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The Shaman

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The Shaman

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Author Bio

Ambika Kirkland was born in rural Pennsylvania, where he lived in the same deep, dark, goblin-infested forest for eighteen years. He also gets chased about frequently by scary men in black robes. He kindly asks: "If you see any of them, don't tell them where I am, but let them know that I have finally decided to go over to the dark side..."

The Shaman

I hadn't wanted to go outside. Not at all, thank you. I had been in writing, working on something, important. That was what I wanted to do. It was hot outside--too hot at 95 degrees to be gallivanting about from one side of the property to the other.

But the mother's insistent voice:

"Are you a vampire? Go outside for a change."

I'd been outside once today. No, twice. The first time had been all of my own accord. The second time I had been on a fetching mission to the garden, but that scarcely mattered. The point was that I had been out. I explained this. My mom didn't buy it.

"Get your butt out there," she growled. "People get fat from sitting around on their asses all day like lumps."

So now I'm standing here in air that smells like someone's rejected sunlight, maybe a little burnt and with a bit too much humidity to make the cut. It's too hot. I mean this. It is incontestable fact that it is too goddamned hot. My existence cannot continue for much longer in this hell. I'm going to die. Basically I think it will happen like this. First my hair will start to melt, run down my face, all over the place. My ears will droop. Then they'll melt too. Then my face will start dripping from the nose like wax that's been too long in the heat, and little runnels of stuff will trace down and track dirty lines of melting body substance along my disappearing face until it spreads to my neck and my arms and further and there's nothing left of me but a puddle. Like the Wicked Witch. Only it'll be the heat that does me in and not the humidity. Help, I'm melting! I'm melting!

And I don't like the view either. The lawn is a tangle of weeds. It's a downright mess. It looks like some sort of jungle that has somehow acquired life and motive of its own, and it does not seem happy to see me. Don't get me wrong. I like the outdoors. I love the outdoors. I only despise being outside when it's like this and I'm in a bad mood. I've been coerced. I feel cheated. That doesn't help my attitude much.

Shadow rubs up against my leg. Go away cat.

I bend down to give him a polite pat anyway. Then I hear the shrill scream.

The voice carries through the muggy air with surprising clarity, bites into my ears, attacks my sense of hearing distantly but violently.

Shaman. My little brother. In trouble.

I shouldn't say that I worry about him constantly. It's just that he's four, and he gets into trouble easily, and with all of the wilderness about it's

rather easy for his trouble to get him hurt. His skinny little body is already covered in faded scars and fading bruises from falling down, running into things, running into dogs, running around ceaselessly with this sort of reckless obliviousness. I love him. I can't help being a little edgy when he goes off with no one to protect him.

So when I hear the screaming I forget my stubborn sluggishness all at once, kick it as far away from me as I can manage and break into a run.

The noise comes from the edge of the woods, back past the sloping bank of exposed shale where nothing can grow in the poor soil. I tear up the uneven road until I can see the line of trees clearly, and breathing heavily (it's too damned hot) I scan the forested tangle with anxious eyes. He's still yelling. I don't know what about. I can't see him. I don't know where he is, I don't know what's happening to him. Where's that good-for-nothing Oren? Oh god, what the hell is happening?

"Shaman! Shaman! Shaman, Shaman, SHAAA-MAAAN!" The ululating cry rolls ponderously up the embankment, only to be suppressed and pushed back toward its origin by the sheer heaviness of the air. My little brother's frantic yells, however, continue.

"Shaman!" No answer. I'm running. I'm flying, up the sharp rocks in flapping sandals with sweat slick on every inch of my body.

"Shaman!"

My foot slips from under me and the sandal strap tears from its mooring. Pain. Pain, lots of it. My knee has been torn open along the same broad scar that it was ripped along years ago, and bits of the sharp fragments of stone are embedded in the bleeding flesh. I couldn't really give a damn. My ankle feels oddly twisted. My shoe is gone, the shale-monsters are biting the soles of my feet. I don't care.

"Shaman!"

I've reached the top of the bank, and now I'm confronted with the rude snarl of green and living things that stands like a hostile army in my path. I shove aside branches, poison ivy, thorn bushes. My arms and legs are going to be a mess and my foot already is. I'm not thinking about this. I'm thinking of all of the terrible things that could be happening to my little brother. Mauled, eaten, hurt, savaged, kidnapped, torn apart, fell from a tree...

"Shaman!"

And then a quiet but audible little whimper:

"Bika?"

I turn and I look and I see the impish little face, tear-streaked, staring down at me from the low branch of a tree. Shaman. Unhurt but up a tree like a frightened beast. How did he get up there? I didn't even know that he could climb.

"Shaman!" I'm shaking so hard with some cocktail of adrenaline and relief that that's really all I can manage. "What happened?" I ask finally. I'm laughing a little. I don't know why. My tears aren't from laughing. Maybe I'm laughing at myself. Maybe I'm just so damned relieved that I don't know how to respond and my mind's just picked a few familiar emotions to throw out there.

"I saw a bear," he whispers. I give him a long look.

"A bear?" I ask. "Are you sure?"

"I s-saw it from far off," he says quietly. "It was really big. It was the color of white. Like a -- what are those ones called? -- a polar bear." I was so proud that he remembered that. I was also very glad that there was no real bear.

"It had brown spots though," he hissed. "I think it was a monster kind."

He had seen the neighbors' dog. I started to laugh. Rescuing him from the tree as carefully as I could, I picked him up and squeezed him. He didn't like that very much. He wasn't so big on hugs.

"It was just a dog," I reassured him, setting him on his feet. "Now let's go out in the sun where it's nice. This is almost as bad a place to spend the day as inside." He frowned.

"I saw it!" he insisted. I raised a brow but I didn't say anything else. I knew all about overactive imaginations.