

## **The Curse of the Shadow Blight**

By Mike L. Downey

Aerial Raventime woke on her perch feeling . . . off. As she pulled her wings back from covering her head, she rubbed her eyes while looking down at her feet wrapped around her . . . black perch? Where's my red?

Her head jerked as she stared about her cottage. All her things had been leached of color. The walls, her paintings, her easel, and everything else was either black or white. Leaping down, Aerial picked up a paintbrush in her hands and examined what had been Hooker's Green on the tip, now black. She pushed aside black window curtains expecting lush green landscape but now grayish all the way to a white sky horizon. What happened to all the colors?

As she gaped out the window, she could see flying and gliding shapes moving toward the village center. The Gaggle must have been called. Aerial hustled out the door to join her fellow Winged. Shesoar was probably already on her way. She vaulted into the air to glide downhill, hopping at times to stay airborne.

When Aerial arrived at the Gaggle, she saw almost everyone in the village and the surrounding countryside there. Their faces looked right except all were ashen or pallor. She spotted Shesoar, her brown face black. It's like a bad dream. Aren't dreams black and white? And everyone's wings were so bland. Bland. She searched the crowd for . . . there she is. Taylor Warbleside, looking pale and forlorn. She had just loved her blonde hair and yellow feathers. Poor thing.

Aerial stopped crowing inside. What was powerful enough to strip color from everything? Or was something wrong with our eyes? She heard others muttering similar questions.

Paul Parrotheart cawed three times, and the Winged silenced. He flapped slowly up to the Roost to begin the Gaggle.

“Winged, many here are too young to remember the last Curse of the Shadow Blight, but that is what has befallen us. The Blight removes pigments from the Winged world. No more colors, only black and white and shades of gray.”

The Curse of the Shadow Blight. Aerial had heard the scary stories since she was an egg. Why again now? The twittering rose around her until Parrotheart cawed once more.

“The Curse comes because we the Winged have failed in some way to progress, to grow. We have become stale. Or we have fallen back. Each of us must search inside and out for an answer. The Shadow Blight remains until one-or more-of us moves the Winged forward. It takes just one action-just one-and our colors return. Go now.”

“Attack the Denuded,” Aerial overheard as she moved away. She spotted a small group of young males talking loudly, arms waving, wings rippling on their backs. She moved closer as Shesoar joined her.

“I bet the Denuded still have color,” one shrill blackwing said. “We’ve attacked them before. They have no wings. We can conquer them. That will make us strong, move the Winged forward. Our colors will return. We’ll all be heroes.”

The others called out, shaking their fists in the air, hunching their wings upward. Then the sound of wings snapping open made them go silent. Aerial and the loud boys turned to stare at the young man with wings spread wide and quivering in the air.

“You know nothing,” the male said. “Were you there when the Winged fought the Denuded? No. Your parents’ parents were still in the nest during that awful time. War did not move us forward.”

“What do you know about the past, Flightdive Blanche?” the shrill one countered. “You spend all your time indoors. Besides, you and I were hatched days apart.”

“History, Beakclaw,” Flightdive responded. “I read our history. You should try it sometime. You can ask Leader Parrotheart though if reading strains something.”

Aerial felt a snicker escape her lips; Shesoar giggled. Beakclaw’s white face went darker. Aerial watched as his mouth worked. He can’t think of a comeback. Beakclaw finally waved his arms at Flightdive as if to push him away before launching into the air, the others slower to follow.

Flightdive’s wings folded behind his back. So, this is the odd recluse always reading. That’s why she’d never seen him before. Aerial and Shesoar walked to him.

“I’m Aerial, this is Shesoar. How do you keep your wings open so long?” she asked.

“Practice,” Flightdive said.

“Why would anyone practice holding their wings open when they’re on the ground?”

“You must hold your wings open when you glide. You don’t ever practice strengthening your wings for when you fly?”

“Girls don’t fly,” Aerial and Shesoar said automatically.

“That’s never been true throughout Winged history. It’s only this generation, crusty relics like Parrotheart, that started that.”

Aerial felt her mouth drop open. She must look like an idiot to Flightdive. Huh, his white face is young, but his hair is gray. Shesoar shook her head. Gasping to give her lips something to do, Aerial felt her wings tremble.

“There’s no reason, no law, stopping females from flying?”

“Let’s face it, that’s the stupidest thing imaginable. Prohibiting flying when you have wings? Absurd.”

“How do you know this?”

“Like I told Beakclaw – talk about someone who fell out the nest one too many times – I read our history.”

“Where?”

“The buc-hord near Dive Valley.”

“Show me.”

“Wait, just wait,” Shesoar said. “You’re not believing this, are you, Aerial? Why would our family and friends keep us from flying?”

“That’s what I want to find out,” Aerial said. “You coming?”

“No, thanks,” Shesoar said. “Enjoy wasting time at the buc-hord with hermit Flightdive here.”

Shesoar leapt into the air and headed back to her cottage. Aerial turned to Flightdive who was sadly watching her friend hop-gliding away.

“Show me,” Aerial repeated.

Flightdive sprung into the air. Aerial followed, spreading her wings to catch as much air as possible. Flightdive coasted alongside her. When Aerial’s glide ended and she had to push off

again, Flightdive touched down with her, hop-gliding like her. Aerial liked that. They continued to the buc-hord.

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Aerial looked down on the gray of Dive Valley as she soared in the white sky, black dotted houses and dark trees about. As she felt herself descend, Aerial remembered the words she had read: “Slice the air on your upstroke, be one with the air under and around your wings.”

Like it was the first time, she flapped her wings up and down. And Aerial flew. She was flying. Her chest felt like it would explode. Her eyes teared. She was flying. Aerial wiped her face on her sleeve, tilted her wings, and then moved them faster to plunge in a controlled dive. This was so much fun as she wheeled up from the surface.

A shrill cry sounded behind her. Turning in the air, Aerial saw a Winged furiously flying toward her. It was Beakclaw, and he was screaming, his white face darkening from his effort and his rage.

“Girls don’t fly!” Beakclaw shrieked. “You’ll take us backwards, lawbreaker! It’s you that brought the Curse upon us! Your planning to fly doomed us! I’ll stop you! I’ll stop you!”

Aerial was taken aback at his anger, but she gulped while gliding right. He’s working so hard, beating the air into submission. Why, Beakclaw is terrible when flying. Aerial flapped her wings to climb higher and higher. Beakclaw labored to match her height. She flew to a loftier altitude, cutting the sky with ease. Beakclaw’s breathing grew harsh, his wings thrashing aimlessly as he tired.

Finally, Beakclaw gave up the ascent and pivoted to glide down. Aerial folded her wings and plummeted down toward the gliding boy as he careened about. As the wind rushed up at her, Aerial wanted nothing more than to crash into Beakclaw at full speed. But her wings opened fully with a ragged crack at the last second. She drove her legs into Beakclaw's back between his wings, knocking the breath out of him.

Gripping him, Aerial carefully crashed Beakclaw into the turf where she rode him like a plow over the dark ground until they stopped. She lightly hopped off the gasping boy to glide over to an arriving Flightdive and Leader Parrotheart.

"I thought you were going to be around to rescue me," Aerial said.

"No, I said I would be around if help was needed," Flightdive said as Beakclaw raked gouts of gray grass and black dirt from his face. "Beakclaw, you need some help?"

A sputtering was the only response.

"Young Aerial," Parrotheart said. "Flightdive showed me the history in the buc-hord. There is no law stopping females from flying. The Winged just followed a bad tradition. I'll do my part to rectify that. I am sorry for all the wasted years."

"Thank you, Leader," Aerial said. "I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything," Parrotheart said. "Just fly. Your flight, your flying, it is a work of art. Continue. I have others coming to take care of Mr. Beakclaw here."

Soon, it was just Flightdive and Aerial standing in Dive Valley. They circled each other, moving their wings up and down.

"So, I told your friend Shesoar you'd be up here, and you'd be flying."

"You did, did you? Why would you do that?"

“Well, since your flying is a ‘work of art,’ I thought that you might want to teach your friends.”

Aerial stopped moving as she fought to keep from crying.

“Oh, I would love to do that more than anything in the world.”

A slow grin built on Flightdive’s face.

“Anything?”

“Almost anything,” Aerial fought to not grin back as he extended a wing toward her. An astonished look grew on Flightdive’s face as he gestured behind her.

“Aerial, Aerial, look, look.”

Aerial turned to see the bottom of Dive Valley. There she spotted Shesoar hopgliding up the way with Taylor Warbleside just behind. Following close were many of the women and girls of the village.

But just as wonderful were the colors that accompanied them: the deep green of the pasture, the breathtaking blue sky on the horizon, the red of the setting sun, even Taylor’s yellow hair.

Aerial looked at Flightdive in full color for the first time.

“You’re a redhead?”

They both laughed as they waited for the others.

End

