

The Myth of Little Wings

The pale faces keep themselves pretty because they never need to work out under the sun. Those that were touched, long before we were born, touched with Louisiana swamp hexes, baptized in fire water, and lullabied in the cradle with voodoo jazz, give our powers away. We give away our magic in the hopes they might see that we are mighty too. Even before the war, and even after the next war, this is the way of things.

So, when I got to the altar, I knew the look of war: folks from all walks, just plain angry. They're angry at all sorts of things but they don't know which way to shout. Those types, they come from all regions, all factions, all kinds of hurting and struggle. Maybe that's why I walked in there, thinking that maybe, even though I ain't got the face or the family or the blood, that maybe my magic might make them walk away a little different.

When I arrived at the grand event, my master knew me before I knew I was his slave. He wore dotted satin and cuffs with his initials and a big yellow grin. His shoulder pads made him look like the King we took him for.

He looked me up and down. "This all you can scrape up? Just one man? And a black man, at that?" We're at Apollo's bloody theatre for fuck's sake."

I turned to him and I squeezed out a smile. I knew I was looking at a tyrant watch his power drain out from him and there wasn't anything his small mind could do about it.

And I'll be damned, but I couldn't blame him. See, our kind, we got no families, or clans, or societies. We live on the fringes. We live in the wilds and we live in the alleys that only come alive at night. Some even call us "leeches" because most of us are black and we feed off any elixir or soup or slime that will carry us to the next high. We may only be gods for a moment, but I get the feeling that we got a special sense for the kind of magic our whole world needs right now.

So I turned to him and said, "Listen, brother. We're all here to feel somethin' real. We're all achin' to feel somethin' we've all forgotten with this war and that war. 'Sides, I'm just the opener. I'm the sacrificial lamb to your ritual."

He raised an eyebrow and I knew my charm got through.

"So let's keep this holy," I said.

He was besides himself, for sure. His type has never felt fire like that from a commoner like me. I thought he might want to slug me with that kind of power only high born folk command, but once he saw my ragged robes and my dented instrument, he decided it was best to save his strength.

Instead, he found his chance to get out one more lashing before the event as the music man came by. He just wanted to test the arena, see how our rhythms jived.

"Get your greasy hands off of my beauty, bloke!"

I've heard legends of mystic instruments, the kind that are bound to their owners like Excalibur or a blood oath or a disease the family can't seem to shake. So when he made a fuss and a show when our music man handled his dearly beloved instrument, I didn't blame him. But, for the first time, I just couldn't understand him.

See, I always thought there was somethin' sleepin' in me. Somethin' that wanted so badly to wake up and howl and thrash and sing and cry. When I was little, I would use old brooms or trashed bows or anything I could pluck or pretend to pluck a note on. Even when my daddy got me my first proper instrument, the same man who was a bit angel and at least half devil, I had to play that thing upside down 'cause it was meant for orthodox righties. I never had that kind of bond, so I never had to name them.

I knew he would be mighty angry at me for what I was about to do. But this was the altar. This was bigger than him or me or any of those about to feast.

So I stepped up. I was alone on the stage, but I was used to that.

What I didn't expect, were those impossibly bright shafts of light; spotlights, filtered through crystals and gems and amethysts, smoke breathing up from beneath the stage, making the whole scene a purple haze.

But, my, my, I had been waiting. This whole life of mine, all those delicious highs and impossible lows, were meant to test me for this moment.

So I planted my feet and plucked the first note. A metallic whine doused the crowd, inflaming the young and old, shooting yelps and whoops into the air before silence fell, and it was deafening.

So I threw another twangy chord. This time I made it bend and quiver, and cry right at the end.

Just as the luscious sound began to fade, and the audience drew a desperate breath, I felt something take hold. At first, it was like warm amber, glowing and growing, in light and hotness until it felt like a white flame shooting down my fingertips.

The next verse just came tumbling out. Pouring from my mouth, escaping from my hands -- before I knew it, my hips, my knees, my feet were all playing like the devil too. Without thought or will, sweeping rains of arpeggios and curious torrents of notes fell where they wanted with style and grace and just a bit of sass. Maybe I didn't know then, but the audience before the altar sure did. I was a possessed man.

I knew I could keep going, that I could spread my little wings -- hear my voice carry over field, and borough, rattling the little cages my audiences carried with them. Cause for the first time, I thought maybe all this energy, between the crowd and me, could build something real.

But then, I looked at my purple and bloody fingers and thought, "You can build bridges and cities and towers, but once you walk off this stage, Jimi, they'll just blow away and all return to dust, like castles made of sand."

So when I spent my very last fiery lick, I stepped off the stage. I said my goodbyes to the magic that carried me to the heavens and their good graces, and stepped off the stage.

I knew he'd try to stare me down and steal back whatever I earned out there with my sweat and blood and blisters. But when we met eyes, I didn't find that kind of smallness. His shoulders were slumped, but he felt huge. His yellow grin was gone, but he had a look of peace or enchantment or the look you get when you're soaring on a wind crying Mary.

And even though he couldn't bear to shake my hand, he stared, and he stared deep, and he said, "Thank you, Jimi."

As he strode out onto stage, to fulfill the pure and pretty prophecy the audience was awaiting, I thought to myself, "Maybe this time, this experience might stay."