

# THE PRINCESS'S FEATHERS

## 121. What Does God Say?

“This is the portal to Keuvra’s realm.”

Standing beside us at the entrance to the room, Meldi continues, “When the tree is bare of leaves, then Keuvra does not wish to be disturbed.”

“That is *one* of the reasons why I stopped you two,” Khosa rumbles with a straight face,

“But if the tree is full...” Meldi extends a wing outward, gesturing towards the portal.

“He’s expecting visitors,” I conclude.

For a silent moment, I stare into the swirling mists. The tree was bare when we were led here for the first time. Keuvra never intended for us to enter his realm until now.

“Kuro,” I say. “This was their plan all along, wasn’t it? Getting caught and being judged before the flock?”

Standing beside me, she tips her wings. “That’s why Gust left his feathers for us, so we’d realize it was all a test.”

Kuro’s revelation surprises me — I thought the duplicitous bird was merely taunting us. But if this was Keuvra’s plan all along, then just how long has he been judging us? Is that why Gust has been following me since I arrived in Felra? Could this be the reason why I became a Lithan in the first place? So I could be led to Felra and judged for a Divine Flight that only a Farlander could perform? Whatever the case, in spite of my feelings about everything that’s happened, I should try to keep an open mind. Mother always taught me the importance of respecting the Goddess, and I suspect the Dragon deity is no different.

“I want to go in first,” I say.

Kuro nods. “I’ll be right at your tailfeathers.”

Slowly, I place one talon in front of the other. When the portal is close enough that I can smell the dew on the tree’s leaves, a wave of anxiousness washes over me. Is this really it? No more tricks? Will I *finally* learn the answers to my transformation? I glance back to see the two elders staring expectantly at me.

“Warm currents,” Meldi smiles. “Don’t stop until you get there.”

After everything that’s happened, I’m not sure I can trust Khosa again just yet. But Kuro’s Grandmother has always had our interests in mind. I trust her.

...

I nod wearily and step forward, holding my breath as I enter the portal.

The mists dissolve, leaving only the image of the tree against an unyielding black void. With each step forward, the sound of my talons reverberates through my head like a bell struck by a hammer. The tree trembles and wavers, and the scents of Felra become stronger and stronger. It's nighttime in lower the Great Valley. A meadow full of sedges and bunchgrass. Standing water. A lone poplar tree. It all comes flying towards me in a wingbeat. Instinctively, I shut my eyes.

When I reopen them, I find myself there.

The Great Valley lies before me, serene and quiet. I find myself at night in the meadow I sensed, the lone poplar tree a short distance away. I feel the grass beneath my talons, a cool breeze between my feathers — this isn't like my dreams with Gust. Somehow, I've been transported from White Mountain to this scene. This is *real*.

But where is the Dragon deity? I call out to him, but the only response is an owl moving between the trees at the meadow's edge.

Just then, another set of talons steps into the meadow. I look back to see Kuro emerging from the mists, her eyes wide in amazement.

“Oh!” she chirps, nearly tripping over herself. “Asha? How did we get to the valley? This can’t be Keuvra’s den, can it?”

“I think it is,” I say. “But I tried calling for him, and he didn’t respond.”

As we search for any sign of the deity, I notice a glimmer of light reflecting off a nearby pool of water. Intrigued, I approach it and gaze into its murky, black waters. Unbloomed flowers line the water’s edge, framing a perfect reflection of my face against the endless expanse of night sky. Startled, my heart skips a beat; I’ve never seen such a clear representation of the Dragon I’ve become.

As I examine myself, something subtle changes behind my reflection. The prophets in the sky flicker, twinkling in a way I’ve never seen before. Then, another prophet appears in the southern sky...? Wait, was that one always there? There can’t be more than 19! But then, another new prophet appears. Then another, and another...

“Kuro...?!” I ruffle in surprise, stumbling away from the pool. Above us, the sky continues changing as innumerable new prophets flicker into existence, forming silvery tendrils of dappled light across the horizon.

I nearly tumble backward in awe before a spiced scent comes over me. “I’m right here,” Kuro rumbles, propping herself against me. She lifts her head above mine and asks, “Asha, what’s going on?”

The sky continues to fill, weaving a tapestry of prophetlight so luminous it could rival Maki's glow. Eventually, I answer Kuro "Something wonderful."

We stand for a time, our feathers close. Soon, the twinkling begins to subside, and the sky settles into a peaceful, harmonious glow.

"Oh, Asha..." Kuro trails off. "This is..."

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

An age-marred voice thunders across the sky, stealing our attention. We spin around and gaze across the valley to find the dragon deity himself, as large as an entire mountain, lying atop the valley's peaks like he'd been lounging there his entire life.

"Almighty Keuvra!!" Kuro exclaims.

With his gaze drawn skyward, the deity rumbles, "When those who've flown the skies of Maki are ready to move beyond the mortal realm, they ascend to become points of light across the night sky. Every prophet you see is one of your ancestors." Keuvra lowers his head and smiles at us. "Yours too, Daughter-Of-Kelani."

Beside me, Kuro stares on in muted awe. I suppose she's never seen Keuvra in the flesh, only the ghostly, transparent apparition that appears during gatherings. I watch in

calculated silence as she mantles her wings and dips her head slightly before the flock's leader. As for me? I used to be a Princess. I bow to no one.

“Why did you toy with our emotions like that?!” I snap. “Kuro was delirious!! She thought she was going to lose the love of her life, the mate she waited so long to find!! What kind of a caring deity are you?! How could you lie to her?! To US?!”

Silence stretches across the valley, broken up only by my labored panting. *Erm, oops.* So much for respecting the first deity I've ever met. His expression moderates in response, but he doesn't seem upset at me. Does he feel... guilty?

“Do you know why I invited you to my realm, Asha?”

For a moment I consider responding but decide to remain silent. I can see the coldness in his eyes — I don't care if he's a deity, Kuro and I deserve an answer.

“You are far from the first to curse us for our actions or inaction,” he continues. “But, like nature, deities must be stoic and unmoved by the affairs of the moon. We serve—“

“That's a jimbaldung reason,” I interrupt.

Without stopping, the preaching deity continues, “—our Children before the God of Creation, bound by the sacred pact formed centuries ago. By Azurrel's decree, the natural order of the moon must be preserved. And so, we are forbidden from interfering in the

affairs of enlightened ones,” He pauses for a wingbeat before adding, “...All affairs but yours, it would seem.”

I feel myself taking an unsteady step backward. He just... admitted it? “Why? Why did you toy with our lives like that?! What test have we passed?”

“The God of Creation sought to understand your capability for sacrifice,” Keuvra rumbles, his cold eyes piercing me like daggers. “There are some in your family’s line who lacked this quality. Most recently, your Mother.”

Stolen from its rightful author, this tale is not meant to be on Amazon; report any sightings.

“Mother...?” I gasp, my voice weak at the mention. “What does my mother—“

Without warning, the scene around us changes. In an instant, the Great Valley slides out of existence, dissolving into streaks of color like wet paint smeared across a canvas. The scents of a nighttime meadow are replaced by the overwhelming odor of fresh regrowth and decomposing wood. A new world, one of lush greenery, a crowded understory, and daytime sun, comes forth. We find ourselves in a greenwing forest, one less familiar than the forests in the flock’s territory.

“AHH!” Kuro yelps in surprise.

“Whoa!” I cry out. “What just—“

My voice seizes — I sense Kin behind us! I spin around with Kuro to discover, quite astonishingly, that we’re standing near the entrance of a building. Immediately, I recognize the structure as the ancient Farlander den Kuro and I visited in frostwing, the one we unceremoniously set on fire while defending ourselves from Relmoon. But instead of a crumbling facade overgrown by trees and vegetation, the building is in perfect, sparkling condition. Dazzling shades of azure and gold adorn painted columns once collapsed to dust, heralding the entrance to a building we once had to squeeze through to enter. There, by the stone doors, we discover three Kin — a drakon and two drakainas — clamping long, braided ropes in their jaws. Standing near the entrance of the building, they’re pulling a wooden sled with a large assortment of crates and stone jars stacked on top. And there by the Kin, we discover four Ruffed Lemurs, clad in strange clothing, shouting directions at them in the Goddess language.

“*What?!*” I whisper in hushed shock. “What is *this?!*”

For a silent moment, we watch the scene unfold. The Ruffys work in concert with the Dragons, helping them navigate the sled up a stone ramp and through the massive entrance of the building. Though they’re some distance away, I can tell that the Dragons are not encumbered by saddles, halters, or anything else that would restrict their movement. They are helping these Lemurs of their own volition, treating them as equals instead of prey-animals.

“Asha...” Kuro trails off. “Is this... real?”

I incline my head. “Keuvra must be showing us an event from the past, before the continents were raised. It seems like the mural we saw in White Mountain was right. My ancestors really were in Felra.”

<Indeed,> Keuvra echoes inside our heads. <Your family, among others, once traversed Felra in the spirit of cooperation with the flock. Lemur and Kin working side-by-side for each other's benefit. For a fleeting moment in time, this trust was possible. It is this serenity that we seek to restore.>

As his words dissipate, I ruffle uncomfortably. "Restore...? What do you mean?"

Instead of receiving a response, the scene before us changes again. The scents of greenwing disappear, replaced by odors unfamiliar to Felra. A golden scene begins to take shape, filled with waving fields of tallgrass, a grove of trees, and an expansive blue sky. Distinct scents begin to emerge, ones strangely familiar to me. A warm harvestwing breeze blows through our feathers, and I pick up faint traces of orchids, ironweed, and indigo.

Then, like a kick to the head from a rearing spikehorn, it all comes rushing back to me.

"N-No..." I trail off in horror. "This is...!"

It is the Eastern Weald on exactly the day of my transformation. The unseasonably warm weather, the distinct tree line of the grove... how could I forget it? I'll remember this scene for the rest of my life. We find ourselves in the nearby field, the place where I very quickly taught myself how to fly. Before us is the hollow itself, that cursed place where my impossible transformation occurred and my only friend sacrificed his life to protect my own.

“Asha?!” Kuro takes a concerned step closer to me.

“K-Kuro...” I stutter, extending a trembling wing forward. “Those brambles over there... that’s where I became a Lithan. This is the Eastern Weald.”

<Your transformation,> Keuvra echoes. <Instigated by a mortal, led to a chain of events which irreversibly altered the order of the moon. Even among ourselves, we can not deny the significance of your misfortune. The veil has been lifted between what once was and what now is. We seek a compromise of these... uncomfortable outcomes.>

“Instigated by a...” I trail off, trying to make sense of everything Keuvra said. “What do you mean, ‘a mortal’?! I— I thought the diamond changed me!! Or—!”

I quickly cut myself off before I can finish my sentence. The weald begins to fade away from us, taking with it those terrible scents I never wanted to smell again.

I thought it was the diamond that changed me! The monolith we found north of White Mountain said it had the power to protect the royal family, and I was seconds away from being killed. So, how could a mortal have ‘*instigated*’ my transformation? Did they do something to activate the diamond’s power? What about Crow Wing? What were they doing in Eastern Weald that day, anyway? Ugh, I still have so many questions!

As my mind races, I feel a wing drape across my back. I look to see Kuro smiling above me.

“You’re safe, now.”

Feeling a wave of relief, I nuzzle my head with Kuro’s, sharing our warmth until I sense a pair of eyes watching us. I pull away to discover ourselves in the Great Valley, the Dragon deity watching us from the mountain ridges. The coldness in his eyes has vanished, and his muzzle is curled into a gentle smile.

“Oh!” I chirp, quickly separating myself from my mate. I run my fangs through my chest feathers and mutter, “Sorry.”

Keuvra chuckles, “It’s quite alright, Daughter-Of-Kelani. Your transformation was rather traumatic, after all.”

“Y-yeah,” I stutter. If he knew it was traumatic, then why did he show it to me? But, more importantly... “Um, how was a mortal involved with my transformation? Do you and the other deities have something planned for me now that I’m Kin?”

Keuvra watches me for a moment, and his head tilts. “We have recognized your potential since your birth.” Slowly, the deity rises on all fours, revealing the impossible length of his serpentine body. He arches his back to stretch, then begins crossing to the next mountain along the ridge. “The Goddess believed you would be the one to accomplish what your Mother could not: peace between Ellyntide and Sarlain.”

Um, okay. He dodged my question about the mortal. That seems a little fishy. But the Goddess... she thought so favorably of me? That I could achieve what Mother couldn’t? Appeasing the Goddess’ demands for peace was a tremendously big deal during the failed

peace accords with Sarlain. Mother often told me she only went to Truce and spoke to King Finn for the Goddess' sake. So, why did she...

"Etain," I say. "I want to speak to the Goddess. I want to know why she had such faith in me and why she harmed my Mother on the day I left Varecia."

Oh, Mother... how did you grapple with the misery of losing your only daughter with the sting of Etain's rejection? You always told me how much you appreciated your communes with her... perhaps Ellyntide's fall resulted from these terrible events.

Now on another mountain, Keuvra averts his gaze and frowns. "I'm afraid it is not possible to commune with the Goddess in this realm."

"Oh..." my wings droop to the ground.

"But," Kevura rumbles, coiling his body to lie down. "I believe the Goddess will speak to you when she is ready. I am quite certain of it."

"What do you mean?" Kuro roars, interjecting the conversation. "Where was the Goddess when Asha transformed? Why didn't she help her? And why did YOU wait two seasons to talk to us?!"

I blink, hardly expecting Kuro's rage to rise to the surface against our leader. The deity seems equally surprised. But instead of being upset, his muzzle curls into a gentle smile.

“Daughter-Of-Mecali, the passion for your mate warms my heart. The flock would surely benefit from having more spirited members such as yourself.”

Kuro pants heavy breaths, keeping her eyes affixed on Keuvra. Her tail sways rapidly, but she says nothing in response. Kuro has always been steadfast in revering Keuvra, even when it seemed certain he was leading us to our deaths. Is she trying to suppress elation for receiving praise?

“The fact of the matter is that we were not yet prepared to offer Asha what we have to offer now. Daughter-Of-Kelani,” Keuvra pauses and shifts his gaze to me. “The God of Creation seeks a united moon free of the wars that have ravaged Kingdoms for centuries. Your Mother was incapable of making the sacrifices necessary to achieve this result. But, you... you have demonstrated to them a quality rarely possessed. We believe you are capable of achieving not only peace across the Farlands, but beyond.”

My muzzle slides open in shock. *Me?* Does he mean... I can unite the *entire moon* in peace? That’s what Azurrel wants me to do? “H-how am I supposed to accomplish that? I’m Kin! Even if there was still a throne for me to ascend, solving every grievance with every Kingdom is impossible!”

Keuvra responds, “It was not possible to restore the peace that existed before the continents rose until this point. With the advent of airship-prey, the moon has once more become connected enough to allow its blossoming. The God of Creation has faith in you, Daughter-Of-Kelani. So much so that they are willing to make some... concessions.”

Kuro flashes a worried glance at me. “Concessions?”

Keuvra nods and flips tail forward. “Look to the pool of water.”

The pool of water? Does he mean the one I looked into earlier? I cast about and find it a short distance from the poplar tree. Mist rises from the water, subtly illuminated by the glow from prophetlight above. They part as we approach, revealing a patchwork of roses, bluebonnets, and dandelions blooming by the water’s edge. The mirror-like finish remains, perfectly reflecting the faint glow of our ancestors. I gaze into it, expecting to find a reflection of myself. But what I see instead leaves me breathless.

Clad in impeccably tailored clothing, a groomed ruff, and flowing blue hair, I find the reflection of a young Ruffed Lemur staring back at me. Prophetlight reflects from her crimson eyes, stirring buried emotions deep within my heart. The prey-animal gazing back at me is the Lemur I knew for the first 23 years of my life. It is the reflection of Asha Eloise Lordanou.

“We are prepared to offer that which you have so fervently yearned for: A return to the form you once possessed.”

For a breathless moment, I stare into the visage on the water... no, I stare at *myself*. I hold my right hand up to my face — somehow, I can control it. I feel my fingers brushing across my fur. I feel my clothes weighing gently across my body. I feel clarity of mind, bereft of the urges which made me a bloodthirsty predator.

“I... I can turn back to normal?” I ask, mesmerized by my face’s familiar movements. “I can be a Lemur again?”

Keuvra rumbles in acknowledgment. “You will be as you were the morning of your transformation. With this form, we believe you can fulfill my Divine Flight: The restoration of Ellyntide, peace among the ascendant Kingdoms, and serenity between Farlander and Kin.”

In the corner of the pool is Kuro’s reflection, on the verge of tears. “Asha...” she whimpers.

“Well, then,” Keuvra says. “What will you decide... Princess?”

Hands trembling, I grip my tail and nervously run my fingers through it. Everything I’ve wanted since the moment I transformed into Kin is now within my grasp. I could return to Ellyntide and form a brand new rebellion against Nortane. I could keep my promise to Calypso and take revenge against those who murdered him. I could rebuild my Kingdom and restore everything I know and love.

That includes... Mother.

“I...” my voice fades. “I choose...”

## 122. Transcendence

“...No.”

Keuvra exhales, releasing a long and steady breath. A look somewhere between disappointment and acceptance settles across his face.

“I won’t do it,” I say, turning away from the reflection of the prey-animal. “I want to save Ellyntide, but I won’t do anything that severs the union between me and my mate.”

I look to Kuro and cast a reassuring smile. Her face brightens with relief like the sun revealing itself on a cloudy day. With a playful little chitter, she bounds towards me and wraps her wings around me. “Asha...!”

We nuzzle our heads together, basking in each other’s warmth. It isn’t lost on me that I’m probably the very last hope for the Kingdom of Ellyntide. Seeing... no, *feeling* a reflection of my prior self has reawakened those powerful instincts to protect my family. But I’ll never fly a path that leads me away from Kuro. The Farlands could fall from the sky and drown in the ocean below, but I still wouldn’t care as long as I was with my mate. There’s nothing on this moon I want more than her.

“Don’t worry,” I speak softly into her ear. “I’ll never leave you, Kuro.”

As we embrace, I feel the watchful eyes of our deity gazing down at us. After a moment’s silence, he rumbles in a voice like molasses, “We anticipated your decision.”

In an instant, the scene around us changes anew. Gone are the nighttime scents of Felra, hastily replaced by the familiar smells of Ellyntide. But scents are the only thing recognizable – we find ourselves in a primitive scene at sunhigh, one utterly different from the Ellyntide I’m familiar with. Buildings made of stone and thatching scatter the surrounding area, interspersed between farms, pastures, and livestock pens full of cows

and pigs. There are no roads between the buildings, no steam carriages to ride on. The sky is free of floating islands and airship-prey, and the distinctly acrid scent of boilers and steam generators is absent.

Directly before us in this unfamiliar world is something truly remarkable: A small flock of three Kin are perched on the perimeter of a crowd of Lemurs, gazing intently at a patch of disturbed moon. Two Ruffys stand in the center of the gathering, presiding over a recently planted tree sprout. Their clothes are unlike anything I've ever seen before; dull-colored tunics drape across their body, adorned with colorful markings and simple leather armor. Despite our abrupt intrusion into this world, nobody seems to notice our arrival.

Kuro flinches, startled by the sudden change in scenery. "What the—"

"—This sprout, diminutive in size, will grow to forever serve as a lasting monument to the shared cooperation between the Lordanou Clan and the Snowfell Flock. May our Kin gaze upon its branches for all time."

The crowd remains silent as a tall male Ruffy finishes speaking. A woman beside him produces a small, circular object from the front of her tunic and hands it to the male.

"Asha," Kuro whispers, tilting her head closer. "Can they see us? What's going on?!"

A quick shake of the head is the best response I can muster. As it turns out, I know precisely what's going on. Kuro and I are in Varecia. At least, the place that will one day become Varecia. And this tree sprout... I'd recognize its species anywhere. This sprout is...!

With the round object held firmly in his left hand, the Ruffy uses his right to pull back the sleeve of his tunic. Strange purple symbols resemblant of the Goddess Language are colored into the fur near his wrist and begin glowing in a pale light. I gasp as the same symbols appear in the air above the sprout, surrounded by a circle of light in the shape of a wisteria vine. Falling light bedews the sprout, collecting into a pool at its base before quickly seeping into the ground. The Ruffy conceals his wrist, and a light applause breaks out between the Lemurs. After exchanging a confused glance with the female Ruffy, the Kin join in, rumbling in approval and thumping their tails against the ground.

“The Elder Tree...” I whisper. “Kuro, this is the elderus that grows at my den in Varecia! It was...”

My voice dissipates. What’s happening here, anyway? Was this some kind of planting ceremony?

<It was a gift,> Keuvra answers. <From the Snowfell Flock to the first Kingdom of Ellyntide. For a time before the continents rose, the mutual bond between Kin and Lemur was strong. Ellyntide sought to commemorate their friendship, and the flock offered a sapling from one of the great trees of Felra.>

“By the Goddess....” I trail off, positively spellbound. So, *this* is why an *Elderus Lithanteum* is growing in the middle of Varecia. History had long since forgotten the origins of the Elder Tree, but now I know the truth! It was a gift from the flock! I can’t believe it!

Despite my awe, something seems to be bothering Kuro. She ruffles slightly and remarks, “But, this wasn’t in the story you taught the flock. You teach us that Farlanders are

inferior prey-animals, beholden to foolish gods. Why aren't these Kin mercilessly preying on the Lemurs?"

<Observe,> Keuvra says simply.

As the joyous crowd of Lemurs begins to disperse, the two Ruffys at the center of the ceremony approach the group of Kin.

<Well!> the male Ruffy exclaims, speaking inside my head. <I think that went pretty well.>

A pale red drakon side-eyes the cows. "Are you certain these prey-animals won't disturb the gift?"

The male Ruffy nods. <Absolutely, none of them are allowed to leave their pens.>

<We've cast a protection spell around the sapling,> The female Ruffy continues. <Even if a prey-animal gets loose, It will taste quite dreadful to them. They'll think twice about taking a bite.>

The talons of a tawny drakaina curl inwards. "And what about the night chills?"

<The farmers are used to covering the crops in the evening,> The Ruffy gestures his tail to the fields of agriculture surrounding us. <We should only have to do that for the first few months.>

“Hmmm...” The drakon rumbles, deep in thought.

The male Ruffy smiles and asks, <It worked at the Great Tree, didn't it?>

“...I suppose you're right.”

<Well, of course, I am!>

The female Ruffy playfully shoves the male. <Oh, shush!>

“Are you two ready to leave?” The drakon snaps. “I would much prefer to taste prey rather than constantly smell it.”

The male Ruffy laughs, <I think so. Are you ready?>

<Yeah,> The female nods. <Let's change.>

At that, the male Ruffy closes his eyes while the female begins strolling away. He lowers himself to the ground, placing his arms out in front of him as the strange markings on his arms glow, and wisps of blue light form and circle around his body. His composition changes, becoming fluid-like as his body twists and contorts in impossible ways.

Kuro finches in apprehension. "Asha...?"

"He's transforming into Kin!"

Unlike my visceral transformation, this one is far more smooth and restrained. The clothes on his body dissolve into disparate patches of stumpy-looking feathers while his limbs grow bigger, stretching into the familiar shapes I've come to associate with a Lathan. His eyes remain closed as his face stretches, but he doesn't appear to be in pain. As tender wings begin to sprout from his shoulder blades, the female Ruffy settles against the ground and begins the same act of magical, fluid-like transformation.

And yet, while this astonishing spectacle plays out before us, the other Kin watching seem thoroughly unimpressed, if not bored. The drakon is preening the underside of his wing while the tawny drakaina natters with a pale gray Kin beside her. What's more, the Lemurs who were watching the ceremony just a few moments prior have returned to their field duties, paying no mind to the incredible scene.

Could this type of transformation be... normal? Were Lemurs able to change back and forth into Kin at their discretion?

With a commanding flap of his slate blue wings, the male Ruffy is the first to finish the transformation into Kin. He flicks his tail and rumbles in a hoarse draconic voice, "That's more like it!"

As he re-acclimates to his Litan body, the female Ruffy finishes a few moments later, sporting a beautiful, pale copper plumage. As she opens her eyes, her tail thumps wildly against the ground. She turns to the drakon and remarks, "Oh, gosh. You weren't kidding, Figno. The prey-scent here is *really* distracting."

"Then let's quickly depart," Figno suggests, opening his wings with an impatient flick. "Shall we hunt in the mountains?"

The once-male Ruffy stretches his wings. "I could go for seafood, today."

"Then we'll fly to the ocean," Figno nods.

One by one, all of the Kin present call their takeoffs before leaping into the warm, greenwing sky. Dragonsong echoes across the ancient city of Varecia, a surreal chorus of harmonious, savage thunder that fails to draw the attention of the Lemurs dutifully tending to the fields around us. A warm breeze blows against our feathers, and the Dragons quickly rise into a thermal that propels them west towards the great oceans of the moon.

As the songs of Dragons fade in the distance, Kuro turns to me, her eyes wide as sunflowers. "Wow!"

I laugh, scarcely able to believe the spectacle I just witnessed. “It’s just like I thought, Kuro. Those Lemurs were practitioners of *magic*. Like, real spells and witchcraft! I can’t believe it!”

Kuro’s head tilts. “Magic? Spells?”

“It’s, um,” I sputter, trying to think of an adequate explanation for something so mundane. “In the Farlands, there are a lot of stories about Animals having special abilities called magic. Like, being able to attack someone with a fireball despite not being a Dragon. I never believed any of them were real, but what those Lemurs just did looked an awful lot like magic.”

At that, the scene dissolves again, and the scents of Varecia are replaced by Felra once more. The Great Valley comes into focus, bathing us in the familiar nighttime glow of the prophets. Kevura remains perched on a mountain, his mid-section twirled into the air. He has a strange look of satisfaction about him.

“Was that the power of the Chimera?” I ask. “Magic?”

“Not magic,” Keuvra corrects. “Elementia.”

“You mean, like in the mural we saw in White Mountain?”

The deity inclines the entire front half of his body in acknowledgment. “Magic implies the supernatural, an illusion of reality that defies explanation. Elementia is a property of nature itself, the symbiotic relationship between Jade, Maki, and our Prophet, Sun. The energy that sustains our world is drawn from the Sun and collected on the planet Maki. Every creature that walks on Jade owes its existence to this energy.”

In a wing flap, Maki rises in the sky beside Keuvra. The meadow is bathed in pale green planetlight.

“The enlightened ones of ancient times understood this relationship. They could harness Elementia and distill it into spells, protections, and even transformations. Those who could freely transform into Dragons called themselves the ‘*Chimera*’ due to their distinctly mixed blood, among other reasons.” Keuvra pauses and shifts his gaze to Kuro. “There is nothing deceitful about the story the flock has learned. Until the rise of the Lordanous, Dragons were a scourge to the existence of all enlightened ones.”

A thousand questions swirl inside of my mind. This changes *everything* I supposedly knew about my understanding of the moon. It honestly makes me feel overwhelmed — how could I possibly have every single one of my questions answered? “But it didn’t last,” I say, addressing my most pressing concern. “I live on a moon dictated by science and technology, not spells and transformations.”

A gentle, longing sound escapes Kevura’s muzzle and echoes across the valley. “It did not. A sordid tale for another time, perhaps.”

As Kevura finishes talking, Maki sets in the sky behind him, and darkness again descends across the valley.

“Ah,” I reply, trying to hide my disappointment. Keuvra quickly brushed that question aside. It seems he’s going to answer even fewer questions than I thought.

“Daughter-Of-Kelani,” he rumbles, addressing me directly. “You are learning this information because the need to unite the moon is so urgent that it necessitates the temporary revival of Elementia,” the golden-traced deity pauses, snaking his head across the valley to move closer to us. “If you are unwilling to retain your original form as a Lemur permanently, then perhaps you would be willing to take the temporary form of a true Chimera.”

I blink, momentarily startled by Kevura’s offer. “You mean... I could change back and forth on a whim? Just like the Lemurs in that vision did?”

“For a time,” Keuvra clarifies. “*You can’t rest a talon on two islands*, Daughter-Of-Kelani. A few seasons is all the God of Creation is willing to allow.”

So, I’d be like those Chimera I saw: Lemur *and* Kin. That would truly be the best of both worlds, wouldn’t it? I could remain Kuro’s mate but still save Ellyntide. I could threaten cities with destruction or negotiate as a Princess. “If I could freely switch back and forth between Lemur and Kin, then I would be, like, *insanely* powerful.”

“The Chimera of times past were indeed feared,” Keuvra rumbles with satisfaction. “We believe a modern one has the capability to change the moon forever.”

*Oh, gosh.* With the restored power of Elementia, I could truly change everything, couldn't I? My mind abounds at the possibilities... I would be like no other Lemur in centuries! I flutter my wings and ask, "What about magic spells? Could I cast a fireball?!"

Keuvra pauses momentarily and then snakes his head across the valley until he's nearly hovering above us. A faint smile forms across his muzzle as he rasps, "...No."

"Oh." I turn to Kuro and smile. "Can't have it all, I guess!"

"Allowing the power to transform freely is a considerable... strain. Further, it is not without its drawbacks." Keuvra's body relaxes, and he retreats his head back to the valley's ridge. "Chimera need to assume their draconic form every few days, lest they succumb to their latent predatory urges. Irritability, rage, and unintentional transformations are all possible."

I tip my wings thoughtfully. "So, I would have to be mindful about how I use my power."

The front half of the deity's body nods.

I stare into the ground, overwhelmed by all the information I've learned. "The power to change back and forth sounds... incredible. But even if I could do that, how am I supposed to unite the entire Farlands in only a few months?"

“Well...” Keuvra says, wrapping his tail around himself. “You will find I am much more patient than the God of Creation. While you will only possess the Gift of Transcendence for a short time, my Flight to unite the Farlands has no such limit.”

“Mmh.” I rumble to myself. “Then my first priority should be to restore Ellyntide, as dangerous as that sounds. Since my plan to shoot down airship-prey and appear as an ally to Ellyntide is no longer possible, I should try to locate any remaining family allies. Miss Almandoz lives on an island in Varecia, and I’m certain she could put me in touch with animals I can trust. But entering the city as a Lemur is dangerous. Everybody there knows who the tall, blue-haired Ruffed Lemur girl is.”

“But Asha,” Kuro says. “Everyone in the Farlands thinks you’re dead, right?”

“They do, But the Nortanians will be everywhere. Even if I could somehow find a disguise to wear, someone might still recognize me. And I don’t know how to fight as a Lemur, only as Kin.” Warily, I gaze into Kuro’s merlot eyes. “I don’t want you to worry about me.”

Kuro nods solemnly. “I don’t want you to get hurt, either. Isn’t there anyone else you know outside of Varecia?”

I frown and shake my head. “I met Calypso’s family once, but I don’t know where they live in Coleport. I would have to track them down, which might raise suspicions,” I laugh to myself and add, “I don’t want to sound like a loser who had no friends, but I was really sheltered in my home den.”

Ugh, I *really* wish I had stepped out of my comfort zone as a Lemur and tried to meet more animals. Those damn nobles!! Why did they make me so anti-social and paranoid of everyone I met?

“Asha,” Kuro’s head perks up suddenly. “What about your friend from the other Kingdom?”

“The other Kingdom?” I ask. “You mean, Sarlain? Kuro, I’ve never had—“

My voice trails off. Kuro is looking at me with an expectant face. I flash a glance at Keuvra and find him with an identical expression. What are they...

...

“Oh, *no-no-no-no-no*.”

“Asha?” Kuro’s head tilts.

“No,” I curtly reply with a firm shake of my head. “Absolutely not. **No**. Princess Lucy is *not* my friend!”

“But, you said she was!” Kuro reminds.

I dismissively wave my wing at her. “Kuro, the peace conference in Truce was sixteen years ago! I was seven years old! That’s like... I don’t even know how many seasons old I was! But we only knew each other for a few days! There’s no way she’d still help me!”

“I think she would.”

The thunderous voice of the deity echoes across the sky. We swivel our heads to face him, and a coy smile grows across his face.

“What do YOU know about Princess Lucy?” I glower.

“I know that she’s gravely concerned about the threat of Nortane continuing its manifest destiny,” Keuvra relaxes his body, allowing his tail to unfurl. “Lucy would never admit it, but she wishes there was still a Kingdom between her and Nortane. If nothing else, I believe a chimeric Lordanou would be an invaluable asset to her Kingdom.”

“Are you suggesting A Lordanou grovel before a Richelieu? “ I scoff. “Is your noodle body stretched too thin?”

Keuvra smirks — he must think I’m joking! “I’m suggesting you cast aside the historical feud between your families, sign the peace accords that your Mother refused to make

concessions on, and collaborate with your new ally to reclaim your Kingdom and restore their national security.”

Oh! That’s... a good idea, actually. I would gain a powerful ally if I could somehow convince Lucy to support my cause. How can the Dragon deity know so much about Farlander foreign policy? That’s supposed to be my job!

Keuvra continues, “Traveling to Sarlain would not be without risks. However, your likeness is not known in their Kingdom. It would seem your Mother’s irrational phobia of photography has a silver lining.”

“Oh, that’s right...” I trail off, again surprised by his wisdom. “Mother never released any official photos of me, just some illustrations when I was a kit. And the only Sarlanians who’ve ever seen my face are King Finn and Princess Lucy.”

This plan... I think it could work. Sure, the Sarlanians knew that Princess Asha had long, blue hair. But blue isn’t an unusual hair color. Among a crowd of animals, I should blend right in. Why would an Ellyntidian Princess be walking around in Sarlain, anyway? For once in my life, I could go about public spaces as a regular citizen, free of the stresses and constraints of being a royal.

“All I need is a meeting with an Almandoz,” I declare, stamping a talon against the ground. “Ariana hasn’t worked in years, but Duncan knew every important animal in the Kingdom. If Lucy could use her intelligence assets to help me figure out where he is now and arrange a meeting with him, then we could begin to organize a rebellion against Nortane.”

“It would be like old times for your Kingdom,” Keuvra smiles.

“Only this time, it won’t be a lone Knight attacking the birds. It’ll be ME!” I snarl, licking my chops clean. Fiery memories of the fateful night we downed an airship-prey flow back to me. I would savor the chance to prey on the enemies of my Kingdom again!

This tale has been pilfered from NovelBin. If found on Amazon, kindly file a report.

Now resting against her haunches, Kuro shuffles her talons uncomfortably. “But Asha, how will you make peace with Nortane if you start preying on them?”

“Well,” I say. “Keuvra said I don’t have to do it right away.”

“But you *will* make peace with them,” Keuvra interjects. “Not destruction.”

“R-Right,” I stutter. Why did he barge into the conversation to say that? “Um, how long do I have, anyways?”

He lifts his head slightly and replies, “In good health, your reign could last well over two centuries.”

“My...”

A chill lances my body, capturing my voice. Oh, gosh... I completely forgot just how long-lived Dragons are! When Kuro and I visited the Grandfather Tree earlier this season, I saw endless rows of claw marks, each representing an entire season lived in the flock. I didn't take the time to count them all, but... seriously? Two *centuries*?

“Asha?”

I turn to stare at Kuro, the reflection of the prophets twinkling in her eyes. “If I successfully restore Ellyntide, I'll one day become her Queen. Not as a Lemur, but as a Dragon.”

“It is your right to ascend the throne even as Kin.” Keuvra remarks. “I must admit, I find the prospect of a Lithan Monarch... enthralling.”

A Dragon Monarch. *Queen Asha, Daughter-Of-Kelani*. The words echo through my head like repeating birdsong. The longest reigning Monarch in Ellyntide's history ruled for a staggering sixty-six years. But as Queen, I would blow that record out of the water. And I'd do it as a Dragon!

“Oh...” Kuro trails off, wrapping her tail tightly around her foretalons. “That is... Asha, could that really work?”

“It has to,” I firmly reply. “If Keuvra says it’s my right to ascend the throne, then I will. I’ll become the first Dragon Queen of Ellyntide and establish diplomatic relations with the flock. I’ll return their summer hunting grounds and offer them so much more.”

“Dragonsong will ring anew across the skies of Ellyntide,” Keuvra smiles, letting his gaze wander across the night.

I have to admit, I’m feeling far more convinced to go forward with this. It isn’t lost on me that I’m probably the only creature alive that can still save Ellyntide. And with the power of the Chimera, I think I stand a chance of succeeding. I could make peace with Sarlain, save my family, keep my promise to Calypso, and ascend the throne with Kuro on my wing. It’s a win-win *if*

I can do it. Certainly, it won’t be easy. Some animals will stand in my way and try to stop me. I’ll need to learn or teach myself how to communicate with ascendants as Kin. And through all that hardship, I’ll need to keep Kuro safe from harm. But Keuvra wants me to do this. A *deity* is asking for my help. I’d be a fool not to do this for him, right?

...Right?

...

“You’re beginning to convince me that this is a good idea,” I say, turning to lock eyes with the deity. “But what if I refuse? Then what happens?”

I want this — I really do. But before I agree to move even a single feather, I need to know that I still have control over my life. I'm not just some puppet of the deities like Gust, trundling around the moon as I carry out their whims in a way that makes Azurrel happy.

Keuvra's barbels sway as his expression moderates. "Then you will leave my den as you are now. My declaration remains true, Daughter-Of-Kelani. The skies of Felra are your home, and they always will be."

I turn away from him and slowly nod. "I see. With Kuro on my wing, I'll have a placid life in the flock."

For a silent moment, I consider my path forward. It seems like I'm still in control of my own destiny. If that's the case, I could back out of this arrangement later if it ends up being a bad idea or if I fail in my quest to restore Ellyntide and unite the Farlands. As long as I still have the freedom to choose my own path through the sky, then I want this. I'll become a Chimera and save Ellyntide.

"Alright then," I say, folding my wings. I'm—

"Asha, wait."

My voice is cut off by my mate's anxious plea. I turn to her, slightly ruffled. "What is it?"

Kuro frowns and looks away. "Asha, don't you think you're flying into this too quickly?"

I exhale a little and relax my feathers. “It’s rather sudden, I know. But my Kingdom is still very important to me. As is my family.”

“What about our future together?” Kuro quavers. “I’m a part of your family too, Asha!”

I stare at her as a terrible realization draws over me: I’ve been making a huge decision, perhaps the biggest of my entire life, without first consulting my mate about it. Oh Goddess, what have I done?!

Before I can say anything, Kuro continues talking. “I was so concerned when you told me you wanted to fly to Ellyntide and fight airship-prey for your Kingdom. But I accepted it because I knew how important it was to you, and I believed you would return home to Felra. But now you’re talking about doing things far more dangerous. Asha, I can’t protect you if you become a Lemur again and mingle with dangerous Farlanders in Sarlain.”

“I promise I’ll be safe,” I try to reassure her.

“Asha, that’s not enough! I... I can’t lose you...”

Her voice trails off, her head lowers, and tears slide down her facial feathers. I rush forward and prop her head against my own, pulling her up and relaxing her gently into my embrace. She weeps softly as I groom her neck feathers, allowing me a moment to flash an expectant glance at Keuvra. In response, the deity simply relaxes against the mountain, allowing his tail to wrap around his body and his gaze to pierce me like talons.

Despite the supposed urgency to unite the Farlands, Keuvra won't be helping me convince Kuro.

Feeling anxious, I gather my courage and whisper into her ear, "At the first sign of trouble, I'll leave. I'll turn into Kin, fly away from Sarlain, and never look back."

Kuro raises her gaze and whimpers, "Asha..."

"I won't take any risks. If a situation becomes dangerous, I'll turn around and get out of it. I used to be a Princess — I know how to defend myself. I'll be safe."

Kuro stares at me a moment before sighing placidly. She closes her eyes and returns to rubbing her head against my neck feathers. As she does, an intriguing idea crosses my mind. Again, I turn my gaze to the deity across the valley and ask, "Can she...?"

Heartfelt grief settles across Keuvra's face, and he slowly shakes his head. *Damn it.* I honestly don't think Kuro would agree to become a prey-animal, even if it meant staying close to me. Still, it was worth asking.

I return to mate and murmur, "You can join me in Sarlain. I shouldn't be there for long. You could roost in the mountains outside their capital city, and I'll fly up there to visit you."

Kuro looks at me with tear-swollen eyes. "What about airship-prey?"

“I’ll tell Lucy she can’t harm you. She has a lot of authority in her Kingdom; she can order them to leave you alone.”

Admittedly, that won’t be easy. Everyone in the Farlands is probably terrified of our existence, especially after we proved we could shoot down an airship-prey. But if Lucy truly wants my help defending Sarlain, she’ll have to agree.

Kuro rumbles a soft, contemplative noise. She still seems anxious.

“Kuro,” I say, wrapping my tail around her side. “On the day we met, you told me all about the Farlands and how much they fascinated you. If I save Ellyntide, then you’ll be able to live with me in Varecia. We’ll never have to worry about going hungry or being cold ever again. We can build a den under the Elder Tree and live there for the rest of our lives, safe and happy. It’ll be wonderful, I promise.”

Kuro is silent in contemplation. She exhales and asks, “What about Frida? How can I care for her when she’s grounded at the Grandfather Tree?”

I rub my tailfeathers against her forelegs. “We’ll figure out something for her, I promise.”

In fact, I have an idea for Frida and how she can remain useful to the flock despite her broken wings. It will be... uncomfortable to suggest to Kuro. And quite frankly, I’m having trouble accepting the idea myself. But I’m willing to do anything to calm Kuro’s anxious heart.

Kuro lowers her head and gazes across the valley. After exchanging glances with her leader, she allows her wings to settle across the grass and stares into the ground. “I always believed we would roost in my den in the Great Valley, just like my parents did. But living deep in the Farlands, so far away from the flock... I don’t...”

“Why don’t you think about it,” I suggest. “And we’ll decide later what we want to do?”

Kuro stares at me for a moment, a peculiar look across her face. But instead of responding, she turns away. She’s so close to accepting this.

“If you don’t want to live in the Farlands, then we won’t,” I tell her. “We’ll save Ellyntide — as much as we can — and return home to Felra. My family in the Farlands may not be happy, but I meant it when I said I’d never leave you, deary.”

At that, Kuro’s head perks. She turns back to me, and two pairs of heartfelt eyes lock together. “Y-you’re my deary too, Asha. If this is truly what you want, then... alright. I’ll support you.”

A wave of relief flows over me like warm water. *Thank the Goddesss!* I bury my head into Kuro’s neck fluff as she rumbles affectionately for me. I knew I could count on my mate! It’s one of the reasons why she’s so dear to me.

“I still want to have a say on where we roost,” Kuro speaks softly into my ear.

“Of course,” I tell her. “And I promise I’ll respect your decision, no matter what you decide.”

Kuro exhales, and her feathers relax against my own.

“I love you, Kuro.”

I affectionately nibble on her feathers, and Kuro does the same. We bask in our warmth for a short while, simply enjoying our presence. But eventually, I feel the urge to continue my conversation with the deity. “Alright, then,” I say, pulling my head away from Kuro’s neck. “So, how does this work? How do I become a Chimera?”

At that, Kuro sits up and smiles. “Have you decided? Are you truly ready?”

“Yes,” I tip my wings. “I want this. I want to turn back to normal so I can save Ellyntide.”

Keuvra rumbles in satisfaction. “Very well, then.” He stands from the mountain, placing one talon on a lower peak to steady himself, and unfurls his tail to draw it across the valley. His head lowers, and the sigils on his arm begin to glow bright gold. His tail dips, and a wave of lightheadedness washes over me, temporarily blurring my vision as if I were underwater.

“Whoa,” I say, using my wings to steady myself.

“Asha?” Kuro moves to balance me, but I’ve already regained control.

“It’s okay,” I reassure her. “I’m fine.”

“Daughter-Of-Kelani,” Keuvra rumbles across the valley. “The true power of the Chimera has been unlocked within you. With this, you now possess the *Gift of Transcendence*. May you use it to unite our troubled lands in peace.”

As Keuvra finishes speaking, something within me changes, something I can’t adequately describe. “Whoa,” I chirp, gazing around me in confusion. “Keuvra, what is...?”

Keuvra’s eyes narrow to slits. With his feathery tail still drawn across the valley, he waves it before me reassuringly. Somehow, like a lightbulb illuminating a dark room, everything makes sense. I can’t think about transforming; I just have to do it.

“Okay, I think I know what I’m doing here. I’m going to try turning back to normal.” I release a heavy sigh and turn to my mate. “Kuro, are you ready?”

Standing beside me, her talons curl into the grass. She raises her head and nuzzles against my neck feathers, trying to commit my scent to memory. She draws a long breath and exhales slowly. I can’t help but give her one last affectionate nibble.

“Yeah,” she murmurs, pulling her head back to smile. “I’m ready.”

With the preparations finally complete, I fold my wings tight and brace myself to the moon. So, this is it. *I’m finally turning back to normal.* The wind blows against my feathers, the very ones that carried me to Felra, helped me locate my mate and discover the life I was always meant to live. No matter what happens as a Lemur, this is the form I was always meant to be, the one I’ll remain after everything is put back to normal. This is my future.

With my future decided, I release a long breath and close my eyes.

Golden light shines through the thin spaces of a closed door, the door I walked through at the start of this journey. As I gaze through the shafts of light, something compels me to look down. Illuminated against the darkness is a key, the one that’s been sitting there this entire time, just waiting for me to pick it up. As I touch it with my fingers, I feel my heart reverberate through my body. Slowly, I inset the key into the lock, each sound reflecting off me and fading into the room’s darkness. I can sense the blue lights surrounding me as I turn the lock and the door draws open. The light is so bright I have to shield my eyes; I can barely sense the changes that are occurring to me. As my eyes adjust, I feel the warmth of summer against my body. The scents of a Varecain Rosebush drift through my nostrils, the one I cared for ever so dearly. The one Sandoz grew for me and the one I ran to when she passed. The scene beyond is the Royal Gardens in full bloom, the place I spent so much time when I was Lemur. It calls to me, inviting me back to the world that was so unfairly torn away from me. I step through the door, feeling the sun’s warmth against my fur. Every plant, every flower, every stone is just as I remember it. A glimmer of light reflects from the windows of the Lordanou Palace, drawing my attention. Somehow, the stones of the building seem brighter than usual today. Everything is vibrant, full of color and life, harmony and happiness.

This is not the world I belong to. Not anymore.

I gaze at the key, still in the palm of my hand. This is not mine, either. But for the time being, I'll hold onto it. I slip it into my pocket and step out into the world.

I open my eyes.

Keuvra is lying on the mountain, a peculiar look of satisfaction and curiosity scrawled across his face. My body flinches — for some reason, I find his presence disquieting. I've been in his den for some time now. Why does it feel like I've never seen him before? Is it because I'm so much lower to the ground? Memories stifle dulled senses, reminding me of where I am and calming me somewhat. Instinctively, I try to sample the air, but only the scents of pollen and sedge surround me. A bolt of anxiety shocks me — Is something wrong with my nose!? No... nothing at all is wrong. This is simply the limit of my senses as a prey-animal.

So... I've done it, haven't I? I turned back to normal. I'm a Lemur again.

I try to fold my wings back against me but merely shuffle my shoulders. *Er, right.* I wouldn't have those anymore. I brush away my embarrassment and hold my fuzzy hands out before me. Gone are the talons that have dismembered countless prey-animals the past two seasons, replaced by ten skinny fingers moving slowly in unison. This simple action fills me with morbid astonishment. These are *my* hands, a part of *my* body. I look up my arm, surprised to see the blouse I wore on the morning of my transformation. Somehow, it has returned to me.

"Oh, wow..." a breathless whisper flows past my tongues. "Oh wow, oh wow...!"

At once, the familiar act of two-legged locomotion returns to me. I swipe a dandelion from the grass with my foot and pass it to my hand, smelling scents I haven't known since last autumn. It's merely a dandelion, but it smells *incredible!* I jump and pivot to my other foot, using it to grab a tuft of grass from the ground. Opposable thumbs! I don't have to grab things with my jaws anymore! I laugh to myself, feeling the elation of experiencing what I thought was lost forever.

"Oh!" I say, holding my hands against my chest. "M-My voice!! It's so soft! And quiet!"

Gone is the draconic edge in my throat, replaced by the gentle murmur of a Lemur woman. I try to rumble my chest but only exhale a labored breath. I attempt to tickle the special fire-inducing muscle in my throat but find none. It seems that my draconinity, the force that made me feel powerful and complete, has been totally excised from my body. In a way, it makes me feel inadequate, but a return to this body is what I wanted for so long. And now, it's back!

"Asha...?"

Kuro's voice rumbles across the meadow, causing my fur to stand on end. *Oh, right. There's a **Lithan** standing behind me.* I hesitate to respond, recalling how unsettling Kevura appeared a few moments ago. How will I react to seeing the most important soul I've ever known? Slowly, I gather my courage and turn around to see Kuro sitting a short distance behind me, as tall as a three-story building. A doleful look spreads across her face, and our eyes lock together. Unbidden instincts engage, and her pupils dilate wide with opportunity. But she refuses to act on her nature, keeping her talons planted firmly to the ground.

“Kuro...” I breathlessly respond. “Kuro, can you still understand me?”

Her tail twitches but remains wrapped around her foretalons. “Oh, Asha...” she trails off, fighting for words. “I can understand... you! I can’t believe it, but it’s you!”

“Yeah...” I smirk, holding my hands behind my back. “Since the day we met, you knew I used to be a Lemur from the Farlands. But to actually see your mate as prey... well, I’d be flabbergasted, too!”

Kuro loosens an uncomfortable smile. Slowly, she lowers her head to my level and examines me up close. To think, the same head that used to groom my feathers and playfully nip my neck is now larger than my entire body! Slitted eyes watch my every movement as I present myself to my enormous, draconic mate. I raise my arm as she rotates around me, allowing her to stick her muzzle close and sample my scents. With each breath she exhales, a small gust of wind pushes against me, ruffling my clothes and stirring my hair. I should probably be terrified right now, but I feel completely safe. Two seasons in Felra have afforded me an intimate understanding of Dragon body language; Kuro doesn’t see me as prey; she’s merely curious.

“This,” I say, spreading my arms to my sides, “Is who I was for the first 23 years of my life. A Ruffed Lemur from the Farlands; A sister, a daughter, and a Princess.”

Insanely conflicting emotions stew inside my head. Deprived of my draconinity, I no longer feel like an equal to my own mate. I’m the Princess again, just like I was in Varecia. But I still know Kuro. I know her warmth, the feeling of her feathers against my own, and all the experiences we’ve shared over the past two seasons. I don’t find myself intimidated by her, but I do feel inferior — a separate creature from the one I love so dearly.

Needless to say, it's a *very* strange feeling.

I reach my arm out to Kuro, and her eyes widen slightly. Slowly, I take a step forward and brush my fingers against the tip of her muzzle, running my hand gently across her feathers. She exhales a soft and friendly noise, one she's made to me countless times before. For a fleeting moment, I find myself revisiting the awe of meeting a real-life Dragon in the flesh.

"Asha... I really can't believe it. Even your voice sounds familiar." Kuro pulls her head back and gazes across the valley "But, how can I understand her? Is it because Asha is a Chimera?"

Kevura unravels himself and rises to rest on his foretalons. "There are no language barriers in my den. However, in the mortal world, Asha's perception of language was changed at the moment of her transformation into Kin. This alteration will be lost when she returns to her original form."

"So..." I trail off, trying to make sense of his explanation. "That's why everyone sounds like they're speaking the Goddess Language to me. In reality, they aren't. So if Kuro and I decided to leave your den right now, I'd sound like a normal Farlander to her."

"When spoken to, yes. However..." Keuvra draws his tail across the valley once more and waves it towards me in a reassuring manner.

"Wait..." I trail off, understanding washing over me. "Are you serious?"

<Indeed,> Keuvra speaks inside my head. <The God of Creation recognizes the considerable handicap of being unable to communicate effectively as Kin. This could jeopardize the Divine Flight that has been given to you and threaten the serenity of Jade.>

“Asha?” Kuro’s voice rises from behind me. “Why did everyone stop talking?”

Before I can respond to her, Keuvra continues, <And so, to supplement the *Gift of Transcendence*, we believe you will also require the *Gift of Translation*: the ability to communicate without borders. This gift is already within you, Princess.>

The Gift of Translation...?

...

I can’t explain why, but when Keuvra told me I already had this gift, everything made perfect sense. When I become Kin, I’ll be able to talk to Farlanders like Kevura is speaking to me now: inside their own heads. And when they talk back to me, I can translate their speech into the Goddess Language. Moreover, I won’t lose this power when I become a Lemur. I’ll still be able to talk to Kuro and listen to the conversations of ascendants speaking in a different language... needless to say, if there’s someone I need to communicate with, I’ll be able to.

My body stiffens, and my fur stands on end. As if the ability to transform at will wasn’t enough, I’ll now be able to talk to anyone regardless of their language! Honestly, what

have I done to deserve this sort of power? Uniting all of Jade in peace no longer seems as impossible as it once did.

<Go on,> Kevura says with a flick of his tail. <Why don't you reassure your mate using your gift?>

Oh! Right, Kuro is still looking between us, confused. I turn back to her and, somehow... I feel myself making a connection; a strange feeling inside of my head unlike anything I've felt before. My senses target her and only her, focusing my inner voice in such a way that not even Keuvra will be able to hear it.

<Kuro?> I ask, projecting my voice. <Can you—>

Her eyes bulge, and she nearly stumbles backward in shock. "Asha?! Is that you?"

<Yes,> I respond, chuckling as a shower of down feathers drifts to the ground beside me. <Oh, Kuro. I've been given another Gift from Keuvra: The Gift of Translation! With this, we'll be able to talk to each other when I'm a Lemur! Isn't that wonderful?>

Kuro flashes a slack-jawed glance at Keuvra. "You mean, you get two gifts? How are you talking to me?"

<I'm not sure how to describe this. It feels like I'm using a voice I've always had, but one that hasn't uttered a single word until now. It's so strange... I wish I could share both of these gifts with you, Kuro.>

"Both gifts?" Kuro scoffs. "I'd rather suck on litsha dung than become a prey animal. But, I'm happy we'll be able to talk to each other when you're a Lemur," she pauses uncomfortably before adding, "For a little while."

"Just a little while!" I smile. I extend my puny right arm outward, wiggling it like the limp leg of a dead Spikehorn. "See? This body is far too weak, you know?"

"We both know," Kuro rumbles, shaking the ground beneath my feet. She playfully bares her fangs before quickly hiding them. "But even if you're physically weak, being able to talk to Kin makes you tremendously powerful."

"Yeah, Nortane has no idea what's coming for them!"

I wonder what Calypso would say if he could see me now, fulfilling my promise to him in the most striking way possible? When I made my promise to avenge his death, I understood that I would one day use the power I harbored against those who attacked us. But who could have foreseen I'd possess the gifts I have now? Not only can I turn Nortane's cities to ashes, but I can become the Princess I used to be, working with those I used to trust to more subtly eradicate the enemies now occupying our Kingdom. I can talk to and be understood by anyone I need to communicate with. And if all else fails, there's another, even more powerful Dragon I can call on to lay waste to those who would stand in our way. Honestly, President Weatherlight? If I were you, I would just surrender now. Because I'm not going to stop until I get my way. And trust me — you don't want to upset an already furious Dragon.

“Daughter-Of-Mecali,” Keuvra speaks up. “I would request some time alone to speak with your mate.”

Eh? Keuvra wants to speak with me privately? What could he possibly have to discuss that can't be said around Kuro?

Similarly surprised, my mate raises her head to stare at the deity. “Oh... Of course, Almighty Keuvra.” She pauses and allows her feathers to flatten. “Um, I guess I'll head back to the elder's den. It was an honor to be welcomed here and speak to you.”

Kuro mantles for her leader, and the deity dips his head in kind. “It was a pleasure to speak with you as well, Daughter-Of-Mecali. The next time you see your sister, please give her my regards. Warm currents.”

Kuro's face glows. Unable to hold back her elation any longer, she stamps her talons happily and beams, “Thank you, almighty Keuvra! Warm currents!”

I can't help but smile. I used to wonder why Kuro and the flock held such a strong reverence for their deity. As a follower of The Goddess, I could certainly relate, but only to a certain degree. Why did Kuro still believe in Keuvra, even when it seemed certain he was leading us to our demise? But everything makes sense now that I've seen him across the aerie and visited him in his den. If I had grown up in Felra, unaware of the wonders of technology that exist in the Farlands, I too would be enthralled by his appearance.

Kuro folds her wings and turns about, lowering her head to face me. “I'll be waiting in the elder's den for you.”

“Okay,” I say. “I promise I won’t be long.”

Kuro opens her wings slightly to tip them. But instead of turning to leave through the portal, she continues staring at me, almost like she was expecting a response. An awkward silence drifts between us as we remain staring at each other, mesmerized by our stark difference in appearance.

Finally, I laugh to myself, “This is really weird, you know?”

“It is,” A smile grows across Kuro’s muzzle. “But that’s okay. I’ll always love you, Asha. No matter what you look like.”

Oh, Kuro...

A gentle warmth spreads through my body, a feeling utterly unfamiliar to me during my lonely life as a Princess. I extend my arms outward, angling them suggestively toward Kuro. She takes the hint, happily lowering her head to my level and allowing me to bound forward and hug her squarely on the muzzle.

My hands sink into her feathers, and my head nuzzles softly against hers. Kuro rumbles affectionately for me, and I return the gesture as best I can.

“I love you so much, Kuro.”

Kuro closes her eyes and makes a soft, affectionate chirping noise. It reminds me just how surreal it is that I fell in love with Dragon. That is until I remember that I’m a Dragon, too. Maybe I don’t look like it, but the soul inhabiting this body is as much a Dragon as Kuro’s. I don’t need a deity to tell me that — all I need is this, right here. The warmth of my mate, the one I’ll forever love.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot Keuvra staring at us with a tremendous smile across his muzzle. *Er, right.* He seems happy, but I don’t want to make a deity impatient. “Alright,” I exhale. I kiss Kuro on the feathers and pull my head away from her. “I’ll see you soon.”

Kuro stares at me for a moment and nods. Her head rises, and she furls her wings. “Warm currents.”

I give her a friendly wave with my tail, and Kuro responds in kind with a tip of her folded wings. As she turns to step through the portal, she stops and looks at Keuvra, a gentle look across his face. She dips her head once more and begins to enter the swirling mists to return to the elder’s den. I watch her silently until the last of her soot-plumaged tailfeathers slip through the clouds.

“Well, then!” an unfamiliar voice speaks from behind me.

“Wha—“

“Now that it’s just the two of us, I thought I’d slip into a somewhat more appropriate form for a visiting Princess.”

Somehow, A young Ruffy man in formal clothes is standing before me in the meadow. Spry and full of life, I gaze past his shoulder-length blonde hair, looking to Keuvra for guidance. But the Dragon deity is nowhere to be found, conspicuously absent from the mountain ridges he’s been lounging across our entire meeting. As I stare on in confusion, a realization draws across me, one I long ago cast aside as too improbable to be true.

“...Oh, you’re kidding me.”

Keuvra chuckles, “You’re quite intuitive, Asha. I’d expect nothing less from a fellow Lordanou.”

## 123. The Truce

“You’re... you’re one of my ancestors that came to Felra!”

The Ruffy smirks and gestures his arms to his sides. “Prince Keuvonis A. Lordanou, in his original flesh.”

“Keuvonis?” I ask, crossing the meadow to approach him. “I’ve never heard of you, before.”

“Sadly, none of the records from those times survive,” he sighs, brushing some dirt from his coat sleeve. “But I am the youngest son of my mother, Candice. Her existence was only preserved through spoken word until it could be written on paper again.”

My tail quirks. “Queen Candice? You mean, the first Queen of Ellyntide?!”

“Our family’s matriarch,” Keuvra smiles.

I can’t believe this. In the Farlands, the existence of a Dragon deity is nothing but speculation. But not only is Keuvra real, he’s a Lordanou! From the founding of the Kingdom, no less!

My ancestor continues, “As you know, us deities were apotheosized from mortal beings when the continents rose. In a cosmic quirk of irony, the most powerful Lithan at that time was a Chimeric Lordanou, much like yourself.”

“Then is the story about you true?” I ask. “A Chimera united all the Dragon clans in peace?”

“More or less,” he chuckles, rolling his shoulders. “Though they possessed the Gift of Communication, Lithans in those times were only slightly more evolved than the prey-animals they hunted. Like you, I garnered their trust through the skills and knowledge I learned as a Lemur. I shared with them language, health, and compassion.”

“O-oh, gosh,” I laugh to myself. “I really am one of your Kin, aren’t I?”

“In a certain way, you’re more deserving of the title than any brooded Dragon.”

I smile, a certain warmth brimming inside me. Being told I’m closer to the Dragon deity than those born as Dragons fills me with a particular pride. Is this what Kuro felt when Keuvra complimented her before the flock? Perhaps I shouldn’t have been so critical of her.

Keuvra echoes the smile and motions for me with his tail. I tip mine in acknowledgment.

“I believe,” he says, strolling across the meadow. “The God of Creation has faith in you because they once had faith in me.”

A cool breeze rustles the grass between my legs. “Is that why you united the Dragon clans into the Snowfell Flock? Because Azurrel asked you to?”

“At the time, I did it because Dragons were terrorizing those I loved. I figured If I could become one myself and infiltrate their flocks, then I could destroy them from within. Or, at least convince them to stop harming Ellyntide.” Keuvra pauses and turns to face me. “Azurrel hadn’t yet revealed themselves to the moon. Little did I realize they still had plans for me.”

I stare into his crimson-red eyes. "...What do you mean?"

As the words roll off my tongue, the fierce call of a Dragon splits the air behind me.

**ROOOOARHH!**

I spin around and find myself on a battlefield.

Balls of fire soar skyward, and arcs of electricity crackle through the warm evening air, cast from the outstretched arms of a conspiracy of Lemurs running across a broad, tallgrass field. Clad in the strange robes from our earlier vision, the Lemurs appear to be fighting none other than a slate-gray Lathan soaring through the red-painted sky above us. With a commanding flap of its great wings, the Dragon banks hard to deftly avoid the magical attacks hurtling towards it. The air is filled with the familiar scent of scorched grass – soon, the Lathan will fly around and unleash another blast of fire onto its enemies:

*Us.*

"Keuvonis!"

Torn from my breathless stupor, a Ringtail splits from the conspiracy of attacking Lemurs and sprints towards me with a harried look on her face. I wince, momentarily stricken by the inane belief that I'd somehow become the Dragon deity himself. But my fear quickly dissolves as I realize he's standing beside me, himself now wearing the same robes as everyone else.

"Lagroa!" he shouts. "Wait for the beast to fly around! Draw his attention, and we'll concentrate on the reflection spell!"

Lagora's tail droops. "Will we have enough energy?"

"I—I'm not sure!" Keuvra stutters in an unfamiliar moment of insecurity. "Attenuate as long as possible, then give it everything you've got!"

Lagora gathers her courage, and a group of symbols by her wrist begins glowing. "Yes, my lord!"

She turns on her feet and runs to join the conspiracy, relaying Keuvra's command to '*attenuate*'. When she's firmly out of range I turn to face the deity, his right sleeve pulled back to reveal another set of glowing symbols on his arm.

"Keuvra?!"

“Asha!” he gasps as if relieved to see me. “This was one of the battles we fought to protect Ellyntide! Soon, that Lithan will fly around and have its fire breath reflected by an Elementia spell!”

Across the young evening sky, the Lithan steadies their flight to avoid the magical attacks sailing towards it and prepares for another blast of fire. It’s at this point that I realize the modern clothes I was wearing have vanished, replaced by the robes that everyone else from this time is keen to be fitted in. What’s more, the sleeve on my right arm has been rolled up to reveal more of the strange symbols on the top of my wrist. Finally presented a closer look, they seem vaguely similar to the letter of the Goddess Language, but with some key differences is how they’re constructed.

“What happened to my clothes!?” I exclaim, inspecting the robes. “And what are these symbols on my arm?”

“You’re part of the battle, too!” Kevura uses his mundane arm to point the other. “The symbols on us are called an ‘*attenuation matrix*’. It draws Elementia from the the surrounding environment and tunes it for spell casting. Go on, try casting a fireball at the Lithan!”

Kevura sways his black tail reassuringly towards me, but there’s no need.

“Oh!” I chirp, having already figured it out. “You’re right. I *can* cast a fireball!”

Pushing aside the pertinent question of why we’re fighting a battle that has supposedly already been fought, I still my thoughts and focus on drawing Elementia into a spell. As my mind concentrates, the Lithan circles in the sky with an effortless grace, easily

avoiding the magical attacks being hurdled toward it. They're a well-trained flyer, as I'd expect a Lithan to be. To control draconic fire, you must always be conscious of the wind's speed, direction, and nature. Unfortunately for this Dragon, I'm also well-trained. I had the best teacher in the flock: Kuro! I also know a thing or two about how fire travels through the open sky.

I extend my arm outwards, a warm flame gathering in the palm of my hand. I can't believe it! I'm casting a real, honest to Goddess magic spell! I'm...

...

I steady my hand, taking into account the wind and aim my growing fireball slightly to the left of the Lithan. It'll miss, that much I'm certain. But that's precisely what I want to accomplish. I won't indiscriminately harm a fellow Dragon.

When the fur on my palms feels like an oven, I release it, sending the ball of flame whizzing through the sky. The slate-gray Lithan senses my attack and flicks its tail to try and rise into a thermal. But that's precisely how I knew they'd react.

**ROOARGH?**

They see it coming just in time. The Lithan tents its wings and drops into a dive as the fireball sails cleanly to the left of their former position in the sky. As predicted, my attack would have missed them regardless of how they reacted. But it was close enough to get their attention and force them to respond. With their attack broken up, the Lithan roars in frustration and banks hard to reposition for the next volley.

“Wow!” someone yells from the conspiracy of spell-casters.

The other Lemurs crane their necks in surprise. A wisp of smoke drifts from my outstretched hand, offering easy blame for who nearly harmed the Lithan.

“Hey, nice shot!!” A wide-eyed Ringtail exclaims.

“Where’d you find your friend, Keuvonis?” A Sifaka man breaks from the group and runs to join us. “We could use more like her!”

“Friend?” the furtive deity’s tail quirks. “Why, Asha’s a relative of mine.”

“Urk...!” The Sifaka’s fur stands on end. He quickly draws his arm across his chest, bows to me, and stammers, “Apologies, my lady. I-I didn’t know.”

For a fleeting moment, I find myself startled by the mage’s unexpected obedience. But the hesitation quickly passes as long-buried behaviors from my days in the palace resurface. I straighten my back and project authority in my voice. “At ease. It is a common misconception. My likeness as a Lordanou is not well-known.”

“Save the introductions for later,” Keuvra bleats, pointing skyward. “We gotta deal with that Dragon first!”

Off in the sky, the Lithan is circling for another attack, smoke billowing from their nostrils. They’re preparing to use their fire!

**ROARRGH!!**

Keuvra draws his hand skyward and shouts, “Asha’s attack bought us some time! Let’s get that spell cast!!”

“Right!!” The mages shout.

Unexpectedly, Keuvra darts forward to join the crowd of Lemurs, forcing me to play catch-up. Hands strain to the sky, glowing with magical light – The air is charged with a mystical energy, one I can taste on my tongues and feel in my fur. My fingers twitch as my Elementia attenuates, warping and bending to join the rest of the conspiracy’s power in an unseen reserve forming above us.

As the Lithan draws closer, I see their finer physical details. I can tell it’s a drakon by the distinctly squared shape of his forehead and the broad muscles around his wings. He soars with reckless abandon, pounding his wings to take revenge on the miserable prey-animals who nearly scorched his feathers. Can he sense the spell we’re brewing? I know we’ll successfully harm him; a deity said as much. Still, I find myself anxious. These are the images my prey saw every time I dived in desperation to keep me and those I love alive. What a terrific, terrifying sight!

“Hold the spell until my call!”

Standing beside me, Keuvra’s matrix changes color from gold to blue. His muscles tense, and his tail twitches.

“Ready!”

The drakon rears his head, tickling the unique muscle in the back of his throat. A flash of light emanates from their maw as the blowtorch of flame ignites.

“NOW!”

The energy above me releases, and my matrix dims.

Nothing happens.

For a breathless moment, I squirm as fire sails from the drakon’s mouth on a direct course toward us – the air sings, competing with the sound of my racing heart as prey-emotions overwhelm me. But before I can turn and flee, the sky glistens azure blue as a light shield instantiates in the air around us. The drakon’s fire impacts with a metallic whong, cleanly reflecting from the surface and sailing back toward the Litan.

**ROARGH?!**

The drakon wails in surprise. He panics, quickly trying to reposition himself to avoid his reflected attack. But it's far too late. Flame overwhelms his body and quickly ignites his feathers.

**ROOOOOOARGH!!!**

A Fronted Lemur throws his arms in surprise. "Prophet's light, it worked!"

"Oh, my Goddess!" I gasp. "That poor...!"

I quickly clamp my muzzle. *Erm, right.* Dragons are supposed to be the *enemies* today. Privately, I feel my heart shatter for the poor drakon. His feathers are on fire!! I've had nightmares about that happening to me, but never the misfortune of witnessing it occur while awake. Will this drakon survive? If he does, will his plumage grow back? What if he has a brood to care for in Felra? How will he hunt now?!

The conspiracy erupts in raucous cheers, dancing and cavorting as the drakon writhes in pain. He cries out, shaking himself in a desperate attempt to put out the flames and flee to safety. As he squirms, I feel an overwhelming urge to take flight and help. I flex my wings to open them and... quickly remember I no longer have wings.

The mage's cries fall away from me. A hollow feeling festers in my stomach, and for the first time, I lament the loss of my Lathan body. For as long as I remain a Lemur, I won't know the exhilaration of taking flight and finding an updraft to deliver me to the clouds. The sky feels like a second home to me, and being in a body where I can't return there feels viscerally wrong.

"Asha, we did it!"

I turn to Keuvra, as jubilant as the others. He notices my expression, and his mood quickly deflates.

"Oh," his tail droops. He forces a pained smile and rasps, "I understand your concern. But don't worry, Son-Of-Khahiko will survive our attack and become one of my first Kin in the combined Snowfell Flock."

Framed against the setting sun, Son-Of-Khahiko's pained wail echoes across the crimson sky. The mages absorb his misery and erupt in fervent jeers.

"Fweghing bastard! Go home!!"

"Yeah! Don't EVER mess with us again!"

I turn away, negative emotions coursing through me. I'm sure this Lithan has done terrible things to Farlanders, ones which warrant their ire. But it's *wrong*. Lithans are enlightened creatures! They have lives, families, hopes, and dreams like every Farlander does! Ascendants and Dragons should be friends, not enemies!

Keuvra lowers his head. "Perhaps we should move on from here," he concedes.

"To where?" I ask.

"The next scene!"

Keuvra speaks, but not from before more. I turn to his voice and discover the battlefield erased; The world changed anew. I find myself in a forest clearing somewhere deep inside Felra. Dense evergreens surround me, indicating I'm somewhere in the Great Valley... at least, I would be in the modern world. Somehow, this forest differs from the ones I've become familiar with as Kin.

A small conspiracy of Lemurs stand before us, four total including Keuvra. Two of them are centered in the clearing, gazing intently at the frozen ground beneath us. The other is positioned on the far side of the trees with their hand resting gently against the scabbard attached to their belt. No longer in mage's robes, they have attire more befitting an adventurer, stained and torn from their undoubtedly long journey through Felra to reach this location. There's a chill in the air, and the sky is bleakly overcast.

"It all started here," Keuvra says, standing beside me. "This was where I discovered the power of the Chimera."

I turn to the deity, clad in the same outfits as everyone else. “You...? You discovered it?”

“Oh, yes,” he nods with reserved pride. “In just a few moments, I’ll become the first ascendant to transform into a Dragon.”

I stare at him, slowly blinking. *Keuvra* was the one who discovered the power of the Chimera? Just how many incredible things did he accomplish as a mortal? But if *Keuvra* was the one who learned how to turn into a Dragon, then that means... “This is where that monument was erected. The one Gust led us to in the snow.”

“It was appropriate, no?” *Keuvra* seems pleased that I quickly made the connection. “Mother thought it was ‘*unbefitting*,’ but discovering the power of the Chimera unified Felra and saved Ellyntide. If it weren’t for this moment, the Kingdom would have never risen.”

As my mind strays in wonderment, the Lemurs in the center of the clearing finish their work. “My lord!” a female Ruffy shouts. I recognize her as Lagora, the one I saw in the battle against Son-Of-Khahiko. “We’re ready to begin.”

“Hey,” I interject, tapping the deity on his shoulder with my tail. “If this is where the monument will be erected, then how come there’s no snow on the ground? It was nearly up to my stomach when I came here as a Lithan.”

Keuvra gazes across the clearing and exhales a drawn-out breath. He closes the sides of his button-up shirt and gives me a reassuring smile. “You’ll see.”

He crosses the field, passing the two retreating Ruffys who come to stand next to me. Even though I’ve just met them, they seem comfortable in my presence. Could they be my ancestors as well?

“I take it the attenuator is prepared?” Keuvra asks, inspecting the ground.

“Yes,” Lagora replies. “You’ll find the one with the highest purity in the center.”

Keuvra lowers himself and runs his fingers through the frosty grass, inspecting the objects left there. He pulls back his hand, and... *No way*. It couldn’t be! I gasp, drawing those beside me. Inside Keuvra’s hand is a distinctly shaped stone, the shape of which I instantly recognize; it’s The Serpentine Diamond!!

“This one,” Keuvra announces. “This will be the attenuator.”

I can’t believe it. THIS is the origin of the Serpentine Diamond! Everyone thought it was a ceremonial piece from the time before the Kingdom was formed. But somehow, it was essential to discovering the Chimeric powers that transformed me into a dragon!

“My Lord,” Lagora calls. “Are you truly sure about this?”

Keuvra draws a deep breath and studies the diamond in his hand. He holds it at arm's length, and the matrix on his arm begins to glow. "The Lathan scourge must be subjugated from our lands. I'll do anything to protect my family. Please," he pauses, anxiety overcoming his voice. "I—If this works, but I am no longer myself... do not hesitate."

The Ruffys beside me glance uncomfortably at each other. They steel their emotions and promise, "We won't."

Blue lights, just like the ones during my transformation into a Lemur, begin swirling in the air around the diamond. Keuvra closes his eyes, and pale light grows outward from his feet like vines ascending a tree trunk, forming complex sigils similar to the ones written on his arm. A wind blows from unknown sources, causing Keuvra to stagger backward momentarily before he can regain his footing. The lights around the diamond flicker, changing from Jadian blue to Maki green.

"Damn it!" Keuvra grunts, trying in vain to somehow extend his arm farther away from himself.

Lagora panics, "My lord...!"

"Don't come any closer!! It's...!"

Keuvra lowers his head and bares fangs, fighting against... whatever's happening here. Knowing how one 'discovers' a spell would be nice, but I guess it doesn't matter. It's not like I'll need to discover any on my journey to save Ellyntide.

A light begins emanating from within the diamond, identical to the one that shone during my transformation into Kin. Frost begins forming at Keuvra's boots, spreading across the ground and coating everything it touches. I tense, startled by the sudden change in the environment, but the Ruffys beside me seem less concerned about the frost and more about Keuvra. Breathlessly, I watch the ice spread past me, rising halfway up my boots before stopping unexpectedly. The woman beside me has her arm out, the matrix on it glowing bright. If it weren't for her, I would have been frozen.

"Rrrghh!"

The green lights begin encircling Keuvra, and the consistency of his body changes to become fluid-like. Opaque feathers begin sprouting from his fur, turning a brilliant shade of gold as they grow in size and overtake his body. Clothes recede, and legs waver. The diamond slips from his hand as Keuvra's body collapses to the ground.

The second Ruffy staggers backward in shock. "Prophet's light...!"

Now on all fours and growing in size, Keuvra unleashes a savage snarl as draconic instincts take hold. He opens his eyes and turns to me, a sadistic grin plastered across his elongated muzzle. The Ruffy beside me gasps, quickly moving to stand between us. *As if that could help.* I look past her shoulder and return the smile as wings begin sprouting from Keuvra's back. He snarls again, this time much louder than before.

“Oh no!!”

Lagora grabs my hand and pulls me backward, separating us from the growing Dragon. We sprint to the trees, now covered in thick sheets of frost and ice. I turn back to see Keuvra, fully grown, his golden feathers shimmering from the dimming light of the Serpentine Diamond. The transformation is complete! The newest Litan splays his wings and lets out a savage cry.

**SKREEEEAK!!**

The Lemurs cover their ears and stagger in shock, resisting the urge to retreat into the frozen forest behind us. Lagora flashes me a worried glance — is she concerned about how calm I am? *Hmm*. I should probably learn to act more scared of Dragons, especially when one is standing right in front of me. I exaggerate a gasp and cower slightly towards Lagora. *Yeah, that'll work!*

Keuvra lowers his head from the sky, ruffling his iridescent feathers. He surveys the cold forest surrounding us, tastes the air, and then finally senses prey-animals nearby. The beautiful gaze of a pair of crimson-red eyes falls onto us.

“L-Lord Keuvonis?” Lagora stammers. “My Lord, can you understand—”

**GRRRRR...**

“Eep!”

The mages raise their arms, readying a spell should Lord Keuvonis try to attack us. But surely he wouldn't do that, right? How do the rules of these visions work, anyway? Keuvra holds his head above us, muscles tensed, and fangs bared. Whatever's truly happening right now, Keuvra is resisting the urge to turn us into an easy snack.

“Keuvonis!! It's me, your trusted thane Lagora! Please, you must remember!!”

The Dragon studies us, lip twitching. He furrows his eyes and shakes his head back and forth.

**GROOOOWL...**

Lagora pleads, “You've been traveling with us, searching for an attenuator pure enough to uncover the spell that turns you into a Dragon! You are not a senseless monster! You are a Lordanou!”

At that, Keuvra's eyes open wide. He stares at us, panting heavily. “Okra...” he mumbles, speaking in the language of Kin. “Kree...”

“Yes...” Lagora trails off, trying to inject calm into her voice. “Keuvonis, can you understand me?”

“Wait.” The male Ruffy quickly motions his tail to silence Lagora. He steadies himself and transmits, <Lord Keuvonis?>

The deity stares bug-eyed at him. He shakes his head and tries to calm his breathing. <Flea,> he transmits. <Yes...I can understand you.>

<Oh, my lord!!> Lagora gasps. <I-I can't believe it! You've done it! You're a Lithan!!>

<Yes,> he says, quickly shutting his eyes. <And it pains me to say it, but you all smell delicious.>

The mages retreat a step, their tails drooping to the ground. Keuvra's words also unnerve me but for an entirely different reason. Sooner or later in my quest to restore Ellyntide, I'll have to ally with ascendants as Kin. Will I have the same trouble trying to distinguish friends from prey?

Lagora's breathing picks up. <But, surely you will not...?>

Slowly, Kevura settles against his haunches. He ruffles slightly, then cranes his neck to study his new draconic body. He flexes his hindtalons, revealing a deadly set of rock-hard claws. He draws open a wing, marveled by the intricate movements of feathers shifting back and forth. The sight of it dislodges a memory from my own transformation when I performed the same awestruck ritual.

<No,> Keuvra finally replies, wrapping his tail around his foretalons as if to conceal them. <No, I will not eat you. But I need to prey on something soon.>

Did you know this text is from a different site? Read the official version to support the creator.

<Oh!> Lagora says, reaching for the bag on her shoulder. <We have some leftover elk from last night's—>

<No,> Keuvra interrupts, raising his head high above us. He rumbles and tastes the air, taking in the scents of the forest. <That won't be enough for me, Lagora. I need to hunt. There are so many delicious-smelling ferals around here. It's as if they're calling—no, *begging* me to taste their flesh.>

Lagora and the male Ruffy trade glances. This doesn't sit well with them. <M-My lord, what about our plans? You're beginning to sound like one of those monsters.>

<That's because I *am* one of those monsters,> Keuvra transmits, his eyes narrowing to slits. <This is why I uncovered the Chimeric spell. To save our lands from the draconic scourge, we must learn to understand how they think, to discover what drives them to scorch our towns and prey on our livestock. Only when we know our enemy can we truly scheme to destroy them.>

Lagora's breathing begins to calm. She runs her fingers through her ruff and muses, <W-Well, my Lord. Besides an insatiable taste for flesh, how do you feel?>

Keuvra splays his wings abruptly – the sudden sound of feathers shifting causing the mages to flinch. He tests his wings with a gentle flap and my hair flutters in the breeze.

<...Powerful.>

As the deity finishes speaking, something within me feels strange. Confused, I brush my fingers across my stomach. But in the time it takes me to look down, the scene around us dissolves into darkness, and so does my physical body. It slips away from me, sinking into the void like a cold mountain river tumbling over an endless waterfall. Feeling and sensation are stolen, leaving only my thoughts and a pale blue light amongst the emptiness. I've become formless again, drifting unbound through time and space.

Time passes – a year or a second, I can't be sure. Through numbed thoughts, I recall the last time this happened to me during a vision from Gust. My light begins to flicker – what's going on? What happened to my body?!

Oh... I'm scared. That's why I'm flickering.

<Don't be afraid.>

From the darkness comes Keuvra's voice, calm and reassuring. Long strands of light come into existence and coalesce into a golden form like mine. For some reason, its presence next to me is... calming. The light bends to interact with my own, and my pain begins to subside. Slowly, I stop flickering.

<There,> Keuvra says, his light reforming into a distinct shape. <That's better. These are the forms our souls take when excised from the mortal realm. You can communicate like me if you concentrate.>

...I can? Doesn't communicating with my thoughts use Elementia? How is my soul using that kind of power?

...

If I could just...

...

<I'm... I can...>

<Yes, that's it!> Keuvra's light brightens. <Don't be discouraged. You're using a voice that's never spoken before.>

<Is this... Elementia?> I clumsily transmit.

Keuvra's light dips as if he were nodding. <To put it simply, when you summon Elementia to transform or speak universally, your very soul draws the life energy from Maki. One life, for another.>

*Oh... kay.* Setting aside the insinuation that the life energy from Maki is alive, <Why are you showing this to me?>

<I thought you should understand the interaction between souls and Elementia in the most literal way possible. Besides, I feel that these forms will become necessary.>

My light dims slightly. <Necessary?>

Slowly, darkness fades, and the world is reformed anew. A force acts against our spirits, propelling Keuvra and me forward. We find ourselves amongst the clouds in daytime, the golden shape of Lathan Keuvra flying through the sky before us. On his wing is an Avian — specifically, a rainbow-plumaged Conure, — clad in clothing that's unfamiliar to me.

<Who's on your wing?> I ask.

<Scew Light-Treader.>

My light expands. <That Scew?>

<Indeed,> Keuvra transmits. <The deity of the Avians, still in his mortal form. You're about to discover where we're flying.>

Lithan Keuvra notices an island below us as we drift through a cloud. Covered in snow and ice, the island sits in a frozen sea; the ancient ocean. Keuvra steadies his neck and calls out to it.

**SKREEAK!**

“Oww!” Scew glowers, angrily flapping his wings. “Don’t be so loud!”

Lithan Keuvra grunts, <Don’t be so weak, prey-animal.>

Scew runs his beak across his chest feathers. “Honestly, do you want this meeting to go well or not?”

<I have a feeling our involvement matters little.>

“Maybe for us, but not those who are moonbound. Don’t you care about your family in Ellyntide?”

Keuvra’s expression turns glum. He averts his gaze and transmits, <The Kingdom will endure. I must tend to my flock now.>

“Um, okay,” Scew downbeats a frustrated flap. “If you’re going to be weird about this, just let me do the talking.”

<Suit yourself,> Keuvra growls. He falls into a dive, the force of his body causing a great wind that rocks Scew’s flight ajar.

**SQUAWK!**

He pounds his wings, quickly working to correct himself. When his flight stabilizes, he peers down to watch Keuvra sail through the clouds below.

“Honestly...”

The mortal deity tilts his wings and begins to descend through the clouds. As he does, so to do the souls of Keuvra and me.

Still drifting beside me, Keuvra's light brightens. <I was a cheery individual back then, wasn't I?>

<Scew didn't seem much better,> I observe.

<We were all under a lot of stress. The Great Freeze was at its height, and food was scarce. The God of Creation had summoned us here, at Truce, to discuss his terms for saving animalkind from itself.>

Wait, really?

We're flying to Truce to observe the meeting between Azurrel and the mortal deities?!

My light brightens as awe overwhelms me. <Oh, wow. We're going to witness the meeting where the agreement with Azurrel was reached, aren't we?>

<Princess...> Kevura transmits with a tinge of discomfort. <Do you know why this island is called Truce?>

Well, of course, I do. Every citizen of Ellyntide knows the answer to that. But if he's posing the question, then I feel I'm about to be proven wrong. <I was taught it was

where the treaty was signed that ended the First War with Sarlain. That's why we flew here when I was a kid for the peace accords with King Finn. It was supposed to be a symbolic gesture to the Goddess that we were serious about ending our generations-long feud with the Richelieus and Sarlain.>

<A remarkable coincidence, but false. It got its name because the animals of the day believed our deal with the God of Creation wasn't an agreement, but a *truce*.>

...*Oh*.

The meeting between the deities isn't going to go well, is it? For that matter, is it even safe for us to be talking about opposition to the God of Creation so openly?

<Hey,> I transmit. <Is it okay to—>

<Don't worry,> Keuvra's light brightens. <They don't seem to mind us talking openly about it.>

<That's hardly comforting.>

<Eight centuries have passed since we became subservient to the God of Creation. If they had malicious intentions, then we believe they would have acted on them by now.>

Subservient?

I've never heard of our relationship with Azurrel described with such disquieting words, much less by a *deity*. In fact, heretical talk is explicitly forbidden by the church in Ellyntide. What does this mean? When I contemplate the implications of a deity speaking this way, it makes me feel like the strands of my faith are being pulled apart at the seams. What's real? What's true? Once more, this conversation has challenged so much about my perception of the moon.

Eventually, we find ourselves floating over Truce, coming to rest above a snowy plain near the ocean's edge. Frozen water extends to the horizon, an astonishing sight I've never seen so clearly. Much as it is in modern times, vast chunks of ice are scattered like confetti across the water, creating a labyrinth of hazards for boats daring to sail through them. One such vessel happens to be moored near the edge of the water, and a group of ten or so animals are milling about on land, working a campfire. But it's further inland and almost directly below us that we find the animals we've traveled here to see, as told in every story about the raising of the continents.

Jaya, the Rabbit. Malfex, the Marten. Scew, the Avian. Etain, the Lemur. And, absent from every version told in the Farlands: Keuvra, the Dragon.

They're gathered near each other, the ascendants wearing thick clothes padded with feral hides. I can't feel the cold in my spirit form, but it does look awfully chilly. A breeze is blowing around us, kicking up snow and causing the ascendants to occasionally shield their faces from the icy gusts. The only one who doesn't seem bothered is Keuvra, lying on the ground with wings folded tight against him. I wonder why he isn't shielding the others?

Spirit Keuvra's light brightens, and we descend closer to the ground. It's probably a good thing I'm just a floating ball of light because I'd be going a little bit nuts if I still had my physical body. The meeting between the mortal deities is the most fabled gathering in the history of... well, ever! And now I'm about to witness it happen right before my eyes!

...

Or, um. However I'm watching all of this happen. I probably shouldn't think about it too much.

As we drift closer, I begin to make out the conversation below.

"...don't know," Jaya says, speaking in a voice more shrill than I was expecting. "They told me the same thing, that we would leave our Kingdoms and become '*divine*' animals."

"What does that mean?" Malfex Asks, rubbing his brown paws together. "How can one being undo the damage that Elementia has caused? What are we sacrificing to save ourselves?"

<Our beloved, it would seem.> Sitting at the edge of the group, Keuvra shifts his talons uncomfortably against the snow. <Azurrel told me that once I become divine, I'll no longer be able to see my mate, Nomi.>

Jaya's fuzzy white ears droop to their sides. "I was told the same."

<Yet if I do not accept the title as the savior of the Dragons, then Nomi will surely perish alongside the rest of my flock. When faced with such a dire prospect...> Keuvra frowns and gazes across the snow. <I feel as if I have no other choice. It is a sacrifice I must make.>

“As if *you* know anything about sacrifices.”

Brimming with contempt, Scew’s voice rises above the mortals. The suddenly hostile Avian takes a provocative step towards Keuvra with one wing drawn outward but keeps his matrix dim.

“Whoa, hey!” Malfex squirms in surprise.

Keuvra issues a curt growl like he was expecting Scew to interject. He tenses his golden wings and rumbles, <My flock will hunt wherever they please, *prey-animal*. If you have a problem with that—>

Scew shouts, “You’re one of *us*, Keuvonis!”

<I am *Keuvra*, Son-Of-Candice.>

“You kept your mother’s name, yet you prey on those you used to know! How could a monster like you be offered an audience before Azurrel?”

<We were afforded this privilege because Lithans are the most powerful creatures on this moon.> Keuvra flexes his talons, displaying his razor-sharp claws for the haughty Avian.  
<Even a featherbrained fledge such as yourself should understand that.>

A tension cold as ice hangs in the air. Nothing is spoken as the two mortal deities stare each other down, watching to see if the other acts with aggression. Malfex holds his breath, standing beside Jaya with his sleeve drawn back to reveal his attenuation matrix. Could he really take sides and join a fight? How do the politics in this time work, anyways? I’m unsure what’s happening, but this could get ugly fast. A breeze blows through the gathering of mortals, casting a cloud of snow into the frigid air.

<Nice burn,> I casually remark.

Keuvra’s spirit broadcasts a hearty chuckle. <You know, I still call him a featherbrain to this day.>

“Is this what you want?” Scew asks, his voice slow and firm. “To test your little theory right now?”

As he claps his golden beak shut, the matrix on Scew’s arm begins to glow a bright red. Just how powerful of an Elementia user is he to openly challenge a Lathan?

Keuvra's eyes narrow to slits, and a low growl rattles against his chest. <You are nothing but prey to me, Conure. If conflict is what you seek, then I'd be happy to—>

“STOP!”

The Goddess rushes forward, placing hands across Scew's rainbow-plumaged wing.

“Could you two put aside your differences for just one second? Or have you forgotten we're here to save our Kingdoms from extinction?!”

Kevura and Scew exchange steely glances. Slowly, the Dragon's feathers relax, and Scew's matrix dims.

Etain continues, “This isn't the time for petty bickering or tearing open old wounds. We have to demonstrate to Azurrel that we're worthy of being saved, that we can ascend to the paradise they've promised us.”

<Quite so.>

A strange voice, both distinctly masculine and feminine, alternating as if many animals were speaking as one transmits from behind me. I sense the sound of wings in flight, and the gazes of the mortal deities are drawn past spirit Keuvra and myself. A small, blue-plumaged prey bird splits the gap between us, a trail of dappled light falling at their

tailfeathers. They come to land before the mortals and neatly mantle their wings across the snow.

So, it's true — in all the stories from ancient times, Azurrel is depicted as a small, glowing prey-bird. And here they are! I... can't believe I get to witness this. Countless stories have been written about being visited by the God of Creation in their winged form, and now I'm living it! Or at least, I'm living a vision of them created by a deity. Oh, and their voice! Nobody has ever described what Azurrel's voice sounds like! This is all so, so incredible to witness!

The mortal deities are surprised by Azurrel's appearance but visibly guarded. Based on their conversation from earlier, it stands to reason they've been visited by God at least once before.

They begin transmitting to all assembled. <Centuries ago, a choice was presented to representatives of your species: the decision to ascend and become enlightened animals. As the creator of your world, we offered this gift in the spirit of generosity, hoping to nurture a prosperous moon that would cultivate vibrant, flourishing civilizations. In the ensuing years you have accomplished this, going on to establish the reigning Kingdoms that you now represent.>

This all sounds correct. It is recorded in the history books that after the continents rose, Azurrel tasked the newly apotheosized deities with shepherding their respective species. The '*natural order*,' as they described it, was sacred. Still, at this moment, the mortal deities seem guarded against Azurrel. Have the stories of our ascension and what differentiates us from ferals not been passed down? Could this be the first time they're learning about it?

<But now our moon stands at a precipice. The misuse of Elementia has caused the life energy to drain from the land, rendering it cold and destitute. Food is scarce, and populations are dwindling. We were content to observe the development of your

civilization from afar, but it has become clear that this is no longer a tenable option. Intervention is necessary. To this end, we have proposed the following: those who wish to follow our ways will be lifted into the sky; a paradise free from the strife below. You are here because you have chosen to listen to my proposal and decide amongst yourselves how to proceed. For it will be you that shepherds your races into the raised lands.>

Azurrel pauses and begins preening the feathers on their wing. As the deities glance between themselves, a strange feeling comes across me. I can't explain why, but it seems spirit Keuvra is judging Azurrel's introduction. Does he believe Azurrel was lying?

Stepping past Jaya, Etain projects her feeble voice forward. "And, you can truly undo the damage caused to the environment?"

<That is correct,> Azurrel replies. <The land will be as you remember it before the detrimental effects of Elementia began to manifest.>

Malfex side-eyes Scew, who's already staring at him. He turns to Azurrel and asks, "But it's not that easy though, is it? We would become subservient to you, the one who supposedly granted us the ability to speak. But how would another environmental catastrophe be prevented?"

<I am glad you asked,> the God of Creation transmits. <A catastrophe such as the one that has befallen Jade will be impossible in the raised lands, as the usage of Elementia will be curtailed.>

The mortals wince, shocked at the revelation.

<Curtailed?> Keuvra's tail flicks across the snow. <You mean, *taken away from us!*?>

Azurrel nods. <That would be an acceptable characterization. It is not the supply of life energy being strained but rather the speed at which your civilization utilizes it. Raising the continents and holding them in the sky is a function of Elementia and can be accomplished with acceptable harm to the planet Maki. However, without restraining the sustained draw of life energy, it is unlikely the land could heal and the continent's place in the sky maintained. Truly, a fate worse than the one that has befallen your civilization would follow in course.>

The mortals gaze between themselves like a tragedy just occurred. It seems strange to me, but surely that's because I know life will flourish and go on to become the Jade I'm familiar with.

Scew shakes his head in dismay. "This is unfathomable. How do you expect us to live without Elementia?"

"Yeah!" Malfex adds. "We can't so much as cook a meal without being able to cast fire!"

<Your civilization will learn to adapt.> Azurrel ruffles and begins preening the feathers on their chest. < Mundane methods can tame fire, animals hunted with blunt instruments. We will not deny that this transition will be difficult. However, your kind will survive and learn to flourish anew.>

Scew looks particularly shaken. He draws open his talons and stares at the matrix across his feathers. Just moments ago, he seemed confident enough to challenge a fully-grown Dragon in battle. Now, he's fighting with the revelation that to save the Avians, he'll need to become as weak as the prey-animal Keuvra claims he is. To willingly give up that kind of power must be devastating.

Conversely, Keuvra seems far less worried. His wings are folded to his sides, and his tail is still. After spending two seasons as a member of the Snowfell Flock, it isn't hard to understand why. Losing the power of Elementia is far less of a blow to creatures who can naturally breathe fire. Still, I wonder what life in the flock was like back then? How did they leverage living as the apex predators of the moon with the incredible power to cast magic spells? That sounds fweghing awesome!

"What a terrible outcome," Etain speaks in a meager voice, barely audible. Her long, brown tail wraps around her body like a scarf, as if she were trying to comfort herself. "I grieve for the lives that would be irreversibly altered. How will I explain to Ellyntide that this was the correct decision? That we can learn to adapt without Elementia?"

Azurrel pulls his head from his chest and glares at Etain. <Just as Maki will transit the sky and shroud our moon in darkness, a prosperous outcome is inevitable. To find proof, you need only look to the spirits who have traveled from the future to observe this historic gathering.>

*W-What?!*

Azurrel draws his wing in our direction, and the faces of the mortals fill with shock. Can they see us?!!

<K-Keuvra...?!> My light begins to flicker.

<Don't worry,> he quickly transmits. <This usually happens.>

It *usually* happens!? What is Keuvra babbling about?! I don't *usually* get called out by God eight centuries in the past!

“W...*What?!*” Malfex trembles, his tail flicking behind him.

“Spirits in the mortal realm?” Scew questions, pointing an accusing talon towards us.  
“And they're from the *future?!* How can this be!?”

Just then, a wave of strange emotions wash over me. Although I have no physical form, it feels like someone is peering inside my soul, examining all the constituent parts that make me Asha. My light dims alongside Keuvra's and then returns to normal. At the same time, mortal Keuvra roars in surprise.

**RAARGH?!**

<Hey buddy,> spirit Keuvra broadcasts in a chipper voice. <How's it going? Like what you see?>

Dragon Keuvra stares at spirit Keuvra, unable to believe his eyes. Does he... no, he couldn't possibly know that, could he?

"Keuvra?" Jaya asks. He takes one step toward the Dragon before stopping unexpectedly. "Is... everything alright?"

Keuvra says nothing, his body frozen as his eyes remain affixed on the spirit version of himself from the future. While Keuvra remains shocked, Etain looks disturbed.

Her eyes have settle onto me, piercing like daggers. <How can this be?> She privately transmits. <Who are you, really?>

Does she... know how I am? A Lordanou from the future? A Princess from the Kingdom she'll soon shepherd into the sky? It only takes me a second to decide against replying to her. What if I tell her something that alters the future? I don't want my first conversation with the Goddess to doom the Kingdom forever!

Azurrel lowers their wing, seemingly content with the temporal exchange that's just occurred. As it folds to their side, the mortals blink in confusion.

"They disappeared," Malfex says.

"This must be some kind of trick!" Scew declares, ruffling his feathers. "How can spirits travel from the future? If you..."

The Avian's voice trails off as I get lost in my thoughts. <What just happened? Keuvra, did we alter the future?!>

<Of course not,> his spirit transmits, extending his comforting presence around me.  
<This is merely a recreation of the meeting that occurred all those years ago. Nothing that happens here will affect the timeline.>

Slowly, my light returns to normal. <Then, why did Azurrel reveal us to the mortals? That didn't happen at the real gathering eight centuries ago, did it?>

<It did not. Azurrel called us out because they are not a facsimile. What you see before us is the living God of Creation.>

The... living Azurrel?

Does he mean this prey-bird in the snow is God? Like, the *real* one?

Keuvra continues, <Us deities, we can create and dispel these pocket dimensions at will. Everything in the known universe is at our fingertips to be recreated... everything, except Azurrel. It fails whenever we try to create a facsimile of them, and the real God of Creation appears in its place.>

My light contracts, turning as white as the snow around us. <...Why?>

<Nobody knows. Whenever we ask them about it, all we get is silence. Personally, I think they enjoy controlling the representation of themselves and playing out these little realities in amusing ways. The rest of us sure do.>

This *is* Azurrel. I'm the first mortal in centuries to witness **God**.

...

I get it; I lack a physical form. But I still feel like a prey-bird being tossed about in a gale. Keuvra doesn't seem bothered by Azurrel's presence here, but I sure do. For all my life, I've been led to believe that the God of Creation was kind and benevolent — a superior being that took pity on us enlightened species and became our saviors. But what I've seen today challenges that perception. Azurrel seems... conniving, intensely concerned with their perception of themselves. Why would they need to control how animals feel about them? Keuvra says they don't have some kind of ulterior motive, but I'm not sure I believe that. What could it be?

...

I... shouldn't be thinking these things. This isn't a good line of thought with a deity and God in my presence.

I watched the rest of the gathering in silence. There were more revelations, including some surprising ones about Gust. The mortals were concerned about how the species would be forever separated and what that meant for those who mingled in other Kingdoms. But eventually, all the deities acquiesced and agreed to lead their species into the sky.

Keuvra's light dims from existence, and the world turns dark – it seems the scene is changing again. Where could we possibly go from here? I feel my own light dissolve, and all the world is darkness for a moment.

All of the world except Azurrel.

The avatar of God remains, their glowing body illuminating a patch of snowy existence as they work to preen their feathers. I get the impression they're trying to make themselves presentable, much the same way my mate works to impress me with her impeccably groomed feathers. Azurrel raises their head, cranes their neck, and stares at me with shimmering, azure eyes.

For a timeless moment, I feel their presence.

They turn from me and take flight, growing smaller until darkness envelops them.

My physical body reforms, and my soul is reinserted. Sensation returns to me, sight and sound and feeling and wonder. My feet plant the ground, cool and moist from dew forming on blades of grass. A short distance away is Keuvra, gazing at our ancestors as lies in repose against a fallen tree trunk.

“After the continents rose, the serenity between Lemur and Kin was short-lived. As the land warmed, Ellyntide was slow to adapt. Unable to feed themselves, they came to rely on prey-offerings from the flock. But deprived of the ocean’s bounty, so too did the flock strain for prey. We were forced to expand our territory against false-kin, hunting deeper into Felra to stay alive. Eventually, the elder’s patience wore thin. Our friendship with Ellyntide ceased, and the memory of such an alliance was lost to time. Even the great Elder Tree, the living symbol of our once inseparable bond, was forgotten. You are the first Lemur in centuries to learn its true origins.”

A hollow feeling festers in my stomach. Dragons could have been a regular sight in the skies of Ellyntide if things had gone differently. With Felra as our allies, Ellyntide would have never fallen to Nortane, and the flock would have a more reliable prey source. Kin could survive frostwing without worrying about starvation, and Ellyntide would be safe from the threats of other nations. It would have been wonderful.

“Why are you telling me these things?” I ask, approaching the tree trunk. I sit beside Keuvra and curl my tail around my legs. “No other deity has spoken so openly to an ascendant about our past.”

“Others have,” Keuvra says. “It’s those who listened that decided to hold secrets.”

So, I’m not the first to learn these things? Could that mean Mom knows about Keuvra and our past with Felra? If so, she’s choosing to conceal a vast portion of our history from the Kingdom. But after hearing all these incredible stories, I think I understand why. What would happen if the world learned magic is real but is being concealed from us? What if someone tried to reactivate Elementia and use it against their enemies? Could such a thing even be possible?

“Besides,” Keuvra looks to our ancestors and smiles. “Nobody’s stopping me from telling a few good stories.”

After a moment’s thought, I come to an unsettling conclusion. The ‘*nobody*’ he’s talking about isn’t hypothetical: it’s Azurrel. Azurrel *allowed* Keuvra to show me these past events.

“I see.”

“I think a little historical context was necessary to understand why the God of Creation trusts you for my Divine Flight. Our family has a proud history of serving Ellyntide, the Snowfell Flock, and the God of Creation in tandem. My story as a mortal has already been written. But yours...” he trails off, and his gaze returns skyward. “It is just getting started, Princess.”

He... really expects me to do incredible things, doesn’t he? Things nobody else has done before. My tail goes limp against the grass, and my fur flattens.

“But you see it now, don’t you? A world where dragons and ascendants coexist peacefully is not a storybook fantasy; it has happened once before. It’s what us deities have longed for ever since our apotheosis. And finally, it seems the God of Creation wants it too. I don’t mean to put so much on your shoulders, Asha. But all of us here are hoping you succeed.”

Try as I might, I can’t muster a response. To bring me to his den and show me all these incredible events from the past... Keuvra truly has faith in me. Everyone does! Kuro, the

Kingdom, my Mother... everyone is counting on me. Everyone and everything is against my wings.

“No pressure!” Keuvra laughs, throwing up his hands.

“I’ll try my best, I really will!”

For a time, our ancestors watch us from above, and we watch them back. But eventually, the reality of my situation catches up to me: It’s terribly late, and my body is exhausted. I exhale a mighty yawn, one that would make any Dragon jealous.

Keuvra lowers his gaze and smiles. “You should head back to White Mountain.”

“Mmh,” I sleepily mumble, dragging my fingers through my ruff. “I have so many more questions... but I have a feeling I’ve learned enough for one day.”

Keuvra shrugs his shoulders and smirks. “Perhaps you’ll be able to ask the Goddess about them.”

The Goddess, huh? Obviously, I can no longer commune with her at our palace in Varecia. But Etain is worshiped in Sarlain, too. No doubt, Princess Lucy and King Finn must commune with her regularly. If I can form a rapport with Lucy, maybe I could convince her to let me talk to the Goddess!

My tail twists happily. “I like the way you think.”

I jump from the fallen tree and step into the clearing, contemplating the meaning of everything I’ve learned today. For as long as I draw breath, I’ll remember the time I visited the Dragon deity in his den.

“I think you should return as a Lemur,” Keuvra suggests. “Khosa deserves a good scare now and then.”

“That would be funny,” I laugh. “But, this form is no longer mine. I’m just borrowing it.”

And besides, how would Kuro react if I returned as a Lemur? I don’t want to scare her or hurt her feelings. Kuro is far too important to me to play pranks on her.

“Fair enough,” Keuvra smiles.

I step away from the deity, pacing across the field to give myself enough room to transform into Kin. But as I do, something important crosses my mind.

“Actually,” My tail twirls as I turn back towards Keuvra. “Before I go, there’s something I need to ask.”

Still against the trunk, Keuvra recrosses his legs. “For you, I’ll answer it as best I can.”

I smirk — obviously, he’s only allowed to influence events under special circumstances. But for a deity that’s lived for hundreds of years, he sure can be charming. If Keuvra was a part of the Lordanou family today, I’m confident I’d have another Lemur to call my friend.

“When I arrived here, you told me a mortal was responsible for my transformation into Kin. Who was it? And how could a living mortal control the power of the Chimera?”

“Hmm...” Kevura gazes at our ancestors and brushes his ruff contemplatively. “If the true nature of who you are becomes known, then the one responsible for your transformation will seek you out.”

I watch him closely, studying his expression. “Are they my enemy?”

For a silent moment, the deity is motionless. Then his face changes, turning to become unexpectedly stern. Like a storm on the horizon, he rumbles, “That’s for you to decide, Princess.”

*Oh...kay.* Keuvra knows I plan to go to Sarlain and seek Lucy’s help to restore Ellyntide. So, that must mean the animal who changed me is someone powerful, someone capable of finding me no matter where I travel in the Farlands. It has to be someone from Nortane who commands Crow Wing. Not even Lucy wields that kind of all-reaching power. Needless to say, it would be really bad if I encountered Crow Wing as a Lemur. No matter

what happens in the Farlands, I must keep my Lithan identity secret until Ellyntide is restored. Otherwise, it could truly spell the end of Ellyntide.

Kevura's expression returns to a smile. "Let it stew for a while. Perhaps you'll figure it out."

"Yeah..." I trail off. "Um, thanks. Thanks for everything today."

Keuvra rises from the trunk and curtsies like I'd expect a Lordanou gentleman should. How did he get so good at doing that, anyway?

I exhale sharply. No more fooling around. I've enjoyed my time as a Lemur, getting to re-experience all the emotions I longed after for so long. But it's time to turn back to normal.

I close my eyes and focus on my Elementia, This time, the transformation is more lucid; I can feel the changes occurring in real time as blue light surrounds me. Bones pop and rearrange themselves while muscles recede and regrow in different places stronger than before. The changes aren't painful, but a snarl nonetheless escapes me as wings pop from my shoulder blades and quickly grow in size. I rumble, comforting myself in the familiar sensation of power vibrating against my chest. A sinister laugh follows – I can't believe I *want* these changes to occur. It wasn't that long ago that I thought of my transformation into Kin as the most traumatic event of my life. Now it feels like I'm returning to the body I was always meant to have. What a strange and exhilarating sensation.

I feel grass beneath my talons and wind blowing against my feathers. I open my eyes to see the tree canopy below me, just where it should be. My transformation is complete, and

I couldn't be happier. I missed being a Dragon! Acting on reformed instincts, I raise my neck skyward to let the world know that I'm so happy to be back!!

**SKREEEEAK!!**

But as my head levels out, something is awry. There's a prey-animal standing in front of me, and it isn't cowering in fear. In fact, it looks happy! What's going on?! I snarl, lowering myself into a defensive position. Where's this creature's fear-scent? Who do they think they are, standing so confidently before a mighty...

...

"Oh!" I chirp. "O-oh, jeez. I'm so sorry!"

I quickly fold my wings and dip my head in apology. Oh, my Goddess!! I just thought about preying on *Keuvra!*

"It's quite alright," he laughs, looking oh so small below me. "As you perform more shifts, your rationality will be quicker to return."

"T-That's good to know..." I raise my head, trying to keep my hunger in check. Undoubtedly, this will be the first of many conversations I have with ascendants as Kin. I need to learn how to control these emotions under control. "Well, um. I suppose I'll get going."

Keuvra smiles and dips his head. I mantle my wings and cast about, approaching the portal back to the elder's den. As cross the field, my mind flutters. There are so many things I need to digest from my time with Keuvra. How will I share them all with Kuro? Obviously, I can't tell her Keuvra is a Lordanou. He asked her to leave so she wouldn't have to face the realization that her deity was born as a prey-animal. But at least I can tell her I got to see the meeting between the deities and Azurrel. I also learned a few exciting things about Gust. Hopefully, that's enough to sate her curiosity.

But as I approach the portal, something else crosses my mind — something I regret doing. “Oh, um,” I mutter, turning back to face Keuvra. “I'm sorry that I told the flock about Gust.”

“It's quite alright,” Keuvra says, brushing the dirt from his sleeve.

“Are you sure? How are you supposed to influence events now?”

“Well, if you happened to ask the flock about him, they'd have no idea to whom you were speaking.”

“Really?” my head tilts. “But, I told...”

As the words drift through my fangs, Kevura's smile widens.

“...Oh.”

My wings droop to the ground, and an uncomfortable feeling forms inside my stomach.

“Try not to do that again,” the deity sighs. “I don’t particularly enjoy manipulating those sorts of things.”

“Right, right.” I dip my head and turn to approach the swirling mists, only to stop and turn around again. “You’ve never... done something similar to me, have you?”

Keuvra’s expression is unflinching. “Warm currents, Daughter-Of-Kelani.”

I loosen an uncomfortable smile, tip my wings to the deity and step through the portal.

## 124. Know Your Enemy

In the days since my late-night visit to Keuvra’s den, I’ve spent a lot of time ruminating on what happened. The things he said to me, the things he showed me, and the gifts he gave me.

I've also thought about the things he didn't show me. And that's a problem.

The afternoon sun glistens against my feathers, warming the moon and providing the updrafts necessary to reach my far-off destination. From my perch in the sky, I sense the alluring scent of prey and drop into an unfamiliar forest. Leaves scatter as I pass through the deciduous canopy and into a clearing just wide enough for a Dragon my size to land. If Kuro were on my wing, we would have been forced to search for something larger. But she isn't. It's dangerous to be here; I couldn't possibly tell her about my plan. She would have never agreed to let me go alone. But as the recipient of Keuvra's Divine Flight to unite the moon in peace, I must face this task alone.

I still my body when I touch the ground, refusing to shift even a feather. For a breathless moment, I sense my surroundings, searching for any sign of prey. Warm sunlight filters through the trees around me, outlining the forest in a calming yellow hue. The air is warm, and the trees are silent. Locating confidence, I fold my wings and lower my head, stalking through the underbrush as quietly as my legs will carry me.

A short time later, I find myself at the top of an incline, gazing across the forest. In the distance are two elderuses growing close to each other, their evergreen branches delicately entwined. It's here at the base of the ancient trees that I discover my prey, a lone false-kin consuming the body of a recently slain Litsha. Their dirty-red scales shimmer scarlet in the mottles of sunlight, revealing their diminutive size, even for a false-kin. If I were to fight this Dragon, I could easily defeat them and come of age in the flock. But I haven't come here today for a fight.

I'm here to talk.

Since receiving Keuvra's gifts, I've had some time to try out my restored Lemur form and test the capabilities of my universal speech. After a day of trial and error, I can translate the language of Kin quickly enough inside my head to have a conversation with Kuro. I'll

finally be able to understand ascendants when I return to the Farlands! But during my time as a Lemur, I realized something I wouldn't have considered Kin.

In all the tales of Azurrel and the ascension of the species, false-kin are never mentioned. As I saw with my own eyes, no false-kin were present at the meeting between the mortal deities and Azurrel. And yet, the last false-kin I came across spoke to me, a clear sign they've received the Gift of Communication. So, what's happening here? If false-kin were enlightened by Azurrel, why weren't they at the gathering on Truce? Keuvra gave me a Divine Flight to unite the moon in peace. If false-kin are intelligent, worthy of Azurrel's gifts, shouldn't they be among those I unite?

What better way to begin unification than by having a conversation with one?

I lower my head and stalk through the underbrush, following the false-kin's scent downwind. Once I get close enough, I'll use my universal speech to call out to them and act as friendly as possible. I'm reasonably confident they'll be able to understand me! If not, then this is going to be a terse conversation.

Suddenly, the wind shifts, blowing my scent back toward the false-kin! I freeze, lowering myself flat against the ground. Several wingspans ahead of me, the false-kin shifts, tearing their muzzle from the Litsha and sniffing the air. Blood drips from the scales of their maw, and their lips raise to bare fangs. I'm sure I'm hidden behind an oshbush, but it's no use. The false-kin reacts like lightning, leaping onto an elderus trunk and using it as a springboard to sail through the air.

**ROAAAR!!**

My own instincts engage, propelling me from the underbrush and into the open forest.

**SKREEAK!!**

I leap, dodging the lightning-fast wingspurs of the angry drakon. *Damn it!!* I can't concentrate on sending him a message if we're in the middle of a fight! But if I try to defend myself, then he definitely won't stop attacking me until I'm dead. This is bad!! What should I do?!

As the false-kin charges with jaws wide, I pivot on my talons and take off running. The drakon's jaws close with a vicious snap, taking inches from my tailfeathers but missing bone. I tuck my wings and dash straight across the forest, trying to distance ourselves as much as possible. If I can just get away from him, I'll have enough room to concentrate and connect to his mind. This is my only chance of defusing the situation!

Heavy talonsteps thunder across the forest, competing against loud whimpering. I don't want him to flee — if I sound like a frightened prey-animal then I'll be irresistible to a hungry Dragon. I leap across the side of a downed cypress and flip mid-air, turning to face the racing false-kin. Blood drips from his scales as he races towards me, jaws wide! I force myself to stifle the adrenaline surging and concentrate on the false-kin. *Focus, Asha!!* At the last moment, I feel a connection made!

But it's too late. The angry drakon slashes my neck, drawing hot blood against my feathers.

**SKREEAK!!**

I tumble backward, trying to avoid the next attack from his wingspurs. But with the connection established, now I can talk to him! He has to listen!

<Wait!!>

The drakon ignores me, tensing his muscles and issuing a fierce cry of defiance.

**RARRGH!!**

Will he respond to reason? Or will I be forced to fight back and prey on him? If this doesn't work...!

The story has been stolen; if detected on Amazon, report the violation.

<Listen to me! I'm not your enemy!>

Sensing a low attack with his fangs, I lope through the air and land on the opposite side of an emberroot, causing leaves to explode in all directions. My wings tuck, and I roll across the ground to position my talons and receive the follow-up attack from the raging false-kin. But, the attack never comes. Gazing through a curtain of falling leaves, I frantically scan the forest for the distinct shimmer of light reflecting from scales. Still, there's

nothing there. I whip my head up to see the false-kin in the same position he was in moments ago, his eyes wide in shock.

This is my chance!

<Please, honorable drakon! I only wish to talk!>

Heavy growls roll across the forest, our bodies frozen with fangs bared. Is he waiting for me to strike first? Or has he truly yielded? His fear-scent is thick (and tantalizingly sweet) – given my advantage in size, it's in his best interest to avoid a fight. But does he truly believe I'm speaking to him inside his head?

...

Holding our talons at a feather's edge is no way to begin a conversation. I silence my growl and force myself to hide my fangs.

<I am speaking to *you*, scaled one. You and I, we don't have to fight.>

The false-kin's growl slowly lowers and becomes inaudible against the forest sounds. He stares at me, panting heavily, but keeps his talons planted and muzzle shut. Why isn't he talking back? Doesn't he understand what I'm transmitting? I suppose a creature that's hunted you and your kin for your entire life suddenly stopping to begin a conversation

must be a moon-shattering experience. I'm going to have to take the initiative in this conversation.

Still against the ground, I lower my wings and dip my head. <I recognize this must be difficult to accept, but I understand your tongue. If you allow it, we may have a conversation.>

He responds in kind, repositioning his wingtalons and raising his neck to speak. "Rrrru'ag..."

His voice trails off as he gathers the courage to speak. Quickly, I translate him to say 'You...'

The crimson dragon continues, "But I can't be hearing your voice. Lithans are incapable of speech!"

Oh, *wow*. I knew it was coming, but I'm still astonished to hear a false-kin speak. I was right! They're enlightened creatures like us! And what's more, they seem to know I'm a Lathan. That proves it! They've communicated with Azurrel and the deities!

<Honorable drakon, I assure you that speech comes naturally to us.> Slowly, I fold my wings and rise to my talons. <Tell me, what's your name?>

Instead of replying, the false-kin begins to slink away from me. Even though we've established communication, I'm still intimidating him. I force my feathers flat and mantle my wings. <Please, don't be afraid. My name is Asha, Daughter-Of-Kelani.>

And that's all I plan to share with him. I won't tell him about the flock, Keuvra, or my identity as a Chimera. None of those things are important right now, and I don't want to overwhelm him with information.

Still, the false-kin holds his muzzle, fear-scent billowing from his scales. Isn't there something I can do to assuage his fears? Perhaps he can sense past my friendly veneer and taste the hunger on my breath. Although I took a family of Jimbal before flying here, I rarely get to prey on false-kin.

<You do not—>

“How are you speaking to me?!” he explodes, falling into an attack posture. “Tell me, now!”

My tail flicks, but I keep my talons planted. <We are speaking because your kind stood before the God of Creation and received the Gift of Communication. Isn't that right?>

His neck jolts in surprise. “The God of Creation? Does your kind have a pact with Azurrel as well?!”

A 'pact'? What does that mean? Well, I suppose it's similar. I roll my wings and transmit, <In a manner of speaking, yes.>

Technically, we're more indebted to the deities who act on our behalf in front of Azurrel. Does that mean false-kin communicate with Azurrel directly because they don't have a deity? Fascinating!

The false-kin before me pants heavily, and his gaze falls away from me. "This... it cannot be. How are you speaking to me without words? How could *monsters* like you have been granted the sacred Gift of Communication?"

<Monsters?> My head tilts. I have a bad feeling about this.

"Hmph!!" the false-kin scoffs. "Just as we predicted!! Savage, unconscionable beasts, the lot of you!! Stealing our prey, driving it to the verge of extinction every snowbark! Stalking in packs, separating our precious dragonets by fang and claw! Do you have any sense of the torment you've inflicted upon our clan? Are you even capable of empathy!?"

...Wow, okay.

Not only are these Dragons intelligent, but they're fitly spoken. Still, all I hear is the bleating of a pathetic prey-animal. As much as I wish I could transmit that, I need to keep things civil. <We do what we must to survive. Surely, as a fellow Dragon—>

“Don’t call me that!” he snaps, unleashing a savage growl. “Dragons are intelligent, enlightened creatures! You and I, we’re nothing alike!”

A shallow remiss falls over me. I wanted an intelligent conversation with a false-kin, and I sure got one. I should have expected this response; Kin have preyed upon false-kin since ancient times. Their culture must be permeated by an ever-present fear of Lithans stalking them to come of age in the flock. As much as I would love to prove that we aren’t the senseless monsters they believe us to be, I won’t deny our need to survive.

False-Kin are prey... for now. Although our conversation was short, I’ve seen enough to confidently say that my Divine Flight to unite the moon extends to these lesser Dragons. They, too, should live in serenity beside Kin and Farlander. But I can’t change the world in a day. For now, this conversation is enough.

A rumble of disappointment rattles against my chest. <I can see our conversation today won’t be fruitful.>

“That’s right,” the False-Kin scoffs, flicking their tongue. “I care not how enlightened you claim to be. I’ll do nothing to sate the curiosity of such a heartless monster.”

<Then you may go,> I transmit. I fold my wings and plant my talons deep into the ground. <I won’t deny my Kin’s right to survive. But perhaps one day we could learn to coexist peacefully in Felra alongside the other enlightened creatures of the moon.>

“The other...” A flash of wonder sparks in the False-Kin’s eyes but quickly subsides. He shakes his head and growls, “No, I don’t believe you. This was all a ruse! You’ll stalk me as soon as I take flight, chasing me to the ends of the continent until you kill me!”

<Then allow me to the first flap.> I mantle wings and bow my head before him. <I will not chase you, honorable drakon. Fly the path created by warm updrafts and return to your kin. Remember our encounter and tell stories of it.>

The False-Kin studies me through slitted eyes. Slowly, he shifts his talons, taking measured steps to back away from me. “If you so much as raise a pfod, then I’ll...!”

<A pfod?> My head tilts. <What’s that?>

The drakon stares at me disbelievingly. He snorts, then retreats until we’re at least five wingspans apart. His eyes flick to the canopy above, and he explodes with motion, leaping to the side of an elderus. He clammers the trunk like a fleeing spikehorn until he disappears through the lower canopy. The sound of leaves soon follows, and a red figure emerges into the sky, its wings flapping hard.

**ROOAR! ROARRRR!!**

I loosen a heavy sigh and allow my wings to droop. That’s an alarm call – he’s still terrified of me. I guess there’s no helping it.

Did I make the right choice by talking to him? Much like my first encounter with Kuro and Enyll, I have a feeling that nothing will ever be the same between Kin and False-Kin. How will they react to the knowledge we’re enlightened creatures? Will they approach with more civility? Or will they have an even more lamentable opinion of us?

...

...I won't change the world in a day. For now, this is enough. I tuck my wings and begin marching back to the clearing and back to the flock's territory.

## Bonus Chapter: World Lemur Day! Two!

The Ringtailed Princess stared at the paper, her tail lashing.

"Fucking hell," Lucy mumbled to herself. "It says here, '*98% of Lemurs are still threatened with extinction, and 31% are critically endangered.*' Those numbers are unchanged since last year's World Lemur Day. It seems none of you have done enough to save Lemurs."

An uncomfortable murmur rolled through the crowd of Sarlanians. Despite none of them being present to witness last year's World Lemur Day special bonus chapter in Ellyntide, they nonetheless felt a pang of guilt. Their Princess was upset, after all. And the Lemurs from the miserable human world were no more safe.

It was a bright, sunny day in autumn. Across the Chateau, a crowd had gathered to—

"Now, just wait a darn-tootin minute!"

...Wait, what?

Princess Asha, now reunited with her Lemur form, rested her hands against her hips and glowered. “*The Chateau?* Do you mean the one in Sarlain? We haven’t yet reached that part of the story, omnipresent narrator voice!”

Oh.

Well, it’s going to be a little while until the novel starts up again, ya’ know? So, what I thought I’d do was—

“But that’s a spoiler,” Calypso interjected. “Nobody clicked this chapter to see spoilers about what happens next. They came here to find out how to save Lemurs!”

The main characters of *The Princess’s Feathers*, gathered today at ~~THE CHATEAU~~ and all quite sure of themselves, nodded and passed around a murmur of agreement. As it were, the setup of the chapter was quite similar to the setup of the last Lemur Day chapter, wherein Queen Kelani compelled a crowd of Ellyntidians to learn about Lemurs (in the garden of the Lordanou Palace, no less!) This chapter WAS going to take place at the equivalent location in Sarlain, but it seemed none of the main characters of *The Princess’s Feathers* were interested in learning about all of the cool new stuff happening in the next phase of the story. What a shame!

“That’s not to say we aren’t interested,” Duncan clarified. “I would rather like to know if, like, I’m still alive after that blow to the head. But this isn’t the time for that. This is the time for Lemurs.”

“Yeah!!” Kuro said, fluttering her wings in excitement. “Did you know Lemurs get high by rubbing millipede secretions over their bodies? I didn’t! That’s pretty neat!”

“HEY!!” a voice squawked. “Did you peek at the script? Kuro, you miserable cunt! That’s a spoiler!!”

At once, everyone assembled turns their attention to the area just beyond your mind’s eye, a space where a gathering of characters who hadn’t yet appeared in the story were watching with guarded expressions.

“Eh?” Asha croaked, staring at the feathered character. “Is that really a spoiler? I don’t become addicted to drugs, do I?”

Another unseen newcomer joined the conversation, this one more soft-spoken. “Well, no. But it does get brought up a few times in your presence.”

“Can we please get on with our presentation?” Lucy asked, speaking into her microphone.

“No objections from me,” another unseen character rasped. “We are quite good on time.”

“Alright, then.” Lucy rearranged the papers at her lectern, situating herself back in her prepared presentation. Lucy opened her muzzle and spoke into the microphone at the capital city of Sarlain, which shall not be described in any more detail lest we receive a verbal berating from the cast of the Princess’s Feathers. Look, I’m sorry, but you’re just going to have to use your imagination on—

“Cut it out,” Keuvra growled.

...

...

...

Oh, fine.

“Right,” Lucy said, tapping her papers impatiently. “Lemurs are members of superfamily Lemuroidea. They are small primates, ranging in size from the diminutive mouse Lemurs to the noisy, singing Indri. Some fun facts about Lemurs include the toothcomb they possess for grooming,” The Ringtailed Princess paused, opening her muzzle to display the toothcomb along her lower row of teeth. “A second tongue called a sublingua is used to clean the tooth comb.” The Princess paused again to demonstrate the fact to the audience. “Additionally, Lemurs are efficient distributors of seed, which helps the rainforest in light of illegal deforestation.”

“It would seem Lemurs are quite peculiar creatures,” Grith mused, standing alongside the other characters from Rowan Silver’s Wyrmland.

If you spot this tale on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

“Aren’t Lemurs only found on the island of Madagascar?” Pret asked.

“That’s right,” Lucy answered. “Of the over 100 species of Lemuridae, all are extant in the small island nation. They do not exist anywhere else in the realm.”

“And that’s why protecting Lemurs is so important,” Alikea nodded. “If they disappear from Madagascar, they’ll become extinct in the wild. We can’t allow that to happen!”

“Extinct?” Tarka squeaked. “You mean, they’ll be gone? *Forever?*”

Nakino solemnly nodded. “Even the most powerful chronomancer with all the shimmer in the realm couldn’t save them.”

Tarka’s eyes darted between the Southernns, his expression cold. “That’s... really, Grith? Not even you?”

Grith frowned and dolefully lowered her gaze. The power to restore a species was beyond even her considerable skill.

“No...” Tarka trailed off in disbelief. “I... I can’t accept this. Lemurs can’t go extinct, not a single one! I’m going to do everything I can to save Lemurs!!”

“Fucking hell!” Lucy yelled, slamming her fist against the podium. “That’s the enthusiasm I want to see!”

Tarka leaped forward, his wings spread wide. “From this day forward, I will be the savior of all Lemurkind! Just wait!! As soon as Princess Lucy finishes her speech, I’m taking the greater gate straight to the human world!”

“The human world?!” Alika gasped. “TARKA, NO!”

“And I’m going to help him!” Arit declared, appearing suddenly in a flash of bronze light.

“ARIT, NO!!!” everyone screamed.

“Arit?!” Pret squealed, his gamer socks nearly flying off his legs in shock. “What are you doing here?! You can’t help Tarka!!”

“Oh, please,” Arit scoffed with a dismissive flap of his tattered black wings. “Dear Tarka may possess boundless enthusiasm, but he’ll need the help of a native to succeed in his pursuits. Among most places on Earth, I am quite familiar with Madagascar.”

“Really?!” Tarka’s face beamed like a happy Sifaka. He bounded before the larger Southern, eager to follow his every command.

“Oh, yes,” Arit smiled. “I spent some time researching the island just last year.”

“Research?” Grith echoed, her trepidation thick. “Arit, what are you—“

“And when it comes to Lemurs,” Arit continued, talking over his cousin. “Well, I met many there and became quite fond of the crowned sifakas. Such precious, small morsels of black, brown, and cream-colored fur. If I didn’t already have a contingent of Ravens at my disposal, then I would recruit them for my nefarious deeds!”

“Whoa, hey!!” Snow exclaimed, her three tails fluttering as she bounded between the two Dragons. “Are you guys going to the human world to save Lemurs?”

“That’s right,” Arit proudly nodded.

“Oh, hi Snow! Are you going to help us, too?” Tarka asked, enthusiasm brimming his voice.

“You bet!” Snow exclaimed, bouncing in excitement. “I’ve never visited Earth before! If I get to go there AND save Lemurs, then count me in!”

“I guess I’ll join too,” Lilith shrugged, wiggling her way into the newly formed party.

“Wonderful!” Arit purred, surveying his band of merry Dragons. “With the four of us together, those who harm Lemurs won’t stand a chance!”

“*Stand a chance?*” Asha echoed.

“Arit?” Grith approached the newly formed group, a firmness like steel to her voice. “What are you planning to—“

Suddenly and somewhat expectedly, the group of Lemur Heroes disappeared from ~~THEIR HATEAU~~ in a flash of bronze light. Indeed, in the time that had passed, they had already proceeded to the nearest greater gate to begin their journey to Earth and brutally— er, I mean, work within the confines of the law to save Lemurs.

Pret stared, blinking at the spot where Arit used to be. “Fweghing...”

“I have a very bad feeling about this,” Grith remarked, her talons turning inwards.

“Yeah...” Alika trailed off, anxiety weighing against her wings. “Will Tarka be alright?”

I’m sure he will! Arit is powerful, and Tarka has a promising future ahead of him.

“Could you like, cut that out already, Ansila?” Pret asked, staring at the sky.

I can’t, and I won’t.

“This is really getting out of hand,” Lucy sighed, dragging her hand down her face.

Oh, come on! I don’t pick just any web serial audience to communicate with telepathically, you know? They should consider themselves incredibly privileged!

“Alright, look,” Lucy said, staring into your mind’s eye. “Enough of this nonsense. World Lemur Day is *today*. Please consider donating to a reputable organization such as the Duke Lemur Center, Lemur Conservation Network, or The Madagascar Fauna and Flora Group. The situation is dire, but hope isn’t lost. Don’t listen to the black-pilled defeatists who peddle biosphere collapse as an inevitability! If we all work together, then we CAN save Lemurs!”

“Preferably before Arit and Tarka,” Dunc added, tugging his shirt collar.

“Here, here,” Kelani said, raising a gin and tonic before immediately demolishing it.

“T-Thanks, Mother,” Asha sighed uncomfortably.

And so, the assembled characters from the Princess’s Feathers and the Wyrmsrealm resolved to help Lemurs in their own way. Nakino spoke at the Grandfather tree about the importance of Lemurs, while Kelani re-instilled last year’s speech in a Kingdom-wide radio address. Alike did some stuff on Tasien that would be a massive spoiler, but Dragons of Frost and Fang hasn’t been released at the time of this chapter’s publishing, so too bad. Pret began selling a line of gamer socks with Lemurs on them. Yeah, he really is that committed to the bit.

“Awh,” a teal-scaled Dragon sighed offstage. “Everyone goes on to do such nice stuff to help Lemurs. I wanted to join Arit and Tarka on Earth but couldn’t go because my book hasn’t been released yet! It’s not fair! I heard they have some great music in that realm!”

“Perhaps you could cheer yourself up by singing about Lemurs,” Asha suggested.

“That’s a great idea!” the teal-scaled Dragon exclaimed, uncoiling themselves.

**“OHHHHHHH! LEMURS ARE GREAT, AND LEMURS ARE FUN, THERE’S SO MANY THINGS THAT THEY HAVE DONE! LEMURS!! LEMURS!! I LOVE LEMURS!!!”**

“Fucking hell,” Lucy sighed, uncorking a bottle of whiskey. “Please don’t make me do this again next year. Help Lemurs!!”

## 125. Beneath Your Wings

“Asha’s right. There’s no better way to make myself useful to the flock without my wings.”

Kuro snarls, slamming her tail against the wooden ground. She stares down at her sister and bellows, “There has to be another way!”

“There isn’t,” I deadpan. “Frida’s passionate about helping. You’re only upset because she wants to help *Nakino*.”

Kuro gasps, her eyes glazed with fury. She whips around (nearly smacking her tail against a quickly retreating *Nakino*) and roars, sulking around the back of the healer’s den like an upset hatchling.

*Ugh.*

Why is she still acting this way? “Kuro, you promised me you wouldn’t be so mean to the drakons. I’m asking you to consider Frida’s feelings above your own.”

“I’m not—”

“Yes, you are!!”

Kuro snarls, flicking splinters into the air as she drags her talons across the ground. Why is she taking this so personally? Frida is her sister! Doesn’t she want what’s best for her? Beside me, Frida sits with fluffed feathers and half-drawn wings; even she is unnerved by Kuro’s acerbic behavior.

I guess it’s up to me to try to diffuse this.

Gathering my courage, I rise to my talons and cross the den. Kuro has her head held against the wall, her eyes clenched and her fangs gritted. Her hackles rise as she senses my approach.

“Hey,” I whisper.

**GRRRRRR...**

Kuro’s body bristles as she bares a muzzle full of razer-sharp fangs — Her scent is thick with agitation. Undeterred, I lean my head in close. “I know you’re upset, but you can’t

take care of Frida forever. One day, we're going to live in Ellyntide, and she'll be an entire continent away."

A peculiar look flashes in Kuro's eyes, and she quickly averts her head to growl some more. Taking advantage of the moment, I draw my wing across her flank and obstruct our view from the rest of the den.

"I get it. I don't like Nakino, either. But it's not about him, it's about the flock. The Dragons here are going to be so much healthier if they have two healers."

Kuro turns to me, but her rankled expression persists. It seems Frida's utility to the flock isn't a convincing enough argument.

"Do you remember how overworked Nakino was during the illness?" I pause and privately transmit my voice. <He wouldn't stop complaining about it. Day in and day out, he never shut up about how miserable he was. The Grandfather Tree needs someone like your sister, not a *whiny bitch*.>

Kuro snorts, a brief smile cracking her muzzle. Across the den, Nakino rustles and leans his neck in closer but keeps his talons still.

I continue in a louder voice. "And when you're sick or injured, you can fly here and have Frida treat you instead of Nakino. You'd prefer that, wouldn't you?"

Kuro's expression fades. She raises her head slightly and sighs, "Yeah. Perhaps you're right."

*There!* I knew I could talk her out of it! Feeling a wave of elation, I fold my wing and quickly rub my head against Kuro's neck.

"But you'd better treat my sister well!" Kuro roars, pulling away to stare down Nakino. "And I don't want to see you trying any of your shifty drakon behavior on her!"

Nakino flinches, drawing his talons inwards. "My... *what?*"

"YOU know what I'm talking about!" Kuro bellows, tucking her wings to confront the black-plumaged healer. "Massaging broken wings. Giving her presents. Taking her to your secret cave in the mountains!"

Nakino blinks, but it's not long before understanding returns. He flattens his feathers and mumbles, "K-Kuro, I wouldn't dare—"

"Wouldn't you?" she chides, her fangs mere talons from Nakino's face. "I remember what you did to Asha! You were so desperate for a mate that you were willing to hurt her! But here comes my sister, down on her luck and eager to make herself useful to the flock. It all seems rather suspicious, doesn't it?!"

Nakino's neck rears back, but he forces himself to endure the verbal assault and hold his ground. I guess I never told Kuro that he apologized for cornering me in a den last frostwing and holding me there until I agreed to become his mate. But, truthfully, it wouldn't have made any difference to Kuro. She has every right to be suspicious of Nakino. And quite frankly, I'm enjoying watching him squirm. You deserve to feel some of the fear you instilled in me, Nakino!

"Kuro," Nakino trembles, inching his head forward to gather his courage. "I-It's nothing like that, I promise. Frida is a charming drakaina, but I don't have those feelings for her."

"You'd better not!"

From the front of the den, a new voice barges into the conversation. Standing in the entrance is a copper-plumaged drakon, his wings-half open and his feathers ruffled from recent flight. The scent of freshly butchered prey is strong against his usual metallic scent.

My head tilts sideways. "Enyll?"

"What's going on here?" Enyll asks, stepping into the den. "Asha? What are you—"

**GRRRRROWL....**

If you spot this tale on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

A stiff growl from Kuro interrupts Enyll's entrance. The two Dragons ruffle as their eyes meet, but neither seems keen to antagonize the other. An uncomfortable silence lingers in the air as Kuro's growl subsides.

Then, most unexpectedly, Nakino confidently strides past a distracted Kuro. "Me and Kuro were just discussing Frida's decision to stay at Grandfather Tree and become my assistant."

"Really!" Enyll exclaims, his eyes sparkling and all traces of anger dissolved. "Oh, Frida, are you're really gonna do it?"

"Yeah!" she chirps. "I was worried Kuro would be upset, but... well, everything's okay now!"

I exchange an uncomfortable glance with Kuro. Her feathers are fidgeting like she was forcing herself to keep them flat.

"Oh!!" Enyll exclaims. "That's fantastic!"

The copper drakon struts forward with a confident gait. He pulls up and kindly rubs his head against Frida's, who responds in kind. Now standing beside me, Kuro gives up trying to flatten her feathers. She hates seeing Enyll this confident.

“Won’t it be nice to have her around?” Enyll asks, turning his attention to Nakino.

“Oh, yes. She’s really going to help me out around here.” Nakino approaches Enyll with his tail fluttering. He laughs to himself and says, “Maybe I can finally keep the den clean and organized.”

Enyll sighs. “Oh, but you know I’m going to have to hunt for two sets of jaws now.”

“Is that a problem? After all, you hunted with Kuro for so long.”

“No, it isn’t,” Enyll admits, giving a half-shrug of his wings. “It’s just... you know. It’s more special when it’s all for you.”

The two drakons smirk and laugh at each other.

Um, what the fwegh just happened here? Why are the two most single drakons ever acting so confident and assured of themselves? Just who are these Dragons?!

Wait, a wingbeat...

“Oh, *no*.” A muffled gasp escapes me. “You two? *Really?!*”

The two Dragons stare at each other for a wingbeat before bursting out in laughter.

“Oh, dear,” Nakino chuckles.

Enyll’s tail thumps loudly against the ground. “They had no idea!”

Desperate for confirmation, I turn to Frida. The huge smile painted across her face is all the proof I need: Nakino and Enyll are mates! I can’t believe it!

“Well, we’ve been kinda busy!” I say, puffing my feathers. “You guys didn’t have to worry about attending a meeting with Keuvra!”

“I can’t believe this,” Kuro says, allowing her wings to droop to the ground. Her face is sullen and her tail twitching — This is perhaps the most defeated I’ve ever seen her. “Seriously? *Enyll?* This whole time, you had a thing for other drakons?!”

“Y-yeah,” he says, shuffling his wings uncomfortably. “I’ve always felt that way. But it wasn’t until I saw you and Asha mated that I felt safe to explore those feelings. I didn’t

think anyone in the flock would accept me, and I didn't think I could find anyone who felt the same. But, I did."

Nakino lowers his head and rubs it against Enyll's neck to comfort him. The two dragons exchange loving growls and nuzzle.

"Awwwwh!" I can't help but exclaim. "That's wonderful! You two are such a cute couple!"

This may seem out-of-character for me, especially given just a few moments ago I was rooting for Kuro to pluck Nakino's feathers out. But I'm serious! These two *are* a cute couple! And it's so gratifying to learn that my relationship with Kuro inspired other gay Dragons to step out of the closet and explore their feelings! Perhaps best of all, I no longer have to feel bad about what happened between me and Nakino! Everyone's found a mate and everyone's happy!

"Hmph!" Frida smirks, ruffling in satisfaction. "Nakino didn't think you guys would support them, but I knew you would!"

"Well..." Nakino trails off, and his gaze falls onto me. "I knew you wouldn't have a problem with two drakons being mated, but..."

Huh? What is he...

...

...Oh.

Right.

I complete his sentence. “You thought I was still upset about what happened in frostwing.”

At that, the affectionate growling stops, replaced by an uncomfortable silence drifting across the den. Enyll gazes up at Nakino, a worried look across his muzzle. Kuro raises her head and looks at me with a soft growl, but I quickly dismiss it with a gentle lowering of my wing.

“You’re right,” I say. “I’m still upset about everything that happened. And just because you’ve taken a mate, that doesn’t mean that you’ve changed as a Dragon.”

Slowly, Nakino sighs, crestfallen that my assessment of him hasn’t changed. Enyll rumbles softly and tries to assuage his mate by nuzzling against his neck.

“I don’t think you’re irredeemable, Son-Of-Yzori. Everyone deserves compassion and forgiveness. But I still don’t feel totally comfortable around you, and I don’t know when, or if, I ever will. I know that must be difficult to accept, but... I hope you understand.”

I hope I can learn to feel comfortable around Nakino, I really do. But with the trajectory my life is heading, I doubt I'll be spending time around him in the foreseeable future. And even if I'm successful in restoring Ellyntide, me and Kuro will probably end up living in Varecia and won't have time to travel to Felra very often. I know Nakino values my opinion of him, so it's best to be honest about these things now, even if it upsets him.

Nakino looks away, a bitter expression across his face. Enyll looks similarly glum, and even Frida seems downtrodden. I guess should probably try to cheer them up.

I shrug my wings and say, "It's water under the bridge."

Enyll cocks his head. "The *what?*"

"Oh, um, right," I mumble, shuffling my wings. "Um, it's a Farlander expression that means, '*What's happened between us is in the past, and it's no longer important.*' I'm happy Kuro is my mate, and you're happy to be with Enyll. And Frida's found her place, too! Everyone's happy! So, let's not dwell on old arguments, okay?"

I'm happy Nakino is improving! Because, quite frankly, I didn't think he was capable of it. Nakino has an important role in the flock, just like every other Kin. And believe it or not, I'm capable of forgiveness!

...Well, *sort of*. A small voice reminds me I'll *never* forgive Nortane for what they did to me, Calypso, and my family. But Nakino is just a big, featherbrained idiot, not an inherently evil animal like President Weatherlight.

Slowly, a set of smiles grows between the two drakons. They embrace with a happy rumble and nuzzle the heads together.

“I... won’t stop trying to improve,” Nakino says, his face half-buried in Enyll’s fluff.

“I’ll make sure of it!” Enyll smiles.

“Alright, come on! Let’s go share the prey you brought!”

Enyll stares into his mate’s eyes and squeals a rumble of delight. The two Dragons lope through the entrance of the den, leaving me to Kuro and Frida.

Finally, the guise drops.

Kuro exhales a sullen rumble, tearing her talons against the floor of the den. “I still can’t believe this. Why didn’t he just tell me he was into drakons? And why did the two worst drakons in the flock have to be mated? How is that even possible?”

Feeling suddenly confident, I move close to my mate and remind her, “Stranger things have happened.”

At feeling my head against her neck, Kuro's feathers bristle before slowly relaxing. She stares down at my smile, and slowly, another one grows across her face.

## 126. The Company of Friends

“So, what are we doing here, exactly?”

“Asha has something important to discuss.”

“Uh-huh. So why isn't she talking yet?”

“The last Kin hasn't arrived.”

“What's so important that she had to gather all of us on this island?”

“You'll find out as soon as she gives her speech.”

“I'm tired, and we need to return to our den. Why don't you just tell us now? Why did we—”

Kuro growls, “If you don’t stop asking questions, I’m going to rip out your tongue and shove it so far down your throat that I could pull it out the other side! WAIT until the last Kin arrives and SHUT UP!”

Enyll recoils slightly, his feathers bristling. He’s trying very hard to not lash out. “I was just trying to be nice, *Kuro*. But as usual, it seems you’re only interested in causing problems. Guess some things never change.”

Kuro snarls a warning. She lowers herself and opens her wings wide in provocation.

Enyll scoffs, whipping his tail as he leaves to trot back to Nakino’s side. “Dungheaded wingbeater...”

I laugh, feeling some reserved pride. Kuro’s been taking my advice on burns to great effect! It honestly makes me feel a little bad for Enyll, but the fact they’re still flinging insults at each other leaves me oddly comforted. Some things truly never change, and I’m all the more glad they haven’t.

But where *is* the last Kin? I told everyone to arrive at this island as the sun was setting behind the mountains of the Great Valley, and the last Dragon, Tomcat, is nowhere to be found. Everyone else – Ykivi, Gima, Enyll, Nakino and Fra, – have all arrived on time. I suppose all I can do is wait a little longer.

Sunlight crests across the mountains, painting the grass along the island's ledge a brilliant shade of orange and red. The others have assembled in front of a gnarled strand of wind-swept trees, idly preening themselves and chattering to their mates as they lie among the undergrowth. After a bitterly cold frostwing and frigid early greenwing, it's great to feel a warm breeze and be in the company of friends.

I pace along the ledge, assessing each of them as they wait. These are the Dragons I've grown to trust the most during my journey in Felra. Ykuvi and Gima, the second and third dragons I ever met, ones who would vie for my admittance into the flock. Fra, the first Dragon I ever considered my friend, and another important voice during my admission. Enyll and Nakino, the second dragon I ever met, and...

Well, my relationship with Nakino is still a little strained. But for what I'm planning to ask of these dragons, I need all the help I can get. Maybe I'll get lucky, and Nakino will feel compelled to owe me a favor after all the crap he put me through?

The sun lowers against the sky, and just as the shadows of far-off peaks stretch their tendrils across the valley, a cry arrives on the wind.

**ROOOARGH!!**

From the direction of Tall Spires a white-dappled Kin wings into view.

"About time!" Gima exclaims in her reliably cantankerous voice. "I almost ran out of feathers to preen!"

The young drakaina catches a thermal and rides the distance to our island perched at the bottom of the valley. With the grace of a fledgling on their very first flight, she dives in fast and angles hard for a landing. I raise my wing to shield against the spray of sticks and leaves, then lower it to find Tomcat sticking a perfect landing directly in front of me.

“Heh-heh!” She ruffles her feathers in satisfaction. “Made it just in time!!”

Like every other Kin, Tomcat has molted her winter plumage and shifted her feathers from pure white to a checkered brown and gray. As she usually roosts at Tall Spires, this is only the second time I’ve seen it.

“No, you’re *late*,” Enyll chides, his tail whipping behind him.” All of us showed up on time except you!”

“I was busy!” Tomcat says, trotting to join the crowd of Dragons. “Asha didn’t invite my mate, so I had to spend as much time as possible with him!”

“Well, she’s here now,” Gima says, stretching her talons. “So Asha can start talking about whatever it is she wants to talk about!”

“Yes,” I say, releasing a breath. “Finally, we can begin.”

The other dragons finish what they're doing and turn to me with expectant, curious stares. I relax against my haunches, close my wings and attempt to relax. This is the exact type of speech I'd give as a Monarch, though I'm in the company of friends. I can relax.

The wind blows gently through my feathers.

...

I open my eyes and begin talking. "Thank you all for flying here today. I invited you because I consider you one of the Dragons I trust the most."

I assess everyone present — two seasons ago I knew none of these Dragons. Now, they seem like the only friends I have in a changed world. I wouldn't make this request of them if I didn't feel like I had any other choice.

"I flew to Felra last harvestwing assuming I'd have a home to return home to. But as Kuro and I discovered, that is no longer the case. Ellyntide has been ransacked, torn to pieces, and occupied by our enemies from the Confederacy of Nortane. If I were to return to my home den as a Lemur, I would be captured and imprisoned alongside the rest of my family, never to see my homeland again."

As the Kin look on with curious stares, something magical flashes in Tomcat's eyes. Since Kuro and I parted ways with her at the beginning of Greenwing, Tomcat's made the crossing to the Farlands and come of age in the flock. This is a particularly special occasion because it's the first time she's allowed to hear my stories from the Farlands.

“But the deities do not favor this outcome for Ellyntide. They favor a different approach, one that bends the notions of what we consider... reality itself. Keuvra has tasked me to restore the Lordanou crown through whatever means necessary and foster peace among ascendant and Kin.” I pause and ruffle slightly. “This is my Divine Flight.”

Did you know this story is from NovelBin? Read the official version for free and support the author.

Every Kin besides Enyll seemed to know this was the true reason for this gathering — I was here to discuss my meeting with Keuvra and share what we talked about. Until now, Kuro and I have eluded the bevy of questions from the flock and refused to share any details. Indeed, I was keen to take a page from Ellyntide’s playbook and keep the whole thing secret from the public. But Keuvra never told me I couldn’t talk about it, and now I feel comfortable doing so.

On hearing that I had received a Divine Flight, the other dragons perk in stunned surprise.

“W... what? Really?” Ykuvi asks in disbelief.

“*You?!*” Nakino ruffles in shock. “He gave you a Divine Flight to... make us friends with Farlanders?!”

“Yes,” I say simply.

The Kin exchange uncertain glances.

Enyll leaps to his talons and asks, “How could he choose *you* for that?!”

“I am Ellyntide’s Princess,” I say. “And the rest of my family is—”

“No, not that!” Enyll glowers. “Farlanders are prey! We can’t be friends with them!”

...*Oh*.

I guess I wasn’t expecting this response. As I look between the Kin, everyone but Tomcat seems to bristle at the revelation. Quickly, I try to imagine how Mom might’ve handled this; I must carefully thread a response.

“I believe the serenity of Kin and Ascendant is necessary for the future of the flock. For example, a healthy relationship will foster easier access to the summer hunting grounds. Keuvra shares this opinion.”

“But we need Farlanders for prey,” Fra says, projecting her meager voice forward. “The last time my mate flew to the Farlands, the only prey he could find was a Rabbit.”

“Farlanders aren’t as dumb as they used to be,” Kuro ripostes, a particular bite to her voice. “The seasons of our ancestors preying on droves of Lemurs is long gone.”

Kuro has a point: The proliferation of radio has made it far easier for homesteaders to be aware of Lathan sightings and seek shelter. These days, the news of ascendants being taken in Sarlain rarely reaches Ellyntide’s borders.

“And there is much we can learn from each other,” I quickly add. “My time in the flock has taught me we are more alike than different. With the restoration of Ellyntide, we have an opportunity—“

“This is stupid,” again Enyll interrupts, his talons tearing at the grass beneath him. “Kin are the grandest creatures on the moon, and Farlanders are only useful to us as prey.”

“Are you suggesting Asha’s lying about Keuvra’s intentions?” Kuro asks.

“I want to hear Keuvra himself tell us!” Gima says.

“I agree,” Ykuvi tips his wings.

“Asha,” Nakino says, his voice measured. “This is not what I was expecting to hear from you. I want to believe you, but... even if Keuvra gave you a Divine Flight, what he asked you to do seems impossible. Farlanders are prey animals, and the only thing they can do when they see us is flee.”

“But they can be so much more!” I exclaim, grateful for the chance to explain myself. “I know Farlanders are terrified of Dragons, but they’re just as brave and intelligent as any Kin! As long as they feel safe, they won’t flee!”

A part of me feels taken aback; These are the same arguments Relmoon used to justify exterminating me from Felra, though I suppose I can’t blame my friends for sharing a similar response. They’ve spent their entire lives watching ascendants flee at their mere presence, a lifetime lived knowing every creature alive dreads them. And that they’re as sentient as Farlanders matters little. In death, some Kin would sooner prey on their own family members than live with the knowledge a contemptible prey animal consumed them.

Indeed, I’m no stranger to the macabre urge to prey on the flesh of my own.

But I *know* Kin and Ascendant can live together. I saw it with my own eyes! There’s no way I can reveal to them the visions of the past Keuvra showed me, so how else can I convince them?

“This is a waste of time,” Enyll snarls, whipping his head around in frustration. “Farlanders are as feckless as every other prey animal. We’ll never be their friends!”

“Now wait a wingbeat,” Gima says, concern suddenly filling her face. “I want to hear Keuvra tell us about her Divine Flight, but Farlanders aren’t as dumb as the usual prey-animal. Asha used to be a Farlander, and she was *smart* when we met her!”

Enyll’s gaze whips to Gima and he flinches as if the older drakaina physically assaulted him. Why did she defend me? Has she noticed how upset this conversation is making me?

“T-That’s different!!” Enyll barks.

“Is it?” Gima asks, her talons growing restless. “Asha gave yoursister prey because she felt bad about her. When was the last time a *feckless*’ prey animal gave *you* prey?”

Enyll snarls, “I don’t need the charity of a prey-animal because unlike you, I’m still able to catch my prey!”

The old drakaina roars, leaping to her talons with a whip of her tail. Ykuvi rises to join her, and Nakino bolts forward to support his mate. Though she survived the illness that swept through the flock last harvestwing, Gima’s been plagued by a persistent fatigue that has kept her flights short and jaws stilled from hunting. But, um, what the hell, Enyll? Why are you trying to fight her?!

Growls and snarls rise as the Dragons erupt in a tizzy of emotions.

Gima flares her wings and bellows, “Freck, you’d better take that back!”

“Why?!” Enyll taunts. “Because it’s true, Gima? All you do is lounge around the Grandfather Tree! I think you’re just lazy!!”

“She’s INJURED!” Ykuvi roars. “Nobody should understand that better than you and your mate!”

As feathers fly, Kuro flashes a glance at me. She believes this argument is as pointless as I do.

*Ugh.*

I had a feeling this would happen. Kin are feral, apex predators; they simply can’t understand why a prey-animal wouldn’t flee their presence. When me and Kuro planned this meeting, we decided it would be a good idea to have a Plan B in case we couldn’t convince my friends that Farlanders were intelligent creatures capable of controlling their emotions. I guess we should have considered my friends were Dragons, and they too had emotions that often needed taming.

I exhale a quick grunt and offer Kuro a curt nod. With that, we launched our plan.

Kuro leaps to my side and splays her wing across my flank. Briefly, Ykuvi's attention is drawn as he believes Kuro's going to join the fray, but quickly shifts back to the argument. With everyone focused on the fight, I fold my wings, lower my body close to the ground, and close my eyes.

The changes begin quickly, as they often do. The hackle feathers on my neck are the first to recede, followed soon after by the tips of the grand flight feathers on my wings. Here in the real world, my transformation still doesn't cause me any pain, but the feeling of bones shrinking, cracking, and rearranging themselves isn't the most pleasant. It's at this point that I see the dim glow of elementia behind shut eyelids, and the senseless argument reaches a swift conclusion.

"Wha?!"

"Asha?! What are—?!"

"Kuro, what's happening?!"

Kuro offers only a stiff growl, one that reverberates and blends with the sounds of my friends as my language processing is reformed and replaced by that of a prey-animal's. Words of stark dismay and ardent confusion are exchanged with the braying growls and savage noises of creatures far larger than me. The air is thick with the scent of monsters, some of them my own. Finally, when I feel the underbrush pushing against my shoulders, I rise to my feet and open my eyes.

Kuro's wing is draped beside me, a shield from the predators lurking at the opposite end of the clearing. By this point, everyone was standing at attention with the muzzles agape

and their eyes as wide as I've ever seen them. Though I can recognize the shocked words of draconic language, I can barely hear them over the drone of Kuro's low warning growl. Enyll had taken an opportune step forward during my transformation, his talon frozen in midair.

Still groggy from the change, I'm slow to translate their words.

"Asha?! As... ppend to you?"

"—a Lemur!! She's a Lemur!"

I hold my palm against my head and clumsily transmit, <Does this satisfy you, Son-Of-Zuki?>

The ground shudders as Enyll shrieks and leaps a step back.

"Asha?" Nakino rumbles. "How are... this whole time, you really *were* a Lemur!"

I push the underbrush aside and confidently project, <I am Princess Asha Eloise Lordanou, heir apparent to the Lilac Throne of the Kingdom of Ellyntide. And I will not flee the company of my friends!>

## 127. War Paint

The Kin reel at the power of my words, gasping in surprise. I shouldn't have had to transform to prove to my friends that Farlanders aren't witless prey-animals — who did they think they were talking to the past two seasons? — but a part of me feels a weight lifted at revealing to them my original form. Sometimes I wished I could have offered them even a glance at what I used to be, and now that I'm finally here, I don't feel afraid.

“Fress...” Gima blinks, studying me closely. “You received a gift from Keuvra, didn't you?”

<Two of them,> I smile, pleased that the old woman is acting rational again. <The Gift of Transcendence, and the Gift of Translation. I received them to complete my Divine Flight.>

“But Asha, what if you're...” Fra trails off before closing her muzzle and leaving her question unfinished. It seems she could answer it herself.

Nakino and Gima look similarly contemplative, perhaps sensing the truth that the only a deity could have granted me these powers. But Enyll and Ykuvi seem less certain — Enyll's eyes have narrowed, and Ykuvi's tail is fluttering in the grass beside him. Perhaps he didn't have time to eat before flying here? The only kin who seems unfazed is Tomcat: An infectious smile has formed across her face, and she seems eager to step forward and inspect me closer.

<You were right about one thing, Son-of-Zuki. Saving Ellyntide from the clutches of Nortane would be impossible without my original form. As Kin, I'm too intimidating to communicate with Farlanders and too big to enter their dens. Soon, I will travel to the last Kingdom, Sarlain, and infiltrate it as a Lemur to carry out my Divine Flight. But,

eventually, they will learn my true nature. My gifts are not permanent, and I have chosen to remain Kin. It is a difficult, but necessary task to convince Farlanders that Kin are not the savage monsters they believe us to be. But they are not witless, and they *can* learn! We can *all* learn to live together as friends! And, that is why...>

My transmission fades, a sudden wisp of anxiety growing to envelop me. Since the day I landed in Felra, these are the Dragons I've come to trust the most; The ones that fought fang and claw, some risking their very lives for an outsider they had no reason to help. Even now, that they haven't leaped forward to turn me into an easy snack feels like an impossible feat of trust.

It feels cruel to ask them something so outrageous, but I feel I have no other choice.

Once, I promised myself that I would do whatever it takes to see my family again, but merely seeing them is no longer enough. I must save them! I must save our whole Kingdom! And while nobody but me can truly accomplish this task, I can't do it alone. Against the might of a powerful Kingdom, I need all the help I can get.

<...That is why I have gathered you, my friends, to this island. For the time will undoubtedly come that I would ask you to join me in battle and risk your lives to help defend my Kingdom.>

I pause, allowing a wingbeat for my words to settle.

<This body is weak, untrained, and incapable of fighting effectively. But to take the form of Kin would nullify my authority as Princess, and those I once knew would only see me as the monster from their nightmares. Indeed, I will need help from Farlanders, but their

support won't be enough. Only the might of Keuvra's Kin can defeat a flock of Nortanian airship-prey. A battle against them will be dangerous, but me and Kuro know the trick to defeat them. We are ready to train you as well! And although I can not tell you when or where this battle will happen, I am all but certain one is inevitable. I understand how difficult it is to ask this of you all, but know that our leader wishes it to happen. You will perform a great deed for him, myself, and all the animals that call Ellyntide home. Please... help us!>

Despite failing to utter a single word, I find myself panting at the end of my speech. If these Dragons couldn't recognize the sincerity in my voice, then perhaps they can recognize it in my body language.

But for their part, my friends are silent, their muzzles sealed as they look uncomfortably between themselves and wonder who will speak first.

"That is... a considerable ask," Ykuvi laments.

"I won't fight airship-prey," Gima says flatly. "Even if I were healthy enough to fly to the Farlands. Even if Keuvra himself told me to do it! Someone else has to help her."

Immediately, she looks to Enyll like she was inflicting one last jab in their cut-short argument. In response, the copper drakon flinches slightly and grunts, but keeps his sullen composure. Despite Enyll's reputation for... well, being Enyll, he's often capable of compassion and empathy, a note I seem to have imparted to him with my speech. He studies me for a moment, then exhales slightly.

If you stumble upon this tale on Amazon, it's taken without the author's consent. Report it.

“How many Farlanders live in Ellyntide?” he asks, his voice meager.

<Over ten million,> I respond. <I know that number means nothing to you, but... it’s a lot. More than every Kin that’s ever lived in Felra, many times over.>

Enyll seems surprised, as do the other Kin. He grunts, but seems to have trouble forming a response. Then he looks to Nakino, whose expression seems as empty as everyone else’s.

“He gave you these gifts, made you weak... all to save a Kingdom no Kin has visited in a generation.”

“Mmh,” I nod. <Though our worlds seem separate, imperceptible connections unite them. The arrival of airship-prey is one example of this relationship.>

Again, Enyll looks to Nakino. This time, his expression had turned sullen and uncomfortable.

“...No,” Enyll replies, his gaze trained to his mate. “I won’t risk my life unless our leader wills it. You and Kuro could defeat an airship-prey once before. Surely you can do it again without my help.”

At that, a weight seems to be lifted from Nakino's wings. He loosens a smile, only to realize that a response was now owed from him. He ruffles slightly, but doesn't take long to produce a response.

"I am the Grandfather Tree's healer. It would be reckless to risk my life for those outside the flock."

"I agree," Ykuvi speaks up. "If airship-prey threatened the flock's territory, then things would be different. But to defend a Kingdom I've never visited, and Farlanders I've never met..."

My tail slumps against the grass. I knew asking them to fight airship-prey was going to be a tough sell, but I didn't expect things to go this badly. They've only asked two questions so far and nobody has wanted any clarification on my plan. They've just been flat out rejecting me.

At that, Fra seems to have noticed my reaction. "Asha..." she trails off, frowning. "I feel for you and your Kingdom, I really do. And I can't imagine what it must be like to lose your entire family and not even know if they're alive. But I'm a Mother, now. I have two beautiful hatchlings, and I wouldn't want what happened to you to happen to them. I wish there was something I could do to help, but if it involves putting my life in danger, then I can't accept your offer. I hope you understand."

Finally, only Tomcat remains. A part of me believed that the promise of adventure in the Farlands would cause her to leap to my aid, slowly compelling the others to join in after I worked my skills of persuasion. But the string of rejections has left her boundless enthusiasm deflated like a balloon, and the weight of being the lone Dragon to help is

weighing heavy against her wings. She's slow to raise her head and meet my gaze, but when she does, she simply frowns and shakes her head.

A cold lump forms in my stomach. I thought I could at least secure Tomcat and Enyll's help, but they've all rejected me. I'm used to being the smallest Dragon in the group, but right now, I feel especially small.

Kuro makes a sad noise and rubs her feathers against me.

<It's alright.> I stare up at my mate and force a meager smile. <This wasn't the outcome I expected, but I'm still thankful you all came to listen. Your friendship means the world to me, and it's not an exaggeration to say I wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for all of you.>

Perhaps I was doomed from the start; I couldn't even provide them any details about when or where I'd ask them to fight for Ellyntide. Unfortunately, when the time comes to put my plan into motion, I doubt I'll have the time to fly all the way back to Felra and ask them for help. Whether I'm in Varecia, Nortane's capital, or somewhere else, my identity as Princess Asha will be a closely held secret, and to transform into a Lithan would be a dangerous risk. This was my only chance to ask them for help, and I failed. When the time comes, I'll just have to save Ellyntide without them.

Fra's wings rustle. "Asha, if there's any other way we can help, then please let us know."

"Ideally, ones that don't involve airship-prey," Ykuvi adds.

The other Dragons tip their wings in agreement.

<Yeah...> I trail off. <Um, I'll let you know.>

When I think about it, I can't imagine any scenario where Kin could help if they aren't willing to attack airship-prey. Discretion will be key no matter how my plans materialize, and there's nothing discrete about a Dragon the size of a building. But who knows, maybe I'll arrive in Sarlain and something unexpected will happen? Maybe Lucy secretly loves Dragons, and she'll swoon at the idea of having a flock of Kin flying around her Kingdom?

...Okay, maybe not.

"It's getting late," Kuro rumbles. "You should turn back to normal."

Though we're on a floating island, it's not safe for someone as small as me to be out at night; Lithans aren't the only winged predators roaming the skies of Felra.

<Yeah, you're right.>

I lower myself to the underbrush and close my eyes, restarting the transformation. Elementia swirls around me, its calming blue glow visible through closed eyelids. Within moments I recognize the Goddess Language being spoken as everyone reacts in stark astonishment to the growing Kin before them.

Then, I sense it: A Lemur, young and confident in herself.

Unbidden, my fangs bare and a growl loosens in my chest, a reaction which comforts me. This is how I *should* respond to the scent of a prey-animal. This is the way things are supposed to be. It contents me to assume my true form in the company of friends.

I open my eyes to see Kuro, relief painted across her muzzle. I rumble a happy greeting as we nuzzle our heads and twine our tails.

“Good,” Gima says, standing to open her wings. “You don’t look right as a prey-animal, Asha.”

I smile past Kuro’s warmth. “I don’t feel right as one, either.”

At that, the group begins to disperse and take flight. As farewells pass between us, Tomcat plods forward, her usual mischievous grin restored.

“You’re pretty cute for a prey-animal.”

“...Tomcat?” My head tilts. “How could you possibly know that?”

“Heh-heh! It’s your voice. It’s so cute and soft-spoken! You sound totally different as Kin.”

Oh, yeah! I’ve kinda forgotten how my Lathan voice is so draconic and menacing compared to my Lemur one. Still...

“Well, um, thanks? Though I think all Farlanders sound kinda soft compared to the power of—“

“Take the compliment,” Kuro whispers into my ear. “You *are* cute.”

I just roll my wings. “Okay, okay...”

## 128. Dragonsong

Glistening sunlight reflects from the chiseled peak of White Mountain as Kuro and I ride the thermals. The snow across the mountain had melted somewhat, warmed by longer days and the approaching start of warmwing. Despite the warmth, the ice near the top remains stubbornly thick, a blanket of cold that will forever coat the mountain no matter how warm the coming season gets. It’s this pocket of land forever locked in time that Kuro and I are flying to.

We approach the peak, catching a breeze that blows us clear over the top. Warmed by a brilliant blue sky, the winds are powerful enough that it makes descending nearly a

challenge. If I were still the inexperienced Dragon that landed here in harvestwing, I might have to fly back to the aerie. But the past few seasons have taught me much about flying, among countless other things.

I'm the first to land, locating a rounded boulder free of snow. A few moments later, Kuro wings up beside me.

"I've been thinking about what you said," She announces, shaking her wings of built-up snow.

"Oh?" I ask.

"About roosting in the Farlands." Kuro approaches an ice-free cliff and gazes across the valley. "You may be used to living around Farlanders, but I'm not. Varecia will be an enormous change for me; the sights, the sounds, that terrible smell... to say nothing of being surrounded by prey all the time."

My wings droop a little. During our meeting with Keuvra, Kuro promised she would consider living with me in the Farlands after I restore Ellyntide. Besides the occasional coercion, I've been quiet on the matter, knowing that she would talk to me when the time was right. But I wasn't expecting her to bring it up here, of all places.

"Our ancestors adapted to living among Farlanders," I remind. "I think you can too."

“Perhaps.”

Kuro gazes a moment longer before stepping away. She approaches the enormous ice wall that coats the horn of the mountain and gestures a wing towards a certain crevice. After scraping a few frozen ember roots into my jaws, I carry them towards the cliff overlooking the Great Valley and drop them among a pile of charred boulders. A blast of fire later, and thick smoke pours into a flawless blue sky.

“Perhaps I’ll feel homesick or unsatisfied by the prey,” Kuro says, approaching my side. “I still feel uncomfortable leaving Frida at the Grandfather Tree, and my Grandmother is one of the oldest Dragons in the flock. I don’t know, Asha. Maybe I’m just not cut out for the things our ancestors could accomplish.”

A sudden gust whips across the mountain, throwing a cloud of snow between us. Once the air clears, Kuro’s expression has softened.

“But I’m willing to try.”

Chirping in surprise, I leap to her side and nuzzle my head against Kuro. She’s coming with me! Oh, I was so worried she would say no! Once again, Kuro proves she’s the perfect mate for me.

“Thank you,” I mutter, buried among her feathers. “Varecia is wonderful. I just know you’ll love it!”

Oh, this is such great news! Ever since we became mates, I've been fantasizing about the day I could finally bring Kuro home and introduce her to the rest of my family. How will Mom react to meeting the newest Princess Consort, a Dragon from Felra? Could Sofl decipher the Lithan tongue and translate it into Goddess? Oh, I can't wait to tell them all about her!

Ah, but still...

"I just wish everyone else could join us."

Kuro looks down at me, her expression cool. "What you asked of them was very difficult."

"Yeah," I tip my wings. "But It was worth trying."

Despite saying these things, I somewhat regret asking them. I had no plan to offer, not even a guarantee of where I'd be asking them to risk their lives for me; I should have known it would have failed! It doesn't seem to have damaged my relationship with anyone, but I must be careful about asking for help in the future.

"Well," Kuro says, drawing her wing outward with a smile. "Only one thing left to do."

I gather my thoughts and rumble in acknowledgment.

Striding towards the cliff, I'm ready to accomplish the task given to me by the elders. The last time I was here, it was me who stood near the ice wall as Kuro called the flock. Back then, I was only a few days removed from my privileged life as a Lemur. But now... oh, just look at me now! I'm fully accepted as a member of the flock! I had a meeting with the Dragon deity himself! And I found a mate who loves me unconditionally, one I'm certain will be on my wing for as long as I live. So much has changed since that day last harvestwing.

And yet, there's so much more I need to accomplish.

I anchor my talons, spread my wings wide, and sing.

**SKREEEEEEEEEEAK!!!**

The mountain shivers, walls of snow loosening an icy grasp. My song echoes across the valley, and another voice joins the cacophonous chorus: an avalanche roars down the mountainside. Thermals catch and launch clouds of snow skyward, obscuring my view behind a veil of snow. As the rumbling subsides, the flock sings back to me.

**ROOOARR!**

**RAAAARR!**

**SCREEEEEECH!**

I wonder how many more things will have changed in my life the next time I hear the song of Kin? Feeling a rush of emotion, I can't help but call back to them.

**SKREEAK!**

Whatever the future brings, I welcome it. I embrace it! If I could survive Felra and everything it threw against me, then I can survive Sarlain. I can survive Nortane's assault and restore my Kingdom to its former glory. I *will* be successful!

As more voices join in, Kuro approaches my side. "Race you to aerie?"

"In a wingbeat," I reply. "I'd like to enjoy this moment a bit longer."

I may be Kin, but the future won't be easy. There will be heartbreak and sacrifice and unexpected events to grapple. I promise myself I'll be successful, but I must still prepare for the worst. I should savor these fleeting moments of clarity and wonder.

...

Okay, enough savoring.

“Psche!”

I leap from the cliff and drop like a stone down the side of the mountain. Somewhere far above, Kuro cries out and chases after me.

My name is Princess Asha Eloise Lordanou XIX. I’m twenty-four years old, and I was born in the capital city of the Kingdom of Ellyntide. I am a member of the royal family, and in my spare time, I enjoy reading and learning about plants.

I’m also known as Asha, Daughter-Of-Kelani. I wasn’t born in Felra, but everyone knows I’m a Dragon. I am a huntress of the Snowfell Flock, and I enjoy spending time with my mate, Kuro.

Two Ashas, two bodies, two entirely different lives. Which one is real?

The crackle of flame reverberates in my ears, slowly drawing me back to reality. Stepping forward from the back of the gathering stone, I assess the aerie, packed to the brim with nearly every Kin in the flock. A representative from the Grandfather Tree recently informed the elders of their arrival, so the gathering can now begin. I steel my emotions and trod forward to join Meldi and Uma at the front of the stone.

Did you know this text is from a different site? Read the official version to support the creator.

**ROOOOARGH!!**

Uma's roar echoes across the aerie, leaving a silenced flock in its wake.

“Blue skies, brothers and sisters. Recently, we called a meeting to discuss the conduct of Daughter-Of-Mecali and Daughter-Of-Kelani. As you'll no doubt recall, our leader returned to... set the record straight.”

Unsurprisingly, it seems Uma is having some difficulty admitting their mistake. I wonder how difficult it was for Ashene and Khosa to do the same after nearly driving me to sacrifice my life? Everything turned out okay in the end, but it wasn't until this meeting that I found the strength to forgive them for what happened.

Uma continues, “We now recognize that Keuvra's silence was intentional. We recognize the harm we caused to Kuro and Asha because of his absence. It is never easy to admit one's fault, but we, the elders, must do so.”

At that, Khosa, Meldi, Ashene and Uma all dip their heads and mantle their wings. This is the public apology, though before I sung the song of Kin, each elder personally apologized to me and Kuro. Understandably, Kuro was still rather cross about the whole thing, but in time she too came to forgive them.

“But that is not all,” Meldi says, folding her wings. “As some of you are aware, Asha and Kuro were asked to appear before our leader, the first time such a request was made to those who are not yet elders. We have been asked to share with you what has transpired and what is yet to come.”

With a flick of her tail, Meldi invites me to speak. Sometime during the past few days, Keuvra asked the elders to call a gathering so I could explain to the flock what had occurred during our meeting. I agreed to do it, of course. But after witnessing how my friends reacted to learning about my Divine Flight, I kinda wish Keuvra could appear and tell the flock instead.

Meldi gives me a nod of encouragement as I stroll past and come to stand at the front of the gathering stone. Once more, the curious stares of the flock fall onto me. Oddly, though, I’m not experiencing my usual pre-speech jitters. Is this how Mom felt when she stood before crowds of animals?

Perhaps Keuvra intended me a favor.

I project my voice forward and announce, “The restoration of my Kingdom, peace among ascendants, and serenity between Farlander and Kin.”

I study the crowd’s reaction; a few heads turn up, and other Dragons perk their feathers in surprise. If any Kin wasn’t paying attention, then they are now.

“This is the edict that was given to me by Keuvra — my Divine Flight. When I landed in Felra last harvestwing, I couldn’t have predicted...”

As I deliver my speech and explain the task before me, my mind wanders, ruminating on just how much my motivation has changed since the day I became a Dragon. Oh sure, I used to be that privileged little girl, the materialistic brat I once admitted to being. But in order to save the Kingdom I was groomed to lead, I must assume the destiny I once abandoned. It’s ironic, isn’t it? Even before tragedy befell me, I was always the lone animal who could save Ellyntide. Sofl was never really Monarch material; the task fell squarely on my shoulders. And as much as everyone knew it, as much as I will readily admit I was unqualified to lead, I understood what it entailed. I resolved that one day, I would ascend the throne on *my* terms.

...

Talk about a set of terms!

For as much as things change, some things eventually stay the same.

Soon, my speech comes to a close. I mantle my wings and turn to retreat to the back of the rock. I’m not sure how they took the news that Keuvra wishes for them to have friendly relations with Farlanders; there was whispering between Kin, but everyone remained cordial. Even if they’re upset, I know they’ll eventually come to accept it. They came to accept me, after all.

“Daughter-Of-Kelani.”

My tail twitches in surprise. I turn to Meldi, providing her with a look of confusion. I was only supposed to give my speech, then step aside so the elders could conclude the gathering.

“You have a long flight ahead of you, one that draws you from your home in Felra to unfamiliar skies. We would be remiss to not acknowledge the effect your arrival has had on our flock, and bid you warm currents.”

Meldi strains to raise aging wings far above herself. She roars in a discordant tone, dips her head sharply, and mantles her wings before me. To my supreme shock, the sound of shifting feathers nearly overwhelms my ears. I turn to see every Kin in the aerie with their wings mantled and their heads lowered in respect.

For me.

I always knew that one day, I would command a deep reverence from the citizens of Ellyntide. But to witness it from the Snowfell Flock leaves me utterly breathless.

“T-Thank you!” I say, fighting tears. “Thank you, everyone!”

Eventually, the meeting draws to a close and Kin take flight from the aerie. I find myself close to Kuro with her wing draped across me, reeling from the unplanned show of support. *Supposedly*, I was groomed to lead a Kingdom and expect adoration from the public. Why is this affecting me so much?

“Hey, Asha!”

A familiar face emerges from the thongs of skyward Kin. Tomcat wings forward, coming to hover above us. “Come on, you’re not leaving without one last grooming pile!”

“Really?!” I squeal.

A grooming pile?! Oh, I haven’t done one of those in ages! We take flight, waving goodbye to Meldi as we exit the aerie and pass through the tunnel to daylight. Warmth greets my feathers on the opposite side, cast down from a strong greenwing sun. This late in the season, patches of bare ground have emerged from their long slumber beneath the snowdrifts. It’s in one of these snow-free areas I spot my friends.

**ROOARGH!**

Tomcat announces our arrival. Enyll, Nakino, Ykuvi, Gima and Fra all turn to greet us.

“Oh, there she is.”

“Hi, Asha!”

**SKREEAK!**

I call out, happy to see my friends. After landing in the snow, we bound over a fallen tree and trot towards to the lounging group of Dragons.

“Did you really think you could fly away without a send off?” Enyll asks, his muzzle half-buried in Nakino’s wing.

“I planned to say goodbye!” I laugh.

Me and Kuro originally thought to stop and say goodbye to everyone as we flew south along the Great Valley.

“But this is a lot better, isn’t it?” Ykuvi asks, laying beside his mate.

“Yes, yes,” Gima responds, smacking a talon across Ykuvi’s flank. “Now shut up and stop moving.”

We crowd around them, forming a tight circle to feed off each other's warmth, each Kin working to groom the feathers of the one closest to them. As Kuro works my chest and neck, I groom Enyll's feathers, something I never, *ever* thought I would do. Soft rumbles flow between the group as everyone relaxes to enjoy the moment.

And, as it often does, my mind begins to wander. It leads me back to the question I asked myself earlier: Who's the real Asha, anyways?

Certainly, this feels real: The warmth of my mate and friends, the Dragons I'll trust for as long as I live. But what about my Kingdom and my destiny? That's real too, right? Shouldn't I be rejecting all this?

Well, no. Of course not!

When I flew here, the only thing I wanted to do was turn back to normal. And if you'd told me I'd hesitate when offered the chance, I would've bitten your head off. But these days, I no longer think of myself in such narrow terms. Feathers and claws, predator and prey, thermals and infinite horizons... these are my new normals.

But it's not like I can fully escape my past, either. No matter which physical form I take, I will always be the Princess who grew up in the Lordanou Palace. I will carry the lessons Sandoz taught me, the ones that influence nearly every decision I make. I will live with the consequences of sneaking out of the palace, a decision which doomed me to house arrest. From birth, my parents molded me to be the Kingdom's Monarch.

I pull away from Enyll; his feathers are clean enough. After allowing a wingbeat for Kuro to finish my wing, I waddle to the next Dragon in line... Nakino. I hesitate, staring into jet

black feathers in desperate need of a preen. I still don't particularly trust him, but in this moment I don't want to consider uncomfortable things. This is supposed to be a joyous occasion! Sandoz wouldn't want me tarnishing it with arguing and conflict.

I settle against the ground and bury my head into Nakino's wing. The larger Dragon's feathers tense before slowly relaxing. We exchange a contented rumble and the preening resumes.

Unexpected events in life 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.

*There is always a choice*, and I choose to make the best with the positives in my life. I chose to ignore the negative feelings that sometimes overcome me. I embrace the friends I made on this journey, even if those friends sometimes made mistakes. I'll never reject the trust they put in me!

Eventually, I get my fangs across everyone's feathers. By now, we were the only ones left on the side of the mountain; the sky painted orange as the sun yawns against the walls of the valley.

Gima rises to her talons and flutters her wings. "Fress, you'd better visit us once you finish getting your Kingdom in order!"

"Of course I will," I reply. "I'll be back in Felra as soon as I'm able!"

“And you’d better take care of her!” Enyll barks in Kuro’s direction.

“Featherbrain,” Kuro puffs her feathers. “I’ll protect her with my life!”

Speaking quickly, Fra works to diffuse the tension. “My hatchlings will be waiting for you!”

After nuzzling each of the Dragons, we return to the snow and call for our takeoff.

**ROOOARGH!**

**SKREEEAK!**

We launch into the sky, catching a thermal that propels us high above the trees.

So, who’s the real Asha?

Two Ashas, two bodies, two entirely different lives. Who am I? She is both. The past life influences her current. One can not exist without the other. She is the culmination of everything she ever was, and everything she has yet to be.

And yet, one life must end. You can't rest a talon on two islands, after all. And so I choose the life where I can protect those I love and restore the Kingdom I would lead. That is who I am: The Dragon Princess Asha!

With visions of infinite horizons, I soar through the air and give my friends a parting wave.

**SKREAAAAAAK!!**

## Bonus Chapter: The Way the Wind Blows

“So, I guess this is it.”

Wind whipped against Asha's facial feathers, revealing a face filled with resolve and determination.

After a long pause, Kuro tipped her wings and muttered, “This is goodbye.”

Asha forced a smile and nodded in kind. It was the best response she could muster.

The two drakainas sat beside each other in silence, their eyes following the wind-whipped clouds drifting past Archer's Landing. Earlier in the day, Relmoon told Asha she still had a day's time before the winds at the crossing would become unsafe. The wayward Princess had finally completed her training and was content to enjoy her last night together with Kuro until a strange premonition gave her second thoughts. When Kuro learned Relmoon had given her advice, she was furious. She huffed, insisting they needed to leave for the crossing at once. But when she sampled the winds and discovered Asha had to leave immediately, her mood changed.

It wasn't hard to understand why. Though they hadn't known each other for long, the two Dragons considered each other friends unlike any they'd ever known before. For Asha, she finally found someone outside her family she truly, wholly trusted. She wasn't entirely sure what Kuro saw in her — perhaps she would've learned if she'd stayed in Felra longer.

But it was truly time for her to leave. After all, to return home after being trained by Dragons like herself had been her goal since the moment she landed in Felra. And boy, did she ever succeed! It was time to put the second part of her plan into motion. Everyone back home was counting on her.

Setting aside her emotions, Asha turned to her friend. "Thank you, Kuro. Since the moment you found me, you've been so wonderfully kind and.... well, I wouldn't be alive right now if it wasn't for you. I could thank you every day for the rest of my life, and it still wouldn't be enough."

Kuro was quiet for a time, but her muzzle eventually curled into a smile. "I'm glad you're finally heading home to see your family. I know nothing is guaranteed over there, so please be safe in the Farlands, okay?"

Asha tipped her wings. "I will. I promise."

She laughed to herself, and the two Dragons nuzzled their heads together. For a fleeting moment, it seemed Kuro was happy she was leaving. Perhaps Asha was simply misreading her emotions, as she thought she often did.

"I'll never forget you, Daughter-Of-Mecali. For as long as I live."

"Yeah..."

The two Dragons drew in each other's scent, committing it to memory. When Asha pulled away, she felt tears rolling down her eyes. Kuro was looking on, clearly forcing a smile. For a moment, Asha felt pity for her friend, but quickly stifled the thought and stepped away.

Asha faced the strait, its endless sea of roiling clouds beckoning her. Somewhere far beyond them was her home, her family, and her future. She drew a long breath and unfurled her wings, feeling an icy wind blow against her feathers. She knew what she had to do.

"Thank you for everything!"

With a commanding leap, Asha captured the breeze.

**SKREAAK!**

She soared quickly, gaining altitude against the powerful gales. When she reached a certain altitude, she banked around and tipped her wings to the Dragon who saved her life; her mentor, her friend.

“Goodbye, Kuro!”

Kuro stood and watched, her wings tense and her body stiff. She watched Asha soar into the area of calm winds and begin her long journey back to the Farlands. With a still-beating heart, she watched her friend, the only one she'd ever truly known, fly away from her. She allowed these things to happen. Somehow, she convinced herself it was for the best. She stood as cold as the winds around her as Asha slipped through a cloud bank and disappeared from Felra forever.

Finally, the guise shattered.

Kuro shrieked, wailing in misery as she collapsed to the ground, a mess of feathers and tears. With all her heart, she wanted to object, but how could she? She couldn't go with Asha to Ellyntide. She was a member of the flock, so she had to stay in Felra. She had no choice. She had to stand and watch as the love of her life, the only Dragon she ever felt comfortable around, disappeared forever.

How was *this* Keuvra's plan!? The red bird promised they'd be mates. He promised Asha would stay in Felra for a time, perhaps a long time. She wasn't sure how long that could be, but less than a season? Asha had only just arrived! Kuro believed something strange would happen and Asha would stay until greenwing. She could see it in her eyes – a season was enough. She thought they would be mates before the snow disappeared from the Grandfather Tree. How had everything gone so wrong?!

Kuro cried for hours, waiting long past nightfall, watching the clouds and hoping, pleading, screaming, that Asha would reemerge and return to her life. It wasn't until the sun rose again that she had the courage to leave Archer's Landing, return to her den, and attempt to resume her shattered life.

Early one morning, Asha's head shot up in surprise.

Footsteps on the periphery of her senses dawdled her from a restless sleep. She gazed past the canopy of the tree she was sleeping under and quickly silenced her growl. Two Lemurs, outlined against the dim morning sky, were patrolling the perimeter of her den and making far too much noise with their uniforms. As usual.

Asha exhaled, flattened her feathers, and curled up around herself. Irritated, she tried to recommit to sleep but found the exercise pointless. She shifted against the grass and instead pieced together the dream she had just had. Slowly, the memories returned to her: she was back in Felra, hunting in the forests south of the Grandfather Tree. The scents of autumn were alive in her mind, the taste of prey fresh on her tongue. And as it often was, Kuro was with her.

The punchline was wearing thin. In the months since Asha returned home, it seemed Kuro was always on her mind. Why did her thoughts always flow back to her? Sure, they had been good friends. Arguably, Kuro was the only good friend Asha ever had. But her decision to return home had been undoubtedly correct. She knew these things, and yet she

struggled with them. What was Kuro up to these days? It had been a warm summer in Ellyntide. Surely the flock must be eating well.

Before she could ruminate for too long, Asha sensed animals approaching on the wind: A Ruffy, a Marten, and a Rabbit. Rumbling in displeasure, she raised her head to discover Commander Almandoz and two members of the guard strolling down the incline into the space beneath the elder tree, her makeshift home. In their arms were a chalkboard, a large roll of paper, and an oversized inkwell.

*'Ugh,' Asha thought to herself. 'It's way too early for this.'*

Duncan lifted his head and smiled, pleased to see Asha awake. He was in his usual morning attire: a purple vest around his chest and a folio at his side. "Good morning, Princess."

Burdened by sleep, Asha murmured in acknowledgment and tipped her head. What he spoke, she understood the meaning.

With that, the guard took their usual position before Asha and began assembling the equipment. They unfurled the huge roll of paper, spread it across the grass, and secured it with metal stakes. As they worked to uncap the Litan-sized inkwell, Duncan flipped his chalkboard around and displayed a message to Asha in the Goddess Language.

*'My sincere apologies for rousing you from sleep. Your Mother wants to know if you've reached a decision.'*

Asha rumbled, causing the guard's tails to perk in fear. Mother was being impatient again. She went to Owen's Island last week, so why did she have to fly to Coleport again so soon?

Perhaps she should have expected this whole charade. Mother always had a penchant for the spotlight, and what better way to relish it than by parading around her daughter – the Lithan, the war hero? In decimating the Nortanian fleet, she cemented herself as the savior of Ellyntide, a legend befitting the tales of Ixshe herself. And although she felt pride in what she accomplished, it was all a bit much. The battle above the formerly disputed island was months ago. Asha was tired of being treated like a show pony for all to see.

By now, the guards had finished. They moved to stand beside Duncan and give Asha plenty of room to compose her response. She raised her talon and dipped a claw – a claw worn down in a particular way to be flatter – into the inkwell. Then, using the claw, she composed a message in the Goddess Language, careful not to puncture a hole in the parchment.

*'Not this time.'*

The Commander looked crestfallen, but inclined his head. He spoke something to the Ruffy, who turned to scamper up the incline and back to the palace. As he did, Duncan erased his old message and quickly composed a new one. He stared at it a heartbeat, quirked his ears, then flipped the chalkboard around for Asha.

This text was taken from NovelBin. Help the author by reading the original version there.

*'I understand. It has been a busy schedule for us all.'*

Asha tipped her wings and loosened a smile. In the time since she returned to Varecia, Duncan had proven to be a stalwart ally in the face of her Mother's fantastical whims. As usual, she wondered where she'd be if she'd never fostered a friendship with the Commander on that cursed day last autumn.

With official business taken care of, Duncan shooed away the Marten in order to have a more private conversation with Her feathered Majesty. Asha had been looking forward to sleeping in, but now that Dunc was here, it made sense to have a quick chat. For the past few weeks, Duncan had been working with his family to secure a private retreat for Asha. An island to herself, somewhere far away from the noxious scents of airships and the clattering of heavy uniforms that kept her awake in the morning.

*'We didn't get Ambassador Island. Mother thought it was a terrible deal. We're still looking.'*

Asha frowned, flicking her tail impatiently. Didn't Dunc's family have money? Why were they so concerned about getting a good deal? Of course, none of this would have been an issue if Mother had simply listened to her concerns and had the Crown acquire an island on her behalf. But then Mother wouldn't be able to parade her around and—

Asha ceased, noticing Dunc staring at her with ears angled and eyes wide. His fear-scent was palpable — this wasn't the reaction she wanted to impart on a friend. She quickly flattened her feathers and dipped her head dolefully, muttering something akin to an apology. Asha may have been the Princess, but the battle above the disputed island had made her temper the stuff of legends. She had to be careful around ascendants.

She unrolled a new section of parchment and quickly composed a message.

*'I appreciate everything you've done to help.'*

Duncan smiled, then replied on the chalkboard.

*'We will always be of service to your family.'*

*Camaraderie.* It seemed like such a hard commodity to come by these days, especially in the aftermath of her return to Ellyntide. Just as it was before she left home, everyone wanted to attach themselves to the heir to the throne and get something out of *her*. To stake their claim in the storied Lithan who single-handedly saved the Kingdom from barreling into a war it stood to lose. In Felra, it seemed everyone was working together for the betterment of the flock – selfless actions to further their fellow Dragon. But in Ellyntide, the only things that mattered were power and influence, fame and glamor. It made Asha sick to her stomach. But at least the Almandozes were on her side.

Asha lowered her head, an action Duncan understood well. She nuzzled against his head, careful not to push him off his feet. If nothing else, the mutual tragedies they endured had brought them close.

Eventually, the Commander took his leave. Since the guard was nowhere in sight to retrieve her writing equipment, Asha decided she might as well rise for the day. Departing the relative comfort of the Elder Tree, she stepped beneath its branches and into the

morning light, glimpsing the first rays of sunshine shimmering above a far-off horizon. After Asha returned to Varecia, workers hastily cleared the area around the Elder Tree, and the new layout was still a work in progress. Gone was the broad, grassy field that her Mother used for formal gatherings, replaced by a rocky landing strip that Asha could safely navigate. Horatio was awake, working with the grounds crew to continue the arduous task of transplanting sections of the Royal Gardens into areas more favorable for Asha. He called a greeting to her, and Asha responded with a friendly, “Rahh!”

It wasn't long before eager animals descended from the palace to tend to the Princess's needs, their chalkboards at the ready. For once, Asha had some good news: A rancher had phoned the crown to inform them one of his horses was gravely ill and wouldn't survive for long. Instead of accepting the usual offering of pre-butchered prey, Asha had the chance to hunt! A location was provided to her, Asha accepting the instructions with a tip of her wings. After everyone retreated to a safe distance (and covered their ears,) Asha called her takeoff and leaped into the sky, aflutter at the opportunity to sate her predatory urges.

As she banked around the Elder Tree, she realized her Mother was nowhere in sight. Normally, the Queen would visit her oversized daughter before she settled in for breakfast. Oh, well. She was probably busy that morning.

Asha soared, feeling the warmth of the sun against her feathers. Life on the ground was confusing, often leaving her frustrated and dejected. But here in the sky, she was *alive*. Sometimes she would leave the palace for no other reason than to experience flight – the sky had a strange way of cleansing her thoughts, making her feel peaceful and content. Though she wouldn't admit it to anyone but herself, it reminded her of her time in Felra and the total freedom she enjoyed.

As she followed the terrain, Asha had a sudden change of heart. The dream of hunting had left her restless – a lowly, famished horse could no longer satisfy her. She needed to stalk prey. Hunt it from the sky. Track it through the undergrowth and chase it until it was beneath her jaws. Unless she could bask in its fear-scent, she would not be satisfied.

So instead she banked for the mountains, navigating the gusts until she came upon a herd of deer crossing a field in the higher elevations. Plucking a doe from the group, she quickly flung it to the ground to disable it. The sound of prey squealing in pain brought her a macabre sense of joy, one she relished as she clamped down and put an end to the prey-animal's suffering. It was one of a handful of wild prey-kills since returning to Varecia, and it made her day feel special.

From there she flew toward Rhl, encountering a passenger airship along the way. Her spirits raised, she flew along the vessel and tipped her wings in a friendly wave. Through the tiny windows of the ship, she saw the passengers, delighted at the chance to view the hero Princess in her element. Though she loathed being paraded as a trophy, she found she enjoyed interacting with the public on her own terms. Why did she have to be an accessory to her Mother? She knew the reason, but decided it was something she didn't have control over. Best to focus on the positive aspects of her life, after all.

She flew the rest of the afternoon, gliding around the southern continent until the sun dropped below the eastern mountains. Musn't stay out too late, otherwise Mother will worry. She returned to the ranch she meant to visit in the morning and made quick work of the horse. As she preyed on it, the farmer appeared in the pasture beside her and gave an enthusiastic wave. With blood dripping from her muzzle, she called out, returning the gesture with her wing. Despite her surely monstrous appearance, the farmer wasn't at all bothered.

The sky was dark by the time she returned to Varecia. Soaring overhead, the airships parted to give her safe passage back to the palace. In calling her landing, everyone in the city knew the Dragon Princess had returned home.

But it seemed she had worn out her welcome. As the winds from her landing subsided, she was soon accosted by her new bodyguard, an Eternal who seemed bitterly upset that she stayed out so long. Asha wasn't certain, as she ignored the chalkboard that was shoved into her face and turned to retreat to the relative safety of her den beneath the Elder Tree.

Her Mother had so fervently wished for her to engage with the public, and she had done that today. If the Eternal had a problem, she could take it up with the Queen.

Later that night as Asha worked to preen her wings, she sensed someone approaching. A Ruffed Lemur, young, and filled with anxiousness. It was, in fact, her brother, Prince Sofl! She spun around to see the young Prince descending the incline, his face downtrodden and a chalkboard in tow.

“Sofl?” she asked in the Lathan tongue.

He forced a smile and waved his tail. Sofl understood a few words, his name among them.

Something was wrong. Dreadfully wrong. There were few in the kingdom as relieved as Sofl was to see the seemingly dead Princess return to life. On her first night back at the palace, he was so insistent on staying at Asha’s side that he fell asleep half-buried in her fluff. This was the first time Asha had seen him in a turbulent mood since she had returned. Beyond concerned, she folded her wings and repositioned herself to give Sofl her full attention.

He’d already prepared his message for her. Dolefully, he flipped the chalkboard around and looked away from her.

*‘Mom tried Communion. Still no response.’*

The hole in Asha's stomach deepened. It had been four months since she had left a message in the Goddess Language at Ford Richter, reestablishing contact with her family. But in all that time, the Goddess had refused to acquiesce to her Mother in communion. Unbidden, her tail slapped the ground, and a quaking growl grew in her throat. Mother had told her to restrain her more baleful vocalizations, but such things were impossible with news this upsetting.

Unfazed by her sister's outburst, Sofl jotted another message.

*'I won't give up until I find a cure.'*

On second thought, perhaps there were some things that could quiet her. Sofl had been working tirelessly to scour the palace library, the university's archives, anything that might offer some kind of clue as to why Asha became a Dragon. But so far, he'd had little luck. The biggest problem was that books of a certain age just didn't exist in Ellyntide any longer, and what they knew of the ancient history of the kingdom was sourced from second-hand accounts and, ironically, books from Nortane. The occupation of Ellyntide cast long shadows that lingered to the present day.

Asha felt tears in her eyes. She could accept being a Lithan for the time being and the challenges it brought, but it was all so stressful. And to see the pain it brought Sofl... well, that was too much for her. She lowered her head, and Sofl rushed forward to hug her.

For a time they lay beside each other, saying nothing as Maki rose on the horizon. Eventually, when he grew tired of listening to the rhythmic rise and fall of Asha's breathing, Sofl stood.

“Asha.”

She raised her head from her talons, gazing curiously.

“I know you can’t understand me, but...” Sofl rolled his shoulders with a sigh. “Mom’s giving up on you.”

Asha stared at her brother, understanding only body language.

A bitter frown grew across his muzzle. Sofl kicked the ground and snarled, “She thinks it’s the reason Etain won’t talk to her! And we just have to give up and accept that this is some kind of punishment for being— oh, I don’t know! Because you’re actually a terrible Princess! Because you snuck out of the palace when you were a kit! Because... argh! Asha, it doesn’t make any—”

Sofl huffed, interrupted by the forceful push of Asha pressing her head against him. Her body was shaking, overcome with emotion at the sight of her brother being so upset. Briefly, Sofl worried if Asha could understand the words in his tirade. But he quickly realized Asha was upset simply because he was upset. As it often was, Asha was trying to protect him.

Unexpectedly, she pulled her neck away and enunciated a word.

“Hhhuurrrruuu.”

“Asha?” Sofl asked. “Asha, you—”

“Ssssoofffrrrrrlll.” Asha turned her head, flicking her tail in annoyance. “Groooowl...”

“It’s okay, it’s okay.” Sofl assured her, making gentle motions with his tail. “We don’t have to work on speech tonight.”

He leaped to his side and grabbed the chalkboard, working quickly to compose a message.

*‘Sorry for getting emotional. I promise I’ll never stop fighting for you.’*

Sofl knew Asha was trying to cheer him up, but such things were unnecessary. She deserved to know the truth, but he didn’t have the courage to tell her. How could he, the family member Asha trusted the most, be the one who delivered the news that she would be stuck as a Litan the rest of her life?

Again, Asha lowered her head and pressed it against Sofl, who responded in kind. Comforting her was the best he could do. It was perhaps the only thing he’d ever be able to do.

Eventually, Sofl said his goodbyes and departed for the palace. The lights shining through the windows dimmed and Asha finished preening herself with a reserved sense of hope. Despite her transformation, it seemed everything eventually put itself right. She returned to Ellyntide, defeated the Nortanian fleet, and reestablished contact with her family. She still had faith that the Goddess, or Sofl, would turn her back to normal. She just had to take it one day at a time, and things would work out.

There was always a choice. Asha chose to have hope.

She curled into a ball and laid her head down to sleep. That night, she dreamed of the skies of Felra and the spiced drakaina that saved her.

## Bonus Chapter: Etain's Promise

On the frozen island of Truce, the deities of Jade are deliberating their future.

One-by-one, they've stood before the God of Creation, Azurrel, and agreed that sacrificing the lifeblood of civilization, elementia, was the only path to salvation. But of those soon to be apotheosized, one has yet to be convinced. Etain, the Lemur I've spent my entire life worshiping, is standing before the group with her tail twitching nervously. The eyes of those already convinced are staring at her with eager anticipation.

"And what about the others?" She asks. "Has the Kingdom of Ryne truly refused to join us?"

Lying in the snow, Lithan Keuvra ruffles slightly. <They've reached a consensus, and the answer is 'no.' Respect it.>

"I don't think it's a matter of choice," Etain says, staring up at the far larger Dragon. "A great number of them wish to follow Azurrel!"

"And many who do not," Jaya responds, his voice stern. "The representatives of their species have decided what is best for their Kingdom. If they wish to freeze to death, then so be it."

Etain flicks her tail, failing to regain her composure. "So, that's it? We're raised to salvation while they're left to freeze? How can we save the lives of our own while condemning so many others to death? Every Fox and Wolf will perish!"

"As will the others," Malfex shakes his head in dismay. "It's heartbreaking."

Of all the deities, Jaya seems the most firm about the fates of the other ascendants. And when you think about it, It's easy to see why. Back then, the Rabbits were split on whether to follow Azurrel to the raised continents. But instead of conceding their differences, they simply joined the Kingdom that, to this day, remains moonbound: Ryne.

Rabbits joining Foxes and Wolves... it's crazy to think about. Though nobody's seen one since ascension, it's said Wolves were the fiercest of the ascendant species, causing even the toughest Martens to turn their tails in fear. Even the Avians breathed a sigh of relief when they no longer had their claws to worry about. How frustrated must have Jaya been, watching half of those he was supposed to shepherd walk into the welcoming arms of an enemy?

Ever since then, the populations of Rabbits have been a fraction of the other ascendants. And after the Rabbit plague, their numbers were reduced even further. It's fascinating to think about how things might have been different if they were as prosperous as the other species.

<I believe you should reevaluate your perspective,> Azurrel transmits from his perch in the snow. <As the steward of Lemurkind, you will become the savior of countless lives, shepherding them into their next phase of development. It is not the responsibly of one deity, or one God, to save the unwilling.>

Etain seems distraught. She fixes her hair and stares at the ground, contemplating a response.

"Please," Scew says, draping a wing over her shoulder. "This is a lot to take in. And I know you're worried about him, but we all have to make sacrifices for the greater good."

*Him...?*

Wait, who is Scew talking about?

Etain raises her head, overcome with emotion. She clears her nose and mutters, "It's not fair. We suffered so much trying to hide our relationship. If it wasn't for Keuvra, they'd have sent Gust back to Nortane. How am I supposed to abandon him now?"

Wait... *what?!*

Gust? You mean *that* Gust?! The prey-bird that stalked me around Felra is the Goddess' *boyfriend?!*

Dragon Keuvra curls his talons and frowns. <All of us have had to confront the reality of leaving our families. It's far from easy, but it's the right decision. I know that's faint comfort, but... I wish I had a better answer, Etain. I really do.>

Oh, wow! This is incredible! The holy book doesn't record a lot of information about Etain's life as a mortal, only the things she did that led to her deification. Even among the Monarchs, it's said they know very little about her personal life. Well, of *course*

they wouldn't! Nobody is supposed to know about Gust; his existence is a total secret!

Back in the deity's time, speciesism was still a real problem. Lemurs blamed Rabbits, Avians blamed Wolves, and everyone was at each other's throats as the moon cooled. It wasn't until the dawn of airships that multiculturalism emerged and taking a mate from another species became socially acceptable. Is it any wonder Etain is so upset about losing Gust? I can't imagine the hardships they must have faced trying to hide their relationship.

Etain stares across the ground, her lip twitching. Finally, she throws down her arms in defeat.

“No,” she speaks, barely louder than a whisper. “Unless he joins us, I won’t do it. That’s my decision.”

Like a bomb detonating, the deities reel in shock.

“N-No...!” Scew stammers.

Keuvra quickly rises on his talons. <Etain, please!>

“You told me I had to respect Ryne’s refusal,” Etain says, crossing her arms. “So respect mine, Keuvra!”

Growling in anger, he paces away from the group and smacks his tail against the ground. “Rhe arra kree sssrek!”

Malfex flinches, caught off-guard by Keuvra cursing in the Lithan tongue. “Etain, how could you refuse!?”

“Find someone else to be your savior of Lemurkind,” she says, locating a stronger voice. “I wasn’t even Azurrel’s first choice, so it’s not a big deal!”

“But, it has to be you! Azurrel said—”

“I don’t care!! I promised Gust they’d never separate us!! *Find. Someone. Else!*”

Etain whips around and goes to grab her bag, propped against the side of a tree.

Dread fills Jaya’s face. Realizing what’s about to happen, he takes off after Etain. “Where are you going?”

“Home,” She replies.

“But you can’t!”

“Yes, I **CAN!!**”

Jaya stops, flinching at Etain’s roar. Everyone present stares in dismay, having no idea the soft-spoken brown Lemur could speak with such ferocity. Etain is supposed to be the Goddess Mother, full of boundless compassion and unyielding sympathy. The Lemur I see before me is a furious monster!

As she paces away, Scew looks to Keuvra with a hushed, expectant gaze. The Dragon rumbles, again cursing to himself before squaring his wings and drooping his neck low. A pallid blue light forms around his body, twisting in intricate patterns. His feathers waver, and he shrinks in size.

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

If I could gasp right now, I would. Keuvra's transforming! He's returning to his Lemur form! Is this what it looked like when I became one a little while ago?

"Wait..." Jaya's ears droop. He inches closer to Scew and asks, "He can still do that?"

The Conure scoffs, "Of course he can, nimbus."

Wow, I haven't heard an Avian call someone a '*numbus*' in a loooooong time. But why is Jaya surprised? How long has it been since Keuvra last became a Lemur, anyway?

It isn't long before Keuvra rises from the ground, his Lemur self fully restored. He steps forward only to seize up after the first step, a chill jolting his body. Dressed in sandal footwear and mage's robes, he's completely unprepared for such frigid weather. Ignoring the concerned gazes of those around him, he flicks his tail in determination and begins running after Etain.

“Hey, wait!”

Etain stops halfway to the tree where her bag is propped. She spins around and shock fills her face. “Keuvonis?!”

“Please, just wait up!”

“What are you doing?!” Etain yells back.

“I’m trying to stop you from making a mistake!”

At that, I find myself drifting across the ground, spirit Keuvra bringing us closer to the conversation. We catch up with his younger counterpart just as he comes to a halt before Etain.

“Idiot,” she huffs, removing her furred gloves. “Here, take these.”

“Keep them,” Keuvonis says, pushing them away. “I’ve survived far worse in Felra. You need to reconsider this.”

“Why should I?” Etain asks.

“Because nobody else can do it. Candice won’t and Ellyntide doesn’t trust anyone else.”

“That’s not my problem.”

Keuvonis frowns, growling like a Dragon. “Then why did you agree to come here?”

“Because I had no other choice.”

“Azurrel told us we’d have to leave our families behind. You knew this was going to happen.”

“I know! But, I thought...” Etain sighs heavily and explains, “When I accepted the role from Candice, I thought I could still negotiate. I thought everyone would agree that giving up our families was too much. If I had known you’d all go along with this nonsense, then I would’ve stayed in Coleport.”

“Nonsense?” Keuvonis’ tail lashes. “How can you possibly say that?”

Etain looks away, but doesn’t offer an explanation.

“When Redaga flew over Hollyhead, you were the only one standing in their way! When the Ember Flock bore down on Varecia, you nearly gave your life to defend those who couldn’t fight back. And when the fighting was over, you refused to sit down until every Lemur was taken care of.” Keuvonis stares in disbelief at the friend he thought he understood. “Your compassion was the only reason Ellyntide survived the Dragon onslaught. Every soul in the Kingdom knows your name because you believed there was no sacrifice too great.”

“And despite everything I did, they nearly turned their backs on me when they found out about Gust,” Etain speaks with the fire in her eyes restored. “All I wanted to do was love those close to me, no matter what they looked like. But somehow, that was too much. Well, I can turn their backs on them, too!”

“But they didn’t turn their backs on you! Because of Candice, you two are together!”

“And if I go along with this plan, we’ll be separated forever. Don’t you get it, Goldfeathers? Every time we try to love each other, someone else stands in our way!”

Keuvonis tries to find a response but remains silent. His body shivers; It seems the cold is finally getting to him.

“You talk about my compassion like it’s sacred. How can I...” Quickly, Etain glances past Keuvonis’ shoulder. Azurrel is perched on the ground, gently preening it’s feathers. “How can I respect some so-called God who has no compassion for those who refuse to follow them? One who condemns them to death?”

Keuvonis pauses, and understanding fills his eyes. “That’s what this is about, isn’t it? You can’t stand the thought of being subservient to someone like Azurrel.”

Etain fixes a strand of her long, curly hair and rests a hand on her hip.

“Yeah, okay,” Keuvonis says. “Gust, too. Both of those things.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll admit... I have my reservations. I don’t understand how we’re supposed to shepherd an entire species while looking past Ryne.” Keuvonis gazes across the island, frozen and barren. “But if there’s one thing the war... no, this entire existence has taught me, it’s that we have to savor what this life offers us. You know? We can’t dwell on the things we have no control over. But we can choose to accept what’s been given to us and believe that things will turn out alright in the end.”

Etain’s eyes soften. “Do you really believe that?”

“I do,” Keuvonis nods. “It’s what kept me going through the raids on Ellyntide, and what gave me hope during the battles with my flock. And do you know who inspired me to feel that way? It was you. That’s why I don’t think Azurrel matters, because nobody in Ellyntide considers them their savior. When the going gets tough, they think of you.”

Etain seems a little lost for words. She looks away and frowns. “I want to do this, Goldfeathers. I know how much everyone looks up to me, but... if I give up on Gust, then I’ll just be betraying all those principles about me that everyone finds so endearing. How could I lead everyone as a hypocrite? How would they respect me? Azurrel says they created everything, including ourselves. And yet, how can they not understand simple compassion?”

Silence drifts through the soon-to-be deities, interrupted only by the sound of Keuvra’s tail swaying softly against the snow. For once, it seems he has trouble locating a response.

Finally, Etain musters the courage to speak. “If... if there were some way—”

A streak of iridescent light interjects the conversation. <Perhaps there is a role for your mate beyond this life.>

“Eep!”

“Aah!”

Etain and Keuvonis stumble backwards, kept upright only by deep snow drifts. Slowly, they lower their arms to see Gust hovering in the air before them, dappled light falling like raindrops below the God of Creation. It seems they were listening to the conversation and found it necessary to barge in. As their breathing slows, Etain and Keuvra exchange startled glances before looking to Azurrel expectantly.

<...My apologies.> Azurrel dips their dainty little head. <It is true that after you take on your roles as deities, the natural order of the Moon will be preserved from your direct influence. However, from time to time, it will become necessary to act upon events in more subtle and direct ways. We had planned to carry out this role ourselves. However, I am forced to concede it would be advantageous to delegate this responsibility to one who has lived as a mortal, one more familiar with the nuances of those living on our world. If it were to put your mind at ease, then I would extend this offer to your mate.>

Etain's muzzle drops. "Really! I'm..." she trails off, flicking her gaze to Keuvonis. "Shocked. Really, I'm quite surprised that you would offer this."

Keuvonis nods in understanding. "So, Gust would be the one carrying out these influences for us. Not as a deity, but a liaison."

<That is an acceptable characterization.>

Etain looks away, carefully contemplating the offer.

Keuvonis approaches her and asks, "This is what you wanted, right?"

Etain looks up at him, asking a question not spoken. He seems conflicted for a response, but soon nods.

The Goddess turns to Gust. “And we’d still be able to love each other?”

“I should clarify that your mate will not be a divine lifeform. They will not be privy to the conversations of you and your fellow deities, nor will they exist on the same plane of existence. However, you will still be able to visit them as you see fit.”

Etain’s face twists. That was an awfully crude way of explaining it, but it sounds like the answer is yes. She looks away from Gust, contemplating her answer.

“Please,” Keuvonis says, resting his hand on Etain’s shoulder. “For all of us.”

Etain stares up at him with a somber expression. But before she can deliver her response, the world drifts away from me.

<Needless to say, the answer was ‘yes.’>

Slowly, the freezing island and everyone on it fades to black, and I find myself floating in the void with spirit Keuvra at my side. My light dims slightly; words are hard to come by after witnessing the most important gathering of animals in the history of Jade.

<I do envy him somewhat, Gust. Ever since the continents rose, he's been galvanizing around the moon, influencing things in ways I could only dream of doing. He gets to do all the fun stuff that matters! I just act like I'm summoned to the White Mountain aerie and talk to some Dragons.>

Again I find myself short for words, realizing a deity is admitting the ritual used to summon him is entirely unnecessary. Does Etain feel the same way about communion with Ellyntide?

I clumsily transmit, <Do Etain and Gust still love each other after so many centuries?>

Keuvra's light dips as if he were nodding. <Oh, yes. I'm quite sure of it. When you've lived as long as we have, it's difficult too find things to anchor yourself to. Nearly everyone and everything I used to know is gone. But through it all, Etain still has her mate.>

<Is that why she's considered the Goddess Mother? Because... she still has something worth fighting for?>

For a curiously long moment, Keuvra is silent. His light dims slightly as he transmits, <The Goddess is a uniquely determined animal. And, some would argue, stubborn to a fault. But I believe Etain is capable of growing past the morals she so vehemently believes in. One way or another, she has a way of getting what she wants.>

That was a strange response. What exactly is Keuvra trying to tell me? Feeling compelled to answer him, I locate a thread and transmit, <I never would have thought the Goddess could be stubborn.>

<I think you would find there are many surprises about us, Princess.>

At that, I feel Keuvra and I drifting apart until his light dims from existence, leaving me alone in the void, awash in a river of conflicting emotions.