

THE PRINCESS'S FEATHERS

16. I'm... A Dragon?

Something incredible... no, something *impossible* just occurred.

Orie, Starla, and the Owl are dead. Their mangled bodies are strewn across the floor of the hollow, adding to the already macabre scene. And while I can't help but feel a weight lifted at their passing, the nature of their deaths flies in the face of everything I know to be true.

I killed them. Unarmed, using my *teeth* as a weapon.

Something happened to me as Orie was about to strike. I felt an incredible force overtake me, unlike anything I'd ever experienced before. Then, something changed inside me, giving me the assurance I could defend myself and easily take revenge against those despicable animals. I embraced the hatred swelling up inside me and turned it into a weapon.

The scenes from the fight repeat in my head. I attacked Orie and Starla like a feral would hunt prey. Pouncing them from behind and biting their necks. Then the Owl, somehow shrinking in size, tried to escape by flying away. I caught him in mid-air, dragging him to the ground as he wailed in pain. And then to shut him up, I—

...

I can't believe this. None of this can be true. And yet the evidence is right in front of me as clear as day.

I slam my eyes shut, pleading to awaken from a nightmare. These events, these terrible *feelings*, they must be a dream!

This isn't real.

This isn't real.

This isn't real!

...

Get a hold of yourself, girl. Panicking won't do us any good. We need to take this one step at a time and try to think this through logically.

Deep breaths.

...

Alright.

First things first, am I safe? A group of animals with unknown motives, possibly from Crow Wing, just made an attempt on my life. It's possible they aren't alone and there are more of them lurking nearby. Out here in the Weald, there are plenty of places you could lay low for days at a time and hide. I could gaze around to see if I could spot any more of them, but... even without doing that, I'm certain I'm alone right now.

I can't explain it. My body is sending the signal telling my brain there's nobody else here. And It's not just a premonition that I'm alone, but a certainty. I'm as certain of it as I'm certain my entire party died trying to save my life.

...I don't know. Nothing makes sense, everything is so confusing right now. I wish someone could tell me what's going on!

...

I suppose trusting my intuition is the best I can do right now. To trust what I can see with my own two eyes, no matter how astonishing it may seem. I have to believe that I killed the animals who made the attempt on my life. So, if there are more like them nearby, I could defend myself from them too.

Right? Right. I am safe. If any more hostile animals try and pull a sword on me, I'll just... kill them with my *mouth*...

...What's happened to me, anyway?

I'm no longer myself, am I? Or rather, I'm no longer a Lemur. Impossibly, it seems I've *turned into* something else. For one thing, Lemurs don't have the fangs or the jaw strength to attack other animals. I wouldn't have been able to kill those animals the way I did if I were still a Lemur.

But the best evidence is how much smaller everything has become. The bramble patches that blocked my escape earlier look like clumps of crabgrass I could lope in a single bound. And the trees in the grove we passed through we walked through earlier? My sightline has become so high that even down in the hollow, I can see halfway to their tops.

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So, I've become bigger. Much, *much*, bigger.

I look down to inspect my feet. Except, they're no longer feet. Where before I saw laced leather boots I now see *talons*. Talons with tufts of blue fur, dark blue claws, and the distinct lack of an opposable toe. Near my talons lies the motionless body of the Owl, now so minuscule that if I weren't mindful of where I stepped I could quite easily flatten him.

Armed with only these observations, I can deduce a lot about what's happened to me. What creatures on Jade are so tall they can see over the tops of trees? Or so immense that a full-grown, adult Owl could easily be trampled by one?

There's only one answer:

Dragon.

I'm a Dragon. I turned into one.

But, that's impossible! Animals can't transform into different creatures! Shapeshifting is the work of fictions and fairy tales. We live in a world of science and technology, not spells and magic!

Except, that's exactly what's happened, hasn't it? I told myself I had to trust my intuition, to trust what I could see with my own two eyes. If my eyes aren't playing tricks on me, then the truth is I have turned into a colossal Dragon.

Okay, okay... if I've truly become a Dragon, then what species of Dragon am I? There are two that are known to exist on Jade: Redagas and Lithans. Both are only found on the Northern Continent, far to the north of the lands where animals live. It's the same place the Elder Tree's species natively grows.

Redagas are the smaller of the two species. They are seldom seen with only one or two confirmed sightings in the last century. What's known about their appearance is they're reptile-like: Scales cover their bodies, and their wings are made of a thin layer of skin, like a bat's wing. They've never been seen outside of the Northern Continent, and nobody is quite certain why.

Then there's Lithans. Unlike Redagas there are occasional sightings of them in Sarlain and Nortane, so we know more about them. They're bigger than Redagas — in fact, they're so big we believe they're the apex predator of the entire moon. Instead of scales, their bodies are covered in thick, massive feathers. I'm sure they make avians quite jealous.

I thought I saw fur on my talons, not feathers. What does the rest of my body look like?

I rotate my head to investigate, nervous to see the outcome. To my surprise, once my head passes a certain point, my neck itself twists, allowing me to maneuver far enough that my entire head is gazing directly *behind* me.

Well, that sure was an interesting sensation. But compared to that, what I see behind me is downright astonishing: enormous wings constructed of innumerable pearl white feathers lay on my back, shimmering iridescent in the golden afternoon sun. Past my wings, my fur — no, my feathers — change to a brilliant shade of azure all the way down to the tip of my tail, which is now a bushy frock of feathers. I move my wings back and forth, and they fold and open in the way I'd expect a feral birds to. Somehow this movement with appendages I've never had before comes naturally to me.

Surveying myself, it hits me like a sack of mulch fumbled by a clumsy Greenleaf: I'm a *Lithan*! The largest predator species on the moon! I'm enormous! Colossal! Immense!! I...

...Have so many questions right now!!

How did I get turned into a Lithan? Can I turn back to normal? Are the animals that attacked me from Crow Wing? What were they doing here that was so important? Does Mom's fall during communion have something to do with this? And, most importantly...

Why did this happen to me?!

But here in the hollow, surrounded by images of death, is hardly the ideal place to begin to answer these difficult questions.

On the thought of mortality, scenes from Calypso's sacrifice forcibly resurface in my head. The leap in front of me. His final moments. The look of relief in his eyes. I turn across to the hollow to where he's resting... and quickly turn back. I can't do this right now. I'm not yet ready.

The sight of blood unnerves me, but what truly makes me uncomfortable is the image of my bodyguard lying motionless on the ground. It's a scene that I'm certain will haunt me for as long as I live.

I have to pay my respects to him, here in the place where he sacrificed himself. He is a true, righteous hero of the Kingdom. And while I could never hope to repay the debt of my life, to him I owe my inner feelings at least. There were things that, in life, I never dared to tell him directly.

I don't know what the future holds for me yet, but one thing is certain: My life is about to become much, *much* more complicated. This will be my last chance to be with him alone.

Tears stream down my face over the tops of my facial feathers. How strange it feels to not have them soaked up by fur. What would Calypso think if he could see me in this form, grieving as I am now? Would he still see me as Princess Asha? Or would he instead see some feral monster?

I need to leave the hollow before my thoughts turn bleak and consume me. When I'm ready to see Calypso again... that is when I'll return.

17. Disposition

I stare into the hazy water, examining the visage looking back at me.

I've returned to the pond where I found Calypso skipping rocks. I wanted to know what my new face looked like and thought this would be the best place to do it. I suspect as a Lithan, I'm not the friendliest looking thing. If someone from Ellyntide ends up seeing me in this form, then I want to know exactly what they're looking at.

But now that I've arrived here, I've discovered something unsettling: Calypso's cloying cologne, lingering in the air and blending with the smells of algae and canebrake. I only caught a whiff of it when Calypso absentmindedly backed into me earlier today. But for some reason it's just as strong here, floating by the pond, as it was when I was right up next to him on the train. We left this area at least an hour ago, how can his scent still be so strong?

What a cruel way to be reminded I'll only know his scent for a while longer. I'm trying to not let it bother me, anyway.

Forcing myself to refocus, I tilt my head slightly, and the reflection in the water follows. I blink, and it blinks in response. Crimson pearls, glistening off the surface of the water; fierce, beautiful, and unlike anything I've ever seen before.

It's the reflection of a Lathan's face.

My face.

How can such things be possible? Perhaps I died in the fight after all, and this is simply the afterlife. Someone's cruel joke of an afterlife. I lower my head closer to the water, touching the tip of my muzzle to the surface. Ripples are cast, leaving cool drops of water on my feathers.

No, I'm not dead. This is real life. Though the afterlife may be preferable to the situation I now find myself in. It wasn't enough that I had to watch Calypso die in front of me today. No, not only that, but I've also taken the form of a terrifying monster.

I can't look like this. I can't *be* this. I'm the Princess of Ellyntide! How am I supposed to carry out my official duties when I look like this terror staring back at me? If I were to return to the palace as I am now, it would cause a crisis. Would mom see me as the daughter she's raised for 23 years? Or would she call on the knights to come and exterminate me?

And Sofl... Oh, goddess above...

A premonition plays in my head: I'm at the palace gardens, surrounded by knights of all orders with their weapons drawn and pointed at me. As they're closing in, I'm desperately trying to explain to Mom what's happened. Sofl is there, hiding behind Mom's side, but my pleas aren't reaching him. It seems he can't understand a word I'm saying. With terror swelling in his eyes, he turns and flees...!

"Damn it, no!"

I whip my head around and turn away from the pond, charging headlong into the grove trees. I fold my wings flat and force my way through the foliage, causing a shower of leaves and shattered tree branches to explode out in all directions. I tumble through the forest until I burst through the other side and take off in a sprint across the prairie.

This can't be happening to me! I'm the Princess, I can't be a dragon! I have to change back to normal!

I open my wings wide to skid to a halt and slam my eyes shut. Frantically, I search the fragmented memories of the fight and the transformation that occurred during it. There must be something! Some emotion, some feeling I can replicate that will turn me back to normal. There must!

A scene comes into view. It's right after I scaled Orië's back and bit his neck. I'm on the ground on all fours, facing down Starla as she stares on in shock at what the mons— erm, at what *I* just did to her companion.

Something catches my eye. There, on my right hand... the serpentine diamond. It's shimmering!

My ring was shimmering during the fight. How can that be? I open my eyes in disbelief, focusing on my foretalons. The ring's no longer there, of course. But what happened to it? Where did it go? Could the ring have something to do with my transformation?

I probe my memories further. What happened after I saw the ring shimmering?

After Orië was finished, I chased after Starla. Even though she was farther away and tried to escape, I was easily able to close the gap between us and pounce on her from behind. Like the Marten, I went for her neck, and... and, um. I killed her, too. With her no longer a threat, I whipped around and saw the Owl trying to escape by running to take off and fly away.

At this point in my memory, I can no longer see my talons. I suppose my neck had gotten long enough that they were no longer visible without looking down. I attacked the owl on

the ground a moment later, but I was too busy silencing him to remember what my talons looked like.

In a positive development for everyone who hated my outfit today, it shredded to pieces as my body exploded in size. Could the same thing have happened to the diamond as I was growing? What if the diamond was responsible for my transformation somehow? Could I have inadvertently destroyed my only way to turn back to normal?!

The narrative has been taken without permission. Report any sightings.

I have so many questions, and it seems like I can answer none of them.

Let's back up a little bit and try to think deeper about this.

The serpentine diamond is a national treasure forged by ancient members of the royal family, the Lordanous (that's me!) It's given to the heir apparent at a certain age to be worn as a ring until their coronation as Monarch.

The diamond is inert... at least, I believed it to be inert. It began shimmering right as my transformation into a Lithan began. There's no way that can be coincidental, right? It's as if the diamond knew my death was imminent and reacted to give me the means to defend myself. No wearers of the diamond have ever passed away before ascending the throne, so does that mean I'm the first to have faced mortal danger? It sounds absurd... but what else could it be?

I had anger problems when I was growing up. Dad likes to reveal to friends of the family how much of a problem child I was and how difficult it was to parent me. Could my anger have stemmed from the fact I'm some sort of half-Lemur, half-Lithan hybrid? And I didn't take my Lithan form until my life was in danger?

Okay, that sounds as absurd as an enchanted ring. Also, I've mellowed out since my hormonal-driven, rebellious teenage years. Anger is something I've learned to manage.

...

...What!?

You don't believe me? You think the argument at breakfast this morning proves I'm still a rebellious little girl?

Feh! That was an isolated incident.

At least, I think it was.

I don't know... magic rings, mutant forms, none of this sounds very plausible. And ultimately, it doesn't matter a whole lot. Regardless of *how* it happened, it happened. I'm a Lithan, and now I have to deal with the consequences.

What if I just concentrated on trying to turn back to normal? If the ring or some latent power turned me into a Lithan, then maybe it also gave me the power to change back to normal?

Could it really work like that? I guess it's worth a shot.

I close my eyes and try to focus on the image of myself: A big, blue and white feather dragon, maybe the size of the two-story building. Large wings, a long tail, and what I assume are some very sharp and very scary looking fangs.

I hold the mental image of myself that I've created and begin to shape it. My wings fold and shrink, becoming so small that they disappear back into my shoulder blades. My tail changes shape, losing its frock and returning to the curved black appendage I'm familiar with. My feathers molt, giving way to black and white tufts of fur. The only blue left on my body is my blue hair, which is growing out of my head and back to its original length. I'm regaining the appearance of a Ruffed Lemur.

I... I can feel something!! My legs are tingling! Something's happening!

...

I open my eyes and examine my front leg, which is unchanged. The wind has shifted direction, rasping a group of *Liatris pycnostachya* flowers against my calves.

...Fweghing hell.

I stomp the moon, leaving a talon-shaped depression in the ground where the flowers used to be. Sorry, pollinators.

Undeterred, I try the thought exercise again. Then a third time. And, a fourth. Try as I might, no matter the type of mental tricks I play out in my head, nothing changes.

This isn't going to work, is it? Am I really stuck in this form forever? I shift uncomfortably, anchoring my talons into the ground to keep me upright. My head feels light, as if the breeze could topple me over sideways.

What am I going to do?

...

"...Can I still talk?" I ask aloud, to nobody in particular. To my supreme relief, it seems I'm still capable of speech! But, whoa, what's happened to my voice?!

"I *can* still talk!!" I exclaim, wishing to hear another sample of my new vocal cords. "Oh gosh, my voice changed! It sounds so... draconic!"

My voice has become shrill and tense, like the cry of a feral bird of prey. Still, I hear a voice that sounds remarkably like the one I'm familiar with. If someone I know hears me speak, I think they could recognize me! I've never heard of a feral being able to speak the Goddess language, but it seems I'm the lucky exception.

This is something. I can work with this. If I can't change back to normal now, then surely I can get help from the palace, right? If it really was the serpentine diamond that changed me, then there has to be some book, some record in the archives from when this thing was forged that explains what's happened.

And if we can't find anything, mom could commune with our Goddess and ask her for help. If there's anyone who can help us with this, it's Etain. She'll know what to do, I'm certain of it.

It's not going to be easy to explain any of this. What's happened to me, what happened to Laurent, Bodie, and Calypso. But mom will listen to me. No matter how difficult my story is to process, she'll believe what I have to say. I might be a Lithan, but I'm still her daughter.

Landing at the palace and trying to find her is out of the question, though. Even if I managed to catch her while she was outside, mom's surrounded by a layer of security at all times that will protect her with their life. They'll never allow someone as dangerous looking as me to get close to her unless I can talk to someone else first and convince them I'm not a threat.

Calypso was the only animal outside my family that was close to me, though. I don't know any of the groundskeepers in the garden well enough, and I rarely get to talk to professor Willow. Isn't there someone else I can turn to for help?

Duncan!!

That's right!! Me and Duncan became friendly with each other today!

I'll tell him about my nickname for Calypso! I haven't told anyone else about 'Bristlebody' yet, he'll know it's me right away!!

Yes! Yes! Yesssss!!

I'm so happy I have dumb little idiosyncrasies like giving animals nicknames!! Eat your heart out, mom!! My 'regressive' behaviors are totally going to get me out of this!!

Okay, erm, settle down. I still need to develop a plan for how I'm going to do this. No matter what, if I contact Duncan first then I have the unenviable task of delivering the news that his partner is dead. Obviously, I shouldn't do it back in the hollow. Seeing his partner lying in a pool of blood with a giant dragon standing over his motionless body is... yeah. Not a great look. I don't think any amount of talking down would work in that situation.

Confronting Duncan and the guard back at the airship is going to be the best way to do this. I'm unsure how those soldiers will react when a *Dragon* lands in front of them, but if I do it quick enough and start talking before they can pull their weapons, I think I'll be able to get them to stop before they attack me.

Of course, that plan assumes I know how to fly. Or that I even know anything about how this body works. Before I decide to go back to the airship, I sho—

...

I'm not the only one here.

There's something nearby!

18. I, Predator

Instincts scream to make myself as small and compact as possible. I crouch until my chest feathers are grazing the tips of grass, angling my neck perpendicular to the ground. Something is telling my brain that the feeling I'm alone, that comforting certainty I've felt since I was back in the hollow, is no longer true. Someone, or something, has joined me on the prairie.

I scan the field to try and identify what's causing my instincts to flare. But there's nothing out of the ordinary I can spot, just the endless wafting of tallgrass that I've become accustomed to this afternoon. I perk my ears around but hear nothing.

This is what I expected, though. While my vision has improved somewhat as Lathan, it's my nose that's gotten the biggest upgrade.

I sniff the air, taking in the scents around me; like a light bulb illuminating a darkened room, the breadth of the prairie is revealed to me. My brain processes it all, effortlessly able to categorize and pinpoint the smells as my olfactory senses process them. In the corner of the field is an orchid patch, smelling lovely as usual. Wafting through the trees I damaged earlier is the scent of the pond, blending with the smells of withered leaves and shattered bark.

Bisecting the field, the stale scents of animals who've recently traversed it. A Ringtail and a Marten. A man who covered himself in cologne this morning to delight his partner. A woman who kept a daisy pinned to the hat her mother gave her as a birthday present.

...

There! Among the rhubarb and logweed, it's the scent of another feral! Though I'm uncertain which feral it belongs to, or why I associate this smell with a feral in the first place. It smells aromatic and sweet, not like any ferals I can recall. If I had to come up with a comparison based on things I smelled as a Lemur, I'd say it's a cross between a birthday cake and the lavender that grows in the royal garden.

Paradoxically, it also smells unique, like neither of those things at all. It's quite vexing.

It really is astonishing how hyper-sensitive my nose has become. As a Lemur, my sense of smell was about as sharp as a hen's egg. If I wanted to smell the gardenia in the palace, I had to stick them so close to my nose you'd be forgiven for thinking I was about to gulp one down as a snack.

I think a proper investigation is in order! If I'm going to be spending some time in this form, then it's going to be worth it to familiarize myself with its capabilities. Tracking down an unknown feral across the prairie should be a good test of that. Despite my earlier apprehension, I can tell whatever's out there isn't a threat to me, so it should be safe to go looking for it.

Is what I'm feeling really apprehension? Maybe it's... excitement.

The longer I sit here though, the fainter the scent gets. Does that mean the feral is moving away from me? Hey, don't leave so soon! I need to come find you!

I stand up and trundle across the field in the direction the scent is coming from, taking in whiffs of air every so often to stay on course. Soon I reach a pin oak out in the middle of nowhere and the profile of the scent changes. It smells... fresher, now. The feral has been in this spot recently. I push on, this time able to track its scent so acutely it seems I'm following an invisible line in the grass, drawn by the scent the feral left in its passing.

You know, the thought of what I'm doing right now is *hilarious* to consider given how important a person I am. I can just imagine what the nobles in the palace would be saying if they could see me right now.

Her Majesty's heir to the throne, Princess Asha Eloise Lordanou, is faffing about a field like one of her father's mangy hunting dogs. Truly a lamentable waste of her talents, she would surely do herself better to track down an assortment of maths textbooks to study and arrange dinner with one of my fine male consorts!

I wonder if I can convince mom to let me bite their heads off.

The scent leads me across the field and down a small dip in the landscape where a stream runs. I reach a bend in the stream and the small head of a doe shoots up through the grass some distance ahead of me, the whites of its eyes clearly visible. I freeze in place, and my muscles tense up in excitement.

So that's what I was tracking! It's hard to be certain because of how far away and small it is, but it appears to be a red-tailed deer. I've seen these in person at the Varecia Zoo before, but never out in the wild like this.

A breeze blows through us, bringing another whiff of its pleasant scent. We stare at each other for a few moments, neither of us daring to make a move. It must be terrified of me, right?

I want to get closer to it.

What if... I moved very slowly. Could I approach it without spooking it?

With a feather touch, I move a front leg forward in the direction of the deer. But before it can touch the ground again, the doe takes off running!

I give chase as it darts down the stream bed. It's small, easily able to leap and bound over any of the smaller briars in its path. But I have the size advantage. My legs are so long, so easily able to cover the ground with each stride, that I can handily make up the distance between us.

That is unless the deer decides to escape into a grove at the edge of the field... which it does. All I can do is watch helplessly as it leaps and disappears through a thicket, forcing me to use my wings to come to an abrupt halt.

Darn it! Just as I was catching up to it, too! My stomach growls in protest.

...Oh! So *that's* why I've been so invested in trying to track down this doe!

I told myself that I wanted to find it so I could become more familiar with the capabilities of my new body. But my eagerness to get close to it, and my disappointment when it escaped me, that wasn't just my curiosity, was it? *Oh, no.*

I wanted to *eat* the doe.

I saw it as *prey*.

I recoil a little as the weight of this realization washes over me. That poor, defenseless creature!! I wanted to rip it to pieces!! What is wrong with me?!

...There's nothing at all wrong with me, is there?

I've turned into a predator species, the largest on the entire moon. It's completely natural for me to track down and kill other ferals. In fact, it's essential to my survival as a Lithan; If I can't hunt down ferals like that doe and eat them, I'll starve to death.

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

Sorry, Asha! But there's no palace staff to cook and serve you dinner out here! If I want to eat something, I must go and catch it myself. When I smelled the scent of the doe and wanted to investigate, that was just my instincts kicking in and guiding me in the right direction so I could survive.

The instinct to survive, huh? Is that what happened during the fight with Starla and the others? Was it my instincts as a Lithan that guided me to... do what I did to them?

I can recall the beginning of the fight, right as I began to lose control. In a flash the plan of the attack appeared in my head perfectly formed, presented as if I had carried it out countless times before: I'd swipe Orië's legs with my foretalons, causing him to lose his balance and stumble to the ground. With his attack on me broken up, I had an opening to swing around from the back unnoticed, scale his flank and bite him in the neck.

So, I did.

Then I turned on Starla, and... well, um, I attacked her too.

The optimal way to kill a Marten... I do not know of these things. What use would I have for such macabre knowledge back in the palace? And yet when my life is in danger, I recite it by heart. The only explanation is this is the instinct of the beast I have become, revealed to me by the will of self-preservation.

My stomach growls a second time, interrupting my deep thoughts. Yes, yes, I do still need to eat something soon, thank you for reminding me! But my hunt for the doe wasn't exactly a resounding success, was it? My instincts may show me the way to defend myself when my life is in danger, but they have nothing to say when the dinner bell rings. I don't have the slightest idea how to hunt.

If I had been born a Lathan on the Northern Continent, I'm sure I would have watched my parents hunt growing up, slowly being tutored by them over time until I was making kills of my own. But dropped into this body, here in the middle of Ellyntide, I don't have the guidance of a parental figure. Heck, I'd never even *seen* a Lathan in-person before I saw my own reflection earlier.

How am I supposed to find something to eat if I can't hunt? It sure would be nice if a feral could kindly drop dead for me.

...

...*That's it!*

The scent of the bear was still strong by the time I arrived back in the field.

Yup, it's the same mysteriously deceased bear we passed by earlier today. Here I was, wishing dinner could magically fall into my lap without having to put any effort into it. I nearly forgot some already did!

That doe might have smelled like some delicious baked goods, but the only thing that's wafting through the air here is the stench of death. As soon as I entered the field I felt on alert – perhaps a warning from my instincts that whatever caused this deathly smell could still be in the area. But as was the case in the hollow, my senses reaffirm that I'm still alone.

I approach the bear, stirring a murder of crows from its side into flight. Okay, *almost* alone. I guess it's not surprising my senses don't consider small birds a threat.

But it makes me wonder... why weren't the crows here when we passed by the bear earlier? The way I understand it after a feral dies in the wild its body quickly decomposes. The scent of the decomposition attracts scavengers who further accelerate the biological cleanup by consuming carrion. Shouldn't we have seen them?

Well, It certainly succeeded in attracting *me* to the scene. Though I wouldn't say the bear smells very appetizing. Perhaps Lithans are one of those ferals that won't scavenge for food unless they're desperate.

...Yes, I'm desperate!! I have no idea how to hunt! Throw me a bone, here! (Preferably, a bone with some meat still attached to it.)

Skreeech!!

My shadow overtakes a turkey vulture with a piece of ligament dangling from its beak. It spreads its scrappy black wings and takes off from the side of the bear, making a hasty retreat from the field. Guess it didn't expect to see something as big as a Lithan show up today. I don't blame you, dude. I'd probably freak out if I saw myself right now, too.

The birds have already picked through the bear; beak-sized clumps of fur are missing from its checkered gray hindquarters, revealing a patchwork of red innards. Through the largest hole, I can see torn muscles and exposed bone.

My feathers ruffle, turning cold. Am I really going to *eat* this, the bloody remains of a bear? I won't get sick, will I?

I... guess I'll just have to trust that my body can digest it safely! After all, why wouldn't it, right? Eating meat is what a predator species like me does! And by all accounts, I seem to be a perfectly normal, healthy functioning predator! Yup!!

...

There's... one other reason that makes me think I'll be safe eating the bear. And, Um...

...

Listen.

I need to get something off my conscience.

I can't keep lying to myself like this. To keep ignoring it, pushing it aside, and pretending this new part of me doesn't exist.

I keep trying to remind myself that it's normal for me to think certain things and to feel certain *urges* now that I've become a predator species. But I've kept my sensibilities as a Lemur — a Princess with a pampered lifestyle in a civilized society. My passion for botany, and a sense of duty to the Kingdom. A life that has been dedicated to the cultivation and the preservation of life.

So, when I look at myself through that lens, I'm downright disturbed by the things I now feel. By what I've become.

I don't want to explore this side of me, I'm not yet comfortable accepting it. But when I consider the paths before me, even in the most optimistic scenario I'll be stuck as a Lathan for days. I *have to* eat something. I simply have no other choice but to reconcile with this aspect of me.

So as difficult as it is, I must admit this to myself:

I *love* the taste of flesh.

They were all delicious, but it's Starla's in particular that I favor. I haven't been able to stop thinking about *her* since I left the hollow — the fear scent she gave off as I bore down on her. The feeling of fangs sinking past fur into flesh. The spray of warm blood rushing into my mouth. When I think of how she tasted my heart flares, and my soul sings.

What a fantastic feeling.

But I've been trying to distract myself from her death, to pretend it didn't happen. As much as I loathed Starla for what she did, she deserved a fair judgment for her crimes, not death. I was horrified at what I'd done to her and horrified that I could derive such visceral pleasure from taking the life of a person in such an unconscionable way.

I knew all along I was chasing the doe because I was hungry. But I lied to myself because I thought I was a murderer. I thought I was the same as— no, *worse* than the animals that attacked us and took Calypso's life. And that by acting on my urges for flesh and blood, I was only reinforcing just how depraved I had become.

But seeing the bear here, presented for me as if I had just hunted it myself, fills me with the same sense of excitement I felt hunting the doe. The same insatiable urge for flesh as I smelled its fear scent. The same satisfaction I felt killing Starla.

The unlucky bear has elucidated the truth for me — I wasn't the sheltered Lemur Princess with a head of cheery convictions when I killed Starla. I wasn't even acting in self-defense.

I was feral. I was a Dragon.

I don't want to be afraid of myself any longer.

I turn my head to the ground and open my maw wide, biting into the side of the bear facing me. Fangs sink through flesh, blood spills out, and I get my first taste of Bear.

...

And I've gotta say, after having a few bites: It's delicious!

On their own, the flavors are not very complex. Dad likes to keep a stock of feral jerky back home, and the taste of a single organ or a slab of muscle is similar — pronounced, but simple.

But getting a big mouthful of guts is a different story. The simple flavors mix with the blood and fat of the bear to create an explosion of raw flavors that's irresistible to my Lathan tongue. As soon as I got a bite of everything together, my fears of being unable to digest raw meat evaporated. How could something so appetizing possibly make me sick? Nature isn't that cruel.

It doesn't take me long to finish off the meat of the bear. I quite liked that! I'd eat a gray bear again. In fact, I could go for another one right now, because I don't feel full from eating just one of them. This bear was a freebie, but I'd happily hunt one down, or any of the animals out here to be able to sample their flesh as well.

...Gosh.

Here I was only a few minutes ago, getting myself all tied up over the morality of simply wanting to enjoy food. All it took was one bear, and now I think of the Weald as not so much a nature reserve, but my own personal buffet.

But it's not like I have a choice, okay? I have to do whatever it takes to survive in this form long enough to see myself turned back to normal. If that involves taking out some of the local wildlife population, then so be it.

If it's going to be me or them, it has to be me.

I should feel that way about the animals that tried to kill me, too.

19. The Friends You Keep

I could smell the stench of death long before I arrived back at the hollow.

I wouldn't have had to rely on scent alone to find my way back, though. As I approach the area, vultures circle the sky above the grove. It won't be long before they get to work on the animals that lay there.

A terrible thought crosses my mind. No, I won't even recount it to myself. What an undignified end to someone as gallant as Calypso! He, Bodie, and Laurent all deserve to be mourned in Varecia as heroes!

Fetid creatures! Don't you have any sanctity for the honorable dead?

"Get away from them!" I shout, attempting to break off their slow descent. But they simply continue spiraling down as if I hadn't said a thing.

Damn birds! If I knew how to fly, I'd go up there and scare them away myself. If only I could shout at them louder, why I'd...

...

I clinch the back of my throat and let out a piercing screech so loud I feel the ground shake beneath my talons. The vultures veer off as if blown apart by the force of my cry, shrieking and flapping their wings hard to escape. The sound travels across the prairie, ejecting a flock of birds in a grove at the far side and sending them into a tizzy. My voice bounces off the trees and returns to me on the cries of terrified starlings.

...Wow?!

I can be *that* loud, and cause *that much* terror in the hearts of ferals?

I stick my neck out, watching still more flocks of birds take flight from thickets of grass beyond my view. A sensation builds in my chest. It rises, dissipates, and spreads to all corners of myself. It makes me feel...

Powerful.

With just my voice alone, I've caused the moon itself to tremble. I gaze down at my talons and clench them back and forth, mesmerized by their constricting and expanding movement. I'm as tall as a building, able to rip apart ferals with my jaws, and possess machetes for fingers. Just what sort of terror could I cause in the hearts of Lemurs, Martens, and Rabbits? To those who are enemies of the Kingdom?

The animals that killed Calypso sure paid the price. They may have deserved fair judgment, but I won't be shedding any tears over what I did to them. Whoever they worked for, whoever sent them here, that is who I will use this body against.

The scene in the hollow was exactly as I left it: Six bodies, mercifully undisturbed. Thank the Goddess nothing happened to them.

And I mean that for more than just the animals who were on my side of the fight.

It pains me to see this morbid scene again, but I told myself I'd return when I was prepared to see Calypso. The retribution from mom for an attempt on my life is going to be hard and fast. To say nothing of the response to what's happened to me. I won't have another chance to be alone with him, and I owe a personal debt.

I feel like a completely different beast than the one who walked away from here earlier scared and confused. I'll admit, I'm still confused about what's happened to me. Turning into a Lathan against my will and having an insatiable bloodlust... none of it makes any sense. But I'm no longer scared of what I've turned into. In fact, I'm feeling a little bit grateful.

If this supernatural event hadn't occurred to me, I'd surely have joined the rest of my group in a pool of blood on the floor of the hollow. I would have died here, leaving the throne to Sofl, monumentally unprepared for such a burden. It's hardly an ideal situation, but I'm alive and I can still talk. That's what's important.

The brambles that prevented my escape during the fight are no match for me now as I bound them in a single stride. The hollow is small and crowded though, and I must be careful with the placement of my talons to not trample anyone. I keep my wings folded tight against my sides so they don't disturb anyone.

It's not like Orie, Starla or the Owl deserve respect in death — if anything, the exact opposite. And that is what I intend to give them.

I don't know anything about how to handle a crime scene, but I'm certain desecrating the body of a suspect is the opposite of what you're supposed to do. In this instance though, I feel it's appropriate.

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Starla's neck tasted so good earlier. I need to find out what the rest of her tastes like.

It's not like they *need* her body to find out who she is, right? Well, most of it. I'm sure they'll need her face to help determine her identity and where she came from. But I can leave that on her. Her organs are superfluous — quite frankly, I believe they're owed to me. You helped murder my bodyguard, you bastard.

She's lying on her stomach near the slope we descended, caught by me in a futile attempt to escape. I can see the scar I left on her neck, where my growing fangs punctured the artery to her head. It won't be the last mark I leave on her.

Using my muzzle, I turn Starla over and onto her back. Chesnut hair partially obstructs her pale face, frozen in time at the moment I took her life. Then, using my fangs, I rip apart the cloak and armor that surrounds her — setting it aside for those who will try to determine her identity in the future — and reveal her fuzzy brown abdomen.

I will have to justify my actions, what I'm about to do... but it's fine. I'm prepared to accept whatever comes my way for the chance to sample her again. Anyone who admonishes me will never have the chance to taste something as delicious as raw meat. How could they possibly know what they're missing?

Enough stalling. My maw is practically drooling onto her, I can hold it back no longer. I deserve this for all the crap I've gone through today!

I bite into Starla's stomach with the tips of my front fangs, tearing her apart like a can opener. Then, using small and delicate bites, I sample her flesh once more.

...

She's Wonderful. Just, wonderful.

I think (and I don't think this lightly,) that was the best thing I've ever eaten. The Goddess herself couldn't have served up a tastier little snack. It's a good thing I'm at the point of diminishing returns for a creature as big as me because I'd down the rest of her in a heartbeat if I could.

As content as I am with how she tasted, she wasn't anything more than a morsel, a single bite from the best dish that's ever been served. I suppose I could stay here and take a quick bite out of Orie and the Owl too, *buuuuuut...*

My plan for handling this whole sordid mess was to take the initiative and fly back to the airship, letting Duncan and everyone else know my side of the story before they see just how bad things got out here.

Will he trust a talking Lithan telling him that his partner is dead and the royal he was ordered to protect was turned into an enormous, winged monster against her will? I have no idea. I'm anxious about how this part of the plan is going to go, but I have to trust that I'll be successful in convincing him. What other choices do I have?

My plan, of course, hinges on my ability to fly to the airship. And right now, I don't know the first thing about flying.

Sure, I've overheard avians talking amongst themselves about flight conditions before. Updrafts, downdrafts, that sort of stuff. But it's not like I've ever gone up to one and asked, "*Hey, just curious, but how do you birds fly around anyhow?*" Besides being creepy, just what use would a Ruffed Lemur have with knowledge like that?

So, I'm going to have to have to give myself a quick crash course on how to fly. A literal crash course, I'm sure.

The instincts I gained when I took this form helped me defend myself when my life was in danger, perhaps I can rely on them to get me up in the air? I sure hope so. I don't know what I'm going to do if this part of the plan falls through.

But before I get started on any of that... there's someone I need to talk to.

I cross the hollow and stare down over Calypso's unmoving body. Until this point, I've tried to avert my gaze and not be reminded of the tragedy of his death, but I won't allow myself to ignore him any longer. He's remained in the same position since he took his last breaths, lying on his back with his eyes closed in a gentle state. He knew in his final moments he had fulfilled his duty and protected me — it's because of him I was allowed another chance at life.

I've lost two people close to me, and only one of them I was old enough to remember. Grief is not something I have a lot of experience dealing with. Even now, seeing Calypso extinguished of life, I don't think the full weight of his passing has truly hit me. If he's out there somewhere watching this scene, then I hope what I have to say will be enough.

"Hey Bristlebody," my voice cracks. "It's me. Asha."

I pause as if waiting for a response that will never come and sigh placidly. How can I eulogize him in a way that does him justice? What could I possibly say that lives up to the sacrifice he made?

...

I anchor my talons to the ground and begin again.

“Listen. I’m not as good as my mother yet when it comes to these things. But there’s no possible way I can adequately thank you for what you did today. You are a true, honest-to-goddess hero of the Kingdom, and the taking of your life has afforded me another chance at my own. As your Princess, I promise that your sacrifice will not be in vain.”

I pause again, letting my wings relax against the ground. Calling him a hero was the easy part. I take a deep breath.

“This isn’t easy for me to admit, especially after what happened earlier today. But I deeply regret I couldn’t say how much you meant to me... as a friend,” The words escape my mouth, and a weight is lifted. “You *are* my friend, Calypso. Perhaps the only friend I really... had.”

Tears begin flowing as the realization my only friend passed away rises and spreads over my consciousness like a dismal fog. He *died for me*, and in life, I couldn’t even find the strength to admit I reciprocated his feelings of friendship. How truly pathetic am I, compared to a hero like him?

Just once, I wish I could see his dumb face smile again.

“I was too closed off. Too suspicious of everyone around me. But you were the only person outside my family I felt comfortable being around. The only animal I could relax with and take comfort in knowing you wouldn’t try to use me for some ulterior motive or manipulate me into holding a belief that would benefit you when I become Queen. I don’t know what I did to deserve a friend as loyal as you, Calypso. And I don’t know what I’m going to do now that you’re—“

...

Something's approaching the hollow.

I raise my head and draw a breath. At least 4 distinct scents moving towards me on the wind from the direction of the grove, flirting with the artificial smells of tanned leather and forged steel. Two Lemurs, a Pine Marten, and...

Oh, no.

'Please return before the sun starts setting,' he said. 'I don't want to come looking for you in the dark.'

It's Duncan.

...I completely forgot!

20. Fleeing the Scene

The shadows of the grove extend past the hollow, long and slender needles straining to puncture the horizon. The sun is low, and the sky is turning to dusk. Calypso promised Duncan we'd be back by five — I don't need a pocket watch to tell me it's well past that.

We never checked in at the airship. Duncan is coming to find us, and he's bringing the guard with him. And when they get here, they'll... No no no, he can't see me like this!! What is he going to think when he sees all this blood, all the bodies, and, and...?

I run the top of my claws against the feathers of my muzzle. They turn red from Starla's blood, still staining the sides.

A hollow full of bodies, one partially consumed, and a Dragon covered in blood. What conclusion would you come to?

I have to get away. I need to escape from the weald as fast as possible and figure out a new plan somewhere else. I have to learn how to fly and learn it *right now!*

But... *Calypso*. I silence all the senses screaming at me to flee and force myself to look down onto his restful body for the last time. As gently as my new form will allow it, I lower my neck and rub my muzzle into his flank to take in his scent. I close my eyes and imprint it onto my soul; this will be the last time I know it.

“Thank you... friend.”

I lope over the bramble patch and scramble into the field beside the hollow. My wings open, allowing me to better sample the breeze blowing across the prairie. The lingering daylight has caused the wind to die down considerably, it blows so little now as to hardly ruffle my feathers. Is this going to be enough wind to take off?

I turn back in the direction I came from. Any second now, Duncan and the guard are going to walk out of the tree line at the top of the hollow. I still have time to figure this out, but precious little of it.

Taking deep breaths to slow my racing heart, I attempt to conjure the scant memories I have of Avians taking off at the palace. They rarely visit us, as there are only enough Avian knights in the whole of Ellyntide for a single order. What was it they did that allowed them to defy gravity and soar through the skies?

A memory comes into view. The other day, mom summoned a Secretary Bird to the palace to help with the Melicola border dispute. I was in the garden on my volunteer shift as she was leaving and watched her take off. She bent her skinny yellow legs, lowering her entire body to the ground with her wings stretched outwards. Then with a spring of her legs, she thrust skyward, raising her wings high and flapping them down hard. Before I knew it, she was in the air and flying away from the palace.

Her technique seemed simple enough: jump in the air, flap wings, fly away. I have the body and the wings to do it, so it should be easy for me too, right?

I lower myself close to the ground, low enough that my chest feathers are scraping the tips of the grass. With my wings extended outwards as far as they'll go, I just need to wait for the right moment when the breeze picks up. I'll mimic what the Secretary did and hope for the best.

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I wait in silence as the wind blows gently against me. The only noise is the sound of my heart thumping against my chest.

Not yet...

...

Now!

I leap, pointing my wings straight to the sky before flapping them down hard. But instead of achieving lift, gravity wins. I return to the moon with a loud thud.

THOOM!

The prairie rumbles, scaring a flock of birds that had roosted after my earlier outburst. Misjudging just how far I leapt, I have to scramble my legs to keep myself upright.

Oh, man. I'm not sure if Duncan was close enough to hear me talking to Calypso earlier, but he *definitely* heard me crashing. If he wasn't already hustling with the guard to make sure me and Calypso were safe, he is now.

I've got to keep trying until I get it right! Even if Duncan sees me now, I still have to escape! I crouch and close my eyes, focusing all my attention on judging the wind. I have to time it perfectly when the wind is at its strongest, otherwise, I won't achieve lift, and I won't take off.

I wait again... and jump!

...And crash a second time. The ground reverberates once more.

This is bad. This is *really* bad. What if there isn't enough wind right for a creature as big as me to take off? How am I supposed to escape?

I could take off running, but the grove is at the top of a ridge. No matter which direction I turn, they'll see me before I can get to a safe distance. If I had more time I might be able to do it, but they're far too close now.

Could I be in the wrong place to take off? I scan my immediate surroundings to see if there's any rise in elevation that could give me an advantage at catching the wind, but the ground here is smooth and low. The only perceptible difference on the prairie is the boundary where the shadows cast the trees end, giving way to the light of the setting sun.

...Wait a second.

Light and shadow. Warm and cold.

I follow the path created for me by warm updrafts.

The reading of scripture from this morning's communion resurfaces in my head. The bishop was telling the story of ascendance, the one where the Avian was hesitant about the God of Creation's gift.

'The path created for me by warm updrafts'... Could that be some sort of clue to how birds fly? The heat from the sun? Now that I think about it, didn't I just notice that the wind had died down from earlier this afternoon when the sun was still high?

I run to where the shadows end a few yards downwind, feeling my feathers warm under the light of the lowering sun. A breeze picks up, stronger than before, carrying with it the fresh scents of rabbit and maple. Duncan is traveling through the grove at this very moment, and soon he will emerge on the other side where the hollow is. I won't have another chance at taking off before he gets here. I have to make this attempt count!

My body lowers until it's almost touching the ground, and my wingtips extend as far as my muscles will allow. Another breeze blows, stronger than anything I felt in shadow, but I hold my stance, trying to be patient for the right moment. I've got to make this attempt count and give it everything I've got.

I wait... and a gust from behind ruffles my feathers.

Now!!

I thrust skyward, straining with all my might to get off the ground. When my wings bottom out, I heave the back half of my body upwards, pushing my forelegs back behind me until they're touching the bottom of my tail.

My body floats.

I raise my wings and repeat the locomotion. Instead of floating, I feel lift. I flap them again, slowly rising higher and higher still with each gargantuan beat. An updraft from below ruffles my underside, pushing me upwards and making my ascent easier. I peer down and watch as the ground below grows farther and farther away.

I'm doing it!! I can't believe it!! *I'm flying!!!*

Despite my boost from below, I flap my wings harder, trying to gain altitude and speed to make as hasty an exit as possible. Was I able to escape in time?

I crane my neck in the direction of the trees. At the ridge that overlooks the hollow was a group of animals staring back at me, four of them clad in the armor the palace guard wears, and the fifth in a plain black waistcoat. Despite the growing distance between us, I could make out terror in their expressions.

“I’m sorry!”