

# THE PRINCESS'S FEATHERS

## 101. Power Play

**ROARRR!!**

Kuro's voice reflects off the smooth slope of Flat Rock as we approach the stone mountain from the north, our wings heavy with ice and exhaustion. As we've already reached the edge of the forested island, it's not long before a response sounds from the aerie.

**SKREEAK!**

**RARR!**

Still leading our flock of four, Kuro pounds her wings to summon a final burst of speed. Instead of angling for one of the clearings that pepper the island, she stills her wings to fall into a dive towards the center of the aerie. Landing there is forbidden due to the unpredictable winds around the rock, but clearly, Kuro doesn't care today. Unwilling to let her escape my sight, I follow after her and descend into the clearing at a more leisurely glide. As the bottom level comes into view, I see that Kuro has already landed and is on her way to Frecci's den. Kin have gathered in the snow, gazing skyward to see what all the commotion is about.

A cloud of snow is thrust into the air as I approach the ground, working as hard as possible to provide a soft landing for our precious cargo. When I'm mere feet from the ground, I let go of the log, giving it a soft landing into an oversized snow drift. For once,

I'm relieved to be one of the smallest adults in the flock. I land, ignoring the questions from curious onlookers, and make my way to Frecci's den.

"What do you *mean* she's at the Grandfather Tree?!" Kuro's voice thunders as I bound over the snowdrifts.

"Kuro, she..." Frecci trails off as she notices me slip into the den. She's standing in the back by a denfire, organizing a pile of samples from her store room. She ruffles slightly and continues, "That's where they took her. Frida's wings were in terrible shape; she was in no condition to fly up here. She told us she was ambushed by Moth and another . I don't know if she'll—"

**GROOWLLL...**

Kuro snarls and whips around, nearly smacking her tail against me. As she moves past without saying a word, I can see a certain resolve in her eyes — Frecci's account was all the proof she needed. She wants Relmoon's neck.

"Kuro, wait!"

I reach forward and rest a wing against her flank, causing her feathers to shudder. Baleful emotions are tempered, but not before Kuro raises her lip to reveal rows of razor-sharp fangs hungry for the taste of blood.

“Frecci,” I say, swiveling my head to face her. “I found a rare ingredient, one I can use to make a treatment for the illness.”

Her eyes widen. “Really?”

“Yes. I want to take it to the Grandfather Tree, but I’m not allowed there. I need someone else who can vouch for me and convince Sefri that I’m safe. She has to listen!”

Perhaps expecting some kind of objection, Frecci’s eyes dart between Kuro and me. When it never arrives, she asks, “How do you know this treatment will work?”

“Trust me,” I say, taking a step forward but keeping my wing planted against Kuro. “It’s a treatment from the Farlands. The way it works...”

Quickly, I spout off the abridged explanation of the elixir, the one from that Nortanian book Sofl translated. As I explain the procedure to combine all the ingredients, Kuro’s feathers start to relax.

“And this special ingredient...” Frecci trails off and gazes into her stock room across the den. “Really, it’s nowhere to be found in the flock’s territory?”

“Trust me,” Enyll responds, shaking his wings of ice as he enters the den. “It’s a long flight away.”

I nod in agreement. “It’s not in the flock’s normal territory. At least, that Nakino or I are aware of.”

Nakino stores a few lichens in his den, but none are the devil’s matchstick. Despite my efforts with him, the flock is broadly unaware of the restorative properties of lichens.

Frecci exhales a long sigh and stares at the ground. “I could take the log to Nakino. Asha, I’m—”

“No,” I say. “It has to be me. I have experience making the treatment, and the process is very delicate. If I don’t make it, then it might not work! We can’t waste the lichen!”

That was a lie — I didn’t even know the elixir existed until Sofl found it — but it was necessary. Kuro has an insatiable bloodlust that can only be satisfied by Relmoon’s neck. And when she arrives at the Grandfather Tree and discovers what’s happened to her sister, she’s going to relapse into blinding rage. I need to be there to...

...

Well, I don’t know what I’m going to do.

I have a sneaking suspicion that Kuro will fly off in search of Relmoon, and she won't stop pursuing him until he's dead. Kuro is dear to me, a closer friend than anyone I've ever known. But do I really want to help her hunt down her ex-boyfriend? Then again, what if she encounters the rest of Relmoon's flock? Could she really survive a fight against all of them?

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Could I... live with myself if Kuro is killed?

...

No matter what, I have to be with her at the Grandfather Tree. I have to try to convince her it's a bad idea to attack Relmoon. There must be another way to deal with his flock that doesn't risk Kuro's life!

Frecci's tail sways anxiously. "Asha, I don't think it's a good idea for me to join you. I'm... not one to sway the branch. If Sefri gets upset, I don't know if I can argue in your favor."

"Then I'll do it."

A gravelly voice intrudes the conversation, and a cool scent drifts into the den. I crane my neck around to see an elderly drakon standing at the entrance, his tawny plumage outlined in a pale gray light shimmering from snow drifts.

“Bonello!” Kuro retreats a step in shock.

“Blue skies, Asha,” The chevil of Flat Rock dips his wings in greeting. He enters the den, dragging his long barbels across the surface of the snow. “This treatment you speak of. Are you certain it will work?”

After taking a second to gather my composure in front of the leader of Flat Rock, I incline my head. “As certain as Maki will eclipse Jade.”

Bonello looks intrigued. He raises the top of his wing to his face in contemplation. “Asha,” he rumbles. “Once, I believed there was much wisdom we could learn from each other. It seems my trust in you was well-placed.”

Wait, what?! Does he already trust me? But I didn’t even have to argue with him or anything!

When he and I first met, Bonello’s jollity quickly gave way to painful memories and mistrust. But something changed between our first meeting and the gathering where I pleaded to be admitted into the flock. He was one of the voices that spoke up in favor of my admittance, a powerful vote that held considerable sway over the elders of White Mountain. If it wasn’t for Bonello, I may have never become a member of the Snowfell Flock.

Perhaps that's why he has faith in my treatment. When Bonello vied for a Farlander in front of the entire flock, he put a piece of his reputation on the line. But lately, my image in Felra has been tarnished. The whispers about me never stop — I've been accused of causing starvation and harboring a plague, all the while having a target painted across my tailfeathers for the simple crime of existing.

Clearly, a problem with my reputation is a problem with *his* reputation.

It's in Bonello's best interest that I redeem myself in a big way, and developing a treatment for the illness is just the ticket. It occurs to me that if Bonello had never vied me in front of the flock, he wouldn't be helping me right now. Well, fine! I'll take whatever help I can get!

"There's so much more I know," I assure him, in case there are any lingering doubts. "Treatments, how to attack airship-prey... This is just the beginning of my relationship with the flock."

...Wait, what am I saying!?

The *beginning*

of my relationship with the flock? Asha, you're still flying home in the spring, right? My feathers wince ever so slightly. With my wing still resting against her, the only Kin who seems to have noticed is Kuro.

Bonello releases a long growl in satisfaction. “Today, the treatment of our Kin. Tomorrow, the return of our warm hunting grounds. Let us fly to the Grandfather Tree. I will speak to Sefri and guide her to warm winds.”

Oh, right. I promised them their old hunting grounds too, didn't I? Ugh, I was really hoping they'd forget about the promises I can't possibly keep! Damn it! I'll just have to worry about that in the spring!

“Bonello,” Frecci says, motioning with her talon to the dried samples on the ground. “It would be best if I stayed here and continued my work. A trip to the Grandfather Tree would risk the illness.”

“Understandable,” Bonello says, tipping his wings. He turns to me and says, “Now, then. Daughter-Of-Kelani.”

He turns out of the den and beckons with his wings to follow. After holding it there for the entire conversation, I refold my wing from Kuro's side. Instead of acknowledging me, she stares at Bonello with a firm face. I wonder what she's thinking about? Does she also understand the veiled reason why Bonello is helping me? Either way, I'm glad Kuro listened to reason and calmed down. I hope she remains calm as we arrive at the Grandfather Tree.

A crowd of Kin has formed beneath a stale, overcast sky. Fledges and their parents are standing on the cliffs above us, speaking idly as they wonder aloud what could have stirred the elder from his skyward perch on top of the aerie. As Bonello marches through the snow, the crowd begins to hush, anxious to hear what their Chevil has to announce.

When he reaches the center of the clearing, Bonello raises his head and draws his wings open. “Brothers and sisters! I bring good news! Daughter-Of-Kelani has discovered a treatment for the illness that plagues our siblings at the Grandfather Tree. She has created it before and knows it will work. Their suffering will soon come to an end.”

Murmurs of surprise roll through the crowd. Just as it was the last time there was an impromptu gathering in the aerie, all eyes are fixed squarely on me. Back then, a few days removed from my life as a Princess, I found the flock’s attention intimidating. But standing here in Flat Rock today, I feel more at ease in front of Kin than ever before.

Bonello goes on, “As you are aware, Asha has been targeted by former members of this flock who wish to spread lies and mistruths about her. Some of you may even believe them! To that end, I will accompany her to the Grandfather Tree to ensure her treatment can be used without interference.”

Okay, I don’t have to guess any longer: Bonello is *definitely* trying to repair my image in the flock. And in doing so, he’s once again putting himself on the line for me. Um, Gust? Can you hear my thoughts? You’re certain the elixir is going to work, right?

Despite my trepidation, Bonello’s arguments seem to have worked. The crowd is talking amongst themselves, and everyone agrees with what he said. Once again flanked to my sides, I sense Kuro and Enyll relax their feathers.

“Warm currents!” a fledgling shouts from the second level.

“Yeah!!” another one adds. “Please save them, Asha!”

As I gaze across the aerie, the adults nod and tip their wings in agreement. What happened to all the animosity about me? Did they really change their minds just because Bonello trusts me?

After a few more words of encouragement, Bonello finishes his speech and beckons us to join him on the wing.

**ROOARRR!!!**

I unfurl my wings and leap into the air with Kuro and Enyll close behind me. When we pass the tree line, I circle around and drop into the clearing to once again snatch the lichen-crusting log with my front talons. As I grab on and prepare to leave, I raise my head to discover a heartwarming sight: Hatchlings and fledges from across the aerie, waving and tipping their wings at me in encouragement! They're supporting *me*! It makes me feel warm and content in a way I've never quite felt before. Is this how Mom feels when she steps before a large crowd of Animals? I wish I could say '*thank you*' to every single one of them, but we're already on the wing, so a cry of acknowledgment will have to suffice.

**SKREEEEAAKKK!**

The smell of fresh snow greets my nostrils as I rise above the trees and wing after my friends. Snow is on the horizon, and it won't be long before flurries begin falling. Will we make it to the Grandfather Tree before the snow starts? What about Frida or all those battling the illness? Are we really going to save them today?

## Bonus Chapter: World Lemur Day!

On an obnoxiously sunny day in the Royal Gardens of Ellyntide, the main characters of *The Princess's Feathers* were lined in a row upon the broad, grassy lawn where events were held. Three Lithans, a conspiracy of Lemurs, and one handsomely-dressed Rabbit. This was not at all a strange occurrence, for the events taking place that day were strictly non-canonical. The reason for this impromptu gathering, however, couldn't be more important.

"98% of Lemur species are threatened with extinction, and 31% are critically endangered," Queen Kelani spoke into a hand-held microphone, her voice projecting across the crowd of Ellyntidians gathered at the palace. "In the miserable Human world, today is celebrated as World Lemur Day. A day to raise awareness of the most endangered mammals in existence."

As the Queen spoke, Prince Sofl grew noticeably concerned. "So, we're endangered in the Human world?"

"It's worse than that," Duncan explained. "Without significant intervention, many species of Lemuridae could go extinct in the next 20 years."

"The situation is quite dire," Kelani confessed.

The young Prince shivered in fear. He grabbed his tail from behind his back and muttered, "That's terrifying. I hope never to visit such a dreadful place."

“Honestly,” Nakino said, shuffling his wings. “That’s genuinely awful. It almost makes me feel bad for preying on our delicious Jadian Lemurs.”

“Hey, don’t sweat it,” Calypso grinned, tipping his cap as he gazed skyward at the black Lithan towering above him. “There’s still plenty of us Jade Lemurs around. It’s the Human world that needs help.”

“Bristlebody’s right,” Asha chimed. The Dragoness was lying in the grass next to the Queen. “But Mother, what can we do to help those filthy, hairless apes raise awareness?”

Kelani smiled wistfully. As she stared into her daughter’s draconic eyes, she briefly contemplated resting her hand against Asha’s feathery muzzle before ultimately deciding that one line of self-indulgent fanservice was enough. “I find the best way to bring awareness to Lemurs is to simply talk about how *cool* they are. Did you know that Lemurs live in matriarchal societies?”

Kuro raised an eyebrow. “Matri-what?”

“Oh, you know,” Asha smirked. “A society where positions of authority are primarily held by women. Kinda like Ellyntide and Sarlain.”

“Really?” Kuro squawked. “That’s a *thing!*?”

As a cloud of soot-plumaged feathers drifted onto diminutive-sized main characters, Kelani gestured her arms wide in such a way as to indicate, ‘*Um, do you know who I am?*’

Kuro reeled in pleasant surprise. “That’s... incredible. That sounds really nice. I wish we had that in the flock.”

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“Why don't you become a Lemur and join us?” A coy little smile curled across Princess Lucy’s muzzle as she spoke.

Kuro snorted. She lowered her head to Lucy’s level, feeling disappointed when she didn’t detect her fear-scent. “I’ll stick to helping the Lemurs in the Human world. Thanks.”

A murmur rose from the crowd as the Princess of Sarlain stared down the huntress from the Snowfell Flock. Hoping to recapture their attention, Asha raised her voice and asked, “So, Mother. What’s the best way we can help the Lemurs in Madagascar?”

Kelani drew the microphone close to her muzzle. “Open your hearts to Lemur conservation by opening your wallets! Check the links in the author’s note to find out which organizations you can send your hard-earned fiat currency to. You can also purchase some swag merch for this year’s World Lemur Day. What better way to spread awareness of Lemurs than by covering your disgusting, hairless body with depictions of beautiful, majestic Lemurs? You have to wear *something*, so it might as well be a Lemur!”

The main characters nodded, convinced that Lemur Conversation was seriously cool and worth considering.

“And... there!” Nakino said, his voice accentuated by a metallic *‘ding!*

’ emanating from his cell phone. “I just donated \$50 to the Duke Lemur Center in Durham, North Carolina. I’m doing *my* part to help Lemurs!”

**ROARRR!!!**

At that moment, a Dragon’s cry split the air like the wail of singing Indri. Everyone present gazed skyward to see a Lithan, clad in a brilliant silver plumage, circling in the thermals above Varecia.

“One of your friends?” Calpyso guessed, gazing past the Kin healer.

“I’ve never seen that Kin before in my life,” Nakino rumbled. “Asha, do you know who that is?”

The Princess shook her head. It seemed nobody knew who this mysterious Silver dragon was. Slowly, they circled down from the sky until they were at the same level as the great Elder Tree. They circled around the back side to reach a soft landing in the grass just before the assemblage of main characters. With their potent noses, the Lithans could instantly detect this outsider was a drakon, though not like any drakon they’d ever witnessed before. As a glimmer of light reflected off his strange, golden headpiece, he smiled and folded his wings tight, beginning a slow canter across the grass. Virescent eyes focused squarely on the one he flew so far to meet.

“Nakino,” The drakon called to the healer in a warm voice brimming with confidence. “Meu querido gavião negro. Injustiçado porém não esquecido, pois seu coração é meu!”

Nakino ruffled into a black ball of fluff. The others could swear they saw him blushing beneath his feathers. Who was this dashing, confident drakon? Where did he come from, and why was he interested in Nakino? As the Silver drakon approached, his scent wafted into Nakino’s nostrils; warm and inviting, like the summer day surrounding them. Green and gold eyes locked together, and Nakino found his racing heart began to ease. He felt safe in the Silver drakon’s glow. They needed no words to express their affection for each other.

Something compelled Nakino to close his eyes. He felt conflicted, unwilling to lose sight of the Silver drakon for even a wingbeat. But soon, his restless heart stilled. He closed his eyes, and their muzzles locked together in ecstasy.

They made out.

Watching this wholesome scene from afar, Asha sat in pointed shock. “What... just happened here?”

“Something utterly non-canonical,” Lucy grumbled, flicking her tail.

“It’s more than that,” Kelani smiled. “*Good things happen to those who donate to Lemur conservation.*”

With that, the meeting in the garden concluded, and the main characters returned to their respective roles in the story, all the more happy for donating their money to a worthy cause. Nakino and the Silver dragon lived happily ever after in Felra, dutifully donating plenty more money to Lumur conversation.

## 102. Spilled Blood

Pale winter light shines through the skylight of a frosty root ceiling, revealing the entry room of Nakino's den at the Grandfather Tree. The last time I was here, this first room housed nothing but fallen leaves, dried-out bedding, and musty scents. Today, with the specter of illness hanging over the aerie, the room is filled with sick Kin waiting patiently for treatment from the overworked healer. Lying on the ground with their wings drawn over their back, they raise their heads as our flock of three enter the den on harried talonsteps. The relief drains from their faces as they understand none of us are the coal-plumaged healer on their rounds to offer relief. Indeed, as heartbreaking as this scene is, none of us are here for those stricken by the mysterious illness. Our interest is in the group of Kin at the back of the den, hovering above a small, ash-plumaged fledge.

Moments ago, we were able to slip through the branches of the Grandfather Tree without attracting a lot of attention. As we landed in the clearing, a talonfull of Kin noticed my arrival and perked their feathers in concern. But then Bonello landed beside me, and all eyes shifted to him. I suppose Chevils don't often visit other aeries, so the arrival of one in the middle of the day caused quite a stir. Whatever the case, Bonello took a moment to idly preen his feathers, giving us the perfect opportunity to slip away and rush over to Nakino's den in the roots.

Now that we're finally there, Kuro wastes no time moving past the ill Kin to reach the crowd at the back of the den. As they sense her approach, they part like moving water, opening a path to the ash-plumaged fledge lying on the floor.

Frida moans lightly as Kuro approaches her. Lying on her side with her eyes closed and wings drawn open, blood-soaked moss covers where her wing curves along the top of the appendage.

Kuro stands above her sister and draws an unsteady breath. "Frida..."

Kuro's sister moans lightly before opening her eyes. As they focus, a smile forms across her muzzle. "Kuro."

As Enyll and I approach, Kuro drops to the ground and nuzzles her head against Frida's. She releases a frail cry, one of relief mixed with anguish. "Tell me what happened."

After taking a moment to gather her strength, Frida speaks slowly. "I was flying with Assi near Craggy Bottom. We smelled Litsha, so I decided to land and stalk it. At first, I was confused... the scent was fresh but unmoving. Eventually, I came upon the roots of a large tree and found it butchered there. I knew it was suspicious, but I was so hungry that I thought it was worth the risk."

Kuro's wings droop in apprehension. I have a bad feeling about this, too.

"By the time I heard them, it was too late. They flew from the branches or around the trunk. I'm not sure. All I know is they were on top of me quicker than a gryhawk. Moth, and another Exile I didn't recognize. They..." she trails off, and her gaze slides from Kuro to her injured wing. She tries to flex it but winces in pain. "Nakino says they attacked the weakest point. Kuro, he... Nakino says I'm moonbound. I'll never fly again."

I slam my eyes shut, and my heart shatters. *She'll never fly again...* oh, Goddess, what a terrible fate! There are times when I wish the flock had access to the medical techniques we had in the Farlands, and this is one of them. A Dragon with broken wings is like a Lemur with broken legs. How can a Dragon survive in the flock if they can't fly? How will she hunt prey? Or return to White Mountain to see her Grandmother? How...

As my mind strews in misery, Kuro whimpers in anguish. I open my eyes to see her openly weeping into Frida's neck. Unwilling to see her upset, Frida angles her head and lightly preens Kuro's neck feathers. I've never seen Kuro this vulnerable before; even when she thought I had turned into a Lemur, she was more composed than she is right now. Goddess above, this is awful.

"But Kuro," Frida speaks softly, her fangs still between Kuro's down feathers. "We still have each other, right? Mom and Dad never had a second chance. So please, don't be—"

"Where did they attack you?!" Kuro erupts, whipping her head away from Frida. For an uneasy moment, she stares at Kuro but says nothing.

"Moth chased Figano earlier today," a fledge from the crowd speaks out.

"Yeah," another drakon responds. "I was flying past Relno's Leap when Moth flew from an island above me. I tried to fly away, but he just wouldn't leave me alone. When he finally caught up, he told me that Relmoon was waiting at Vito's Forest."

Kuro flicks her tail and unleashes a menacing growl. She gives Frida one final look and rises to her talons, muscling her way past me and Enyll with her wings half-open. As she passes us, I exchange a worried glance with the copper drakon. Even prey could figure out where Kuro was going. Someone has to stop her!

“Kuro?” I raise my head and call out. “Kuro, wait!!”

We set off after her, leaving Frida’s side to follow Kuro onto the roots outside the den. Once there, she opens her wings, preparing to take off at the edge of a root that leads down into the clearing under the tree.

Snow crunches beneath my talons, turning my feathers cold. “Kuro, what are you doing?”

“I’m going to *kill him*,” Kuro snarls, refusing to look at us . “The only thing Relmoon deserves is death!”

She growls and slams a talon against the ground, her hatred for Relmoon so consuming she can’t stand to even think about him.

Enyll joins me at my side. “Kuro, it’s a *trap*. Don’t you get it? Relmoon and his flock are going to ambush you!”

Kuro's feathers shoot straight up. She flicks her tail and whips around to growl, "I don't care. I'll kill them too. I'll kill anyone who thinks they can attack my family!" She lowers her head and bares fangs. "You wouldn't stand in my way, would you, Enyll?!"

"You utter featherbrain," Enyll growls back. He flips his wings open but stands his ground. "Are you *trying* to fly to Maki today? You can't kill his entire flock by yourself!"

"Watch me," Kuro thunders. "The next time you see me, I'll have Relmoon's horn."

I sniff, trying to hide my rising irritation. Enyll's right. It's so obvious; Relmoon knows how much Kuro loathes him, so he's using it to manipulate her into a trap. He sent Moth to attack Frida because he knew Kuro couldn't resist taking revenge. And just to ensure she knew where to go, Moth chased after a random Kin and told them where Relmoon would be waiting. How is she so blind? She's putting herself in mortal danger for no reason!

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Feeling helpless, my heart rate spikes and my hackles rise. I'm not immune to the sounds of other Dragons arguing. Something inside me, something bestial and instinctive, feeds off their anger. When I hear the power of their hatred, I can't stop it from fueling my own emotions.

Enyll takes a deep breath and lowers his head. "No," he says firmly. "Kuro, I won't let you go."

The soot-plumaged Kin stares at him, unflinching. It's like she knew all along that Enyll would oppose her.

"Frida will be devastated if she loses her sister. To say nothing of what Asha will think."

Enyll flashes a glance at me. For a moment, I feel like concurring with him before my better judgment stops me. I agree with him, of course. I can't imagine the anguish Frida will endure if she loses her sister on top of losing her wings. But taking sides with Enyll will only serve to upset Kuro even further. I don't want her to feel that way, but... what else can I do? Even if I joined Kuro to fight Relmoon, we wouldn't stand a chance. We experienced just how big his flock was in the ancient building to the south. To oppose them again would be suicide.

Kuro flashes a glance at me, and for a fleeting moment, I see remorse across her face. But it quickly passes, and her brow furrows deeper in anger. "So, you would stand in my way," Kuro says, baring fangs at Enyll. "Are you sure about that?"

Across the aerie, more and more Kin are being drawn to the argument. Surely, even they can understand just how unreasonable Kuro is to defy Relmoon alone. How can they see clearly what Kuro is blind to? She's flying into a trap! She's going to *die!*

Enyll growls and lowers himself into an attack posture. "I *am*

opposing you. Someone has to save you from yourself, Kuro. And it's—"

Without warning, Kuro roars and lunges for Enyll with her jaws open and talons outstretched! The copper drakon sees it coming and tries to leap out of the way, but Kuro is far too quick. She extends her claws and strikes a glancing blow against Enyll's shoulder, causing blue blood to flow freely down his foreleg. Shrieking in pain, he bounces off his talon and steadies to counter Kuro's recovery. Enyll snarls and rears back, ready to deliver an attack of his own.

**“STOP!!!”**

I collide with Kuro, ramming my left shoulder against her flank in a deliberate attempt to disrupt her counter-attack. Negative emotions overflowing, I snarl in defiance as Kuro stumbles backward towards the entrance of Nakino's den but manages to stay upright on all four talons. She steadies herself and stares at me aghast, not expecting the one she loves to intervene in her attack on Enyll.

Standing before the copper drakon, hackles raised, and feathers puffed, seething emotions dictate my speech. “Kuro, you...!! Stop acting like such a fweghing idiot!!”

Kuro stands unmoving, too shocked to react. Across the aerie, the Kin on the branches and roots stare at me in shock. Nobody expected me to lash out against Kuro, least of all *myself*. Why am I...?

Negative emotions regain control. “You're going to DIE if you try to attack Relmoon!! Don't you care at all about your sister?! Who's going to take care of her when you're DEAD!?”

I stand on the roots, gasping for air while my whole body quakes. I haven't been this upset since the morning I left Vareica. Back then, Duncan was able to interrupt my argument with Mom before my fury could be unleashed against her. But here, nothing's holding me back. I'm on a feather's edge, erupting with impassioned rage, and I don't even know why.

Enyll approaches and stands beside me. "Even *Asha* understands how foolish you're acting. Don't you get it, Kuro? How much of a featherbrain you are?"

With that, Kuro's face changes from shock to fury. Her feathers bristle, and her tail lashes behind her. "You... either of you... you don't even know what it's like to lose family. To watch your parents die!"

"I lost my family the moment I became a Lithan!" I snarl. "I watched my only two friends draw their final breaths! Don't tell me I don't know about heartbreak, Kuro!!"

Kuro snorts. She flares her wings and stands tall above me and Enyll. For the first time since the day we met, I feel intimidated by her size. "That's why we're different, *Asha*. You watched Calypso die because you were *weak*; incapable of taking actions to protect his life. You could have helped him, but you didn't! And that's—"

At that moment, I lose myself.

I explode forward, yearning with all convictions to attack Kuro. *You desecrated Calypso's name! How could you say such heartless things?!* I have no plan, no place to aim my seething rage. As I race towards her, I don't even see her face. All that's real is anger and fury.

Something strikes my neck, lancing hot pain down the side of my flank. My forelegs buckle, and my body tumbles towards the ground. Another force interacts against my back and propels me down. It's Kuro's talon.

"Agh!!"

My body collapses as I hit the ground and slide along snow-covered roots. I skid to a halt and cry out in anguish from the pain of fresh wounds against my neck. Reeling in pain, I open my eyes to see Kuro standing above me, a potent cocktail of pity, remorse, and fury scrawled across her face.

"Kuro!!" Enyll roars. Out of the corner of my eye I watch him splay his wings but maintain a measured distance from the angry drakaina.

She looks at Enyll, frowns, and then quickly gazes back at me. Her brow furrows deeper, and for a brief moment, I see pain in her face. Pain that quickly gives way to acceptance. She gathers herself and steps away with a loud grunt. Warm blood flows down my neck as I groan in pain, still reeling from the force of Kuro's attack. I clench my eyes and try to stand up but slip sideways against the snow.

**ROARR!**

The sound of wingbeats fills the air as Kuro quickly takes off in search of Relmoon. Moments later, the air is still again.

“Asha!!” Enyll shrieks, running to my side. “Good Keuvra, are you alright?! She—“

“I’m *fine*,” I deadpan, rising on unsteady talons.

Enyll stares at me, muzzle agape. “Asha, you should see Nakino! That wound—“

“Yeah,” I say, shuffling my wings of snow. “I need to do what I came here to do.”

I turn towards the clearing beneath the tree and hobble past Enyll, using the top of my left wing to slow the bleeding on my neck. A Kin from the branches above lands on a nearby root and asks if I need help. I ignore her.

“Asha?” Enyll calls out from behind me. “Asha, what are you—“

“Enyll!!” I bark, flicking my neck around. His feathers flatten at the power of my voice. “Help me carry the log.”

I flick my ears behind me, pointing toward the lichen-covered log resting in the snow. I turn around and continue my labored walk to the spot where we landed.

“Hey, wait a wingbeat!” Enyll shouts from behind. Muffled talonsteps approach, and a moment later, he’s walking beside me. “Asha, what are—“

*“There is always a choice, and Kuro just made hers. There’s no point in dwelling on it.”*

She told me not to worry about her. She told me I could grieve for the loss of my mentor, or I could choose to carry on, living the life *I* wanted to live. A life free from those who would try to manipulate me and my family. A life without those who would sacrifice themselves for petty revenge.

*I choose to carry on without Kuro.*

This is the path my mentor would want me to take.

Enyll stares at me with his muzzle agape. It seems he’s having trouble accepting my decision. But before I can lash out against him, his expression softens. “Alright, fine,” he rumbles. “But please, have Nakino take a look at your neck when we get back to his den.”

I scoff and flick my tail. “Yeah, whatever...”

Ignoring the stares of gawking onlookers, I turn about and march across the snow to retrieve the log and complete my divine edict. I'm sick to my stomach, embarrassed that I ever allowed Kuro into my life. If she seeks death, then so be it! She's made her choice clear, and so have I. I choose to live for the family that grieves for me and the Kingdom whose Princess is absent. Ever since I became a Lathan, all I've wanted was to see their faces again, no matter the cost.

I won't allow my feelings for one arrogant Dragon to get in the way!

### 103. A Salve for Guilt

The stares of sickened Kin weigh heavy as Enyll and I strut into Nakino's den with the lichen-covered log dangling from our jaws. Waking side-by-side, we gingerly navigate through the crowded room, ensuring our gaze doesn't stray to the far corner where Kuro's sister is nursing a shattered wing.

*'Don't tell Frida what happened,'* I ordered Enyll before picking up the log.

*'Right,'* he nodded. *'Just walk past the first room. Don't even look at her.'*

Frida needs to heal, not worry about Kuro and her petty campaign for revenge. She probably won't even find Relmoon today! It's going to start snowing soon, and she won't be able to find him from the sky! Likewise, I don't want to break the news that things are over between me and her. I can accept certain things from Kuro, but physically attacking me was a step too far!

...As you can tell, I'm still fuming about her. For now, I need to set Kuro aside and worry the true reason I flew to the Grandfather Tree: treating the flock of the deadly illness. But as we arrive at the back of the den where the passage to the main room is located, a problem emerges. I completely forgot the passage is only wide enough for one Kin to pass at a time. We've been carrying the log side-by-side with our jaws on opposing ends. Both of us can't fit.

Frustrated, I drop my head to spit out the log and nearly drag Enyll down with me. He glares at me and asks with a tinge of annoyance, "What should we—"

"Just push it through," I grumble.

Enyll opens his muzzle to object before quickly clamping it. It seems he's unwilling to argue with me today. A wise decision. He uses his head to push the log around so it's pointing into the passageway, then rests his talon on the back to shove it through. He grunts as he struggles to gain traction against the worn-down root of the tree but is soon able to overcome friction and muscle the log into the next room. Once Enyll's made it through, I follow his tail and slip into the passageway.

A breathless gasp escapes me as I step into the dim main room of Nakino's den. Sick Kin litter the floor like seeds packed in an ovary, almost every inch of space used to house a Dragon moaning in pain. The last time I was here, we used this room to triage the very sickest of Kin. Is this truly how much the illness has progressed? By the Goddess, this is terrible!

I step around the log and join Enyll at a patch of empty root. His copper wings are shaking, and his face is unnerved.

“Asha,” he asks in an unsteady voice. “Tell me what I can do to help.”

I gaze around the room, taking a visual assessment of the scene before me. An unfamiliar, granite-plumaged drakaina is pacing about the room and speaking with the Kin on the floor. Nakino must have recruited her to help, as there’s no possible way he can take care of everyone by himself. Right now, it seems her task is to give Kin words of encouragement. That’s a worthy use of her time, but these Dragons need painkillers and hydration.

“The sick need to ingest something called dourwart,” I say. “I sense Nakino in the stock room; he can tell you where to locate it. Tell the sick to chew on the stems for two flaps and then spit it out. Once you finish that, melt some snow and give everyone a drink.”

As I was talking, Enyll seemed oddly pleased that I was assigning him work. He furrows his brow in determination, nods, and then turns on his talons to head to the stock room.

I draw a deep breath and ruffle slightly. A part of me has dreaded returning here since my last encounter with Nakino. He cornered me in a den at Flat Rock, pressured me to become his mate, and wouldn’t accept ‘no’ for an answer. When he finds out I’ve returned to the Grandfather Tree, he’s going to have a heart attack. We’re surrounded by Kin, so I don’t think he’ll try anything stupid, but...

Whenever my brain reminds me about Nakino, the memories are never from Couple’s Night. Those beautiful iridescent plants, the view of the Prophets shimmering through the trees, my first kiss... none of those things come to mind. Instead, it’s always the same sordid scene: Nakino is hovering above me with anger in voice, a heartbeat away from the moment I lashed out against him. Even now, I can stop seeing the fury in his eyes. Why can’t I remember anything else?

*What am I going to do...?*

For now, I guess I just have to keep working. I returned to his den for a reason, and it wasn't to make amends. Slowly, I turn around and navigate my way back to the log sitting near the entrance. No matter what happens next, I'm going to need the lichen. Portions of it blew off during the flight here, but most of it was preserved by a layer of ice (which is now melting into a puddle on the floor.) Slowly, I rake a foretalon against the bark, gathering a small sample of lichen against the flat side of my index claw.

"Asha...? Asha!!"

Nakino's voice invades my concentration, causing my talon to slip ever so slightly. I gasp, watching helplessly as invaluable spores drift to the floor and are lost forever in a puddle of cold water. A rumble rises in my chest as I see Nakino standing at the entrance of the stock room, the feathers of his crest perked in shock. Just beyond his left wing is a penitent Enyll, gazing helplessly as Nakino reels. Every Kin in the room is watching our exchange with curious eyes.

I stifle a snarl and march forward on three talons. "Nakino, don't say a word."

"Asha, what are you doing here?!" he exits the stock room, and his gaze flows past me. "Wait, what's... a log?!"

I ignore the dumbfounded healer and stride past him, crossing the den to one of the skylights. Some time ago, a snow drift fell into the den, providing me with a freshwater source for the elixir. I take a bite of snow, then return to one of the hollowed-out depressions in the floor where ingredients are combined. Smoke vents from my nostrils as

I release the melted water into the basin and carefully scrape the lichen from my claw, noting its location at the water's edge. After a quick, wordless trip to the store room, I now possess all the ingredients to make the Sofl's elixir.

Nakino approaches with his tail between his legs. "Asha, what are you doing?"

"Watch," I say simply.

One part, yarrow. Two parts fireweed. One part, axsage. A pinch of the Devil's Matchstick lichen. I separate the lichen into four equal parts and roll it against the ground with the flat edge of a claw. The compound is added to a patch of fireweed leaves and carefully wrapped together. Using the weakest flame I can produce, the sides of the leaves are scorched. I roll the charred compound into the basin and add the axsage and yarrow. Finally, I use my talon to stir the water and mix the ingredients together.

Nakino gazes into the basin. He asks with a tinge of wonder, "What isthis?"

"It's a treatment for the illness," I tell him.

"What?!"

"Just trust me on this, okay!?"

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Nakino cowers at the power of my voice and retreats a step. I lower my voice and say, “It’s going to work. Trust me.”

Nakino blinks. “A-Asha, how can you—“

“You there!” I command, flicking my ears to the nearest Kin. “Drink this. Two full sips.”

The peat-plumaged drakaina slowly raises her head from the ground. She glances towards the healer and asks, “Nakino?”

For a brief moment, he looks sick with concern. After racing his eyes between me and the drakaina, he finally relents. “Do what she says.”

The drakaina nods and rises to her talons. Taking unsteady steps, she hobbles across the floor and dolefully lowers her head to drink.

I turn to Nakino and ask, “Did you follow how I prepared it?”

He inclines his head.

“Good. Now, make enough for everyone who’s sick. You can find the lichen on the log I brought. That’s the special ingredient.”

Nakino whimpers and quickly nods. With his black tail between his legs, he scampers away to the stock room without giving me a second glance.

I release an unsteady sigh. That went about as well as I could have hoped. I allow a moment for my feathers to relax and angle my head to check on the recipient of the elixir. “How are you feeling?”

Back against the ground, the peat-plumaged drakaina swallows hard and coughs slightly. “I’ve been better.”

I can’t help but smirk. Even while sick, Kin are tough ferals. “You’re going to feel better soon, I promise. What’s your name?”

Instead of responding, the drakaina gazes into my eyes and hesitates a response. She looks oddly familiar, yet I can’t place a claw on where I’ve seen her before. Finally, she responds in a meager voice, “I am Sardi, Daughter-Of-Tish”

“Sardi?” I cock my head to the side. “I’ve heard that name before, but I can’t—“

My voice seizes, and my blood turns to ice. I remember the last time I saw her: White Mountain, my second day in Felra. After the gathering concluded, I was preparing to leap from the gathering stone when I noticed something out of the corner of my eye.

“Yes,” Sardi says, squaring her wings. “Relmoon is my mate.”

As their fledges ambushed him, Sardi bounded through the crowd to join him at his side. They kissed and shared a tender moment together while I watched silently across the aerie. At the time, I didn’t understand how Relmoon could be mated while Kuro remained single. Now, the Dragon I least understand is lying before me.

Reflexively, I retreat a step from her.

“Please, don’t be afraid,” Sardi eases me with her wings. “I... don’t know why he hates you, Daughter-Of-Kelani.”

My feathers relax a little. “Hasn’t he told you?”

She coughs lightly and explains, “Relmoon left the flock’s territory as soon as he was exiled. He said nothing, leaving me to hunt for our fledges.”

A deep, unbidden growl rises in my chest. That mud eating...!

“I understand why you’re upset at him, Asha. He tried to kill you. But Relmoon is a good Dragon. He’s hard-working and a loyal mate. It’s just...” her voice dissipates, and she averts her eyes.

“How could you possibly say that?” I growl. “He abandoned you and your fledges!”

“Haven’t you ever loved someone, Asha?”

My head rears back as if someone slapped it. *‘Haven’t I ever loved someone...?’* Of all the questions she could have asked, why did she ask *that* one? I attempt to conjure a coy response, but my mind is blank.

“So, you have,” Sardi nods with satisfaction. “And you still do. I can see it in your eyes, fress. You’re just in denial.”

*What?!*

...

This is ridiculous. Relmoon's mate is just as featherbrained as he is. Who does she think she is, psychoanalyzing me? You can't see affection just by looking at somebody's face!

Sardi clears her throat and beckons with her wing. "Lay with me, Asha."

I stare at her and her outstretched wing. Is she playing me for a fool? What can this drakaina possibly know about love? She's mated to *Relmoon!* And yet, something compels me to join her on the floor. A small voice of reason, one that believes there could be something important to learn despite her lunacy. Slowly, I shuffle my wings, fold them to my sides, and settle down beside her.

Sardi smiles; she seems pleased that I joined her. "You have eyes for her, don't you?"

*Erk...!*

I try to stop myself from ruffling but fail. "I have no idea who you're talking about."

**RA-RAAR!!**

Sardi cackles like a raven, drawing the attention of every Kin on our side of the den. “Don’t bite my tail, Asha. Everyone knows Kuro has a crush on you. It’s obvious that you like her as well, so why aren’t you two mated yet?”

I frown, once more struggling for a response. This is so embarrassing. Is it... really that obvious I share romantic feelings for Kuro? I’ve stifled them for so long because my guilt wouldn’t allow me to act on them. Even now, I have trouble admitting this fact in myself.

But when she attacked me today, it made me feel...

...

Sardi gives up waiting for a response. “Has she ever told you why her mating with Relmoon failed?”

I remain silent for a time, trapped in my ardent thoughts. But to her question, I know the response. “No. Kuro doesn’t like to talk about him.”

“Well, that’s not surprising,” she smirks. “Relmoon doesn’t like to talk about her, either. But those two fought all the time. It got so bad that they nearly killed each other, and Kuro’s grandmother had to forcibly separate them.”

It’s hard to forget how upset Kuro became as she explained her brief time with Relmoon. Understandably, she didn’t want to go into a lot of detail.

“But, here’s the thing,” Sardi says, lowering her head close to mine. As I stare into virescent eyes, she lowers her voice and murmurs, “Relmoon gets mad at me, too. He roars, stamps his talons, and bares fangs at me just like he did to Kuro. But when the sun sets beyond the mountains, we still love each other just as much as the day I asked him to be my mate.”

I blink slowly. “Even after everything he’s done?”

“You accept that sacrifice when you become mated, Asha. Nobody is perfect, and there are only so many Kin in the flock. You choose to accept your differences and come to appreciate the ways they bring you together.”

You *choose* to accept your differences?

...

But, my differences with Kuro seem insurmountable. She attacked me!

Sardi continues, “Relmoon and I met on Couple’s Night. It was a total disaster; we got into a huge argument and nearly tore each other’s heads off. But to my surprise, he returned to my den a few days later and apologized. I was so moved by his candor that I invited him to join me on a planetlight flight. By the next eclipse, he had moved into my den, and we’ve been happily mated ever since.”

A sickening feeling is beginning to form inside my stomach. They got into a big fight but still apologized? I...

“So you see, that is why I live for the day Relmoon returns to our den. I know he’s done terrible things, but... I also know that on the inside, he’s a loyal soul. Relmoon is irreplaceable to me.”

I frown and stare at the floor. With each word she spoke, I was dragged further and further into a pit of my own guilt. If Sardi and Relmoon could resolve their differences after a big fight, why couldn’t Kuro and I? That would be one of the sacrifices I have to make, right?

No matter where the winds take me, I’ll have to sacrifice something I hold dear. If I discover a way to turn back to normal, I’ll be sacrificing a future with Kuro. If I stay in Felra, I’ll sacrifice the family I lost and the Kingdom I was destined to lead. Returning home would be the moral thing to do, but... what about me? What do *I* want? *Me*, Asha Lordanou? *Me*, Daughter-Of-Kelani, and Kin-Of-Keuvra?! Nobody else!

Relmoon’s mate still loves him even after everything he’s done. Kuro attacked me, but I think it’s forgivable. I was the one who charged her, after all. Perhaps the reason I was so upset was because...

I couldn’t stand the thought of losing her.

The festering feeling in my stomach grows to encompass my entire body. My feathers quake, and tears begin to form. I was never upset at Kuro! I never have been! Oh, Goddess, how could I make such a terrible mistake?!

“Is everything alright?”

Oh, right.

“...Mmh,” I clear my nose and try to recompose myself. “I, um. I may have done something I regret.”

From the corner of my eye, I spot Nakino exiting the store room with Enyll to his side. In their jaws are large quantities of fireweed, axsage, and yarrow. It seems they’ve committed to preparing the treatment for everyone.

“Nakino has things under control,” Sardi says, gazing at me with concern. “Go fix what needs fixing, fress.”

I loosen a weak smile. “...Yeah. Thanks, Sardi.”

We nuzzle our heads together, sharing each other’s warmth. I can’t believe Relmoon’s mate helped me see the truth, but... she did. I’m grateful to her in ways I can’t express.

With renewed energy, I leap to my talons and scamper to the exit of Nakino's den. I've made a terrible mistake, perhaps the biggest mistake of my entire life. I have to find Kuro before Relmoon kills her!

Frigid winds smack my face as I return to the roots. A fresh coating of snow blanketed the ground while I was inside, erasing any proof of the fight that took place there. I gaze past it and turn skyward into spiraling snowflakes. In storms like these, even dark-plumaged Kin like Kuro can become invisible against the swirling curtains of snow. How am I going to find her now?

**SKREAAK!**

I call my take-off and leap from the edge of a root, quickly gaining altitude to soar through the branches and into an unfamiliar sky.

Kuro... wherever you are, please, *please* be safe when I arrive there!!

## 104. Shadow of a Doubt

Snow changed to sleet, and then sleet changed to rain. A spine-chilling rain, the very worst kind for a creature covered in feathers. I don't think I've ever felt this cold in my life.

**SKREAAK?! SKREEEEEEEEK!!!**

I call out for Kuro through the pelting rain, desperately hoping she'll respond. *I'm such an idiot. I'm such a fweghing idiot!* Who cares about my family in Varecia if Kuro is dead? She's a part of my family just as much as they are! If only I had controlled my temper, then none of this would have happened. If Kuro dies today, then it will be squarely my fault!

About a talons mark from the Grandfather Tree, I came across another Kin flying north. They told me Kuro was flying in the opposite direction towards Vito's Forest, the place where Relmoon was supposed to be waiting. Snow changed to rain as I arrived there, enabling me to quickly find a clearing with Kuro's scents. When I flew down to investigate, it quickly became apparent that a fight had occurred there.

Blue blood stained heavy snow, covered in patches of brown and soot feathers. I strained to identify the other Kin's scent but could only detect it on their blood. A young drakon, not of the flock. Definitely not Relmoon. The air in the clearing was perfectly still, not so much as the call of prey-bird interrupted it. It seemed Kuro attacked her opponent, and he took to the skies, trying to flee the huntress. But why? Where was Relmoon? As I put the pieces together, I came to a startling revelation: What if this was all a part of Relmoon's plan?

It made perfect sense. He knew Kuro would go nuts and chase after him. So, if any reinforcements from the flock arrived later, all they would find was this: an empty clearing and no trace of Kuro. The Kin waiting for her was just a decoy to lead her to Relmoon's true location.

Armed with this revelation, I began to panic.

It was clear Relmoon wouldn't be anywhere close to Vito's Forest. So, if not there, then where? There's an entire continent full of places Relmoon could be hiding! How was I supposed to know where to look?

But then I remembered the other Kin's scent. I could only detect him by his blood. *He was using Raven's Thistle to mask his scent!* And there's only one location in the flock's territory where Raven's Thistle grows. I was convinced: Relmoon's flock was hiding in the forest where I fought the False-Kin.

But now that I'm flying above it, there's no sign of Kuro or Relmoon's Flock. At least, I don't *think* there's any sign of them. Within the last few moments, heavy rain reverted into a blinding snowstorm. I can barely see the trees, much less the clearings where Kuro could have landed. I'm convinced she's here, but how can I find her?

**SKREAAAAK!!!**

I listen, but nothing returns on the winds.

I continue flying for a time. Calling, hoping, then pleading for Kuro to respond. I'll never forgive myself if I find her body today. Why did I have to get upset at her? I should've tried to reason with her like I always do! I could have prevented this whole sordid affair!

Eventually, my wings grow tired. It's not easy to fight the gales in storms like these. Ice has encumbered my wings, weighing them down significantly. Faced with little other choice, I lower myself from the sky and land in an empty clearing free of scents. I'm not done searching, not by a long shot. But I need to warm myself up.

I trod through the snow drifts, the wind blasting my face with snowflakes. All I can think about is Kuro. Everything that's happened between us since the moment she saved my life flows back to me. My introduction to the flock. The White Mountain Gathering. Our training together with Tomcat. Couple's Night, and the search to uncover my family's past in Felra. She was there with me every flap of the way. Always loyal, always warm, always by my side. I know why I lashed out against her; I couldn't stand the thought of her dying a senseless death.

But... why am I like this? How come I respond to stress with violence? My fight with Kuro is hardly the first time something like this has occurred. Back in Varecia, Mom's endearing memory of me could be the time I nearly erupted on her at the breakfast table. Now, I may have lost the one most dear to me because of that very same temper. If Kuro survives this ordeal, then... I need to understand this aspect of me. I need to tame it before it causes even more horrible mistakes.

Eventually, I arrive at the base of a stunted elderus and hobble beneath its branches. I lay against the roots and draw my cold wings open. Sheets of pearly opaque ice have formed across them, though not as thick as I initially anticipated. Rearing my head, I draw on my meager reserves of flame to blast heat past my wings, making extra sure not to scorch my feathers. The oil my body produces for preening is fire-resistant but not fire-proof.

With my reserves running low, I extinguish the blowtorch and examine my wings. I wasn't as thorough as I would have liked, but my wings have become broadly ice-free. Most ice patches are gone, and the remaining parts aren't big enough to slow me down. I step away from the roots and unfurl my wings, testing them for flight. They feel light and limber, ready to take on another round of gliding through the storm. I fold them to my sides and release an unsteady breath. I hope I haven't wasted valuable time.

Standing beneath the elderus, I close my eyes and attempt to gather my emotions. The air is still — the only sound is the gentle accumulation of snowflakes across the serene forest.

...

RARR!

My eyes go wide in attention. That sounded like...!

ROAARR...!

The languid cry of a Dragon in agony echoes softly between the snowflakes. It's so subtle that had I not focused my senses and stilled my anguished heart, I never would have noticed it.

I take off like lightning, sprinting into the clearing to unleash a fierce cry.

**SKKKREEEEEAK!!!**

I rip open my wings and leap skyward, pounding hard to gain altitude and fly as fast as possible. There were two distinct cries. The fight could still be ongoing! Oh, please last just a little bit longer, Kuro!! I rise above the treetops, and the storm greets me with a blast of snow to the face. I growl, fighting against the gales to soar in the direction of the fight.

It's not long before I find myself overhead. What I see through the curtains of snow leaves me breathless.

Four Lithans lie dead, their blood staining the snow around their bodies a bitter shade of cerulean blue. The fight has been intense, causing damage to the small trees peppered around the clearing and the larger ones in the forest beyond. Like claw marks upon the moon itself, long stretches of snow-free ground are visible, the telltale signs of Lithans ignoring the Dragon deity's edict never to use their fire in battle. At the center of this chaos are Kuro and Relmoon, locked together in an intense back-and-forth battle. Torn and bloodied, caked in a layer of snow and ice, both Kin are seemingly a feather's edge away from defeat. But between the two, Kuro seems to be doing worse. She's fighting with a considerable gait, no doubt incurred from the battle with the previous four Lithans. To kill them and still have the strength to fight Relmoon is extraordinary. But she's close to her limit, and she won't last much longer.

My anger boils over. I allow the seething emotions that have caused me so much pain to take control once more. Relmoon is the singular reason my life in the flock has gone so wrong. For hurting the one I hold most dear, I won't forgive him!

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I tent my wings, dropping like a stone toward the clearing. I descend faster than I've gone before, ignoring the warning bells in my head screaming at me to slow down. The two Kin hurtle towards me, and at the very last second, I flip open my wings to cause a great cloud of snow to be thrown outward.

**SKREAAK!!**

I land on top of Relmoon — more accurately, I crash into him. As we tumble to the ground, I flail with all my might, attacking him with my claws and fangs like I would any other prey. I smell his blood and then his fear-scent. He wasn't expecting me. He knows he's close to defeat.

But he's not dead yet. His hindlegs extend, pushing me outward into a snow drift. I bounce off it and meet him as he's struggling to regain his composure. He attempts to swing his claws at me, but I see it coming. He's slow, encumbered by exhaustion and ice. I pivot off my talons and reach in to slash his hind legs, causing them to buckle. He tumbles to the ground, snarling in pain from my attack. This is my chance! I won't allow him to escape! I rear up to pounce, only to see Relmoon rear his neck and open his jaws. He's using his fire!

A streak of gray blocks my vision, followed by a savage snarl. Kuro lands on top of Relmoon just as I sail harmlessly into a snow drift to avoid Relmoon's flame. Kuro latches onto Relmoon's shoulders, picks him by her claws and flips him sideways across the ground. He lands with an inglorious thud and skids across the snow a short distance. When he stops moving, I find myself pouncing on top of him with my claws dug into his neck and his life firmly in my talons. I open my jaws and lunge for his neck.

*'Relmoon is irreplaceable to me.'*

My head seizes. In my mind, I see Sardi and the anguish on her face as she spoke about Relmoon's exile. I see their fledges gliding across the White Mountain aerie to greet their father. I remember — if I hadn't decided to lay with Sardi, I would have remained apathetic to Kuro. At this moment, fate would be reversed. Relmoon would be putting the finishing touches on Kuro's life, an act that would plunge mine into abject misery.

Is this what Relmoon's family deserves?

"What..." Relmoon coughs, his face twisted in pain and confusion. "What are you waiting for, Princess? Now's your chance. You better take it."

Gasping for breath, I raise my head and stare straight into his golden eyes. "It was never about me, was it? You didn't even care about starting a new flock. All that mattered was your family."

Relmoon's fear-scent is overwhelming. "My... family?"

I scoff lightly. It's exactly as I thought. "You don't deserve to die. A fool like you deserves—"

Cut off mid-sentence, my whole world tumbles sideways as something crashes into me. I fall into the snow just as a languid wail splits the air. A terrific shattering sound follows, and the clearing falls silent. Rising from a snowdrift, I see Kuro standing over Relmoon with his neck in her jaws, blood flowing down the crimson drakon's neck. His body is limp.

Since the day I landed in Felra, I've witnessed death countless times, most often with prey locked in my jaws and the taste of flesh on my tongue. Perhaps it's because Relmoon is Kin, or I know his family loves him. Whatever the reason, I wince and avert my gaze. Moments later, his body collapses into the snow.

Intense emotions well up inside me, my hatred of Relmoon gnawing on the sympathy for Relmoon's family. But the most profound feeling is that of relief. I saved Kuro's life. Kuro is alive!!

"Kuro!!!"

I leap over the snow drifts and attach myself to her flank, rubbing my face against her feathers and filling my nose with her wonderful, spiced scent. She tries to step away from me, but I follow, refusing to leave her side. I'll never leave her again!

"Asha..." she trails off, her voice lethargic.

At that moment, I feel a trickle of blood flow across my forehead. A long wound against her back is still raw.

"You're hurt!!" I wail. "Why did you...!!"

I reach up and begin licking the wound, desperately trying to heal her. I very quickly realize the futility of such an act as her entire body is covered in scars. She needs medical attention. She has to return to the Grandfather Tree! Slowly, the elation of seeing Kuro alive changes into a different type of emotion. My head returns to her feathers, and I growl in anguish, smacking my wings against her side and nipping her skin with my fangs. The pain of watching her abandon me at the Grandfather Tree flows fresh inside my head.

“Kuro, you fweghing idiot! Don’t ever put yourself in danger again!!”

With my head against her chest, I feel Kuro’s heart racing. She draws a breath and asks, “...Why?”

*“Because I love you!”*

I collapse to the ground and weep against Kuro’s wing. It wasn’t until I almost lost her that I realized I couldn’t imagine my life without Kuro. I want to wake up every morning to the smell of her scent. I want to see her through the underbrush with prey locked in our jaws. I want to be on the wing with her at my side until the day we soar the skies of Maki.

“I love you!! I love you, Kuro!!!”

As my brain stews in a thousand intense emotions, Kuro makes a low and affectionate growl resemblant of a purr. She lays beside me in the snow and nuzzles her head gently against my own. Feeling her warmth, my emotions relent for only a heartbeat before I realize she’s forgiving me. Despite everything I did to her, she forgives me!!

My heart swells until I’m incapable of holding back. I cry as hard as I ever have before with my head in her embrace and our tails entwined.

We lay together for a time, allowing the snow to build against our feathers. Lying still with Kuro, I ignored the cold creeping in from around me. All that mattered was being in her presence and knowing she was safe. At some point, she covered me with her wing, blocking more snow from accumulating against me. I could tell she was waiting for my emotions to subside.

But now, something unusual is occurring. Still beside her, I clear my nose and ask, “Kuro? Are you...?”

I focus on the feathers under the cleft of her wing. They’re dancing back and forth, but the wind is still.

“You’re shivering!”

I drag myself from beneath her wing and ruffle myself of snow. Despite her soot-colored plumage, Kuro looks nearly invisible with a blanket of white draped across her.

“Ahh! Um, I’ll dig up an ember root! We need to—“

“I’m fine,” Kuro rumbles, rising to her talons. The wind catches a cloud of snow as she flaps her wings clean. “Asha...”

We stare at each other, unable to locate words. I can see it on her face — she wants to talk about everything as much as I do. But this is hardly the location for such a rosy

conversation. Five Dragons lie dead around us. The falling snow has done little to mask the overwhelming stench of death.

My tail sways slowly across the ground as I gaze around the clearing. “We have to clean this up, don’t we?”

“Then return to the Grandfather Tree so I can heal,” Kuro frowns.

“I can check if there’s any dourwart nearby,” I offer. “Something to ease the pain until then.”

Kuro growls softly, and her gaze shifts to Relmoon. “I’ll be fine... just as soon as I prey on him.”

My eyes go wide but quickly subside. I admit, the thought crossed my mind. I can sense how exhausted Kuro is after fighting so many Dragons. To make matters worse, we haven’t had a decent meal since we departed Flat Rock for the territory north of White Mountain. It would be a waste of prey just to leave him here.

“Yeah...” my voice dissipates as strange thoughts stew inside my head. A part of me can’t believe I’m drawn to preying on one of my own, while another part finds it perfectly sensible. How terribly poetic. Two halves of me, Lemur and Lithan, the sensibilities of both vying for presence.

“Asha,” Kuro says, turning to face me with the faintest hint of a smile. “After Nakino takes a look at me, we can talk. Just like we said we would.”

At hearing those words, I feel spirits lifted as high as Maki. “Okay. Thank you, Kuro!”

Kuro smiles, then chitters to herself in happiness. I haven’t heard her chitter in so long! Oh, how I missed her little chitters! it really feels like everything is going to be alright!

Kuro trods through the snowdrifts and stands over Relmoon’s body. She unfurls her wings and flaps them to clear the snow building across Relmoon. Though it hasn’t been long since he passed, his crimson feathers are turning pale as his body begins to freeze. Kuro braces a talon across his neck, then reaches down to clamp her jaws around Relmoon’s horn. A wrenching crack echoes across the clearing, and Kuro rises with the proof of Relmoon’s life grasped firmly in her muzzle. She gingerly lays it to the side, then beckons me with her wings to join her.

A frigid wind ruffles Relmoon’s feathers as I join Kuro at her side. Sardi will be devastated when she learns what happened here, but I won’t be shedding any tears. Relmoon brought this upon himself. As I contemplate all the pain he’s caused me, my Litan instincts take hold. I’m cold, tired and hungry. I want to be with Kuro. I need his flesh.

What I’m about to do would be unconscionable if I were still a Lemur, but I don’t care. I’m too hungry, too upset at Relmoon to consider the sanctity of my actions. Perhaps most importantly, I’m no longer the idealized little girl who would find this behavior abhorrent. I never will be because I’m no longer afraid of myself.

I am Kin.

Felra is where creatures like me belong.

I brace my foretalon against Relmoon's flank and use my jaws to rip him apart like a can opener. Warm viscera flows freely over my claws, exciting my predator senses. I can't hold myself back any longer. I snarl in visceral delight and begin gorging myself, tearing Relmoon apart piece by bloody piece. A heartbeat later, Kuro joins me in the feast.

## 105. The Greater Good

As it turns out, the airship raid on Varecia was a false alarm. But not for long.

An airship was indeed spotted off the edge of the continent — just one. From a cloud bank to the northwest, it appeared: A small scouting vessel on a provocative heading straight into the heart of Varecia. As our ships at the ledge began to react, it took a hard turn starboard and quickly returned to the cloud bank. We breathed a sigh of relief, but the generals agreed: Nortane was testing our reaction speed to a full-scale invasion.

It wasn't long before it began in earnest.

Two nights ago, the Nortanian fleet appeared from the southwest, some 30 vessels in total. Ours was slow to react, as our intelligence indicated the fleet was north of Varecia. Caught flat-footed, we were able to halt their advance before they could reach the ledge and begin attacking ground targets. For now, the Queen has taken the general's advice and allowed the fighting to occur off-ledge. Our plan is simple: keep their ships in the air long enough for their water tankers to run dry. Eventually, the smaller ships will be forced to retreat, leaving the larger ships more vulnerable to attack.

The fighting has been fierce. Unlike the wars against Sarlian, fighting Nortane is an entirely different affair. Avians routinely swarm our ships, looking for any unguarded hatches to infiltrate and cause chaos. Once inside, hand-to-talon combat is a dangerous affair for even our most experienced knights. In a particularly heartbreaking event, the *Boylston* fell this afternoon after being infiltrated by a small battalion of Hawks. They were able to commandeer the ship and return to Nortanian lines, adding it to their fleet.

To make matters worse, reports of stray Nortanian vessels have been received across the entire western flank of the Kingdom. *Hollyhead*, *Owens Island*, and *Coleport* reported vessels lurking in the clouds. So far, none have strayed close to land, but the threat of an attack has forced us to reposition ships that could be used in the fight to defend *Varecia*. 95% of the fleet is on the western side of the Kingdom, yet it's still not enough!

How long can we continue to fight? Nortane's fleet dwarfs ours in size – those of us with common sense knew a conflict with Nortane was unwinnable. Still, the Queen is adamant that we press on, and President *Weatherlight* has rejected calls for a cease-fire. I truly fear what the future holds for our Kingdom.

For the moment, I find myself at my office in the palace. Her Majesty has taken her usual seven o'clock break, affording me some valuable time to review the reports coming in from the front. Long shadows are cast across the room by a singular wall-mounted oil lamp, providing a fitting mood for the work I'm conducting. As I sift through the papers, there's a knock at my door.

"Come in," I mutter, gazing into the abyss of information.

The door creaks open behind me. When I fail to hear a response, I raise my head to see Finch peeking through the doorframe like a sad puppy in a storefront.

“Oh!” I chirp in relieved surprise. “Hello, Finch. I thought you were someone from upstairs, here to deliver another report.”

Unsurprisingly, Finch is in their red guard uniform with a rapier at their side. They turn a meager smile and ask, “Burning the midnight coal?”

“Just reviewing the latest from the front.’ I say.

Finch looks sullen. Everyone is anxious about the battle occurring off-ledge. “Just wanted to ask if you were interested in joining me for a coffee.”

Intrigued, I gaze at the clock on my wall. We still have another twenty minutes before the Queen finishes her break. Drinking coffee this late is preposterous, but God knows I’ll be up past midnight again. The nights will be long until the battle reaches a conclusion, whatever that conclusion may be.

“Very well, then,” I say, resting my pen by the inkwell. “I could use a walk to stretch my legs.”

I stride into the quiet hallway. All the overhead lighting is powered off, leaving only the wall-mounted oil lamps to guide us to the kitchen. At the end of the hallway, a pair of

guards are stationed next to a window; their gaze is drawn skyward by the drone of an airship passing overhead. The palace is calm, but the mood is tense.

I suppose Finch is on their break before the shift change at eight o'clock. The war has been hectic, affording us little time to interact since we returned from our trip to the weald. Consequently, I've kept them in the dark regarding the matters the Prince and I uncovered. It's not that I don't trust them with such information, but rather, the nature of our discovery is so incredible I struggle to believe they'll accept it. *Princess Asha is the Lithan?* You'd have to be mad to accept that.

Much as it is currently, my mind has been restless. I can't stop thinking about my encounter with the Lithan, and I'm still in shock that it could be the Princess. As I've ruminated, some details from the encounter resurfaced in my memory.

If Asha has indeed become a Lithan, then what was the '*talking*' described by the Beatrix at the Northern Continent? As the Lithan confronted the warship, it began speaking in a language of hisses and growls. Naturally, nobody that day thought to bring a recordable wax cylinder, so I'm left to speculate on what it sounded like. Was the Princess trying to communicate in the Goddess Language?

Perhaps most important was the thunderous noises we heard outside that cursed grove of trees. It wasn't until yesterday that I realized it could have been Asha teaching herself how to fly. After all, once I arrived in the hollow, I watched the Lithan struggle to gain altitude before a gust of wind caught its wings. Was she trying to relearn the Goddess Language as well? I suppose that makes sense, but if Asha wasn't feral, then why...

I frown and shake my head. Once again, I'm getting carried away in my thoughts. Ultimately, if there's one thing I could wish for, it would be to turn back the pages of history and listen in on Calypso and the Princess as they confronted Crow Wing. Oh, the things we could learn! There is no doubt in my mind that Crow Wing was aware of the diamond's power and indeed may have planned to ambush the Princess once the

opportunity arose. If I could only hear their exchange, then perhaps my mind would be at ease.

“Lot on your mind, huh?”

“Oh, yes,” I tell Finch, dragged back into the moment. “Much more than I’d prefer.”

Finch murmurs in agreement. “If you ever need someone to talk to Dunc’, just let me know.”

As we round the corner into another hallway, I give Finch a curious stare.

“*Commander*,” they correct themselves. Past their uniform, I see their tail twitch uncomfortably.

I smile, hoping to calm their nerves. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Poor Finch. Try as they might, they’re not very good at hiding their crush from me.

I’ve known about it for some time. The way they look at me, their penchant for visiting my office at opportune times... it’s as plain to see as Maki on a clear day. I can’t help but

pity them a little; Finch really doesn't know how to approach someone they like. As for myself, I trust Finch, and I very much appreciated their compassion during my time of need. But beyond that, I feel nothing.

If there's one thing I'm certain of, it's that I'm not ready for another relationship. The pain of losing Calypso is still too fresh, and I'm unsure when I'll feel comfortable seeking a partner. If I'm lucky, then Finch will continue to remain awkward and distant. I would like to avoid any uncomfortable conversations.

Continuing to the kitchen, we say little between ourselves. The coffee from this morning is still warm, albeit burnt. After a brief conversation about our sweetener preferences, Finch offers to escort me back to my office.

We walk through the halls in silence, idly sipping our drinks until we come upon the eastern wing of the building. As we approach the hallway where my office is located, I hear a muffled pounding noise. Who could be pounding things at this hour? As we turn the corner, the source of the disturbance becomes clear: Two palace guards, a Ruffy and a Fisher, are trying to enter my office by force. Standing next to them is a Marten and a Ringtail. I recognize the Ringtail as Lieutenant Tobin and the Marten as someone I dread. He notices me, and his face goes wide in shock.

"There he is!" Orlando shouts, pointing squarely at me.

The guards, dressed in the same uniform as Finch, turn about and begin marching down the hall. They have a certain glint in their eyes, one that begets intimidation.

Finch recoils in surprise. "Wha—?"

“What is this?” I ask aloud.

“Commander Almandoz!” The Fisher shouts. “By the orders of Her Majesty the Queen, I am placing you under arrest. Please, do not resist!”

A case of literary theft: this tale is not rightfully on Amazon; if you see it, report the violation.

Stunned into silence, I find no words to object as the guards trudge forward. Everything is happening so fast that I can't think straight. I-Is this because of the serpentine diamond? Because I brought it to Mother's house?

“*What!?*” Finch gasps. The guards stop a few feet in front of us. “U-Under what charges?”

“Sedition and conspiracy,” Orlando answers, appearing at the Ruffy's side. “Now, please. Place him in restraints.”

The guards nod and begin to search their coats for handcuffs.

*Sedition and conspiracy?! For what?! Performing my duties faithfully for twelve years? My ears flick in annoyance. If those are indeed the charges, then they aren't pursuing me for*

the diamond. This is plain and simple nonsense, and Orlando is the crux of it. The last time we met, Prince Sofl humiliated him before a crowd of gawking onlookers. Now he's back with a litany of false charges to exact his revenge!

But... why is Tobin here? How did he manage to con a Lieutenant of the Air Squadron into his scheme, much less one favorable to me?

"What is this nonsense?!" I shout, stamping my foot against the ground. "If I am being detained, then show me the papers!"

"Papers are unnecessary in wartime," the arrogant Marten sighs. "And before you object – yes, the charges against you are so grave that you must be apprehended immediately."

On a day when justice is blind, papers must be presented to an individual being arrested that explain why they're being detained. There is indeed a mechanism for doing so without a paper trail, and it's called martial law. While the war has come uncomfortably close to Varecia, the municipal police force is still in control of the city. Something else is at play here, something much bigger than me.

I glance at the once faithful Tobin and scowl, "Who are these guards? I've never seen them in the palace before," I pause and glance at the Ruffy. "Who is your superior officer?"

"He is," the Ruffy mutters, motioning to Tobin with his tail .

“Commander,” Tobin finally responds, his voice penitent. He looks at me in the eyes and says, “Please, don’t resist. This is a fight you can’t win.”

The way he spoke... Tobin fully believes in himself. But as I realize why, my stomach churns: *Tobin has been compromised*. No member of the Air Squadron would turn on their own, certainly not a loyal officer like him. And the worst part is that Orlando is behind this. I can see it in their faces – Tobin’s penance and Orlando’s smug confidence. The power structure is as plain as an obedient dog.

For a fleeting moment, I consider following his advice. If Tobin had confided such things to me in private, I might be more receptive. But I will never submit to such blatant corruption with the threat of violence hanging over me.

Quickly, I give Finch a sidelong glance. Their tail is drooped behind them; they must be as alarmed as I am. Do they realize there’s something much bigger at play? Something that threatens the royal family and the Kingdom itself? I wish I could tell them to follow my lead, but an uneasy glance will have to do. I hope to God they understand.

“No,” I say, pulling down my vest. “I have done nothing wrong. Tell me what’s going on, Tobin.”

Tobin’s face moves in subtle ways. After taking a moment to gather his voice, he says, “The only thing that’s happening is your apprehension, Commander. Please don’t make this any more difficult than it has to be,” he pauses to look at Finch and swallows. “I expect your cooperation as well, Ensign.”

My frown deepens. Appealing to reason was worth a try, but it predictably failed. Me and Finch are on our own, but that doesn't mean I have to take this willingly.

"No!" I object, raising my voice so everyone nearby can hear me. "A Commander of the Air Squadron is being detained by two palace guards nobody has ever seen before, a Lieutenant, and one arrogant landlord?" I scoff so loud my chest burns. "No! I will not comply with such transparent nonsense!"

What a laughable ruse. A Commander of the Air Squadron is being detained for sedition and conspiracy, but only two palace guards and a Lieutenant are there to apprehend him? Someone like me demands the presence of the Legion of Dragons, not a pair of combat-starved rookies. This is the novice mistake an arrogant man like Orlando would make.

The Marten's fur bristles. "Alright, fine. We can do things the hard way. Mister Ciro, if you would, please?"

The Ruffy draws his rapier and grins, "With pleasure."

Instinctively, Finch and I retreat a step. If anyone in the palace heard my mockery, then they've decided not to save us.

"Whoa, hey now!" Finch whines, holding their free hand up in front of them. The Ruffy hesitates and looks to Tobin for advice.

“Ensign,” Tobin says, stiffening his voice. “Help restrain the Commander.”

Finch exhales a curt breath. They remain motionless, staring at Tobin with conflict scrawled across their face.

The Ringtailed Lieutenant reiterates, “That’s an *order*, Officer Roland”

“You’d do well to listen to the Lieutenant. Unless you want to join the Commander in prison?”

As Orlando spoke, I felt a tail tap against my back. I tense my muscles in preparation.

“Damnit!” Finch growls. They take an uneasy step away from me and draw their rapier. “C-commander Almandoz!! I’m ordering you to—“

With a flick of their wrist, hot coffee is cast into the faces of the turncoat guards. As I watch the scalding hot liquid impact, I add my own coffee to the equation, flinging it against Orlando and Tobin’s chest. Time slows as the guards wail in pain, and coffee dutifully ruins the landlord’s wardrobe.

“RUN!”

The guards recover, growling in fury as Finch engages them with their blade. For a breathless moment, I hesitate. I thought Finch was going to flee alongside me. They can't possibly...!

I stifle my emotions and turn to run as fast as my legs will carry me. My life is in danger. I have to get out of here. I need to find someone else on my side. But who? Could others in the palace have been compromised? Who can I trust? Who's my enemy?

Calypso's rapier. It's in my office, and he trained me well. If I can just—

“AGH!!”

A yowl splits the air like a buzzsaw. I spin around to find Finch collapsing to the ground, cut down a rapier to their sternum.

“FINCH!!”

Before I can react any further, something forceful grabs me from behind. Instinctively, I try to fight back with my fists but am quickly subdued by someone far stronger than me. A pair of arms, clad in the distinct, red velvet uniform of the palace guard, drag me to the ground and sucker punch me in the stomach. I cry out as pain lances my insides, and another pair of arms holds me firmly against the carpet.

Throbbing in pain and unable to clench my stomach, my eyes lazily focus on the scene down the hall. Finch is in a similar state as me, yowling in misery as they lie on the ground in a puddle of their own blood. Above them is Orlando, lazily wiping his down coat with a cloth while giving Finch a look of askance.

“Get a nurse for her,” Orlando growls in annoyance.

The Fisher nods. “Yes, sir.”

*That bastard!!* My fingers curl against the carpet, and I feel a familiar rage festering inside my heart, one I haven’t felt since I confronted Father. Argh, damnit! What the HELL is going on?! How is...!

“Orlando,” I seethe. “I’ll see to it you’re ruined for this!”

He turns to me, retrained against the ground, and a coy grin grows across his muzzle. “Commander, the only thing you’ll be seeing are the cold walls of your jail cell.”

As he chuckles in amusement, I catch a glimpse of Tobin crouching above Finch. Is he trying to offer assistance? Why?! Ugh, that treacherous bastard!! How could he swear an oath of loyalty to the Kingdom and still...

A horrendous revelation comes across me. If Tobin has been compromised, then the palace — nay, the upper echelons of the Crown itself — can no longer be trusted. The Royal Family is in danger!! The Kingdom itself could be at risk!!

Orlando checks his watch, turns, and begins a slow saunter away from us, his tail swaying in satisfaction. “Get him out of here.”

A pair of hands snatch my ears and drag me to my feet. I shriek in pain before another force pushes me forward and begins dragging me through the hall. Held by my shoulders, I can only see the arms of my captors. Though they bear the uniform of the palace guard, I’m certain they’re outsiders. They must be in cahoots with the same turncoats who attacked Finch. Just how deep does this deception go?

Carted through the halls in silence, I notice we’re headed in the wrong direction. I know the protocols — if someone were arrested inside the palace, they would be taken to the detention cells in the basement until the proper authorities arrived. Instead, it seems I’m being led to the front door of the building. Why?

“Where are you taking me?” I demand.

As we approach the gilded front doors, my captors remain silent.

“Well? Answer me!”

Instead of responding, they only tighten their grip on my shoulder. Strong hands push me around a corner, and the grand, gilded doors of the palace entrance come into view. On a regular day, one would expect these doors to be secured by no less than three members of the palace guard. But today, it's silent, and not so much as an oil lamp is lit.

The doors swing open with a metallic racket, crashing against the sides of the building. Gazing across the front lawn, I see the heart of Varecia, looking every bit as normal as it possibly could on a night when war is at its doorstep. Does anyone know about the treachery occurring in the palace? I'd cry out for help, but it's clear there's nobody here on my side. In the roundabout lies a single, unmarked steam carriage with two shadowy figures sitting in the rear compartment. Outside the carriage are two Martens clad in black, guarding the doors with stern expressions. Based on their body language, it's clear the figures in the carriage are being detained. And they from the palace, too?

"An unmarked carriage?" I scoff as I'm dragged down a set of stairs. "What is this non—"

"Shut UP!"

The clenched fist of my captor reaches out to sock me square in the stomach. I scream, reeling from the hit before another fist collides with my jaw. Instantly, my senses become muddled. Instincts scream as I feel my body tumble into a free fall, but the impact with the ground never arrives. When awareness returns, I find myself at the bottom of the stairs, my whole body reeling in unimaginable pain. Air raid sirens have begun to wail across the city, signaling a fresh attack on Varecia.

At that moment, everything slides into place. Orlando isn't exacting some kind of petty revenge against me. *This is a coup!* A real, god damn coup attempt! All my sensibilities compel me to fight back, to *somehow* resist my captors and warn the royal family... but it's hopeless. I can barely move in my current state, much less stand up and return to the palace. As I revel in horror, footsteps approach from behind.

“Fucking cottontail,” a voice hisses. “Get the door open.”

“Right,” says the other.

I wail in pain as a pair of hands drags me to my feet without any regard for my injuries. A figure stands before me, and my eyes focus. The Marten helps the one behind me, dragging me across the roundabout towards the steam carriage. When we arrive, he steps away and greets the figure in black before reaching to open the door. I feel myself propped up, and my body turned around.

The sky above the palace is black, free of Maki’s pale glow. Even the lighting outside the palace is conspicuously turned off, leaving only the faint glow of the city lights to illuminate the palace’s facade. As my eyes adjust, something catches my attention. Winged figures, clad in black, are descending from the sky to land on the roof of the palace!

“Hey!” I shout. “H-HEY! There are Avians on the roof! Crow Wing is raiding the palace!!”

The man restraining me scoffs. “Yeah, right.”

“Can’t you see them?! Crow Wing is here!! The royal family is—“

Something blunt strikes the back of my head. For a fleeting moment, I feel stark pain and the sensation of free fall, but my body never touches the ground. Senses uncouple from consciousness, the world detaches in a heartbeat, and my soul descends into darkness.`

## 106. Heart to Heart

A full day has passed since we returned to the Grandfather Tree with Relmoon's horn, and Kuro is still recovering in Nakino's den. I should have known just how much pain she was in after the fight – It's in her nature to conceal these things. Still, Nakino was quickly able to tend to her wounds, and now she's on the mend. According to the healer, she'll be ready to leave his den by tomorrow morning.

I can't wait!

Last night, while enjoying the warmth of Kuro's wing, we agreed that we should discuss our feelings for each other somewhere outside the Grandfather Tree. Somewhere away from prying ears... somewhere nice and private. Ever since then, I haven't been able to get her sweet scent out of my head. I'm as light as a feather and more content than I've ever felt in my life. Is this what it feels like to be in love? Why did I ever doubt a future with Kuro on my wing?

But for now, I've decided to make myself useful by cleaning up Nakino's stock room. Unsurprisingly, the chaos of the past few weeks has left it in a state of chaos. Dourwart is mixed with ayonell, sassefron is resting on top of dewberry... I don't even know what happened to all the moon bark! It's tedious work, and I'm sure there's other work to be done around the aerie. But I don't want to stray too far from Kuro. I need to be near her... I won't be at ease until I can finally confess my feelings for her.

As I pull a wad of blood cress out a crook in the roots, there's movement at the front of the room.

"Oh!" a familiar voice reacts.

I raise my head to find Nakino standing at the entrance, his talon held in the air, and a surprised look scrawled across his face. He steps inside and says, "I didn't expect to find you here."

...*Ugh.*

I frown and drop the blood cress to the ground. "Well, somebody has to organize this mess. Are the sick still improving?"

Nakino shuffles his wings. "Slowly, yes. Gima is able to raise her head again. She's still very sick, but it's an improvement. Compared to the others before her, she should have passed by now. Asha... I think you saved her life."

So, she's going to make it. I saved the old girl's life. The thought raises my spirits, and a meager smile grows across my muzzle.

Once it was clear Kuro needed time to recover, I flew to check the rootspring — the source of the Grandfather Tree's fresh water and the first of the scenes revealed to me in Gust's vision. At the time, I didn't understand why he was showing me something so mundane.

But as the importance of the monolith and Sofl's elixir became clear, I realized there had to be importance there as well. Sure enough, I discovered the carcass of a spikehorn in a feeder pool above the primary one where Kin drink. It had contaminated the water supply, infecting everyone who preferred the taste of spring water.

Clearly, Relmoon placed it there as part of his campaign to implicate me as a harbinger of death. What an utter psychopath.

Meanwhile, Bonello suggested we form search parties to find more of the devil's matchstick lichen. I think that's a great idea! There has to be more of it inside the flock's territory! It seems like a return to normalcy in the flock is just on the horizon, and I couldn't be happier. I just wish Nakino would leave me alone so I could embrace my mate in peace.

Feeling like I have nothing further to add, I crane my head away from the black Kin and begin searching for more blood cress.

"Asha."

Nakino takes a step forward, causing me to ruffle in annoyance. His body freezes, and his face twists in frustration; not at me, but at himself.

He exhales sharply and says, "Asha, I need to apologize."

“I don’t want to hear it,” I growl, flicking my head away.

“Asha, please!”

I stop and give him a rankled look. I can’t believe Nakino’s doing this to me after everything that’s happened! He knows the only exit from this room is past him, and he’s using it to confine me here and talk to him. Kuro’s just outside this room – if I yelled, she would come to rescue me. She would also crush Nakino’s neck. As appealing as that sounds, it wouldn’t be good for either of us. Argh, it seems I have no choice but to listen to him! I growl and narrow my eyes but offer no further resistance.

Nakino takes a measured breath and begins to speak slowly. “I know you and Kuro are going to be mated. I’m...” he trails off and lowers his gaze. “Last night, I told Enyll about what happened between us at Flat Rock. I was convinced he would see things my way and tell me I was right. But that didn’t happen. He was furious at me.”

*How could he tell someone...!*

...

My frustration quickly subsides. I never told anyone that Nakino cornered me in a den at Flat Rock. Partially out of embarrassment and partially because I didn’t think anyone would believe me (besides Kuro, of course.) But if Enyll heard the story and understood how toxic Nakino was acting, then maybe I was wrong to withhold it.

“We... had a long talk. Just him and I. He convinced me what I did was wrong, and...” Nakino trails off, and his wings droop to the ground. “If you truly don’t want to be near me anymore, then I understand. But if that’s the case, then I need to apologize. What I did to you was terrible, and it was wrong. I’m sorry.”

Feathers quaking, he dips his head and mantles his wings before me.

“That’s nice,” I huff, turning my head away. “But an apology means nothing unless you actually improve yourself.”

“And I will!” he says, eagerly raising his head. “Enyll offered to help me. He’s going to stay in my den and help me take control of my emotions.”

Really? Enyll offered to do that? He clearly has some kind of ulterior motive. His den arrangement at Tall Spires must be truly awful. “Uh-huh. Well, that’s nice of him.”

I turn away to the back wall, desperately hoping Nakino takes the hint. He seems to understand that he did something wrong, but how much should I trust him? What he did to me wasn’t just terrible, it was unconscionable. Should I really give him a second chance?

I suppose... it’s good that he’s seeking help. That is the very least he should do. But I still feel super uncomfortable around Nakino, and I don’t know if I’ll ever stop feeling that way.

After failing to hear another whiny retort, I turn around to see a completely empty stock room. I sigh, fold my wings, and return to my work.

Emergent light tickles the ashen-gray ridges of the Great Valley, a subdued glow of tart orange and chromatic purple on a far-off horizon. Dawn has arrived on the first day of the rest of my life.

As Maki lowers in the western sky, we rise on a cool thermal, turning our gaze towards a sparsely forested island covered in a fresh blanket of snow. Of all the floating respites in my new home, Kuro claims this one is the best for watching sunrises. It seemed like a fitting place to finally discuss our romantic feelings for each other.

We rise above the island and begin circling it, searching for a suitable place to land. Momentarily, my eyes are drawn across the valley and fixate on the distinct profile of a Kin on the wing, most likely on their morning hunt. A plume of steam leaves my muzzle as I call out a friendly greeting.

**SKREEEEAK!!!**

It echoes across the valley, and soon, a response is heard.

**ROOOOOOARRR!!**

Briefly, our echoes combine to form a brilliant cacophony of draconic sound. Oh, how I love dragonsong! Fierce and beautiful, it never fails to bring a smile to my face. And should the urge arise, I can always count on a wayward Kin to share the sky with me. Truly, Felra is where I was always meant to be.

Clouds of snow are suffused into the air as we land close to the ledge, disturbing last night's snowfall. As it returns to the ground, I bound over a snow drift to stand at my mate's side and rub my face against her neck feathers. I can't hold myself back any longer. I need to be affectionate with her. She releases an affectionate warble and wraps her wing around me. For a time, we share a tender moment together.

Held in Kuro's embrace, I loosen my muzzle from her feathers. "There's something I have to know."

"What is it?" she asks warmly.

"You had so much time to confess your feelings to me. But even as Couple's Night approached, you kept your muzzle shut. Why?"

I look up at Kuro, staring into her merlot eyes. She smirks, then flicks her eyes to the ground. Recognizing her intent, I follow Kuro as she lowers herself to the ground and settles against the snow. I cozy up beside her, feeling warmed by her presence.

"I was afraid," she explains, gazing out across the valley. "I was afraid of finding out there was some Lemur boy waiting for you in the Farlands. I was afraid you were going to tell me girls can't be mated with other girls..."

NovelBin is the home of this novel. Visit there to read the original and support the author.

“Asha... I had to know if you felt the same way I did. And I didn’t want to think about what would happen if you didn’t.”

I smile and rub my wing against her. “I do.”

Kuro chitters, smiling brighter than the sun at day’s crest. She looks so overcome with happiness that she could start weeping. We laugh and nuzzle our heads together.

“Is that why you hated Couple’s Night?” I ask, pulling away from her. “And why you never took a mate after Relmoon?”

Kuro tilts her head. “What do you mean?”

“Kuro, it’s so obvious. You never took a mate because you don’t feel for drakons. In the Farlands, we’d call you a *‘lesbian’*.”

Kuro smirks as understanding washes over her. She shakes her head and says, “You’re wrong, Asha. I don’t dislike drakons.” As she stops speaking, a wry smile crosses her muzzle. “I *hate* them.”

My crest flattens. "...Really?"

"Men are *disgusting*," her body winces as if she sampled rotten prey. "They're arrogant, smell bad, and look terrible. Whenever I'm around them, I feel so..."

Her brow furrows, and she looks genuinely upset. Eventually, she gazes back at me, studies my face, and her expression softens.

"Asha?" she asks. "What's wrong?"

I hesitate to respond. "Oh, Kuro... I've, um. I've never met anyone who dislikes men as much as you do."

Kuro's head tilts a little. I think she was expecting me to agree with her.

"I don't think I have feelings for drakons, either... but I've known plenty of decent men in my life. Calypso was loyal, strong, and honorable. I can't imagine him ever doing something wrong to a woman. And Duncan was good, too! I never got to know him personally, but he certainly wasn't a scumbag."

I've certainly noticed Kuro's sour behavior around drakons, regardless of who it is. And it's not like I'm immune to the same urges. But hating all of them unconditionally? I can't imagine myself ever feeling that way, even if I had a vindictive ex who hated my guts. Drakons are fine... I just don't want to be intimate with one. Or, really, be around them very often. I very much prefer the company of other drakainas.

A wind blows past us, and Kuro's eyes drift away from me. I think she realizes this isn't normal behavior. I hope she doesn't think I'm disappointed! I think I understand her feelings, especially after all the trauma that occurred in her relationship with Relmoon. I won't scorn her for it. I want to help her move past these feelings and have a more healthy relationship with the drakons in the flock. She'll be happier that way, and more respected!

But we can talk about that some other time. For now, I decide to change the subject. "Have you always felt this way? About your feelings for other drakainas?"

Across the valley, golden shafts of light are causing the clouds to shimmer. It won't be long before the sun pokes above the ridges and bathes the valley in morning light.

Kuro turns back to me, and her face softens. "Since I was a fledge. But back then, I was in denial. I thought I was broken for not liking drakons. I thought... if I forced myself to mate with a drakon and whelp a brood, then I'd learn how to be normal."

Gosh, poor Kuro. She must have tried so hard to fit in as a fledge. I loosen my wings and say, "So, you chose Relmoon."

Kuro pauses as another breeze blows past us. She looks remorseful, the most penitent I've ever seen her. "There are few Kin in the flock as fierce as I am, and Relmoon was one of them. We loved to spar with each other, and he was always chasing after me for more. So, when he finally approached me about being mated, he seemed like the right choice. At the time, I didn't have feelings for him, but..." she pauses, and her talons curl inwards, "I thought if I gave him a chance, then I could learn to love him."

Another pause. The air is still, but I can feel the tension in her feathers.

I scoot a little closer to Kuro. "You pretended to like him and hoped for the best. But your feelings never blossomed."

Kuro frowns, and looks away from me. "He was insistent on starting a family. It was all he could talk about as the leaves began to change. '*Hatchlings by greenwing,*' he told me every morning as the sun rose. And when the sun lowered, all he wanted to do was mate."

Every time Relmoon did something questionable, he cited his family as the justification. When he argued I should be expelled from the flock, it was because his fledges were starving. When he announced his intention to form a new flock, he claimed he would do anything to protect his family. It was the crux of his deplorability.

Kuro continues, "I felt trapped. It seemed like there was no way to escape our bond. So... I began to lash out at him. I didn't want to, but... I didn't know what else to do. I had to get away from Relmoon, even if it meant destroying my reputation in the flock."

Kuro has a reputation for being a good fighter, but little else. Was she more respected in the past? Most Kin look down on her now, and this must be why. She ruined her image on purpose to get away from Relmoon.

“At first, Relmoon was worried about me. But then... something changed. It was like he used the Gift of Regression and never stopped. He became intolerable — always in a foul mood, always trying to provoke me into a fight. He told me I was being cruel to him on purpose and that *he* was the victim. Eventually, I couldn’t take it anymore, and I gave him what he wanted. My grandmother had to separate us before we could kill each other. From that day forward, he went out of his way to antagonize me specifically. He flew to every aerie and told anyone who would listen that I was the worst Dragon in the flock. All he cared about was making my life miserable.”

...Perhaps I was wrong.

I thought Relmoon’s lodestar was his family, but that’s only half the story. The truth is that Relmoon was driven by his hatred for Kuro.

Every action he took was done solely to make her life miserable. He mended his relationship with Sardi so he could take a mate and claim to be the more loyal member of the flock. He lied about the winds at Archer’s Landing to instigate a fight between Kuro and I. Frustrated, he tried to kill me when he foresaw Kuro and I becoming mates. And when all else failed, he tried to form a brand new flock so that he could exact his revenge with authority.

I’ll never forget the look on Relmoon’s face as he was exiled from the flock. That night, as he turned to leave the clearing, his baleful gaze passed over me. All of that wasted breath to give a speech about how awful I was, but where did his scorn truly lie? It was with Kuro. He stared at *Kuro* as he was leaving. He knew how much she longed to be with me, so he sent the message that he would pursue the one she loved. *That* was what drove Relmoon to madness.

What a wretched, pitiable Dragon. I'll savor the taste of his flesh for as long as I live.

A Dragon's cry echoes off the mountains, catching my attention. "What happened after Relmoon?"

Kuro ruffles and joins me in gazing across the valley. "I had some encounters with other drakainas, but nothing serious. Most of them were already mated, and those who weren't were only interested in mating with drakons. I'm sure you've noticed, but Kin look forward to raising a brood. It's beneficial to have one when you become an elder."

Family bonds are just as important in the flock as they are in the Farlands, perhaps even more so. As me and Kuro age, we'll always be the ones clearing snow from our den in frostwing. Nobody will hunt for us as our wings grow tired and our flights become labored. Eventually, we'll have to retire to one of the aeries and pass on our den to someone new.

"I was gliding through life, allowing turbulent winds to toss me around," she pauses, and a smile grows across her muzzle. "Then, one day, you showed up."

I can't help but loosen a smile of my own. It brings me so much joy knowing what happens next.

"I'd never seen someone with a plumage like yours. And when you opened your eyes and smiled at me... it was like the sun emerging on a cloudy day."

I look away, overcome with joyous emotion. Oh, gosh! She's going to pour her heart out for me! I can't believe a cute girl loves me!!

"Drakons make me frustrated and angry... but when I'm around drakaina, everything feels right. And when I'm around you," Kuro leans in and nuzzles her head against my own, "All my frustrations and anxieties disappear. Asha, you bring out the best of me in a way nobody else can!"

As I stare into Kuro's rosy eyes, a familiar memory resurfaces; this isn't the first time someone has poured their heart out for me. Last time it was on Couple's Night, when Nakino told me how much I meant to him. Didn't he say something similar? About how I bring out the best in him?

How quaint. I may have had a similar effect on Nakino, but clearly, I didn't bring out his best. When our faux relationship was strained, it brought out the *veryworst*

. Conversely, Kuro had every chance in the world to make things ugly. Our arguments at Archer's Landing. Couple's Night. My initial rejection of her. The only time things became sour was when it was my fault. When Kuro says I bring out the best in her, she means it!

"Is that why you were so patient with me?" I ask, leaning my head in.

It takes her a moment to nod. "That's right. I knew you had your family and your Kingdom waiting for you in the Farlands. I couldn't possibly ask you to stay in Felra, but..."

Kuro trails off, and her face begins to contort. She's beginning to cry!

Her head lowers, and the tears begin to flow. "If I had lost you, then... I don't know what I would have done. I don't think I would have ever found a mate in the flock. Asha, you were conflicted for so long, but I never gave up hope. I told myself, *'I'll only stop when she tells me no.'* And Asha, you...!"

Kuro can't hold it back any longer. She wraps her head around my neck and begins weeping tears of joy. I knew this was coming, yet I still can't believe mighty Kuro is capable of being so vulnerable. As she wails, I twist my head around and begin to preen her crest, trying as best as I can to comfort her. "You did everything right," I whisper, causing her to ease up and stare into my eyes. "You couldn't have been any sweeter to me, Kuro. I love you so much!"

At that, she begins wailing anew, broadcasting her languid cries across the valley. I return to preening her crest, and a curious realization crosses my mind.

When I landed in Felra, I had no concept of what a romantic relationship was like. So when Kuro tried to court me, I was utterly clueless. On Couple's Night, I was forced to confront the prospect of love with a drakon who seemed equally as confused as I was. It never worked out between me and Nakino, but... I don't think I'd be here right now if it weren't for him. How was I supposed to understand what a good relationship was without first experiencing a bad one?

I've learned so much as a Lithan. I can't believe I've made it this far. I owe everything to her.

“Kuro?” I whisper softly into her ear.

She takes a moment to stop crying, gathers her composure, and unwraps her neck from my own. As the dawn light grows stronger, our eyes lock together.

“Kuro, I...”

I stare into her gentle eyes, and my heart begins to flutter. That familiar, warm sensation. But the longer I stare, the more pronounced it becomes. Something wells up inside me, and I find myself drawn to Kuro’s face. The face I’ll know for the rest of my life, the one that’s so, so dear to me.

Through closed eyes, I feel the first rays of sunlight cast across the far mountain peaks. Our muzzles join together as the valley is bathed in light.

It feels... perfect.

From the warmth on my face to the warmth from Kuro to the warmth inside my heart. Everything in the world is exactly where it should belong.

As we pull away, I find myself overcome with happiness. I've waited my entire life for Kuro, and finally, we'll be together. "Please," I say, resting my head against her neck. "Don't ever leave my side."

She draws her wing across me and nuzzles my head with an affectionate warble. "I won't. I promise."

When I think about it, Kuro and I are more alike than I could have ever imagined. I was ostracized by those outside of my family for being a menace. Kuro is considered one of the most intimidating Dragons in the flock. We're misunderstood misfits that nobody particularly liked, yet we're perfect for each other.

How did all of this happen? The improbability of our relationship is mind-numbing. I had to transform into a Lithan, fly to the opposite side of the moon, become a member of a flock of Dragons I didn't even know existed and survive the assault of a deranged Dragon to find the love of my life in a society with no same-sex couples. If any one of those steps had failed... for a fleeting moment, I try to imagine my life without Kuro. The thought causes me to weep gently into her feathers.

"Kuro? I love you."

With the sun rising in the eastern sky, I bask in the warmth of my mate. The memories of my past life — my responsibilities and my family — begin to dissolve in my mind. The small voice that compelled me to protect them is silenced forever.

*I don't care,*

*I don't care,*

*I don't care.*

I'll turn my back on everything I've ever known.

I'll abandon every moral I've ever professed to believe in.

I'll leave them all behind just to spend one more day with her.

*I'm so happy,*

*I'm so happy,*

*I'm so happy...*

## 107. Greenwing's Warmth

Damp talons trod silently across a ground bare of snow, momentarily disrupting golden shafts of radiant light. The snowdrifts that once buried the Grandfather Tree have dissolved, heralding a change of seasons in the Snowfell Flock. Prey-birds dance among the branches, trilling birdsong as they sun their wings in the mottled patches of light. The air is tense with anticipation— they, like the rest of us, have eagerly awaited the warmth of greenwing and the earthen scents redolent of new life.

Kuro bisects the clearing under the ancient tree, leading me toward a particular den I have yet to visit. Her talons click eagerly against the bark as we scale the roots with harried steps. When Tomcat told us the snow had melted, Kuro insisted we visit the Grandfather Tree as soon as possible. As the newest member of the Snowfell Flock, it was finally my turn to participate in the flock's oldest tradition. We left this morning as soon as the sun rose over the peaks of the Great Valley.

We scale the roots until we arrive at a den I've never visited before. The entrance is recessed against the tree's trunk, surrounded on both sides by gnarled roots and an impressive showing of virescent carpet moss. A drakon, advanced in age but not yet an elder, is resting on his haunches with his wings perked in attention. Has he been expecting us? I suppose he expects everyone when the seasons change. As we approach him, the drakon's eyes slide past Kuro and focus on me. He remains motionless.

Kuro stands before the drakon and mantles her wings. "Blue skies, Son-Of-Frito"

With a certain grace, the drakon dips his mottled green head. "Warm currents, Daughter-Of-Mecali. You have come to inscribe your age."

“That’s right,” Kuro says. “And for this season, I brought my mate. Her name is Asha, Daughter-Of-Kelani, and she is new to the flock.”

Slowly, I step forward and join Kuro at her side. The drakon studies me for a moment, then tilts his head. I can see knowledge absent in his eyes. For some reason, this strikes me as odd.

“A new adult,” he rasps. “How peculiar. Adults are added to this tree only when a Loner joins the flock. But you...” he trails off as his gaze draws across my body. “I sense you are no Loner. You are something else entirely.”

I give Kuro a sidelong glance; I wasn’t expecting this response. He won’t be upset, will he? “I am the Farlander,” I answer before quickly correcting myself, “...was the Farlander.”

The drakon’s head elevates in brief surprise. I’ve never seen this Kin around the Grandfather Tree, much less at the gatherings in White Mountain. Surely, he’s heard about me on the fangs of other Dragons. “So you were. Of the Kin recorded on this tree, all were Kin-of-Keuvra. It is a profound occasion to welcome a child of the Goddess.”

I relax against my talons — he’s not upset.

Despite everything I’ve done for the flock, some of the older Kin are still reluctant to accept me as one of them. They see Nakino as the Dragon who treated the illness and my encounter with the Beatrix a fluke. Perhaps they would be more willing to accept me if Keuvra reappeared at the gatherings, but that has yet to happen. It’s the one nagging thought that has kept me anxious this past season. I should be a child of Keuvra, not the Goddess. What’s taking him so long, anyway?

A certain part of me yearns to march into Keuvra's den and ask him directly despite the strict rules against it. But as frustrating as it is, I know I have to be patient with the deities. After all, they were the ones who led me to the flock and guided me to help it. Without them, I would have died ten times over in Felra. I have to believe they have my best interests in mind, and everything will soon be revealed to me.

According to Kuro, his name is Kish, and his sole responsibility is to guide Kin through this ceremony. Like a sepal drawing open flower petals, Kish unfurls his wings and warms them in a sunbeam. "Very well, then. Join me on the wing."

We take off after him, departing the aerie through one of the openings in the lower branches. Warm sunlight greets our feathers under a brilliant blue sky, and the wind brings the intoxicating scents of prey and new growth. As we rise in altitude, Kish studies the branches closely, his eyes darting about like fish in a river. Eventually, after one full trip around the tree, he finds what he's looking for.

"There," he announces, flicking his ears towards one of the larger branches. "Please follow me."

We follow, taking turns landing on one of the branches big enough to carry the weight of three Kin. Kish grooms the path as he leads us deeper into the canopy, using his jaws to nip at the greenwing growth that would soon grow to prevent our passage. As we walk along the maze of twisting branches, Kuro comes to a halt seemingly at random. Kish follows a moment later, then reaches to rest his talon on one of the branches growing parallel to ours. He tests his weight, and with a flick of his ears, beckons us to follow. As I'd expect, they both know precisely where we're headed.

Just as the scent of moss and sap becomes overwhelming, the ancient trunk becomes visible through the tangle of branches. Immediately, I spot something peculiar: Innumerable vertical claw marks adorn the bark in massive sections, stretching out across the visible length of the trunk. As we pass a low-hanging branch, the scope of the scene becomes more clear. The entire circumference of the trunk has been marked by Kin! Incredible!

Kish settles before the trunk and wraps his tail around his foretalons. “Daughter-Of-Kelani, these symbols tell the story of your mate’s time in the Snowfell Flock. As soon as she could fly, young Kuro came to this tree and left a clawmark to herald the passage of each season. In our flock, we commemorate the passage of seasons and the persistence of life.”

He pauses and draws his left wing over a broad section of claw marks — Kuro’s record. Her marks started out small and jagged, but grew to become longer and more straight as the seasons progressed. It makes me smile, imagining an innocent young Kuro on this very branch long before I was even born.

Kish angles his head towards the trunk and studies Kuro’s section carefully. “Daughter-Of-Mecali... with the passage of frostwing, you are 172 seasons old.”

Wait, what!?! Did he seriously just count all her claw marks? But that was so fast!! I was taught a math curriculum in the Farlands, and I can’t even do mental math that quickly!

“Thank you,” Kuro says, ruffling a little in satisfaction. She gazes at me and smiles.

Kish inclines his head. “Now, then. Demonstrate the proper technique to your mate.”

Kuro nods and approaches the trunk. She rests on her haunches and draws her talon past the mark she inscribed in frostwing. She pushes against the trunk, then drags vertically across the bark. When she reaches the length of her previous mark, she pulls her talon away. As she does, a wisp of pale blue light emanates from the mark and quickly fades.

“Whoa!” I chirp in surprise. “I wasn’t expecting it to react.”

Kish flashes a smile and growls in satisfaction. “Long before the time of Dragons, Azurrel crafted The Grandfather Tree – the very first, and that from which all others sprouted. The legacy of his creation persists to this day.”

I feel my eyes go wide. I knew the Grandfather Tree was ancient, but the *very first tree*? And if that wasn’t enough, it still emanates the power of Azurrel all these years! Armed with this stunning revelation, I can’t help but gaze anew across the tree in wonder.

Kish shakes his wings and rises to his talons. “Daughter-Of-Kelani. To record your first season in the flock, we must travel to another branch. If you would follow me.”

The tawny old drakon leads us back into daylight and down to the lower branches of the tree. When we arrive back at the trunk, I notice a single, short set of inscriptions against the bark. The rest of the tree appears normal.

Kish approaches the trunk and stands before it, silent and unmoving. He draws a deep breath, exhales, then turns in a circle to settle on his haunches. “Asha, Daughter-Of-Kelani... child of the Goddess Etain.”

He flicks his ears, beckoning me to step forward. I move across the branch and stand before him.

“Follow your mate’s lead and commit the record of your time in the Snowfell Flock.”

I nod and move past Kish to confront the tree. Resting against my haunches, I place my right talon against the trunk – the same trunk that every Kin who came before me touched. I extend my index claw into the tree and slowly drag my talon across the texture of the bark, inscribing a clean, straight line. When it’s the same length as Kuro’s marks, I pull away. The inscription glows in a pale blue light before slowly fading.

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I cast about to see Kish tipping his wings in approval. I got it right on my first try! Beside him is Kuro, smiling like the happiest Dragon in the world. It’s easy to understand why – this is a small but hugely symbolic step in my new life as a member of the Snowfell Flock. The record of my time in Felra has only just begun.

Perhaps more than anything, I’ve come to appreciate warm skies.

I find myself at the top of Flat Rock, lazily passing the time while Kuro speaks to Bonello in his den a level below me. After an entire season of frozen prey and beds in the snow, I'm savoring the first warm day of greenwing. Curled into a neat little ball, my wings are splayed across the stone, and my head rests gently past the plumage of my tail. Somewhere far below me, the muffled cries of playful hatchlings lap at my ears, providing a pleasing backdrop to contemplate everything that's happened to me since I last felt the world's warmth.

It had to have been the day I left Varecia. I can still recall the sun against my fur as I pranced off the Blue Daemon and into the Eastern Weald, blissfully unaware of the dangers that awaited me. But while the weather that day may be similar, the girl in my memory couldn't be more different. Irritable and naive, she was burdened by the emotional baggage of being the Princess.

Oh, yes. I look back on my past self – my memories and my experiences – like they were transplanted from somebody else's head; an old friend that flew away and promised never to return. That *prey-animal*, that privileged little girl, was a materialistic brat. Sheltered and insufferable, it's no wonder those around her couldn't stand her existence. These days, It's difficult to imagine my life as a '*Princess*' on the gilded lap of luxury. What was it like to wake up every morning with my breakfast already prepared for me? To go about my day completely safe and to always have a warm bed to fall into at night? Day after day, season after season, all of my whims and needs perfectly catered to.

What a miserable, joyless existence.

I'm alive now. Freed from the shackles of blood and inevitability, I'm *flourishing!* Every day is just as exhilarating as the last, full of purpose and wonder, joy and love. To this end, I have lived as everyone else in the Snowfell Flock – unprivileged, toiling about to *earn* my fair share. I accept this role willingly. I embrace it.

Mom always said I wasn't cut out for the royal life, and she was right. Back then, everyone was always trying to box me into a role that was never meant for me. What was it that Commander Almandoz told me on the day I left? That little parable about inevitability?

*'You must sacrifice these parts of yourself for the good of the Kingdom. Your futures will be dedicated to public service, and nothing can steer you off that path.'*

Hah!

Poor Duncan. He never could have predicted any of this. But as it turns out, my path through life is not so rigid. What happened in the hollow was a tragedy, but it culminated in my rebirth as a huntress of the Snowfell Flock. It may not be the life destined for a Princess, but it's the life *meant* for one. I wouldn't change a thing.

...

*Mental Note:* Check the bulbs when we return to the den. It's so warm today, I'd be shocked if they aren't sprouting yet.

Enough idle rumination of the past. I'm yearning for the *future!* I'm going to fly to Flat Rock tomorrow and teach Frecci some of the skills I taught Nakino. Ever since we treated the illness, everyone's been interested to learn about my knowledge of Farlands botany and herbalism. I'm all too happy to share, and I'm looking forward to meeting the healers at Tall Spires and White Mountain.

And after that? Well, we'll see! Kuro talked about visiting some of her favorite spots in Loner territory, and I think that's a great idea. Supposedly, there's a big lake over there, and Kuro likes to go swimming in it! To think, a lake big enough for a Litan! The lakes in Ellyntide were so small, and—

...

I raise my head in alert. The winds carry muffled dragonsong; a cry unlike any I've heard before. It sounds anguished, almost like an alarm call. A heartbeat later, the aerie erupts in savage noise as seemingly every Dragon present adds to the call, wailing in the same intonation.

**RAA-RAAAAAAR!!**

**RO-RROOOARRR!!**

**RAGH-RRRRGHHH!!**

Confused and a tiny bit scared, I leap to my talons and add to the chorus. `

**SKA-REEEEEEEEAK!!**

As our collective wail subsides, I hear other Dragons echoing across the Great Valley. What's going on?! Nobody told me we had a cry like this before. What could cause fierce Kin to wail in such anguish? I peer over the cliff's ledge to see Kin darting about the levels below. Mothers are screaming at their hatchlings to return to their den, while others are staring at the sky with worry in their eyes. From the lower levels, I see a mottled brown drakon rising on the currents, grave concern scrawled across his face.

"Asha?!" he calls, frantically scanning the sky. Eventually, his gaze locks on me. "Oh! There you are!"

"Parth!" I yell to Fra's mate. "What's going on?!"

"Asha!!"

Drawn away by a familiar voice, I gaze cliffside to see Kuro leaping from the ledge below me, taking flight with a commanding flap of her wings. With a solemn glint in her eyes, she shouts, "Airship-prey!"

"What!?" I gasp.

"That call means an airship-prey has been spotted!" Parth explains, catching up to Kuro. "Please, you must tell it to leave!"

I retreat a step, struggling for a response. Airship-prey have returned already?! But greenwing just began! It couldn't be one of Mom's ships, could it? W-what should I do?! As Kuro and Parth glide into view, they look at me expectantly. Kuro knows the truth about airship-prey, but Parth still believes the lie I concocted about their sentience. Everyone in the flock does. No doubt, they'll be counting on me to scare away this ship, too.

I've dreaded the day the airship-prey return to Felra. There are so many ways it could end badly. What if they don't take my threats seriously? What if there's more than one ship? What's if it's one of Mom's ships, and they're determined to fight me until the bloody end? I tried to prepare a litany of excuses in case I failed, but...

I square my wings and feign confidence. "Right. I'll do my best!!"

No matter what, I have to try. My reputation precedes me; I can't escape it. I have to reap what I've sown and scare away another airship-prey!

**SKREEEAK!**

With storm clouds gathering on the horizon, I fight the gales off Archer's Landing to approach the hostile airship-prey. I've only just arrived at the scene after a harried flight from the Grandfather Tree, and things are looking in my favor.

The vessel is a Sarlanian merchant ship of the harrier class. We knew these ships well in Ellyntide — piloted by associates of the Knights Eternal, they were the only Sarlanian

vessels allowed to conduct trade with Ellyntide. While docked in our ports, we had free reign to inspect them for contraband. And boy, did we ever! Our intelligence assets were so versed in their construction that they could tell if a screw was fastened in the wrong spot. Consequently, I know with complete certainty that this ship has no offensive capabilities. If they wanted to attack me, they'd have to step onto a sky deck and fling rapiers overboard.

Still, I draw an unsteady breath. To once again see ascendant technology stirs powerful emotions inside my heart. For far too long, I yearned to return to the Farlands and revert to my previous form. The memory of Asha Lordanou has been buried, but I can never be completely free of her. She is an inseparable part of me that I must learn to contend with.

...

I pound my wings and approach the vessel from the starboard side. Clearly, they're waiting for the storm on the horizon to pass before flying to the island of Samsivik. If I appear aggressive, will they return to Mezonnia? When I feel I'm close enough, I pull my wings back and begin hovering in place. Scanning the vessel, I search for any signs of prey-animals on the sky decks. It only takes a moment to feel confident they're inside.

Just like last time, a crowd of Kin have gathered at Archer's Landing. They expect to hear my diplomatic voice, the one with the power to command airship-prey. I breathe in, draw from somewhere deep inside me, and release the voice of authority.

"Sarlanian vessel! You are trespassing in the sovereign territory of the Snowfell Flock! I order you, as an emissary to the elders of White Mountain and the former Princess of— "

The air shakes with an incredible force, nearly causing my wings to flutter. A wrenching, metallic noise reverberates across the sky as the primary propellers are rotated 90 degrees into the aft position. Acrid smoke pours from the rear smokestacks, and the ship begins banking to the left. They're getting the fwegh out of here!

I exhale, forcing slow breaths to calm my thundering heart. That was too easy! I could barely finish my threat before they got the message. Moreover, I'm surprised how easily I could slip into my authoritative voice, the one I used to command others with. They must have heard of what happened to the Beatrix and took the hint to leave!

...

So, it's true. The news of me and what I did spread to all corners of the moon. As well it should have — I've killed Princess Asha in more ways than one. Surely, I've become the most reviled Dragon in the history of the Farlands.

...

Boiler smoke drifts into my nostrils, causing me to scowl its the noxious stench. I twist my tail and bank left to return to Archer's Landing.

As I lower from the sky, the cries of Kin reach me on the wind.

"Asha!!"

“You did it!! It listened to you!!”

“Good Kevura, you’re alright!!”

I can’t help but smile. A crowd of twenty or so brave Kin flew beside me from the Grandfather Tree, fully expecting a repeat of my legendary feat. I’m glad I didn’t disappoint them! I glide past the ledge and come about to land next to a copse of wind-twisted rosewoods. A great cheer rises from the crowd, and I tip my wings to acknowledge them. Finally, I settle down for a graceful landing.

The crowd leaps forward and swarms around me, nuzzling their heads and singing praise. Somewhere among the feathers and fluff, I sense Kuro draw near. I turn my head to see her standing there, a proud smile across her muzzle. I smile back, and our heads are drawn together.

I’m pleased I could make everyone happy. How could I not? I’m a hero! But as Kuro and I embrace, something doesn’t sit well with me: A nagging thought that bothers the Princess just as much as the creature I’ve become.

## 108. Vestigial Self

Dear Mother,

This is your daughter, Asha.

I know we haven't spoken to each other in a long time, but I wanted to let you know that I'm safe and I'm happy.

*I've never been so happy in my life!*

This will no doubt come as a surprise, but I'm a Lithan now. Yes, *that* Lithan. It's a long story.

Though I can't actually send you this letter, I felt compelled to write it in my head. I wanted to gather my thoughts and think about all the amazing things that happened to me since we last spoke. With any luck, it won't be long before I'm recalling it all to you in person.

So, yeah. I'm the Lithan. Turns out it was the serpentine diamond that changed me. Pretty crazy, right? I tried to tell everyone, but as you can tell, I don't speak the Goddess Language anymore. In order to survive in my new form, I had to fly to the Northern Continent and locate other Lithans like myself. And once I did, the strangest thing happened:

I fell in love.

My mate is named Kuro, Daughter-Of-Mecali, and... oh, I wish I could explain why she's so great. The way she looks, the way she smells... obviously, a Ruffed Lemur would have no idea what I'm talking about. But just take my word for it, okay? I love Kuro with all my heart.

Allow me to describe an average day in the flock. Early this morning, I woke up, preened my feathers, and left my den to hunt. I stopped at an island to watch the sunrise – they're special to me, now – and then got to work tracking prey. Using my senses, I was quickly able to locate a pack of ferals called 'spikehorn' and pluck one from the ground with my talons. I carried it a short distance, crushed its head against the side of a boulder, and butchered the carcass. Then I preyed on another so I could present it to Kuro when I returned to our den.

...I hope that doesn't make you feel uncomfortable. I'm a predator now; this is what I do to survive. Still, I wish there was some way I could convey the thrill of the hunt. Tracking prey, smelling fear-scent, feeling a body go limp in your jaws... there's nothing quite like it. And to top it off, you get to have the best meal of your life! Prey tastes so good, you have no idea what you're missing!

Eventually, I arrived back at my den, which is where I am now. I live in the hollowed-out roots of an elderus tree, which is like like our Elder Tree in Varecia, but even bigger! You may think my accommodations are unbecoming of a former Princess, but I'm happy with them. Besides, I've been able to redecorate the place since moving in! While the snow was still melting, I flew around and collected bulbs from the ground. I planted them all across the clearing near my den, and they've begun to sprout! Clearing the regrowth under our tree is a process that lasts all season, but by warmwing, we'll have a beautifully groomed clearing with tons of flowers growing around it. I can't wait!

(By the way, could you tell Professor Willow I learned how the Elder Tree sprouts survive? It involves Lithans, and it's a little bit gross. He'll understand.)

Clamping prey in my jaws, I cross the clearing beneath my home tree. With the entrance to our den downwind of me, Kuro soon emerges to greet me. “Blue skies!” she calls out, a common greeting in the Flock. With my mouth occupied by prey, I growl a warm acknowledgment. I’m so happy to see Kuro awake! Everything feels right in the world.

I admit, I’m not sure how you’ll feel about all this... life as a Dragon stuff. I know you raised me to be a Monarch, but my mind is settled: this is how I want to live. This is who I want to be. I’m a Dragon now. In a certain way, I always was a Dragon. And even if you knew how to return me to my old form, I would refuse. Because this is not the life that was destined for me but rather the life that was *meant* for me.

I hope you understand.

I think about you every day, Mother. And I can’t wait to see you again.

Forever your daughter,

*Asha*

I toss the spikehorn to the side and lope the last few wingspans to embrace Kuro in front of the entrance to our den.

“You brought prey!” she happily exclaims. She lowers her head, and we nuzzle.

“Of course I did!” I smile. “I already ate, so this one’s yours.”

“Thank you, deary,” she growls affectionately.

I chuckle to myself. I taught her the word ‘*deary*’ only a few days ago. “You like using that word, don’t you?”

“Yes, because you are my deary, Asha.”

Oh, *groooooowl*. Kuro’s good at this whole ‘*being my mate*’ thing. I’m really the luckiest girl in the world, aren’t I?

Eager to gorge on the spikehorn, Kuro gives my cheek a quick lick and steps away. I wander through the undergrowth as she feeds, checking the growth of the bulbs I planted late last season and searching for a flat patch of moon to rest again. Once Kuro finishes, there’s something I need to talk about.

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Eventually, she rises from a pile of bones and licks her chops clean of blood. “Did you sleep well last night?”

“I did,” I nod. “But I wanted to see the sunrise this morning. And then I thought I should bring you some prey.”

Kuro smiles and tips her wings as thanks. “Well, I’m glad you got some sleep. You had a big day yesterday. Your first mark on the Grandfather Tree, and you chased away another airship-prey! ”

“Yeah...” I trail off and flick my gaze off her. “Kuro, can we talk about that?”

Her ears perk up. “Hm? Of course, Asha.” She crosses the clearing and asks, “What’s bothering you?”

“Well,” I pause as she sits down next to me and folds her wings. “Kuro, it was too easy.”

“Too easy?” she asks.

I nod. “Last time, I had to threaten the airship-prey with fire. But this time, it just flew away when I started talking.”

My mate tilts her head. “I don’t understand. Isn’t that a good thing?”

“Kuro, it means they knew about me from last time. Sarlain learned about the attack on my Mother’s airship-prey.”

Kuro’s expression softens, but understanding is absent in her merlot eyes. I shouldn’t be surprised that a Dragon doesn’t understand what a news cycle is. I continue, “The animals on my mother’s ship told everyone in Ellyntide about me, and then everyone else in the Farlands learned about it. I’m the Lithan that killed Princess Asha and attacked a ship... to them, I’m probably the worst Dragon that’s ever existed. Kuro, I... I don’t want to be that. I don’t want to be remembered as a monster to everyone I used to know.”

The sounds of the mid-day forest grow around us, and Kuro begins to understand. Her expression turns serious, and she wraps her tail tight around her foretalons. “You want to return to the Farlands and contact your family.”

“They need to know I’m safe,” I firmly declare. “They need to know that I’m not some witless monster, and... I’m happy in Felra, and I’m not coming back. That’s the least I can do for my Mother.”

Kuro’s feathers relax. She seems reassured by that response. “I understand. How do you plan to contact them?”

“The same way I planned to it in harvestwing,” I say, rising to my talons. “I don’t know if Mother is still trying to defend the disputed island from Nortane, but I’ll start there. Maybe there’s no more airship-prey because we repelled Nortane, or Nortane took the island. Either way, I’ll find a way to show them I’m on Ellnytide’s side. Then, I know a place where I can write a message in the Goddess Language. There’s this fort near Hollyhead that has a large, stone wall outside the...”

My voice dissipates. Kuro is staring into the sedge patch at her talons.

“Kuro?” I ask, taking a step towards her. “Is everything alright?”

She raises her head and forces a faint smile. “Asha, I’m... we only started living together as mates last season, and you’re already talking about dangerous things. You assured me you weren’t interested in returning to the Farlands so quickly, but...”

Oh.

So, that’s why she’s concerned. She’s bringing up this argument again.

“I know,” I confess, allowing my wings to droop to the ground. “But the airship-prey reminded me that for better or worse, the Princess and I are inseparable. I can move on from my life in the Farlands, but there will always be a part of me I left there.” I exhale a long sigh and pick up my wings. “I guess what I’m trying to say is that I need closure.”

Kuro raises her head. She seems to understand me completely now. Or perhaps she understands I won’t take ‘no’ for an answer. She growls thoughtfully and says, “Alright. But if you’re flying to the Farlands, then I’m coming with you.”

“What?!” I squawk. I rush to her side and babble, “Oh, Kuro, not like this! it’s too—“

“You promised to show me Ellyntide, right?” Kuro’s gaze pierces straight through me. She’s acting unabashedly earnest. “Your old den, the places you grew up? If you contact your family, then I want to meet them, too.”

Well, she’s right. I did promise to show her Ellyntide — on a darkmoon, when there was far less chance of us being spotted. The last thing I want to do is terrorize my family with our presence over Varecia. Still, Kuro has a point — if I can make contact with them, then I’d like everyone to meet her. They deserve to know why I can never return to my role as heir.

I turn away from Kuro and stare across the clearing. “I would like you to meet them. But it’s going to be dangerous. If I have to attack an airship-prey— “

“You said they can be hurt by fire, right?” Kuro rubs her wing reassuringly against my flank. “Asha, you don’t have a large supply of flames. I do.”

Again, Kuro has a point. We discovered during our training that I have a naturally low reserve of fire. Initially, I had planned to catch some fish and bring them with me to the disputed island in the vain hope I could refuel during a fight. But it would make much more sense to bring Kuro along with me. With the two of us attacking an airship-prey, we could bring one down in no time. We could be a real menace to the Nortanian fleet... if we wanted to.

“If you run out of fire and an airship-prey tries to attack you...” Kuro trails off and shakes her head. “I don’t want to think about that. Asha, you’ll be much safer if we fly together.”

She's right... I'll be safer with her on my wing. A part of me always longed for this, but I was uncertain if I could convince Kuro to attack an airship-prey. Even though she knows the truth of their origin, Kin have an instinctual fear of them.

My mind made up, I smile and nuzzle my head against Kuro's neck feathers. "Alright. We'll fly together."

She nuzzles back and growls affectionately, "I'll always be on your wing."

I lay against my mate and bask in her scent, allowing our tails to entwine behind us. With Kuro on my wing, we could survive almost anything — even a fleet of Nortanian airship-prey! Ah, this is going to be great! We're going to be Ellyntide's saviors, and then I'll be able to show her everything I used to know!

As we draw close to each other, Kuro unexpectedly pulls her head away and ruffles. "But before we leave, there's something you have to do first."

Confusion abounds until an old memory resurfaces. I roll my head back and mutter, "The third trial."

"You must slay a false-kin and come of age," Kuro nods. "I'm sure your Mother would be pleased to learn that you became a full member of the flock."

With all the drama that happened in the past two seasons, I had completely forgotten about the requirement to come of age. As the elders explained during my first gathering at White Mountain, Kin are expected to perform a series of trials, two of which I've already completed: Fly the crossing to the Farlands and take a mate. The third – and the hardest for me, personally – is to slay a false-kin unassisted.

The prospect of confronting one alone has left me terribly anxious. In both of my previous encounters with the scaled Dragons, I was very nearly killed. Kuro has been helping me train for my inevitable rematch, but I'm still worried. No matter how much training I receive, I'm still among the smallest dragons in the flock. Fra, another small drakaina, was able to come of age, so it must be possible. But Fra has been a Dragon her entire life, while I only became one two seasons ago.

But If I can do it, the benefits will be enormous. For one thing, I'll no longer be expected to share my prey with the aeries in frostwing. After an entire season of sparse prey-kills and frozen scraps of meat, I'm willing to do anything to keep my own prey. Maybe the older Kin in the flock will respect me more, too? Nobody can claim I'm not pulling my weight around if I come of age. I'll truly be equal to everyone else here. Kuro is one of the strongest Kin in the flock, and she's trained me well. I have to believe I'll be successful!

I exhale a long breath and rub my face against Kuro's feathers. "I think Mother would be proud of me. On the day I left, I found out that she didn't think I was ready to be Queen... I don't think she believed I could do anything right."

"Then we'll show her just how much you've grown," Kuro growls affectionately.

I gaze up at Kuro's face and can't help but smile. Of all the Dragons in Felra, I'm so lucky that she's my mate. "We should practice one final time. Let's review everything you taught me!"

Kuro nods, and her brow furrows in determination. She's always ready for another round! If I believe in myself, then Kuro's training will surely help me slay a false-kin. And once we've done that, I can take Kuro to Varecia and show Mother just how much I've grown since the day I left home. She may disagree with my decision to remain a Dragon, but she'll surely be proud of who I've become. That would be the best closure for my old life that I could possibly ask for.

## 109. False-Kin Showdown!

Like a leaf descending silently on the breeze, I lower from warm skies and into the cool respite of a damp forest clearing. Passing the tree line, I take inventory of my surroundings: strange cypresses surround me, stocky and unfamiliar. The ground below me has been groomed of the explosive regrowth that occurs in greenwing, something I find concerning. It is, of course, the duty of all Kin to groom the forest for the well-being of the flock. But this is not our territory. This is beyond the lands of Kin, deep in the domain of False-Kin. How could witless prey animals know the utility of grooming the forest? Could it be an instinctual habit present in all Dragons? Perhaps these things don't matter. I'm deep in enemy territory, hunting the most dangerous prey in Felra. One wrong move and it could be my last.

I land in the grass, my senses on high alert. The stench of False-Kin is strong — a young drakon landed here in the past talon mark, and the stale scents of others litter the clearing. Unbidden, a growl rises from my chest but is quickly subdued, leaving only the sound of my stampeding heart. Every alarm inside my head screams at me to return to the skies, but I have to persist. If I don't prey on a False-Kin, then I'll never become a full-fledged member of the flock. I have to push aside the sordid memory of my past two encounters with false-kin and press forward.

Mercifully, I'm with someone who knows how to fight today; I gaze skyward to see Kuro's familiar silhouette circling the thermals. To pass the final trial, I must do so alone. But should my efforts be unsuccessful, she's watching the battle like a gryhawk and ready to swoop down and defend me once more. Even if things go south, I'll be safe.

That's right; everything's going to be fine. We can do this, Asha! Today is the day I come of age!

My nose twitches, and I capture the scent of the drakon. I fold my wings flat and trod slowly through the clearing with my head held low. I need to be especially careful today; the winds are blustery and unpredictable. My scent will be scattered about the forest like seeds to the wind. When I reach the tree line, I discover a flattened path that leads into the underbrush. Could this be a trail to a False-Kin den? If nothing else, it seems the task of locating one of the pitiful beasts is already a success.

I stalk beneath the cypresses, groomed shorter than the trees in the flock's territory but still tall enough for me to pass. It occurs to me that my diminutive size has afforded me another advantage — a normal-sized Kin would have trouble stalking beneath these trees. Could that be one of the reasons Nakino had to cheat to come of age? Helping me further, the unfamiliar forest is alive with the sounds of greenwing, muffling my talons as I lurk through the underbrush. With each step, I feel my confidence rise.

Eventually, the scent of the drakon becomes overwhelming. I move past a thicket of green oshbush and find myself at the top of a small ridge, gazing into a broad depression where ferns have grown to cover the forest floor like a fuzzy green carpet. Fallen trees pepper the area, each one harboring a small, flattened patch of ferns near the trunk. A warm breeze blows through the trees, ruffling my feathers and bringing with it countless different False-Kin scents.

This appears to be some kind of communal spot for them to relax. Admittedly, it's quite cozy. Pity I'll be disturbing the peace with the macabre sounds of prey-kill.

Silently, I step down an escarpment and into the ferns. The trees open up slightly overhead – plenty of room for Kuro if she needs to make an emergency intervention. This is the place we'll fight. With my head elevated above the ferns, I follow the drakon's scent across the clearing. Turning past a fallen redwood, I expect to find the False-Kin lounging beside a fallen tree. Instead, all I find is a sunbeam shining against a flattened patch of ferns.

Confused, I lift my head slightly and taste the air. Then, I react like lightning.

The moon trembles as a Dragon impacts the ground at the place where I used to be crouching. Still reacting on instinct, I whip around to find a drakon roughly four wingspans away from me: clad in mottled green scales, his fangs bared in a baleful challenge. Large, membrane wings are splayed across the forest floor, blending in almost perfectly with the carpet of young ferns. It's the False-Kin!!

Immediately, I identify the error in my judgment – as soon as he sensed my approach, the False-Kin marked his bedding and furtively scaled a tree to hide in the canopy. The ruse worked, and had I been less aware of my surroundings, I could have easily become prey-kill. But Kuro trained me well – I now understand False-Kin to be Dragons of the trees, ones who use them to their advantage. They may be inferior, but False-Kin certainly aren't dumb.

But I'm far more clever than he is! I even used to be a Farlander! I flair my wings and issue a fierce challenge of my own.

**SKREEEEAAK!!!**

My cry echoes across the forest, and my thoughts begin to regress. I have learned to control the Gift of Regression, and I intend to retain only the faintest trace of rational thought. Responding to my challenge, the False-Kin pounds its wingspurs against the ground and rears its head to issue a cry of his own. But before it can, its head seizes. Without shifting my gaze for even a heartbeat, I watch the False-Kin's eyes drift sideways – It's noticed Kuro in the sky above us. Instantly, its face drops like a butchered spikehorn. Fear-scent, intoxicating in its aroma, emanates from the False-Kin like a Varecian rosebush in full bloom. It gazes at me, then back to Kuro. A warble of horror passes its fangs, and the False-Kin begins to panic.

My head tilts sideways. A False-Kin in distress? I suppose I'd be terrified as well if two huntresses from the Snowfell Flock were pursuing me. Eventually, the False-Kin settles down, and its gaze rests on me. It seems to have remembered I could attack at any moment. It opens its jaws, but what leaves its muzzle isn't a roar.

"G'lorr redoga...!" the False-Kin speaks. "En tlorr laksha kiln kinka oh estra!"

*What?!*

The False-Kin spoke?! But how could that...!

With my mind reeling, I find myself flat-taloned as the False-Kin takes off charging at me! He crashes into me sideways, quickly aiming to take a bite from my lower thigh. I yowl in pain from his razor-sharp talons but manage to quickly toss the lighter Dragon to the ground before he can clamp on and do serious damage. He may have caught me napping, but I'm still stronger!

Hesitating, the False-Kin's attention is drawn to purple blood streaming from a wound on my foreleg. Now it's my turn! I erupt forward and manage to rake claws across his flank, drawing forth tattered scales and warm blood. He shrieks, fighting the pain to flee for the safety of a nearby cypress. When he reaches the side of an oshbush, he quickly scans the skies for signs of Kuro. I attempt to exploit his anxiety, but the False-Kin is simply too quick. He leaps backward and opens his wings for take-off, but this time, It's me with the surprise! Anticipating his movements, I've already leaped into the air to cut him off halfway – a neat little trick that Kuro taught me! We crash into each other midair, the False-Kin at the bottom of a downbeat of his wings. As we tumble to the ground, I rake my claws against his back, causing him to roar in pain. Still, the False-Kin is quick – I whip my head forward to clamp onto his hindlegs and come up with nothing but air. Despite the wound to his back, the False-Kin has already retreated a safe distance. He lashes his tail in frustration and crouches low for another attack.

The fight continues for a time, back and forth with each of us scoring successful blows on the other. Just as Kuro predicted, the False-Kin has been attacking in a frantic, unpredictable way. Usually, he'll approach like lightning, only to back off at the very last second. Sometimes, he'll scale a trunk and bounce from tree to tree before dropping to the ground and finally lunging forward. He knows I can easily overwhelm him with my massive size, and to be clamped in my jaws would mean certain death. As we rise off the ground from another light tussle, light I find myself growing impatient. This is taking too long! Doesn't this scalebrain realize if my life is in danger, then Kuro will come to my rescue? Why won't he just roll over and die already?

Back in Varecia, Mom often taught me the importance of standing tall and acting decisively. If I want to come of age today, then I have to be as cunning as this False-Kin. I need to do something drastic!

Quickly, a plan forms in my head. Kuro told me before the fight this probably wouldn't work, but I'm going to try it anyway. So far, me and the False-Kin have been confined to the ground where he has the advantage. I want to bring it to the sky where *I* have the advantage. Flying is my strength, and if I can lure him into a mid-air battle, then my victory will be quick and decisive. It's a risk, but one I'm willing to take!

This book's true home is on another platform. Check it out there for the real experience.

Rising from the ground, I cause my left hind leg to buckle suddenly. Snarling in pain, I exaggerate a painful limp and act like I'm regretting my decision to challenge this drakon. The False-Kin momentarily hesitates but makes no adjustments as he pounds his wings into the side of a fallen Redwood to scale it for another attack. I quickly glance and my leg, then at the False-Kin. I snarl in fury, unfurl my wings, and leap into the air. As quickly as I can, I rise through a clearing in the canopy without taking a second glance at my opponent.

My plan hinges on the False-Kin believing I'm a weakened, easy prey-kill. Will he take the bait? As I emerge into the sky, I see Kuro circling in a thermal above me. She takes notice of me and cries out.

**ROOOARGH?**

I stare at her but say nothing. I don't want to announce that I'm not actually hurt. After watching me for a moment, Kuro takes the hint and flicks her tail in acknowledgment.

I soar over the forest, patiently waiting to see if the False-Kin reveals their scaled, green body. I enter into the same thermal as Kuro and circle around a few times, but still, the False-Kin is nowhere to be found. Ugh, where could he be? Is he really going to let an easy prey-kill escape?

Frustrated, I growl and tip my wings to return to the forest. I sail through the same clearing I departed from, careful not to clip the branches with my—

**WHUMP!!**

Something impacts me from the side, disrupting my flight and causing me to spiral out of control. I squeal in pain and feel the world spiral around me. Hot pain lances my side, and through the twisting, I catch glimpses of green and brown close to my body. It's the False-Kin! It ambushed me from the trees!

The moon shudders as we impact the ground at an angle, ejecting a cloud of dirt and detritus across the forest floor. As I reel in pain, the False-Kin wastes no time tearing into my flank like a wounded spikehorn. Argh, this is bad! I have to get him off me! Summoning every ounce of strength available, I toss the scaled Dragon to the side, adding a quick swipe of my claws with an available foretalon. As he stumbles from his own injuries, I rise on unsteady talons and snarl in frustration.

In retrospect, it's plain to see why he didn't chase me into the sky — Kuro is up there! Of *course* he stayed on the ground! Argh, I can't believe I allowed myself to be bested by such an inferior Dragon! I knew I needed to stay a feather's edge above a full regression, but it's clear that wasn't enough. I'm making dumb mistakes, and now it's cost me dearly!

If I want to hear my mourn echo across the forest, then I have to focus. The False-Kin is rising to his talons and seems to have a second wind of energy. He bounces on his wings and snarls back at me, ready for a second round of attacks. I drew a breath and flinch, feeling overwhelming pain from the side where the drakon attacked me. Can I really fight back against him in this state? What am I going to do?

I rear back on my talons and prepare for what comes next. But before I can react, a shadow draws over the forest.

The False-Kin's ears perk, sensing the change in light. His gaze draws skyward, and his fear-scent returns. They turn tail and attempt to flee to the safety of a denser section of forest, but it's far too late. Leaves explode like confetti as Kuro slices through the forest canopy and effortlessly swoops onto the False-Kin.

**ROOARR!!**

She latches her foretalons onto his back and carries him a short distance like she would any common prey-animal. With a flick of her tail, she drops to the ground and wrenches the scaled drakon's body against the side of the felled cypress. A sharp crack echoes across the forest, and the drakon whines a meager, half-hearted yelp. His eyes roll backward, and the life from his body extinguishes. Once her talons plant the ground, Kuro lunges for the False-Kin's neck to finish the prey-kill.

**"KURO!!"** I snarl, my mind still reacting on impulse. Why did she swoop down and kill him?! The fight wasn't over yet!! Now I can't come of age!!

Kuro whips her head around, fresh blood staining her muzzle. A hushed fury still resides in her eyes from the adrenaline of a successful prey-kill. She snarls back at me, baring fangs and flaring wings wide across the forest. For a tense moment, we stare at each other with hackles raised and muscles tensed, but the aggression quickly subsides. Even among mates, the baleful energy of a hunt is difficult to extinguish.

Kuro grunts and lowers her wings to de-escalate the situation. "I can't allow you to get hurt today. We're flying to the Farlands tomorrow; you need your strength for the flight."

Unbidden, a low growl reverberates through my chest. *But, I could have killed him!!* I growl again and shake my head about, trying to dislodge the energy of the hunt. Kuro is absolutely right, of course; There's no place to land in the strait between Felra and the Farlands. If I grew tired from my injuries during the flight, I would die.

I force myself to meet Kuro's gaze — I sense the empathy in her eyes and her delightful spiced scent drifting towards me on the wind. Slowly, drawing deep breaths, I subdue the regression and allow my rational mind to reassert itself.

"...Skunkscent," I rumble. My tail flicks through the ferns behind me. "I was so close. I made one bad decision..."

"You'll have plenty more opportunities," Kuro says, folding her wings. "By this time next season, you'll be able to tell your Mother you've come of age. I promise."

I can't help but smile at Kuro's optimism. With enough of her training, surely I could be just as fierce in battle as she is.

"Alright," I say, drawing down my wings. "Next time. That's when you'll hear my knell."

Kuro returns the smile and chitters lightly to herself, making my heart melt for her all over again. *She's so important to me.* If for nobody else, I'll do it for her — The next time I encounter one of these miserable scaled Dragons in battle, I *will* come of age. *I will make my mate proud of me.*

“Come on,” Kuro says, flicking her snout. “Let’s butcher him and get out of here.”

I tip my wings to acknowledge and join Kuro by the side of the False-Kin. As she licks her chops clean of blood, I gaze across the body of my opponent, cold and motionless. This drakon was awfully foolish. Why did he bother resisting? Didn't he understand his life was forfeit as soon as I challenged him? Thinking back to how our fight began, I can't recall with certainty any of the words he spoke to me. They were like a foreign language, though I could understand the intonation of his voice. He sounded defiant, almost like he...

My body freezes, and a profound realization crosses my mind, leaving me stunned.

“Kuro,” I interrupt.

Her head seizes a talon-width above the drakon's flank, a heartbeat away from tearing him to pieces. She shuts her jaws and asks, “What is it?”

I ruffle slightly, and my gaze falls onto the False-Kin's face. “Earlier, before we started fighting... he spoke to me. Not with feral noises, but words.”

I wasn't going to tell Kuro about what he said to me because I didn't think it was important. But I was wrong. This *is* terribly important.

Kuro's expression softens a little. She stares pensively at the False-Kin and says, "Sometimes they speak nonsense, but nobody can understand them. I just ignore them when that happens."

"Really?" I ask in surprise. They've spoken to Kin before?!

Kuro stares at me, unconvinced of my concern.

I tilt my head closer. "Can't you see? They're intelligent!"

An amused smile grows across Kuro's muzzle. She thinks I'm biting her tail!

"it isn't nonsense!!" I object, curling my talons into the ground. "Kuro, they're speaking a different language! They possess the Gift of Speech just like we do!"

"So?" Kuro asks, tilting back to rest on her haunches. "Who cares if they speak a different language? Prey is prey."

I wince slightly, struck by how quickly she brushed the idea aside. “Yeah, but...” my gaze is drawn to the anguished expression of the drakon. “It means False-Kin have spoken to Azurrel. Maybe... they even have their own deity.”

Possessing the Gift of Speech implies that False-Kin spoke to Azurrel in ancient times, perhaps at the same time Lithans received their Gift of Speech. And every species on Jade that received a Gift from Azurrel has their own deity to represent themselves before the God of Creation. Kin have Keuvra, and Lemurs have the Goddess, Etain. It follows that False-Kin would have a deity as well, right? If I’m correct, then this is a moon-shattering revelation: A sixth deity, completely unknown to anyone until right now!! Could such a thing truly be possible?

It would go against everything I’ve ever been taught about the deities, though my education has been wrong before. When I was a Kit, the church taught us there were four deities, one for each species. The existence of Keuvra was speculated by scholars, but never confirmed by The Four or those they communed with. Clearly, there was a fifth deity all along, and it was for Kin. So why has Keuvra’s existence been withheld for centuries? Could the deities be withholding similar truths about False-Kin?

Kuro’s face moderates, and her tail sways across the ferns behind her. “I hadn’t considered that before,” she rumbles thoughtfully. “But Keuvra teaches us False-Kin are inferior Dragons, ones meant for Kin to prey upon. I’m not going to second-guess the teachings of our leader.”

Her response moves me to an uncomfortable silence. Obviously, I don’t want to go against Keuvra, either. But what does all of this amount to? The False-Kin I fought was cunning and clever, not some witless prey-animal. He *spoke* to me just as any Lithan or Lemur would. The deities may have my interests in mind, but... I don’t know. This doesn’t sit well with me.

A warm breeze passes through the trees. Perhaps sensing my dissonance, Kuro rolls her wings and says, “I wouldn’t worry about it too much.” She rises to her talons and continues, “Even if they could speak, False-Kin will always be inferior. That’s just the way things are.”

I watch in silence as Kuro struts past me and uses her jaws to tear open the drakon’s flank. Perhaps she’s right... it’s not like we *can* understand the False-Kin language. If the deities don’t want us to communicate with them, then who am I to disagree? Keuvra is my leader, and he’s always had my interests in mind. I’m not going to go against him for something as inconsequential as one dead False-Kin.

Strange thoughts stew in my head as I join Kuro in gorging on our prey.

## 110. The Farlands

“There it is!”

I gasp when I see it: Emerging from the swirling mass of clouds are the first traces of land I’ve seen in at least three talon’s marks — A distant and dazzling strip of green against the endless sea of placid gray and shimmering blue. There were times in the past two seasons when it felt like I would never see this island again, but now it’s finally before me.

Archer’s Point.

I've returned to the Farlands.

It's been a few days since my encounter with the talking False-Kin. Kuro and I had planned to depart the morning after the fight, but we needed to wait for an overcast day to pass unseen through Farlander territory. Gliding through the zone of calm air, the flight over the strait has been as uneventful as I remember it. But unlike last time, I haven't been lonely. I gaze past my left wing to see Kuro flying beside me, a look of tired determination across her face. The sight of land has given her a second wind of energy to finish out our marathon flight.

**KREEEAK!!**

I call out to the island of Samsivik, conscious that this will be the last time I hear my call for quite some time. Unexpectedly, another voice joins me.

**ROOOARR!!**

Dragonsong fills the skies, heralding our return to the Farlands. Kuro's expression turns into a curt little smile, forcing me to return the gesture. More than anyone else, she understands how important this moment is to me. Kuro's listened to my tales of the Farlands since we first met. Finally, we get to experience the world I came from together.

As we glide over land, the winds abate. Through a patchwork of low-slung clouds, I spot an island – perhaps the same island I departed from – and tilt my wings to descend from the sky.

“This one,” I announce, flicking my ears toward the island in question.

Kuro growls in acknowledgment. Her discretion is intentional.

From this point forward, we’ll have to be very careful with how we travel. airship-prey could ambush us at any point along our journey, an event which would trumpet to everyone in the Farlands that the Princess killing Dragon had returned. Needless to say, if I ever want to see my family again, then we can’t let that happen. If we trace the route I took to leave Ellynytide and stay high above the islands, we should be able to skirt past the ledge city of Coleport and onto the disputed island near Nortane territory.

A warm breeze fills my nostrils, bringing scents I haven’t smelled in over two seasons. Is it any wonder Kuro could smell the Farlands on my feathers when we first met? I sail below the cloud deck with Kuro on my tail, and before long, we find ourselves lowering onto an area free of trees. A cloud of debris is ejected outwards beneath me, and my talons touch the ground. My return to the Farlands is official!

Taking a moment to catch my breath, I marvel at just how long it took to reach this point. Last harvestwing, I was convinced I’d be visiting ‘*The Northern Continent*’ for a few weeks at most! Interrupting my thoughts, another cloud of debris bounces against my feathers as Kuro performs a sloppy landing beside me. Her wings fall to the ground, and she nearly collapses from exhaustion.

“Oh!!” I chirp in surprise. I rush to her side and prop her body against my flank.

“Let’s rest here,” Kuro pants, settling quickly against the ground.

“Good idea,” I say. “Are you thirsty? I smell some water nearby.”

She nods quickly, then rests her head on the ground in front of her.

“Okay,” I smile. “I won’t be gone long.”

A breeze blows from the strait, ruffling my feathers and stirring the wind-swept trees in the center of the island. Observing the scene before me, a realization dawns in my head — this was the island I departed from last harvestwing! Instantly, the memories of that incredible day flow back to me. I rested here for a time, gathering my strength to make the long flight to Felra. I was so excited; I thought I was some kind of brave explorer on the fringes of science. With hindsight, I suppose I was. I wonder what that girl would say if she could imagine herself as a member of the Snowfell Flock with a mate on her wing?

...

I push the thought aside and take inventory of the island. Immediately, the differences from Felra are profound. The tangled, wind-sculpted cedar trees are drastically smaller than the rosewoods that pepper Archer’s Landing on the other side of the strait. Even if Kin tried to groom these tiny trees, we could never hope to fit beneath them. Beyond the trees, I smell spring flowers and other plants I haven’t smelled in over two seasons. Much like last year, the island is free of the scents of Kin — me and Kuro are likely the first to make the crossing this greenwing.

I search the island for a time, muscling my way through the low-slung trees. Eventually, I come across a shallow depression where rainwater ponds. After taking a drink of my own, I slurp up as much of the murky water as my muzzle will carry. Returning to Kuro, I spread out the grass before her and dig a shallow hole with my talons. I exhale the rainwater, and Kuro sips as much as she can before the water is absorbed into the ground.

“There’s still more in the grove,” I say, settling down beside her. “Let’s take a drink before we leave.”

Slowly, she nods in acknowledgment. I think the water helped.

As Kuro rests, I work to idly preen myself. I molted earlier in the season, and I’m *still* pulling muzzlefulls of feathers from my body. It’s ridiculous! Every time I so much as ruffle, a veritable explosion of feathers flies from me in all directions. Honestly, how do Avians deal with this?! What is Mom going to think if I litter the palace grounds with a dusting of my own down feathers?

“So,” Kuro speaks, raising her head from the ground. “What’s it like returning to the Farlands?”

I pull my head away from my left wing and spit out a wad of feathers. “Oh, well... It’s exactly as I remember it and completely different. I can no longer look at the world the way I used to.”

Kuro blinks slowly.

Hm, yeah, perhaps I *should* be more concise. “What I mean is, when I look at these trees,” I draw my wing forward and gesture to the grove. “I used to think of them as just... trees. *Thuja Corintis*. But now I see them as a potential source of water. A hiding spot for prey. A place to shelter in case of a sudden snowstorm.”

Kuro smiles, and understanding grows across her face. “You never had to worry about those things as a Farlander.”

I shake my head. “I was the Princess. Everything was always perfectly catered to me, day in and day out, without any deviation...” I trail off and stare across the strait to Felra. Grey clouds obscure the horizon. “Until I became a Lithan, I had never left the safety of my den for more than a few days. I always knew everything that was happening in the Kingdom... I’m anxious about the disputed island. And what I’m going to tell my parents.”

Kuro growls thoughtfully. She inches closer and offers her head. I oblige and nuzzle against her chest feathers. “Everything’s going to be fine,” she whispers.

I growl dreamily and allow our tails to entwine. When I’m beside Kuro, it feels like everything will work out.

After allowing ourselves to rest, we take another drink of water and resume flying south, deep into the heart of Sarlain.

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With a break in the overcast skies, we decided to wait for nightfall at the crescent island.

This time, I was able to prey on my own moose and share it with Kuro. It wasn't much, but I didn't want to spend too long hunting. Goddess knows those featherbrained loggers are still somewhere on that island. We rested until the sun went down, then departed for the eastern horizon.

We flew for hours, occasionally stopping to rest at small islands along the way. At some point, we flew over Queen Heather Island – the first recognizable piece of Ellyntide I've seen in over two seasons. It's mostly uninhabited, though a few Animals call it home. Since Kuro becomes practically invisible at night, she flew down and snatched our prey from a homestead. Kuro gorged on a plump, round cow while I got a delectable-looking horse. I have to admit, I enjoyed hearing its long neck shatter to pieces beneath my jaws.

After dining at a small island, we flew east over clear air, north of the ledge city of Coleport and away from the flight paths of airship-prey. So far, we've caught plenty of stale scents whipped around on the breeze but no visual sightings of the artificial beasts. It's a little unusual not to see any airships floating around the ledge of the north continent, but not unprecedented. One of the scents seemed to be flying in the direction of the disputed island! Could that be why there's no airship-prey near Coleport?

It doesn't take long to discover the answer. Framed by the pale glow of a rising Maki, I begin to see the distinct shape of a floating island nestled between a patchwork cloud deck.

“There!” I say, flicking my ears forward.

Flying to my left, Kuro’s head perks up. She scans the sky ahead of us and asks, “Is that it?”

“That’s it!” I announce. “I remember the shape of the island from our intelligence reports!”

It’s a modestly sized island, smaller than the crescent island but bigger than the small islands that litter the skies of Jade. The furrows come to a point directly in the center, while the right-hand side is heavily forested. There can be no mistaking it: this is the unnamed island that Mom was adamant about claiming for Ellyntide.

My heart pounds fast against my chest —I’ve been awaiting this moment for over two seasons! I scan the entirety of the sky, looking for any sign of airship-prey. Clouds obscure part of my vision, but there doesn’t appear to be any ships in the area. What’s more, the air is clear of their nauseating scents.

With this information, I draw an uncomfortable conclusion: Someone has already claimed the island. If a battle was fought here, then I’ve missed it.

I growl, frustrated that I was too late. This could ruin my plans to take sides with Ellyntide! But even if the island is already claimed, shouldn’t there be airship-prey around here to defend it? No matter who won control of the island, I would expect airship-prey to be patrolling the area for months afterward. This strikes me as a little *too* odd.

Against my better judgment, I decide to call out to the island.

**SKREAAAK!!!**

“Asha?!” Kuro squawks in surprise. “Asha, what are you—“

“Shh!”

My call echoes across the pale night sky, but nothing returns on the wind — no propellers spinning up, no orders being barked over a sky deck intercom. I search the clouds for the distinct glow of oil lamps and the shadows they cast, yet find nothing.

“Okay,” I say calmly. “We’re truly alone out here.”

Kuro’s tail lashes through the air. She chides, “What did you do that for!?”

“I had to know if airship-prey were hiding in the clouds,” I explain. With a gentle flap of my wings, we glide into a new thermal. “Kuro, I didn’t expect to find an unguarded island. This place should be crawling with airship-prey. The fact that we’re alone means we missed the battle.”

Kuro looks momentarily surprised, then growls thoughtfully to herself. “Is that a good sign or a bad sign?”

A long sigh passes through my fangs. “I don’t know. Let’s land and see if we can find any evidence of what happened.”

I’m familiar with maritime law; after the fighting concluded, the victor would have planted their flag on the island... If it wasn’t already there, of course. Anyone can stake a claim to an island at any time, but to do so typically signals your intention to defend it by force. But even if the battle is long over, where did the airship-prey go? Why are we alone?

Unfortunately, even with Maki’s glow guiding us, we’re unlikely to find the flag in the dark. We circle the island and land in a broad clearing somewhere in the center of the island. After making our way to a grove of redwoods, we settle down for the night. Despite the exhaustion from flying, it takes some time before I’m able to silence my runaway thoughts and drift to sleep.

We awoke the following morning to a light drizzle and no sign of airship-prey.

With our stomachs grumbling, Kuro and I took to the sky for breakfast. Islands of this size typically have meager prey, and this one is no exception. I was able to spot a doe from the air, only to watch it dart to the safety of a cedar grove. Kuro was able to find some deceased prey-birds which filled our bellies somewhat, though not as much as we would have hoped. Still, after surviving last frostwing, I know scraps of prey can sustain me for a time.

With prey (sort of) accounted for, we began searching the island first by air, then by talon. While exploring an area free of trees, I was able to sense the long stale scents of an airship-prey that landed in early frostwing. Somebody visited this island, though it seems it wasn't to plant a flag. After searching for most of the morning, we came empty-taloned, not so much as finding a single fresh scent from the Farlands. By the early afternoon, we found ourselves at the edge of a maple forest, pondering our next move.

"I'm anxious too," Kuro says, lounging in the grass beside me. "When we fly over Ellyntyde, I'll be the first Kin to visit the summer hunting grounds in a generation. I can't believe I get to be the first to see them!"

I smile, trying to hide the terror in my thoughts. I *still* have no idea how I'm going to tell Mom we need to allow Dragons to hunt in Ellyntyde. Forcing myself to play along, I chirp, "It'll be like the prey you caught last night. Easy to kill and delicious!"

Kuro recalls the cow and rumbles in satisfaction. She licks her chops and growls, "I'm looking forward to it."

We lay in silence for a time, lazily watching the clouds roll past our view. The morning drizzle has given way to patchwork clouds, offering glimpses of blue sky and a setting Maki.

"Honestly..." I trail off, ruffling my crest. "It's almost like a battle didn't even happen. Mom fought for this island, that much I'm certain. So why is there no trace of Farlanders? Didn't they land to claim this island?"

“What about Avians?” Kuro asks. “Aren’t they skilled enough to leave an airship-prey and land?”

Oh, that’s right. I forgot their Knights do that all the time. Still... “That depends. It would have really been difficult to—“

Suddenly, my ears perk in attention.

“Do you hear that?” I ask.

Kuro’s eyes go wide. She raises her head and twists her ears in the direction of a faint, droning noise. “Asha, that’s—“

*“Airship-prey!!”*

I leap to my talons and dash a few wingspans to get an unobstructed view of the sky. Gazing to my right — towards the border with Nortane — I locate a small speck of black emerging from the clouds.

“It’s a Nortanian vessel!!” I announce.

Kuro throws her wings open with such vehemence it ruffles my feathers. “Alright! What should we do?!”

After a quiet moment of contemplation, a plan devises in my head. I flick my ears behind me and say, “Get to the tree line. We’re going to watch what it does.”

“Right!” Kuro exclaims.

We scamper to the forest and wedge ourselves in between two large maples. Settling against the underbrush, I feel my heart slamming against my chest. Not only is it a warship, but it’s Nortanian. Has it come to do a patrol around the island? What if this is just the lead vessel? What about Ellyntide? Did Mom decide to pull our ships back? Or will they soon appear to greet this one?

“Kuro,” I speak in a hushed voice. “I don’t know what’s going to happen. Prepare yourself for a fight.”

She flashes shock but quickly furrows her brow and blows smoke in acknowledgment.

If Mom’s ships appear, then we’ll help them attack Nortane. This is where we make our stand; Weatherlight will regret ever trifling with Mom. The airwomen on their ships will come to fear this island’s angry, territorial Lithans. For Mom, Sofl, and everyone else back home, we’re doing this for them!

Slowly, the ship gains altitude as it approaches the island. It seems to be on a course to do a patrol around it. Have they already claimed the island for Nortane?

I stick my head out and whisper, “Here it comes!”

Watching silently and with bated breath, the airship-prey glides into view directly in front of us. Recalling our intelligence on Nortane, the vessel appears to be a light attack cruiser. Flashes of light reflect from its midnight blue hull, the steel polished to a dazzling sheen in the midday sun. Could this be a new airship-prey? Two skydecks wrap around the ship's exterior, situated directly above three steam cannons on the port side – they're a threat to be sure, but not as imposing as the Beatrix's main canons. The drone of the propellers slides past us, and the ship continues on its way. But instead of banking left to loop around the island, the ship tilts starboard to....

“What the...”

Kuro shuffles uncomfortably. “Asha?”

I strain my head, gazing to watch the Nortanian vessel sail past the island entirely. “It's... it's flying past us.”

Kuro's gaze switches between me and the ship. “What does that mean?”

“Kuro,” I mutter almost breathlessly. “That ship just flew into Ellyntide territory unopposed.”

A cold breeze blows from the direction of Nortane, ruffling my feathers and turning my spine to ice. A wrenching feeling festers in my stomach as the gravity of the situation becomes clear.

Something is truly, profoundly wrong.

“Asha?” Kuro asks with pronounced concern. She inches closer to me and asks, “What’s going on?”

Horror propels me as I leap from the trees and throw open my wings.

“Asha?! Asha, WAIT!”

As I run, Kuro’s voice dissipates on the wind — not that I was paying any attention to it. The only thing on my mind is Mom, Dad, and Sofl. I have to know if my family is safe. I have to know if Nortane attacked Ellyntide. Could the battle still be ongoing!? Oh, Goddess, please let them be safe!!!

I leap from the island's ledge and fall into a thermal, pounding my wings to gain altitude and fly in pursuit of the Nortanian warship.