

THE PRINCESS'S FEATHERS

111. Home

From a measured distance, we pursued the Nortanian vessel deep into Ellyntide territory. So deep, that after a claw's mark of flying, we began to smell the distinct scents of the southern continent blowing downwind. Forests and grassland, farmsteads and agriculture, steam carriages and airship-prey.

The vessel was on a course straight to Varecia.

I've been struggling to comprehend the ramifications of this. Obviously, Mom lost control of the disputed island, and the Nortanian fleet advanced towards Varecia. War at Ellyntide's doorstep... the thought sends a shiver across my spine just thinking about it. Tensions with Nortane were already simmering on the day of my transformation in harvestwing. How much further did they escalate when it came to light that Crow Wing was operating in the Eastern Weald? How long ago did it boil over into conflict?

At best, a battle for the city is still ongoing. At worst...

...

I'm not going to think about that. Not yet. I know the contingencies in case of war — I need to assess the situation with my own two eyes and not fall victim to panic. Mom is a clever Monarch, and the Air Squadron was strengthened after the Fourth War. I have to believe in them.

With the sun still a considerable distance from the horizon, we decide to land at an island and rest until nightfall. That old voice, the one that compelled me to protect my family at all costs, is screaming at me to rush forward as fast as my wings will carry me. But no matter what's happening in Varecia, the appearance of two Lithans can only make the situation worse. This is not some island in the middle of nowhere — the whole of Varecia will be beneath our wings. What if we're forced to attack an airship-prey floating above the city? I don't want the lives of innocent Varecians on my conscience.

Kuro and I come to land on a lightly forested island, one that should shelter us from passing airship-prey and little else. After clearing a path beneath some wind-twisted cedars, I find myself lying beside Kuro, her wing draped across my body. Like a quailing child, I explained the stakes to her as we pursued the Nortanian vessel. She understands that not only is my family in danger, but the lives of everyone in Varecia.

Eventually, the sun lowers beyond the horizon, painting the sky a fiery shade of orange and red. It won't be long before nightfall.

"I think it's time," I announce, lifting my head from my partner's neck.

Kuro gazes down at me, concern on her feathers. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah," I say. "By the time we reach the ledge, it should be dark. We need to assess what's happened before Maki rises."

Kuro looks away and growls softly in acknowledgment.

A silent moment passes, neither of us rising to our talons. “Are you nervous, too?” I ask.

“Mmh,” Kuro nods. “I’ve never flown above a Farlander city before. Everyone knows you can’t do that. There’s too many airship-prey.”

Once I compared them to aeries, the notion of a ‘city’ became crystal clear to Kuro. Still, I can’t blame her for being anxious about flying over Varecia. I, too, find myself intimidated, though for markedly different reasons. The capital of Ellyntide is a far larger city than Rhl, the one I was spotted over in harvestwing. Searchlights are scattered like confetti in a windstorm, and airship-prey can be immediately dispatched to defend the city.

“Everything’s going to be alright,” I say, assuming the unusual position of comforting Kuro. “Varecia will be like nothing you’ve ever seen before. The lights from the Farlander dens will be shining below us, each one like a prophet shimmering in the night sky above. It’s beautiful in its own unique way.”

She stares at me a moment, and her talons uncurl.

“Listen,” I continue, scooting myself closer. “I know Varecia like the feathers of my wing. The islands, the locations of searchlights... Kuro, if we stay together, I promise we’ll be safe.”

Kuro studies me for a moment and smiles. “Okay,” she says, lifting to her talons. “Lead the way. I’ll be right beside you.”

I smile back, feeling my confidence rise. Yes, that’s right. As long as Kuro is with me, then everything will be alright. No matter what I find in Varecia, I still have her.

We depart the safety of the trees and step onto the island. No airship-prey have passed since we landed here, and in gazing around us, I sense nothing to indicate we’ll see any soon. We should be beside ourselves as we fly... home.

A breeze blows scents from Ellyntide, reminding me of the life I chose to abandon. I wince and gaze at Kuro, wings drawn and back turned as she watches the last traces of daylight slip below the horizon. She is the life that’s still before me. No matter what happens in Varecia, I would be wise to remember that.

Once we approach the continent, we’ll have to keep our muzzles clamped shut. Feeling the urge, I unfurl my wings and raise my voice.

SKREEEAK!!!

As my call echoes across a darkened sky, another one joins me.

ROOOARR!!!

I look over to see Kuro smiling at me. “One last time?” she asks.

I incline my head. “One last time.”

Surely, this won’t be the last time dragonsong is heard over the skies of Ellyntide.

We take to the air, following the scents I’ve known my entire life. Oh, my Goddess, this is it. I’m flying home. I’m returning to Varecia as a Lithan. This is really happening right before my eyes!

We flew for a time, guided only by the light of the prophets. At some point, we rediscovered the scent of the Nortanian airship-prey and decided to follow it. Approaching Varecia from the ledge should give us a better view of the city and the places where airship-prey lurk.

And then, after flying for a little while longer...

“Oh, my Goddess,” I whisper.

Appearing from beyond a cloud, I begin to see the first signs of civilization: individual points of light lined in a row that stretches out across the entire horizon. It’s the city

limits of Varecia and the surrounding communities following the natural contour of the continent's ledge. We're approaching Ellyntide!

"There it is!" I call out to Kuro. "I smell lots of airship-prey! Let's fly higher!"

Staring at the impressive scene before us, it takes a moment for her to respond, "R-Right!"

Enjoying this book? Seek out the original to ensure the author gets credit.

We flap to gain altitude and fly into a thermal of warm winds blowing straight from the continent. The odor of airship-prey is noxious and overwhelming, just as I expected. But mixed between it are the scents of a bustling capital city: the stones of buildings still cooling after the mid-day sun, the smoke from locomotives on their commuter rounds throughout the city... and of course, Farlanders; women, men and children, Lemurs and Martens, Rabbits and Avians. If there were an ongoing war, I wouldn't expect to find the scents of civilians going about their night. There should be steam, burning wood ash, and rampant fear-scent.

What could this mean?

So far, we haven't spotted a single airship-prey since we left the small island — Nortanian or otherwise. I almost expected to find their fleet off the ledge of the continent. What happened to the warship we saw earlier? The scent leads here, so where did go? Most importantly, where's Ellyntide's ships to intercept it?

“Something unusual is going on,” I tell Kuro as we even out our flight. Far below us, the lights of Varecia are quickly approaching.

“You sound concerned,” she observes. “What is it?”

I release a sigh and shake my head. “I... I don’t know. The scent of the Nortanian warship is here, but there’s no sign of their fleet. Let’s keep flying and see if there’s any damage to the city.”

As much as it pains me to admit it, I’m beginning to get nervous. If the Nortanian fleet isn’t here, then they could have captured Varecia and moved further inland. If I see damage to the buildings downtown, then I’ll know for sure they... bombed Varecia. Oh, what a terrible thought that is!

We trudge forward, the clouds growing thicker as we approach the ledge. From this height, we should be far above the airship-prey that meander about the city and invisible to the eyes of curious Farlanders. Slowly, by the light shining through the breaks in the clouds, I begin to recognize the distinct shapes of central Varecia — the road network, the metropolitan rail lines, and the absence of light created by the Elder Tree. The ledge defenses, built to protect Varecia in case of an invasion by Nortane, appear to be intact. As does the river drainage system. In a hypothetical battle for the city, I’d expect them to be among the first targets. That’s a good sign.

The lights from the sprawling, ledge shipyard come into focus, revealing merchant vessels docked at the grassy aerodrome for the night. If a war were ongoing, they would be mad to park airship-prey so close to the ledge. What’s more, there are no gaps in the lighting anywhere surrounding the shipyard. That means it hasn’t been bombed.

“Oh...” Kuro’s voice dissipates, stolen by profound wonder at the scene before us. “Oh, wow. Oh, good Keuvra.”

Despite the uneasy mood, I feel my heart warmed by Kuro’s reaction. She’s been fascinated by the Farlands her entire life, and now she’s discovering one of its largest cities for the very first time! When was the last time a Kin witnessed this scene not in their memories but with their own two eyes? Oh, how exciting it must be to see Varecia for the first time at night!

After a cloud obscures our view, I rumble to her, “Told you Varecia was big.”

“A-Asha... “ She ruffles, searching for adequate words. “I can’t believe you lived here. Is Varecia really full of Farlanders? How can there be so many?!”

I chuckle, “This is just *one* city, Kuro.”

She goes bug-eyed, moved to a stunned silence. With a playful flick of my muzzle, we continue forward.

Slowly, the ledge of the continent drifts into view directly below us. After more than two seasons away, I’ve returned home to Varecia! Gazing across the horizon, the sight of it all stirs turbulent emotions inside my heart. The city is just as I remember it, though the creature I’ve become couldn’t be any more different. Not only am I physically unrecognizable, but mentally. I’m completely changed! I’ve grown so much! I’m...

...

...Getting carried away with my sentimentality!

I ruffle my crest and refocus; this is a dangerous situation. Gazing ahead, I try to assess the state of the city. Varecia looks peaceful... quiet, almost. Not at all like a city in the throes of an ongoing war. If the Crown had moved across the continent to Rhl — as was planned in the event Varecia fell — then there's no evidence of an eastern front. I'd expect long lines of supply ships landing and departing the Municipal Aerodrome, but there's nothing like that — just the usual merchant ships and air transfer vessels on their rounds through the city. What's more, the buildings in the city's core are all in one piece. Gazing around me, I can't find any signs of bomb damage. Was Varecia even attacked by Nortane? What's going on?

My gaze is drawn to Fort Fletcher, directly below us. This fort exists primarily to defend Varecia in the event of a Nortanian invasion, so I'd expect it to be one of the very first targets to be bombed. But, much like the city surrounding it, it's completely intact. None of the buildings have sustained any damage. There are no craters on the aerodrome. There is...

My eye catches something unusual: Far more airship-prey are moored for the night than would be expected at Fort Fletcher. Furthermore, the way they've been arranged is downright strange. I visited this fort a number of times as a Princess, and the airships were always parked perpendicular to the hangars where they're serviced. But tonight? They're parked horizontally. It's a small but significant difference; procedures like this aren't just changed on a whim by the Air Squadron. Come to think of it, where did all these warships come from, anyway? From above, it's impossible to identify their class and which parts of the Kingdom they may have been flown from. I want to fly lower and identify them, but that would be too dangerous.

Leveling my gaze, I discover Kuro staring at me with a longing expression.

I frown and shake my head. “I haven’t figured out a plan yet. I expected to find our dens attacked by airship-prey, but they weren’t. I’m not really sure what happened here.” I tuck in my forelegs and say, “Let’s keep flying.”

Kuro acknowledges with an understanding growl, and we continue deeper into the city. Gliding into a new thermal, I find my mood changing from anxiety to dread. Nothing here makes sense. Varecia is fine; it’s like a war never occurred. So how does that explain the Nortanian warship sailing into Ellyntide unopposed? Where did it go? Why wasn’t our fleet there to intercept it? If a war is ongoing elsewhere on the continent, why is it so peaceful in Varecia? My mind wanders, conjuring a litany of sordid explanations. Then, something catches my eye, and I gasp aloud.

“K-Kuro!” I stammer, flicking my ears ahead of us. “Over there!!”

“Hm?” She asks, raising her gaze from the ground. “Is that...?”

It is the Elder Tree, looming in the skyline before us, illuminated pale gold by the city’s lights. Oh, gosh, I’ve never been so happy to see a tree in my life! And it’s there below the tree that I find the Lordanou Palace – my home of twenty-three years – completely intact, just as it’s always been.

“Oh...!” I choke up, fighting tears and overwhelming emotions. “Kuro, do you see it? That’s the Elder Tree! And below that is my den! That’s where I grew up!! Oh, thank the Goddess it’s still there!!”

Kuro looks back at me, and her muzzle curls into a gentle smile. “You were right,” She rumbles. “That’s the biggest Farlander den I’ve ever seen. No wonder your family has so much power.”

...

Kuro’s saying something to me, but I’m not paying attention. My wings have stopped flapping, and I’m beginning to sink through the thermal. Something else has caught my attention; something that should not be, but is apparent at even this great height. It causes my thoughts to sputter and my blood to freeze.

This...

...

...No, this can’t be true.

This can’t be—!

“Asha?” Kuro’s voice infiltrates my panicked thoughts.

I flash a glance at her, just long enough to convey the terror in my heart. Like a lightning bolt, I tent my wings and fall into a dive towards the ground. Kuro yells something at me, but the wind rushing past my ears is far too loud. I have to get down there and confirm it with my own eyes. I don’t care if it’s dangerous!

After a tense moment of diving, I burst through the bottom of the cloud deck, casting misty wisps in all directions. I throw up my wings and slow to halt my descent, the breadth of Varecia revealed before me like a picture book. If any Farlanders happen to be gazing skyward, they’ll surely notice a Dragon hovering above the Lordanou Palace. That’s fine. My reason for being here is far more important than my safety.

A heartbeat passes, and Kuro punctures the cloud deck a few wingspans to my left. She raises her wings and slows to a hover, confusion and distress scrawled across her face. “Asha!!” She whispers with furious concern. “What’s going on?!”

Try as I might, I can’t form a response. I peel my gaze away from Kuro and allow it to fall upon the southern wing of the Lordanou Palace. Time slows as the events of the past two seasons become perfectly, horribly clear.

Perched upon the chapel’s flagpole is the flag of the Confederacy of Nortane.

Mom fought a war against Nortane, and Ellyntide...

...Lost.

It must have been quick; that's the only explanation for why Varecia isn't damaged and why there's no evidence of an ongoing war. The fleet met them off-ledge or at the disputed island, and while they were fighting, a coup was attempted at the palace. It succeeded.

Ellyntide has fallen.

And my family... my family is...?!

112. Heart and Soul

996 years.

It is said that the Kingdom of Ellyntide predates the Great Freeze and the raising of the continents by hundreds of years. Through all that time, it has resiliently weathered droughts, famines, storms, and wars — four major conflicts with Sarlain and one with Nortane that nearly destroyed the Kingdom forever. But, now... bereft of her Princess for a mere two seasons, and that's it? The proud, ancient Kingdom of Ellyntide has fallen under the occupation of Nortane once more because one Animal disappeared from the equation? Am I losing my mind?! Has everyone and everything I've ever known been erased forever?

“Asha? Asha, what’s going on?!”

With horror in my eyes, I watch as the flag of Nortane wafts gently in the night breeze. How could such a catastrophe occur in such a short time span? My Kingdom was strong in the wake of the Fourth War! Our fleet was modernized, and our Knights trained for any possibility. And even against a superior enemy like Nortane, this is the result? Total annihilation of the Lordanou Crown and the Kingdom itself?! I gaze into the flag of the enemy and grit my fangs, a thousand negative emotions rapid-firing through my head. *I can’t accept this.* There has to be a rational explanation. This isn’t the inevitably. Ellyntide is not some frail, weakened Kingdom!! Oh, Mother, what on Jade happened here?!

“Kuro!!” I bark. “Follow me!!”

“R-right!” she stammers.

With a commanding flap of my wings we return to the clouds, the visions of my family swirling through my head like the mists surrounding me. If there was a coup in the palace, then their lives may have been forfeit. I have to know if they’re still alive! *I can’t be the Queen yet!*

I return to the thermal we were in before and feel the wind against my face. In between the noxious fumes of airships are the scents of wheat, barley, and soybean – distinct smells redolent of the agricultural centers east of the city. With panic hurtling me forward, I take off upwind and begin racing through the clouds.

Moments later, Kuro flies up beside me.

“Asha!!” She pants. “Where are we going?”

I grimace, feeling sudden guilt for leaving Kuro behind. “Sorry,” I mumble, looking away. “We’re flying to Legacy Island. It’s the final resting place for members of my family.”

“Resting place?” Kuro cocks her head. “Asha, are you—“

“Yes,” I say. “Kuro, I think my family may have been murdered.”

The simple act of admitting it aloud fills me with intense dread, turning my stomach to knots. Kuro notices my distress, and her eyes bulge. “Asha, what’s going on!? How can you tell what—“

THOOM!

Without warning, the sky between us is split by a dazzling light beam, putting a swift end to our conversation. Momentarily blinded, I furrow my eyes and cry out in surprise.

KREEEE!

I bank hard to my left and flap wildly to correct my flight. When I reopen my eyes, I find the beam of light traveling swiftly through the clouds ahead of us.

“Asha!!” Kuro cries out. I gaze left to see my mate, fluffed and startled. “What was THAT?!”

“They’re looking for us!” I yell back. “Kuro, follow my—“

THOOM!

Another pillar of light illuminates the clouds, this time directly beneath Kuro!!

ROARRR!

She snarls, unable to avert her gaze from the blinding light. With the beam remaining stationary, she banks hard to her left and disappears into the inky expanse of clouds.

Horrified, I flare my wings and cry out, “Kuro?!”

There's no response.

“Kuro, please!! Answer me!!”

As I stare into the void, the searchlight begins to wander forward, growing softer in intensity until it dissolves completely through the mists. The only noise is the dull hum of the city below.

...

RAWRRR!!

A roar splits the silence as Kuro spirals down from the clouds above. She throws open her wings and comes to a halt just above me.

“Kuro!!” I cry.

“Asha!!” she roars back. “Are you alright?! What’s happening?”

“Don’t worry, they’re just searchlights!! They won’t hurt you!!” Gasping for breath, I rise to meet Kuro. “Come on!! They can’t see us through the clouds!”

So, I don't actually know if you can see a Dragon through the clouds at night with a searchlight. But the air raid sirens haven't sounded yet, so that means we're still safe, right? My theory seems to be proven correct as I lead Kuro through the sky, following the earthen scents of agriculture. Searchlights illuminate the clouds around us like oil lamps in a darkened room, but the sirens remain quiet.

Eventually, the clouds begin to part, allowing me a view of the city below. Recalling what I remember from maps, I piece together our location on the eastern side of Varecia.

"Okay," I announce. "It should be safe to descend here."

We lower from the sky and find ourselves above a greenbelt bisecting two residential neighborhoods. Far from the lights of downtown Varecia, the eastern reaches of the city are broadly residential and free of airship traffic. Crucially, they're also free of the searchlights that were emplaced to defend the city in case of a Nortanian invasion. We should be safe flying below the clouds here.

In the distance, I spot central Varecia, illuminated by innumerable beams of lights scanning the sky in a vain attempt to locate us. I see the air transfer ships flying like crazed starlings as they flee to safety, but the sky is conspicuously absent of warships. Shouldn't they be launched by now? Perhaps we caught those bastards from Nortane off-guard. Whatever the case, this gives us a crucial moment to slip through the sky unnoticed on our way to Legacy Island.

"Is that it?" Kuro asks, flicking her ears to our right.

I follow her gaze and find a small, sparsely populated island with three polished stone buildings erected in the center. The sight of it hits me like a spikehorn kick to the stomach.

“Y-yeah,” I stumble. “This is where my family members are laid to rest.” I pause to clear my nose and shake away tears. “Come on. We need to see if they’re here.”

We come about and approach the island from above to ensure there are no Animals present. I spot a broad and grassy plain surrounded on two sides by a small grove — the airship landing zone for the island. Mercifully, the area is free of any ships. We’ll be beside ourselves as I...

...

I’m the first to land in the field and waste no time sprinting for the mausoleums. As they grow in size, the small island trembles beneath me; Kuro has landed.

“Asha!!” she cries.

“It’s this way!” I answer.

As I approach the mausoleums, the smell of chamomile wafts into my nose. That's the mourning flower for Lemurs!! My heart just about sinks until I remember the flowers could be for *me*. Yes, that's right: I've been dead in my family's eyes since last autumn. It doesn't mean Mom has passed! Oh, please, Goddess! Please let the flowers be for me!!

A stone terrace surrounds the mausoleums, causing my claws to click against the stone as I approach on harried talonsteps. Chamomile has been stacked in neat bunches at the foot of the center mausoleum, a regular practice when a member of the royal family passes away. It's been several months since I died in the eyes of the Kingdom – could they still be leaving flowers for me?

I stand before the central mausoleum, heaving panicked breaths. Stone colonnades line the front of the building, framing the entrance behind two double doors at the top of a stone staircase. I feel memories from kithood return to me: the days we grieved for my grandmother, Beatrix, after her assassination by Sarlain. Back then, I found this building impressive from the outside. But here, in my current form, it's only as tall as my shoulders.

“Oh, Goddess...”

The tears begin to flow freely. I never thought I'd return here to discover if my family was still alive, much less while in the body of a Litan. I'm dreading with all my heart what I'll find inside, but I have to press on. I have to know the truth.

I crouch on my haunches and extend a talon outward, checking the state of the large steel doors. It goes without saying that I'd have trouble turning a doorknob, but mercifully, I find that one of the doors has been left open. Was someone here today to lay the flowers? As gingerly as could be expected from a Dragon, I pull the two large doors outward with a claw, lower against my stomach, and proceed to squish my head through the entrance of the mausoleum.

For the first time in months, I find myself (partially) inside a building. The interior room is dark, overwhelmed by the scent of fresh chamomile. Between the flowers, I discern the fresh scent of a Fisher. It seems my theory about laying the chamomile was correct. As I adjust the fit around my neck, I sense Kuro approaching outside.

This tale has been unlawfully lifted without the author's consent. Report any appearances on Amazon.

“Asha...?” she asks softly with a touch of confusion. “Are your parents in that den?”

“I-I don’t know,” I answer. “I can’t switch on the oil lamps, so I’m going to need to use my fire.”

It’s safe to do that indoors, right? This building is made of polished stone — in the worst-case scenario, I might set a tapestry ablaze. In light of the circumstances, I doubt my ancestors would mind. I take a short breath and tickle the special muscle in the back of my throat to produce the smallest flame possible.

FWOOSH!

A small wisp illuminates the walls, revealing the crypts where my ancestors were laid to rest. For a fleeting moment, I see the back wall, the one where my family was set to be laid, but my flame flashed far too quickly to read the inscriptions. Carefully, I maneuver my head deeper into the building to get a better look on the second flash.

Then, something utterly unexpected happens.

A dazzling white light begins emanating from the back wall of the mausoleum, illuminating the room in a pale glow!

KREE?!

My head jumps back in shock but stays within the building. As it does, the light on the wall dims slightly and begins pulsing in intensity.

“Asha?!” Kuro cries, gazing through a row of windows surrounding the top of the mausoleum “Asha, what’s happening?!”

This light... I know this light!

Last Autumn – the Eastern Weald. My transformation into a Litan!! For a breathless moment, I watch the light, too scared to lift a feather. Eventually, I exhale a long breath and curl my talons – thankfully, I’m still a Litan.

“Kuro...” I trail off, searching for adequate words.

Outside the building, she thumps her tail impatiently. “What’s going on? What is that light?”

With the darkness dispelled, I nudge my head closer to the light. It emanates from a marble crypt on the back wall, one with fresh chamomile stacked below it. I gasp when the inscription comes into focus.

PRINCESS ASHA ELOISE LORDANOU XIX

790 - 813

It’s *my* crypt. This is where Mom, Dad, and Sofl paid their respects and said goodbye to me. As if the melancholy of witnessing my own grave wasn’t enough, the glowing light is emanating from some kind of clear apparatus above my name. I tilt my head closer and gaze into it, trying to determine the light’s source. Squinting, I begin to make out the shape of something encased within. It’s small and jagged-shaped, a shape that reminds me of...

...The Serpentine Diamond?!

“*What?!*” I gasp.

“W—What is the Serpentine Diamond doing here?!”

“The Chimeric Stone?!” Kuro shudders. “It’s here?!”

But how can this be?! I thought the diamond was destroyed when I became a Litan! They must have found it in the weald while they were investigating the attack and decided to leave it with me as some kind of memorial! Instantly, a slew of questions rapid-fire through my head. Why did the diamond start glowing when I approached it? Is the power that transformed me into a Litan reactivated? Does that mean I could use the diamond to return to my old form? Also, why was the diamond placed here in the first place? It’s supposed to belong to...

...Oh, that’s right.

By rights, the diamond should’ve gone to the Lordanou second in line to the throne: Sofl. But without a throne to ascend to, it’s just a relic of what Ellyntide used to be. Does that mean someone in my family wanted the diamond here? Did Sofl or somebody else petition the Nortanians to leave it at my crypt? Could they still be alive?

...

I pull my head back, and the diamond dims somewhat, though not enough to prevent me from reading the other inscriptions on the wall. Queens and Kings alike line the walls of the mausoleum on all four sides. I recall the spot where Mom grieved when I was young and locate my Grandmother, Beatrix. Next to her is my Grandfather, Quincy. Directly beneath them are the spots reserved for my parents. And it’s here that I find... nothing. The crypts are free of an inscription. Nothing has been carved into the stone.

My parents are alive. *My family yet lives.*

...

I stare at the wall, heaving long and heavy breaths. *They're ALIVE!!* Oh, thank the Goddess I wasn't too late! Everything else may have gone to Hell, but at least my family isn't in the Temple!

...So, if they're still alive, then where are they now? What did Nortane do to them?

This isn't the first time Nortane has occupied our Kingdom. Centuries ago, the Avians took control of Ellyntide and decided to spare the lives of the royal family. Most of my ancestors were held in Hollyhead, but Queen Felicia was secured in a Nortanian outpost on Owens Island, completely unreachable by airships of the day. In the shadows of the occupation, a rebellion against Nortane began to take shape. But without a strong leader, it was disorganized and ineffective. Much as it is today, authority in Ellyntide stems from only one name: *Lordanou.*

It was because of the bravery of one Knight, a selfless Avian whose light would shine Eternal across the ages, that Prince Anton was rescued from Hollyhead and delivered to the rebellion. With a Lordanou to unite them and the sword of the Eternal Knight to guide them, Nortane would come to be driven from our islands and the Kingdom restored to power.

Surely, the Nortane of today would have learned from their historic mistakes. If my family still lives, then there's no chance they're still in Ellyntide. They'll have been moved far away from here, somewhere across the vast expanse of sky and deep within the ancestral territory of the Avians. With all the Lordanous extradited from Ellyntide, President Weatherlight must be so fweghing smug. She probably believes she's quashed any chance of a second rebellion.

...

I gaze into the light emanating from the Serpentine Diamond — the ancient trigger of my draconic transformation — and wonder. As I angle my head closer to the crypt, the light intensifies until it's just as bright as the moment I transformed. A shrill noise begins to sound through the mausoleum.

If I were to touch it...

...

'Whoever they worked for, whoever sent them here, that is who I will use this body against.'

...

"Asha?" Kuro calls from outside the mausoleum. "Why are you growling?"

...

I pull my head away and exhale sharply. Feeling there's nothing else to learn here, I carefully extract my head from the building and stand on all fours. Inside the mausoleum, the light from the serpentine diamond extinguishes.

Kuro approaches me from the side of the building, looking unnerved. "Asha," she murmurs. "What happened in there? Is your family...?"

"No," I say, wrapping my tail around my foretalons. "My parents are alive. Sofl is alive. But they're not here, and I don't know where they've gone. I think that Nortane captured them."

An uncomfortable silence stretches between us. Off in the distance, the searchlights over Varecia begin powering down.

"Sandoz," my voice rattles. "Sandoz was my mentor. She taught me that unexpected events are inevitable; We can choose to dwell on them, letting the negatives grow to define us. Or we can choose to overcome them, embracing the positive aspects we have control over. She taught me that no matter what happens, I always had a choice."

Kuro stares at me with longing in her eyes. She opens her muzzle to speak, but my heart can't take it any longer.

“How could I choose to accept THIS?!”

I can't hold it back any longer — all at once, sorrow and pain and fear are channeled into fury. I raise my head and unleash a baleful roar into the night sky!

SKREEEEEEAK!!!!

The little island trembles as my call echoes across Varecia. If the Kingdom couldn't hear me before, then it certainly can now! I may have been too late to defend it in autumn, but now I'm back! I want them all to know that the Litan is back! And she's royally *pissed!*

“ASHA!!”

As my roar trails off, a force impacts me from the side and slams me into the ground. Instinctively, I begin fighting back against my surprise attacker, attempting to flail my claws at the blurry mass of dark feathers. But my opponent is far larger and far more level-headed than I am.

“Asha, STOP!!”

Kuro muscles me into the ground, applying weight against my shoulders. Why is she attacking me? Doesn't she understand how upset I am!? When she fails to stop me from flailing about, she reaches down and sinks her fangs into my shoulder.

KREE!!

I shriek in pain and feel my resolve to fight back dissolve. She may have stopped me, but the rage in my heart is still burning bright. Kuro lifts her head and gazes down at me with a look of reproach, purple blood dripping from her muzzle. For a tense moment, we stare at each other with fangs bared and savage growls emanating from our chests.

"Is your head full of bees?!" Kuro chides. "Do you want every airship-prey in the Farlands to find us?!"

"Let them!" I snarl. "I'll shoot down Nortane's entire fleet and turn their cities to ashes!"

Kuro stares at me in muted shock. "Asha, you can't oppose," she pauses to gesture her wing outward towards Varecia, "all of this by yourself! That's more than—"

Agitated, I cut her off with a bare-fanged snarl of opposition.

GRRRR...

“No!!” she objects.

Using her talons, Kuro grabs me by the shoulders and lifts me slightly off the ground, only to slam me back into it with all her might. As she does, she sinks her claws deep into my shoulders, causing me to squeal in pain.

“Listen to me!!” Kuro hisses. “I know how upset you are, but attacking Nortane won’t bring back your family! What if they decide to retaliate against us by sending airship-prey to Felra? Do you want the flock to suffer, too?!”

I stare at her with fangs bared but offer no rebuttal to her argument.

“This can’t be what the deities had in mind for you, Asha. Please...!” Kuro folds her wings, and pain overwhelms her face. “I don’t want to keep hurting you. We need to return to Felra. Keuvra will know why your Kingdom is gone.”

“Keuvra?!” I hiss. “He’s been gone since harvestwing! What makes you think he’ll appear *now*?!”

“I don’t know!!” Kuro cries, throwing her wings in frustration. “I don’t know why any of this is happening! But he has to appear now. I’m certain he will!”

“How can you be so confident?” I riposte. “What if he’s wasting our time, just like he has the past two seasons?”

“Then I’ll help you,” Kuro rumbles, narrowing her eyes to slits. “We’ll attack Nortane’s cities. Together. And we won’t stop until we find your family.”

We stare at each other, panting heavily. Does Kuro really mean that? Doesn’t she understand how difficult it will be to locate them?

“Please,” Kuro growls. “I believe there has to be a reason why you were brought to the flock.”

A reason...? What does my admittance into the flock have to do with Ellyntide’s fall? That’s what she’s saying, right?

Wait a second...

Kuro said ‘*brought.*’ As in, I was led to Felra by someone else. What could she possibly mean by that? I flew to Felra of my own accord after I had no other choice!

...Right?

...

“...Okay,” I growl, trying to calm my seething anger. “We’ll do that. We’ll return to White Mountain and try summoning Keuvra one last time.”

As the words pass through my muzzle, Kuro’s face fills with pained relief. She whines softly and uses her tongue to clean the wounds she left against my shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” she whimpers as she steps off me.

With muscles aching, I roll onto my stomach and rise to my talons. As I ruffle to clear my feathers of dirt, I gaze past Kuro and look to the horizon. The searchlights over Varecia shine anew, framing the city in a portentous glow. For the first time, I spot Nortanian warships – the warships of our enemy, flying freely over *my* Kingdom. How could it all go wrong in such a short amount of time? How could the disappearance of one Lemur cause such a catastrophe?

Staring down this scene, a realization draws across my mind: At every turn, I found myself grounded to Felra. When an opportunity arose that harbored the possibility of returning home, I found myself pulled back every time. And who was there every step of the way? The one working behind the scenes to ensure I became a productive, happy member of the flock?

"GUST!!" I bellow, flaring my wings and raising my head to the sky. "I know you're watching me!!"

Kuro's eyes bulge. "A-Asha?!"

"You led me to Felra so I wouldn't intervene in the war with Nortane!! You and the deities have blood on your hands!! The blood of my KINGDOM!!"

Oh, yes. Everything makes *perfect* sense now! Gust, the liaison of the deities, was trying to *pacify* me. That's why he led me to Kuro — the perfect mate. That's why he helped me discover a cure for the illness — to earn the flock's respect. And that's why he led me to the strange monolith in the middle of nowhere — to offer me closure about my transformation. Every interaction was carefully orchestrated to make me comfortable about my new life in Felra. The deities thought I would accept the fate of my Kingdom just because I have a Lithan mate! They were manipulating me, just like the nobles and everyone else has *my entire life!*

Kuro lopes to my side and pleads, "Asha, don't—"

"I don't care!!" I snarl in her face. "Kuro, this goes deeper than Nortane! This—"

"I KNOW!!"

The vehemence of her yell forces my head to recoil backward. "...You do?"

“Asha,” Kuro whines, tearing at the stones beneath her talons. “We aren’t supposed to talk about him!”

My head tilts closer. “...Him?”

“Yes,” Kuro nods. “He warned you not to say anything, right? The red prey-bird?”

I open my muzzle to speak, but no sound is produced.

“Right,” she says. “So, please. Just stop talking. If something happens to you because you said too much, then...” A sharp breath passes her fangs, and she shakes her head in dismay. “Asha, I don’t know what I’ll do without you.”

All I can do is stare at my mate in morbid shock.

Kuro knows about Gust?!!

113. A Little Bird Told Me...

Tempered light shines through the canopy of the forest, illuminating my feathers in a patchwork of midday sun. Scurrying through the undergrowth, I raise my head from the ground and sample the air, warm and moist, just as it should be for warmwing. Between

the familiar scents, the pleasant odor of an unsuspecting jimbal passes through my nose. just a little bit further, and he'll be mine.

I refold my wings and tread silently through a depression in the ground created by the uprooting of a great tree. As I pass the mass of tangled roots, I sense something has changed – something nearly imperceptible to my senses. Confused, I raise my head and scan the forest. Though I rarely hunt these lands, everything appears to be normal. Did a branch fall somewhere? Perhaps it was a squirrel or some other prey-animal trundling along the forest floor. A gentle breeze passes around me, reminding my senses of the sleeping jimbal. I shake my head and decide to press onward. I'm hungry and eager for an easy prey-kill.

The scent of the jimbal grows as I stalk around a cluster of bushes. I can sense it lying in its den, blissfully unaware that a proud Kin is stalking it. I lick my chops and tread lightly through a patch of ferns. One talonstep too heavy, and I could awaken my prey.

Then, something catches my attention: A shimmer of dazzling light at the edge of my vision, something unlike anything I've seen before. I raise my head to face it and feel a branch crack beneath my left talon.

“Erk!”

I gaze down at the shattered branch. It's so big! Where did it come from?! Off in the distance is the sound of prey scurrying through the undergrowth.

I open my eyes.

The room before me is dark, muddled by the scents of decaying wood, leaves, and Dragons. I'm in a tree den somewhere in Felra — it seems I was dreaming just now. With my head still foggy, I raise my head slightly and taste the scents. Unfortunately, one of them is the unmistakably vile scent of Enyll. *Disgusting*. But the other... it smells unfamiliar, yet wonderfully pleasant. Who's scent is it? Did another Kin join us yesterday? Rumbling to life, I raise my head to discover my wing draped across a sleeping Dragon curled together. Slowly, the memories from yesterday flow back to me like water in a river.

This Dragon... she is no ordinary Dragon.

She is the Farlander.

This blue-plumaged drakaina calls herself 'Asha.' She claims to be a Lemur from the Farlander territory of Ellyntide, the one watched by the prey-deity Etain. After Enyll and I saved her life, Asha told us she was a 'Princess' from the 'Kingdom of Ellyntide' who was mysteriously transformed into a Lithan. I thought it was the most featherbrained tale I'd heard in my life until an airship-prey appeared, and she *ordered* it to leave Felra. To everyone's shock, it left without attacking the flock's territory.

Honestly, how are we going to explain this to the rest of the flock? What is Grandmother going to think about her?

I suppose it's a problem for tomorrow.

I rest my head against the ground and readjust my wing, ensuring Asha is warm. We must bring her to White Mountain so Keuvra can decide what will happen to her. I have a feeling tomorrow is going to be a very long day.

Slowly, I close my eyes and allow sleep to return.

...

“Blue skies, Daughter-Of-Mecali.”

My eyes open as wide as Maki.

My head shoots up to discover something incredible: Standing at the den’s entrance is a small, glowing red prey-bird. Enamored by a dazzling light — the same light I saw in my dream — long shadows are cast from the bird, painting an incredible show of colors against the floor of the den.

This bird...! I know this prey-bird!!

“Y—you...!” I gasp, quickly covering my muzzle with my wing. I cast about to see Enyll and Asha still asleep despite my noisy reaction.

“It’s good to see you again,” the bird speaks candidly in the voice of Kin.

I turn back to find the bird still standing at the entrance. I blink, tilt my head closer and ask, “...Strange prey-bird. You can speak to me?”

“Quite so,” he says, shuffling his wings. “Despite the appearance of prey, I am perfectly fluent in the words of Kin.”

For a silent moment, I watch him, still unable to believe my senses. How is he emanating light? Why can’t I smell any scents on his feathers? “You led me to her, didn’t you? Who are you?”

The bird takes flight unexpectedly, causing me the wince. He flies into the den and lands on a twisted root near the edge of the trunk. “I do apologize for rousing you from sleep. Unfortunately, this was the only time we could have a discrete conversation together.”

His tiny eyes gaze past me and fall onto the Dragons sleeping in the center of the den.

“A conversation? I whisper. “Um, should we leave the den? I don’t—”

“There is no need,” he replies in a normal voice. “I have taken steps to ensure they will remain asleep.”

Stolen content warning: this tale belongs on NovelBin. Report any occurrences elsewhere.

Can he really do that? *How?* I curl my tail around my foretalons and feel my crest flattening. Should I really trust this strange, glowing creature? “What’s your name?”

“My name is of little consequence,” he says, preening his chest. “But, if it would put your mind at ease, you could think of me as a friend of the deities.”

“The deities?!” I gasp. “What does...”

My voice dissipates as understanding washes over me. *The Farlander.*

He’s here because of Asha! I swivel around to find her at my side, sleeping peacefully.

Yesterday, while hunting with Enyll, I encountered this same prey-bird perched atop a tree. I thought it was strange to see lights outside the Grandfather Tree and descended from a thermal to investigate. The bird took flight as I approached, leaving a glowing light trail as it raced along the treetops. For some reason, Enyll claimed he couldn’t see it. I thought he was lying and decided to pursue the prey-bird, if only to prove him wrong. After a short pursuit, I found myself over a clearing where two Dragons were fighting: a False-Kin, and Asha. It’s because of this bird’s guidance that we were able to quickly intervene and save Asha’s life. It’s because of this bird’s strange appearance that I decided to trust the Dragon he led me to and allow her to speak to the airship-prey.

“You’re here because of Asha,” I say, gazing down at her. “Aren’t you?”

The prey-bird nods in acknowledgment. “In her Kingdom, she is someone of tremendous importance. As you can imagine, it caused quite a stir among the deities when she took the form of Kin.”

“Wait...” I say, curling my talons. “You mean, it took them by surprise? Keuvra didn’t transform her?”

The edges of the prey-bird’s beak curl into a frown. He looks away and warbles, “It would seem someone mortal is responsible.”

A mortal...? Did someone *mortal* change Asha?! I was convinced it was Keuvra! My eyes are drawn to her, still soundly asleep. How could a Farlander have the power to change a Lemur into a Lithan? Who would even do such a thing?

Is this bird for real? I feel my thoughts being pulled apart like a warm Litsha pelt. “But, how...”

“You have eyes for her,” the prey-bird interjects. “Don’t you?”

“*What?!*” I squawk in surprise. “How did you—“

Behind me, Asha stirs. I flip around and find her adjusting her head into a more comfortable position past her tail. She exhales a soft rumble and returns to a deep sleep.

The prey-bird ruffles. Glowing feathers fall from his dainty little body and dissolve like snow into the ground. "I've seen how you look at her, Daughter-Of-Mecali. It is plain to see."

A deep sigh flows past my fangs. Somehow, this *'friend'* of Keuvra must have been watching me yesterday, even after we saved Asha. He knows things about me that I'm afraid to admit. "But, she's a Farlander..." my voice dissipates as conflicting emotions become overwhelming. "How could I..."

After a silent moment, the prey bird twitters, "You've been lonely for untold seasons. If I could make an observation the rest of the flock will not... the Brothers, they do not interest you, do they?"

Silence stretches across the den.

How could he possibly know so much about me? Especially *that*? Slowly, I frown and shake my head. "No. No, they do not."

"Then it is only natural to feel a connection," he replies. "You saved her life, after all."

I frown and ruffle slightly – this is *not*

the way I was expecting this conversation to go. Should I really trust him with my innermost feelings? My most intimate desires and fears? Perhaps it doesn't matter. He's been completely right about everything so far. There has to be a reason he's leading the conversation this way.

"She's..." I gaze down at Asha, sleeping peacefully. This is what I've always wanted, right? A drakaina for a mate? I can't help but smile at the thought. "I've never seen a plumage like hers before. Bright blue, like the clearest sunwing day. And when she smiles, it's just as brilliant."

After a brief moment, the bird remarks, "In her Kingdom, it is not unusual for females to mate."

"Really?!" I gasp aloud.

"Kuro," The prey-bird takes flight and crosses the den to land on one of Asha's horns. "I know which way the winds blow. This child of the Goddess is destined to spend time in Felra. A long time, perhaps."

A *long* time in Felra...? Surprised, I gaze down at Asha's expression.

The prey-bird continues, “She’ll need guidance and protection in the coming seasons. Provide it to her.”

Whoa, really? He’s asking me to help Asha? “But what if she doesn’t want my help?” I ask cautiously.

“She does,” The bird nods. “As does Keuvra.”

I gasp, immediately understanding the implications of involving our deity: It’s a Divine Flight! To be chosen for a sacred task by our flock’s leader is the most special event that can happen to a Kin in this life! Oh, I don’t believe it! Out of all the Dragons in Felra, Keuvra chose ME!

...

He is surely watching us at this very moment; I could stand to look a little more dignified before our leader. I flatten my feathers and say, “Yes, I understand.”

“Good,” The prey-bird smiles. “Keuvra’s smile shines upon you.”

I beam at his words and can’t help but ruffle a little in satisfaction. “And what about Asha? Does she...?”

The bird's expression moderates. "Only she can answer that question, I'm afraid."

...Oh. Well, I suppose even the deities have limits to their understanding.

"But," the prey-bird continues, "Should you succeed in courting Asha, Keuvra will support your union."

At hearing that, I just about flutter my wings with joy. "Thank you!!" I say, dipping my head before the prey-bird. Keuvra will support me having a drakaina for a mate!! I don't believe it!! I don't think I've ever felt so happy in my life!! "Oh, thank you, thank you!!"

"There's one more thing, Daughter-Of-Mecali."

"Oh!" I chirp, raising my head promptly. "Um, yes?"

The prey-bird's face turns suddenly stern. "Under no circumstances may you disclose my existence, the nature of our meeting, or what we discussed tonight. Not to the elders, your Grandmother, and certainly not to Asha. This is a Divine Flight between you and Keuvra alone."

“O-of course,” I sputter, caught off-guard by the sudden change in tone. “Wings mantled, I won’t tell another Dragon.”

“Good!” he chirps, spreading his wings. He flies from Asha’s horn and returns to the ground behind me. “I appreciate your cooperation. I have been able to carry out my duties over the seasons with very few incidents. I would prefer to keep it that way.”

“Your *duties*?” I cock my head. “Are there others—“

A sharp noise from behind me causes my feathers to stand on end. I flip around to see Enyll shifting his wings into a more comfortable position — for some reason, the featherbrain released a loud growl in his sleep. *Dunglicker!!* Can’t you see I’m talking to someone far more important than you’ll ever be?!

I growl and turn around to find a darkened den. The divine prey-bird had vanished without a trace.

114. Our Mutual Friend

"Kuro... " Asha trails off. “You’ve met Gust too, haven’t you?”

Gust...?

That must be the prey-bird's name. It seems he told it to Asha but not me.

I frown and gaze at the ground. I can't stand to look at her... it feels like I'm responsible for the horror flashing in Asha's eyes. I never wanted to hurt her, only prevent her from getting in trouble with Keuvra. Was there some way I could have handled this situation better?

"When did he start talking to you?" Asha takes an unsteady step towards me. "How much do you know?!"

I gaze at the sky and quickly flick my head away. The terms of my Divine Flight were clear: assist Asha in becoming a member of the flock and keep my muzzle shut about Gust. This isn't even the first time Asha has mentioned him, but... I won't lie to her. She's my mate, my sunshine on cloudy days. I can't lie to her! I already feel terrible for suggesting there was a reason she was brought to Felra. Oh, gosh, I hope Keuvra will forgive me for what I'm about to do!

"He led me to you," I murmur, barely louder than a whisper. It feels like the weight of the entire moon against me. "On the day you landed in Felra, I saw a glowing prey-bird perched upon a tree. When I flew to investigate, it took off and led me towards the clearing where you were fighting the False-kin."

Asha opens her muzzle to speak, but no words spill out.

"That night, he woke me up and asked me to help you. He said..." My voice trails off. Are the jaws clamping down? Is it only a matter of time before our leader punishes me? I

furrow my eyes and continue, “He said you would spend time in Felra, maybe a long time. Keuvra wanted me to help you, Asha.”

Asha winces, and she slams her eyes shut in pain. How much heartache is she enduring? I can't imagine what it feels like to believe everyone is always trying to manipulate you. I'll admit, I'm concealing some details about my meeting with Gust. I want to be truthful to my mate, but this is so much more than Asha can endure.

“So, it's true,” Asha whimpers. Her body is beginning to shiver. “The deities were manipulating me all along. How could I...”

...! She's going to...!

“Asha, wait!” I leap to her side and quickly nuzzle my head against her neck feathers. I've seen this reaction far too many times! She's about to—

SKREEEEEEAK!!!

As her voice echoes across Vaercia, Asha falls to the ground and buries her head against the stones. She girts her fangs and howls, “I was so stupid! I shouldn't have stayed in Felra!!”

“Asha?!” I cry, wrapping my wings around her. Instead of the explosion of anger, tears are streaming down her face. She curls her talons as she wails in agony, causing the stones

beneath them to crack and shatter. Asha's heart begins to stampede and her whole body shakes uncontrollably. I've never seen her have this kind of reaction before. What's going on? Shouldn't Asha be angry? Argh, skunkscent! What should I do?!

"It's okay," I murmur, unable to think of anything else to say. "You're my mate and I love you."

Asha inhales sharply, gasping for air as her body continues convulsing. As best as I can, I work to preen the feathers on her crest. Asha once performed the same act of compassion, and it helped me calm down. I can only hope it works for her, too.

"I love you, Asha."

As I work her feathers, uncomfortable thoughts stew inside my head. This is yet another outburst of emotions from Asha that I can't understand. Usually, she explodes with anger when she's stressed out, but... what is this? Why is she so overcome with misery? Is there no more anger for her to express?

I'm no stranger to powerful emotions, but I've never understood Asha's rage. It's so spontaneous; one moment, she's irresistibly sweet, and the next, she's an uncontrollable monster. And she's been like this since she joined the flock! Asha first lost control of herself on the day I brought her to my den in the lower valley. Then again, after she tried to fly home and discovered Relmoon had tricked her. And I'll never forget the most painful moment of our relationship was when she charged me outside Nakino's den, leaving me no choice but to defend myself. Time and time again, her outbursts fail to make sense to me. Oh, Kevura, I wish there was something I could do to help her! It shatters my heart to see her so miserable!

Below me, Asha stirs. She gasps for air and lifts her head to gaze silently across the island. She seems crestfallen like she was expecting somewhere else to be here.

“Kuro...” she trails off. “Why did this happen to me? To my family and my Kingdom? How could the deities allow this?”

I gaze down at her. It takes me a moment to form a response. “There has to be an explanation. You know they can’t interfere with Jade.”

“I know...” Asha mutters. “I know about Azurrel’s doctrine, and why the deities are forbidden from interfering. To do so would disrupt the ‘*natural order*’ of the moon. But Gust has helped us ever since we met. He...”

Asha trails off as the negative thoughts overcome her once more. She buries her face into my neck feathers and begins to sob anew.

I sigh, feeling the weight of the decisions that led us to this sorrowful moment. I admit it – when Gust told me that Keuvra would allow us to be mated, I felt emboldened to pursue Asha. Sometimes, it was to my detriment. It’s all my fault, of course; I began courting her far too quickly. In hindsight, it’s obvious that Asha wasn’t ready yet for romance. But after learning that Keuvra had given me a Divine Flight to help Asha, it felt like it was my duty... no, my *destiny*, to be mated with her. On nights like Couple’s Night, where it seemed like we would never be together, I kept reminding myself what Gust told me. And when Asha and I finally kissed on that golden dawn... everything finally came together, and all was right in the world. It felt like I had Keuvra to thank for fulfilling my life’s dream.

But after hearing her curse the deities, I can't help but wonder if Asha's right. Did Keuvra really have some kind of ulterior motive for asking me to help Asha? But, why? Was it really because the deities didn't want her to interfere in the downfall of Ellyntide? Argh, this is all so stressful... I was going to eventually tell Asha about the rest of my meeting with Gust, but I've changed my mind. She deserves to know it wasn't the Chimeric Stone that changed her into a Lithan, but her mental well-being is more important.

Just then, I sense something at the edge of my vision; the skies over Varecia have turned golden bright, illuminated by the uncomfortable glow of searchlights. No doubt, the Farlanders who live here have been terrorized by Asha's wailing cries. To make matters worse, Maki is beginning to rise against a cloud-cluttered horizon. We've been in Varecia for far longer than we intended. I feel my feathers rise in apprehension — I know Asha is miserable, but we can't stay here. We need to leave Varecia as quickly as possible.

"We should go," I say, nudging my head against hers. "I—I can see more airship-prey over Varecia."

Asha gasps and rips her from my embrace. Across the city, airship-prey fill the skies like a flock of migrating prey-birds. They've heard Asha's yells, and now they're tracking us like a scared prey-animal. At seeing the scene before us, Asha's breathing becomes erratic again.

"It's alright," I nuzzle my head against her neck. "We'll be safe, I promise."

As she often does, Asha stares at me deep in thought. "Yeah," She murmurs after an uncomfortable moment. "We should go."

This tale has been unlawfully obtained from NovelBin. If you discover it on Amazon, kindly report it.

I rub my head against her one last time and stand on all fours. Asha is slow to join me, taking a silent moment to begin moving. Eventually, she clears her nose and stares back at the mausoleum behind us.

“Kuro,” she speaks in a fragile voice. “I don’t want to leave my family.”

I join her at her side and drape my wing across her. “You’re not.”

Asha looks up at me and slowly, a gentle smile returns to her face. Oh, I’ve helped to make her feel better!! It warms my heart brighter than the sun when Asha smiles at me. I would do anything to protect her smile.

“Come on,” I say, beckoning with a wing.

I begin walking towards the nearest ledge but only make it a few steps before sensing Asha isn’t following. I look back and find her staring into one of the dens. Her crest perks in surprise, and she turns to bound forward towards me.

“Which way should we fly?” I ask as she catches up to me.

Asha rumbles in contemplation as we continue towards the ledge. Since we've landed, Maki has risen through a mostly cloud-free sky. We can no longer rely on the cloud cover that hid us from sight during our flight here. To our left, the densest part of Varecia is still crowded with searchlights and airship-prey. Naturally, we can't fly that way.

"What about this way?" I ask, extending a wing to our right. "There are mountains over there. I'd feel safer flying with so few Farlander lights."

Asha shakes her head. "That's on an airship-prey flight path to a city called 'Rhl.'" She pauses, and her face grimaces. "We would have to fly over the eastern weald. I don't have the strength to return there."

The eastern weald? That sounds familiar. Where have—

...Oh, that's right. Asha told me it was the place where she transformed into a Lithan and watched her best friend die trying to protect her. Yeah, we can't fly in that direction.

"So, that leaves directly in front of us." I sigh, gazing ahead. Searchlights shine like glowing tree trunks from an endless expanse of Farlander dens, drifting silently through a dark, cloudless sky. There aren't as many lights as the densest part of Varecia, but Asha assured me it would be a huge mess to be caught in one of the beams.

"They'll be looking for us in the sky," Asha says. "If we fly low, then maybe we can avoid the searchlights."

“And what if someone on the ground sees us?” I ask.

Asha shuffles her wings. “Hopefully, our feathers will be too dark for them to recognize us. Once we leave the city, we’ll be able to avoid the places where Farlanders live until we return to Felra.”

I curl my talons inwards – I don’t want to know what will happen if the searchlights capture us. Still, I can’t look anxious in front of Asha. She needs to see her mate projecting confidence.

A strong wind whips against my feathers as we approach the ledge, bringing the pungent stench of Farlander scents. Before us is the vast field of Farlander dens, punctuated by a patchwork of searchlights.

“Then we’ll try our best!” I announce, unfurling my wings. “Asha, are you ready?”

Slowly, she opens her wings and looks at me with a soft growl of acknowledgment.

We leap from the cliff and fall into a gentle dive to gain speed and quickly pass the searchlights. Gazing at the scene before me, my heart begins thundering against my chest. Here we are, flying through a field of Farlander dens, surrounded by airship-prey on all sides. No Kin has ever attempted something so dangerous. If we survive unscathed and return to the flock, they’ll tell stories about our trip to Varecia!

As we glide closer to the lights, Asha's head perks up suddenly. "Another cloud bank!" she announces, flicking her ears forward.

I look past the searchlights and gaze skyward to see a low cloud bank dimly lit by the city's lights. Broad and dense, it's just like the clouds we flew through on our trip into Varecia. If we can fly there without being captured by the searchlights, then we'll surely return to the flock safely. I flick my gaze to Asha; Communicating without words, we agree to rise into the clouds after passing the lights.

Asha lowers from the sky mere wingspans ahead of me, flying just above the tops of the trees. Farlander dens whiz below us, overwhelming my senses with a potent mix of burning wood, small prey-animals, and other strange scents I don't recognize. I stifle a cough, worried it could call attention to a wayward Farlander on the ground. How long will it take to reach the clouds? I'm anxious to make it there, even though the searchlights before us seem so imposing. Lights that shine taller than the Grandfather Tree? Why do Farlanders create such frightening things?

Asha slowly banks right, leading us along the outside perimeter of the dens. Somewhere far to our left, we pass the first set of searchlights idly scanning the sky above us, none the wiser to our covert escape near the ground. We pass the second, as silent as a resting jimbald in its den. As we pass the third, I gaze skyward to see Maki rising from a cloud bank over the center of Varecia. We can no longer rely on the cover of darkness to conceal our escape. Will we make it to cloud bank in time?

As we glide past the fourth set of lights, the closest ones yet, I feel my nerves begin to relax. It seems like we're halfway through the field of Farlander dens; it won't be long before we reach the clouds!

Then something unusual happens.

One of the lights from the fourth set begins shaking erratically. With a swift motion, it jolts across the sky and lowers its beam directly in front of us! Asha's feathers stand on end, but she says nothing as she flicks her tail to dive suddenly. I follow suit, gasping aloud as the searchlight moves sideways across the sky faster than any creature I've ever witnessed. Tail feathers brush treetops as the light passes silently overhead, a feather's edge away from capturing us.

That was far too close for comfort! But before I can relax, the rest of the searchlights begin lowering from the sky to hunt the same section of air we were just flying through. Somehow, they're communicating silently across the field of Farlander dens! How is that possible?! A pit forms in my stomach – is that what it feels like to be hunted as prey?

Above our heads, the sky is turned bright as sunhigh. Asha pounds her wings, trying to gain speed against the rapidly advancing beams. She squeaks, sensing one of them lowering to our altitude. She tilts her wing to bank hard to the left, and I flick my tail and bank hard to the right. With the wind howling against my feathers, I catch a fleeting glimpse of golden light across Asha's tail feathers.

“Fwegh!”

With the trees clipping our feathers, Asha has no choice but to gain altitude. But by now, it's far too late. All at once, the searchlights communicate with each other and begin converging close to our location.

“Close your eyes!” Asha shouts.

I furrow them just in time. In an instant, the sky turns brighter than the brightest warmwing day. I've been captured!!

KREE!!

I open my eyes just enough to see a golden pillar of light illuminating Asha as she rises through the sky. She's been captured, too! I flap my wings to follow, but try as I might, the searchlight remains affixed to me. It's no use!!

VRRRRRRRRRRRRR....

Like an enormous creature coming to life, a piercing and dissonant cry begins howling across Varecia. What's going on?! Are we in danger?!

“KURO!!” Asha cries. “It's okay!! Get to the clouds!!”

I cry out in acknowledgment, hoping to mask the terror in my voice.

RARR!!

As if the searchlights weren't frightening enough, now there's a huge monster coming to life in Varecia!! How can Farlanders have such power?! We have to flee as quickly as possible!!

Pounding my wings to keep up, It's not long before we reach the safety of the cloud bank. Asha is the first to arrive, gliding headlong and without hesitation into the swirling darkness before us. As she disappears from sight, it becomes apparent that these clouds are far thicker than the ones we flew through earlier. That's fine by me! We should be able to hide from the monster coming to life somewhere across Varecia. As I slip into the mists, I find my vision completely obscured. With Asha nowhere in sight, I cry out to my mate.

ROARR!!

SKREE!!

We communicate by long-range cry, flying through the clouds as long shafts of diffuse light frantically dart about in a futile attempt to capture us again. As we fly on, the beams begin to disappear until there's nothing left but darkness and the lonesome howl of the monster coming to life. I exhale, feeling a momentary respite. Our return trip to the flock just got a whole lot more dangerous, but we were able to escape the searchlights without getting hurt. Asha sounded confident when she told me not to worry about the monster... I don't understand what's going on, but I trust her. If Asha says we're safe, then we'll be safe.

We fly for a time, the sound of the monster still echoing around us. Asha and I have continued our long-range calls, but we still can't see each other through the darkness. Just

how big is this cloud bank? As the monster's cries begin to subdue, I start to hear a new sound from ahead of us. A low, grumbling noise. Could that be...?

SKREEEEEEEEAK!!!

The furious cry of a Lathan splits the air like a crack of thunder. It's Asha's!! But what's happening up ahead?! Oh, Asha, please be safe when I find you! I pound my wings to regain speed until the wind whips against my feathers. The grumbling noise I heard earlier is growing louder and louder. I know this sound well — every time I hear it, it makes my blood turn to ice. Oh, Asha, please don't tell me you're...!

Without warning, the clouds come to an end. I shake my head to clear the mists from my eyes and gasp at the portentous scene before me.

It's an airship-prey!

And, Asha... Asha is...!

"ORLANDO?!" she snarls. "What are YOU doing here?!"

115. Prey

An enormous noise reverberates across the sky as the noxious scents of the airship-prey slam against my nostrils. I ruffle, gazing in horror at the enormous winged beast looming above us. I've never seen an airship-prey this big before! Even the one Mother attacked wasn't this big! Has it been flying here this whole time, waiting to pounce on us the moment we departed from the clouds?

As I stare down the beast, something catches my eye. Perched upon the outside of its skin are three Farlanders: Two Avians staring at me with terror in their eyes and a Marten with a peculiar pelt and some kind of object on its head. Although they're far away, I can see them waving their arms around and making noises at us. It's this particular prey-animal that Asha seems to be interested in. She's heaving quick breaths and her feathers are ruffled in abject irritation.

"Asha!!" I cry out.

She flicks her snout towards me for only a wingbeat before returning her gaze to the ship. Instead of acknowledging me, she snarls a fierce warning to the Farlanders.

GRAOWL... SKREEE!!

The Avians flinch and cover their heads with their wings. As the growl of the airship-prey recaptures the sky, the prey-birds throw their wings skyward and begin shouting at the Marten. I don't need to smell their fear-scent to know that they're trying to flee. But the Marten is standing firmly in place, refusing to move even an feather's width as they stare down Asha and me.

What's going on? Why are Asha and the Marten staring at each other?! The only thing that's certain to me is that we can't stay here. We need to flee before the airship-prey tries to attack us!

"Asha!!" I shout, winging towards her. "We have to go!! The airship—"

"No!!" she snarls. "I know that Marten, he was close to Mother!! Argh, that fweghing traitor!!"

Asha knew that Farlander when she was a Princess...?

I look again at the ship. The Avians are practically dragging the Marten back to the maw of the airship-prey. Asha called him a traitor — that must mean that even though he was close to her mother, he was secretly a member of Nortane. Could he be one of the reasons Ellyntide fell? Unbidden, a growl rumbles in my chest. Could this petty prey-animal be responsible for my mate's misery?

"Kuro!" Asha barks as I fly up next to her. "We going to attack the airship-prey! Do you remember the plan?"

Searching my head for an answer, I hesitate to respond. I'll admit it: I'm scared right now. I've known it could come to this since Asha told me she wanted to fly to the Farlands. But I never could have anticipated how intimidating airship-prey has become since I saw one as a fledgling. What if Asha is underestimating them as well? Can we really prey on a monster this big?

Off in the distance, the Farlanders pass through a maw of the airship-prey and disappear. They must have ordered the beast to attack us.

...

I shake my head and stifle the nagging doubts inside me. Asha is upset. My mate is in agony from the loss of her Kingdom, and these prey-animals are responsible. I trust her judgment.

“Yeah,” I say, flattening my feathers. “Attack the spinning propellers with fire and watch out for its attack.”

“Good,” Asha says. “Are you ready?”

I nod. “But what about Varecia?”

Asha’s eyes bulge—it seems she forgot why we were trying so hard to avoid a confrontation with an airship-prey. She gazes at the ground, and her face fills with concern. “Damn it,” she growls. “There’s some dens down there, but not a lot! And they’re not the kind that Farlanders live in!”

I blink, confused at how a den could be built but remain unoccupied. How does she know there are no Farlanders inside? Building a den and not sleeping in it doesn't make sense!

“Just trust me!” Asha shouts, sensing my dissonance. “Once we take out one of the propellers, we’ll—“

An enormous groan echoes across the sky, causing me to yelp in surprise. I turn in horror to see sections of the airship-prey's body awakening. The monster exhales, releasing a noxious breath from one of the maws on its back. Near its underside, long dark appendages, shaped like finely carved tree trunks, shudder and rotate to life.

“Fwegh!!” Asha shrieks. “Kuro!! Follow me!”

Surprisingly, Asha tents her wings and drops like a stone towards the ground.

SKREEE!!

What's going on? Is the airship-prey attacking already?! Pushing aside my confusion, I let out a roar of acknowledgment and raise my wings to follow her.

ROARRR!!

Asha quickly bottoms out her flight and begins soaring back towards the airship-prey. This is it! We're attacking! With the sound of the beast overwhelming my senses, we fly up from beneath and take turns using our fire. Asha is the first, rearing her neck back and unleashing a pillar of flame directly towards the propeller on the right side. As fire consumes it, Asha banks right to allow me enough room to attack with my own volley of flame. But as the propeller becomes visible again, I notice a problem: the flame has had little effect, having been dissipated by the air currents of the propeller. Was Asha's flame too weak? I cock my neck and unleash another blast to the same spot, one far more powerful than Asha's. The beast's skin turns gray to red, but the propellers keep moving. Was it not enough? I thought that area was their weakness?

"Did it work?!" I call out, flying towards Asha. She's taken a spot in the sky above the airship-prey.

"No," she growls. "The propellers dispersed our flames. Let's try again and aim closer to the ship!"

It repelled our flames? How is that possible? Asha told me airship-prey were constructed from materials on the moon. Does that mean the propellers are constructed from some kind of hard stone? Whatever the case, Asha was right; Farlanders have truly mastered the environment to their advantage. The thought sends a chill across my feathers.

We lift our wings to dive for a second attack. Passing the ship, I notice the long, dark appendages writhing madly. What are they doing? Being unable to recognize the movements of a prey-animal makes me tremendously uncomfortable. As we climb for a second approach, Asha shoots another pillar of flame towards the airship-prey. This time, her flame goes slightly to the left, impacting the area between the propeller and the body of the airship-prey. Its skin turns bright red, but her fire is once more dispelled.

SK-KREAAK!!

Asha wails in frustration, causing the beast's skin to tremble. I blast my fire across the same area as my mate, but once more, it fails to penetrate the monster's body.

“Fwegh!” Asha curses as I fly up to her position above the airship-prey.

“It's not working!!” I tell her. “Should we begin attacking it with our jaws?”

“No!” Asha growls in frustration. “Argh, damn it! There has to be a way to attack the propellers!”

I gaze down at the ship, struggling to respond to my mate. “Asha, is there any—“

BA-BOOM!

BA-BOOM!

An ear-shattering noise ends our conversation. Reacting instinctually, I rear my body away from the cacophony and glance at a large object splitting the space between me and Asha.

ROAARGH!!

SKREEEAK!!!

I flatten my ears, attempting to silence the deafening ringing inside them. My flight buckles, and I flail my wings to regain control. What was THAT?!

...Asha!!

I open my eyes and gaze at the place my mate used to be flying. Feathers ruffled, Asha's hovering some distance away in a similar state of stunned shock. Somewhere above us, two dark objects fly through the sky like a diving gryhawk but in the wrong direction. It was the airship-prey! It *attacked* us!!

"Asha!!" I gasp. "Are you alright?!"

Instead of responding, Asha grits her fangs and stares down the airship-prey with a baleful look. She rears her head back and unleashes a savage cry of defiance!

SKREEEEAK!!!

Even at my distance, I can hear the airship-prey trembling in fear at Asha's call. With her prey spooked, Asha raises her wings and begins to fall through the air.

Love what you're reading? Discover and support the author on the platform they originally published on.

“Asha?!” I cry in surprise. “Asha, WAIT!!”

I tilt my wings to follow but momentarily hesitate. I'll be entering the area where the airship-prey can attack if I pursue Asha. Everything in my body is screaming at me to flee as fast as possible, but... argh, skunkscent!! I have to help her! Drawing a quick breath, I fall through the air as quickly as my body will allow and tilt my wings to follow Asha. Gusts of wind ruffle my feathers as I pass the propellers, and I catch a glimpse of the smooth appendages at the bottom of the monster moving about wildly. I hold my breath as I pass them, but mercifully, the airship-prey doesn't attack. Evening out beneath it, I exhale, but only slightly. Could it still attack us from here? I wish I had asked Asha before all this started!

Gazing ahead, I find her gliding around to rise above the monster's head. As she comes about, Asha sees me and flicks her muzzle to the side. My breath goes shallow — She's going to...! I fall into another dive just as Asha rears her head back and releases another blast of flame.

SKREEEEEEAK!

Scorching flame impacts the airship-prey and flutters across its skin in rippling waves. I even out my flight and gaze up just in time to witness Asha's attack injure the monster's head. A noise like shattering ice echoes across the sky, and the airship-prey bleeds forth, suffusing small pieces of viscera into the night air. A Farlander — a Marten, I think — bleeds from the monster and is sucked outwards and down the belly of the monster. I resist the urge to chase a deceptively easy prey-kill, well aware that a prey-animal lacking wings will tumble through the sky like an injured red eagle.

With smoke billowing from her nostrils, Asha smirks at the injury she's caused. It fills me with a pang of pride seeing my little Asha injure a prey-animal as grand as an airship-prey. Still, the beast remains airborne. If we don't finish the hunt, it will surely chase back to Felra. We can't appear weak to the enemies of Asha's kingdom. But attacking the propellers — the area Asha told me was its weak spot— didn't injure it. Isn't there any other way to injure it?

"Asha!!" I cry, joining her at the head of the airship-prey. "Are you okay?!"

Asha looks at me for a wingbeat before refocusing on our enemy. "Yeah. I damaged the flight deck and killed a few birds, but there's still more inside." A low growl emanates from her chest. "We've got to take down the ship before they can reorganize!"

I gaze inside the injured maw of the beast. Blood and viscera scatter the interior, illuminated by a patchwork of smoke and burning flames. Farlander bodies lay about the mess, while those still alive are angrily bleating at each other like a flock of raucous prey-birds. I feel a bloodlust growing inside me — these are the creatures responsible for hurting Asha.

"Here," I say, flying up beside her. "It's my turn. I'll burn them so hot—"

“No,” Asha interrupts. “I attacked them to buy us some time; they can still control the ship from elsewhere. We need to bring it down while they’re disoriented!”

I open my muzzle halfway to object, aware of just how much pain these wretched prey-animals have caused my mate. But she’s right; if nothing else, we have to kill this airship-prey to prove we’re strong. To prove that *Kin* are the most dangerous predators on Jade, just as Keuvra teaches us to be. Anything less would be denigrating our flock’s leader.

Thoughts race through my head as I gaze at the monster before us. Asha told me that Farlanders create airship-prey; creatures constructed from the moon instead of being born into a brood. But if there’s one thing I understand about prey, it’s that they all share the same weaknesses.

“What about its heart?” I suggest. “Can we attack it there?!”

“No,” Asha rumbles in disappointment. “Kuro, that’s not how they...”

Her voice trails off, captured by a breeze. She turns her head to me, and a devious little grin crosses it.

“Asha?” I tilt my head.

“Kuro,” she says, feathers perking. “Maybe you’re right, after all. Follow me!!”

With fires engulfing its head, I follow Asha to the tail-end of the airship-prey. Acrid smoke bellows from the maw on its back, causing me to cough at the stench. “Asha, I can’t stand being here.”

“I know,” Asha says. “But if I’m right, we won’t be here long. See that?”

She extends her wing outwards towards the very end of the monster’s belly.

“That’s where the heart of the ship is. If we can overheat the boiler, the ship will break down and stop flying!”

I gaze at the airship-prey, only a tiny bit surprised. I was right, after-all: these monsters have organs. I don’t understand why Asha doesn’t believe they’re living creatures, and I get the impression she’s withholding information from me on purpose. That’s fine. All I need to know is that they’re just like every other prey-animal on Jade: waiting to be preyed upon by Kin.

“We need to shoot fire at its heart,” I conclude.

“And I don’t have much left,” Asha snorts. “If I run out, you need to keep shooting until the ship dies!”

“Right!” I say.

Two flame pillars impact the airship-prey's belly, causing it to turn bright red. At the same time, the appendages on the bottom of the ship begin moving wildly. Is it going to attack us aga—

BA-BOOM!

SKREEEE!!

I gasp, watching as another attack from the airship-prey mercifully flies wide to our left. Asha wails in agony at the force of it, causing her flame to extinguish. But with my ears against my head, I hold my fire steady, determined to inflict a mortal wound against this wretched prey-animal.

Without warning, a colossal noise splits the air, rocking the airship-prey from side to side. A bulge forms suddenly at the place where its skin is reddest, and scattered entrails can be heard rattling across its insides. I extinguish my flame and gaze skyward, my attention drawn to the clouds of black smoke belching from the maw on the monster's back. The persistent grumbling noise that all airship-prey make suddenly softens, and the wind from the propellers abates.

“Its injured!!” I yell.

“Yes!!” Asha cries, her feathers perked in elation. “We did it! It won’t be in the air for much longer!” As we watch the ship heave in pain, a sadistic little grin curls across my mate’s muzzle. “The Farlanders are going to abandon ship!”

Abandon ship? I don’t know what that means, but I have a hunch: they will leave the airship-prey before it falls to the ground and dies. Understanding perfectly what this means, I can’t help but rumble in excitement.

We rise past the smooth appendages, lowered down and frozen stiff. We can relax, knowing that the airship will no longer attack us. We’ve truly dealt a mortal blow to this terrible monster. Somewhere above us, a group of Avians has already exited a maw and is gazing down at us with terror in their faces.

SKREEEAK!

Asha shoots a pillar of flame below them, spooking the prey-birds into flight.

“You believe you can fly over MY Kingdom?!” Asha taunts.

One of the Avians drops like a stone, while another tries to glide away from the dying prey-animal. Unfortunately for them, a sudden gust from a thermal blows them utterly off course. The first victim begins plummeting towards the ground, while the other is flung straight towards me. I tense my wings and lunge through the sky, clamping onto my prey with a relaxed ease.

“Je na gou!! Nakv vn, YUCUG!!”

The Farlander writhes and screams in agony, allowing its delectable viscera to drip into my maw. For a blissful moment, I savor it, allowing fear-scent to drift happily into my nostrils and enhance the taste. I can't hold back any longer — I bite down to silence the bleating prey-animal, and with a sudden twitch, its body snaps and goes limp. Using the claws on my foretalon, I slice open its pelt and toss it aside — Farlander pelts upset my stomach. With the unnecessary parts removed, I raise my head and swallow the rest of the Farlander whole.

Rrrrrowl....

I exhale in serene enjoyment — it's been far too long since I preyed on a Farlander. Oh, how I've missed their taste! Feeling somewhat satiated, I gaze across the sky to find Asha engaged in the same act of predation. The bloodied, severed torso of an Avian is dangling from her jaws as she works to remove its pelt. Blood splatters across her feathers as she cackles in glee at the fate of her prey-kill.

KREE-KREE!

At that moment, something steals my attention. On the other side of the ship — now listing precariously on its side — is a Farlander descending slowly through the night sky with the assistance of some sort of broad, white wing. Based on the length of the prey-animal's tail, I instantly recognize it as a Lemur. The hunt isn't finished, but the thought of preying on this particular Farlander gives me pause. Is this what Asha used to look like before she flew to Felra?

Having quickly preyed on the Avian, Asha seems to be in a similar state of dissonance. But the thought soon passes as Asha shakes her head and pounds her wings to chase.

KREE!!

The Lemur shrieks and wails, trying to adjust the long brown vines across its pelt. Asha snatches them cleanly from the sky and, with a quick flick of her head, puts an end to the miserable Lemur's life. As she screeches in delight at the taste, two other Avians leap from a maw on my side of the ship. I easily pick off the first, while the other falls into a steep dive to escape the scene. One has managed to get away, but that's alright. Warm blood stains the entirety of my maw – we're eating well tonight.

As I lick my chops clean of the second Farlander, the propellers of the airship-prey begin to wind down. The lights inside the monster go dark, and the ship begins to descend rapidly.

“Get back!!” Asha shouts.

With a commanding flap, I bank left to clear the area. As I do, I begin to see another Farlander at the head of the ship, the place where Asha shot her fire. One last prey-animal is trying to escape!

“**ORLANDO!!!**” Asha snarls.

Despite the threat from the dying airship-prey, Asha charges for the Farlander, now suspended in the air on white wings. A blood-curdling squeal is cut off as Asha snatches him from the air just before the edge of the dying airship-prey can impact her wings. After a brief moment obscured by the descending monster, Asha reappears with the Farlander dangling helplessly in her jaws, his white wing separated from his body. Asha savors her prey, allowing their blood to pool in her maw as screams of torment fill the cool night air. Pierced on the fangs of Kin, Asha throws her wings out and comes to a halt in the sky. With no regard for their pelt, she inclines her head and downs the bleating Farlander in a single bite.

I can't help but smile—Asha seems especially pleased to have preyed on the traitor. With the hunt concluded, she gazes at the dying airship-prey and roars defiantly.

SKREEEEEEAK!!!

Asha's told me countless stories about how much she disliked the Farlanders who used to live in her den. This must have been a uniquely satisfying hunt for her. As she licks drenched chops clean of blood, we gaze at the moon to watch the airship-prey finally die in a blazing ball of fire and smoke.

Fire erupts across the ground, instantly destroying Farlander dens and igniting many others. I wince, feeling vivid memories from fledgehood flow back to me. I never wanted to witness another airship-prey die, and I can't believe I had a part in preying on this one. But as the flames flutter like water across the land, I can't help but feel a sense of serenity. It is, after all, the natural course of the moon for Kin to prey on all other species. An airship-prey is no different — Farlanders have had this coming for a very long time.

I glide over to Asha, orange light flickering across her sullen face as she watches the destruction below. I want to say something to her, but what can truly be said? We've just preyed on an airship-prey over her Kingdom in the Farlands; its death is the most incredible thing I've ever witnessed. All we can do is watch as smoke and fire fill the sky.

“Come on,” Asha interjects the silence as smoke obscures our view. “Let’s go home.”

I stare at her a moment longer before rumbling in acknowledgment. Another silent moment passes, and with a steady flap of our wings, we begin flying north on our long journey back to the flock. Despite our victory, all is not well. Asha is in distress, and Keuvra could be at fault. I have many uncomfortable questions to ask our leader when we return to White Mountain.

117. Whatever Happens...

Fighting against a strong tailwind, four days of steady flying preceded us on our return trip home.

Ever since we preyed on the airship-prey, Asha has been in a dour mood. When we land and settle down for the night, she’s still accepting of my embrace. But she speaks little and moves slowly with her head and wings dragging close to the ground. Needless to say, I’ve been worried sick about her ever since we left Varecia.

On our return flight across the Kingdom, Asha flew down a few times to get a closer look at the state of Ellyntide’s cities. She was hoping, pleading to herself that there might be a stronghold Nortane didn’t yet control. But the truth was laid painfully bare. At each city we passed, there was evidence of airship-prey battles. Evidently, the north of Ellyntide was far more reluctant to cede control of the Kingdom than Varecia was. But at every city and every fort we passed, the Nortanian flag was flying above it. Despite the valiant effort of the resistance, Nortane had conquered the entirety of Asha’s Kingdom.

I feel awful just thinking about it. What happened to Asha's family? Could they still be alive? Despite everything I've done to help Asha, I can do nothing to comfort the wound of a fallen Kingdom.

Everyone at the Grandfather Tree was surprised to see us back so soon... everyone except Nakino, who was rightfully terrified. As before, Asha kept to herself and spoke little to other Kin. I did most of the storytelling about our flight over the Farlands and subsequent encounter with an enemy airship-prey. Despite the fervid excitement over our airship-prey predation, we only stayed at the aerie for a day. Asha was adamant about returning to White Mountain as soon as she regained her strength. And so, with a bitter greenwing chill in the air, we departed for the snow-capped mountain early this morning.

Now, we find ourselves in the upper Great Valley, the edifice of White Mountain perched above us like a roosting Kin. Asha is on my wing, flying with her eyes fixated on our snow-capped destination ahead. But then, her feathers perk; something on the ground has captured her attention. Curious, I gaze down to spot a glowing streak of light skirting the treetops, perfectly matching our speed.

...Oh. It's Gust again.

Since we entered the lower valley, he's been flying just above the tree line, vanishing and reappearing seemingly at random. When I asked Asha if we should fly down to greet him, she said no. She's not interested in speaking to the 'avatar' of the deities, only the real deity himself.

Is Gust trying to get our attention? Why hasn't he flown up to greet us? Honestly, with an attitude like that, I agree with Asha. Stop biting our tails! If you have something to say, then fly up here and say it!

Eventually, we come upon White Mountain's base and the aerie's entrance. After we call our landing, I spot a twinkle of light from a lone pine tree along the mountain's edge. *Finally*, after following us nearly the entire trip here, Gust zips through the sky and appears before us in the amount of time it takes to flap a wing. Feathers fly as Asha flares her wings in surprise, and her face contorts in fury.

"GUST!!!" She snaps, the vehemency of her anger restored.

"Daughters Kelani and Mecali," the glowing bird speaks impatiently. "Please follow me."

And with that, he flaps around and starts flying away from us!!

"What?!" I squawk.

"HEY!!!" Asha screams.

The bitch stops mid-flight and tilts his head around. "You seek an audience with Keuvra, do you not?"

"You bastard!!" Asha snarls, baring fangs. "Tell me the truth!! You were trying to keep me in Felra, weren't you!!"

Gust reorients himself and shakes his head. “I was trying to accomplish nothing. As I’ve explained before, I am simply—“

A searing column of fire interrupts Gust’s monologue, engulfing his tiny prey-bird body in flames. Clearly, Asha has had enough of the twittering fool. Unfortunately, the fire passes cleanly through him as if he weren’t there. Smoke drifts from Asha’s nostrils as Gust continues in a more measured tone: “...I am simply an avatar of the deities acting on their behalf. Nothing more.”

“But you went along with it!” I point out. “You conspired against Asha and her Kingdom!”

Gust frowns and shakes his head. “As a vassal of Azurrel, I cannot disobey. This is my task, as agreed upon in the sacred pact.”

Asha’s eyes go wide before narrowing back to slits. “The sacred pact,” she grumbles. “I should have known; you really *were*

an avian!”

I flick my gaze back and forth between Gust and Asha. I know the pact well: It’s the agreement between Farlanders, Kin, and Azurrel from when the islands were raised. Basically, it stipulates that those who lived in the sky would be subservient to the deities and Azurrel in exchange for saving us from the Great Freeze. But what does that have to do with Gust? Was he really an Avian from those times? How does Asha know that?

“What occurred long ago is irrelevant,” Gust sweeps his wing dismissively. “If you recognize that I am a harbinger of the deities, then recognize that even now, I am acting

on their behalf; Keuvra wishes to discuss the calamity that befell Ellyntide. However, he will not appear before you in the aerie. If you desire an audience, then you must do as I say *right now*.”

Asha and I stare at each other, low rumbles passing through our chest. Gust sounded like he was making a *threat*, not an invitation. I ask him, “Why should we trust you?”

“Why should we trust Keuvra?”

I recoil slightly and gaze at my mate. It’s not that I disagree with her, but... she would openly defy Keuvra in front of a divine being?

Gust’s head quirks. He seems equally as perplexed. “The way I see it, you have little choice.”

Silence stretches across the sky as we keep our muzzles clamped. Did he really think that was reassuring?

Sensing the failure of his approach, Gust ruffles, and his expression moderates. “In all of my time serving the deities, I have never known them to be disingenuous or act against the interests of those they represent before the God of Creation. Their ways may be difficult to understand... the business of deified mortals serving living mortals is tricky. But as Kuro can attest, Keuvra is a kind Dragon who cares deeply about his Kin. I believe that he views you as one, Asha.”

This book is hosted on another platform. Read the official version and support the author's work.

I give a quick sideward glance to Asha and catch her in the same act of insecurity. She's staring at me with longing eyes... she's unsure if I truly agree with Gust. The fact of the matter is, I do. Keuvra has always been kind when he appears in the aerie. Once, he even commended me in particular, singing praises to the flock about a successful frostwing hunt that brought much-needed prey to Flat Rock. I felt so happy knowing our leader had seen me. I felt the same elation when Gust told me I had been chosen for a Divine Flight to protect Asha. I have some uncomfortable questions to ask Keuvra, but I still trust him.

Turning back to Asha, I rumble softly and incline my head.

"Alright, fine," Asha mutters. "Take us to Keuvra."

Gust smiles gently. "As you wish."

The harbinger's little head pivots to me, and our eyes lock for a heartbeat. He casts about and begins descending towards the ground at the speed a normal prey-bird would.

"Come on," I tell Asha.

After a moment's hesitation, she rumbles softly in acknowledgment.

Gust leads us to the ground, across the treetops, and towards a clearing on the side of the mountain. As we fly along, I begin to make out something peculiar. I know White Mountain like the feathers of my wing, but I've never seen the set of strange-looking stones before us. Nestled into the glacier at the bottom of a snow-carved valley lies a spattering of odd stones piled up against a snow drift in a manner that reminds me of the ancient Farlander den me and Asha once visited. How come I've never seen this before? Did an avalanche recently uncover it?

"Whoa," I call out. "Gust, what's that ahead of us?"

"It is an entrance," he says simply.

I look past my wings to see Asha similarly intrigued. "Another entrance to the aerie?" she asks.

The only response is the sound of feathers passing through the cold mountain air.

We rise in altitude as we approach the entrance, following the curve of the mountain. We pass the tree line, and the ground below us becomes a broad plain of dense snow and compacted ice. Just when it seems Gust will lead us toward a safe landing spot, he disappears into a puff of glowing green mist.

"W-what?!" Asha reacts in surprise.

<Follow the entrance into the mountain, and heed the lessons contained within. Keuvra is anticipating your arrival.>

From somewhere unknown, Gust's voice echoes inside my head. What's going on?! I search the sky around us, but he's nowhere to be found. How did he speak to me?!

"Kuro."

I gaze past my wing to see Asha smirking.

"It's okay. He does that sometimes."

"Oh," I say, feeling slightly embarrassed. "Have you spoken to him more than once?"

"A couple of times," she smiles.

We settle down from the sky. Asha slips ever so slightly as she hits the snow, sliding a short distance before curling her talons into the ice. Ahead of us lies the stone entrance, somehow revealed from the icy glacier. Has it always been here, waiting for someone to be allowed into Keuvra's den? Somehow, I have a bad feeling about this.

Now firmly on the ground, Asha wastes no time tucking her wings and marching across the snow. After being passive and quiet for the entire trip home, it's clear she's emboldened for answers. But what if she's moving a little too quickly? What if...?

"Asha, wait!"

She stops two wingspans ahead of me and twists her neck around halfway, gazing expectantly for a response.

"I don't like where he's taking us."

Asha's head tilts. "Why?"

"Do you remember the entrance to the elder's den? The one inside the aerie that's guarded because it's strictly forbidden to enter?"

Slowly, understanding creeps across her face. She tips her wings and mumbles thoughtfully, "Keuvra's den is inside. Do you think..."

"Yes," I nod. "I think this is another entrance."

Asha recoils a little. “But, Gust said—“

“Asha,” I interrupt, speaking as sternly as possible. “The punishment for entering the elder’s den is *death*.”

Asha stares at me, muzzle agape. Across the mountain, a cold wind whips down the valley and howls past our feathers. “Death?!”

“Yes,” I say. “By Kevura’s decree, anyone caught in the elder’s den before their time must be slain.”

It’s... difficult to imagine Keuvra intentionally leading us to our deaths. He must be bringing us to another aerie deep inside the mountain, away from the flock’s watchful eyes. But with the penalty of death hanging over our heads, I would be negligent if I didn’t mention it to Asha. She deserves to know before we press forward.

Asha cautiously steps away from me. “Keuvra said that? A deity advocated for the death penalty?!”

I blink, surprised by her response. “Death must not be a punishment in the Farlands.”

“No!” Asha glowers. “The death penalty is barbaric! We stopped using it centuries ago!”

“Well, we still use it here,” I say, rolling my wings. “And if someone from the flock catches us in the elder’s den—“

“I don’t care,” Asha says, flicking her tail.

“W-What?!”

“If I can’t learn the truth about Ellyntide and my family, my life isn’t worth living!”

She folds her wings, turns on her talons, and resumes marching towards the entrance, leaving me stunned.

“Asha?!” I cry, bounding over the snow drifts to catch up. “Asha, how could you say that?!”

“I said it because I mean it!!” she yells, picking up her pace to put distance between us.

Wh... what’s going on? Why is Asha talking about risking her own life all of a sudden!?
“Asha, wait!”

“I’m not some puppet to be manipulated by the deities!!” She shrieks, casting about to face me. Tears are streaming down her face. “I’m me!! Asha, Daughter-Of-Kelani!! And if the deities are conspiring to lead me to my death, then I’d sooner die than grovel before them!!”

She turns and bounds away, the sound of her sobbing cut off by another bone-chilling gust of wind.

As her tail bobs over the snow, I feel my emotions overflow. What’s going on? Why is Asha acting so featherbrained all of a sudden?! Incapable of holding back, I snarl into the air and take flight, fighting the winds to come in for a fast landing in front of Asha. I unfurl my wings and impact the ground hard, causing a puff of snow to scatter into the air between us. With her path blocked, Asha holds her ground in a neutral stance.

“Asha!” I yell. “What do you think you’re doing?!”

She responds irritably, “If you don’t like what I’m doing, then wait outside while I talk to Keuvra!”

Asha splays her wings and snaps her jaws at me, a clear escalation! Acting on instinct, I roar across the mountain and fall into my own aggressive posture, keeping my muscles tensed just in case. The mountain trembles beneath my talons, causing chunks of ice to dislodge and tumble into the valley. The moon seems just as tense as we are.

“Listen to me!!” I seethe. “I know you’re angry at Keuvra! I am, too! But don’t throw your life away for nothing!!”

Asha flinches slightly but keeps her feathers puffed to appear larger than she is.

“And I know you’re concerned about your family. But what about me?! How do you think I’ll feel if you’re DEAD?”

The words smack Asha like a rearing spikehorn, crumbling her resolve. She winces, feeling negative emotions return to her. Her wings droop, and her head lowers to the ground. Feeling relieved, I snort and relax my wings.

“Gust was right about one thing,” I say in a more measured tone. “Keuvra has always been kind to the flock. It would be unthinkable for him to do something as insidious as misleading Kin to their death. The flock wouldn’t stand for it.”

Asha’s feathers rise and fall, but she says nothing as she stares into the snow. What is she doing? Feeling a pang of worry, I cross the space between us to join Asha and rub my head against hers. While keeping her wings drooped, she raises her head just enough to rub it against the tips of my neck feathers. She rumbles an affectionate little growl, and I return one.

“We’ll go together,” I say. “And at the first scent of Kin, we turn around. Understood?”

Asha stares across the glacier at the mountain's entrance. "But Gust wants us to go in there."

I raise my wing to block the snow from flying into Asha's face. "And we're not supposed to tell anyone about Gust, remember?"

"But, then why—"

A small growl interrupts Asha.

"Right, okay." She corrects. "At the first sign of Kin, we'll turn around."

I smile, feeling satisfied that Asha has returned to her senses. I tuck my wing and nuzzle against her one final time before allowing Asha to step away. She raises her head and squares her wings, the determination in her face restored.

"Let's go see Keuvra,"

Asha smiles and joins me at my side as we march across the snow. We approach the entrance to the mountain and slip side-by-side into the unknown.

118. Piercing the Veil

Cold stone surrounds us, chilling our feathers as we descend into the unknown depths of White Mountain. With our wings pulled tight, there's just enough space for Asha to walk beside me through the frozen passageway. The path before us is dark, covered in blowing snow and very little else.

"It's just like the entrance to the aerie," I say.

Asha rumbles in quiet acknowledgment. She's squarely focused on reaching Keuvra's den and learning the answers to questions that have plagued her since she became Kin. Daylight nips at our tailfeathers before extinguishing completely, leaving us to press forward in total darkness. The air is still, filled only by our own scents — it's been a very long time since a Kin last traveled over these stones. Eventually, our talons' sound changes, becoming more full and open. I sense we're no longer in the passageway.

"Asha."

My voice carries a distance, echoing off a distant wall.

"We're inside a den," Asha observes.

A flash of light leaves her muzzle, briefly illuminating the surrounding area. I catch just enough detail to confirm that the passageway had given way to a broad, airy den.

“You’re right!” I exclaim.

“Wait,” Asha drapes a wing across mine. “I saw something else.”

Another shot of fire illuminates the den, this time a feather longer than the first. Directly before us lies a series of stone pillars, rising straight to the den’s ceiling. Though I only caught a fleeting glance, they remind me of the pillars Asha and I saw in the Farlander ruins we burned. Somewhere closer to the ground is a pile of stones that seems to have been placed with intention. Was that what Asha noticed? As she takes a cautious step forward, something unusual happens: A flash of pale green light emanates from a stone before us, outlined in the shape of an unfamiliar symbol.

“Whoa!” Asha chirps, reflexively flinching.

I quickly join her at her side and examine the strange symbol. “Asha, is that the Goddess Language?”

To my surprise, she shakes her head. “I don’t know. I’ve never seen this symbol before in my life.” After a moment’s silence, she mutters, “If I were to touch it...”

Asha extends a wing forward, her feathers gently trembling. As soon as the barbs touch the stone, the den changes. Lights from unknown sources illuminate the den in a subtle orange glow, a radiance not unlike the lights of the Grandfather Tree. The breadth of the den is revealed to us – while far smaller in size than the aerie of White Mountain, a

Dragon could comfortably take flight in here. A raised portion of rock, half a wingspan off the ground, lies in the center of the den, flanked on both sides by a row of five stone pillars approaching us. Directly in front of the raised stone is another one of those strange, transparent stones that I saw Asha as a Lemur through. But the most striking feature is a series of... talon symbols? I'm not entirely sure what to call them. But there's a series of carvings against the stone walls on each side of the den.

"By the Goddess..." Asha whispers.

"What is this place?" I ask, gazing around the den. "Has this always been here?"

"Kuro, look."

Asha flicks her ears to the carvings on the right wall.

"Is that...?"

We cross the den and examine the wall up close. To my astonishment, the carvings are a series of highly detailed inscriptions that, when taken as a whole, appear to resemble a scene from real life. Flourishes of color, weathered by time and applied through means I don't understand, give the carvings a further sense of reality. I recognize the shapes of Farlanders, the shape of a small tree... Most strikingly, I recognize the shapes of Kin.

"Whoa..." I trail off in wonder. "Asha, what is this?"

My mate stifles a cheeky laugh. “It’s a mural, Kuro. Somebody with artistic talent carved this scene for future generations to admire.”

I gaze into the stone, mesmerized that entire stories could be told without a single word spoken. This one appears to be about Farlanders and Kin; Three Kin are perched in a field, gazing at the ground while a group of Farlanders look on. In the center of them is some kind of plant sticking out of the ground with green, wavy lines emanating from it.

“What’s going on here?” I ask. “Why aren’t those Kin preying on the Farlanders?”

“Look,” Asha points her wing toward the plant at the center of the mural. “Kuro, this is a tree sapling. They must be planting it.”

“Why would Farlanders and Kin plant a tree together?”

Asha rumbles in contemplation. “I don’t know. I wish I could tell which species it is, but there’s not enough detail to make a positive identification.”

Farlanders and Kin, working together to plant a tree? Why would Kin need the help of prey-animals to plant a tree? This mural doesn’t make any sense... could something like this truly have happened long ago? If so, why?

“Let’s check the mural on the other side,” Asha suggests.

We cross the den, passing the raised portion of the stone and the pillars in the center of the room. The next mural seems to tell a story about Kin and Farlanders outside of a large stone den near a bunch of... blue stuff? Could that be a lake? The Kin are holding vines in their muzzles that are attached to strange, flat objects on the ground. Somewhere nearby, a group of Farlanders are also holding vines attached to the flat objects.

“More cooperation,” I observe. “Asha, do you know what this blue stuff is?”

She tips her wings. “I think that’s the ocean.”

The *ocean*? “You mean, Farlanders were in Felra before the continents rose?”

“It doesn’t make any sense,” Asha rumbles in faint agitation. “But what else could it be? This scene must have occurred around the time the ancient Dragon clans were fighting each other.”

“*To prey on the land, in the sky, and at the sea...*” I mumble to myself, reciting a line from the parable about the history of the flock that all Kin know by heart. “But, the Farlanders in that story were mercilessly preyed upon by Kin. So how come this story shows them working together?”

An unspoken intrigue passes between us as we gaze into the mural. If this story is true, how has the flock been taught a different version of events? Gust told us we would find 'lessons' in this den, not more questions. Which story is right? Could both of them be true?

After a silent moment passes, Asha rises from her haunches. "Come on. Let's check the last one."

We trace the side wall, passing the columns and the raised stone rock. As the back wall comes into focus, Asha's feathers perk.

"The Goddess Language!"

She lopes forward, coming to a halt beneath a mural of a Farlander transforming into Kin with some Farlander symbols carved beneath. On the left side of the story is a Lemur, perhaps the same kind Asha used to be, clutching themselves with their arms. The Lemur has become much larger in the middle, feathers and wings sprouting from their body. Finally, the right side shows the Lemur fully transformed into Kin, bellowing fire from the muzzle into the sky above them.

Asha studies the inscription below the mural, mouthing the words as she translates the weathered stone. As I catch up to her, she recites aloud, "*The Lordanou Clan... tamers of elementia.*"

"*Elementia*'?" I ask. "Asha, what's that?"

She shakes her head in dismay. “I don’t know. I’ve never heard of that word before in my life. Kuro, do you think...”

She trails off, doubt lingering in her voice.

“Asha?”

Her red eyes stare into me before twisting back towards the mural. After a silent moment, she mutters, “I think I know what ‘*elemntia*’ is. But it’s... difficult to explain. And I’m not even sure something so fantastical could exist.”

Unauthorized tale usage: if you spot this story on Amazon, report the violation.

My head recoils a little. For some reason, Asha sounded rather ominous. “What do you mean, fantastical?”

She shakes her head and opens her wings slightly. “We should locate Keuvra’s den. If I’m correct, you won’t have to wait long to see *elementia* in use.”

I feel my tail wrapping around my front talons. Usually, Asha is eager to explain things I don’t understand. Why is she deflecting all of a sudden? Is there something about her family’s history that she’s embarrassed to share? Could *elementia* mean something different in the Farlands?

“What about the rest of this den?” I ask. “We haven’t explored the—“

“No,” she quickly turns away and shakes her head. “I’m not interested in the past, only the future. None of this matters, Kuro.”

I exhale, flattening my feathers. It feels like Asha’s putting stones between us. But instead of being angry, she smells... frustrated. And a little bit scared. What’s going on? What is it about elementia that’s got her so worried? And why doesn’t she feel comfortable telling her mate?

After a long silence, Asha rises to her talons but keeps her gaze from me. “We should keep looking for Kevura’s den,” she speaks softly.

Feeling the urge to comfort her, I take one step forward before holding my talon half-way in the air. Does Asha want my comfort right now? I can’t really tell... she seems so distant from me, and it breaks my heart to feel like I’m no longer someone she trusts. But I suppose I have to accept these feelings... Asha’s been troubled ever since we left Ellyntide, and I could never hope to understand the pain she’s been through since her transformation.

“Alright,” I say, resigning myself. “Let’s keep moving.”

It doesn’t take us long to discover another passage in the back of the den, partially concealed by the side of a recent cave-in. After clearing the stones, we proceed onward,

leaving the ancient den behind us. As we descend deeper into the mountain, the passage begins to narrow, constricting in size until we can no longer walk beside each other. Asha takes the lead, quickening her pace.

After walking for seemingly a claw's mark, Asha stops suddenly. "Do you hear something?"

I raise my head to taste the scents. "It's just us."

"Then what's that noise?"

Asha rumbles lightly, her feathers perked in attention. She lowers her head and paces a few steps forward. As she does, I begin to make out what she's hearing — a low noise, not unlike the growling of an airship-prey, or the sound of wind rushing past my head. What could that be? As we continue down the path, it gradually begins to slant uphill. With each step we take, the rumbling grows in intensity.

Eventually, a speckle of light becomes visible in the distance. Could it be light from Keuvra's den? I open my muzzle to ask if Asha sees it, but find myself cut-off by the distinct sound of feathers ruffling behind us. I whip around, fangs bared, half-expecting to find another Kin standing behind us. Yet there's nothing but unyielding darkness.

"What was that?" Asha asks.

I hold my silence, straining to sense another presence. But only Asha, myself, and the stone walls surround us.

“I don’t know,” I growl, shaking my head and turning back towards my mate. “Asha, do you—“

My words cease, stolen by the presence of a pair of red, glowing feathers on the ground before Asha. She stares at me for a confused moment before twisting around herself.

“Gust...!” she gasps.

“What is this?!” I ask aloud. “Why would he leave his feathers here?”

“C-Could this mean Keuvra’s den is up ahead?”

Asha stares at me, pale light reflecting in her eyes. It only takes her a moment to begin sprinting away from me.

“Asha?!”

She leaps over the feathers, causing dappled light to shimmer across the passage's walls. I duck my head and take off after her, following the passage as it continues downhill towards the distant speck of light, the sound of wind growing with each stride.

“Asha, wait!!”

Slowly, the light grows until Asha's feathers become visible against it. The ground levels out, and the sound of wind becomes overwhelming. I begin to see the far wall of a den at the other end of the passage. With one final burst of speed, Asha leaps headlong into the den before quickly stumbling out of sight. As I tumble in after her, I find Asha frozen stiff, her wings half-open, and her trembling gaze drawn to something extraordinary.

“By the...”

On the back wall is a swirling mass of mist, warping and bending in on itself, torn open to the den in a tempestuous show of light and sound. Though we find ourselves deep within White Mountain, I feel moisture against my feathers, and the walls are covered in a thin sheen of moisture that scatters pale light across every surface. I taste the scents of Felra — is this the Great Valley? A mountain by the ledge? I can't be sure. I can't be certain of anything right now. I'm at a loss to describe what I'm seeing, much less explain what it is.

Primal emotions surge through my body. My head screams at me to flee, yet my legs feel as heavy as tree trunks. I attempt to move something, anything, on my body, but nothing happens. I get the impression that I'm witnessing something viscerally wrong with the world, and staying here could harm me in ways beyond my comprehension.

Finally, something responds. I tear my gaze from the mists to see Asha in a similar state of shock, her fear-scent overwhelming. The urge to protect her — the most important Kin I've ever known — overpowers my own morbid fears. As I rush to join her at her side, the mists begin to waver, bending and parting until the image of a tree bare of leaves becomes visible.

What has Gust brought us to?! I thought we would find Keuvra's den, not... this!

"Kuro?" Asha yells, finally breaking free of her trance. "Is this...?"

I stare at her, attempting to offer an explanation. But what I see before me defies everything I've ever known. Where's Kevura's den?! It couldn't be somewhere inside the mists, could it?

Having seemingly thought of the same thing, Asha yells, "I'm going to enter it!"

"No!" I yell, feeling a sudden surge of bravery. "Asha, I'll go first!"

"Kuro, it's—"

ROARRR!!!

A furious noise splits the air, interrupting our conversation. We spin around to find a Dragon advanced in age standing in a second entrance to the den, her grizzled face filled with horror.

“Khosa?!” I shiver in horror at the sight of the elder.

Asha quakes, “W-What are you doing here?!”

The elder rips open her great wings and falls into an attack posture. Reacting on instinct, Asha and I take a similar stance, baring fangs and raising hackles. But instead of attacking us, Khosa rears her head and issues a shrill warning cry.

RO-ROARGHH!! ROARGH!!

Panic lances my body. What’s Khosa doing here?! Are we... no, we couldn’t be! There were no scents here but our own! This can’t be the elder’s den! Gust can’t...!

“How did you get in here?!” Khosa snarls. “The entrance is guarded!”

“Stay back!!” Asha roars, splaying her wings in a vain attempt to protect me. “We’re entering Keuvra’s Den!”

“NO!!”

Asha turns to flee, but the elder is too quick. She pounces Asha from behind and easily slams her against the ground, swatting and kicking against her back. Asha roars in pain and tries to fight back, but Khosa easily overwhelms the far smaller Kin. Acting on instinct, I raise my talons to defend my mate before a surge of dissonance stops me cold. If I attack an elder, I'll be committing one of the gravest acts a Kin can do. But if I don't save Asha—

ROOARRRR!

Another yowl rises above the chaos, dissolving my thoughts. I spin around to see Uma leaping into the den, his slate-colored plumage sparkling blue in the light of the mists. His gold eyes fixate on me, and he wastes no time leaping forward with claws outstretched!

I can't... I won't do this!

I leap to the side, easily dodging Uma's initial attack. Although I'm a much more formidable opponent for an elder, the last thing I'm after is a fight!

“STOP!!”

I lower myself and splay my wings across the ground, indicating a yield. Uma flinches, a feathers' edge from leaping into battle, but steadies himself with his fangs bared.

I grit my fangs and yell, “We yield!! Asha, stop fighting!!”

With the elder pinning her against the ground, the melee between Asha and Khosa pauses just long enough for Asha to shriek, “WHAT?!” She snarls angrily, ignoring my plea and snapping her jaws at Khosa’s face to resume the fight in earnest.

“NO!”

I leap into the fray, joining Khosa in an attempt to restrain Asha as much as possible. Feathers fly as we snarl, working to contain Asha’s limbs and stop her from resisting. With her body pinned to the ground, Khosa reaches to hold her forelegs while I apply pressure to the hind. With both of us holding her down, it seems to work — Asha roars, smacking her tail against the ground in a vain act of defiance. But her mettle begins to taper, and it isn’t long before she’s reduced to heaving breaths and weak, sputtering growls.

“Kuro...” she whimpers in dismay. The sight of my mate in a pain I knowingly caused hurts worse than any physical wound I’ve ever received.

“What is the meaning of this?!” Uma hisses, stepping forward to get into my face. “How did you get inside our den?!”

I hear feathers rustling and look up to see Ashene and Grandmother standing at the second entrance of the den. Ashene looks horrified, while Grandmother looks like she's seen my corpse. In a certain way, she has.

I can't possibly tell them how we got here or *who* it was that sent us. Gust's instructions were clear: we must conceal his existence from everyone, including the elders. Is it our fault that we were discovered? What if Gust was acting maliciously and *wanted* to see us captured? Could someone with the power of the deities truly act that way against mortals?

I don't know what to think. I can't possibly think straight at a time like this. I need time to sort things out, even if it's to our detriment.

So, I won't tell them. "...I can't say."

"What?!" Khosa snarls. "Why can't you tell us?!"

I draw a breath and flick my gaze to Asha. Patches of feathers are missing from her body, replaced by rough bruises and splotches of purple blood. Khosa looms above her with a talon against her chest, staring into Asha's eyes with hateful reproach. She's been broken, humiliated, and torn, but she keeps her muzzle clamped, refusing to reveal the secret of Gust's existence.

"Petulant Fress!" Khosa bellows. "I don't know how, but you've made a grave mistake today. If you will not speak the truth to us, then we are forced to judge you before the flock."

My heart sinks deep into my chest at her words, and my stomach freezes to ice. Feeling guilty, I force myself to meet Grandmother's gaze. She looks mortified, heaving heavy breaths as she strains to keep herself upright. By entering the elder's den, she knows precisely the fate that awaits us:

Death, in the fires of White Mountain.

April Fools: Dragons of a Feather

Damp paws tread over withered leaves, echoing across an overgrown and unfamiliar forest. I stop by the side of a colossal redwood tree to taste the scents – the intoxicating odor of prey is as muddled as the late-season underbrush. Still, I'm confident they're here, and I'm willing to do whatever it takes to finally catch a meal. It's been two days since we ate, and the dragon I was forced to abandon is...

...

Feeling a second wind of determination, I refold my wings and tuck my head to slip quietly through a thicket.

Emerging on the opposite side, I find myself at the top of an escarpment, gazing down into a creek that hasn't flowed freely in months. I taste the air again, and my tail flicks – finally, a fresh scent! I lower myself into the creek bed, flanked on both sides by carved walls of clay and earth. The scent leads downstream, meandering past heaps of moss-covered boulders and a bend in the creek long ago bypassed and filled with silt. After losing the scent by the side of a decayed redwood, I recapture it and find myself staring

down a heavily trampled path into the trees. Unwilling to leave my scent where others could find it, I flank the path from the outside and reenter the forest.

Eventually, I come upon my prey. Sleeping in a sunbeam at the top of a fern-covered incline is a furred creature resemblant of a rabbit. I can't help but salivate; this is my best chance at a meal since I arrived here. I raise my head to stalk around the side of a bramble bush, careful not to get my feathers caught in it. The forest here is covered in twigs and leaves, so I must be careful not to awaken my prey. Carefully, I put one paw before the other, conscious of where they land. If I can make it to the backside of the incline without awakening—

Somewhere, a twig snaps. My head shoots up in attention, and I turn to face the source of the sound. With a muffled roar, a creature covered in short tan fur darts from the side of a cypress tree and begins sprinting towards me!! I flinch, startled by the sheer size of the beast. It's at least twice the size of me! Where did it come from, and how long has it been stalking me?! The ground trembles as it charges towards me, claws outstretched!

Golden clock hands appear around the perimeter of their body.

The beast begins to slow, sailing through the air at a quarter speed like a bald eagle caught in a thermal. Seizing the opportunity, I unleash a savage roar and bounce off a nearby boulder to dive for my opponent's neck.

RAAAARR!!

Golden feathers fly as I clamber the beast and sink my fangs into their neck, tearing open a jagged wound of blood and viscera. But before I can inflict further damage, something

changes. The clock hands surrounding the beast shatter and fade from existence. I roar in horror just as the beast returns to normal time. It rears its hindlegs, flinging me from its back and sending me sailing across the forest and into the side of a tree.

RAARGHH!!

Searing pain lances my body as I collapse to the ground with an inglorious thud. What did my spell fail *again!*? Conscious that my opponent is close, I struggle to rise from the force of the impact. But as I put weight on my paws, an intense wave of lightheadedness comes over me. My legs buckle, and I collapse to the ground once more. My thoughts muddle, and my consciousness begins to slip away from me.

I have to get up. I can't leave them all behind. I can't...

With the scent of the beast close, I hear something closing in fast through the trees above me. But try as I might, I'm powerless to stop my soul from slipping into the void.

Darkness roils in the depths of my mind, silent and unending.

Then, the stillness gives way to the sound of distant thunder. It intensifies, quaking my soul until the chaos is directly overhead. Roars and shrieks punctuate the air, adding to the visceral cacophony around me. I strain to cover my ears but find my muscles locked. Or perhaps I never had muscles to begin with.

And then, just as quickly as it came, the thundering ceases. The cries of dragons lower to a murmur before ceasing altogether, once more casting me to the void. But before the darkness can return, a particular pale light shines from beyond the abyss. It grows in intensity, and I allow it to overtake me.

...

Acrid smoke fills my lungs, as if I were a hatchling once more, still learning to breathe fire *out* rather than back in. Instinctively, I turn my head, unable to escape the smoke. My eyes water and sting, and I rub them with my paws.

Fuzzy memories return to my head. There'd been a fight, and I'd lost. Had I died? Is this what joining the stars was like?

"Oh! That's enough!"

A dragoness's voice. In Southern? Could it be...? Had I succeeded in finding them? I force my eyes open, staring through the smoke and trying to make out the figures above me.

"Give her some room," the voice continued.

"Are you sure about this?" a new dragoness asks, this one more haughty and confident than the first.

“Yes, there’s nothing to be afraid of.”

A second wind of strength blows through over me. I was right! There are Southernns in this realm! But who could they be? I strain to gaze through the haze and learn more about my saviors, but the figures above me are a muddled mess of colors and shapes. Ugh! What is this smoke from, anyway? As I furrow my eyes and work to clean them, a breeze blows through the forest, clearing the smoke around me and replacing it with the scent of the dragons. Their feathers smell of springtime flowers and spiced nutmeg; pleasant scents lacking any trace of aggressiveness.

With the smoke cleared, my hacking cough begins to subside, and I decide to test my eyes again. Slowly, I peel them open to discover two Southernns, each the size of a small building, staring down at me like mountains.

I yelp in panic, falling backward into a defensive posture.

“Stay back!!” I shriek.

A caterwaul splits the air, the two larger dragons falling into their own towering stances with fangs bared and feathers ruffled. They issue growls like thunder, causing the ground beneath me to tremble. As anger flows between us, I quickly try and assess the situation. Two Southernns, soot gray and sky blue, have seemingly saved me from certain death. But why are they so big?! Have I somehow returned to hatchhood?! I stifle my racing thoughts – now isn’t the time for conjecture, I need to defend myself! My wing spurs twist, readying a spell should it become necessary. Will slowing the carotid artery of a dragon this size be enough? The soot-gray Southernns tenses her haunches to attack, but the sky blue one fluffs in surprise.

“Wait!!”

Everyone present freezes, a deadly tension left hanging in the air. The growls subside to a low rumble, and the gray one gives a sidelong glance. But the blue is unflinching, staring at me with curious eyes.

“You speak in the voice of Kin,” she rasps inquisitively. “Who are you?”

The voice of Kin...?

Questions fly through my head. What’s ‘Kin’? Who’s Kin? Is that what they call ‘*Southern*’ in this realm? These dragons look vaguely like me, but beyond the discrepancy in size, there are critical differences in how our plumages are arranged. Are they truly fellow Southernns?

“And you possess the Gift of Communication,” the blue one continues as my mind toils. “Could you—”

“How are you speaking Southern?” I demand. “There are no dragons in the realms your size!”

“Our size?” The gray one questions. “Speak for yourself, *prey-animal*. A Dragon such as you should have–”

“Kuro, wait.”

The gray one – Kuro, it would seem – tenses as she abruptly cuts off her sentence. She flexes her talons, but allows the blue one to continue speaking.

“What is ‘*Southern*?’” she asks.

As I contemplate a response, I realize that The blue one is attempting to diffuse the situation! Is she making an attempt to be diplomatic? I’ve only been the leader of something for a little over two years, but I can recognize when someone is trying to negotiate with me. If my hunch is correct, then she’ll be receptive to any counter-offers and try to reach a deal. This could be a way to end the standoff without a fight!

Staring down the larger dragons, I draw a deep breath and force my crest to flatten. “I will not speak under the threat of violence. However, If we could lower our claws and be civil, I would be willing to share a dialogue.”

The blue dragon’s eyes go wide as discs. It seems she wasn’t expecting to encounter such an eloquently spoken dragon. But Kuro seems less impressed. “How can we trust you? What are those lights around your wings?”

“Self-defense,” I answer simply, convinced these dragons aren’t Southern. “I do not seek conflict but will defend myself if necessary.”

At that, the blue dragon’s gaze rises to scan the forest around us. Is there something behind me? I don’t smell anything out of the ordinary. What could she be looking for?

This content has been unlawfully taken from NovelBin; report any instances of this story if found elsewhere.

The ironically named Kuro studies me, her tail flicking in the grass behind her. “Asha, I don’t think we can trust her.”

“I think we can,” The blue dragon sighs, relaxing her wings.

Kuro’s feathers perk in surprise. “Asha?”

“This is *really* weird,” she says, raising her head from the ground. “But weird stuff has a tendency to follow me. My name’s Asha, Daughter-Of-Kelani. And this is my mate Kuro, Daughter-Of-Mecali.” She tips her wings to Kuro, their weary gaze still attached to me. “What’s yours?”

Wait, so they’re–

...Oh.

Well, um. At least they shouldn't be offended if I tell them I have a girlfriend. But 'Kuro' and 'Asha' certainly aren't the names a Southern hatchling would receive. While they seem capable of being friendly, I can't help but feel their piercing stares. Will they really believe the truth of how I arrived here?

"I am Grith," I say, dipping my head. "I came to this realm searching for my parents, assuming I would find others like me. But, it seems I was mistaken."

Until I learn more about these dragons, I shouldn't tell them too many personal details about my life on Terra. What if they learn something about me and find it offensive? Still, I know that in order to gain their trust, I'll need to divulge certain information about me. Hopefully, the story of why I came here and how I got trapped will be enough for them to take pity on me.

"This realm?" Asha's head tilts. "You couldn't be from the Farlands, could you?"

"Terra," I correct. "I arrived here via the greater gate in the mountains to the east."

The dragons exchange befuddled glances. Could they... not know what a greater gate is? Are they clueless about the existence of the other realms? How could a dragon not know about such things?

“This is *very* strange,” Kuro remarks. “Asha, do you think...?”

Something unspoken passes between Kuro and Asha. She flicks her gaze to me, suddenly overcome with trepidation. “You... came here of your accord, right?”

I don’t understand it entirely, but these dragons are trying to conceal something from me. I open my muzzle to deflect Asha’s question before the rumbling of my stomach interrupts my thoughts. Um, right. It’s been two days since I last ate, and the scent of fresh prey is on my nose. Somewhere behind me is the corpse of the beast that nearly took my life, just waiting to be devoured. If I could gain the trust of these dragons, then perhaps they would share their kill with me.

I’m going to have to take a leap of faith, aren’t I? I don’t entirely trust these dragons, but this is a dangerous realm full of creatures far larger than me. If I can’t form alliances here, I may not survive long enough to find a way to return home.

I draw a breath and click my tongue in acknowledgment. “My cousin and I discovered the gate to this realm on our ancestral homeworld, Fikol. The entrance was hidden in a sacred place to our kind, buried beneath a dune on the side of a desolate mountain. At first, we were confused... the inscriptions on the gate were utterly alien to us. After studying them in great detail, my cousin concluded it could lead to an entirely new realm, one that our Legends spoke nothing of. I volunteered to explore it, believing it could lead me to the location of my parents, who have been missing since I was young.

“But things did not go well. We could open the gate without incident, but as soon as I stepped into your realm, the link collapsed and stranded me here. It makes no sense...

there should have been enough shimmer to sustain the connection for weeks. I tried to reopen the gate myself, but it was to no avail.

“Faced with little other choice, I was forced to explore this new realm in search of game. The magic here is... different. I can not explain why. Sometimes my spells form without incident, but others collapse at the most inopportune times. I was about to prey on the animal that knocked me unconscious before my spell ingloriously fizzled. Had you not intervened in the fight, I surely would have perished. For that, I am grateful.”

I look up from the ground to see Kuro and Asha staring intently, their expressions guarded. Do they believe the things I'm saying? Or is it only a matter of time before they consider me prey?

“I must return to Fikol as soon as possible. There is no food on our homeworld, and the realm is poisoned by death magic. Without me, my cousin can not return to our home, Terra. But without my cousin, I cannot reopen the gate which stranded me here. I am beside myself about what to do next. Please, if you know of any chromancers in your realm, or even those familiar with shimmer, then you must take me to them at once!!”

Silence stretches across the forest.

The larger dragons relax on their haunches and audibly exhale. I didn't overwhelm them with information, did I? The shimmer in this realm - inconsistent as it may be - has a pleasant aroma and is consistent everywhere I've been. Surely they must know of other chromancers, some perhaps even more adept than I am.

“This is an awfully familiar story,” Asha says, loosening her wings.

“Too familiar,” Kuro quips.

“...It is?” I blink.

“I met Asha under similar circumstances,” Kuro nods. “She was not from this, um, ‘*Terra*’ you speak of. But she arrived in Felra from a place far different from it.”

“Felra...” I echo. “Is Felra the name of this realm?”

“It’s the name of this continent,” Asha says. “But, you’re not from this continent, are you? Or even from this moon?”

Kuro ruffles slightly, switching her gaze between us. “Asha!”

“If I’m understanding things correctly,” Asha tilts her head forward. “Then my ‘*realm*’ is called Jade – that is the name of this moon. Your realm is somewhere far away from here, isn’t it?”

Oh, gosh. The veil is really dropping between us now. Aren’t these dragons familiar with the realms? Are they even familiar with magic? It feels like I’ve stepped back in time to

the days when Grandfather was young – these dragons know so little about themselves or their place in the universe. At least they seem to believe my story... for now.

“It would seem so,” I sigh. There are no gas giants hanging in the skies of Terra. Our constellations are nothing alike. And all the dragons I know are intimately familiar with magic, if not practitioners themselves.”

At that, Asha’s face droops. “You’re lost in an unfamiliar place you know nothing about, desperately trying to return home to your family.”

I ruffle slightly, taken aback by Asha’s sudden empathy. Even Kuro seems somewhat surprised by the change in tone. I want to tell her she’s correct, but the words are difficult to loosen.

Asha rumbles a soothing noise, one not unlike the sounds Mother used to make when I was a hatchling. She splays her talons in front of her, resting on the ground before me. Her face is gentle, full of patient understanding. Has something similar happened to Asha before? After a confused moment, understanding grows on Kuro’s face. She joins her on the ground beside Asha and drapes a wing across her mate.

“So, you’re a...” Asha quickly trails off and flashes her gaze to Kuro. “Shimmer user. Like, *magic*.”

“That is correct,” I exhale, confused but thankful for the change in subject. Searching for an opportunity, I gaze up to see dried leaves drifting through the air from the trees above us. I tilt my wing spurs and summon just enough shimmer to slow a leaf’s descent to half speed. The dragons gasp, watching in muted shock as golden clock hands appear around

the leaf before quickly disappearing. “My Grandfather taught me chronomancy magic, which is how I opened the gate to your realm. Among other things, I can use it to alter the flow of time.”

The leaf returns to normal speed and quickly descends to the ground. The two dragons exhale and relax their feathers, reeling from the rudimentary demonstration.

“Asha,” Kuro asks, turning to her mate. “Do you think—”

“Yeah,” she says. “It seems really similar to me, doesn’t it?”

“Do you practice magic as well?” I ask, excitement fringing my voice.

Asha’s face twists in apprehension. “Erm, sort of. Our deities grant us ‘*gifts*’ that enable us to do things we couldn’t normally do, like communicate with each other in a spoken language.”

“Or ascend to a more ‘*civilized*’ form,” Kuro grumbles, rolling her eyes so hard they risk departing their sockets.

“Oh,” my wings droop. “That does not sound similar to what I can do.”

“There’s more to it than that,” Asha smiles. “I can’t cast spells like you can, but we’re more alike than you think.”

“Really...?” My head tilts. What could she possibly mean by that?

Kuro smirks and pushes her wing against her mate. “Not yet, Asha.”

“Don’t worry!” she laughs. “I wouldn’t dare.”

Okay, they’re *definitely* hiding something from me. But strangely, I don’t get the impression that it’s anything malicious. More like something I’m not yet ready to see. Still, I can’t help but be morbidly curious. Who are these dragons? What are their lives like? How are they connected to Fikol? And why are they so *big*?

As I ruminate, Kuro notices the dissonance in my face. “Asha, We have to protect her. If another Dragon finds Grith...”

“Right,” Asha nods. “It wouldn’t end well. We need to take her to White Mountain as soon as possible. Her cousin is in danger.”

“White Mountain?” I ask. “Is that where you live?”

“Not us,” Kuro says, stretching her paws. “But our leader, Keuvra.”

Asha nods. “Kevura is the leader of our flock, and our deity. He’ll know why your spells keep fizzling.”

“Your *deity*...?” I gasp. “You mean, like a *God*? You can *talk* to your gods here?”

“I mean,” Asha rubs her neck with her wing spurs. “A deity isn’t the same thing as a god, but we talk to Keuvra once a darkmoon.”

“Oh...” I trail off in faint wonder. “We do not talk to our gods on Terra. Well, my cousin claims to have spoken to one, but I find it more likely that he ate the wrong herb. Perhaps that is what has happened here.”

“I think he’ll be pleased to meet you,” Asha says, rising to her talons. “Just stay close to us when we get to White Mountain, okay? A lot of Dragons live there, and everyone will be really curious about you.”

“Um, yes, of course,” I say, loosening my wings. ‘*Curious*’ can only mean one thing – they’ll see me as prey! I hope Kuro and Asha know how to fight because I don’t want to use my magic to defend myself. These dragons seem primitive, and using the breadth of my magic may frighten them. Asha claims we’re alike, yet she was just as shocked as Kuro was to see my chronomancy. How would a dragon who views me as lunch respond?

“Grandmother is going to have a fit,” Kuro jokes, standing on all fours to join Asha. She stretches her wings and exclaims, “*What have you dragged back to White Mountain this time?!*”

Asha laughs and is about to turn away with Kuro before her crest perks. She looks back and asks, “Are you hungry, Grith? Me and Kuro already ate, so you can have the rest of the Litsha, if you want.”

The two dragons smile, instantly raising my spirits.

“Um, thank you!”

Without wasting another moment, I cast about and find the ‘*Litsha*’ lying behind me. A warm breeze blows through my feathers as I feast on the animal, bringing strange scents from beyond the forest. Somehow, it seems I’ve managed to court the favor of these dragons. I don’t know what the future holds at White Mountain or if their deity will even be able to help me reopen the greater gate. But if nothing else, it seems I’ve made two new friends.

With the delectable taste of prey still fresh on my tongue, Asha and Kuro led me through the forest and into a broad clearing where trees are absent. Following their tail feathers, I step through the side of a bush and emerge into the mid-day sun. The skies have cleared since I last saw them, allowing me to feel the warmth of this realm for the very first time.

As I gaze beyond Asha and into an endless sky, she unfurls her wings and smirks. “You know how to fly, right?”

“Of course,” I nod. “Please, lead the way. I won’t be far behind you.”

The two dragons nod, raise their heads and issue savage calls into the clear autumn sky.

SKREEEAK!

ROOOAR!!

As they leap into the air, I feel compelled to join them with my own call.

RARRRRH!

Kuro and Asha rise quickly, entering a thermal that sends them soaring past the tree line. As I join them in the updraft, I get my first unobstructed view of the skies of Felra.

“By the stars...” I trail off in wonderment.

I find myself in a great valley, flanked on both sides by towering mountain ridges. Forests of green and gold stretch out in all directions, untouched by the cruel hands of humankind. Above me are islands perched in the sky, floating in place among the endless expanse of clear blue. And it's there at the top of the valley that I find a towering stratovolcano, blanketed by sheets of alpine glaciers, making its prominence known above all else. Surely, this is White Mountain – a fitting place for a deity to reside.

If nothing else, this is certainly an exciting realm.

I catch up to Kuro and Asha, winging forward to fly beside them.

“Um,” I call out.

Gazing past their wings, my new friends smile and give me their undivided attention.

“To answer your prior question; ‘*Southern*’ is the name of my kind; those dragons descended from ancient Fikol...”

119. At The End of it All

“*Almighty, ancient Keuvra! Appear before us!*”

A pillar of azure fire erupts from the Gathering Stone, rising towards the ceiling of the aerie and fanning outward in all directions. As the roiling flames dissipate, I look to the smaller fires illuminating the mountain and hold my breath, silently pleading for the flames to snuff out and finally herald the arrival of our leader. But, just as it's been the past two seasons, a silent moment passes, and nothing unusual happens. Yet again, Keuvra has refused to appear at the most critical time.

A heavy sigh escapes me. Without Keuvra, our chances of avoiding death are bleak. How could Gust lead us to Keuvra's den, only for the elders to discover us? What are we supposed to do?

After Asha and I were apprehended, the elders quickly separated us, fearing that we might try to work together and flee the judgment now owed to us. I wouldn't do such a thing, but Asha was far less cooperative. She remained upset, growling at Khosa and refusing to leave the den until she had time with Keuvra. It took Grandmother, Uma, and Ashene working together to keep her subdued, nipping her feathers until she finally calmed down enough to be led to the Gathering Stone in the heart of the aerie. A gathering was called from the top of White Mountain shortly thereafter, and the flock soon assembled.

As we paced out of the den, the much larger Ashene at my side, I could feel Asha's piercing gaze against my feathers. She was wondering, pleading to know why I wouldn't join her in resisting something so plainly unjust. But I won't fight back against my Grandmother. I know that the other elders didn't have to save us, and they could have chosen to simply take our lives instead of offering a chance of a reprieve. I feel terrible about it. In a way, I'm less of a mate for not fighting alongside Asha until the bitter end. But I'm also not going to force my Grandmother to send another family member to the skies of Maki. I can't leave that burden on her conscience.

I tried talking to her as we left the den, but she refused to meet my gaze. Once we arrived at the top of the Gathering Stone, she and the rest of the elders had a long conversation that lasted until the entire flock had arrived from the rest of our territory. Grandmother was facing away from me for most of the talk, but I could tell by her body language she was terribly upset. Eventually, she skulked away from the group, her wings folded tight

and her tail between her legs. After doing so much to protect me over the seasons, I got the impression that her influence among the elders had run dry.

Across the gathering stone, the elders fold their wings and solemnly lower their heads. Feeling a pang of guilt for Grandmother, I take a gentle step forward before a strong wing whips me back to where I was sitting. *Um, right.* Well aware of my fighting prowess, the elders asked no less than four Kin to surround me, keeping me constrained away from the comfort of my mate. Embarrassed, I gaze across the stone to see Asha staring at the elders, flanked by two drakons much larger than her. But instead of being anguished, she looks furious. After everything that's happened, I can't say I blame her. I just wish I could be at her side, comforting her in perhaps our final moments together.

"It would seem our leader has once more entrusted us to handle the affairs of the flock," Uma announces as he turns to face the overcrowded aerie. Flickering light dances across his slate-gray feathers from the roaring ember root fire at the back of the gathering stone. "Keuvra's decision is difficult to understand. But we must respect his wishes and the faith he has placed in us all. It will be us mortals who decide the fate of Kuro and Asha."

My tail whacks against the hindlegs of the Dragons surrounding me. *I can't believe this is happening.* And I can't even speak out to defend myself! I just have to keep my muzzle shut and allow our lives to rest on the wings of the elders.

"To enter the elder's den is strictly forbidden," Khosa bellows, stepping past a sullen Grandmother. Golden barbels drag across the ground as she faces the throngs of Kin. "Keuvra's edict is clear: Those caught before their time must be thrown to the fires of White Mountain, never to share the knowledge of what they've seen."

I cast an anxious glance at the fire in the back of the rock, belching crimson flames high into the air. Jawfulls of ember root were added in preparation for the gathering, causing the flames to explode to a size rarely seen. All we saw was some weird, misty tree! It wasn't even that unusual! Why is it so important that we be punished?

“However,” Uma continues, Keuvra has entrusted us to navigate this sordid affair. We would be remiss if we didn’t recognize Kuro and Asha’s contributions to the flock. Daughter-Of-Mecali has been a stalwart huntress, selflessly providing prey for untold seasons. It was Kuro who saved Asha's life, the Kin who would go on to discover a treatment for the blight that sent so many Dragons to the skies of Maki.”

“*The Kin who discovered the treatment,*” Ashene chuckles. The oldest Kin in the flock slowly rises from his perch at the back of the stone. Tattered gray feathers drag from his haunches as he ambles forward and speaks, “You denigrate the work of our accomplished healer, Son-Of-Yzori. To compare him to this lost girl, this *Farlander* who has yet to be formally recognized as Keuvra’s Kin is an insult to Nakino’s tireless—“

“SHUT UP, BITCH!!”

Something happens as I splay my wings and take a provocative step forward — perhaps it’s the drakon to my right or the haughty drakaina to my left. Either way, quicker than a wingbeat, I feel myself dragged to the ground, and the weight of four dragons pile on top of me. The sound of heavy growls and thunderous snarls overwhelm my ears.

“KURO!!” Asha’s voice rises over the chaos.

I roar in pain, feeling my captor’s claws sink into my flesh — but I don’t care. Anyone who still believes Nakino was responsible for the treatment is a featherbrained fool. It was *ASHA* who discovered it, nobody else!! Screaming at Ashene will make me look terrible to the rest of the elders, but a certain bitter part of me has already accepted my fate. I allowed Asha to question my loyalty to her because I believed our leader would save

us. What a fool I was! If I'm truly destined to die here today, then I would rather be remembered as a fiercely loyal mate than a silent coward.

"Arrogant fress," A voice whispers into my ear. A heartbeat later, pain shoots through my neck as a set of jaws clamp onto my crest and tear away a patch of feathers. I snarl in pain, helpless to stop the onslaught of those restraining me.

"Release her," Khosa growls, agitation fringing her voice.

Slowly, the Kin relax their talons but remain close, ready to subdue me should I cause another disturbance. I loosen a growl and shake my head, gazing past the disappointed stares of the elders to see Asha breathing heavily with a look that could either be morbid concern or tacit approval. I can't help but smirk — I get the distinct impression that either way, Asha was pleased by my outburst.

As I rise to my talons, Uma looks down on me and growls, "You are not making a good case for yourself, Daughter-Of-Mecali."

"Whatever," I spit, puffing my feathers to loosen the dirt on them. "If you think I'm going to stay quiet while this featherbrain speaks lies about my mate, you're wrong."

"You speak of lies, yet the truth is that you and your '*mate*' are only together because of the insistence of *one* Dragon," Ashene rumbles, refusing to meet the gaze of the Dragon in question. "In the eyes of our leader, your union is illegitimate."

This story originates from NovelBin. Ensure the author gets the support they deserve by reading it there.

I slam my tail against the ground and snarl, “Is this gathering about us entering the elder’s den or not?!”

“It is a judgment of your character,” Kohsa answers. “Because your lives are on our wings, and we are more forgiving than our leader. You would do best to remember that, Daughter-Of-Mecali.”

I snort, folding my wings and wrapping my tail around my forelegs. Khosa’s wrong, but I’m not going to argue with her. Quite frankly, I’m just relieved that she didn’t linger on the thorny subject of me and Asha’s union. Normally, the rules about us are clear: because we can’t have a brood, drakaina couples must have their union approved by Keuvra. But with his absence the past two seasons, the elders have been more proactive about making decisions. Grandmother insisted that Asha and I be allowed to love each other, and after everything she did to save lives at the Grandfather Tree, the elders relented. It shouldn’t be a problem — they were the ones who allowed us, after all. But it seems such things are no longer important.

“If we are to judge her character, then I would first like to know why Kuro was in the elder’s den.”

Finally, after remaining silent this entire time, Grandmother lets her voice be heard. Sitting by the back of the fire with her wings partly open — as if to prevent me from being thrown into it — she meets my gaze for the first time tonight. A potent mix of fear, longing, and anger is scrawled across her ash-plumaged face. She wishes she could do so much to protect me right now, but her wings are furled. As an elder, her commitment to the flock precedes her commitment to family. If necessary, she must condemn her Granddaughter to the skies of Maki.

An unspoken tension passes through the air. Seemingly, every Dragon in the aerie is aware of the implications. Ahene's eyes dart to Grandmother, but nobody offers a rebuttal. Slowly, the flock's gaze turns towards me for my explanation.

I better make this sound good.

I straighten myself and project my voice across the aerie. "Me and Asha had just returned from the Farlands, on our way to White Mountain to request an audience with Keuvra. You see, a rival Kingdom has conquered Asha's Kingdom, and her family's whereabouts are unknown. Asha wanted to look for them in the rival Kingdom, but I convinced her it would be safer first to ask Keuvra for guidance. It would be dangerous to fly into her enemies' territory and attract the attention of airship-prey.

"But as we approached the entrance to the aerie, we noticed... um, some unusual rocks on the ground in one of the nearby valleys. We thought it looked strange, like the stones at the ruins Asha and I visited, so we decided to investigate. We discovered it was an entrance into White Mountain that had been uncovered by the greenwing thaw."

"Another entrance?" Uma's tail twitches behind him.

"That's right," I say, tipping my wings.

Ashene's eyes narrow to slits. "Don't bite my tail, Daugher-Of-Mecali. Nobody has flown the skies of Felra longer than I have. There is but one entrance into White Mountain, and it is the entrance that every Kin passed through today. Yourselves included."

"Did anyone see them?" Grandmother asks, facing the crowd. "Kuro, or Asha. Did they enter the aerie before they were discovered in the elder's den?"

Feathers shift as anxious Kin gaze around the aerie, waiting for someone to speak up. After nobody answers, Grandmother relaxes against her haunches. She seems fairly content but steadies her gaze on the crowd instead of facing me directly.

With nobody winging forward, the other elders exchange glances. Khosa tips her wings to Ashene before asking, "What compelled you to enter the mountain? You know that Kevura can only be summoned from the aerie."

"We... decided we wanted to investigate first," I answer.

Slowly, Khosa crosses the stone towards me. "You flew from deep within the Farlands, deeper than any Kin has flown in nearly a generation, only to get distracted at White Mountain?"

Khosa's gaze pierces me like talons. Can she tell I'm concealing Gust's existence? If Asha and I want any chance of a reprieve from Keuvra, then we can't mention anything about him. I need to tell her the truth, but...

“Yes,” I lie. “That’s what happened.”

The pale elder frowns; she seems unsatisfied by my response. She approaches Ashene, still perched by the fire, who stretches his neck forward and allows Khosa to whisper something into his ear. When he doesn’t respond, she turns back to me and asks, “This was how you entered the elder’s den? Through this entrance nobody has seen before and is no longer there?”

Urk...!

Did someone fly around the mountain before the gathering? How did they know to check? Agh, skuntscent! I’ll just have to keep telling my story!

“We followed the entrance deep into the mountain. The path opened into a larger den, one that had nothing inside it, before passing a rockfall leading into a smaller passage. We followed it until we arrived in the den where... you found us.”

For a wingbeat, Khosa stares at me in faint disbelief.

“Daughter-Of-Mecali,” Uma speaks up. “There is no other entrance into the elder’s den.”

My heart just about stops. “...Really?”

“There is another passage,” Khosa concedes. “But it ends at a cave-in. There has always been a cave-in for as long as any Kin can remember. Yet somehow, you passed through—“

“Keuvra cleared it for us,” I quickly declare, attempting to take a step forward before the wings of my captors pull me back. “He told us he wanted an audience with me and Asha, and led us to the second entrance on the side of the mountain.”

As my words settle across the aerie, quiet discussions roll through the crowd. Everyone on the rock looks very surprised... everyone except Asha, of course. I was committed to explaining our story without mentioning Keuvra, but it was beginning to fall apart. More importantly though, as Khosa was speaking to me, I realized something critical:

Gust warned us about this.

He foresaw... no, he *intended* this outcome. He left his glowing feathers in the passageway as a reminder that *he* had cleared the cave-in for us to pass. He knew the elders would discover us, attempt to summon Keuvra, and be forced to decide our fate. It all makes sense to me now! This is a part of my Divine Flight to protect Asha! For some reason, Keuvra is testing us before the flock!! But why?

...I push the thought aside. There's no time to speculate on the reasons why; I just have to keep telling my story and save our lives! Keuvra will intervene and stop all this, but only if we can prove ourselves to him before the flock! I'm certain of it!

Khosa looks agitated by the crowd's response. She hisses, "Why didn't you tell us this before?"

"I can't say."

"Why not?!"

I hold my tongue. Keuvra is certainly testing us to see if we'll reveal Gust's existence to the flock. The deities are trying to make this as uncomfortable as possible to see if we'll break. But I won't say a word. I'll happily defy the elders for my leader and my mate.

Khosa stares at me, one talon held in the air like she was about to jump forward and attack me. "Alright, fine." Her barbels twist as she casts about and turns to face the opposite side of the gathering stone. "What about you? Why did you enter the elder's den?"

Oh, fwegh.

Asha stares into Khosa's face, solemn and reserved. "Because Keuvra wanted to discuss the downfall of my Kingdom."

Scant murmurs pass through the crowd. Does Asha realize that we're being tested by Keuvra? I could pull her aside and tell her what's happening if we were together. But how am I supposed to tell her we *can not* reveal Gust's existence? Everything hinges on her story being consistent with mine!

"Keuvra did?" Khosa's head tilts. "And somehow, he asked you this directly?"

She shakes her head. "No."

"Then how did you know?"

Feathers quaking, I hold a deep breath. Will she...?

Asha frowns and stares at the ground. She looks about to say something before she shuts her muzzle and shakes her head. After gathering her composure, she answers meagerly, "I was told to seek him out because the deities have forsaken my family."

For a silent moment, Khosa says nothing. She relaxes on her haunches and asks in a more measured voice, "What do you mean?"

Asha smirks and ruffles slightly. "Everything started on the day of my transformation. First, it was the Goddess who caused my Mother to collapse while trying to commune with her. Then, while I was trapped in Felra, she allowed our Kingdom to be conquered and our

authority to dissolve. Now, Keuvra has tricked me and my mate into entering the elder's den so they can inflict the final blow and end my life."

I avert my gaze from Asha—I can't stand to be separated from my mate while she's miserable. From her perspective, it must be easy to assume that Keuvra is manipulating us. He hasn't appeared to the flock for over two seasons, so she's never had the chance to see the fair and wise leader like I have. If only she knew he was testing us, then perhaps none of this would be happening.

"So, you believe Keuvra cleared the cave-in for you to pass." Khosa assumes.

"No," Asha quickly shakes her head "Keuvra didn't help us. *He* did."

Oh, no.

Khosa's tail twitches. "He...?"

"You've met him too, haven't you?" Asha asks, her misery replaced by a surging anger.

Uma flashes a glance at Ashene before asking, "To whom are you speaking?"

“Asha...!” I furiously whisper across the rock, but it’s too late.

“You know,” Asha smirks. “*Him. That red bird.*”

Khosa’s neck lowers – I can’t tell her expression from here. Does she...?

“And what about all of you?!” Asha thunders, addressing the flock directly. “How many of you have encountered a glowing red bird? The ‘*harbinger*’ of the deities, Gust?!”

She just...!

Asha, you fool!!

120. The Skies of Maki

“There’s no need to speak out,” Asha continues, addressing the flock. “Hold your tongues and keep your muzzle shut, just as I was told. You wouldn’t want to upset your so-called caring deity!”

Oh, Asha, how could you do this?! Not only has she revealed the existence of Gust, but she’s openly mocking our leader before the entire flock! Across the gathering stone, I spot Khosa and Ashene’s tails flicking wildly behind them. If Keuvra doesn’t punish Asha, then surely the elders will!

Asha whips from the aerie to face the elders directly. “Keuvra couldn’t stand to punish me himself, so he had his lackey lead me on, slowly allowing my trust in him to build. Gust was the one who led us to the entrance on the side of the mountain. He was the one who cleared the cave-in just so all of you could catch us. Think about me the next time you call your leader ‘*almighty*’! This is what happens when—“

Without warning, Asha’s voice is cut off. The dragons beside her pounce on her back and slam her to the ground.

KREE!!

“ASHA!!” I shriek.

Khosa tipped her wings, signaling them to attack Asha! She was being cruel to her on purpose!!

That dung eating...! It's unforgivable!

I can’t keep my claws coiled for this. Convinced that I have to respond, It only takes me a wingbeat to weigh my options and make perhaps the most important decision of my life. With incredible speed, I leap from my captors and charge headlong towards the pale elder. Despite her age, she senses my approach and whips her neck about to face me. But it’s too late for her. Shock reflects in her eyes as I tackle Khosa by the shoulders, raking claws across her face as we tumble to the ground. Feathers fly, and blue blood is spilled

from a fresh wound against her cheek. She shrieks in pain as I land sideways, quickly attempting to recover for another attack. But before I can locate my balance, I find myself thrown to the ground by one of the Kin assigned to guard me.

Furious roars rise around us. I attempt to fight back, taking a bite out of the wing of the closest Dragon. As the world tumbles around me, I manage to push away one of the Dragons, only to feel another impact me from the side. It only takes a wingbeat for the rest of the Kin to subdue me into the ground.

ROOARGH!!

Fangs and claws pierce my skin from every angle. I attempt to resist, but too many Dragons are holding me down. I wince from the pain and go limp, the fire in me thoroughly extinguished. It's over. I had my moment of disobedience, and now it's passed.

Through the fierce growls of those subduing me, I hear bedlam across the aerie. Dragons are going featherbrained, as they rightfully should be. To attack an Elder is one of the gravest mistakes a Kin can make, but I don't care. My fate was sealed the moment Asha insulted Keuvra. If the elders were judging us for our character, then we've failed. If Keuvra was testing us for some unknown reason, then we've failed. The only thing left for us is death, and I wasn't about to go down with a fight.

Through a mess of feathers, I spot a group of Dragons surrounding Khosa. Grandmother is by her side, draping a wing across her body. She lowers her neck and asks, "Khosa, are you—"

"I'm fine," the pale elder deadpans with a snarl. She quickly rises to her talons, blue blood dripping from a wound across her cheek. "Release Daughter-Of-Mecali."

One of the Dragons restraining me stutters, "A-Are you sure?"

Khosa rumbles in acknowledgment. At that, the Dragons restraining me slowly move aside to release me. Free to move again, I gaze across the rock to see Asha whimpering beneath the bodies of the two drakons guarding her. She looks terribly distressed but doesn't appear to be injured. The rest of the flock has their eyes on me... all except Grandmother's. She's turned away from us, gazing silently into fires with her wings drooped to her sides. I couldn't care less what the flock thinks about me, but seeing Grandmother ashamed... it hurts.

Still, I will face those who have wronged me. With a loud grunt, I rise to my talons and shake my wings of dirt, brushing them against the Dragons who freed me. They're close enough that I can feel the warmth of their bodies, tensed to pounce should I make the slightest provocation. Khosa is standing before me, a deep scowl competing for prescience against the wound I left across her cheek. Asha once told me that a leader has to project strength to their enemies, so I suppose that's what Khosa is attempting. She doesn't want to appear weak in front of the flock. Neither will I.

"So," Khosa rasps without a trace of fear-scent. Her facial feathers look more tired than usual. "You would attack one of your elders, would you? Is your head full of sparrows?!"

"Just kill me already."

Khosa glares at me for a moment. In the silence somewhere behind her, Asha whines. *Poor girl*. More than anything else, I wish I could comfort my mate when she's upset.

"We will decide your fate, Daughter-Of-Mecali." Khosa growls and turns around to face Asha. "Our concern is the Farlander. We were not yet prepared to punish her."

Still held to the ground, Asha raises her head slightly. "...Really?"

"Your presence in this flock is illegitimate," Ashene scowls, approaching Khosa to stand by her side. "The refusal of our leader to appear proves that the matter of your existence is yet to be settled. We will not punish indiscriminately against those who can not rightfully call these skies home."

Khosa glances at Grandmother, still gazing into the fire. Was she able to convince the other elders that Asha shouldn't face death? Did she fail to do the same for me?

Asha shifts uncomfortably. "You mean you no longer consider me a member of the flock? After all I've done for it?!"

"You have failed to come of age," Ashene says. "And you have failed to return the summer hunting grounds, as promised."

"That isn't my fault!!" Asha protests. She squirms, but the drakons above her reapply their weight. "Airship-prey no longer recognize my authority!!"

“The reasons are irrelevant,” Khosa hisses. “Your promises are as hollow as your legitimacy to be called Keuvra’s Kin. You are an outsider on these lands, and you denigrate Keuvra’s name with falsehoods and fabricated stories.”

“They’re not falsehoods!!” I roar. The Kin surrounding me try to push me down, but I remain standing. “Gust is real!! He gave me a Divine Flight from Keuvra to protect Asha!!”

“Really?” Ashene scoffs, turning to face me with an amused expression. “The Farlander’s madness has flown to you as well!”

“If my Granddaughter is mad, who allowed her into the elder’s den?”

Grandmother whips around, her wings tensed open. She looks at Ashene, in particular, for a response.

“And what of this bird she saw?” Grandmother continues. “If Keuvra will not appear before us, then I believe it makes sense for him to send others!”

Ashene’s eyes narrow. “Meldi, you are once more allowing your compassion to cloud your judgment.”

“My judgment guides my compassion!” Grandmother retorts.

“Your compassion has been little more than a wing to shield your Granddaughter from her failings,” Ashene takes a provocative step forward, matching Grandmother’s stance. “Her spat with Son-Of-Zuki, her *‘union*

’ with the illegitimate Farlander. Time after time, we have stretched the rules to accommodate your family’s problems. You would be wise to remember your commitment to uphold the values of this flock, Daughter-Of-Koco. You can not protect Kuro from the punishment now owed to her.”

Grandmother lowers her head slightly and lets out a low growl. Is she about to attack an elder as well?

“I do not understand how Kuro and Asha entered our den,” Uma says, re-entering the conversation. He rises from the back of the stone and continues, “But to me, the method by which they did so is irrelevant. Keuvra’s edict on this matter is clear, whether a divine being assisted them or not.”

“If they were, then they should not be punished!” Grandmother hisses as Uma strolls by.

The slate gray elder rolls his wings. “Only Keuvra can truly say if they should not. But, he has chosen to remain silent.”

Grandmother’s tail sways wildly. She growls and turns away, pacing back toward the fire with her head held low.

“Then we agree,” Khosa rumbles. “For entering the elder’s den, the Farlander will be exiled from the flock, and Daughter-Of-Mecali will be thrown to the fires.”

Khosa and Ashene nod to each other. As Uma approaches the group in the center of the stone, he tips his wings.

So... that’s it. I’ll be thrown to the fires. I’m going to die.

My head lowers, and I stare into the ground. A certain emptiness stews inside me, one that can surely only be felt when you know death is near. I can’t fight back any longer. Grandmother has done everything she can to protect me over the seasons, and it was all for nothing. I’ve worked *so hard* to try and be the best member of the flock I possibly could, but it still wasn’t enough. I’m tired. If I’m going to die, then I just want to get it over with. I can’t stand this cruel, heartless world any longer.

Maybe Asha was right. Maybe the deities truly have forsaken her family... at least they consider me a member. At least Asha will be able to continue living. She can return to the Farlands and resume the search for the family. Maybe she could one day resurrect her Kingdom and become Monarch. Wouldn’t that be something? A Dragon ruling over Ellyntide. She still has so much to live for, unlike me. If one of us has to die today, then I feel at peace knowing it’s me.

Across the stone, the elders look to Grandmother with impatience. Uma speaks, “Your decision is requested, Daughter-Of-Koco.”

Unauthorized content usage: if you discover this narrative on Amazon, report the violation.

She's perched in the back of the stone, watching the roaring flames rise into the aerie. A silent moment passes, and she remains still.

Khosa thumps her tail impatiently. "We have considered Asha and Kuro's character. We considered their contributions, just as you insisted we do. The time has come for you to respect the order of this flock and make a decision."

For a wingflap, Grandmother says nothing. Finally, she folds her wings to her side and turns around to face the elders. Tears are streaming down her face. She knows she has to make the most uncomfortable decision of her life.

"T-Then I decide," she stutters, feathers quaking. "I decide that—"

"Wait."

Grandmother stops speaking. The eyes of everyone present are drawn to Asha, still restrained beneath the bodies of two drakons.

My head jolts up in horror. What is she... *no, she wouldn't...!*

“Please,” Asha pleads in an unsteady voice. “I can’t be responsible for any more innocent lives. I’ve already lost everything dear to me; My family, my Kingdom, and now my place in the flock. If one of us is to die, then it should be me.”

“NO!!!” I screech, slamming my tail against the ground. “ASHA, DON’T—”

Her voice rises over mine, “A life without Kuro on my wing is a life not worth living. If you spare my life for Kuro’s today, then I will simply end it another. Two huntresses will depart this world solely to justify the inane rules of a selfish deity.”

My legs buckle, and my forehead falls to the stone. This can’t be the way it ends between us! I’m the one that’s supposed to die! I’m the insufferable drakaina that nobody likes! I have no reason to be spared! She does!!

Please don’t...

Please don’t...

Please don’t...

Please don’t do this, Asha!!!

“But Kuro still has a family. She has you,” Asha pauses to glance at Grandmother. “She has an ailing sister who desperately needs her help. I know that in exchange for death, she will likely be exiled instead. But she will be alive. So, I ask you: which would you rather keep? The tight familial bonds of three Kin from birth, or one wayward Farlander who never should have set her talons in Felra?”

I cry out, misery overtaking me. Grandmother is going to agree with her. The other elders will say it makes sense. They won't condemn an outsider to death, but they'll happily allow one to sacrifice themselves. Asha is going to die!

Asha begins fighting back her emotions as well. In a quaking voice, she continues, “I-If I can sacrifice my life to save Kuro's, to give her family comfort... then I accept my fate. I accept my sacrifice. I'll willingly fly to Maki's skies and watch that far-off horizon, patiently waiting for the day my mate joins me.”

Through hazy tears, my eyes lock with Asha's. Tears are streaming down her feathers, but she's smiling. She knows it, too; her plan will succeed, and my life will continue. She would sacrifice herself to save my life, just as I would for hers.

“No... Asha, don't...”

As tears begin to blur my vision, our eyes remain locked. Is this the last time I'll see my mate smiling?

“The Farlander has a point,” Ashene rumbles.

“Yes,” Uma concurs. “Despite her outburst, Kuro’s contributions to the flock have had long-reaching and...”

I fold my wings over my head, unable to bear the elder’s conversation. *It’s over.*

The mate I waited my entire life to meet will be torn away from me after a single season together. I wail, sobbing in anguish as the sound of the elders gets lost in my misery.

Please, Asha...

I can’t go back to the way I was before.

I don’t want the darkness to return...

I was so lonely before I found you, Asha.

I was so...

...

“...We can choose to dwell on them, letting the negatives grow to define us. Or we can choose to overcome them, embracing the positive aspects we have control over. I still have a choice: My life for Kuro’s. I choose to save...”

No!!

Asha, please stop!!

You fool... you’re the only one who can save me.

...

Nobody is coming to save me...

Please, Asha.

Please don’t...!

Someone brushes against my feathers.

My head shoots out from beneath my wings, and I find myself in the presence of Asha's scent. She's standing before me, tears streaming down her facial feathers. The Dragons restraining us have parted, leaving us alone in the center of the stone. Behind Asha's wings are the elders, watching us with expectant eyes. How long have they...?

...

"Asha—!"

We embrace, burying our heads into each other's feathers one final time. I wrap my wings around my mate and try to commit her scent to memory. This will be the last time I know it.

"Asha," I mutter. "Asha, please..."

Her wings tighten. "You're going to live, Kuro. They're going to let you stay in the flock. They said it would appease Keuvra, because—"

"No!!!" I shriek. "Asha, I can't lose you!! I can't go back!!"

For a time, we sob into each other's feathers. Eventually, she pulls her head away from me.

"Frida is going to keep her sister," Asha speaks into my ear, her voice shaking. She's scared too. She's in so much pain, so much more than I am. But even in the depths of her misery, she's still trying to comfort me. "She's going to grow up and become a productive member of the flock because of you. And Meldi will keep the granddaughter she nurtured into a fierce and passionate huntress. She won't have to face the agony of losing another member of her family."

My misery is unyielding. I'm with Asha, yet it feels like I'm falling back into the darkness. How can this be the last time I'll ever know her scent? How will I never again know the feeling of her feathers against my own? How could my mate be stolen from me by the deity I've spent my entire life following? How can this world be so unspeakably cruel?

"My story in this world is over... but yours is still unwritten. I know that you have so much more to live for, Kuro. And I know we'll see each other again in the skies of Maki"

I gasp, heaving quick and heavy breaths. I try to bury my head so far into Asha's feathers that they'll never be able to take me away from her. I can't say goodbye to her, I can't...!

Again, we cry into each other's feathers. Eventually, I feel Asha's head pull away from me before quickly returning.

“It’s time,” she mutters.

“NO!!!”

I pull her closer with my wings. The sounds of heavy talonsteps are growing closer. They’ll have to kill me to take her away from me!

“Kuro...” Asha whispers into my ear. “Remember me, Kuro. Remember that I’ll always—“

FWOOSH!

An enormous gust of wind steals Asha’s voice. Acting instinctually, I pull my head away to see a pillar of blue flames erupting from the fire at the back of the gathering stone. Wind from unknown sources buffets our feathers like we were falling in a dive toward the ground. As the flames spread across the ceiling, the fires illuminating the aerie snuff out, plunging the mountain into darkness. The cries of Kin clash with the sounds of a furious gale.

“The fires?!” I gasp, pulling Asha closer.

Knowing what comes next, I gaze at the ceiling just as the dazzling lights come into existence. A jagged tear in reality itself comes forth, and the long, serpentine body of Almighty Keuvra emerges through the mists and into the aerie. Clad in a smooth gray plumage, gold-trimmed dorsal feathers line his transparent body from head to tail,

bathing the aerie in the familiar pale glow that heralds the arrival of our leader. Long, flowing barbels hang from his muzzle-like tendrils, fluttering as he soars through the aerie without wings. There were times in the past two seasons when it felt like I would never again see the spectacular arrival of our leader.

“That’s quite enough!” Keuvra bellows, shaking the mountain to its core.

“Almighty Keuvra!!” An elder wails in shock.

“There will be no death in my flock tonight!” A mystic voice, old and wise, thunders across the aerie. “It was I who invited Kuro and Asha into my den. We did so to test the Lordanou, and I’m pleased to say that she has admirably passed.”

I try to open my muzzle to speak, but no sound is produced. This was... I was right all along?

“A test?” Ashene calls. “Great leader, why would you test the Farlander?”

The Dragon deity snakes around the ceiling, allowing his impossibly long body to unfurl. “We find ourselves in strange times, Son-Of-Pan. Asha’s presence in Felra is proof of the chaos that has ensnared the Farlander Kingdoms, a chaos which touches even us deities. We believe Asha has a role to play, one which affects the Snowfell Flock. It was necessary to understand her worthiness for this flight.”

The elders exchange befuddled glances. Khosa stretches her neck and asks, “Then, she won’t be punished for entering the elder’s den?”

“No,” Keuvra rasps. “Asha is as worthy a member of the Snowfell Flock as any brooded Kin. Her union with Kuro shall be maintained, as will her right to call the skies of Felra home.”

So, that’s it? We’re forgiven? Asha won’t die, and we’ll remain mates?! The misery that burdened me begins to subside.

Keuvra’s gaze slides to us, and our eyes lock. Though we’ve never spoken before, I don’t find myself intimidated. In a way, I find his presence calming. “Daughter-Of-Mecali. It is regrettable that you had to endure the agony of Asha’s demise. Had it been possible any other way, I wouldn’t have flown a path that necessitated so much heartbreak. For this, I apologize.”

I stare into the deity as Asha nuzzles hard against my neck feathers. Keuvra... apologized?! To *me*?! An unsteady “Yeah...” is the best I can muster for a response.

Keuvra smiles softly. He seems to be pleased.

“The matter of the Lordanou has been settled,” he announces, snaking around to face the rest of the aerie. “If there are any lingering doubts, let it be known that Asha is my Kin and always has been. From this time forward, she shall be treated with the same respect and dignity afforded to every member of the flock.”

Wearily, the elders lower their heads and mantle their wings. “O-of course, Almighty Keuvra.”

“Good,” he rumbles. “Sons and Daughters, this concludes our gathering. I know our time together was brief, but I have faith we will meet again soon beneath blue skies.”

“B-but Almighty Keuvra!” Khosa whimpers. “You have been absent for two seasons! There is so much we must discuss with you! The greenwing thaw, the illness that spread during frostwing, and the deception of Son-Of-Zuki!”

“In due time, Daughter-Of-Ciro.” Keuvra snakes around the aerie, allowing his body to coil up again. Asha gasps as he comes together, and the tear in reality reforms across the ceiling. “May warm currents bring us together once more.”

Keuvra smiles, looking one final time across the aerie before allowing his gaze to fall onto me and Asha. His eyes lock with my mate, and I feel her feathers tense. Something unspoken passes between them before Keuvra casts about and snakes his way back through the rift. As his tailfeathers slip past the swirling mists, I drape my wing across Asha, attempting to calm her frayed nerves. The tear closes, and the fires across the aerie return to life.

For a breathless moment, all I can do is reel in shock from everything that’s just occurred. *Did that really happen? Are we truly forgiven?* I gaze across the gathering stone to see Khosa in a similar daze. Her neck lowers, and her wings droop to her sides. She glances at Asha and I, a look of tacit regret across her feathers. To her right, I spot Grandmother, her face quivering on the verge of tears. I’ve never seen her so relieved in my life.

“Kuro...!”

A meager voice calls my name. I gasp and look down to see Asha tugging against my wing. Tears are streaming across her facial feathers.

“We’re going to be...!”

Powerful emotions well up inside my heart. This time, I’ll be able to comfort my mate. I’ll be able to comfort her every day for the rest of my life.

“We’re going to be alright!” I cry.

We nuzzle our heads, sobbing profusely as we slowly collapse into a pile of feathers and tears. I feel Asha’s warmth, smell her scent, and revel in her love. Never again will I take these things for granted. I’ll cherish them for as long as I live.

“I love you, Asha!”

Through the haze of a dreamless sleep, something sharp nips at my feathers. My head shoots up to see Grandmother standing above me, her wings half-open and her gaze squarely on me.

“G-Grandmother?” I mutter, trying to focus through sleep-stained eyes. “Why are you—“

“It’s Keuvra,” she speaks softly. “You and Asha have been summoned to his den.”

My head inclines backward. “...Really?”

“No tricks this time,” she smiles. “I spoke with the deity himself.”

“Oh...” I trail off in surprise. My gaze falls away from Grandmother and settles onto Asha, sleeping beside me. Flickering light from the aerie reflects off her facial feathers — for the first time since we left for Ellyntide, she looks peaceful in her sleep. Once last night’s gathering concluded, we quickly found an empty den and settled in to rest. After everything that happened yesterday, we were both thoroughly exhausted. “Um, I guess I’ll wake her up.”

So, we’ve been summoned again. And with the elder’s blessing this time, it seems like we’ll actually enter Keuvra’s den. I wonder what we’re going to talk about? Surely, Asha is going to finally learn the truth about her transformation. But what else could our leader have in store for us? Feeling a tinge of excitement, I nuzzle Asha’s neck, searching for the place she likes to be affectionately nipped. I nibble her skin, and she begins to stir beneath me.

“Asha,” I speak softly. “Wake up, Asha...”

