

PHAZE FLARE

FREE FICTION



SOMETHING IN THE WIND

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The Nest was ravenous.

It had been days since last It had taken sustenance. Already, the thirst was a dry husk in Its mandibles. The night wind played hotly against Its urticating hairs, adding to the insects' misery. The enticing scent of pheromones from the night flyers winging past gave rise to strong needs within the Nest.

But the insects and creatures of the forest gave the Nest a wide berth: carelessness was a thing of the past when dealing with Its kind. Movement too close might well be the last taken in this world.

"Listen!" The Queen hissed from Her place on a high branch of the tree. She moved away from the cluster of over 1,000 pale green eggs that were due to hatch any moment.

The slithering sound within the Nest ceased. Night-alert eyes turned attention to the ebon darkness beyond the bole of the tree.

A Nestling lifted Its triangular rear, the hairs on Its tubular body bristling. Its antennae twitched and the scent of fresh-coursing blood made It gurgle with longing.

"Sustenance," the young one whispered.

"One comes," The Queen cautioned. "Be ready!"

As one, the Nest undulated from the bole of the tree, rippling like a wave across the gray-brown bark. Its spines scraped along the wood and a faint sucking sound followed in Its wake. A cinereous trail oozed from beneath Its body to slime the tree trunk.

In the distance, a monkey screeched: awakened from its restless slumber by the presence of the evil that had suddenly emerged in the forest. The shriek acted as a warning for the other creatures wandering about and all movement, all sound, ceased. Chatoyant eyes, fearful of what was coming, kept well away from the spot where the Nest dwelt.

"What is it?" one of the Nestlings asked.

"It walks upright," the Queen responded.

"Ah," the Nest sighed in unison and Its spines vibrated in anticipation.

The Queen flexed Her wings, stretching the chevron-shaped brown structures to a full six-inch span. The wings, made up of dust-like scales, flapped soundlessly in the heated air. Her abdomen quivered, the network of veins supporting Her wings pulsed with need. She cast her attention to the male hunched weakly on the branch beside her.

"How much longer?" She asked.

The male lifted his head and the feathery antennae turned Her way.

"Not long now," he whispered.

"Go with the Wind," She said then dismissed the dying male. He had served his purpose in their midnight mating. His death meant no more to Her than had his life.

A high-pitched sound whistling amongst the foliage drew the Queen's attention and She trembled. There were bats nearby and although the airborne rodents never ventured close to the Nest, a part of Her feared the ferocious creatures. Instinctively, She engaged the jamming device in Her brain and sent out Her own sonar to generate sound waves that would confuse the bats.

"Filthy flying rats," She mumbled as the male beside Her tumbled from the branch to float to the ground in his final death throes. She gave a mental shrug and forgot about the brilliantly hued male.

The aroma of the approaching Bearer of Sustenance intensified and the Nest stopped all movement. It hung from the small branch onto which It had undulated and now clung there, the lowest larvae in the pod dangling seven feet from the ground.

Sensing the Bearer closing in on Her Nest, the Queen flexed her hind legs and propelled Herself from the high branch. She arched upward for a few feet, twisted Her bulky body into two lazy spirals, and then flitted through the trees to come around behind Her victim.

Silently, stealthily, She observed Her prey and was pleased to note it was a specimen of some superiority. Its smell was not as unpleasant as some She had encountered. The thought of the rich, red blood coursing through its veins made Her giddy.

Unaware of the dreadful threat suspended in wait, the Bearer crunched gravel beneath its heavy feet as it moved down the pathway. Its eyes-acclimated to the shadows but unable to see that which draped from the tree branch-darted about the forest, searching for predators on the ground.

It did not sense the danger overhead.

And so it came closer, closing in on the place where the Nest dangled in the wind.

The Nest held Its breath, the spiracles on Its abdomens ceasing to rise and fall with Its intake of air.

Gently, coquettishly, the Queen glided toward the Bearer. Seductively, She brushed her right wing across the Bearer's cheek, startling the prey, bringing it to a halt directly beneath the swag of Her Nest.

Risking an attack from the prey, She flitted by it once more, garnering the full attention of the Bearer, keeping it still beneath the dangling cluster of Her offspring. One compound eye refracted the Bearer's surprised face while the other took in the release of the Nest from the branch over the head of the prey.

Though She could not hear the scream of terror that erupted from the mouth of the prey as the Nest quickly slithered over its forehead to attach Itself to the Bearer's face, the Queen took delight in the convulsive movements of the human writhing on the ground, its hands digging at the

mass of larvae. She watched with glee as the prey's hands, stung by the venomous urticating hairs covering Her offspring's bodies, arched away from its face. The spines were now sticking to the prey's fingers, buried in its flesh, and would be causing acute agony.

Death-six times more potent than the venom of most pit vipers-would claim the prey within a short time. The venom lurking in the poisonous spines on the Nest's bodies would coagulate the blood in the prey's veins; its kidneys would cease to function. Taking of the Sustenance that kept the Nest alive would have to be done quickly while the blood still flowed.

The flesh could be devoured at a leisurely rate.

The marrow extracted.

The bones ground into a fine powder She could suck up through her proboscis.

"Enjoy, my children," the Queen advised.

As the hungry mandibles of Her offspring sank sharp fangs into the Bearer's flesh, She sighed and settled on the branch to rest. Her outspread wings fluttered in the night wind.

"What are these?" the little girl asked, pointing to the cluster of caterpillars clinging to the tree.

"Don't touch!" the guide warned. He pulled the child back. "They will sting you."

"They're just big worms, aren't they?" the child's mother asked in a bored voice. She fanned herself with the straw hat she'd purchased on the tour bus. "Aren't you being a bit melodramatic?"

The guide shook his head. "No, Senora. They are the larvae of the Lonomia moth. They are mucho poisonous."

The twenty or so tourists moved back from the tree on which the larvae were clustered like grapes. They stared at the reddish brown bodies with their gray speckles, giggling nervously as now and again one of the insects would lift its rear end from the rest of the pod.

"How poisonous are we talking about here?" a man in a black shirt asked.

"Very," the guide confirmed. "The hairs on their bodies are filled with it. One touch of those hairs has been known to kill a person within 72 hours."

"In what way?"

"It makes the blood vessels burst open. Large bruises form on the body. The kidneys stop working and then you go into a deep coma."

"Sounds like Ebola virus to me," someone mumbled.

"Just do not touch the larvae," the guide repeated. "Even if it does not kill you, the pain is horrible. Mucho stinging." He motioned for his tour group to follow him.

After one final look at the cluster of larvae, the group moved on, anxious for the sight of the ancient Mayan ruins they had come to see.

The man in the black shirt moved closer to the tree and stared at the cluster.

"Do not get so close, senor," a native woman said. "Sometimes the spines break off from the larvae and people inhale them."

He looked around. "And" he prompted.

She shrugged. "It causes problems similar to asthma. You can also get them in your eyes. I have heard of cases where serious damage was done."

"They are that dangerous?" he asked.

"Si, señor. They are that dangerous," she replied. "They are becoming a deadly problem in Central America. Recently, a woman from Brazil died a horrible death when she was stung while picking plums. I am told it is an awful way to die."

"Poor woman," the man said.

"A dangerous way to make a living, eh?" the native woman queried.

Nodding, the man stuck his hands into the pockets of his jeans and turned away from the larvae. He rejoined the group from the bus and listened as their guide told him the legends and history of the Mayan civilization.

As the group wandered past the old structures, the courtyard where ancient sports tournaments were held, and a few hardy souls climbed the treacherous temple steps to look out over the invading jungle, the man in the black shirt lagged behind. His mind was on the unsettling insects that had wormed their way into his thoughts.

The Queen stood sentinel over the nestlings that had hatched from Her latest batch of eggs. She watched them slithering about, squirming over one another, forming the cluster on the trunk that would be Its home for a few weeks. Soon, this generation would join the one before It, high in the branches above her.

She looked up at the thousands of cocoons that hung from the branches in pupae pouches. In a matter of hours, the first of that generation would break free, blood would infuse Its stiff wings, and It would take to the midnight skies to hunt.

Pleased, Her progeny was thriving She turned Her gaze to the last generation. That offspring had fed well the night before and were now ready to undergo the first of the instar transitions by shedding the old skins.

A male fluttered past, lured to the Queen by the aromatic pheromones She was excreting from Her scent gland located in the abdomen. He emitted a sound from his metathoracic organ and the Queen responded with an answering sound at a different modulation cycle rate. It was an indication She was ready to mate.

Lighting on the branch beside Her, the male rubbed Her body with his hind legs, coaxing Her to turn so he could mount. The Queen opened Herself for the intrusion and tolerated the rutting for this was the only way to populate this world with Her kind.

Halfway through the mating, the male realized he had made a horrendous mistake, but it was too late. As the life-giving fluid pulsed from his abdomen into Hers, he knew his life cycle had been greatly reduced.

"What are you?" he asked, his bewilderment giving way to terror as the first burning pain traveled from Her body into his.

"Go with the Wind," She stated and withdrew, lifting Herself from the branch and flitting further up the tree.

From Her position, She surveyed Her kingdom. The boles of many of the trees were filled to overflowing with Her offspring, teeming with life that would one day rise up to overtake and cast off the native species.

For the Queen was not of this world into which She had been thrust.

"What are you?" the dying male whispered as he dropped from the branch.

"Nothing you would understand," She scoffed as he ceased to move on the ground.

As for as She knew, Hers was the last of the Breed. She had traveled millions of miles through space, windborne to the jungles of the Yucatan, to begin a new colony. To establish a Nest that would one day extend Its tendrils to the far reaches of this world and claim it as Its own. One day,

She would be Queen here and Her Nest would rule the ones who slither, hop, and crawl as well as the ones who walk upright.

The first generation would soon emerge-hungry and thirsty from inactivity-to devour everything in Its path, even the vile bats that sent their repellent squeals through the night air. Her mind on the glory of the kingdom to come, She almost missed the new scent that rose from the dry, hot wind.

"Mother?" a nestling questioned. Its voice trembled.

"Aye," She answered. "I am aware."

"What is it?"

The Queen sent out Her finely tuned sonar but no conclusive signal returned to Her. Her antennae twitched, searching the scent that was unlike any She'd experienced before. Perplexed, She sprung into the air and winged Her way toward the unidentifiable smell. Her night vision was sharp, Her sonar adjusted to catch the faintest of movements in the undergrowth.

But She saw nothing lurking about the paths of Chichen Iza.

No being that walked upright.

No creature that crawled or hopped or slithered upon the ground.

She did not inhale its musky aroma.

She did not know the first moment's fear until it was too late and She was captive in his grip. She shrieked and turned her gaze up to the being holding her captive.

His eyes were crimson red, his snout short and stubby, the nostrils were wide and flaring. His ears were pointed, his flesh leathery. When he grinned at Her, she saw the rows of razor-sharp fangs.

"A bat!" She cried, shuddering in his fierce grip. She had not thought to seek danger from the air.

His wings flapped lazily over the high stands of trees where Her offspring pulsed and slithered.

"A hungry bat," he chuckled.

Her heart thundered in Her thorax. She squirmed to get free but his talons tightened around her.

He dove for the ground and as the sandy gray dirt rose up to meet them, he stopped in mid-air, flipped head over feet, and transformed himself to one who walks upright, settling down gently on the night-darkened soil.

Her mouth opened, the proboscis furling and unfurling in terror.

He reached a hand into the bole of a tree and She rejoiced that this one would soon embrace an agonizing death.

But Her offspring posed no danger to the human. Though spines broke off in his free palm, he did not seem to feel the burning pain of the poison.

"What are you?" She groaned as he began nibbling Her offspring like grapes from the cluster.

"Just a little something from the Wind," he said with a laugh. "A warrior from Mother Nature."

As cinereous tears fell from Her multi-faceted eyes, the Queen watched in horror as Her offspring were consumed one by one. She fluttered uselessly in his grip, unable to break free. Though it took most of the night and early into the dawn hours, the human kept at it until no pupae, no larvae, no egg was left.

Wiping his hand down the front of his black shirt, the human left a smear of slime on the fabric.

She hung Her head in abject misery. The blood of Her offspring was on his evil hand.

"Kill me," She said, unable to move. "As you have killed my children."

He brought Her close to his face. "I think not," he said.

Her terror grew. "What are you going to do with me?"

His smile was predatory, as sinful as the darkest reaches of the Abyss. "Don't you like surprises, Moth?" he questioned.

The children filed past the collections in the museum cases and marveled at the beauty of the butterflies and moths pinned within the glass shadow boxes. When they came to the one that was labeled Nightwind's Moth, they felt uncomfortable and hurried on.

It wasn't that the moth inside the gilt-framed box was ugly for it was quite beautiful.

It wasn't that it was the largest moth in the collection for it was not.

What caused the unsettling effect on those who viewed this lone specimen pinned to the black velvet fabric was the way the compound eyes seemed to track their viewer.

The insect almost looked alive.

Only a passing bat that might happen by the windows of the museum late at night would ever hear the never-ending shrill scream of hopelessness from the gilt-framed shadowbox.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charlee is the author of fifty books, the first ten of which are the WindLegends Saga. Married 41 years to her high school sweetheart, Tom, she is the mother of two grown sons, Pete and Mike, and the proud grandmother of Preston Alexander and Victoria Ashley.

A native of Sarasota, Florida, Charlee was adopted at birth and grew up in Colquitt and Albany, Georgia. She says of her heritage: "I was born in Florida and raised in Georgia so that makes me an official Sunshine Cracker!" She now lives in the Midwest where she enjoys the changing of the seasons.

Her hobbies are writing, watching Gerard Butler strut his stuff in period movies, and trying to keep her adorable husband, Buddha Belly, from snoring and hogging the TV remote. She is owned and operated by five cats who allow her to only leave the house for catnip, kitty kibble, and clumping kitty litter.

Currently, she is at work on a new erotica novel for Phaze.



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