

Feather Starship

A tale of the girl who wants to fly to the stars

A lyrical and fantastical story

By Artifex Verbum

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Excerpts





TORIN @ MOUNT OF ELDERS

Grace and Speed

If he hadn't been looking carefully, he might have thought it was a bird in the brush, darting up the hill with surprising grace and speed. But Torin's eyes could tell. A warrior, cloaked in feathers, was approaching stealthily up the mountainside.

The warrior was apparently trying to stay hidden. Torin kept out of sight too. He watched as the intruder darted this way and that, hiding behind first a stone, then some brambles, then a stone again. The warrior peered towards him. Torin pulled his head back to avoid detection. After a moment, Torin moved to where he could better watch the warrior approach. As the warrior planned to attack in stealth, he too had no shield. Torin glanced across the mountaintop towards the stone sentinel, Rebhā, who looked back impassively. He grasped his spear firmly in his right hand. The stalker appeared among the rocks, reappeared at some distance, and then disappeared again.

Suddenly, the aggressor sprang out from an unexpected direction. How did he get so close undetected? wondered Torin, and as Torin wondered, the warrior's spear jabbed, then sliced the air, just missing Torin's ear. Torin fell back clumsily. Torin cut an arc low to the ground with his spear hoping to put some distance between them. He needed to regain his

balance. Sweep to avert, basic move, perhaps too basic. The warrior jumped easily over the spear, then, with ferocious speed, he closed again. Leap to divert —too late. The warrior swung with the broadside of his spear and struck hard. Torin stumbled back, but this time he kept his balance. The blow bruised his arm, but he managed to push the butt-end of his spear into his adversary's torso. The warrior fell back sucking air but regained his footing.

They both righted themselves for another parry. They stood apart, their spears almost touching, the tips drawing small circles around its counterpart. Both were breathing heavily.

“Give way,” said Torin, “Acknowledge your superior.”

“Never!” said the feathered attacker snarling and shaking his head. Torin thrust with the tip of his spear. The warrior parried, then drew back. Torin thrust again. Each tested the other. Each struggled to find an advantage. Each strove to throw the other off balance. Each sought the definitive blow. Jab and parry. Torin saw the warrior falter, then thrust his spear. Stab the unwary. Too late, Torin realized his thrust had missed.

The interloper sidestepped the spear. He pulled the spear and Torin towards him. He closed to grab the stumbling Torin about the middle in a crushing embrace. He held him hard, chest to chest, lifting him off the ground. Torin felt his breath leaving him.

Then the intruder paused, looked down, and saw the blade. Torin's dagger was pushed under his rib cage. Blood stained the warrior's feathers.



PASSER @ SALIX

The Last Who Had Been the First

Mother called for her children. She was rather insistent. Passer would rather have stayed warm in the midst of his siblings, but his brothers and sisters started to stir. His Mother's voice gave him courage, and he was the first to move to the edge of the nest. He looked out over the world and saw wonders in every direction. The branches were green with new leaves. The snow shimmered with blue fluorescence, while streams of snowmelt flowed in every direction. Passer had peeked out into the world before from the safety of the nest, but today, when he was to venture out into the universe, it seemed more wonderful than ever—and frightening.

Below were two strange creatures. The boy creature was festooned in many different colors, like the bluebirds he saw nesting in the remains of a broken tree in the middle of a nearby field of buttercups. The girl creature, the color of wild raspberries which Mother had often brought to the nest, was eating greens and nuts. Slight animals, he thought, no big teeth at least. They seemed harmless enough—or not. He wasn't sure.

Mother called again, and the two creatures looked up. The girl ran with a long quill in her hand and hid behind a sapling. The tip of the quill sparkled pink in the morning light.

"It's a crow!" said the girl creature in a hush, probably thinking Passer couldn't hear her.

The boy stood up with a sharp stick and looked up into the willow. He signaled for the girl to come out of hiding. "It's a mother sparrow. And there's her nest in a hollow of the tree. Look!" The boy creature pointed his stick into the tree.

He may not have teeth, thought Passer, but he has one exceptionally long claw. He hurriedly retreated to the back of the nest, his heart pounding.

Mother was still being insistent. The other brothers and sisters each went to the edge of the nest to peer out. One of his sisters then moved towards the edge and jumped. With a flutter, she flew off landing on a stem not far away. Then she took wing again, awkwardly, and disappeared among the branches.

Passer made his way to the front of the nest. He looked around once again. Not far below he saw a black curvy stick. Then the stick slithered. Passer started chirping, "A snake, a snake!" or something of the sort, but the other chicks took no heed.

One after another, the young sparrows left the nest, no longer nestlings, but fledgling fliers. After each had left the nest, Passer looked out and saw the snake was closer than before. Soon the slitherer would be able to reach into the nest and make a meal of poor Passer.

Passer, the last who had been the first, still stood on the edge of the nest, not quite sure of what to do. Then finally, Passer leapt into the air. The snake lashed out, its red eyes darting towards the nest.



ODJI @ SALIX

Voice Airy and Sweet

The girl bounded over to the feather, and then hopped onto a soft down pillow attached to the feather's spine. In the same graceful motion, she let loose the yellow cord from the willow's root which had kept the feather secured to the earth. Her face became transfixed. Nothing happened at first; but then Odji felt the returning breeze on his cheeks. The feather — and the girl! — began to rise into the air. She giggled with a voice that was echoed by the chorus of trickles from the melting snow.

The feather pitched this way and that as it climbed, but she rode it higher and higher. She rose near the top of the willow tree, twitched one of the yellow threads which caused the feather to turn, and then she descended in a whoosh, hugging close to the feather as she flew. She dived towards the boy, his mouth agape. When she came close by, he could see her skin radiating youthful vigor from the exertion. The image lingered, and she came so close to him, he felt he could reach out and touch her. She laughed as she sailed by, the pitch and warble of her voice descending as she swept past, but she was gone before he could stretch out his hand towards her. He turned and watched as she surged to the sky, past the willow tree and over the tall grass beyond.

Odji ran after the feather, beyond the willow tree, through the tall grass, until he came suddenly to the edge of the cliff. He paused at the precipice, glancing at the stream which ran

past the willow tree winding its way to find a gentler course, till it fell in tumbling steps down the cliff, leaping across the steep path that wound its way through the rocks towards the great river Dānu below.

Odji looked up to watch the girl sail over the Dānu. The ferry boat was there, and as she passed the dock, he heard her voice rising in song, her musical voice airy and sweet.

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la La la Do la Sol sol La
La la Do la Do la Re
La la la Do do la Sol sol Ti
La la Do la Sol sol La

She waved at the ferry master, who echoed the tune on his pan-flute, which was made of reeds of varying lengths bound together one next to the other, playing the last note with a trill, sweet and airy like her voice.

A majestic oak tree just beyond the far shore towered higher than the cliff so that Odji was looking up into its crown. Huge branches reached skyward forming an immense spread of green of various shades. The girl rose and rose heading towards the oak. Odji watched as the girl, not quite reaching the top of the tree, disappeared into its uppermost branches. The leaves rustled as she slipped into the shade, and in return, a leaf broke free, floating this way and that, crossing back across the river.



SALIX @ SALIX

To Wherever Rivers Go

Salix's long, elegant locks hung in tangles from the fierce gusts that had just swept through. Somewhat vexed, she shook her tresses free in the last breezes from the storm. She watched as they drifted in the gentling wind, and she looked admiringly at her wondrous mane.

Salix saw the boy and girl huddled against the tempest, and felt a kinship with them, small and vulnerable as they were. She was familiar with their kind. They often came here to camp as they journeyed up or down the Wodr Way, the road that followed the great river Dānu. They would come and go, but she could not follow, she knew, for her willow roots held her fast to the warm, moist earth.

From her lofty vista, Salix could see the river swell from its beginnings, in the place where the day began, where the sun rose over the headwaters. The raindrops fell there on the mountain tops, little trickles combining into streams, streams collecting into boat-plyed tributaries, and then tributaries joining into the one great river, the Dānu. She followed the

teeming waters as they swept past the little town of Bigton, to the ferry docks, and then to the falls where the Dānu fell on its way to, to where? To wherever rivers go, she supposed. It was beyond even her dreams.

