



WINTER

A short story by Danny_Zou
(† **Eclectic** Wanderer †#5423) for the
game World of Magic, soon to
become Arcane Odyssey.

WINTER

PART ONE

MEMORIES

he sky had been gray for several days now. Arielle stretched, feeling the chill air on her arms, which she had, until then, kept wrapped tightly under her cloak. It was a beautiful season, winter. Never before had she journeyed this far north, but she had a quest from Melody, and leaving it unfinished was unthinkable.

She reached into her satchel, its vials and compartments tucked neatly away despite the long journey. A pulse of fear ran through her. *The map!* It was gone!

Had she left it in the inn last night? If so... she could probably return and have enough time to get it.

Arielle decisively reversed direction, setting off for the small outpost. The wind had picked up. Doing some quick math, she guessed that if she got to the inn before the sun went down, she could still cross the mountains before the first snow fell.

The trees were covered in icicles, their cold light playing beautifully over the worn bark. But it was far too cold to admire them. Arielle had been born in the warmth of the

Eastern Peninsula, and had never gotten used to these frigid realms.

The sound of the icy ground crunching under her feet was the only company she had, yet old memories surfaced in her mind, painting colorful pictures onto the dark tree trunks. Here, an old friend smiled, there, her mother laughed. A jagged wound in an old sentinel tree reminded her almost of Vance's twisted face after he had completed a dare to eat a whole lemon. And that tree was identical to Cayden cringing away from the sight. She smiled, and warmth melted through her like dark chocolate, heated by the fireplace.

The inn's lights appeared in the darkness, a cheerful smile in the dreary environment.

"Ms. Lamina?" a voice called out hoarsely. "Is that you?"

"It's me," Arielle replied. "Did I leave a map here?"

"Ah is that what you came for?" the old woman said. "I thought he would've met you already. Perhaps he passed you in the dark?"
"Who?"

“That friendly young man, the one who said that he was chasing after you.” She smiled. “He said he was journeying with you, but got left behind after he was injured.”

Arielle’s heart fell. “Oh, then I must’ve missed him. I’ll hurry back,” she lied. If she told the truth the old lady would feel as if it had been her fault. The map was valuable, made by a renowned cartographer in Ironport. No doubt it had attracted the eye of some impoverished laborer. “Good night, Mrs. Calding.”

The walk back was a miserable one. A light rain began to fall, and Arielle wondered more than once whether it would be wiser to simply spend the night in the inn and make the trip the next morning. But she knew better. The snows would fall tonight, and the pass would be blocked for the next few months.

She knew, very well, the danger of letting her mind rest now. She had no map and it was getting late. But the cold, the dark, the ache in her legs, and the ache in her heart forced her to let the memories in.

They flooded her senses, dulling the cold and washing away the pain. The pretty illustration of a bird she had found in an old book, the smile of an old man rocking on a Riverville porch, his granddaughter-scarcely a few months old-resting in his lap, the taste of fresh raspberry tarts, swiped from the tray upon which they rested, her father, reading in his study, her tutor's hands moving, speaking to her without words.

The trail seemed to wander on, endlessly, through the mountains, yet she scarcely felt herself move. All around her the memories played on, happier days brightening the darkness.

The dreams vanished only once, when the first flakes of snow began to drift before her eyes. She had smiled, caught a few, and watched as they, too, transformed into faces. The family servants, bustling around, the pages of books, the paintings decorating the walls of her erstwhile home.

Her mind drifting, she walked over the mountains onto the cold white plains, and the moon shone across them like a brilliant gem. Yet she hardly noticed, because the tundra was simply a larger canvas for her memories

to be displayed upon. She could see Melody, her enigmatic smile visible as she painted a thousand colors onto the snow, wizards she had met in the forest, their faces smiling as they talked, King David Silver barking orders at the town guards, who listened half with respect and half with fear, as she watched from the window of a small bakery.

She awoke a few hours later, half buried in snow.

With an effort, she got up shakily. All she could see around her was tundra, ice and snow, extending outwards towards the horizon in all directions. Above, the stars shone coldly. She shivered. Then she saw it. A massive pale-white wolf, loping over the frosted plains. *An amarok*, she thought with a sudden realization. She had seen an illustration of it, in *The Journey of the Shining King*. The author had described seeing one briefly off the shore of a northern island. Yet no illustration could compare to the sheer size of it. Thirty-two hands tall at the shoulder, the mighty beast stood twice as tall as the pale white bears she had heard of in these lands. It walked slowly across the tundra, head to the ground. As it did, snow fell off of it, raining

down gently, as if its fur was transforming into snowflakes, blurring its outline against the white of the plains.



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PART TWO

DREAMS



rielle wondered whether to run, but found she had no energy to. She no longer felt the cold. At least, if she was eaten by the elemental, her body would have a use.

Hours seemed to pass as the wolf walked closer, and closer, and closer. Then it stopped. The girl's silver eyes met the soft blue of the wolf's, and both pairs of eyes froze, for a moment, for an eternity.

Weak, came the voice in her head, the one she had heard so often. *Are you just going to sit here and get eaten?*

But what else could I do?

You're a wizard, aren't you? the voice mocked. *Fight!*

She got shakily to her feet. Thrusting out her hand, she barely managed to mumble the name of the spell. A single shard of glass-and-crystal, barely larger than the sparks any newly awakened mage would manage, flew, floated really, towards the wolf. It scarcely blinked as the gemstone crashed limply into the snow. Then it lunged forwards.

Arielle held up her hand, summoning a shield. It was thin as the morning frost on the windowsills. But she had no energy left. She waited for the inevitable, eyes closed shut. But nothing happened.

The wolf simply stood there, watching. *Perhaps it was waiting for her to die first*, she thought, almost laughing at her predicament. She ran out of energy, the shield cracking into a dozen sharp shards.

A brilliant bolt of pain ripped through her chest. She wanted to scream, but blood welled up in her mouth, and she collapsed to her knees. The blood splattered onto the snow, as red as the jagged pieces of glass lying around her. Her vision blurred. She tried to get up. The wolf's tail, white as a snowbank, soft as a pillow, slammed into her, knocking her over into the snow. Then, all was dark.

It was warm. For the first time in a long time, she didn't dream. No colors flitted over her mind, no memories. Simply darkness. It was peaceful. *Was she dead?*

Little girl.

A voice. In her head. *The wolf*, she realized suddenly.

Yes. That's me.

Did you eat me? Arielle wondered.

The wolf laughed. *No. You're asleep. It's time to wake up.*

She opened her eyes. At first, all she could see was white. Then she could see the wolf's eyes, glittering pale blue. Then the wolf's outline, and the snow. They were under the snow, she realized.

"I... I didn't know you could talk," Arielle said.

I wouldn't call it talking, the wolf replied, clearly amused.

"What... who are you?"
You know what I am. I'm an amarok.

"You can read my thoughts?"

The wolf smiled, in her head. *No. I simply know what you are thinking.*

“Isn’t that the same thing?” Arielle asked.

The wolf seemed to shrug. *Many things seem like the same thing from the outside, but are completely different within. Much like you, little girl.*

“Me?”

Had I found an ordinary human, I would probably have eaten them. Better a fast death than a cold, slow death in the ice. The wolf’s eyes glowed. But you are different. On the outside, you are like any other human. Squishy. No fur. But inside, you are like a pile of glass. Broken and shattered.

“Isn’t that just my magic you’re seeing?”

Magic comes in many forms, little girl. This old wolf has a few of them. I know you can see it. The snow. Prompted by the wolf’s words, she realized it. The snow that seemed to flow off of the wolf was its aura. Its magic.

Yes. That’s right. I know your type. You are a little bird, trying to lift up the world. But a little bird cannot carry all the world on its wings.

“I have to try don’t I?” Arielle asked. “I have to make amends.”

Look what trying did to you.

Her mind suddenly shifted. In a moment, she was seeing out of the wolf’s eyes. The snow, so pale and white in hers, was vibrant, shifting with a thousand colors from the eyes of the wolf. Then she saw herself. Lying in the snow, eyes wide open, yet inside, broken and dimmed. Her aura was so small it didn’t even seem to exist.

“That’s... me?”

That’s you. Your magic has been fading.

“I know.” Arielle knew it well. The salts that had set off her rampage had irrevocably damaged her. Her magic circle had become unstable, crackling with energy. Every time she used magic, her power ebbed. Every time she called on a memory, her magic slipped ever further away. “There’s nothing I can do about it. I’m broken. You said so yourself.”

Broken. Yes. But broken things can be fixed. Not by dead flowers, or dark stones. But by letting your burden go.

“I can’t,” she replied. “I went too far too many times. I hurt everyone I ever knew. I let people suffer for me. This is what I have to do.”

You can’t make another shield, can you?

“Of course not! Have you seen the state of my magic?”

Then how can you make amends?

Arielle paused. “I... I can still fight. I can defeat villains... I can...”

You cannot fix what you have done by fighting. Fixing means making things anew. It means protecting what is still whole, and repairing what is not.

“Then... then I’m useless.”



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PART THREE

REALITIES

here was a silence. Outside, the wind howled. A single tear fell in the silence. “I’m useless, aren’t I? I can’t even do what I swore I would.” She was sobbing now. “It isn’t fair. I never wanted to hurt *anyone*. And now I can’t even make up for what I did. Now I can’t even... I can’t even...”

Foolish little girl. The wolf’s tail swept up to her face, raking away and drying her tears. *Did you not hear a word I said? Broken things can be fixed. **You** can be fixed.*

“How?” The word hung in the air. A minute passed, silence, as if time itself had frozen.

The wolf sighed. *By letting go. Your burdens. Your fears. Your dreams. Your hopes. Your memories.*

“But that’s everything I have left.”

And building them anew.

“I don’t understand.”

Because you don’t understand yourself.

“What?”

Who are you, Arielle Lamina. Tell me. The same question you asked me. Who, what, are you.

“I’m... the heir to Lamina. I’m a villain. I’m broken.”

That’s who you think you are. But what are you really?

“A person. Someone who... messed up.”

No. Start with what you want. What you truly want.

“I want... to be happy. I want... to undo what I have done.”

Then who are you?

“Isn’t that what everyone wants?”
Arielle asked furiously. “To be happy? How does that tell me who I am?”

Answer the question. Who are you?

“I’m Arielle Lamina.”

Exactly.

And suddenly, she understood. She was Arielle Lamina. She was an idea. A concept really, a symbol. Something that meant something more. Something bigger than herself, and at the same time, something that was... herself. Who she was had nothing to do with what she had done, or what she had said, or what she had thought, or what she had known. She simply existed. Burdenless. Free.

Realizing this was like... a bird that had been trying to lift the world, holding chains of iron in its talons, not realizing that it was perfectly free to let them go. To drop them, and fly away.

And at that moment, her magic burst back into life. Before, it had been like a thousand candles. and every moment one had burnt out and gone dark. Now, it was like a thousand candles, each igniting its neighbor, each becoming brighter and brighter and brighter and more and more and more joining the flames until they stretched out into the infinite horizon, a sea of brilliant light.

Petals of glass and crystal, pure and free, floating in the air, no longer confined to a shield, or a spear, or a sword or a lance or a

shard, but *free*, really and truly free, bound only to her mind's will, appeared all around her, dancing through the air.

The wolf stood up. As it did, the roof of the snow cave shattered, collapsing, yet not a flake landed on her head, for the petals had pushed every one aside. Now they flew up, rising into the sky like a million stars, turning the sky red as they flew east... and the sun rose.

Warm light, yellow and soft, flooded the tundra. As it did, it ignited her, lighting a flame back in the hearth that had so long been empty. The crystal at her chest, once a chest full of memories, so heavy that she stooped beneath their weight, became as light as air, purified at last by the light. The flower in her hair, harvested from these very plains, a poison and a blessing, bloomed anew, fresh green leaves purifying the sickly scent it had produced. And for the first time in a long time, Arielle Lamina smiled. She turned to thank the amarak.

But it was gone.



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