

# WORLD OF THE FIFTH SEASON



~ Part four of four ~

*a short story by Jeff Harrison ~ Illustration by Wade Shaw*

Zack rolled over and looked out the bedroom window. Another grey, gloomy day that looked threatening with rain. He wiggled his toes deep beneath the warm comforter. Stabbing pain like mini jolts of electricity shot up from his feet threatening to cramp his calves, so he eased off on the stretch, but smiled. He could feel his toes. The pain was not pleasant, but he had feeling in his legs again—that was something to be celebrated!

Recovering from the accident had been an extreme exertion of will—something he'd turned into a do-or-die game of survival with himself. It was that game that kept him going every exhausting morning after another, forcing himself out of bed and into his wheelchair.

Grabbing his cane from where it rested propped against the wall and his nightstand, Zack pulled himself up out of bed. He tottered for a moment, then steadied himself. Week two with the canes. He glanced over at his wheelchair sitting in the corner and his smile brightened. Two weeks free of that rolling prison he'd been in for five months.

The physical healing had been going better than expected. He'd made a remarkable recovery, one that surprised even him. But what of all the strange shit that had lead up to his accident? It was something he'd been able to ignore all this time, focused as he was in getting back on his feet, but now that he'd hit the major milestone of leaving his wheelchair behind for good, it was something that was constantly on his mind now. He'd had a lot of time to decide that he wasn't crazy, so what the hell was he going to do to resolve his part in this battle between the gods?

One thing he knew, it was going to be on his terms. He would be the master of his own destiny—no one else.

Question was, how the hell was he going to arrange that? He was pretty sure it was going to require a leap of faith he didn't feel confident he could pull off. What choice did he have? He was ready to move his life into a new phase and in order to do that he needed to face down these demons who called themselves gods and him Earth's saviour.

He dressed in jeans and his new robin's egg blue cashmere sweater—a recent treat, since he'd lost so much weight and none of his clothes fit him anymore. Then he sat on the bed and stared into the mirrored closet doors for some time. He felt both crazy and afraid of what he was about to do; wasn't sure which feeling bothered him more. He realized he could talk to himself about it all day, rationalizing, arguing with the rationalizing, until stubbornness and impatience came to the rescue.

"Fuck it," he finally said aloud. He had nothing to lose. "Joaquim."

His voice sounded hoarse, so he cleared his throat and repeated the name with more conviction before he could laugh at himself with second guessing.

"Joaquim. I know you are there, so show yourself. We need to talk."

Nothing. The silence rang in his ears. He could hear the humming of his computer in the next room, the buzz of the refrigerator in the kitchen and the ticking of the clock on the wall.

Zack opened his mouth to try again when a flash of orange-red blurred the mirror and the goateed faced man appeared sitting on the bed behind him. Zack fought the urge to look behind him. He knew Joaquim wouldn't be there.

"You are looking good, Zack, considering what you've been through," Joaquim's voice was reserved, like his newly sedate manner. The only thing loud and hyper real about him this time was a tartan scarf worn loosely over a sweater that mirrored Zack's, but in a more somber shade of blue.

"I want to meet with the women, Isabel and Aisha. I'm ready to hear what they have to say, but they must be ready to hear me as well. If I'm going to help restore the balance then I believe we must work together."

"I'm not sure I can—"

"You can and you will," Zack said, firmly. "I've had a lot of time to think and if you truly need me to fulfill this role you've outlined for me—which you seem to believe I am destined for—then we're going to do it on my terms. I'm done being a pawn."

There was a flash of pique in Joaquim's eye, but then



he smiled, which caught Zack by surprise. "Very well...Guardian. When and where shall I tell the warring lovelies to meet you?"

"Sunday at the park across the street from here. I think it has a nice balance of wild nature and man-made structure, which should make both Isabel and Aisha feel at ease."

"You *have* given this a lot of thought."

Zack was hard pressed to decide whether Joaquim was lightly mocking him, or genuinely impressed. He brushed the uncertainty aside. "I need you to be there as well," he said instead.

"Impossible," Joaquim stated flatly.

"I believe you can make it happen, if you want to. I think you have as much at stake as Isabel and Aisha. I think it best if you are there as well."

Joaquim fixed unblinking green eyes on Zack and stared. It was a long appraising look and Zack forced himself to endure it, not looking away. "Very well, Guardian." The title seemed to roll off Joaquim's tongue easier this time. "This will require a great expenditure of power on my behalf to see this through, are you prepared for the price I will ask?"

"Are you prepared for the price of not being involved?"

Again that heated flash from those green eyes and then Joaquim threw his head back and laughed long and hard.

"Touché! Seems you've found your sword and are not afraid to use it. I will be there because you are absolutely right—there's no way I could afford to miss this!"

And then he was gone, leaving Zack alone to question the success of his gamble. There was nothing to do but surrender and believe.

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Zack sat on the iron and wood park bench and closed his eyes, leaning his head back so the sun warmed his face.

"You're doing well. I'm glad."

Zack opened his eyes to see Aisha blocking his sun. "Time and determination are great healers," he said.

The sharp *click click* of high heels on the paved sidewalk interrupted any further exchange. "You." Isabel scorched the air with the single word. "Haven't you done enough damage?"

Aisha drew herself up stiffly, a sharp retort on her lips, but Zack interrupted her. "Isabel, good to see you." Zack felt genuine warmth flood through him seeing her again. True it was a messy mix of passion and lust, but it felt good nonetheless. "I wasn't sure you'd

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come after not visiting me the months I was in the hospital."

"I wasn't really given much choice, was I?" she huffed, perching on the end of the park bench and lighting a cigarette.

"I'm afraid I was as blunt with her as you were with me," said Joaquim, emerging from the shaded portico at the end of the arboretum.

Aisha gasped in surprise, but Isabel merely frowned with disdain. "I see you've

finally grown the balls to pick a side."

"Yes, and I'm rather enjoying both the balls and being forced to take a stand," Joaquim replied, grinning and cupping his crotch.

Aisha smiled; Joaquim winked; Isabel glowered. "You most of all Zack, should know how precious my time is, so let's get this over quickly," she quipped.

"No, Isabel." He barreled on before his outraged former lover could do more than suck in a sharp breath. "One thing this accident has taught me is that change requires time and effort, as does balance. If I am to be the one to accomplish this, then I am the one to decide how that happens."

Isabel stood, a storm brewing on her face, but Zack grabbed her hand. "Did you care for me at all, Isabel?" he asked, surprising himself with how much he suddenly needed an answer. "Did our time together mean anything to you, or was I just a plaything—a toy piece in your game of gods?"

The tempestuous woman had gone rigid in his grip, but she didn't pull away. It was this fire, this determination that he adored and had used as the model for his recovery.

"I did. I do," she said at last. "But there is too much at stake for me to take risks with unknown factors. You were a means to an end, anything beyond that deviated from the plan."

"Yet you were willing to sacrifice everything, when you were confronted by the possibility of losing," Aisha said, quietly.

"I was blindsided by *your* attack!" Isabel blasted the other woman, glad to finally have a target to vent on. "I reacted as anyone would when attacked!"

"Ladies, ladies," Joaquim jumped in, only to have both women round on him.

"It's all your fault!" They both said in unison. "Always the trickster, manipulating events. Always out for the final laugh!"

"Enough!"

The tension was like a growing storm darkening the sky, a cacophony of blaring traffic in his head

threatening to smash into him like that taxi all those nights ago. He couldn't take it anymore, just like he couldn't take it in that fever dream brought on by Aisha's tea.

It was too painful to pace so he alleviated the stress the only way he could. He gripped both of Isabel's hands and lurched to his feet. The sudden movement was too much for his new balance and almost sent them both to the ground, but she reacted in time so they could both regain their balance and they were suddenly in a loose embrace.

"You just said that you cared for me; can you trust me?" He asked her. He had no idea of the look on his face, only what he felt in his heart. It must have been impressive enough because after a moment of furious silence the implacable Isabel softened as she looked into his eyes.

"I...I do still care for you. But trust? To do what? To be what for me? You have no idea about me, about who I really am, what I want, what's at stake—my very existence!"

"But I do know, because I believe you. If you let me in, then it becomes *our* existence, doesn't it?"

"Yes," she said after a long quiet moment.

The word was packed with all the answers Zack needed. It was the first gentle, truly open moment he'd ever experienced with the publishing tycoon, the Fire of Humanity's Heart. His chest thudded with the truth of the moment.

He kissed her. It was like when they kissed the very first time. Better.

Reluctantly he left Isabel's embrace and hobbled over to Aisha, her features were awash in despair.

"We hardly know each other," he said, "but I sense right down to my bones that we have an eternity of history."

"We do," she said, "but I am obviously too late this incarnation to beseech you to change your mind, to understand my desperation. This cannot go on; we must start anew if I am to survive this." Aisha's voice had filled with a crackling intensity—her eyes turned a brilliant glowing white and shivers of blue and purple lightning coursed down her arms to ball around her clenched fists.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, Aisha," Joaquim said, stepping in between her growing elemental fury and Zack, who, as much as he was trying to acclimatize himself to the fact he was dealing with some form of the supernatural, was having a hard time not freaking out.

Zack gulped in a deep breath of the ionized air and ploughed on, hoping Joaquim could calm her down enough that she would listen. "Aisha, I can't understand

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your side, your needs, unless you take the time to tell me. *Slowly*," he emphasized, flashing back to the cramped course he got via the tea. "When I was lying in that full body cast for two months in that drab hospital room, doped up on not enough painkillers, the only thing I could do was think. It's amazing the clarity time and morphine can give you," Zack said, seeking

to regain his earlier footing in the literal calm-before-the-storm he'd been granted.

"Clarity and morphine do not make good bed partners," Joaquim said with his usual wit, seeking to lighten the intensity.

"Joaquim, you are just as guilty as they are," Zack said, not unkindly. "You had the best of intentions, but you did nothing except judge from the sidelines. *Did* you want more than just the last laugh?"

All eyes fell on Joaquim, who for the first time ever, looked uncomfortable, unsure. "Yes, I like the last laugh, but the modern world has become such a morbidly serious place that everyone—including you three—has forgotten what that actually *means*. My last laugh is not to mock, not to belittle, not to squash dreams or ambition. It's to invoke *change!*" he declared, red hair flashing in the sun. "And so it has. I am here, in the flesh. And my sisters are actually willing to listen instead of continuing their war. And you, Zack," Joaquim said, resting his hands on Zack's shoulders, "you have changed most of all. So? Where *do* we go from here?"

"We work as a team. We can do it if we listen to each other," he rushed on before the three shocked looks he got derailed his train of thought again. "If we create a give-and-take relationship, if we form a family, a community reaching for the same goal."

"Which is?" Isabel asked.

Now it was Zack's turn for incredulity. "Seriously, you'd be up for it?"

"I trust you, Zack."

"I'm here, Zack," said Joaquim. "I think my actions speak for me."

Aisha had calmed. She looked at the three people before her, finally resting her gaze on Zack. "It's such a leap of faith," she finally said. "What choice do I have though? I will trust you Zack."

The power that filled him in the moment the three of them said those words made Zack feel like *he* was the god. He banished all doubt and strode confidently toward this new beginning.

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