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Four living souls took note of an articulate bellow erupting from an American bullfrog in a long swamp lining the shore of the creek feeding into Merlo Lake in Northern California. A thousand feet overhead in the sunset sky, a cruising golden eagle altered its course, arcing down and west toward the swamp, which was coming alive with the chorus of the frog's fellow chanters, two thousand strong.

Relura Morell leapt off the porch of her parents' home and scrambled through the trunk of her car to find her Nikon. As she treaded into the swamp in search of her photographic prey, a great horned owl responded to her arrival with a ghostly call of *hooo . . . hoo-hoo-hoo . . . hoooo*. And sixty feet up in a nearby broadleaf maple, a northern mockingbird watched it all in uncharacteristic silence.

Another ten thousand feet up and forty miles east, Zeb Morell's eyes rejoiced at the sight of the tangerine and lime clouds layered above the western horizon as he guided his sailplane southwest to the landing strip at Santa Rosa.

I'll have Shangrilarian exult in a sky like this while flying over Zanzibar—hold on . . . eyes on this sky, pal.

What a blessing it was that Zeb's biggest problem was fending off such delectable images for Shangrilarian, his graphic novel hero, till he was back home on the ground. The hero of his new magnum opus kept imposing himself just beyond the windshield of Zeb's mind, undermining the discipline he had to apply to the task at hand, which was riding the fading Coast Range thermals onto an accurate glide path back to terra firma. But that was cool—part of his particular professional skill set was titrating just enough awakening

of imagination to feed his writing session planned for later that night, but without letting it get the upper hand over his well-honed piloting mindset.

One could choke on a glut of blessings, which was how he regarded the hearty stream of images that flowed his way for review en route to publication in a ZM graphic novel. Yes, his sisters were sinking ever more impressive roots in their respective traditional fields (physics and biology), unintentionally casting shadows over his flights of fancy, but, for the time being, he was able to fend off the self-doubts such comparisons stirred up by remembering that he'd been able to pay for this glider outright with the royalties from his first graphic novel. Dammit, some people actually have made a living from art over the last few millennia, so why not him? Plus, he was filling in the gaps between royalties and hoped-for future publishing advances by occasionally taking on aspiring pilots as students. So, his blessings even included a real shot at prosperity, topped off with a view from the sky that would collapse anyone's attempt to take it in stride.

What the hell? There was a flying creature off his port wing, and he wasn't making this one up. It was a golden eagle, gliding parallel to him, scarcely six feet from his cockpit canopy . . . which was weird enough . . . but this one had turned her head and was staring straight at him, maintaining perfect, riveting eye contact, getting off on the stunning effect it was having on her human counterpart, sending chills through his innards.

Extraordinary weirdness was not new to Zeb. There was that singular night four years before when, at the age of seventeen, he and his twin sister, together with the intense former neighbor they called Geezer and an equally intense Arctic tern, had been swept into the sky over Antarctica, but he thought he had safely walled off that adventure in his mind. It was imperative to maintain a steady balance between reality and his fantastic imagination, where he mined the gems for his creative work. To succeed in both realms, he could not allow the wall between them to be sundered, and, so far, it had held. His artwork had grown, yielding abundant fantastical harvests within the safety of his imagination, most recently featuring a magnificent character he had named Shangrilarian, partly in honor of the single, extraordinary radiolarian he'd encountered on that mystifying night in his past. Meanwhile, Geezer, the unwilling pied piper whose trail they had followed to Antarctica, had met a different fate. Zeb and his sister had managed, through it all, to adjust admirably well to good old-fashioned Reality.

But now, an avian creature that was indisputably real seemed hell-bent on cracking open that wall. Birds do not stare at humans like that, even while perched, let alone in flight at forty-five knots. Zeb found himself jerking his

head away, as one would try to put off a weirdo on the bus in Oakland, as if that would signify “Get lost” to an eagle who plainly had no intention of doing any such thing.

Please stop. I'd like to get home in one piece, physically and mentally.

Finally, the bird did split, but not before nodding at him, as if to tender him a supercilious salute, acknowledging to herself that she had delivered a message, as instructed.

I know why that bird bugged me so much. It reminded me of Shang, our abductor from four years ago. Well, calm down, pal. This was a perfectly normal flesh-blood-and-feathers bird, not some elegant monster in total control of our lives. So, it gave me a look and a momentary shiver—goody for Eagleface. Let's adapt that moment for a panel in Chapter 3 of the sequel, when Shangrilarian first flickers into existence during the coronation of the Zanzibarbarian queen. Let her get rattled instead of me. In my book, I'm God, remember? I can shuttle anything I want from the Real World into Shangrilarian's without fear of retribution or re-kidnapping. No worries—just enjoy your flight.

Zeb caught a few faint twilight glimmers of fireflies in a vineyard below. He estimated his altitude at five thousand feet. (He'd had to estimate since he'd covered the altimeter on his instrument panel a few months ago with a drawing of Shangrilarian. The compass too. He'd remove them if he got stuck in thick cloud cover, but otherwise he figured that doing without would sharpen his senses; most people these days were dulling them through device overuse.) Those lovely flying lanterns dancing among the grapes, so rare out West, couldn't compete in the Firefly Olympics with the champs his family saw in the Great Smokies during the road trip they took the summer after sophomore year, but the subtle little flares floating through the grapevines were yet another sprinkling of rewards for an early evening sky glide. Maybe he never would enjoy the granite stability of a career like the one Marlie was clearly headed for or the one Relura had already fashioned for herself, but as long as he could soar miles above the mountaintops in a marvelous engineless aircraft like his Schempp-Hirth Ventus-2a, he'd be just fine.

Probably best not to tell the girls about that bird. (I'm referring to Marlie and Relura, obviously—telling Alyssa is out of the question. It would be rather stupid to lob a bizarro grenade into a romance with a blissfully normal, superfine girlfriend.) The sisters (and I) are only four years into recovery. Give it another ten before indulging in such risky sharing. Marlie especially—blabbing to her about a bird phenomenon this unsettling just as she's trying to land a spot on a Hard Science League roster would be thoughtless. She's strong, but suppose I just

let this one slide, eh? Now, let's focus on my approach. The runway's just six miles away.

At that very moment, Marlie Morell was enjoying her own sky view and wondering if Zeb was enjoying it too. *I hope Zeb's checking out the sight of Jupiter rising—wait—do I? I wouldn't want him to get distracted by memories of Geezer's last known obsession. Or imagine old Geezer flopping around out there as a space corpse.*

Hey, I'm driving here! I'm driving here! Geezer, get thee behind me!

Marlie wisely refocused her attention on the twisting dusk-dim road on Skyline Ridge in the hills west of Palo Alto. Her brother would appreciate the sight of the giant planet glimmering in the darkening eastern sky, but that sort of fare should be consumed only in small portions. At least that was true for her. Whatever the crazy hell had happened to them four years ago could remain manageable only as long as it was confined to quarters. With a degree in plasma science just months away and, even more important, a real shot at R&D financing for her (hopefully brilliant?) invention, she had to keep her nose as clean as a sterile operating room.

With the top down on her MG F (blueberry blue, in cherry condition despite the six-figure odometer reading) and the cool breeze off the bay enveloping her, she felt like she was skipping along wavetops toward a future brimming with possibilities. At times like this, which these days seemed to keep on coming, Marlie couldn't help seeing Nature's manifold displays of beauty as auguring success in her near future. Rather than having been bent out of shape by the exhilarating trauma of their very unplanned trip to space—*hush*—she'd gotten her act together. Not yet twenty-two, she was killing it—at Stanford, in her NASA Ames internship, and now as the leader of a bushy-tailed team of four smart pals she was about to dine with at the Chipmeister Brewery, all abuzz with the prospect of serious financing to build a prototype of her electromagnetic wave generator. (The recent addition to the team of a rakishly foxy electrical engineering grad student named Trey had nothing to do with her excitement about the project's potential. *Right?*)

Hustling impulses notwithstanding, Marlie was only too glad to spend a few extra miles to come up out of Portola Valley on the ridge road, where she could see the glittering colored lights streaming down the highway several miles below to the east. It was an automotive meditation—why choose the brain-frazzling, stomach-acid-churning, drunken-monkey chaos required to

negotiate rush-hour traffic on US 101 when you could float above it in peace and quiet this sweet? She could hear a whinny from a quarter mile off or a hoot from a stirring owl no doubt monitoring her and other land-bound mammals crossing tonight's hunting field. This ride offered an infusion of pastoral mystery that complemented the animated wit-storm she'd be treating herself to at the restaurant.

She could hardly complain, able to hop within a single hour from research in one of the most sophisticated centers of astrophysics on the planet to a roadster sail through redwood forests, acre-wide vegetable gardens, and cattle pastures. This scene bore comparison to her parents' sweet spot in the placid countryside outside the greater Merlo Lake metro area (population 136), eighty-five miles north of San Francisco, where she'd grown up by a lake graced by eagles' nests, deer visitations, and the occasional coyote. Here, atop the Peninsula, she had access to all of that within sight of Ames, Stanford, and the throbbing heart of global high-tech.

Get a load of this hayfield on my left—that's got to be at least ten acres—and, oh, nice, a couple of quarter horses being led from their corral to the barn by two girls in their early teens—

Whaaaaat? An owl—Stop! Go away! You're creeping me out!

Normally, a great horned owl coasting along on the evening breeze by a road like this with dark coming on would have graced this happy hour with an auspicious mix of nature and magic, but there was nothing normal about this bird. It had deliberately cruised alongside Marlie at her eye level for ten full seconds, *staring right at her*. No, thank you—she'd exceeded her lifetime dose of weirdness on that night four years ago; she didn't need any more time in the Spookarama. But there it was—that owl's look could not be unseen. What was *that* about?

That owl reminded me of the one in Antarctica and . . . that other place.

Cut it out. Maybe I made it up. Some kind of lingering PTSD hallucination, an aftershock glitch.

Are you kidding? Evidence, girl: do not discount unexpected findings.

Do I tell Zeb, seeking comfort? Or keep my mouth shut, to avoid slipping into the Spookarama again? It's riding roughshod on my mellow either way.

Zeb had flashed on a concept for a great panel an hour after he landed the Ventus. Shape-shifting into its female aspect, Shangrilarian would sprout a couple of long pseudopodia, engulf the spaceship from Gargalon, and train

all sixty of her eyes on the startled captain and crew on the bridge, staring fetchingly at them till they quaked.

Clearly, his imagination was repurposing the chills he'd gotten off the encounter with the googly eagle. And Shangrilarian was all the more seductive for positioning the rest of her marvelous, gigantic, unicellular form into the lovely, seductive pose being modeled for Zeb at that very moment by his muse and lover, Alyssa, in the wartime Craftsman house they were renting near downtown Oakland. As a dancer, Alyssa couldn't resist the temptation to add a Zeb Morell graphic novel to the collection of stages upon which one of her fine poses would appear in the year ahead.

The gravitational pull Zeb felt around Alyssa had so permeated his brain at that point, three months into their relationship, that it was affecting his imagination and, hence, his artwork. Nothing wrong with that—why not have a monster-creature superhero who exerted her dominance over the enemies of mankind with the power of her beauty? Shangrilarian's spellbinding powers could overwhelm evildoers on multiple sensory fronts. Behold how they're enveloped with breathtaking choral music emitted by vocal cord organelles lining her outer edges as they vibrate in the sun, mesmerizing all who beheld her sixteen-foot-tall stature! Then how about dazzling leaps to entirely different poses, followed by sinuous slides to others erotic or mysterious, all while emitting captivating tropical floral perfumes? The worst of the worst would fall helpless before such an onslaught of glory, rendered in painstaking detail by Zeb's ever-maturing draftsmanship, which could now give a crossbred offspring of artists like Ernst Haeckel and Roger Dean a run for their money.

Alyssa had multiple motives in modeling for the artiste. Deeming fifteen minutes plenty for this gig, she languorously slid into a sexy stretch she knew would disable any control Zeb's superego had over his id. Sure enough, within two seconds he flung his sketchpad to the side and dropped to the floor, draping himself around her.

"Are you trying to sabotage my career?"

"Poor Shangrilarian, powerless before an ordinary human female."

"Ordinary! Such obvious compliment fishing is beneath you, Alyssa. You've been extraordinary since you were a fetus." Lacking the confidence that his wit could top that line with something a bit more clever, he planted a kiss on her smiling mouth, and it was warmly received and reciprocated.

Twenty seconds of that was all that could be sustained by either party without a decision that would affect the course of the next few hours, so they

separated enough to give their future-planning teams a chance to run out onto the court.

Catching his breath, Zeb asked, “Are we chucking the dinner-and-a-movie scenario?”

“I don’t know. I’m so often mystified by the secrets lying beneath the shimmering surface of Zeb Morell.”

Uh-oh. That reference to what Alyssa had dubbed *The Secret* signaled the need for more dodging ahead. She’d become suspicious when Zeb had come home blurting out something about his flight having been strange, before he realized that mentioning being stared down by an eagle could trigger questions about *The Secret*.

“Foxy Heart?”

Alyssa blatantly batted her eyes, which were just a few inches from Zeb’s. “Yes?”

“I thought we were going to let that subject rest for a while.”

“It has been a while. Three days, in fact.”

He felt like saying, “Three years would be more like it,” except with both of them only twenty-one years of age, envisioning their future together at least three years from then would be a recklessly bold move for him, and, he guessed, even for her. Instead, he got straight to the point.

“Alyssa, if I told you what happened to Marlie and me in our senior year, either you’d never take me seriously again or you’d skedaddle away.”

“I won’t judge you.”

“It’s not that we did anything wrong. I just wouldn’t want you to be unsettled by it.”

“Try me.”

“Don’t take it personally, Alyssa. It would be weird for anyone to hear.”

Her eyes blazed. “Lay it on me or prepare to be goosed.”

Zeb paused, pursed his lips for a moment, and looked away. “Okay, here it is, but don’t tell anyone.” After allowing for a dramatic pause to widen Alyssa’s eyes, he whispered, “When we were seventeen, Marlie and I were taken by an alien to interplanetary space.”

“Jerk!” she exclaimed and delivered on her threat. Zeb wrestled himself away from her, only to return with a more classical embrace.

“I love you, Alyssa.”

“No stupid jokes. The least you could do is come up with something that’s remotely possible. Did you think you saw Sasquatch in a forest? Or a UFO?”

“Let’s move on, shall we?”

“It’s hurtful that you don’t trust me, Zeb. You think every human ear is a microphone attached to a recording device with a speaker-equipped playback system. I would never turn blabbermouth.”

“I trust you as much as anyone.” He was about to add “as long as we’re together,” but he caught himself in time. “But then you’d have to be burdened with a promise never to repeat it to anyone as long as you live.”

“So? It will bring us closer together.”

“But what’s the rationale for telling?”

“What’s the rationale for my loving you? What’s the rationale for surveying the Hanakāpī‘ai Falls from above?”

She scored points on that one. The very thought of their plan to go soaring in Hawaii in February was a romantic tour de force that could sweep up a lot of resistance, but there was one more legitimate reason for discretion.

“It’s not just my secret, Alyssa. It’s Marlie’s too. She’s very uptight about it, and I don’t blame her. She has a lot on the line maintaining a rep for hard-headed science, and more to lose than I do if the secret gets out.”

Zeb had to endure the disappointed look on Alyssa’s exquisite face. He assuaged his guilt by telling himself that somewhere on the other side of the bay, Marlie was going about her business, secure in her brother’s vow of loyal secrecy about the night in their teens that had shattered some assumptions about nature that they had shared with the rest of the human race.