescent film of oil floating on the surface. The air is heavy with the scent of winter, cold needles permeating the frozen ground and burrowing into his bones as his numb legs carry him away from the village and towards the woods, where the veil between what is real and what is not grows impossibly thin, threads fraying, fabric tearing, allowing things to slip through unnoticed.

He stumbles through the barren white fields, snowflakes landing on his cheeks and melting, etching trails through the years of grime and exhaustion caked on his face. As he limps along, frail body buffeted by the wind, he drags his mangled foot behind him, the cold distorting his senses, his perception of up and down, of left and right, of light and darkness. The wind tickles his stinging crimson cheeks with the memory of tall golden stalks of wheat, the sweet smell of wild roses but an illusion, a shadow in the

corner of his eye swallowed by the frost and turned to a fine dust by the mighty, unforgiving fist of Boreas.

A lone star glimmers in the distance, enticing, unreachable when trapped in this weary, frostbitten body, a shell of a person clawing at the walls. He does not remember exactly when his feet stopped obeying him, when his knees finally buckled, provoking a harmony of protests from the metal screws within, nor when his face hit the ground, while in the sky above him, snowflakes tumbled and leapt over each other, turning into water as they settled on his lips. They laugh and whisper and murmur amongst themselves, fragments of nonsense melding into each other and vanishing like a winding mountain stream splashing over rocks.

The star taunts him, the void stretching, expanding between himself and salvation as the North Wind howls his triumph, expelling from his lungs a gust of icy rage for only the birds and the gods and the lost souls to hear. And yet his heart keeps beating, a labored pulse deep within his core. A delicate, yet strong pair of hands hauls him to his feet, fingers as pale as the snow blanketing the world and through a white haze, he feels the jolt of the stranger's gait as they move towards the twinkling light in the distance

Three weeks have passed since he had awoken to feel the warmth of a fire

caressing his cheeks, felt the sensation creeping back into his limbs, the scars adorning his face warming and softening, muscles unknotting, pricked by tiny pins and needles.

In those weeks he had come to realize that he who had rescued him was not a boy but

a god. He called himself Diaz, claiming to be sixteen years of age, although his petite stature made this difficult to believe. To make up for it, he carried himself with the confidence of a boy who was infuriatingly beautiful and was well aware of it. No one knew who he was or where he'd come from, just that he had appeared on that fateful night, when an explosion had scorched the earth and poisoned the water, turning it into what was now called "The Wastes," unexplored, uncharted, uninhabited for over a decade but for a small village nestled at the mountains' fingertips.

For one moment there was balance, a quiet, sleepy summer evening, a chorus of crickets and frogs and small things chirping in the night, and then the scales tipped and one world came crashing down upon the other, a rift torn between reality and chaos, the void spilling over, a wine glass overflowing, clouds of squid ink in water, as if the other side, restrained by only a silk screen, was an ocean now being compressed into a teacup.

As time oozes by, he begins to understand why the air is different at the edge of the woods, heavier, colder, more sinister the closer you get to the trees who rattle their dry leaves and whisper-hum, in voices too low to hear, of the dangers enclosed within; a mere stretch of branches and twisted roots separating the village from the things that slip and writhe and twist through the tears in the veil and into the mortal world.

He asks Diaz why he lives so close to the edge, one night over a bowl of salty, herby chicken broth and sourdough bread, and in response Diaz flashes his brilliant smile and dismisses the question, urging him to eat quickly before the food grows cold, gray-

flecked eyes betraying nothing. A god fears no-one, he concludes as he lies in the darkness, watching the embers in the hearth pulse red like tiny fluttering hearts, not the sirenheads nor the skinwalkers, whose mournful cries are meant to entice, imitating the wails of a lost child, of a cornered doe, of an abandoned newborn mewling in the night as wolves fall upon its scent.

Spring breaks through the cracks in the snow, grasses and leaves unfurling, craning their necks towards the sapphire sky and relishing the sight of Helios's chariot painting a graceful, burning arc across the heavens.

Diaz shows him how to tend to the earth and so he does, the warm, damp, sweet-smelling soil caking his hands as he digs, fat, pink earthworms recoiling at his touch as he buries down through the crusty dirt to get to the rich part below where he lays each seed as gently as a mother her baby. He is pulling up weeds, dandelions with strong, knobby roots, when Diaz rounds the corner of the house. A violet bruise is beginning to swell around his eye, chest heaving as he catches his breath, blood dripping from his nose and all over his crisp white dress shirt. His lithe fingers are wrapped around the shoulders of two identical, trembling little boys.

"Ren and San will be staying with us from now on," Diaz says cheerfully, oblivious to the blood trickling over his lips and pooling in the dip of his chin. "Please be kind to them." He disappears into the house, shadow-like, offering no further explanation.

The next morning when he bikes down to the village well to collect water, the sight of the gallows, of the twin nooses swinging gently in the breeze, taunting, implying, threatening, the sight of a dozen bandaged, bruised men scowling at him as he pedals by is enough to open his eyes once again to his god's might and righteousness.

He grabs the shiny, red apple out of the farmer's basket and takes off, dodging around other children, ducking behind stalls, slipping into crevices that hadn't been there before, the sounds of confusion and pursuit trailing behind him like smoke from a doused flame. At the end of the lane, he catches sight of the twins, thin arms flailing wildly as they wave him over, identical mischievous grins lighting up their faces as he clambers onto his bike, breathless and flushed, the epitome of boyish happiness. The three pedal away, leaning into the downwards curve of the hill, their manic laughter swept away by the wind, high above the ground where the clouds hear and laugh along, the bluebells swaying, the river burbling and chuckling in agreement. They cruise all the way back to the forest, the feeling of freedom lending them its wings and allowing them to fly over the ruts and bumps and grassy patches of the trail, the stalks of wheat murmuring hushed warnings and tugging at their skin and clothes, leaving tiny, smarting cuts as they pedal through the fields, smiling and crying at the same time.

By the time they reach the bottom of the hill, the sun is hanging low in the sky, staining it a bloody red. Boreas has returned, as cold and angry as before, exhaling his fury in a mighty gust that carries the smell of smoke and the sound of wood smoldering and crackling, beams collapsing, water sizzling, a wall of heat distorting the world, flattening,

stretching, manipulating it in every direction like ripples breaking up the glass surface of a lake. The boys let their bikes fall to the ground and quicken their pace, hearts beating in their throats, eyes stinging as they clamber over the crest of the hill, grabbing handfuls of grasses and weeds to pull themselves up, lifting them out of the soil, the naked roots dangling white-brown in the air before being flung to the side, handfuls of dirt wrenched from the ground, wedging painfully under their fingernails as they climb the slope.

A spire of smoke rises from the house at the edge of the woods. Above the flames circles a flock of ravens, their hoarse, foreboding cries an eerie cross between animal and human, breaking apart the name and rolling it off their bumpy, yellowish bird tongues. "Di. Az." From deep within the heart of the forest comes the mournful, haunting wail of a sirenhead, a tremor spreading through the woods as the trees extend their branches and tear their roots from the earth, trunks and leaves swaying as they move. The earth shakes and he is thrown to the ground, face pressed into the wilting grass, gritty flakes of ash filling his mouth as he is pinned down by Boreas himself, the air a lead weight pressing down on his spine, phlegm and blood and tears freezing under his fingertips. Overhead, the ravens circle faster, their cries malicious, gaining urgency, the sky itself thrumming with excitement as the fire blazes on, deep reds, whitish blues, creamy yellow flames spurting from the carcass of their home, its old bones creaking as the last beam gives out, sparks, like fallen stars, shooting into the air and being snuffed into nothingness. "Diaz!" The name is wrenched from his mouth and swallowed by the

turbulent winds, whipping the flames higher and higher as the forest walks, parting, opening a path through the thick wood and to whatever lays on the other side.

He half expects to feel Diaz's small, warm hand on his shoulder, hear his musical laugh in his ear, his gentle voice guiding, comforting, a lighthouse in a turbulent sea, somehow a deity and a child at the same time. Yet there is nothing but the North Wind screaming in his ears and the sound of his own hiccupy breathing echoing in his

head. Tears well in his eyes and water the ground, the smoke scorching the back of his throat as he struggles to breathe, squinting into the flames, hoping to make out that small, familiar silhouette, a phoenix emerging unscathed from the chaos. And he does see Diaz, for a millisecond, his hand over his heart, a fond smile playing upon his lips, a boy dwarfed by the swaying forest and the wall of flames behind him and the piercing cry of the sirenhead.

With a white flash that leaves him blinking away fuzzy black spots, Diaz is gone, the heavens splitting open to mourn his departure. Unleashing a final scream of fury, Boreas pulls his icy hands away and the forest gives one last shudder before sinking its roots back into the ground, defeated, the threads of the veil twisting and writhing and weaving themselves back into place, sealing the void as it strains against its bonds, threatening to consume all. Now he is alone, crouched on the ground, sorrow rising painfully in his throat as he laments the loss of his god, tears mingling with the rainwater and soaking into the ground as his heart shatters.

