

An Excerpt from Prospero in Hell by L. Jagi Lamplighter

Chapter One: The Bird of Ice and Snow

The three of us hurtled through the night on the back of the winged horse. Miles of ice and pine flew by underfoot, glimmering in the moonlight. The arctic night was bitterly cold, but even the biting chill could not dim the joy of flight, the crispness of the air, nor the power of Pegasus's wing beats; how easy it would be to forget earthly life and dwell only in the sky!

Behind me, Mab shouted something, but his words were whipped away by the wind. Leaning over, I freed my flute from where I had secured it to the saddle and held it up for Mab to see. He nodded grumpily and inserted a pair of orange hunting earplugs. Raising the four-foot length of polished pinewood to my lips, I played a quick trill.

The freezing northern winds grew gentler. Their constant roar muted; I could hear the steady flap of our steed's wings and the singing of my brother Mephistopheles, who sat before me. Mephisto had been keeping up a running narrative in song, ever since we left the North Pole. I thanked my Lady that the noise of the winds had previously protected me from his impromptu recital.

I secured my flute and Mab pulled out his earplugs. We were on our way home from the North Pole, heading for Mephisto's home in the wilds of North Canada. Our plane had gone down on the way to visit Father Christmas, so we were constrained to travel by one of Mephisto's many supernatural beast friends. Currently, we flew on Pegasus, the horse that once carried the Greek hero Bellerophon up the heights of Mount Olympus. Bellerophon was struck down with lightning for his impudence. I prayed that our journey would not meet a similar fate.

"There's a storm brewing, Ma'am. Snow coming." Mab spoke with a heavy Bronx accent so that his "there" sounded like "dare." How an incarnated Aerie One came to have a New York accent, I did not know, but a lot of things about Mab defied explanation. "Might not be good for us," his voice grew heavy with sarcasm, "considering our mode of travel."

"Hey! You be polite, or Pegasus will hear you!" cried my crazy brother, interrupting his aria. "It's not his fault you crashed your stupid plane. Is it, Peggie?" He leaned over and stroked the winged horse's smooth neck.

"I'll take care of it," I interrupted before they could start sparring with each other. "Earplugs again."

Mab obliged, and I began to play again.

My flute sang with the voice of the cold wind. It was as if speech had been given to cloud, and night, and the chill of winter air. Their song lightened my spirits. So glorious and enchanting was the medley that I nearly forgot my purpose and gave myself to the music and the night sky.

The winds I summoned dispersed the gathering clouds, and we flew on unobstructed. Unhindered, Pegasus sped along, making good time. This cheered me. It was important we get back to civilization. A great deal of work awaited me at Prospero Inc.. Also, I had not yet finished carrying out the orders from my father's last letter, instructing me to warn my brothers and sister that the Three Shadowed Ones were after our staffs. On top of all this, I still had no idea what doom was supposed to befall my family on Twelfth Night. The demon Baelor of the Evil Eye had not been specific.

Whatever it was, only eleven days remained in which to stop it.

I strapped my beloved flute back into its holder. My wrist brushed against a firm bulge within the pocket of my white cashmere cloak. I smiled and reached inside to touch the slender leather volume: *The Book of the Sibyl!*

After five hundred years of searching, it was finally mine!

It saddened me that I had not had an opportunity to thank Astreus Stormwind properly. Just after he handed the book to me, back at Father Christmas's mansion, an elfish servant had come running to inform us that Mephisto had been found face down in the snow, as stiff as a board, the butt of some elvish prank. Luckily, a drop of Water of Life had revived my brother.

Then, while Lady Christmas fed him soup in her enormous kitchen with its rows of hanging copper pots, I went in search of Mab, whom I found hanging in a closet next to Father Christmas's many red and green robes, his trench coat caught on a hook so that he hung by his arms.

When I asked him what had happened, he just colored. "You...you'd rather not know, Ma'am. Just chalk it up to the folly of agreeing to eat dinner with elves."

By the time we came back to the main hall, the elven High Court had ridden out across the ice, except for Astreus, who had departed through the Uttermost Door, heading back into the Void to carry out whatever terrible task it was that the Elf Queen had bidden him to complete.

My thoughts strayed to the elvish Lord of the Winds and how he had brought me this book I so desired. Before he departed through the Uttermost Door, he told me how he had found the original scroll in such sad condition that he could not take it away with him. Instead, he had copied it, in its entirety, by his own hand and carried it with him for over three hundred years.

Thinking of Astreus helped drive back the biting cold. I recalled his laughing, his changing eyes, and, most of all, our marvelous flight the previous night, as we had soared through the midnight sky on the back of a giant black swan that had flown out of an unknown constellation. More than once, my thoughts returned to the taste of his lips – until I remembered our kiss had only been a dream.

What had motivated him to find the book for me? Had he been human, I might have hazarded an opinion. Human men undertake difficult quests on the behalf of maidens for predictable reasons. But, an elf? Who could begin to guess? They were prey to strange elvish impulses no mortal could comprehend.

"It's happening again, Ma'am," Mab said overly loudly; his ears were still plugged. I played another rousing tune. Again, the clouds dispersed.

The moon set, and we rode for a time in darkness. Then, to our left, the fiery fingers of the rising dawn painted the sky with a rosy and golden hue, reminding me strikingly of the ever-dawn of Astreus's home of Hyperborea. Soon, the snow beneath us glowed with matching colors, so that the dark green spruces and firs seemed to sprout from an ocean of burning cherry and gold.

A snowflake blew cold against my face. I caught another on my tongue.

Snowflakes!

“Something’s not obeying me.” I frowned and began to scan the skies.

“Good for them,” Mab muttered behind me.

Mephisto cried, “Oh, yeah, Mr. Looks-Into-Other-People’s-Business-For-A-Living! Before you get all high and mighty about how my sister’s flute jerks you around like a puppet, let me point out that *we’re* the guys who are going to freeze our tushies off if the weather stops obeying the *Staff of Winds!*” Mephisto glanced over his shoulder at the flute. “Can it even do that?”

“The winds and Aerie Ones who have sworn upon the River Styx cannot fail to obey,” I replied. “But we are somewhere above northern Canada. There are spirits here no Prospero, Inc. agent has ever encountered. Creatures we’ve never needed to bind because they seldom encounter, much less trouble, human beings. Anything could be out there.”

“Really!” A gleam came into my brother’s eye. He stood up in his stirrups and peered into the night. The *Staff of Summoning*, still handcuffed to his right wrist, swung free as he gestured, nearly smacking me across the cheek. He rubbed his thumb and first two fingers together and made a *tta tta tta* noise and then shouted, “Here beastie, beastie!”

“Shhh!” Mab reached around me and yanked on my brother’s royal blue surcoat, which he wore over his parka, trying vainly to pull him back onto the saddle. “Put a lid on it, Harebrain.”

“But I want to catch it!” Mephisto held up the six feet of intricately carved figurines, stacked atop one another like totems. The jeweled eyes of the many beasts and mythical creatures glittered in the moonlight. “For my staff!”

“Great,” drawled Mab, “And if it turns out to be one of the Three Shadowed Ones? I will remind you that our plane crashed because it was *torn apart by demons.*”

“Oh. Good point.” Mephisto sat down again.

A tense moment followed. We peered into the distance, yet could see nothing but snow clouds before us and, elsewhere, morning blue sky. The winds remained quiet at my command, but the wall of white ahead loomed closer. I held my flute at the ready. Mephisto waited eagerly. Mab examined the sky, his hand gripping his trusty lead pipe.

A great alabaster bird, larger than a condor, flew out of the snow bank. Cawing angrily, it spread its jagged wings ahead of us. As the wings parted, a flurry of snow swirled toward us. Snowflakes brushed against my face like so many cool feathers. Only as they began to melt against my skin did their intense cold reach me.

“A p-son-en!” Mephisto leapt up and balanced gracefully upon the shoulders of the flying horse. “I’ve always wanted one of those!” He threw his arms wide, his staff flailing. “Hi, I’m Mephistopheles Prospero, Don’t you recognize me!”

Behind me, Mab put his face in his hand and shook his head.

“At least life with Mephisto is never dull.” I smiled.

“No offense, Ma’am, but I could do with some dull about now,” Mab muttered. “Two hours on a coat rack was more than enough excitement for me.”

I asked him to explain, but he just shook his head and grunted. “You don’t want to know, Ma’am. You don’t want to know.”

The p-son-en brought its wings together, as if it were clapping and then yanked them apart, screaming in fury. Shards of ice flew forth like flying daggers.

Everything happened at once. I raised my flute to call a wind to blow the icicles away from us, but as the cold wood touched my lips, I realized Mab had taken out his earplugs. If I

gave the command now, the flute would compel Mab to obey it. He would be forced to leap from the horse and block the attack with his body. While the flute could control his will, it could not grant his fleshy body the power of flight. He would plummet like a stone.

True he could depart his flesh in an emergency, but the fall would destroy his body. Without Father, I was not certain I could convince my sister Logistilla to make him another one—and, of us, only Logistilla and her *Staff of Transmogrification* had the necessary power and skill.

Lowering my instrument, I threw my arms up in front of me to protect my face, letting the incoming spears of ice bounce harmlessly off the shimmering emerald cloth of my enchanted tea dress. Mab swung his lead pipe and parried three sharpened icicles from the air. Puffing up his cheeks, he blew a gust of wind that knocked aside two more. Mephisto raised his staff, but before he could activate it, an ice shard struck his shoulder. He screamed in pain and pitched forward, arms windmilling. Before either of us could grab him, he fell over the side of the horse, plummeting toward the pines far below.

Seeing his master plunging through the air, Pegasus neighed furiously. He dove, throwing me and Mad forward. As I sailed past the horse's neck, I grabbed onto the long white mane. Mab fared better, managing to grab onto the saddle.

The winged horse snagged Mephisto's pants with his teeth; the surcoat had blown over his head and was out of reach, which was lucky for Mephisto's neck. The *Staff of Summoning* dangled in its handcuff, safe and sound.

I was not so lucky. As the horse grabbed my brother and jerked upward, I was flung sideways, my feet swinging freely. My body gyrated wildly. Terror seized me as I felt the coarse hairs of the mane slipping between my cold-numbered fingers, which were also trying to hold my flute. My nose bumped hard against the horse's ribcage, and pungent horse sweat wet my forehead and cheek.

Far below, pines stood like decorated toothpicks, looking so small and dainty. Recalling Astreus's offer to drop me from a great height and thus speed my way to heaven, I shuddered. Even the extra vitality I gained from the regular intake of Water of Life would not enable me to survive a fall of such a distance.

As I hung on for dear life, I closed my eyes and prayed to my Lady. A feeling of warmth and calm enveloped me, driving away both fear and cold. I was still dangling thousands of feet above the arctic north, but I was no longer frightened.

Pegasus banked, and my legs swung dangerously toward the soft wings. I yanked them up, curling my knees to my chest to avoid damaging our flying steed. As Pegasus climbed upward, he, too, brought his legs towards his chest. There was a report like a gunshot as his hoof struck my shin.

I howled with pain. Horse hair slipped through my fingers. My hands clenched reflexively, to grip the mane tighter. My beloved flute, the *Staff of Winds*, slipped from my grip. Horrified, I watched it twirling end over end as it descended toward the sunrise-stained landscape below.

Mab grabbed my wrist and hauled me onto the horse's back. Then, he leaned over and watched the dwindling flute as it bobbed or dropped depending upon the wind current.

"Not sure what to do, Ma'am. On one hand, I'm delighted to see the last of the accursed instrument that controls the free will of my race. On the other hand, I don't want to risk it falling into anyone else's hands, especially the hands of the three demons who are currently out there looking for it."

“Any suggestions?”

“I could leave my body, Ma’am, and go after it,” he offered reluctantly. “Man, I hate doing that, especially after I just boasted to your brother, Mr. Theophrastus, how I almost never did it.”

“No problem!” Mephisto called from where he dangled upside from the horse’s mouth. “I’ll get it!”

Grabbing the staff that hung from his wrist, he tapped it against his shoe. I began to imagine that a swirl of snow near him was fluttering like a bird. Then, a real swallow fluttered beside him. Mephisto yelled to it, and the swallow dived.

Only the flute was far too big for a swallow to do more than bump. Mephisto tapped his staff again, and I saw the jeweled eyes of the Peregrine falcon figurine glitter. Then, a falcon stooped, talons spread. As it approached the flute, it swerved suddenly to chase the swallow. Yelping, Mephisto tapped his staff twice in rapid succession. Both birds vanished like a dream.

“Great,” said Mab. “Harebrain’s no use either. Any other bright ideas?”

“No, no! I got it!” Mephisto shouted back. “I just need something bigger.”

He scrutinized his staff. A winged lion of whitest ash wood topped the long slender length. Below it, winged creatures carved from pale woods, such as beech and pine, made up the first two feet. The middle section of mundane creatures was carved from reddish woods, such as apple, cheery, and oak. Dangerous mythical beasts of wrought from dark mahogany made up the lower third, and the very bottom was a tentacled monstrosity of ebony.

“Ah-ha!” He tapped the staff against the sole of his shoe.

The swirling wings that sprang so clearly to mind were larger and more powerful. Then, a gryphon screamed, slashing its lion tail. The mythical beast dived, rapidly closing the distance between itself and my precious flute. My heart leapt into my throat. Gryphons had razor-sharp beaks. Would he snap the flute in two when he caught it? If the flute broke, the terms of the servitude of the Aerie Ones who served my family—the eight winds, including Mab, and their many servants including sylphs, zephyrs, and other spirits of the air—would be at an end, freeing them to ravage the earth with tempests, hurricanes, and tornados.

Reaching the flute, the gryphon snatched it gracefully from the air with its eagle talons. Issuing its victory scream, it turned and began winging its way back up toward us. A second scream, lower in pitch, answered from above us.

The p-son-en burst out of a snow bank, its jagged wings releasing another volley of icy death.

I drew the war fan of Amatsumaru. Its moon-colored slats shone like a mirror, showing me a striking young woman with emerald eyes and hair of so pale as to appear silver, her face framed by a white fur. In the moment it took me to recognize my own reflection, the spears of jagged ice bounced harmlessly against the far side of the fan. Behind me, I heard Mab’s grunt of pain as one of the ice shards found its mark.

“Oh yeah! Mess with me?” Mephisto cried joyously, and I heard the tap of his staff against his shoe. “You’ll rue the day you didn’t join my team. I offer a dental plan and everything!”

The rain of icicles had stopped, I peered from behind my fan in time to get the distinct impression I could see a whirl of wingspan the length of two football fields. Then, a speckled bird that was longer than a house issued its war cry. The p-son-en turned and fled. The roc sped after it, talons splayed.

“Saved by the magnificent roc again!” Mab murmured respectfully. “I think we owe that bird a herd of buffalo or something.”

The great bird snatched the smaller one from the air. We began to cheer. The p-son-en dissolved into ice and snow and seeped through the huge claws. Reforming some feet beyond it, it opened its wings toward the roc’s unprotected breast. Mephisto tapped his staff, and the roc vanished, but not before we heard its screech of pain.

I patted the horse’s sleek white neck. “Pegasus, see that mountain top over there? Head for that.” To Mephisto, I added, “Have the gryphon meet us there.”

Pegasus dove toward the peak. The p-son-en pursued, again raining icy death down upon us. Luckily, Pegasus could outrun the speeding icicles, but once or twice, Mab had to knock frozen shards aside with his lead pipe or blow them away from us with his Wind’s breath.

As soon as we landed, I leapt from Pegasus’s back and ran to my flute, courteously thanking the gryphon. Then, I called to my companions to duck. Raising my flute over my head, I began to swing it in a circle. Wind rushed into the holes, causing the instrument to whistle. The whistling grew louder and louder, and the air above me began to stir. Gusting eddies blew past my face. As I whirled it around more quickly, the speed of the winds increased. Within moments, I held a full-blown tornado by the twist of its tail.

It was like standing near a helicopter. The roaring winds sucked at everything around us. My hairpins were ripped free, and my silvery locks whipped wildly about my head, temporarily blinding me. Snow from the peak beneath us filled the air. Mab’s fedora flew from his head. He dived after it, snatching it just before it was absorbed into the cyclone. Still clutching it, he crashed, shoulder first, into the hard snow below, grunting painfully.

Flipping my flute forward, I released the twister directly into the path of the p-son-en. The bird of ice and snow opened its wings menacingly, only to have all its little snow daggers sucked up by the tornado. Free of its restraints, the funnel of wind swept away toward the horizon, carrying our attacker with it.

“Wow! Did you see that p-son-en in action, Miranda?” my brother cried, leaping to his feet. “I’ve got to have one!”

* * *

Mab and Mephisto were both wounded, as were Pegasus and the roc. Before leaving the mountain peak, I had my brother summon up the magnificent bird and lined the four of them up before me. Then, I pulled out of my pocket a small pear-shaped crystal vial. Lifting it up, I swirled a pearly white liquid within. As I pulled out the stopper, a sweet refreshing fragrance spread through the frigid air. A single whiff brought to mind many joyous occasions.

“Water of Life, anyone?” I queried, smiling.

“Me! Oh, me!” Mephisto yelled, throwing his arm up as if he were in school and then wincing with pain as the motion tore his wounded shoulder.

Walking down the line, I used the dropper built into the top to put a single drop on the tongue of Mephisto, Pegasus, and the roc. Mab refused the drop on his tongue, pointing at where the ice shard had tore his arm.

“Better not partake, Ma’am. That stuff goes right to my head.”

I let the pearly drop fall onto his wound and put one on Mephisto’s shoulder for good measure. Water of Life did not heal instantly, but, after a short rest, all four of them were well

enough to depart. Mephisto sent away the gryphon and the roc, and he, Mab, and I climbed onto Pegasus again.

* * *

“Hi, Girls! I’m home!” Mephisto threw open a pair of bright red doors. “Uncover the will-o-wisps and stoke up the salamander. We have guests!”

We had reached Mephisto’s place, which turned out to be an impressive mountain mansion located somewhere in the wilds of Canada’s Northern Territories. Outside, the air was worse than frigid. As the doors opened, wonderful, welcoming warm air poured out from within.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever...whoa!” Mab pushed forward and then halted abruptly. “Er...sorry. Didn’t realize you girls were real. Thought Harebrain was just pretending to have a life.” Mab paused and peered. “Podarge! Is that you?”

“Of course, it’s me? Who else might it be?” cawed an unpleasant voice. “Who are you?”

“It’s Mab...er, I mean Caekeas.”

“Caekeas! Is that you? You look a fright!”

“He doesn’t look so frightening to me,” came a sweet feminine voice. “He looks like a detective.”

“That we can see Caekeas at all is frightening,” purred a third huskier voice, followed by a sharper. “Shut the door, by Bacchus! It’s freezing out there!”

I stepped inside. Three women were gathered in the spacious foyer, from which arches led off in various directions. Near the main archway, a tall, powerfully-built woman leaned against the railing of a curving staircase. She was dressed in a panther skin with a snake for a belt and carried a fennel stalk topped with a long, slender pine cone and twined with ivy.

Closer to us, perched on a chandelier, was a creature that was half-woman and half-bird. She had wings for arms and powerful, cruel talons for feet. Her back and haunches were covered with feathers of gray and slate blue, but her ugly face and pendulous bosom were bare.

Below her and to the left, a round pool approximately six feet across had been set into the blue and green tiled floor. A red-haired mermaid floated in the water, leaning against the rim, her pretty chin resting on her fist. Beneath the water, the scales of her multi-colored tail glimmered like faceted jewels.

“Phisty!” The mermaid clapped her hands in delight as my brother strode into the large foyer. The harpy nodded grudgingly from the chandelier. The maenad gave him a jaunty two-fingered salute.

“You know these women, Mab?” I asked, entering.

“This is Podarge.” Mab waved a hand at the harpy. “She’s my...well, you’d call her my sister-in-law. She’s the mother of Xanthos and Pyrois and those guys, the horses who pull the chariot of the sun – the ones your sister Logistilla was so steamed about having to hold.”

“Pleased to meet you.” As I stepped forward to shake her hand, an unpleasant odor assailed me. I moved to withdraw across the foyer as soon as courtesy allowed.

“Xanthos and my other son Balius pulled Achilles’s chariot, too,” said the harpy with a flap of her great wings, “but did they get any credit for their hard work? No! It’s all Swift-Footed Achilles this, and Swift-Footed Achilles that. What? Do they think he was running on his own two feet? Why do you think he was so swift, I ask you?”

“Er...right,” murmured Mab.

Mephisto reached up and rubbed the harpy's head, tousling her hair, apparently unaffected by her stench. "Don't be such a grumpy-kin,"

I grabbed the handle of my moon-silver fan, afraid she would rend him with her razor-sharp claws for his effrontery. Instead, she arched her neck, pleased.

"After all," he continued, "Homer mentions them, even says how they wept when Patrocles died."

Podarge shuddered with outrage. "And that's supposed to soothe a mother's wounded heart? Mentioned by Homer? ooh! I'm swooning. Why didn't he call his poem 'Xanthos and Balius,' I ask you? Now, that would have been an intriguing work. Poets. Pah!" She spat, nearly missing the mermaid, who whacked the water with her fish-tail to show her displeasure. "What do poets have to say about harpies, hm? 'Hatchet-faced,' 'loathsome,' 'ill-tempered.' Not a word about what wonderful mothers we are. Not a word about our feelings or our needs. No, it's just 'frightened this nosey king' or 'chased off by that pair of winged clowns.'"

"Careful," Mab growled. "Those winged clowns are my...well, you'd call 'em nephews." To me, he said, "She's talking about the Boreads, Calas and Zetes. They sailed with the Argonauts. Drove Pod, here, and her sisters away from King Phineus's table. Good boys, Calas and Zetes. They're filling in for Boreas, Caurus, and me as the heads of the Northerlies while we're working for you, Ma'am."

"Speaking of winds, how is Zephyrus?" asked the harpy. "Has he asked about me?"

"Not that I've heard, Madam." Under his breath, Mab muttered, "Never did quite see what Zeph saw in you birds."

The harpy had heard him. "Oh, and he's such a fine catch, himself, the jealous boy-chaser! Besides," She purred, brushing back her hair and preening, "I can be quite beautiful when I'm in my horse form," she purred. Then she let out a loud squawk and defecated. Her foul-smelling dung dropped to the floor and splattered across the blue and green tiles.

"Ew! Gross!" Mephisto pinched his nostrils shut. "What did I tell you about using the potty? Outside! Outside with you." He shoed the harpy out the door into the cold morning. "Agave, clean that up, will you?"

"Who me?" cried the maenad.

She struck the butt of her pine cone-topped thyrsos against the floor and glared at Mephisto, outraged. With each moment, she grew more terrible. Her hair spread about her like a mane. Mab and I drew closer together, and my hand found my fan again. The Water of Life that gave my family our immortality brought us more than human strength, but even so I did not believe I could win a tussle with a maenad.

"Please?" my brother cooed, bringing his hands together. "Pretty please with cream cheese on top?"

"Cream cheese?" Agave cried, but her hair had settled down again. She snorted impatiently and turned to the mermaid. "Morveren, be a sweetie and go fetch the Yeti, would you? Tell him to bring a mop."

The red-haired mermaid dived down into the pool and, with a flip of her powerful tail, sped off through an underwater tunnel.

"That leaves you and me, Agave!" Mephisto sauntered over to where the maenad leaned against the stairs and patted her fur-clad bottom. "Ready to shag? How about we sneak upstairs and go at it like greased weasels!"

"Ugh!" Mab winced. "There are ladies present!" He glanced at the towering maenad in her panther skin and muttered under his breath, "One lady, anyway."

“Not so fast, Staff Boy,” the maenad replied in a low throaty voice. She tapped him on the nose with the long, slender pine cone atop her thyrsos. The snake wrapped about her waist like a belt raised its head and hissed menacingly. “We maenads are chaste, remember? We’re saving ourselves for the vine god’s return.”

My brother leaned over to stare into the serpent’s eyes. “Hello, Soupy!” He stroked it under its pale scaly chin. “Remember me? Yes, of course you do. Soupy’s such a good Snaky.”

The serpent unwound from the waist of the maenad and circled about my brother’s arm hissing affectionately.

The maenad gave an exaggerated sigh. “Betrayed by my own guardian snake.”

She stepped toward Mephisto who, despite being shorter than her, dipped her over his knee and smooched her.

“Woo hoo!” Mephisto pulled her upright and punched the air. “Come on, Agie-poo,” He hooked his arm through hers – the snake winding about both of them – and headed off, not up the stairs but through the far left archway. “Let’s check on the others, and see if we can’t scare up some dinner.” Over his shoulder, he called, “Make yourself at home, Miranda! I’ll call you for supper.”