

**A Harmatian
Winter
Carol**

By

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For

M.E. Vaughan

Onset Part One: Following the Star

The more I paused to consider it, the more it seemed like a really bad idea. I mean, opening the Veil to hop between dimensions was never going to be a stellar plan. Doing it on little more than a whim... I nibbled my lower lip. No matter what Amy said, I had a tingling feeling between my shoulder blades on this one.

"Emlynn! Come on!" Amy paused again, boots planted firmly in the frost covered undergrowth of the moor. "We only have until this evening. After that..."

I frowned at her. "L-look, I know you want to see your dragon fr-friend again but I'm n-not s-sure..."

"Do not crap out on me now. Pleeese," Amy said. She somehow managed to combine huge pleading eyes with an exasperated tone to devastating effect. It really wasn't fair. She knew I hated to disappoint her.

"Aunt Mary s-said that I shouldn't m-mess with this stuff. I know you th-think you understand the physics b-but--"

"Aunt Mary said not to mess with it if she wasn't around. You were the one who decided not to bring her," Amy pointed out. She shifted the large square present wrapped in red foil paper more firmly into her arms. The bitterly cold wind teased strands of Amy's long blonde hair out of its French plait and tangled them with the gaily flapping green velvet ribbon on the present. Amy pursed her lips. "Don't you want to see Rufus again?"

And that was how she'd got me to agree to this epically foolish plan in the first place, because I really did. I'd found Rufus asleep in the heather – or massively hung over, sleeping it off with one foot in the stream – last summer. I'd been experimenting with the most dangerous aspect of my affinity for Death then too – alone, illicitly and without Aunt Mary's knowledge or approval. That hadn't worked out so well for me, playing with dimensions I mean. Somehow Rufus and I had *connected* and he'd been pulled out of his own world and dumped on the Yorkshire moor. The flip side was that Amy had been swapped and gone to Rufus' world – Harmatia in a place called Mag Mell. The difference between me and Amy was that she had had a fantastic time, while I had ended up chasing a hung-over, naked and flaming Magi through Arncliffe. If you're the local vicar's daughter, chasing a nude man past the church is pretty near the top of the list of things you do not want local gossips to see you doing.

Amy had grown impatient with my silence. "Please, Em. Please just try. We'll... we'll test it out and if it's not safe, then you just close up the Veil again and we'll go home. No harm done."

I rolled my eyes. "You muh-make it sound so easy."

"It is. You can so totally do this. And," Amy paused. "And you don't have to agonise over every decision. Really."

"Th-that's where you're wrong," I snorted. Theoretically, I could trap us both and maybe all of Arncliffe in the Veil, or shift the town back to the Stone Age or something. That sort of responsibility was going to turn me grey before I was nineteen.

Amy smiled winsomely. "Live a little. Look I just want to give Zachary his present."

"Yeah, y'see, that's what b-bothers me. You s-said this was a spur of the moment idea b-but you had time to plan, ac-acquire and wrap a pr-present for your dragon friend."

Amy refused to wilt under the weight of my scowl. The pale winter sunlight glinted on her hair. Her cheeks were rosy in the wind. She'd already won and she knew it. I was far too curious to stop now. Any reluctance was put-on. I shook my head.

"J-just don't be disappointed if this d-doesn't work," I warned. Taking a deep breath, I stilled my mind and reached out a hand. My gloved fingertips felt nothing. I started to relax and then my relief evaporated into a heady thrill of excitement as the stacked edges of reality brushed against my fingers. It was going to work...

Just concentrate. Think of Rufus. Reach out to him...

The feather like edge of one layer felt right. Green and woodsy, and somehow bright and frosty. Like the points of a star. A cold and alien star that had never shone over the Yorkshire moor. Never shone in my reality at all. I was sure it was the right place. *Here goes nothing...* I caught hold of the layer and tugged.

"What the hell are you two doing? Gremlin?"

Oh no. I knew that voice.

"Gremlin, why are you standing there like a pillar of salt? It's bloody freezing—"

"Grace," I said through gritted teeth, "now is really n-not a g-good time..." The edges of the layer of reality had become slippery in my grip... no not slippery, it was actively trying to writhe out of my grasp, like something alive.

"Never is a good time but here I am, trudging out on the moor to make sure my sister doesn't die of hypothermia or lose a hand... Wait, what the ever living fuck is that?!" Grace's tone shifted from grim amusement to genuine alarm.

"Emlynn..." Amy murmured, pressing in close to us.

"If I'd known you were out here doing your weird shit—" Grace began.

She either didn't get any further or the roaring in my ears drowned out the rest of what she was saying. I made a last desperate snatch at the layer I'd peeled back but it was no good. It billowed away like a sail in a high wind, opening a large dark triangle of space, studded with frosty points of light. The stars of Harmatia. For a second we were held between two gusts. The icy wind of Yorkshire and the somehow different, snow spattered breeze blowing through the portal I'd made. Then we were snatched up. I felt Amy's hand torn from my arm, and Grace's fingers tangle painfully in my hair for a moment before she too was whipped away. We were thrown, shrieking into the darkness.

Onset Part Two: Zachary's Midwinter Wish

No one can accuse Merle of doing things by halves, Arlen Zachary thought, eyeing his brothering apprentice with distain. *Just look at the lanky, skinny idiot. As if we needed another court fool.* Rufus was juggling – actually juggling – lowering himself to play entertainer for the oblate children as if he were not a genius and a powerful Magi at all. Zachary drew further back into the shadowed corner he was loitering in. It was far from the fire which meant that the cold was uncomfortably sharp here – orphanages tended to be draughty, dingy old buildings. But it was also distanced from the laughter and excitement. Zachary would rather be chilled to the bone than join in making merry with a bunch of fools who didn't know how stupid they were, or how little life would offer them. He'd take the trade any day.

In fact, Zachary mused to himself, if it were not for Belphegore's instructions, he wouldn't be here listening to the little brats' exuberant squealing at all. Notameer curse Rufus for wanting to spend Midwinter Eve doing something so useless and asinine. Visiting oblate orphans indeed. He watched as Rufus finished juggling the dozen or so objects that had whirled through the air, catching them neatly and setting them aside. The children – some dozen or so scrawny, huge-eyed and perpetually hungry waifs – cheered and clapped their hands, shrieking for more. Rufus grinned and bowed, dark hair flopping into his eyes. Zachary was seized with the irrational urge to sheer the lot off. It would stop his brother Magi from tugging it all the time for a start. He rolled his eyes when apples flew through the air – seemingly out of nowhere, but then Zachary had seen the dark-green velvet sack Rufus had carried in and had assumed it contained pointless treats of some kind. Rufus had an obsession with apples that was beyond comprehension. The little tykes weren't complaining either. Apples floated lazily around and children ran underneath, grinning like loons, leaping and plucking them from the air, which quickly became filled with the sound of noisy, appreciative crunching.

"Zachary!"

Arlen Zachary's head whipped up just in time to see a speeding apple zooming for his face. He started sideways, muttering something by instinct and the apple exploded in a soundless *whumph*. Zachary shook pureed apple out of his hair, grimacing with disgust. He glared at Rufus. The dark-haired Magi sent candied chestnuts flying into the air to join the remaining apples with a wave of his hand, one final flamboyant display. Zachary ground his teeth. It was so ... wasteful. As if the Midwinter Festival wasn't trying enough, a drain on

time and energy. Spending time with people you didn't like but who suddenly recalled you were related to them because the days growing short and cold had induced some state of nostalgia. Gods cursed fools, the lot of them.

Zachary narrowed his eyes as Rufus approached.

"Are you quite finished playing jester? Or do you have a host of cute, fluffy woodland creatures in your underthings you wish to reveal to your audience's insipid, uneducated cries of awe?" The words tasted like lemon juice in Zachary's mouth. He enjoyed spitting them at Rufus' feet.

Rufus frowned slightly, ruffling his hair so that it stuck up all over his head. "Did one of the novices piss in your porridge this morning?"

"Why would I need that to irritate me when our master sending me as minder for you while you play mumming fool for a bunch of grubby ingrates, provides better fodder for my temper?" Zachary snapped.

Rufus shrugged. "You need not have come if you felt that strongly about it. I'm hardly likely to run into trouble here. Although with your face frozen in that expression of distaste and scorn, you're likely scaring off any evil Midwinter spirits." The joke fell flat. Zachary felt his scowl deepening.

"Can we go now?"

"I'm finished. Let's leave before you give one of them nightmares."

Zachary saw Rufus slant a look of disapproval at him, but pretended not to see. He didn't want to talk. He didn't want to be cheered up or to be jolly or to enjoy the season. He just wanted to be left alone. Preferably in the dark, away from the singing and the laughter.

They slipped out of the hall, unnoticed by the children who were still chasing parcels of candied chestnuts with squeals of delight. Zachary told himself that he was relieved to get away from the unnecessary noise and excitement. It certainly wasn't anything to do with the children's skinny arms and pinched, hungry faces. Oblates didn't starve, Zachary knew that, but they certainly didn't get second helpings either. He realised that Rufus was watching him and glowered, trudging faster into the snowy evening. Rufus' long legs were more than match him.

"Just why did you come, Zachary?" Rufus demanded. His cheeks were rosy with the cold and his breath formed silver plumes in the night air like smoke from dragon-fire. "I'll wager Belphegore doesn't require me to be watched quite so badly as all that!"

"You would lose that wager. Since your little excursion across dimensions, our master is as nervous of your safety as a mother hen with a brood of ducklings." Zachary stopped,

remembering that he wasn't in any great hurry to get home, curfew or no curfew. He leant against the wall of a closed shop, half swallowed in shadow. It would be fully dark soon. He supposed Merle ought to get on even if he, Zachary, would be alright.

"Never mind that," Rufus snapped, his irritation crystallising into anger. "You couldn't even hide your disgust at that orphanage. We might not be true brothers as we once were but I thought better of you than to sneer at children. Poor unfortunates who have an unbelievably hard life ahead of them."

"Oblates are always taken care of. They won't starve and no one beats them or interferes with them. They're a damn sight better off than many children." Zachary forced his tone to hardness. He spoke only the truth.

Rufus stared at him as if he'd never seen Zachary before. "I cannot believe you! Those children were given to the temple orphanages. They will never have freedom or a different kind of life. They are trained to do without, to be good servants for the Temples. No they won't starve but there's more to being a child than merely having enough to eat and no one mistreating you. They were given up by their parents to pay debts for Notameer's sake. That must surely stay with them all their lives."

Zachary shrugged. "There are parents who sell extra children to brothels and slavers to make money. I'd say the oblates are far better off. You waste your time playing the fool for them. One doesn't *need* fun to survive."

Rufus paled. "It's Midwinter. Everyone should know they are cared about at Midwinter. A few tricks and games and some fruit is a small price to pay to let those children know that someone cares if they live or die."

Zachary snorted. "You cannot help all of them, Merle. So why bother?"

Rufus shook his head. "I can help those few, so why not act? What do you ever do that isn't ninety per cent selfish? What is so broken in you that you don't even know what kindness looks like anymore, Zachary?"

"I'm a realist, Merle. And it's all well and good for you to come over all nostalgic and caring because of the Midwinter-fest but don't expect the rest of us to be so foolish." Zachary almost hated Rufus in that moment. How dared his brothering Magi judge *him*. "Who are you to speak of being broken, anyway? It is not even six months since, if I must find you I would only need to look in the nearest tavern. All of us expect you to fall back into cups for good. You would be there now if it weren't for that world slip of yours, do not try to tell me otherwise. In fact it would be better if you continued on your path to being a useless drunkard

and a waste of good power, especially if it would mean you stopped preaching to me like a temple dotard!”

Rufus swayed as if Zachary had struck him. “That is your Midwinter wish, brother?”

Zachary shoved moodily off the wall and started to walk away. “My ‘Midwinter wish’ is to be alone, Merle. That means without you!”

“From your lips to the Gods’ ears, Arlen. Have a care...” Whatever else Rufus said was drowned out by the wind. Zachary told himself he was glad.

Stave I: The First Sister

You're not alone. The thought was sudden, and terrible enough that Zachary's eyes flew open. He had been asleep – truly soundly asleep for once. He stared into the dark. That couldn't be right. It couldn't be dark. Not this dark anyway. He'd joined the rest of the Night Patrol after he'd left Rufus but there'd been precious little sport in it last night. Families had gathered close and stayed together on the shortest, coldest night of the year. It seemed not even Harmatia's criminal element cared to work on the holiday and Zachary had gone home, irritable and fatigued just as light was creeping into the sky. So why was it now darker than midnight?

“Are you seriously going to just lie there?” a voice called out of the dark. “Are all Magi this bloody lazy?”

Zachary bolted upright and sprang from the bed, chemise clinging to him with sweat. Had he had a bad dream? Couldn't remember. The air in his chamber was cold enough. The fire seemed to have gone out. He cast around but couldn't work out where the voice was coming from.

“You really are a disappointment, Arlen Zachary. After what I heard, I was expecting someone...scary. Or taller, I would have settled for taller. Instead you appear to be a precious lordling in a nightie.” The voice went on in scathing tones. “Oh well, we may as well get on with it.”

“Who in the name of Penthar's sacred ball-bag are you and what are you doing in my house?” Zachary meant it to come out as a roar, but there was a breathy terror in his tone he couldn't hide.

“Huh, I guess you can't see in the dark or this darkness anyway. Weird that I can but fine...” There was snick and a flare, and then a steady golden glow shone from a candle Zachary had left on top of an armoire. “There. Now maybe we could get down to business. I do not want to be stuck here any longer than necessary.” The speaker was a girl. Or a young woman really. Maybe two decades old? She had long golden hair that hung straight and shimmering past her shoulders, piercing dark-blue eyes and an extremely sceptical expression. She was utterly beautiful, lovely in a way that sat at odds with her folded arms, raised eyebrow and general air of not being very impressed.

Zachary lunged towards her only to crash face first into the armoire with a bone-rattling crunch. The girl hadn't moved.

“Really? Lazy and stupid? Be still my heart. You’re totally knocking it out of the park if you’re trying to impress me, by the way.” She grinned.

Zachary, wiping blood from his bashed nose, thought she looked almost familiar when she did that. He’d passed right through her. As if she wasn’t there. Or not all there at any rate. He sat back on the floor and eyed her. She was dressed strangely. Some kind of form-fitting breeches in a tough blue material and a loose jerkin with long sleeves in a soft grey fabric. There was an auburn scarf around her neck and instead of a cloak, she wore a fitted black garment with buttons.

“Who are you?” Zachary said.

“I am the ghost of Midwinter Past,” the girl said and snorted derisively. “Or at least that’s what that gate keeper entity told me I should say.” She paused and gave Zachary the once over. “If you’re going to puke or pass out can you get it over with now? We’ve got stuff to do and I really don’t want to be here.”

Zachary opened his mouth to say that she could leave as far as he was concerned because he didn’t want her here either. No words came out.

“Did you hit your head that hard or are you just not as clever as Amy said? She’s always been a soft touch.”

Zachary finally managed to find his voice. “Amy? You know Amy?”

“Since she’s my sister, I should do. I’m Grace. I’d say I was the scary sister but then you haven’t met Gremlin yet.” She leaned towards Zachary, straight white teeth gleaming in a smile. “If you’re lucky you won’t!” Grace straightened up muttering something that sounded like, “although when I get my hands on her, *she* had better be scared.”

Zachary shook his throbbing head and climbed slowly to his feet.

“And he’s up! Well done, princess, now grab your handbag and let’s go.”

Go? Zachary glared at her in a way that tended to make his men edge away from him skittishly. Grace merely raised a sardonic eyebrow. “Do all women of your world speak so incautiously to men?” Zachary demanded.

“I’m not the one wearing a lace-trimmed nightgown so I’d say that question is moot.” Grace rolled her eyes. He could see the resemblance to Amy now although this older sister had none of his young friend’s sunny demeanour. Huffing out an exasperated breath, Grace held out a hand. “C’mon. I want to get this over with.”

“And just where do you think we’re going?” Zachary eyed the outstretched hand as if it were a snake.

“How the hell should I know? This is *your* redemption arc,” Grace snapped. She made a swift grab for his arm. Zachary didn’t react quickly enough. As soon as her small, cool hand encircled his wrist, there was a sickening, lurching sensation and a feeling like falling through the dark. A light rushed towards them and then they were standing in a well-lit room. Huge and ornate, lined with shelf upon shelf of books.

Zachary gasped and stumbled a step forward.

“Well that was a trip,” Grace said conversationally. “I can almost see why Gremlin does this.”

“Who is this small, furry imp creature you speak of?” Zachary demanded. “There are no fae here. They would not show themselves inside the city.”

“Furry imp? She wouldn’t thank you for that,” Grace chuckled. “Gremlin is my sister, and Amy’s. The scary one. Amy *must* have mentioned her.”

“I do not recall.”

“If you ever met her, you would. Now how about getting this show on the road?”

“What?” Zachary was not pleased to discover that he was still wearing his chemise and little else.

Grace gave him a look that said she thought he was the stupidest person she had met in two worlds. “Whatever Midwinter past this is, go and watch it. Find the scene. Cry a little. Remember you have a heart. *Something*.” She threw her hands up. “Do I have to do everything? Jeez.”

Zachary was about to snap something nasty back at her when his gaze was drawn by two figures sitting by a fireplace. The fire had died down, limning the figures with a bronze-orange glow. There was greenery strung along the first storey of shelves and over the fireplaces. Grace was right. This was Midwinter. With a start, Zachary realised that he remembered this. It was not long after he’d found a sneaking pauper had been creeping regularly into the library in order to read the books and learn to be a Magi. Instead of being punished, the boy had been apprenticed by Zachary’s own master, Belphegore. This was the Midwinter after it had happened.

Which meant...

One of the figures lifted his head and Zachary recognised himself. A younger version. He hadn’t changed greatly in appearance but this was before the days of curfew and the Night Patrol. Zachary saw something different in his younger self’s face. It was less hard, not so jaded. Missing lines of tension that might denote a fixed anger...or sorrow...or guilt...

Zachary swallowed uncomfortably. He knew what happened next. He'd been avoiding his family and friends, even Sverrin. Midwinter always seemed to bring out the worst in him. He couldn't stand seeing people celebrate when he knew the roiling, shifting tides of deceit and power that hid beneath the shining surface of the feast. Had it always been that way? Midwinter had never been a time of happiness in his father's house. Any time when his father was likely to be around more often was never going to be a happy one.

Rufus lifted his head, as if in response to something Zachary's younger self said. He looked different also. No beard for one thing but it was something indefinable too. Rufus' face was open, artless. As though he was brimming with life and enjoyed it to the full. Only now, when Zachary could trace lines of pain missing from Rufus' younger self's features, did he realise that the Rufus of now had been wearing those same indications of sorrow for a long time.

"I can tell you are not pleased to see me," Rufus said.

"I just want to be alone," Zachary's younger self growled.

"No one want to be alone at Midwinter."

"Well I do!"

"You must have spent all your previous Midwinters with the wrong people then."

"You have no idea."

"I know that it's been awkward, having me as a fellow apprentice and since it's Midwinter, it seemed like a good time to ...er...to put any difficulties behind us." Rufus smiled, artless, charming. He was always so genuine. Zachary never knew what to do with such warmth. "We have the same master now so that makes you my brother, Zachary."

"And you think that's somehow a good thing?" Younger Zachary scoffed.

"Can't think of anyone else I'd rather have as a brother Magi." Rufus grinned again. Zachary watched the scowl creeping across his younger self's face and wondered if in all the times he'd looked back on this memory, he'd ever once considered the simple and honest generosity of Rufus' offer. Making him, the surly and unpleasant Arlen Zachary, family, just like that. Something like shame pitched in his stomach, leaving a foul taste in his mouth.

"And this is for you," Rufus pulled out a small bundle with a flourish, the same artless warmth in his gaze.

A present. Zachary could count on one hand the number of times he'd been given a present without any ulterior motive, and still have plenty of fingers left over. He winced, knowing what would happen.

"Open it," Rufus urged.

Younger Zachary gingerly tore off the wrapper to reveal a tiny wooden figurine. It was a piece of beech wood, polished smooth as soap. A dragon with out-spread wings, miniature fangs and a coiled tail. It stood as high as his thumb. Detailed and exquisite.

“Did you...make this?” Younger Zachary said in an oddly hollow voice.

“Yes. You just seemed like a dragon sort of person.” Rufus smiled, clearly thinking his gift had been received well.

Even now, years later, Zachary remembered how his fingers had wanted to cling to that little dragon. He cringed at what came next.

“You need to leave.”

“Er what...? If you don’t like it...”

“I said I wanted to be alone and I meant it. Go away! And... and take this piece of driftwood with you!” Younger Zachary sprang to his feet. Rufus had already been backing away, alarm written on his features.

Zachary saw clearly, as his younger self flung the dragon into the fire, how Rufus’ expression closed in hurt. How he swallowed once hard and then said in hard-won, steady tone, “Fine, I’ll go. A good Midwinter to you, brother.”

He watched as his younger self stared after Rufus, feeling as stricken as he had in that moment. As sick at heart with himself.

“Wow,” Grace said. “You are an even bigger bitch than me. What a complete cock.” She glanced sideways at Zachary as he continued to watch his younger self. “Someone said they cared and it just scared the shit out of you.” She glanced at the figure by the fireplace. “Not a complete loss though.”

Zachary felt a pang as he watched his younger self throw himself down on his knees before the fire and reach again and again into the flames, trying to retrieve the dragon. The flames were loath to give it up. Finally, scorching his sleeve thoroughly in the process, Younger Zachary fished the figurine out onto the hearthstones where it glowed like an ember. He turned away. He didn’t need to see anymore.

“You still have it don’t you?” Grace was watching him narrowly. Her tone was amused. “Rufus doesn’t even know does he?”

Zachary thought of the tiny wooden dragon, concealed in a drawer in his room. Scorched black. One wing half missing. The tail broken off. He flushed.

“What do you want from me?” He rounded on Grace angrily.

She smirked. “Me? Nothing. In fact I think here is where I get off this insane merry-go-round...” Her voice faded and Zachary was plunged into darkness.

Stave II: The Second Sister

Zachary opened his eyes expecting darkness. Instead there was a steady warm glow of mingled candle and fire light. It was his bed chamber, he realised, but far warmer and more comfortable than he had ever known it to be before. It was odd, as if the light itself conveyed happiness. Which was a foolish, sentimental thought that Zachary would never have believed himself capable of thinking.

“Seriously? Are you going to sleep through the whole thing,” a voice muttered in peevish tones. “Zachary, wake up!”

Someone small and light jumped on the end of the bed and Zachary sat up in alarm.

“You’re awake!” the voice squealed happily.

Zachary stared. The girl bore a resemblance to his last visitor but she was younger, maybe fourteen or so. Petite, golden haired and exuberant. He knew this visitor and he’d never really expected to see her again.

“Amy?”

“Surprise!” Amy’s smile was huge but unusually she didn’t fling herself on him as he would have expected.

“Are you truly here?” Zachary said. He couldn’t have said why but the fine hairs on the nape of his neck prickled. Perhaps it was the warmth and light, the way they tugged at parts of him he had made himself forget were there. Perhaps it was because this was the second ghost to turn up in his bedroom in a single night. Even if she wasn’t really a ghost and he knew she meant him no harm.

Amy pulled a face. “Not exactly. I mean I would totally hug you and stuff, but I think I’m slightly out of phase with your reality so I’m like incorporeal.” Then she grinned. “It’s really good to see you again though and I have a...a...” Amy looked around her, patting the bed clothes with her hands but coming up empty. She turned a face full of woe on Zachary. “It’s gone!”

“What is gone?” Zachary said, feeling as if this couldn’t get much stranger.

“I had a present for you. For midwinter. I wrapped it and everything!” Amy pouted. “I must have dropped it when I got separated from...” The light in the room flared brighter than day then died to a reddish glow.

“What the...” Zachary tensed, expecting imminent attack from yet another supernatural quarter.

Amy flinched, hunching her shoulders defensively. “Okay. Okay. I *am* telling him,” she said, casting a vengeful look up at the left hand corner of the ceiling. “You don’y have to be such a... No, I *am doing it NOW!* Okay?”

The light in the room resumed its previous warm golden radiance.

“They are soooo pushy...” Amy muttered crossly.

Zachary craned his neck but he couldn’t see anything near the ceiling. Thin chills crawled up his spine. “Who were you talking to?”

Amy huffed out a breath. “The powers that be or whatever you call them. I have a job to do and they don’t like me going off script. Let’s see... oh, yeah. I am the ghost of Midwinter here and now. Come with me and know yourself better.”

“That is your script?” Zachary raised an eyebrow. “It doesn’t sound right.”

Amy shrugged and vaulted off the bed. “It’s close enough. Come on.”

Zachary threw the bedclothes back and stood, his spine popping as the tension he’d been holding was released. He saw that Amy was holding out a hand to him. “Where are we going?”

“Well d’uh! We have to wander around and see everyone having a great time now.” Her tone said this was obvious.

“This is possibly the strangest dream I’ve ever had.”

“It’s really not—”

“I can assure you it is and I’m not going anywhere without—” Zachary never finished his sentence because at that moment Amy’s hand brushed his and his bed chamber disappeared.

“Sorry, what were you saying?” Amy said, all big grey eyes and puppyish enthusiasm.

Zachary stood glaring up at the lightly falling snow of the main thoroughfare of Harmatia on Midwinter morning. “I was saying I was not going anywhere until I got dressed,” he said through his teeth. Snowflakes caught in his hair and eyes-lashes.

“Oh,” Amy said. “Yeah actually that would have made sense. That nightie is very thin, isn’t it?”

“That is because it is not a ‘nightie’, whatever in the seven planes of hell one of those is, and it is meant to be worn under other clothing.”

Amy gnawed her lower lip speculatively. “Thing is, I don’t think we can go back now. I’m on a clock, and we kinda have to just keep going forward from here. If it makes you feel any better no one can see you while you’re with me. I mean, I think you can touch things and stuff, but you shouldn’t get cold or anything.”

“Well that is a great source of comfort,” Zachary began before diving out of the way of a throng of children who raced past, rosy-cheeked and laughing. “Festering Midwinter,” he muttered, righting himself.

Amy cocked her head to one side. “I don’t get it, why don’t you like Midwinter?”

“Do you even have it where you come from?” Zachary said disdainfully.

“Of course. We don’t call it Midwinter when we’re talking about the festival, but yeah. There’s a big holiday and families get together and there’s presents and food. What’s not to like?” She seemed genuinely to not understand.

“You have the answer to your question in your own words,” Zachary said, with an unseen baleful glare at a group of laughing young women.

Amy wrinkled her nose. “Families coming together? That’s kind of a bullshit reason not to like something. I mean it doesn’t have to be your actual family. You could get together with your found family.”

“Found family?” Zachary sneered.

Amy scowled, opened her mouth to speak and then winced as she had in his bed chamber, as if hearing a voice that he himself could not. “Maybe later,” she told him. “We have stuff to do first. And I am going to prove to you that everything feels better at Midwinter.”

Zachary highly doubted that but it didn’t look as though he was going to get much choice in the matter so he followed the small girl as she led the way into the packed streets of the city.

At first it was exactly as bad as Zachary had expected. People everywhere. People laughing, joking, eating and hugging. Everything was too bright, garish in its warmth. All the things about the Midwinter Festival that Zachary most disliked were shoved in his face and he was forced to wade through all of it, instead of staying in his own house, quiet and dim and alone as he preferred. And then the strangest thing began to happen. It was subtle at first but Zachary noticed that his first impression was wrong. He and Amy stopped by a group of young women and men who were playing in the town square. That is, they were dancing a four hand reel but they were having such fun, and at least two of the men were making such a mess of their footwork, that it looked more like a game than a performance. A small crowd gathered, clapping, stomping and whooping in time to the fiddle and bodhran played by two young Bethenians. For a moment, it was just as loud, pointless and garish as everything else, the snow and ice adding extra misery as far as Zachary was concerned. And then that same golden warm radiance washed gently over the scene and he saw that it wasn’t pointless at all.

That these young people worked endless days and had little respite and here they were dancing the stars to sleep and the solstice in. Maybe they didn't even really understand the tradition, but they were doing it with joy and that joy spread out and touched everything around them with the same golden gleaming.

Amy turned to him, face flushed with delight. "It's wonderful!"

Zachary fought to keep hold of his scowl. "They're messing up their steps."

"Come on then, if you can do better!" And Amy grabbed his hand. She wasn't solid, not really. But she was a firm, cold pressure on his fingers and he couldn't pull free. He stumbled into line with the other couples, opposite her, just as the lead couple 'saluted the stones' and made their way down the outside of the lines. Then it was his and Amy's turn. Zachary shook his head, glaring at her.

Amy grinned. "A big dragon isn't scared of a little dance now is he?" Her voice was too soft for anyone else to hear and Zachary narrowed his eyes, all his old youthful competitiveness rising to the fore.

"You had better be able to keep up," he warned her.

Their hands met in that same strange, tingling almost touch and then they were away. They whirled and parted and met and threaded in and out of the other couples as the crowd roared its approval. Perhaps no one else could see them as they were, Zachary thought, but they certainly seemed to see another couple dancing the solstice in. And he and Amy were good. Amy was light on her feet, naturally nimble and full of exuberance. Zachary had had a dancing master when he was growing up and could still make a good show if necessary. Now he was caught in the same golden radiance. He felt his heart take off as if it had wings and his feet followed. It was as if they really were treading a path through the stars for the sun to follow as it was reborn. Amy was laughing, her eyes sparkling with fun. Zachary was startled to realise that he was laughing too. Not thin, sardonic laughter full of bile and cynicism, but a sound full of joy. Then reached the top and peeled away down the sides of the rows of couples, meeting again at the end, as the other young men and women cheered them on.

Amy grinned at Zachary and he rolled his eyes but smiled in return. It was like that wherever they went and Amy took him everywhere. She had an endless appetite to see how Harmatians celebrated 'yule'. Seeing it through her eyes, Zachary couldn't help feeling the warmth and kindness and happiness of the holiday. The togetherness. They played games. They spied on his fellow Magi – although when Zachary realised they were in a bed chamber with Emeric and Marcel, he hustled Amy hastily from the room – everyone was having a wonderful time. And it wasn't pointless. It was a spark of hope in the darkest part of the year.

“So, are you going to admit you’re having a good time yet?” Amy arched an eyebrow at him.

Zachary crunched down the last of his candied chestnuts – he’d been obliged to eat some of whatever Amy had thought looked appealing. She’d been very disappointed that she couldn’t eat anything herself so Zachary had had to appease her by trying everything. He couldn’t actually remember when he’d last eaten so much. Or in fact enjoyed eating for its own sake rather than simply to fuel his body. Because there was something about eating in communion with others, wasn’t there? A sharing of the years labours and trials and triumphs that went beyond mere food.

Amy tapped her foot impatiently, waiting for an answer.

“You said ‘found family’?” he asked instead.

“Alright, you want to see your found family?” She clutched his sleeve, grip, coldly tingling and almost not there. The street faded and re-emerged. “Know where you are?”

“This is...the orphanage?” Zachary felt all his previous warm happiness clench defensively.

“There’s no need to look like that,” Amy said tartly, dragging him along. “It’s Midwinter here too.”

“But I visited here yesterday with Merle,” Zachary said. Even he heard the whining tone in his voice.

“It won’t take a minute.” Amy eyed him beadily.

Grumbling Zachary followed her into the Oblate Asylum. They found themselves in a dormitory between rows of small truckle beds. The beds were all empty because the orphans were huddled in a knot at the tint fire place. Not that there was a fire or any description, just a handful of slowly dying embers. There was no chance of a better blaze for there was no wood left. The oblates weren’t looking at the fireplace though. Despite being huddled together for warmth, they were tense with excitement, listening to a story told by a thin, little oblate girl in a ragged tunic. She had a wasted leg that was twisted at the knee and would drag when she walked. Zachary winced. The outlook for oblates who were not physically perfect was bleak, if they survived the years of cold and hunger while they were training. And then he saw Amy go and stand behind the girl. Golden radiance welled up around the orphans and they stopped shivering so hard. Amy. The warmth, the radiance and hope...the love...it was all coming from Amy and she didn’t even know it. Zachary blinked. The girl with the twisted leg seemed to have more energy all of a sudden. Her story became even more exciting and the other orphans gasped, bright eyed with delight as they listened. Zachary paid more attention to the

subject matter of her story then and found himself scowling at a fanciful account of how a magi – that same magi who gave them fruit yesterday – had fought off the entire Night Patrol and sent the dragon yelping up into the night sky.

“She’s good, isn’t she?” Amy said, unheard and unseen by the orphans.

“Her tale lacks realism,” Zachary replied.

Amy rolled her eyes. “Yes but look at them. They have hope. They are having fun because she can see further than these four walls.”

Zachary glanced at the girl with the twisted leg again, seeing the light and animation in her thin face. His heart smote him. It did no good to become attached to those who would soon leave the world forever. “She is remarkable,” he conceded gruffly.

“Found family,” Amy stated. “These children were given up by their real families but they have formed a family together.”

“It won’t last,” Zachary said harshly.

“Maybe not,” Amy said. “But it’s important to be the best person you can in every moment. And maybe they won’t be together for long but in this moment they’ve created something miraculous.” She glanced sadly around the bare room. “They need hope, they have little else and many of them won’t survive.”

“You sound like Merle,” Zachary snapped. “Tell me, what good does it do to try to help? There are too many unwanted children, from rich families as well as poor ones. Too many children neglected, abused and mistreated. You cannot help them all. Were you to devote every living moment to the task, you could scarce make a difference t their vast numbers. The strong survive and the weak are perhaps best off dead.”

Amy’s gaze was full of disappointment. “You can make a difference to one. Just one child is enough. You can change the world, the universe, by acting in the interests of one. If everyone saved just one, then there would be no vast numbers as you describe.”

Just as he had with Merle, Zachary felt...small. Diminished in the gaze of someone whose opinion he valued. The golden radiance around Amy brightened again.

“And I know you don’t really believe what you just said.”

“How would you know that?” Zachary demanded.

Amy smiled and grabbed his sleeve again. This time they were stood in the kitchen of the oblate asylum. A plump, motherly woman, wrapped well against the cold, was stood arguing with a man who was presumably the cook. There were several baskets of firewood scattered around and another basket containing meat and fruit and bread.

“Mrs Benson,” Zachary said in surprise. He stared at the supplies she had clearly brought with her.

“She comes here four times a year on the great feasts and gives food and toys and clothes which she knits and sews herself, to the oblates,” Amy said.

“But, where does she get the coin for this?”

Amy gave him a very sardonic look. “You give it to her. Don’t you remember?”

And at that Zachary did remember. Heather Benson had used to come to him often asking his permission to send a little food and firewood to the poor. He’d got annoyed with it a few years ago and told her to use her own judgement and take what she thought was fair but for Prospan’s sake, not to trouble him with it any more. Apparently Mrs Benson had taken him at his word.

“You’re not a dead loss, Arlen,” Amy said. “I mean you should try to pay attention to other people more. Maybe trouble yourself to wander down here on occasion because that fat bastard of a cook is going to steal and sell all those goodies the minute Heather is out of here. The children won’t get them.”

“Heather has been doing this all this time?”

“Yeah, and in your name apparently.” Amy shrugged. “Come on.”

Zachary expected the world to lurch sideways and right itself that time so it didn’t take him by surprise. The house in the Lesser City they were stood outside did, however.

“This is Torrin and Nora Merle’s house.”

“Yep. And if I’m not mistaken they’re about to sit down to a Midwinter Feast,” Amy said.

Zachary peered through the window and saw she was right. It was pretty meagre as feasts went but there were Rufus’ parents and there was Rufus himself, bookended between family friends as everyone ate and drank and laughed.

“Take a closer look at Rufus,” Amy urged.

Zachary did and for the first time he realised that there was something off about Rufus’ laughter. A false note, like someone trying to appear happy rather than someone who actually was. It occurred to Zachary then that there had been something wrong with Rufus for a while. He had noticed it, hadn’t he? The increased drinking. The surliness. The way Rufus wanted to pull away unless he was helping someone else.

“What’s wrong with him?” Zachary asked.

Amy tilted her head to one side. “I’m not allowed to talk about the past. But I’d say he’s deeply unhappy. Your brother. Your found family.”

Zachary felt a cold ripple of fear, not for himself but for Rufus. “What’s going to happen to him?”

“I’m not meant to talk about that either. It’s the future. But I have this feeling that there’s a crisis coming,” she shook her head. “People ask for help in the strangest of ways sometimes. And if no one is listening...”

“He could ask me for help at any moment he chose!”

“No,” Amy said sadly. “I don’t think he could. And I think Midwinter might be harder for him. It always is harder to be the one left behind.”

Zachary frowned and was about to ask what she meant but Amy stepped back abruptly.

“I have to go,” she said.

“Go?”

“It’s midnight. My time is up. I’ve missed you, Zachary. Please try to remember that you are kind and you do care. You don’t actually have to like people to do that, you know.”

“Amy, wait!”

“There’s no time. She’s coming. I can’t stay. Be brave.” Amy smiled sadly and faded back into the midwinter night.

Stave III: The Third Sister

Zachary stared but no amount of staring, nor his thumping heart, would bring his little friend back now. He felt it then, cold prickles on the nape of his neck and he turned. A young woman was watching him. At first he didn't think there was anything very remarkable about her. She was very tall and she wore the same strange clothes as both his previous visitors. Her curling dark hair trailed over her shoulders and blended with the shadows and her eyes were a brilliant green. And then some unknown sixth sense told him that she was not to be argued with like Grace, or romped with like Amy. Here was danger in the most unlikely of packages. It radiated from her in cold, crackling waves.

"You n-need to come with me," she said. Her voice – warm, husky-sweet and slightly stuttering – did nothing to dispel Zachary's unease. If anything the chill on his skin grew.

"Why?"

She looked at him sadly. "Because someone w-wants you to know w-what's coming."

He had the oddest impression that she would be apologising if she could. As if she knew something he did not, something bad, and was sorry for it. At the same time he felt sure she would change nothing. Here was a young woman who would make hard choices and live with terrible truths, because to do otherwise would be to invite far worse fates.

"Who are you?" Zachary said, and he could hear the fear twisting its way into his voice.

She smiled wryly and this time she didn't speak aloud. She did something far more terrifying. Zachary heard her words clear and cold ringing in his own mind. *I am the ghost of Midwinter Yet-to-be. Sister to those who came before me. I bring you the truth and show you the path your actions will lead you too. Come with me.*

Zachary didn't want to go with her at all. He wanted Amy back. If all he had to do was be a bit more thoughtful and actually indulge in a little fun, he was good with that. He thought he could probably make a good stab at it. He followed the young woman reluctantly anyway.

The night melted around them, reforming on the shores of a lake just outside the city. The girl stretched out a pale hand, pointing and for a moment it seemed to Zachary that she could tear reality apart with that hand like silk off a screen if she wished too. Surely she was one of Athea's own? And then he saw the man sitting on the sandy shore. There was a scattering of flasks and empty wineskins around him.

“Rufus?” Zachary said, frowning.

Rufus did not look up. Zachary knew he couldn't be seen and he also knew that Rufus had reached that terrible clear state of drunkenness where he who seeks relief in spirits does not pass out but instead continues coldly aware, and bad decisions seem not only reasonable but the only thing possible. The only rational solution. Zachary moved closer and gave a cry when he saw Rufus' gaze. Here was his brothering apprentice on the edge of madness, driven thence by who knew what. Some terrible, unspoken loss. Some loneliness beyond Zachary's ken. He knew then what would happen next and he was powerless to stop it.

Rufus rose, considered first his empty wineskins and then the distant gate. It was long after curfew, surely Rufus would not be fool enough to enter the city now? Not even to find more to drink. Zachary did not consider that there was a greater danger until Rufus stepped blindly out onto the creaking ice of the lake. It seemed that the ice would hold and Zachary watched, breath caged in his throat, willing his brother to make it to the other side. A great crack rent the frozen air.

“Rufus, stop! Rufus!”

He did not hear Zachary's cries. Another step on the ice and then the creaking cracking became a roar. The ice gave way and Rufus dropped like a stone into the black waters of the lake. He didn't surface, not even once. Heedless with panic, Zachary ran forward, throwing himself on his belly where Rufus had fallen through.

“Rufus? RUFUS!”

He stabbed his hands into the agonisingly cold water, searching for something, anything to catch hold of because Rufus couldn't be dead. He couldn't be gone forever.

Zachary glared up at the third sister. “Help me!”

She gazed back with fathomless green eyes. *Only you can save yourself.*

Something in the water grabbed Zachary's wrists in a tight, clinging grip.

“Rufus?” One last word, a last gulp of air and Zachary was yanked through the ice. Down, down, down into the dark, the cold, the nothingness...

He tried to scream but water shoved frozen fingers down his throat, clawing its way into his starving lungs. And in the dim below him he saw the trailing dark robes of his dead brothering apprentice. There was no way to save him. No way to save himself. That old panic. That fear of being confined, rose from his childhood memory and threatened to stop his heart. He was flagging. Strength and warmth draining away into the dark. *Not like this. Not like this!*

And then there was no water. There was a killing field. The mud around his ankles was churned into a bloody red soup. All around the screams of the dying. All around, parts of men, parts of women, scattered in the torn ground. The sky was dark lit to hellish fire on the horizon. Zachary realised he was looking down on a dying Marcel. Half his friend's face was missing. "Why, Arlen? Why....?" The last word expelled on a bubbling exhalation of blood and Marcel's eyes went flat and grey.

Zachary lurched back. Everywhere there was horror. He had seen dead men before. He had created dead men himself. But this was beyond his imagining. This was carnage wrought to the breaking point of the mind.

"Why is this happening?"

This is the world without Rufus. The third sister stood beside him. This is the consequence of your self-involvement. One person saved or one person abandoned can change the course of survival for an entire world. Do you like what you have made, Arlen Zachary?

Zachary stared at her in horror. "No! No, I never wanted...I just wanted..."

To be left alone? We are alone, all of us. But we are meant to affect each other for good and ill. You could have stopped this with a little less selfishness.

"Wait...if you are the ghost of yet-to-be...is this... Has it happened? Or is it merely a shade of what might come to be?"

The girl raised an eyebrow, smile cold and cynical. *Does it matter?*

"It matters because I can change it! It matters because I am not the same person I was before!"

Another cold smile.

"I think Midwinter the feast is stupid, yes. But not everything that goes with it. Not hope!"

But there are so many, uncounted numbers in need. You can scarcely help enough for it to make any difference. The girl mocked him with his own words.

"I can help one! One is enough! I can help Rufus. I can help the oblate girl. I can...I can help those who need it. If someone crosses my path and needs help, I should help them. I can see that now."

The girl looked at him, green gaze hard and implacable.

"Oh please," Zachary sobbed, looking at the ruins of Harmatia, "please! Why show this to me if there is no hope?" He reached out to take hold of her but she stepped away and away, fading into shadow. "PLEASE!"

His hands passed through hers and he fell flat on his face in the cold, blood soaked earth.

Finale: Zachary

The coppery scent of blood was gone. The wet claggy mud was gone. His chemise no longer clung to him with frozen lake water. Zachary pushed himself up off his face to find himself kneeling on his own bed. He swiped his hands over his tear-damp face. Had it all been a dream? It hadn't felt like a dream. The terrible urgency, the horror of what lay in the future if Rufus died, all of it clung to him.

The door to his bed chamber opened and Heather Benson appeared carrying a pitcher of steaming water and drying clothes. "Good morning, Master Zachary."

Zachary watched as Heather placed the pitcher and clothes down. Found family. Yes, she was, wasn't she? Heather had been more mother to him than anyone. He was so glad to see her. Glad to be here in the imperfect but still hopeful Harmatia of now. Zachary leapt off the bed and grabbed the plump Heather in a hug, lifting her bodily off the floor and spinning her around.

"Good morning and Midwinter Tidings, Heather," he cried.

"Put me down!" Heather laughed breathlessly. "What in Haylix's name has got into you?"

Zachary gave her a sound kiss on the cheek and deposited her on the floor. "Have I told you recently how important you are to me, Heather? If not, I'm sorry. And I'm sorry I'm such a grumpy misanthrope. I promise I'll do better."

Heather's cheeks were a brilliant scarlet. "Er yes...well, thank you."

"Are you visiting the Oblate Asylum later?" He wouldn't have thought it was possible for her to go any redder but the blush spread down her neck.

"Yes...I am...I'm sorry but you said--"

"I know what I said," Zachary replied impatiently. "I'm taking it back. And I will be accompanying you. I want to have a word with the cook, for one thing." He gave an unconsciously evil smile that made Heather shiver a little. "Oh but wait until I get back, would you? There's something I must do first."

Zachary got dressed at the speed of joy and set off for the Merle's house. He found Rufus outside, looking melancholy. He supposed the festivities had become too much for his brooding apprentice and he'd sought a few minutes' respite.

"Merle, Midwinter Tidings to you," Zachary said.

Rufus looked up in surprise. His eyes were already a little bleary. Had he been drinking already or had he merely made a night of it? "Zachary?"

“I have need of you brother. Can Torrin and Nora spare you for a time?”

“On Midwinter Feast Day?” Rufus shook his head as if he thought he might be dreaming. Zachary laughed and Rufus looked alarmed, making him laugh even harder.

“Yes. It has to be today,” smiling a little, Zachary said, “I know all is not well with you, brother, but I also know you’ll not tell me anything until you are ready. So in the meantime I need your help.” And he put his hand in the pocket of his cloak and pulled out a tiny, carved and somewhat scorched figurine of a dragon with out-spread wings. *I’m sorry*, Zachary thought meeting Rufus’ gaze.

Rufus stared at the dragon, eyes gaining an extra sheen for a moment until he blinked. His throat worked as he swallowed hard but he dropped his hostile manner. “Help with what?” Rufus said warily.

“I think it’s time the directorship of the Oblate Asylum changed hands and I need someone with the brains necessary to help me negotiate. What do you say? A good deed for Midwinter? We might dance a few reels and play at apple bobbins on the way back. I know you like apples.”

A slow smile cut through the sadness on Rufus’ face. “I’ll go with you, on the condition that we stop to hear a proper midwinter story.”

Zachary laughed again. “I have the feeling we won’t have any trouble finding a storyteller.”

“Oh and this is for you,” Rufus held out a square package tied with a green ribbon. There was a label on it reading ‘To Zachary, Merry Christmas. Love, Amy xxx’ “I can’t think how it came to be here behind the water butt.”

Zachary took the parcel but didn’t open it, just clutched it to his chest a moment.

“Who’s Amy? The name seems familiar. And what is ‘Christmas’?” Rufus said, curiosity over-coming his lingering sadness.

“I’ll tell you on the way, brother.” Some of it at least. Zachary swallowed the lump in his throat and he and Rufus walked into the snowy morning. For a moment, it seemed a golden glow of radiance touched everything, flaring like an ember in Zachary’s chest where his heart was. *Thank you, Amy.*

Epilogue: Emlynn

It was going to be a really long time before I tried opening any doors between worlds again, no matter what arguments Amy made. We found ourselves back on the moor, lying in the thickening frost. Grace picked herself up, looking at me as if she had a lot to say and could not get it into any sort of order.

“Um s-s-sorry?” I offered.

She rolled her eyes but helped me up. We both pulled Amy up. Our little sister looked dazed and vaguely annoyed.

“So just what exactly happened?” she said.

I lifted an eyebrow. “I think you just gave Harmatia its first n-nineteenth century ghost story.”

“Nice going, Shortie. You’ll probably have started an industrial revolution or something,” Grace said.

Amy shrugged. “Doubtful. They’ve got magic so they don’t really need one.”

Grace shuddered.

“I can’t believe after all that I didn’t get to give Zachary his present!” Amy said.

“What was it anyway?” Grace asked. “Please tell me you didn’t give him a DVD player or anything?”

“It was a scarf – a nice red one – and a book.”

“A b-book?” I said. “W-what b-book?”

“Um...” Amy smiled sheepishly.

“It was a copy of Dicken’s bloody Christmas stories wasn’t it?” Grace said. “Urgh. You two are going to turn me grey! Come on, Dad’ll be home soon.”

Amy and I laughed and reluctantly Grace joined in. We linked arms and headed home, family and found family in one. United against the cold winter wind and warmed by each others’ company.

“Do you think Zachary is okay?” Amy said wistfully.

I smiled. “I know he is.”