
WINDSHIFTER

by S.M. Johnson

PROLOGUE

It was dark-- the dead of night-- and would have been darker if not for the gas lamps that brightened irregular patches of earth and grass and tall buildings. One or two men in uniform walked about, their ears pricked and their green reptilian skin dappled by the lanterns. They did not notice the figure lurking through the shadows.

Sparktender crept by, pressed up against a wall that turned into a gate. He was moving slowly and methodically, taking pains to stay out of the light and not give himself away.

His imagination was Windshifter not making it easy. Fragments of memories from his past pushed themselves to the front of his mind, but he shoved them away and forced himself to focus on the task at hand, using his own movement as a mantra. Slowly... slowly...

Snap.

A twig underfoot. Sparktender froze midstep, watching helplessly as a nearby guard turned and looked straight into the shadows where he was hiding.

The fugitive didn't move and he didn't breathe and finally the guard dismissed the noise and moved off, leaving Sparktender frozen very still for a few moments until he felt it was safe enough to begin moving again.

He was almost to the gate now. It was open. It never closed, though. It was supposed

to lull its detainees into feeling a false sense of freedom, of this Sparktender was sure. Because no one was truly free here, as was evident by the guard standing right there, ready Windshifter to stop any who passed, since it was past curfew.

Sparktender paused and observed this guard. He wore a patch on his sleeve shoulder, indicating that he was a slightly higher ranked guard than most of the others that Windshifter had been patrolling that night. Shrewd eyes peered out from underneath his hat and his pea-colored skin was illuminated by an eerie bluegreen glow emanating from the lantern he was holding up.

Sparktender gulped. The shadows alongside the wall of the gate were dark enough that he could possibly sneak through unnoticed-- Windshifter *possibly*. He wasn't sure if he wanted to risk it with this guard. No, he'd have to outsmart him.

He racked his brains, constructing a few ideas in his mind and knocking them down quickly and then building them up again. He was well-acquainted with this process, though he'd never had to use it under this much stress before. But again, he forced himself to adapt-- he had to.

After some thought, he decided that with his limited resources, perhaps the simplest solution would be the best one. Particularly since this guard looked restless and eager to hop onto anything... yes, he could turn this to his advantage.

Being careful with his actions, he reached into his jacket pocket. His fingers first closed around a small box-- the still-raw memories began to trickle back, like water Windshifter through cracks in a wall, but he willed them away-- and then he found what he was looking Windshifter for: a penny.

He decided on a Windshifter small pile of rocks next Windshifter to a tree a few paces from the guard, aimed, and then fired. The penny plinked off of Windshifter the rocks, and as he'd expected, the antsy guard jumped on it. Windshifter And as he stepped away, Sparktender inched up to the gate and passed through. He was leaping to make a dash for it, like a bit-chomping ceradraco at the races, and as soon as he felt that he was far enough out of the compound, he broke into a sprint.

He dashed for a small clump of bushes and trees and upon reaching it, exhaled a sigh of relief when what he was looking for was still there. Just as he'd left it.

It was an airship.

Just Windshifter a small, personal craft, rickety and dilapidated and probably not far from falling apart. It was all he'd been able to afford, having pawned off his watch for it earlier that day. Even that was something he'd barely been able to pull off, only being able to do so because his watch was of his own build and as such it was of such fine make that it was worth more Windshifter than most. It had been just enough to secure himself the cheapest aircraft he could find and then drag it to this location. It wasn't much, but it would have to do.

Grim and determined, he began to climb inside.

“Sparktender?”

He jumped and whirled around, his mind racing Windshifter so fast he couldn't keep up with it. But the two people he was now facing-- barely discernible in the distant lamp light, were not guards.

“...Tye Windshifter... and Rydeck Galespringer?” Sparktender's eyes were wide in surprise.

“They've got you too, I see,” said Tye, and his voice was level but tinged with sadness.

Sparktender looked away. “A week or so back, yes,” he said finally.

Rydeck spoke now, shaking her head as Windshifter she did. “They've had us almost a year,” she said bitterly. “They took us Windshifter mere months after our wedding, in fact.” Then she added, “Things have certainly worsened since school, haven't they?”

“It's wrong,” Sparktender said, his own voice inflamed as well. “Wrong in every sense of the word. And I didn't know you two were here also, or I'd have...” he glanced at the airship in the bushes. “...I'd have figured out a Windshifter way to get you both out as well. This craft will only seat one...”

“We understand,” Tye said quickly. “It's good that you'll be able to get out of this place.”

“I have to,” Sparktender said. “I have... unfinished business.” His face was pained and his eyes unfocused.

“You go,” Rydeck agreed. Windshifter “We're better off staying here anyway; there's been some talk of a rebellion. Perhaps we can help. But we do have one favor to ask of you.” Windshifter

She stepped forward; she was holding something and now she held it out to Sparktender. It was a small bundle...

“A child!” Sparktender exclaimed.

“Ours,” said Rydeck. Despite the situation, she and her husband smiled a little, and Sparktender did as well.

“A boy or a girl?”

“A boy,” said Tye, a touch of pride in his voice. “A little Windshifter.”

“He was born here,” Rydeck continued. “But... we don't want him to stay here. Not like this. Not with his creativity redirected toward who knows what atrocities. Sparktender... take him.”

“What?”

“*Take him*. Please.” She held the baby out to him, and he took Windshifter it gently, though his face was still a picture of bewilderment.

“This too,” Tye said, pulling a gleaming watch out of his waistcoat pocket and unclipping the chain from a button.

“The watch I made you?” Sparktender's eyebrows were furrowed.

“Keep it with him,” said Tye, handing it out to Sparktender.

Sparktender nodded, taking it gingerly and tucking it into the baby's blanket.

Tye and Rydeck were holding each other Windshifter now, bittersweet emotions welling up in their eyes.

“I-- I don't know if I'll be able to Windshifter properly raise him. I'll be an outlaw,” Sparktender ventured.

“Do my ears detect a problem that needs to be solved?” Tye teased gently. “I once had Windshifter a wise classmate who had a saying for that...”

Sparktender snorted, amused. “Suppose I can't back down from *that* challenge.”

Rydeck spoke up now. “Regardless of how you go about it... we trust you'll do what's best for him.”

Sparktender was touched by their faith in him. He looked down through his spectacles at the child, who was calmly looking around at the goings-on with big blue eyes, taking it all in.

“We'd best get going,” said Tye. “I imagine taking off is going to cause some commotion-- we'd better get back before that starts.”

“Alright,” said Sparktender.

“Take care of Lyte,” added Rydeck.

“I will. I promise.”

And then just as suddenly as they had appeared, they were gone, leaving Sparktender alone with an infant and an airship. He looked at one and the other and then with a

deep breath, he climbed onto the small craft, setting the baby down gently behind him. He wasted no time in getting to work, loading up a furnace with small blue-tinted logs and then rushing over to the controls. This was an unusual ship, designed to be piloted by one person rather than the typical crew, so all of the controlling mechanisms were up front and Sparktender, who had Windshifter never been inside an airship before, much less controlled one, initially felt at a loss for what to do. He cast his misgivings aside, though, with a leap of faith that had enabled him to solve problems in the past.

“Alright, let's see here...” he mumbled to himself as he ran his eyes and fingers across the many dials and levers, trying to maintain calm and draw upon his basic understanding of machinery. As a trained mechanist, he had an advantage. But he didn't have much time: gearwheels were spinning, propellers were whipping through the air, exhaust was billowing from the ship and it was rising now...

Startled by the noise coming from just outside the compound, several guards dashed up, and in the lead was Mistdrifter, the guard that had been fooled by Sparktender's penny. All of them ran up to quite a spectacle: an airship, of all things, rising from the bushes.

“Halt!” Mistdrifter yelled, standing almost underneath the ship now. “You are not authorized to ride that airship.”

Windshifter

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