

THE PRINCESS'S FEATHERS

21. Untimely Demise

I flew in the direction of the mountains.

Scared and confused, it was the first thing that came to mind when considering where to go. The Caledon Mountains are remote and full of tracks of old-growth mountain redwood forests. There would be plenty of spots to hide from airships and plan my next move.

I must have flown for an hour, chasing the lowering sun on the western horizon, watching the landscape below me transition from tallgrass prairie to montane forest. I was concerned I would get tired from flying such a long distance, but it turned out the task wasn't at all exerting. Cruising over the weald I would occasionally fly into pockets of warm air rising from the ground, giving me the perfect opportunity to regain some altitude without a lot of effort from my wings. With enough of this warm uplift, I think I could fly for hours at a time.

I didn't allow myself to fly very high. At least, I don't think I was that high. The airspace between the capital city Varecia and the edge city Rhl is always busy with commercial airship traffic, and I didn't want to draw their attention. Airships communicate with each other over short band radio, and any sightings of me and where I was headed would spread between pilots fast. Worse yet, with Duncan and the guard now aware that there was a Lithan lurking about in Ellyntide, it'll only be a matter of time before the Crown issues an emergency alert warning of my existence.

Dragons in Ellyntide are unheard of, one hasn't been spotted in the Kingdom in centuries. Occasionally Lithans are seen on the northern islands of Sarlain — the ones closest to the Northern Continent — but never, ever down by us. When word gets out that there's a

Lithan this far south in Ellyntide, the response on news radio is going to be *insane*. To say nothing of what they must think I'm guilty of doing back in the hollow.

I'll be at the top of Ellyntide's most wanted list, tonight. Me, ol' me. Princess Asha.

But for now, the sun has set and I'm circling over a mountaintop in the dark, trying to find a good spot to land. If taking off was the first challenge in learning how to fly, a safe landing will be the second.

Fortunately, there's a breeze blowing up the side of the mountain from the east, giving me plenty of lift to fly around in circles and scope out potential targets. The ecosystem here lends itself to dense conifer and mountain redwood forests, I had hoped I could fly to a mountaintop above the tree line and have a picturesque alpine meadow to land in. I've always wanted to visit one of them.

But it seems I've picked the wrong mountain. The only thing below me is dense forest and jagged, rocky peaks. Not the best environment to attempt my first-ever landing in.

With only a sliver of sunset left to guide me, I navigate to another mountain across the valley. Like it was as a Lemur, my vision in the dark doesn't seem to be that great. *Maki* won't rise for another few hours, so regardless of the terrain I need to find a spot to land here, and within the next few minutes.

Fortunately, I'm in luck. Through the darkness, I can make out the tree line where the forests end and give way to alpine tundra. Few trees grow in that environment, just stubby grasses and shrubs. If it wasn't for the occasional *giant boulder field*, I would have no trouble landing in the dark. That's why I need to land right now!

I allow myself to glide down to the mountain, flapping my wings every so often to keep myself from going into freefall. The features on the ground become clearer, and clearer still, until... oh, hey! Is that a member of the *Primula* family growing down there? Why, there's a whole patch of them! Incredible! I've never seen— h-hey!! Don't get distracted, Asha!

Fwagh, I'm going way too fast! Adjust course!! Full reverse!!

I flap my wings hard, attempting to slow my precipitous descent. My speed decreases but it's too little, too late. Gravity wins a third time.

THOOM!!

“Ack!!”

I don't so much as slide into the ground as I crater into it. A rain of dirt and debris is ejected and showers over the area.

Owww...

It takes a few moments to gather myself and clamber to my talons, wincing in pain from the shoulder that took the force of the impact. It hurts like hell, but I don't think anything's broken. I turn and check on my wings, moving them through motions to make sure everything still works. My feathers are a bit dirty, but I seem to have survived with just some bruises. That's a relief.

Mental Note: Pay attention while landing, Asha!!

Sheesh. That was a rough landing, but my Litan body seems to have handled it well. I figured I'd be more fragile with a body covered in feathers like most avians are, but it doesn't seem to be the case for me.

I ruffle the dirt from my feathers and survey my surroundings. It's completely dark now, with the only light available shining down on me from the 19 prophets. With their guidance I can make out I'm standing in a field, but little else is nearby. Off in the distance prophetlight shimmers dimly off the tops of trees marking the transition between dense forest and the rocky plain I'm currently standing on. The air is chilled, but I don't feel cold.

Well, then. What should I do now?

My plan to get a hold of the situation in the hollow was a complete failure. Not only did I forget about the five o'clock deadline to return to the ship, I panicked when I sensed Duncan approaching and fled the scene in the most incriminating way possible.

I feel so dumb. Why didn't I just stay there and try to talk to him? That would have been the logical thing to do. Maybe I would have failed to get through and convince him of what happened, but at least I could have tried. When I think back to it though, all my instincts were screaming at me to get away from the hollow as fast as possible. It was like my life depended on it — I can't explain why I felt that way, but I did.

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Siiiigh.

I think... I need to lay down somewhere.

The events of today have been overwhelming. When I woke up this morning it was just another average Sunday of being Princess Asha at the Lordanou palace in Varecia. Then a bunch of insane things happened, and now I'm a Dragon standing on a cold mountaintop in the middle of nowhere.

A surge of pain runs up my shoulder, wavering me on my talons. Taking a break sounds pretty good right about now. I saunter across the field in the direction of the tree line, keeping my wings as stiff as possible. My muscles are burning — it will be a while before I can fly again, so I have some time to try and process everything that's happened today.

The scent of redwood blows past as I approach the trees, comforting me with the assurance there will be enough space to fit myself underneath. I pick the tallest group of the bunch and slide underneath the canopy, folding my wings to create as much space as

possible. Using my talons, I build a makeshift nest by flattening down the understory into something softer and more inviting.

A *nest*, huh... I suppose that will have to pass as a bed tonight.

I lay down and gaze into the blackest of nights, still and empty. I stare into it, attempting to take in and process everything that's happened to me today. The argument with mom at breakfast. Her fall in the chapel. The Elder Tree sprout. The incident at the train station. The fight in the hollow. My transformation into a Lithan. A lifetime of unprecedented events occurred to me in a single, unfathomable day.

Time passes. An hour, two hours, I can't be certain.

The stillness of the night was broken by the sound of a commercial airship passing by to the south, flying west in the direction of Varecia. Then a warship heading in the same direction. A few minutes later, another. Then another still, this time with its searchlights shooting blinding columns of light at the ground, sweeping in erratic motions across the valley below.

The meaning of the searchlights and the sudden passage of warships is dreadfully clear: News of what happened in the hollow has reached mom. She's frantically searching for the Lithan. For *me*.

She believes her daughter is dead.

When you think about it, there's only one conclusion you could come to about what happened to me: I was consumed by the Lithan.

The clothes I was wearing were destroyed by my transformation. They shredded to pieces as I grew, leaving tattered remains on the floor of the hollow. Combine that with the disfigured state I left Starla in, and the evidence points to my untimely demise at the talons of... myself.

What could be going through mom's head right now? Through everyone's head? Just how much collective suffering is being felt all because of me? I don't even want to consider how much grief Sofl must be in right now. So, I won't allow myself to. Not yet.

Out of everyone though, the person I feel the most pain for is Duncan. Not only does he have to deal with the inconsolable grief of losing his partner, but the misery of failing to protect me. He oversaw the trip, giving mom a personal promise that he'd protect me. Everything that's happened today is going to fall on his shoulders. He might even lose his position as head of staff.

Oh, Duncan... he deserves none of this. Who could have predicted there was a rogue foreign presence operating in the middle of the Eastern Weald? Or that when my life was in danger, I'd turn into a giant monster with an insatiable thirst for blood?

They need to know I'm still alive, damn it! I *have* to do something!

But what?

If I try to fly back to the palace in Varecia I'll be fired upon by every airship in the fleet. Even if I somehow avoided a direct confrontation, I know all the contingency plans for the defense of the palace. I'd land there and be met by an armed battalion of knights and steam gunners, all prepared to attack me on sight. Could I really talk them down from fighting me before they fired the first shot?

Outside the palace there's nobody I'm close to I could ask for help. And even if there was, the sight of a Dragon in public would cause panic to erupt. How would I even contact somebody in Varecia with a body this big? Knock on their front door with my claws and kindly ask for help?

Hello, it

's me, big murderous Dragon! I'm actually Princess Asha, could you please come out and help me clear my name for the murder of myself?

The lonesome drone of another pair of steam propellers echoes off the side of the mountain, causing my feathers to ruffle. Compared to the noise of the ships that passed by earlier, it seems this one is coming from the direction of Varecia, on its way for a landing in Rhl. I slink further into the cover of the redwoods, folding my wings tight to ensure as much of me is as obscured as possible.

When it seems the droning is directly overhead a glistening column of light shines down, illuminating the peak of the mountain and making it as visible to me as if it were in broad daylight. The light dances, scanning over the uncovered areas that aren't dotted with trees.

Despite its capricious nature, I gasp all the same as the column passes over my blanket of redwoods, trying to stay as still as possible. It moves on, then shuts off entirely as the ship glides over the peak of the mountain. I release my breath.

Feeling safer, I poke my neck out from under the trees to get a better view of the departing ship. It looks... familiar...

Wait!

Those distinct lines that resemble a flower, the color of side panels... it couldn't be, could it? The ship we flew out to the weald on, The Blue Daemon? I abandon my temporary home and dart up to the summit of the mountain before the ship can disappear entirely from sight. When I arrive there, I'm greeted by a terrific sight.

It is the Blue Daemon, on its way to Rhl, outlined against the rising *Planet Maki*. It bathes me and the leeward side of the mountain in its reassuring green glow.

Oh, man. If they're headed to Rhl, then that means they ran out of space at the airfield in Varecia. They must have packed it full of warships after word got out about me. If they're *that* worried, then the palace is probably on a full lockdown. Nobody's getting in, or out.

This is great news for me, though. If Duncan is still on the Blue Daemon, then he's the best chance I have of getting through to someone so we can begin to sort out this mess. If I can land there around the same time as the Blue Daemon and somehow convince the knights I'm not a threat, then Duncan can vouch I'm really Princess Asha.

Okay! *Hypothetical but not actually hypothetical situation*: As the Princess, I'm well versed in the correct sequence of words that gets soldiers, knights, and many other animals to obey my orders. If a talking Dragon lands in an Ellyntidian military base and starts issuing orders to everyone using the correct verbiage, will they follow them?

Self-consciousness gets the best of me. "Does my voice still sound weird?"

Yes. Yes, it does.

Well, it's not like many animals were familiar with my Lemur voice to begin with. I hope it's normal-sounding enough that they still recognize my authority.

Alright, we have a plan again! I'll follow the Blue Daemon, staying well enough behind it so they won't notice me. Then when it gets to Rhl I'll land alongside and start giving orders to anyone gathered there. With any luck, I'll be able to order Duncan out of the ship and we can begin figuring out what the hell happened to me.

I can't fail this time. No matter what, I have to get through to them and convince Duncan I'm Princess Asha. It's not an exaggeration to say the future of the Kingdom hinges on my success.

I unfurl my wings and gauge the wind — It's rushing over the peak with stronger gusts every few seconds. I crouch, wait for one of the stronger winds, and leap when it arrives. I flap my wings and achieve lift almost effortlessly.

Well! That was *easy*! Could all my takeoffs be like that, please?

I climb in altitude and regain the distance lost between me and the Blue Daemon, keeping far enough back so they shouldn't be able to see Maki's light reflecting off me. Based on the distance I think I've flown so far tonight, we'll reach Rhl in about an hour.

Duncan... I sure hope you'll listen to what I have to say.

22. The Real Me

Unlit darkness gave way to the light of civilization as we reached the outskirts of the edge city, Rhl.

A paltry twelve miles separate the rapidly rising base of the Caledon mountains and the edge of the continent. It's impressive that a city as big and cramped as Rhl can even have an airbase. But being on a nearly perpendicular line to Varecia, Rhl also serves as a line of defense for the capital against airship attacks from Sarlain. During the war twenty years ago, airships made it as far as Rhl before they were repelled back. Even now in peacetime, this is still a well-defended city.

On the flight here I had dropped back a few times when the Daemon powered on its searchlights, scanning the ground below in a futile attempt to locate me. I'm unsure why they're looking for me in the first place; the Blue Daemon is a luxury passenger ship used by the royal family, not some heavily armed warship that gets sent into battle.

Battle, you say? Oh, yes. Dragons have been known to attack airships — ones that approach their home on the Northern Continent are accosted by at least one angry Dragon. The infamous McKerras expedition to explore the Northern Continent by a flotilla of fast airships failed when the lead vessel was torn apart by a group of Lithans. There are warships out tonight because mom expects me to be angry, too.

So, why would you send a passenger vessel with limited defensive capabilities to look for a Dragon? Maximilian must be desperate to find me. Or mom's desperate, and he's just following orders.

Despite falling back, it wasn't hard to keep track of the ship. For one thing, airships are notoriously slow in flight and even slower to maneuver. A course correction would have taken much longer than any of their vain scans to locate me. But even if the ships were faster and Maki wasn't rising, I could still easily track it by the exhaust plume of the steam rotors.

It's funny, I never used to mind the smell of steam engines quietly plunking along in operation. Honestly, there's something admirable about a well-maintained steam generator and the smells it gives off. But ever since I took this form my sense of smell has been acutely enhanced, and certain things smell completely different. An airship in operation seems to be one of them.

And boy howdy, let me tell you: *It's revolting!*

Acrid and sulfurous, trailing close behind the Blue Daemon isn't possible; they'd be able to locate me by the sound of my hacking coughs alone. It's not quite, *'vomit in my own*

mouth' bad, but let's just say I understand now why Lithans are so keen to tear apart our airships when we invade their territory.

Mercifully, I won't have to deal with it much longer. A loud clunking from the ship signals the engagement of the vertical rotors, and the tail rotors slow to drop their forward momentum. City lights reflect off the bilge, growing and spreading in oblong shapes as the Daemon begins its descent into the airfield.

Peering down through the darkness I see airships parked for the night and plenty of open masts that could dock more. I suppose the open spaces were occupied by the ships that flew over the mountains to Varecia. That's good news for me, as I should have plenty of space to land alongside the ship.

I keep my distance from the Daemon and wait patiently while it descends, hovering above a darkened greenbelt. It would be easier to fly around in circles, riding the occasional uplift of warm air instead of sitting here and waiting. But there's sure to be airwomen on the ground to help guide the Daemon to its mooring ma—

FWOOM!

Night transitions to day in an instant, turning my whole world brilliant white.

“Agh!!”

I slam my eyes shut and try to move my head back into the night, but it's no use. Everywhere I turn is enveloped in overpowering bright light. I gain altitude and squint, trying to get my eyes to adjust to the sudden change in brightness. Through it, I can make out the light's origin: A hangar at the edge of the airfield. It's one of the searchlights they used during the war to watch for enemy airships. They must have seen me hovering in the dark!

I see light reflecting off the bottom of my wings as they flap, indicating another source from a different direction behind me. Then another from my side. Another from the front. One by one, the network of searchlights in the region activate and train their beams on me.

Ahead of me the Blue Daemon groans as its rear propellers restart to make an emergency course correction and escape the scene as fast as possible. Off in the distance, air raid sirens are spinning up, screeching a warning to the city to take cover.

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This is bad! Like, really bad! Not only have I been found out, but Duncan's ship is fleeing the scene! Worse still, the searchlights and air raid sirens mean they've activated the city's defenses against enemy airships. The only part of the network that hasn't been deployed yet is the anti-airship mortars!

Damn it, I have no other choice! I'm going to have to do this without Duncan!

Throwing caution to the wind, I pull my wings back and fall into a steep dive towards the ground, leaving the searchlights trailing behind me. When the trees below get close I pull up, flying low in the direction of the hangar where the first searchlight was. I know there are animals there manning the light, so that's where I'll make my stand.

I weave through the airfield, flying over the tops of ships to avoid the beams of light wildly searching the skies above to relocate me. The hangar in front of me starts to come into focus – a searchlight nest is perched on top of the building near the enormous hangar doors that allow the airships to enter and exit. Close by on the ground, a group of animals is gathered. They see my approach and scatter, making a run for the safety of the building.

I glide up and flap my wings hard to land, touching the ground clumsily on my front legs first, but planting the back ones to achieve a more dignified landing. A Sifaka Lemur in an airwoman's uniform is tripped up by the gusts from my huge wings and tumbles to the ground. A Yellow-Throat notices their fall and hollers something to them, turning on their heels to help.

Now's my chance!

“STOP!! Please, I order you to stop!! It's me, Princess Asha!!”

The Sifaka cowers and screams, shielding her head like she didn't even hear me. Are the sirens too loud? I dip my head to get closer. “Please, something terrible has happened! This is all a misunderstanding!”

The Yellow-Throat approaches the Sifaka and thrusts her to her feet. *“Frus ot!! Ce jena va j’agh la zon nawpet!”*

Huh?

What was *that*?

Whatever the Yellow-Throat just said, it seems to have made the Sifaka even more distraught. She’s staring at me with discs for eyes, the same morbid terror I saw in Starla’s face before I took her life. The Sifaka turns to the Yellow-Throat and wails, *“Je na mattess, so’v peoyi va ayll cy!!”*

They’re... they’re not speaking the Goddess language, are they? I’ve never heard the language they’re speaking. Why would they be talking in a different language? What is going on?!

“Can’t you understand what I’m saying!?! Don’t you speak the Goddess language?!”

The Sifaka yowls, failing to understand me a third time. The yellow throat drags her by her feet a few paces before she finally breaks free of her psychosis and takes off running towards the entrance of the hangar.

These animals have no idea what I’m saying to them, and I have no idea what they’re saying to each other. How can a language barrier exist between us? In the two countries

where Sifaka Lemurs hail from — Ellyntide and Sarlain, — the Goddess language is the official spoken language. There's no way a Sifaka living in Ellyntide wouldn't understand what I'm saying to them.

And yet, the terror I saw in her eyes... nothing I said made sense to her. The only thing she heard was the braying of a feral monster ready to end her life.

This isn't possible. This *can't* be possible. How can I hear myself speaking the Goddess language, the language of Lemurs, and fail to be understood? How can animals that should be speaking the Goddess language sound like a foreign dialect to me?

Errant searchlight glimmers from a pair of eyes on top of the hangar, stealing my attention. A Ruffy near the searchlight ducks from sight behind a large, olive-colored box. The crew manning the light must have turned it off and taken cover when I landed.

I fold my wings to appear less aggressive and position my head near the ledge of the roof so I can be heard in a quieter, more civilized voice. "Ruffy, can you understand what I'm saying? Please, respond to me if you can. I'm your Princess, I would never harm you."

There's no response, only the twitching of tails protruding from the side of the box.

They can't understand a word I'm saying. I'm no longer speaking the Goddess language.

How can this be possible? How can I hear the words in my voice, feel the reverberations in my chest, construct the words with my mouth, but still have it be interpreted as something completely different?

A caterwaul erupts behind me. I turn to see a group of animals sprinting down the field from the north with their weapons drawn at the ready. Two in the rear trail slightly behind the others, encumbered by large metal apparatuses strapped to their backs with tubes protruding from the sides. There's no mistaking what those are: the steam generators of a portable steam gun.

My stomach drops and it feels like I could topple over sideways. My own citizens, ones I'll someday swear to govern and protect, raising weapons in anger against me. My mission to get them to recognize me as the Princess has utterly failed. *I've failed.* And now, I must retreat from this place.

It's not that I couldn't defend myself against them, of course. Even armed with steam weapons, these animals pose little threat to me. No, the problem is *who* I'm up against. Even as an act of self-defense, a Princess fighting against her own citizens is unconscionable. Enough lives have already been lost today because of me, I will not be a Princess with the blood of her citizens on her hands.

They may not know the monster before them is their Princess, but someday they will. Someday I will find a way to reverse this *curse* that's happened to me. And when that day comes, will I be able to look their families in the eyes and tell them I took the lives of their daughters and sons?

I open my wings and test the wind; a stiff, autumnal breeze from the north buffets the bottom of my feathers. Looks like I'm riding it south out of the city.

I turn to the animals rushing towards me, still shouting incomprehensibly. The language barrier may prevent them from understanding what I'm about to say, but I still feel compelled to a parting message. Holding back tears, I manage to choke out,

“*Goodbye.*”

I thrust into the sky, catching the chilled northern wind, and climb in altitude until I'm gliding through the air at the same height I was before. The searchlights reattach their beams before breaking off, one by one, as I fly further and further south, away from the city lights and screaming sirens, until there's nothing but me and the lonely, unlit unknown.

23. Through The Trees

“...Mr. Almandoz? Sir, come take a look at this.”

My turbulent thoughts are interrupted by the Sifaka officer Roland. They had to call my name twice before I heard their voice — a regrettable lapse in attention on my part. These are young officers I'm assigned to, and we are borderline in a crisis situation. I must be more attentive to them.

Perhaps I'm being too hard on myself. The Princess and her party, gone off on a trip to fetch a rare lichen, didn't return to the airship at the designated time. If that fact alone wasn't unsettling enough, my partner... my *husband*, is among them.

...They watched him kiss me when he departed. A sweet, reassuring kiss on the forehead. I've looked up at him and received that kiss countless times before. Surely, they have to know. They have to understand my apprehension.

"...Yes, of course," I finally reply. Dry leaves crackle under my feet as I move through the underbrush of the small forest, walking past a large oak tree and around a felled maple. Despite the uncharacteristic autumn warmth, the ground is damp and water ponded in spots, giving off earthy and aromatic scents. If I were on the hunt for a lichen, this seems like the place I'd be looking for.

A Ruffed officer turns to the Sifaka, her black tail twitching. "The *Commander* has a rank, you know."

"At ease, officer Bryant," I say, holding my hand up as I pass her on the right. Now isn't the time for snide remarks over rank. "What have you found?"

"It's this," says Roland, crouching on the ground near a log that seems recently disturbed. Down in the mud near their gray and black hands are three distinct impressions of a boot heel. They appear fresh.

"They've been through here," I announce to the group of four officers who've joined me from the Blue Daemon. "We're on the right track. Let's see if we can't locate more and figure out which direction they went from here." The officers acknowledge my order and split up to look through the underbrush once more.

I release a sigh and some of my anxiety is lifted. The Eastern Weald is sprawling and massive — I was terrified of the prospect of just how many potential sites we'd have to

visit to find evidence of the Princess's group. But finding fresh boot prints in the first patch of trees means we're making the right moves.

A lucky guess. If luck is on our side, then we can still get ourselves out of this.

Sunlight filters down through the trees, leaving patchy shadows on my waistcoat. I walk through the shafts of light, seemingly gazing at nothing in particular, keeping myself composed and professional in case the officers are looking to me for leadership. To gauge how worried they should be about this precarious situation.

But inside I'm searching. I'm hoping, I'm pleading to myself that I'll see Calypso and the Princess off in the distance, coming into view around one of the large oak trees. Calypso will smile at me, and I'll smile back. The Princess will wave energetically. Things will be alright.

A noise through the wood grabs my attention. I stop and turn to face the source.

Still no sign of them.

It's been an anxiety-inducing hour. At 4:30 I started to look out the windows of the Blue Daemon for any sign of the Princess's group. At 4:45, I had to put down my work and dedicate myself to the lamentable task, unable to ignore the roiling in my stomach. My husband has many qualities, but 'tardiness' is not one of them. It was unusual for him to not bring the Princess back early. It's unprecedented that I have to go out searching for him.

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When five o'clock came and the Princess still hadn't arrived, I gathered four of the five remaining officers and set out to search for the group. Leaving a single guard to cover the royal family's airship is risky, but I feel the situation warrants it.

Besides... Max is there.

I shouldn't discredit the man. Armed with one of the steam guns stored on the airship, he can handily take the place of one (or two) of the palace guard.

It boggles the mind – my dear friend Max could shoot a thimble off a fence post from a quarter-mile away. But give him something made of steel, and he hesitates, overcome by the anxiety of battling another animal in hand-to-hand combat. Such is the dichotomy of one, Maximilian Scott.

The ship will be safe with him onboard.

It makes me feel bad sometimes, the way things ended between us. But we kept in touch, and this trip was only possible because of him. I smile at the realization Princess Asha, Her Majesty's heir to the throne, now owes my old friend a favor.

“Commander, sir!” Officer Bryant calls through the trees behind me. I shake away the thoughts of things long past and turn to jog to her position.

“Report,” I say, angling my ears to give her my full attention.

“There’s a trail of boot prints here,” she says, pointing her tail off in the distance to her left. “It leads in that direction.”

“Excellent work,” I reply. “Let’s not waste any time,” I call the guards to our position, and we walk as a group, tracing the trail of boot prints through the forest.

Perhaps I should try to keep my spirits up. We’re making good progress on reuniting with the group; things are going quicker than I anticipated. And once we’re all back together at home in the palace tonight, I’ll have some tremendous news to share with the Queen.

A major breakthrough has been made with the Princess!

It’s well understood that the Princess considers those outside her family to be threats. But during our flight today, I was able to get through her internal defenses and convince her I’m not one of them. So successful was my effort that I think Asha may even consider me somewhat of a *friend* now, based on our interactions outside the ship.

Calypso noticed the change as soon as we left the Princess’s private quarters. He was cross that I wouldn’t elaborate on what happened between us, but I will defer to the

Princess on that matter. I suspect she doesn't want the details of our meeting to become public knowledge.

It has weighed heavily on the Queen these past few months, her anxieties about the Princess. While drinking, she often belabors how Asha was '*such an adorable young girl*' before the prior head groundskeeper of the palace '*got to her*'. Despite the seeming importance of this event, she has never elaborated on it further, nor have I asked her to.

For my part, I've stood by and watched idly as the rift between them grew, never believing it was my place to interfere.

But that all changes, as of today.

My intuition was correct. What the Princess doesn't need is more isolation, more separation from the outside world — she needs to experience it! And more importantly, she needs support from someone she *trusts*. If I can foster a friendly rapport with the Princess, and be that person outside her family that she feels comfortable with, then we can begin to move forward from this chapter of her life. To repair those broken bonds between her and her mother.

It is my sincere hope that I can foster that ra— no, that *friendship* between me and the Princess. For in all likelihood, it will be me standing with her as her head of staff the day she removes the serpentine diamond from her hand and ascends the throne. And when that time comes, I want her to see me not just as an adviser, but as her *friend*.

For that future, I will do whatever is necessary.

The trees begin to thin as we move further through the wood. Bryant in the front, watching the ground as she walks. Roland at my side, and the others close behind. As the light grows a scent wafts through my nostrils; the distinct, stagnant smell of a pond. Could they have stopped by the water for a break on their way back? I scan the area ahead, but the view is blocked by brambles and tall grass.

The trees end. A breeze blows from the north and the air is laced with a tinge of cold. It blows over the brambles and through my fur, bringing with it scents of the pond.

Bryant stops at a large thicket and looks back at us. "Commander, the boot prints follow through here. I think there's a pond up ahead."

"Indeed, I smelled it too," I reply. "If you would, please."

Bryant nods, turning to step through a tussock. She moves forward a few paces, and I follow suit behind her.

"What the..."

Bryant freezes in place, her tail shooting up abruptly. She pivots on her right leg backward, then retreats a few steps towards the tussock.

My heart quickens at her unexpected response. “Officer Bryant?”

“Commander. You better take a look at this,” her voice is stern as steel.

I give Roland a sidelong glance and our gazes meet, engaged in the same act of hesitation. Their eyes are cold with fear.

We take off towards Bryant and can hardly believe what we see on the other side of the thicket.

24. The Lurking Fear

They’re... footprints. But not just ordinary footprints.

They’re *immense*.

In front of us to our right, the pond we’d smelled wafting in the breeze. Reeds and other tall grasses surround the shore, and there’s a clearing where one can get right up to the edge of the water. It seems like this would be a popular spot for ferals to relax on a warm day like this one.

But this, these gargantuan footprints near the pond... are not the footprints of any feral I’m familiar with. They cover the whole of the clearing, depressed slightly into the soft

ground. I estimate their size to be so massive that I could stand *directly inside* a single one of them.

What's more, the ground near the pond is littered with innumerable small tree branches and leaves. As I peer around the clearing, I see a great chasm in the row of trees to our left — a void where what would normally be tree growth is instead a gnarled mess of branches and twigs, sticks and leaves, ejected outwards as if a great force moved through it.

Just what on Jade occurred here? What feral could cause *this?!*

"Goddess above..." breathes Roland, no louder than a whisper.

"C-commander..." stutters LaRoche, a Pine Marten who's approached from the rear of the group to get a better look at the scene.

These officers are young and inexperienced, things are going to get out of hand fast unless I take the initiative. I push my worrying thoughts aside and allow my training and experience to dictate me.

"Alright, everyone stay calm," I say, holding my voice steady. "We need to try to assess what's happened here. Bryant, keep your wits about you and survey the vicinity around the pond. If you spot whatever caused all this, I want you back here immediately."

“Yes, sir!” says Bryant, tearing her rapier from its scabbard. I’m not sure a sword would be effective against the feral that passed through here, but her bravery is admirable.

I turn to see the two Marten officers to my left. “LaRoche, Harper, see how far that hole in the tree line goes. I don’t want any surprises coming out of it.”

“R-right!” says LaRoche. She turns to Harper, and they nod in unison.

“Roland,” I say, turning to the Sifaka. “You’re with me. Let’s try to determine if the Princess passed through here before or after this scene happened.”

Roland acknowledges with a nod, trying to keep their face straight. Bryant marches off to survey the pond, while LaRoche and Harper make their way along the edge of the grass, purposefully avoiding the areas with footprints.

This is an unparalleled discovery, whatever we’ve found here. But our priority must be the Princess and her safety. Whether she passed by the pond before or after this feral moved through it will determine what our next steps should be. Once we find her...

...

...*If* we find her.

A terror grows in my heart on the realization of just how dangerous this situation has become. Until now, I've assumed that it would simply be a matter of time before we caught up with the group. Bodie and Laurent are fine officers, and Calypso, well... Calypso is arguably the greatest knight our Kingdom has to offer. I'd assumed there was nothing in the weald that their group couldn't handle. Why wouldn't I?

But now the calculus is changed completely. A creature with prints as big as these, one that could cause incredible destruction to the environment. Could Calypso truly harm a feral that big? Could anyone?

I must now consider the possibility that this... this *monster*, could have encountered the Princess's group. If such an unfathomable encounter occurred, then their safety would no longer be guaranteed.

Anxiety washes over me like heat. The Princess, my *husband*, they're in mortal danger.

"Sir, are you alright?" Roland's candid question takes me by surprise.

I... I must keep control of my own emotions; they're beginning to show through to the officers. Succumbing to panic is not conducive to finding the Princess.

I turn away from Roland. "...I'll be fine. Let's survey those prints,"

“Don’t worry, sir. We understand.”

Again, Roland’s words surprise me. So, the officers *are* aware.

It comforts me somewhat, knowing that. I don’t want to show it, but... stubbornly, I nod in response. Their face draws into a smile, satisfied by my answer.

We tread over grass up to our waists and approach the footprint in the ground closest to us. Its shape is unlike any feral I’m familiar with; the heel of the foot is rounded as I’d expect, but the toes are long and strangely shaped. Where I’d expect claws are only small points in the ground.

I crouch down next to it and stick my right hand inside. The print is depressed in the ground at least 5 inches, maybe more. Whatever passed through here was massive in size.

Still fixated on the ground, I sense Roland joining me by my side. “I’ve never seen anything like this before. I’m not sure what to make of it,” I tell them.

“Commander, you don’t think... this could be...” Roland trails off and their eyes flick away from me.

“A *Dragon?*” I ask, uttering the word they won’t dare speak.

Roland nods sheepishly.

I understand. I don’t want to consider it, either.

“...I don’t know,” I tell them, standing back up. “The evidence before us seems overwhelming, but it’s been centuries since a Dragon was last seen in Ellyntide. Why here, why now?”

Nobody knows why Lithans, one of the two known species of Dragon, stopped visiting the Kingdom centuries ago. They were a menace to livestock and routinely took ferals from the wild. Disturbingly, there are even stories of them preying on farmers and the knights who tried to subjugate them. When they stopped flying here nobody questioned why — they were too busy celebrating.

A Lithan could certainly leave a footprint this large, but nothing else about it makes sense. Why would a Lithan appear in the Eastern Weald today, of all days? How could it even reach this far south without being spotted by an airship?

Ultimately, we aren’t here to ponder these questions.

“Let’s set it aside for now,” I say to Roland. “Why don’t we walk around and see if we can spot any boot prints from the Princess’s group?”

They nod to acknowledge, looking unnerved.

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We walk along the edge of the grass, and I look out over the pond and its mirror reflection. It’s peaceful, here. The Princess must have thought the same thing if their group passed through before the feral did. What conversations were they having, I wonder?

“Huh,” pipes Roland, diverting their attention to the field next to us. “The birds, they’re—
“

Reflexively I pulled my ears down and dropped to the ground. Or perhaps it was the force of the noise hitting me from the side that toppled me over. The only certain thing is I’m now lying in the grass with my eyes shut and a persistent, painful ringing in my ears that cancels out everything else.

I feel hands on my shoulders, touching and pulling at my waistcoat. Someone is surely asking if I’m alright, but through the noise and the pain, I can’t make any sense of it.

“My ears...!” I say, unable to think of anything else to assuage their concern for me. With that, the hands-on my shoulders release their grip.

After a few painful moments, the ringing begins to subside, and normal sounds slowly return to me. I begin to hear the voices of the officers talking amongst themselves.

“—ell, how long does it take?” asks a voice.

“I-I don’t know! I’ve only seen one other rabbit react to sound this bad!” another voice, this time LaRoche’s.

Not wanting to worry them further I force myself to sit up, then feel hands prop my back.

“Easy, Commander,” waxes Roland in a hushed tone. “Please, take it easy,”

“G-give me a moment, please...” I mutter.

Us Rabbits are sensitive to loud noises, of course. We even train ourselves to withstand the sounds that other species are quite capable of tolerating. But no amount of training could have prepared me for what just occurred.

I open my eyes to see Bryant and LaRoche standing in front of me, Roland and Harper to my right. Roland looks worried sick, and even the normally steely Bryant has lost some of her bravado.

“Report...” I ask, still sensitive to noise. “What the hell just happened?!”

“Commander. It’s good to see you’re alright,” answers Bryant, unfolding her arms. “We were hit by some kind of... scream. I don’t know how else to describe it.”

Harper turns his shaken face to Bryant. “It’s a *Dragon*, it has to be! The path it tore through the trees goes clear through to the other side of the forest!”

Bryant looks to Harper and for the first time, I see concern swell in her. Her gaze lowers to the ground. “It’s... difficult to imagine what else it could be, sir.”

I release my ears and hobble to my feet. My head feels like it’s been kicked by a mule, but I’ll survive. With my officer’s dreadful analysis, I no longer have the luxury of worrying about my own well-being.

“We’re leaving,” I announce, unsheathing my rapier. “Right now.”

“Sir?” Bryant asks with a trace of surprise in her voice.

“Lieutenant, lead us in the direction where the scream originated from. I have a strong suspicion the Princess’s group is connected to it.”

Byrant’s eyes narrow, and her expression turns grim. “Understood. Follow me.”

On that, the mood of the group changes instantly. I hear them shift uncomfortably amongst themselves, their anxiousness rising. Nobody wanted this to turn into a rescue mission. Who could have possibly predicted it would involve a Dragon?

We move through the edge of the grass and around the footprints. When we come upon the chasm in the trees I cast a furtive glance, so as not to startle the officers further. Though I only briefly check, it’s just as Harper described; A gaping maw with mangled branches hanging from its sides and a tunnel through the trees, perhaps some 60 yards long, with daylight visible on the opposite end.

Calypso... could he truly survive an encounter with the monster that caused this?

Once we pass the pond we find ourselves at the top of a small incline. Bryant stops and turns to face me.

“It seemed to come from across this field,” she says, using her tail to point off in the distance. “That grove of trees, specifically.”

Instead of acknowledging, I simply start walking, this time quicker than before. A moment later the other officers catch up and Bryant retakes the lead.

We step out into the field as a gust of wind blows through us in the direction of our destination. I feel the sun against my back as we move at a quickened pace, shadows casting long silhouettes in front of us against the golden grass of the prairie. It won't be long before darkness falls.

Whatever we find up ahead, I recognize my priorities must lie in protecting the Princess. She is our future, after all.

But all I can think about is Calypso. All I can think about are those footprints, the hole in the trees, and Calypso encountering the monster that caused it all. I always knew that one day he could be called on to sacrifice himself for Asha... but not like this. Not this way.

When Calypso first vied for the role of housecarl to the Princess, he understood what it entailed.

We were still dating at the time. I can distinctly remember sitting in our bedroom when he came to me with his intention to become the bodyguard of the soon-to-be 18-year-old Princess. Despite already being Knight-Captain in the Legion of Dragons – a title that any self-respecting knight would consider the pinnacle of desirability – he found the idea of being the bodyguard of the future Queen to be the noblest thing imaginable.

My response was... less than enthusiastic. I was deeply concerned for his safety. Being close to the Queen, I knew what that role entailed. I knew the risks it brought.

'It's too dangerous,' I told him. 'Do you really want to die for that girl? She's reckless, insubordinate, and a pest. With her luck, you'll—'

He just bear-hugged me, the way he often did.

'Hey,' he said. 'She's still the Princess. And this is what I want.'

For a few moments, we held each other. He knew how calming his presence was to me.

And so, I too accepted the risks. I made peace with the fact that someday, Calypso might have to make the ultimate sacrifice in service to the girl that nobody, myself included, particularly liked. He believed in Asha when nobody else would... sometimes it still feels like that's true.

It makes me no less apprehensive about our current situation.

Could he really survive an encounter with a Dragon? It can't be like this, a senseless death at the talons of a witless beast. Where's the nobility in that? The honor?

As we approach the trees, worry swells in my chest, and my heart rate quickens. I have to believe that Calypso is still here, protecting the Princess from harm. If I can't have hope, then I'll—

THOOM!

Without warning a noise like thunder bellows through the trees. The ground quivers below us and my officers freeze in place.

LaRoche cries, "Oh my god!"

"What the hell was that?!" shrieks Harper, searching the sky in a daze.

Instead of answering, I take off in a sprint, dropping my sword at my side so I can run faster.

"Duncan!!" Roland yells from behind me.

I don't look back. You told me you understood, now prove it to me.

I don't care if there's a Dragon. I'll die for him if I have to. If Calypso is still alive, I'll force the monster to take me before it takes him.

It can't end like this.

It can't end like this.

Oh God, please don't let my fears be true!!

I stumble through the underbrush, nearly as dark as nighttime, weaving my way around trees and logs as fast as my legs will carry me.

THOOM!

The ground trembles once more, this time throwing me off-balance. My boots catch on a maple root and I stumble shoulder first into a bramble.

“Aggh!!”

Hot pain flashes through me and I wail into the woods. Thorns rake my clothes, and blood flows freely down my flank.

Adrenaline surging, I grab onto a thorny branch and stifle the surging pain, forcing myself to my feet. I can't slow down, not for one second. I need to know if he's safe. I need to see my husband, to smell his sweet scent once more. I can't do this without you, Calypso. I can't fall back into darkness.

Again, I take off running, now with an unsteady gait. Above me the trees begin to thin, and I know I'm close to the other side. My heart is stampeding, and tears are in my eyes. Will Calypso be there? Will he be safe?

I stumble through a thicket, breaking through the trees and into a clearing. Unbidden, my gaze is stolen.

A creature as big as an entire building, covered in dazzling azure and cream feathers, rising aloft from a field in front of me. I immediately recognize its lean body, its serpentine neck, and its enormous wings. No photographs of this feral exist, but its appearance is distinct and immediately recognizable.

It is a Lithan.

It pounds its feathered wings hard, struggling to gain altitude before it seemingly catches a breeze and begins rising above the tree line. As it does its head turns toward mine.

For a fleeting, breathless moment, our eyes lock one another.

EER-KRSAK!

The Lithan cries out to me.

I could swear it sounds lonesome. Remorseful, even.

I stand there and watch with eyes wide as the Lithan, shimmering iridescent in the fading autumn light, more stunning than anything I've ever laid eyes on, soars through the sky. It flies with purpose away from us, seemingly in the direction of the mountains to the east.

I stare agape at this scene until a noise from one of the officers grabs my attention. A terrible, shrill sounding noise. The type of noise that pierces your soul and haunts your memories.

I lower my gaze back toward the moon. Something catches my attention.

Below us, a hollow.

I stare past the brambles that surround the perimeter and fall to my knees.

25. Interloper

Cold raindrops cascade down from above, landing on my head and disturbing me from labored sleep.

Jostled by the drone of steam propellers, I gaze through the redwood canopy to see another airship passing through the dawn sky on its way to Rhl. I can't muster the energy to hide myself any more than I already am. Would it really be so bad if they spotted me? Within a few moments the ship glides by and the cold mountainside goes silent again. I lay my tired, feathered head down in front of me against a bed of redwood needles, despondent and defeated.

I'm still a Lithan. Yesterday wasn't a nightmare.

At some point last night I banked towards the mountains and flew north, discovering the scent trail of the Blue Daemon and retracing it until I rediscovered my mountainside abode. I laid down and sobbed for what seemed like hours, wailing into the night and blaming myself until my eyes could no longer produce tears. Only then did I allow myself to calm down and rest.

But sleep brought little relief. When I lost consciousness, my dreams were disturbing, full of scenes reliving Calypso's final moments, hypothetical scenarios where I scared Sofl senseless, and other unsettling situations I didn't understand. It seemed every few minutes I was jolted awake by another terrible nightmare.

It's early morning, now. Clouds filled the sky in the waning hours of the night and a drizzle fell. It's cold up here — not cold enough to snow, though it won't be long before mountaintops like this one are buried under thick snow drifts for the winter.

I close my eyes and think of family back home.

I just want to tell mom I'm safe.

Deprived of sleep, I attempt to doze off, but rest never comes. My thoughts are too chaotic, too upsetting to allow me to relax. Compounding my misery is the reality of only having slept in warm, soft beds my entire life. No matter what position I shift into, my body ends up cold and wet against the damp ground. Resigning myself to exhaustion, I sit up and ruffle my feathers of the morning rain.

A curious sensation overtakes me, surveying myself in my partially puffed state. Dirt and debris have built up under my feathers from everything that happened yesterday. I seem awfully dirty, don't I? I... I need to *preen* my feathers, yes! That is what creatures with feathers do to clean themselves! I may not have a beak, but I do have some pretty impressive fangs.

I ruffle my feathers out as far as they'll go, turning myself into a big ball of blue and white fluff. I stick my face into my chest and run the tips of my fangs through one of my larger, white flight feathers. The barbs straighten out satisfyingly, cleaned of the dirt that had built up on them. I move on to the next one and cleanse it of dirt, then another. Another still.

The simple act of grooming one's feathers — what an oddly hypnotic and calming chore! Once I clean and straighten a decent amount of chest fluff I find my thoughts wandering again, allowed to relax and contemplate the extraordinary situation I now find myself in.

I've somehow become an enormous dragon that can't talk to anyone, can't hunt, has only just learned how to fly, and has nowhere to go because I'm a wanted fugitive for the murder of myself.

What am I supposed to do, now?

I... would like to move past where I was mentally last night. My head was a very toxic, unwell place. But through my misery, there was one prevailing thought I kept coming back to. The lodestar that kept me from taking actions I might regret:

I can't give up.

Not yet, not ever.

I may have been miserable last night, but the pain I felt was paltry compared to the sorrow being felt in the palace.

I was born during the reign of my grandmother, Beatrix. When I was three years old, she passed away suddenly, thrusting mom into the role of Monarch; the youngest Queen in history. She had no time to grieve, as a massive international crisis spawned because of

Beatrix's passing. Twenty years later on the heels of another international crisis, her daughter, the heir to the throne, has seemingly passed away, too.

Oh, mom... she must be delirious right now. For her, history is repeating itself in the cruelest way possible. We never saw eye-to-eye much, me and her. But she doesn't deserve the pain of thinking her daughter was ripped away from her like her mother was.

I just want to tell her I'm safe.

And then there's Sofl. I... can't even imagine what he's going through right now. Fourteen years old, dreadfully unprepared for the title of the heir apparent, to say nothing of the sorrow he must feel at my passing. If the loss of his cat caused him to grieve for days, then losing the big sister that was his crutch...

No. I don't want to revisit this feeling. This misery. I won't return to the place I was last night. The fact of the matter is: I'm *not* dead! I'm still right here, the same ol' quirky Princess Asha that everyone in the palace knows and sometimes hates! She just, um, looks a little different. A *lot* different.

My mentor taught me that 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.

I could choose to wallow in the sheer insanity of everything that's happened to me. A simple errand to help my brother led to me becoming a Dragon and the entire kingdom believing I'm dead. Or I could choose to do something about it. I could choose to push forward and find out what's happened to me and find a way to reverse it. If there's a way I could become a Dragon, then there *must* be a way to undo it and turn me back into a Lemur.

Right? Right.

I can still find a way out of this mess. *I have to*. As long as I live and breathe, I will work towards finding a way to let them know I'm safe or to turn back to normal entirely. For mom, Sofl, Calypso, the Kingdom... as their Princess, I owe them this much.

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...Wait a second.

Don't Avians have some sort of... *thing* they use to preen their feathers with?

I pull my head away from my wing in confusion. A large flight feather remains stubbornly attached to a fang.

Whenever we visit the Crimson District in Varecia we always pass by the Avian specialty shop, the one that sells perches and personal care items. They're always advertising some

sort of cream, or oil, that avians massage into their feathers. It's a part of their daily preening routine that helps to keep their feathers free and clean of dirt.

But! Avians also have something on their body that naturally secretes oil. Most avians prefer to use artificial stuff, but... I should have something like that now too, right? Something that makes the natural stuff. If that's the case, where is it?

I unhook the feather from my fang and run my head over the rest of my body. Under my stomach, over my flank, across my back. Eventually, I stretch my neck down to the base of my tail and muzzle against something... oily. I puff and push my feathers out of the way and there, sitting on my pale skin is... well, quite frankly, it looks like a nipple.

What a funny word, *oily nipple*. I'm definitely calling it that from now on.

I work some oil from the oily nipple into my muzzle and get to work preening some down feathers in the immediate area. They straighten out smoother than ever, giving off a pleasing shine like a freshly waxed steam carriage. I resume my efforts to groom myself, allowing my thoughts to wander again.

Let's go over it one more time. I'm a Lathan now; a huge Dragon. I can't talk to anyone I used to know, and I can't understand anything they say back to me. I don't know how to hunt, I only just learned how to fly, and I'm a wanted fugitive. Seems hopeless, right?

What are the aspects of this situation I still have control over?

I know how to fly, so I can go wherever I want, whenever I want to go there. I've never had freedom like this before in my entire life, the freedom to just... decide to go somewhere, and then leave. That's very liberating to think about.

Obviously, there are some limits: I can't return to civilization or any of the places animals might live. The mere sight of me causes a hysteric panic, and if anyone from the armed forces sees me, they could attack on sight. I'll have to stay far away from people, sticking to areas of Ellyntide that are remote and unpopulated.

The hunting problem is a much bigger issue, though. I was super fortunate there happened to be a free meal near the scene of my transformation. But even an entire gray bear only partially filled me up. And after all the flying I did last night, I'm feeling pretty peckish this morning. Tracing the scents of carrion isn't going to be enough, I need to learn how to actually stalk ferals and kill them.

The other part of the problem is, even if I teach myself how to hunt, are bears and moose going to be enough to sustain me long-term? I'll need a lot of food to survive, as big as I am. Over a long enough period, I think I could deplete a population of ferals living in an area. That bear we found was down in the weald looking for food to bulk up on before hibernating for the winter. So, in another month or two, I'll lose an important source of food.

Oh, yeah! This is all assuming I won't be chased around by airships trying to murder me every time I leave my nest.

A realization is dawning on me, putting it all together: I need to learn how to hunt. I need a population of food that can support a Lithan. I need to be somewhere I can feel safe.

I need help from others who are like me.

I need to fly to the Northern Continent and find other Lithans.

I pull my head out of my other wing in shock at this realization. *Fly to the Northern Continent?* Could that even work? Putting aside the dangers of flying such a long distance to get there, would other Lithans recognize me as one of their own? Would we even be able to communicate with each other?

It's rumored that Lithans have their own language, but that's *just* a rumor. Nobody knows for certain if it's true. The holy book, which is where we get most of our knowledge about the Northern Continent, mentions nothing about Lithans receiving the gift of speech. Only those species that ascended were given this gift by Azurrel, The God of Creation.

"And yet here I am, using the gift of speech to talk to myself. If I'm not speaking the Goddess language right now, then what language is it?"

Was I speaking the Lithan tongue to those airwomen down in Rhl last night? Is that why nobody could understand me?

I don't know... flying to the Northern Continent seems like a big gamble. What if I get there and the Lithans I find think that I'm an enemy? Or if they're simply witless beasts that attack on sight? To say nothing of just how utterly different their continent is from ours. It may as well be a *wholedifferent world* compared to Ellyntide.

Something Duncan said to me yesterday resurfaces in my head.

‘—Because they have no other choice. And neither do you or Sofl. You must sacrifice these parts of yourself for the good of the Kingdom.’

No other choice, huh? Is this what sacrificing myself for the Kingdom means? Somehow, I doubt getting turned into a Lithan and flying to the Northern Continent was one of the scenarios Duncan had in mind.

He had a point, though; if there’s any chance at all my plan could work, then for the Kingdom, and everyone I’ve ever known, I have to take it. I’ll fight and search my way through every nook and cranny of this moon. I’ll scream until the gods themselves are forced to pay attention to me. And I will not falter until I find a way to turn back to normal.

‘You’re our future, Princess.’

So, I will. I’ll be their Princess — their future.

I’ll fly to the Northern Continent.

I finish preening my coat of feathers and flatten them against myself. Outside my nest, the sky is stale, overcast, and gray. I step out and feel the chilled breeze from the north

gusting over a nearby ridge, carrying with it the damp scents of bunchgrass and alpine lichens. It heralds the direction I'll travel to reach my far-off destination.

I'm miffed I didn't wake up to a stunning alpine sunrise, but this low cloud layer gives me an advantage. I can fly above the clouds, away from the prying eyes of airships as I make my way north. As long as I drop below the cloud deck every so often, I should be able to navigate by the ground features I recognize from maps.

I say goodbye to my temporary home and take off to the north from a craggy ridge, rising in altitude until I reach the bottom of the cloud base. A tinge of anxiousness grows in me about flying through clouds, but I quickly shake it off and continue ascending. The interior is dark, and my wings feel weighted against the hazy surroundings. But soon the light begins to increase until suddenly I break through the top layer of clouds like they were the crust on a warm loaf of bread. The sun warms my feathers, greeting me to a sight more terrific than any *alpine* sunrise.

Oh, wow.

I've been up in the clouds plenty of times before, but those experiences were all in the cramped compartment of an airship. A single, two-dimensional perspective behind the safety of a pane of glass. Nothing I've ever seen, ever felt, compares to this; the vastness of the unhindered sky, everywhere the light touches, all mine to experience. Total, unadulterated *freedom*.

SKREEERAA!

I can't help but cry a giddy little call. This tremendous sight has raised my spirits considerably. Feeling rejuvenated, I catch the fair winds of an updraft and glide through the open sky with effortless grace.

A trip to the Northern Continent, alone, with no guarantee of safety or survival. I don't know what troubles the skies ahead of me will bring, or if I'll be successful. But I can at least cherish this indelible moment.

26. Debrief

“Good morning, Ensign. Tell me, how are you holding up?”

The middle-aged man, dressed up in the same uniform as me, slides the door to the compartment with his foot. He presents one of the cups of coffee he's carrying on the table in front of me. I appreciate the gesture, though I don't drink coffee.

I release a labored sigh. To answer his question truthfully would be pointless. I try to crack a joke instead. “I've been better, Lieutenant Tobin.”

Tobin takes the seat across from me and tucks his ringed tail around himself. “I think we all have, Roland.”

It's late morning, now. Or perhaps it's the early afternoon. Time tends to lose meaning when you've been running on such little sleep. We had to wait this long for an airship to be released from a patrol around Varecia this morning. Not that I was in any hurry to leave.

When the cruiser finally arrived they hurried us inside and took off again just as quick, heading on a direct course back to Varecia. I was ushered into this cramped, bare-bones compartment with not so much as a decoration on the beige walls and told to wait. Just as the drone of the stream propellers was lulling me to sleep, the Lieutenant walked in.

He takes a sip of his coffee while gazing out the window of the compartment. We're intentionally flying low this morning, below the potential altitude that *heartless monster* would be flying at. "In due time we'll debrief the other officers in your party, along with the pilot. But we wanted to start with you first. According to the crew on the ground, you were the most composed among the first responders."

A light chuckle escapes me. To think, the lowly ensign was the most '*composed*' out of everyone there. Who could possibly stay calm in the face of such a macabre tragedy? Evidently, me.

I suppose I should have expected a debriefing. I'd been so focused on the scene in the hollow that I hadn't the time to consider what could possibly be in store for me once I returned home. I get the distinct impression this is going to be the first of many closed-door interactions I'll be having over the coming days.

But before we begin this first one, there's one lingering matter that I simply must have an answer to. "Lieutenant, may I ask a question?"

Tobin, typically a staunchly uptight officer, inclines his head. "Certainly. I'll answer it as best I can."

“W-What will happen to the Commander?” my anxious hands begin shaking under the table once more. “He deserves no judgment for what happened. None at all! Nobody could have anticipated a *Lithan* would have appeared in Ellyntide yesterday!”

The Lieutenant’s face grew grim as a storm. He angled his eyes and stared at the table a moment before drawing them back towards me. “I understand your apprehension, Ensign. As of right now, this is between you, me, and these four walls. But I have it on good authority that the Queen does not consider Commander Almandoz responsible.”

I gasp, feeling a weight lifted. I was certain that Duncan would be held responsible for what happened yesterday! It was his mission, after all. He told me he gave the Queen his personal assurance the Princess would return safely. “And he isn’t going face discipline or lose rank?”

“What I’ve told you is all I know,” Tobin clarifies, lifting his hands off the table. “The Queen is in a state of mourning, as I’m sure you can imagine. Nothing has been decided, yet.”

My fur settles. The mood in the palace must be horrible, right now. They’re still processing the news that the Queen’s daughter was slain at the jaws of a merciless feral, the first to be seen in Ellyntide in centuries. Although it’s been hours since we first saw the fatal tragedy in the hollow, it feels the full weight of what I witnessed hasn’t fully settled yet.

But at least I can take solace in the fact that Duncan shouldn’t face consequences for this. Quite frankly, the Queen would be foolish to reprimand someone as smart and intelligent as the Commander.

“Alright,” I say. “Um, thank you. We can start, now.”

Tobin takes a long sip and tables the mug. “Very well, then. Can you corroborate what happened after you first spotted the scene in the hollow?”

“It was...” I trail off, painful memories of those first few moments resurfacing once more in my head. The bodies were strewn about, all the blood that flowed...

“Take your time, Ensign.”

Oh. I guess I got a little lost in myself, again. I straighten myself back up and reposition my tail. “We went into the hollow... or rather, Commander Almandoz ran into the hollow and fell beside Captain Durham. I remained there with him and told LaRoche and Bryant to return to the Blue Daemon for help.”

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

“I see,” says Tobin. “Did you see anything else while the others went to get help?”

I hesitate a moment before shaking my head. “Harper began to survey the surrounding area, but... I stayed with the Commander most of the night. I was trying to keep him company, sir.”

I'll never know the abject misery Duncan experienced last night. The heartache of seeing your partner strewn about dead before you, compounded by the agony of knowing there was nothing left of the person he was assigned to protect.

I stayed close all night, offering him a shoulder to cry into. Letting him blow his nose onto the fabric of my outer coat. Found him water when he could no longer produce tears. While the others worked the scene and talked to the investigators, I remained with him... it was the right thing to do.

He stayed with the captain until morning, right until the moment it was time for him to board the ship. His face was dolorous, and he ambled slowly around the brambles toward the ship. Once on board I wanted to stay with him until we landed, but we were placed into separate compartments. My only hope now is that he's given enough time to rest before questions are asked of him.

The Lieutenant keeps his expression even. I'm unsure if that was the response he was hoping for. “And, the unidentified animals. Were they disturbed in any way until the trauma team arrived?”

“No,” I answer quickly. “Harper and Bryant looked them over, but... it was too much for me and LaRoche.”

I stare at the table, feeling shame flow over me like cold water. I'm supposed to be a member of the Palace Guard, not a frightened child. I don't believe anyone should be numb to grizzly scenes of horror, but I'm not a front-line soldier, either. I enlisted in the guard because I needed a paycheck and a resume, not psychological trauma.

Tobin drew another sip. Our lack of bravery didn't seem to bother him. "I'll need to save the rest of those questions for those two, then."

"Has the team drawn any conclusions about who they are?" I ask, angling my head forward. Might as well take advantage of my rank.

The Ringtail pauses a moment, flicking his eyes to the door, and back towards me. His expression is as serious as I've ever seen it. "There are no definitive conclusions yet," he whispers, keeping his voice low and firm. There are civilians on board this ship. "...But we found evidence nearby that points to Crow Wing. Scouting the area for a potential incursion."

My face grimaces. It's exactly as I knew it would be.

Until the Queen's fall yesterday, the ongoing border dispute had been all anyone talked about. Most people agreed with the Queen and her hard-line approach to the Island floating into our territory. But I thought it was stupid. Dangerous, stupid rhetoric that could quickly escalate into a broader conflict with a nation more powerful than us.

A lump forms in my stomach, internalizing this sordid news. If his theory about a scouting mission turns out to be true, then a confrontation is inevitable.

“But that’s only half the story,” Tobin continues. “The appearance of the Lithan right then and there... makes little sense. Our response to the former is going to depend on the conclusions of the latter, and I’m afraid there are no easy answers.”

That’s understandable. The scene in the hollow beggars belief and reality. The agents from Crow Wing, torn apart by the Lithan. Durham, Laurent, and Bodie, clearly slain by punctures from a rapier, and not so much as a scratch from the Lithan. It’s as if the Crow Wing agents attacked our people and then the Lithan appeared out of thin air, enacting penance for their grave sins.

But the absence of the Princess’s body has been the biggest conundrum. The team on the ground combed the entire weald this morning, looking for any evidence that the Princess might have escaped the horror that occurred in the hollow. But the only thing they were able to find was the remains of a bear and pieces of the Princess’s clothing in the brambles surrounding the hollow. If she truly was... *consumed* by the Lithan, then it’s unspeakably tragic that it chose her first out of all the animals there.

Agents of Crow Wing, neatly torn apart, while our soldiers remain undisturbed. With the Princess’s body missing, and the Lithan’s abrupt departure, it almost leads you to believe...

...

...Well, no. That couldn’t possibly be the case.

Melicola will deny the attack. And without the Princess's body, they'll have a plausible argument to back them up. I do not envy the Queen and the decisions she must now make.

A gentle knock from outside interrupts my thoughts. Tobin rises from his seat and cracks open the door just wide enough for a Ruffy's snout to peek through. It whispers something into his ear, and the Lieutenant's face turns glum. The ruffy departs, and the door is slid shut again.

"Something's come up," he announces. "Some sort of incident up by Owens Island. I'll need to finish my debriefing later, possibly back in the palace."

"The Lithan...?" I ask wearily.

"Perhaps," he says. "If so, that means it's heading back north. At least Varecia will be safe."

I nod slowly. Lithans, sometimes seen roaming the skies over Sarlain, have never attacked one of their cities before. But we all assumed the worst when the news reached us that the Lithan was spotted over the skies of Rhl. If the legends of their *fire* were truly real, then it could have been a nightmare.

"Lieutenant, before you leave," I speak up as he's about to leave the compartment.

He turns back towards me and slides the door shut to keep our conversation discrete.
“Yes, Ensign?”

“When we found Captain Durham’s body,” I speak slowly as the emotions from those first few moments return to me. “There were large feathers draped over him. The Commander moved them out of the way as he grieved, but...”

Was the Lathan moments away from consuming the Captain, too? Perhaps we’ll never truly know.

Tobin’s ears fold back and his face turns grim. He slips through the door without saying another word and slides it shut behind him, leaving me to my thoughts and the drone of the propellers.

I stare into the table, noticing the undisturbed cup of coffee that the Lieutenant offered me. It’s cooled down considerably since then. Feeling curious, and with nothing to lose, I take a sip.

It tastes bitter.

27. Cast About

I flew for some time, soaring through the morning sky and occasionally dropping below the clouds to get a fix on my position and ensure I was on the right track to my first destination: Owens Island.

If you look at a map, It's the large island floating above the northern and southern continents of Ellyntide. It's almost large enough to be a continent in its own right, but because it floats on a higher wind stream than all the continents do, it gets classified as an island. Geographic pedantry aside, it's an important link between the northern and southern reaches of Ellyntide. All airship traffic tends to travel the island so pilots can keep their ships above land.

I'll be no different, today. I'm not quite ready yet to fly above the vast, open sky that separates the floating continents.

I thought about stopping at some smaller islands along the way but decided to experiment with just how much endurance I really have for flying long distances. The trip to the Northern Continent is going to have a few big stretches where there's nothing but clear sky below me, all the way down to the true surface of the moon. If I drop into one of the powerful gales just below the continents... I'm finished. I'll never make it back up.

So, in that regard, I'm pleased I've made it to Owens Island without stopping. In fact, I think I could go on for quite a bit longer! I'm not sure if I was able to make it here so easily because I could take advantage of the low cloud base, soaring through the warm thermal currents that exist above it. But I'd like to believe it's because long-distance flying just comes naturally to Lithans. The distance gap between the Northern Continent and the northernmost island of Sarlain, Samsivik, is considerable: By some estimates, at least 90 kilometers! If Lithans weren't good at long-distance flying, then there's no way they could make that trip as often as they do.

I dive through the placid cloud base one last time, feeling cool drops of moisture passing over my feathers. When I reappear, I'm above a mountain somewhere along the southwestern flank of Owen's Island. This is the most remote part of the island, with no settlements around for miles. The landscape here is temperate deciduous forest; lots of oaks, maples, and the occasional odd clearing that would make a good spot for someone as

big as me to land and take a quick rest. With any luck, I'll be able to sniff out some carrion and quell my churning stomach.

I fly around the mountain and surrounding valley, looking for a suitable spot to descend. I do so freely, without the anxiousness I had flying in the mountains outside RhI. Most people live in the northeastern quadrant of the island where the aptly named city *Owens Island* is located. As a result, airship traffic down here is minimal to non-existent. Pilots only pass through if they need to change course because of bad weather.

EREEECH!

I screech solely to hear my voice and am delighted by the sound it makes reverberating across the sides of the valley. It bounces off all corners and returns to me at different times, creating a pleasing echo effect. I'm certain I just sent all the prey in the area scrambling to their caves and crevices, but it's not like I had a shot at catching them in the first place. Might as well have some fun.

I spot a river dropping down the side of a mountain and spilling into the valley below. Next to one of the bends in the river is a small meadow with only a few trees near the shore. It seems like as good a place as any to stop, so I lower myself out of the sky, circling down until I can get low enough to drop in for a landing.

When I'm just above the tops of the trees I flap my wings hard, lowering myself out of the sky. As I get closer, something strikes me as unusual about the field below me. But recalling what happened the last time I got distracted by details in the landscape while landing causes me to push the thought aside. Talons touch the tips of the grass and make contact with the ground below.

I land.

Then, I sink.

A dark liquid rises around my ankles, covering them in mud.

It seems my aerial assessment of this area being a nice, dry meadow was wrong. It is, in fact, a *swamp*.

I free one of my front talons from the watery muck and a strong whiff of noxious, decaying plant material is released. It's not as bad as the bear I smelled back in the Weald yesterday, but it's not far off.

Yuck! How can dead plants smell this bad? I've never had a chance to visit a swamp before, and this isn't leaving a good first impression on me. Not only does it smell bad, but my talons are covered in a viscous, black mud that clings to my feathers. I ruffle to try and shake it off, but it simply splashes more of the foul-smelling ooze onto the rest of my body.

This is pretty unpleasant and not how I wanted my first trip to Owens Island to start off. But I guess I should try not to worry about it, right?

I'm a feral, now. Until I can turn back to normal, I won't have the luxury of a roof over my head to keep me clean and dry. Or a nice, hot shower after a long day getting dirty in the

garden. I have to do whatever is necessary to survive, and that means letting go of my old expectations of cleanliness. I'll just have to get used to feeling gross and dirty.

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I decide to make my way to the nearby river. Not because I'm especially itching to get myself cleaned off – thought that would be nice right now – but because my senses are so overwhelmed by the smells of the swamp that I can't smell the forest around me. This stuff is seriously overpowering, even to my enhanced nose.

Mental Note: Avoid swamps.

Unable to locate by smell, I follow the sounds of rushing water over the damp ground, splashing more of the noxious mud onto myself as I walk. Eventually, the swamp gives way to tall, dry grass and after passing a row of trees I find myself at the top of an escarpment overlooking the river.

The river channel is wide with large flat areas where sand and gravel built-up, probably during the spring thaw when the river ran high. This late in the season though, it's only carving a small channel in the middle of the clearing and doesn't look particularly deep. A breeze blows down the valley, bringing with it the smells of fish and dried maple leaves.

I hop down the escarpment and trundle across a rocky sandbank and over to the riverbed. Sticking muddy talons in the water, I expect to be shocked by an icy cold current. But the water is warm to my feathers, not unlike bath water. After my flight from the mountains, this would be a nice place to stop and relax for a few minutes.

I step into the river and feel the current flow through my talons, cleansing them of the swamp mud. I trot to the center of the channel and lower myself in, watching the water rise to the bottom of my chest. It flows in and around my body, gently massaging my feathers. I ruffle, close my eyes, and exhale.

Yeah, this is pretty nice right now!

This is the first time I've allowed myself to relax a little ever since... everything happened to me. It makes me a bit guilty, taking a break. I need to be doing everything in my power to let my family know I'm safe. But surely I'm allowed a little bit of time to relax and enjoy myself, right?

Another breeze blows down the river, bringing more fresh scents. A grove of alder trees. A group of deer, no more than 3 of them, moving away from me. Flowering plants whose scents I'm unfamiliar with.

My curiosity is piqued. I wonder what those plants are? I can take an educated guess based on my knowledge of the area, but I won't know for certain unless I go look. I never did get a chance to explore what grew on the mountain top I just flew from, would it really be that bad if I took some time to go exploring and see what grows here?

...

I wonder what's happening back home?

I push the unpleasant thought aside. It can wait.

...

Boop!

Something bumps into my chest feathers, interrupting my peaceful zone-out. I open my eyes and peer down to see a fish swimming in front of me, confused about the fluffy object it's just bumped into. Aw, hello little fishy!

...Wait a minute.

Unbidden, predator instincts spring into action. The image of the fish transforms from a friendly companion, swimming peacefully in nature to a *victim*

. A victim of my next snack! I lunge towards the fish, snapping my jaws to grab it out of the river. But all I get is a mouthful of water as it deftly swims back upstream.

Fwagh! I was so close to finally getting something to eat today! Frustrated, I growl a little under my breath.

I came pretty close to snatching the fish out of the water, or at least I thought I did, so I decided to wait a while and see if another was senseless enough to come floating into me. Sure enough one did, but again I was too slow with my jaws to make the kill. I tried in vain for some time, but on each subsequent attempt, the fish was always just a little ahead of me.

Just like the doe, I tried to catch yesterday, the prey I go after is always a little bit quicker than I am. There's gotta be some tactic, some trick, to catching them. There just has to be! But without any mentors to learn from, it's hopeless.

...And that's why I've given up on the river to head to a meadow downstream!

Hopping up another erosion-carved escarpment, I turn past a stunted oak and enter a small meadow next to the river. Compared to the Weald yesterday, the tawny grass here is far shorter, barely growing over the claws of my talons. Trees dot the meadow with patches of brambles, and I spot a path bisecting the field where the grass is trampled — the scents are stale, but deer sometimes pass through here.

I decided to cheer myself up a little from another failed hunt by looking for the flowers I smelled earlier. Doing a little botany fieldwork won't do anything to silence my stomach, but it should keep me distracted from it for a little while. Maybe I'll get lucky and locate some carrion while I'm here in the field.

It's not all bad news, though. While I was trotting up the river I managed to find some dead fish that washed up near the shore. They were... not pleasant. As quick as it was to get them down, I still gagged a little in the process! Unsurprisingly, there seems to be a limit on just how long prey can lay dead before it stops being appetizing to me.

The fish wasn't much nourishment, but they should give me the energy to keep flying north through Ellyntide tonight.

Looking out over the meadow, I take in the scents and locate the smells from the river; they're somewhere in the middle of the grass where a group of 3 maples grew. It's unusual for flowers here to still be in bloom this late in the season, so I'm quite curious about what they could be.

I make my way across as a beam of sunlight pokes through the clouds, warming my feathers. Turning skyward I see blue sky poking through a hole in the clouds, fondly reminding me of the incredible sunrise I saw this morning. With my nose turned up, a foreign piece of plant particulate invades my nostrils, tickling my sinuses. Instinctively I pull my neck back down and sneeze a fierce, draconic sneeze.

KRACHOO!!

Just like yesterday when I screamed at the birds, I feel the moon tremble beneath me. But unlike yesterday, something warm flashes on the tip of my muzzle.

...Huh? Something warm?

I open my eyes and peer down to see formerly golden tips of grass in front of my talons turned black, smoldering smoke into the air. The taste of ashes forms in my mouth.

Ashes...? Did I just... cough up some fire?

...

I can *BREATHE FIRE?!*

28. Firestarter

Illustrations from storybooks race through my head. Scenes of Dragons floating above city skylines, shooting long columns of fire from their mouths as scorched buildings bellow plumes of smoke. Unimaginable destruction and power.

Could I do that...?

Ohhh-kay! Botany field trip time-out!! We need to explore this, *right now!!*

I cavort and bounce from side to side before forcing myself to sit still in the grass — I need to calm myself down a little. Yeah, I'm a bit excited right now, but can you blame me? If I'm going to be stuck as a Dragon for a while, then I should at least be able to do some *cool* stuff like breathe fire!

I mean, I thought Lithans couldn't breathe fire! You'd think it would be a given they could, what with how often Dragons are portrayed doing it in fiction. But in real life, nobody has

ever observed a Lathan breathe fire before, so it's been assumed they couldn't. It's a bit of a mystery why the old tales with Dragons portray them breathing fire in the first place. At least, it used to be!

But it's more than just something cool. If I can breathe fire on command, I could use it as a weapon for taking down prey. I would've easily caught the fleeing doe I saw yesterday with a well-aimed blast of fire. I can just picture it now: dinner cooked and served, all in one attack! The prospect of an easy meal right now is reason enough to make me excited.

I turn my head back and examine the smoldering patch of grass. So, how did I do that?

Something about the act of sneezing triggered the systems in my body that produce fire. It had to have started in my mouth somewhere. I become conscious of the muscles in my mouth and throat, feeling around with my serpentine tongue for anything that seems out of the ordinary.

Well, okay, there's nothing *ordinary* about myself in my current situation. You get what I'm saying!

Feeling around the back of my throat, my tongue runs over something I don't remember being there when I was Lemur. A growth with a strange, spheroid shape I can't quite describe. I try flexing the muscles around the area back and forth, but nothing happens. I move in a different direction, trying to flap the muscle—

Pof!

Something in the back of my throat winces. A puff of dark smoke leaves my nostrils, and my mouth tastes of soot.

There! I did it again! I tried manipulating the muscles in my throat and felt a small flash of warmth. I'm not sure if I can adequately describe *what* I did, but I think I can control it now and do perform it at will.

And so I do, finding that if I wince the muscles a certain way it causes a spark to flare that's great at creating a puff of smoke. I practice the movement until I'm able to cause smoke to bellow from my nostrils on a whim.

So, if I wince the muscles in my throat and apply a bit of force like I did when I sneezed, would that expel fire?

There's only one way to find out!

...But before I do that, I should probably move somewhere safer. Out here in the middle of the meadow, surrounded by parched autumn grass and trees full of dried leaves ain't the best place to experiment with *fire*.

I hike back to the river and enter the channel, letting the warm mountain water flow through my talons once more. I turn downstream so the wind is at my back — it can't be pleasant to have a blast of fire blowing back into your face — and because the river flows

a good distance straight from here before rounding another bend. This should give me plenty of space to perform a safety test.

I ease my neck back and forth, trying to imitate the movements my head might do when sneezing. I do it a few times before snapping my neck forward like I am actually sneezing, but without doing the wincing in my neck. When I felt like I had the snapping movement down, I went back to practicing releasing smoke to make sure I remembered the movement.

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...

‘...Moving methodically, and with purpose. To perform each move with distinction and reverence.’

The memory of Calypso’s voice echoes through my head as I recall the advice he gave me during our self-defense lessons. He taught me the importance of repeated, controlled movements when learning a new technique, and to treat each thrust, each *movement*, as important. He would force me to repeat the same motion seemingly hundreds of times until he was satisfied. Only then could we move on to the next technique.

Every time I stabbed my dagger forward, each time I pivoted to avoid an attack, was essential to my understanding of what I was learning. Every failure was actually *movement* — a step forward.

It's funny. Calypso never could've come up with a line that poignant. He was clearly just repeating some sentiment taught to him by one of his many instructors. But that summed up Calypso as a person — for as much as I thought he acted like a knuckle dragger outside his duties, he was *brilliant* as a knight.

Graduated from the academy at the age of 19. Joined the Legion of Dragons, our family's ordained knight order, at age 20. Knight-Captain at age 25. Bodyguard to the Princess at age 28. To say nothing of the things he achieved in his personal life.

He seemed like so much more than I'll ever be.

When they write Calypso's obituary, the list of his accompaniments will speak for itself. They'll mark mine as the spoiled Princess nobody liked; the one that on her last day alive, screamed at a woman in public for something as petty as disliking her outfit.

What the hell was I thinking?!

And to think, for all the one-on-one lessons me and Calypso had in the gardens on self-defense, when it came time to actually use that knowledge, all I could do was stand and watch as—

...

A grackle trills in the distance. And the river keeps flowing through me.

I shake my head, trying to ward off intrusive thoughts. They won't help me accomplish what I'm trying to do right now.

Us Lemurs, followers of the Goddess Etain, believe that in the next life, our souls are shown the future events of those that were close to us. Calypso was just as devout as me, and so I do not doubt that somewhere, he's watching me right now with great interest. He must be thinking to himself, '*What will Asha, turned into a Lathan against her will, do next?*'

I sink my claws deep into the river channel, opening my wings wide to give me as much stability as possible. I squint down the river, focusing on what I came here to do.

I'll demonstrate what I've learned and put on a show just for you, Calypso!

I rear my neck back until my head is floating somewhere over my shoulder blades. Then, snapping it forward, I tickle the muscles in my throat. With *purpose*, force is applied to the movement. In the reaches of my mouth, two distinct liquids are expelled and interact with one another, causing a runaway chemical reaction.

Their unity begets *fire!*

My maw flings open involuntarily. Like a blowtorch being lit, a great column of heat and fire escapes my mouth and races across the river, raining down sparks and cinders into the water below. Somehow, despite hellfire surging through it, my mouth only feels slightly warm.

Just like it was in the hollow when I first achieved flight, I can hardly believe it! I'm actually doing it! I'm *BREATHING FIRE!*

I'm so astonished, so mesmerized that my body can create such a spectacle, that I fail to notice the flames rushing down the river channel unobstructed. They maintain their momentum fully until they reach the sharp bend in the river, colliding with the tree line.

THOOM!!

Like a bomb detonating, the riverbank explodes in a colossal ball of fire, instantly igniting the surrounding area in flames. I extinguish the blowtorch coming from my mouth, but It's far too late now. All I can do is watch helplessly as the remainder of my fiery breath collides with the trees and adds to the towering inferno.

...It truly is just like I remember it from the storybooks.

Wow! Who could have possibly foreseen a lightning strike causing a wildfire on a day without a storm cloud in sight? The weather sure is strange sometimes, ha-ha!

...

Eh.

My stomach in knots, I turn away from the disaster and lunge into the sky, flying in the opposite direction of the quickly expanding wildfire. When I gain enough altitude I breathe a sigh of relief that there are no airships in the vicinity to witness my blunder and bank north, resuming my course to the northern reaches of Sarlain.

Um, Calypso? If you're watching, let's just keep this a secret between us, okay?

29. Across Enemy Lines

After my inglorious exit from Owens Island, I decided that I would fly for a while. A *long* while.

At some point shortly after leaving, I realized that while no airships were around to see me ignite the forest, the towering plume of smoke I created was visible for miles around – a huge, brightly lit sign that advertised to the entire Kingdom, '*Hey!! The Lithan was just over here!*'. I knew it would only be a matter of time before airship traffic in the area noticed it, and mom's warships would be in pursuit after me. It goes without saying that I need to avoid any direct confrontations with one of those.

I suppose I left the island sometime in the early afternoon. But I wanted to keep flying until I was certain I had left Ellyntide airspace, which I estimated would happen sometime after the sun set. Every once in a while I would drop below the clouds and stop to rest at one of the many small islands that float over the whole of Jade. For winged creatures, they offer a quiet spot of respite on long journeys, which is precisely what I was looking for on my long journey north. I didn't allow myself to stay in one place very long, knowing that if someone happened to spot me descending below the clouds, it would only be a matter of time before warships convened on my location.

That also meant that I didn't have any time to stop and search for carrion on the ground below. By the time the sun had set my stomach was in knots, roiling every few moments as it begged for nourishment. But I forced myself to keep pumping my wings, past the northern islands of Ellyntide and into the Kingdom of Sarlain.

I'm unsure when I crossed the border. Airships can use navigation instruments to figure out where that invisible line is, but I didn't know for certain until I arrived at the crescent shaped-island I'm now flying above. This is the first time I've ever left the borders of my Kingdom... I wish I could be more sentimental about it, but at the moment, I'm just *exhausted*.

I've been flying for nearly all day on almost no sleep and the tiniest morsels of barely edible food. I *need* rest, and I need to do it soon.

I'm so deprived of energy that it doesn't cross my mind just how big of a risk landing here truly is. Once I land, I'll be committing a grave act of aggression against a hostile Kingdom we're technically still at war with. A Kingdom we consider our mortal enemies.

I understand these things, and yet I couldn't care less. I am at my physical limit; I just want to sleep wherever my weary head will lay.

If anything is working in my favor though, it's the crescent-shaped island I'm over that is wide and forested, remote and unpopulated by animal settlements. Even if there are homesteaders somewhere on this island, I should be able to slip in for the night without anyone noticing.

With almost no energy left in me, I circle down out of the sky and approach a clearing in the middle of the island. Guided by prophets and the light of Maki, I make out a meadow surrounded by tall conifers and paths leading to other clearings. It strikes me as unnatural, but I'm far too tired to pay it mind. With muscles trembling from fatigue I flap my wings hard one last time to slow my descent.

Talons touch the tips of grass, and an act of war is committed.

I settle down and struggle to prevent myself from toppling over into a deep sleep right then and there. After giving myself a moment to catch my breath, I hobble across the meadow to what appears to be the tallest group of trees around me.

I wedge myself under their branches and let go of myself, gracelessly collapsing from fatigue. Darkness envelops me before my head makes contact with the ground.

Perhaps it was because of the exhaustion I felt flying all the way to the crescent island, but I woke up the next morning remembering nothing.

First, I was confused about why I was a Lathan. *Again.*

Then, I was confused about how I'd teleported from the top of the mountain to a deciduous forest with flora I was unfamiliar with. It took a few minutes of introspection before my memories of the previous day fully returned to me.

I've never experienced memory loss like that before. It was actually quite unsettling.

I suppose the upside of being so tired was I didn't dream at all last night — no nightmares! I actually feel rested today! The sky is overcast again, so I can't quite tell how many hours of sleep I got, but I feel much better than I did at any point yesterday.

Of course, I only feel better about being sleep-deprived. Hunger still rakes my stomach, worse than it's ever been, and I'm certain I'll have to find something to eat before I take off from the island. I won't have the energy to make it all the way to the Northern Continent unless I get some prey inside me.

I spend some time preening myself before ambling out of the trees and into the meadow to shake off morning grogginess. I stretch my talons out in front of me and push my flank backward until my whole body goes taut. Then I release it, pivoting the stretch to my shoulders while I stretch my wings out.

The claws on my wings are about to touch grass when a scent blows into my nostrils. The distinct, burning wood ash of a campfire.

There are Animals nearby!

Sensing danger my body instantly reacts, releasing the stretch and twisting around to face the direction the smell came from. Off in the opposite corner of the meadow is a wide, grassy path between the trees. From there, the scent of the campfire was drifting through. I remember seeing this path when I was landing last night. Strangely, the area seemed to have quite a few meadows that were all connected by paths like this one.

I raise my head to get a better read on the scents. I take them in and just about fall over in surprise. Buried in the ash is the scent of *prey*. Somebody is cooking breakfast on the campfire! And it smells fresh enough to be recently killed!

My mouth salivates just thinking about it. Warm, delicious prey!! Finally, I could eat! Surely I deserve it more than the lowly animal who's cooking it right now, right? I haven't had a meal in days! I bet you had one just last night!!

I'll have to scare away whoever's cooking it of course, but that's dead simple. To some random Lemur or Marten camping out in the wilderness, running into a Lathan is about the scariest thing imaginable that can happen to you.

With my churning stomach cheering me on, I'm about to march off on my impromptu trip to the campfire before common sense interjects: Stealing prey from somebody here is *super* risky.

I'm in *Sarlain*, now. The simple virtue of me being here is breaking the cease-fire that has kept our two Kingdoms out of a full-scale conflict for the past 19 years. If word gets out that a member of the Ellyntide royal family entered their territory and attacked a group of civilians... well, the war would resume. It's as simple as that.

Of course, I don't *look* like a member of the royal family right now. If a random Lithan steals prey from some animals on holiday it *might* show up on page two or three of the papers. Appearances by Lithans in Sarlain are almost routine in the summer months.

But I'm no ordinary Lithan. I am the blue and cream feathered Lithan who murdered Princess Asha and threatened the edge city of Rhl. By now I'm infamous, and the heartbreaking tale of how the enemy's Princess was consumed by the talons of a Dragon is all anyone is going to be talking about.

To put it short, my appearance here won't be skimmed over. They'll remember it.

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And when the time comes that it's announced Princess Asha isn't dead and instead was the victim of something insane and supernatural, they'll think back to that time she landed in their territory and scared the crap out of some people making breakfast.

Will they consider my plight and show leniency? Or will they instead send the airships to resume bombing our cities?

Ghrooogl!

My restless stomach yells at me once more, frustrated by my indecision to continue.

...I might not have the luxury of choice. Last night I felt so delirious, so emaciated from exhaustion and hunger that I woke up this morning unsure of who I even was.

Perhaps I'll fly away from here and find carrion somewhere else along the way. Perhaps my string of bad luck will continue, and I'll simply fall out of the sky from malnourishment while crossing to the Northern Continent.

Ugh.

I hate to push *another* problem into the future, but...

It's the right thing to do. I must survive, *no matter what*. When the time comes that Sarlain figures out who I truly am, I'll just have to deal with the consequences of it then.

My mind made up, I make my way across the meadow in search of breakfast.

I crouched under tall conifers, my body obscured by shadow and branches. From my vantage point under the trees, I gaze out over another golden meadow at a group of three wooden cabins, shoddily built on the opposite end of the field against a row of cypress

trees. In the center of them is a fire pit with slabs of meat cooking on a metal grate over an open fire. A group of four animals sat next to it on logs, enjoying their morning coffee and joking amongst themselves.

A short distance away from the cabins was the dissected carcass of a moose. It's difficult to be certain, but it smells like there's still plenty of meat left on it.

As I crossed the meadow I landed in last night, I began to notice tree stumps obscured by grass. As it turns out, I had landed in the middle of a field that had been cleared by animals for lumber, perhaps these very animals before me now. The meaning of the meadows and paths I saw from the air last night became clear — this is a Sarlain logging operation.

Loggers live in camps like these for weeks at a time, surviving off the environment and the occasional resupply from airships that come to take the logs away. I'll be taking their meal this morning, but it won't be difficult for them to go hunting for more. It assuages my worries somewhat, knowing I won't cause them any hardship.

They'll have weapons on them, of course. But if my fight in the hollow was any indication, then they'll be far too scared to put up a resistance. I'm uncertain what I'd do if one of them was daft enough to try and fight back. Under no circumstances can I actually harm somebody here.

With that in mind, subtlety isn't going to be my strategy today. My predatory urges, pushed aside and stifled from reaching me, are handed over full control. The more rational parts of my brain are given leeway to sit back and watch as the next scenes unfold.

I explode through the trees, dropping my head to unleash a baleful snarl in the direction of the logging camp.

SKREEECH!!!

Just like it was in the hollow, I feel visceral hatred pulsing through me. These loggers aren't simply preparing breakfast, they're desecrating prey. *My* prey.

Two of the loggers turn to face me in stunned shock. Both are Ringtails, a middle-aged man, and a younger-looking woman. The others, two rabbit ladies, are hunched over in pain, holding their ears down against their heads.

Sorry, I guess. I haven't had anything to eat in days though, I'm in a lot more discomfort than you right now.

Not allowing them any room to breathe, I keep my head low and open my wings wide. I stride across the field at a pace quick enough to make them sweat, but slow enough that they still have time to flee.

“Mattess evou!! V'eff, uvh zon tilgev!?” the male Ringtail shouts.

“XYFK!! Rky'z du way su khuh!!” cries the female.

The Lemurs jump to their feet and nearly trip over themselves running to the rabbits, still hunched over in pain from my scream. They take them by the shoulders and bring them to their feet, quickly ushering them past the fire pit and beyond the cabins to the dense cypress trees beyond.

I roll my wings and grunt, almost disappointed at how anticlimactic that encounter was.

Keen to finally quiet my stomach, I trot to the cabin on the left and inspect the prey that's owed to me. As expected, the moose's flank was already opened with pieces of its innards removed. Judging by the smell, I'm certain that this feral hasn't been dead for very long. Most likely it was killed earlier this morning and brought straight here for breakfast. I recall the dreadful, half-decomposed fish I gagged down yesterday and am grateful for the chance to eat fresh prey once more.

Finally!! I reach in to take a bite from my first true meal in nearly two full days.

...Or at least, I would have, if I wasn't interrupted by the gallant cry of a screaming Ringtail.

"K'HE!! Rbk Khuh!"

The male skulks back into view from around the corner of a cabin, screeching a defiant battle cry at me. What's more, he's acquired a pitchfork and is holding the weapon out in front of him, making stabbing motions in the air towards me.

My head tilts at this confusing act of aggression. Does he really intend to come after me with that? Surely, he's not foolish enough to try attacking a Lathan, right? Could he be trying to bide my time so the others can escape to somewhere safer? ...But it's not like I could really chase after them through the forest, either.

Perhaps if I were a regular, feral Lathan, I might be a bit more concerned about this. As small as the Ringtail is to me his disposition is quite threatening, and now he's armed with a weapon. If I were trolling the island for quick and easy prey, I might think this situation was no longer worth it.

But I'm desperate, and not at all in the mood for this.

"Feckless Ringtail," I taunt, lowering my head in front of the moose to separate it from the Lemur. I let out a low warning growl and lock eyes with him.

This is *my* prey, now. I nearly died trying to get this far, and I won't be giving it up for the likes of anyone.

But the brave Ringtail's expression is unwavering, and my warning appears to have only strengthened his resolve. With his tail lashing, he steps forward another few paces and keeps the weapon trained on me.

What does he think he's doing? Does he have a death wish?!

I bare my teeth, eliciting a louder, much more pronounced threat. But again, despite my growl shaking the ground beneath him, the Ringtail takes two steps forward, making more thrusting motions with the pitchfork. His gaze is cold, and his determination like steel.

This is getting out of control. I'm not in any mood to give up my prey, but there's no way I can harm the Ringtail. Even threatening a Sarlain citizen is walking a thin line, but It would be unconscionable to outright attack one. I'll never have any chance of leniency in the future if blood is spilled here.

But at the same time, if I don't eat this prey, there may not be a future for me to ask leniency in. I have to convince him to back off somehow and do it in a way that doesn't harm him. Isn't there something else I can try to scare him away?

My stopover at Owens Island comes back to mind. My experiments with fire, and the towering inferno that ensued when I underestimated my abilities. Starting another wildfire is totally out of the question, and even lighting the cabins on fire would be a huge risk.

But, what about my smoke?

It's plain to see why Lithans never use their fire as a weapon — It's *too* powerful. But this Ringtail doesn't know that. For all he's aware, the notion that Lithans can breathe fire is just another fairy tale. If I expelled a bunch of smoke and made it look like I was about to blast him with flame, would he believe it? Would bluffing be enough for him to back him down?

Of course, if he doesn't believe me... well, let's just hope he believes me.

Slowly, I pull my neck away from the moose, keeping my eyes locked on the Ringtail. When my head was far enough back, I tickled the muscle in the back of my throat, letting smoke escape through my nostrils.

His expression changes from dogged determination to stark disbelief. He retreats a step and struggles to maintain his aggressive stance.

Despite clouds of smoke billowing from my nose, it seems not quite enough. I decide to offer the Ringtail my sincere advice in the deepest, most menacing tone possible:

"R u n ."

The ground shakes, and my mouth slowly opens.

"...Vekew!!!"

Eyes wide in terror, he drops the pitchfork at his side, turning to flee past the fire pit and beyond the cabin he approached me from.

I stand there for a moment and listen to the crackling sounds of footsteps rushing over fallen leaves, gradually moving in a direction away from me. When I can no longer hear him, I wait a few moments longer to make sure his musky scent doesn't return. I won't be caught off-guard a second time.

...

Certain he was gone, I let wings heavy with apprehension droop to the ground. I exhale a long sigh and sit, thankful that he took my bluff credibly. I don't know what I would have done if he hadn't.

Rationality returns and regret washes over me like cold water. I regret that it had to come to this. These animals weren't the same as the ones who attacked me in the hollow — they were utterly innocent, a victim of nothing more than their misfortune of being here at the same time I was.

But at the same time, I won't apologize for doing what I have to do to survive. My life, and my quest to turn back to normal, is far more important than the breakfast of some civilians from an enemy kingdom. When push comes to shove, I'll always choose the path forward that's the most beneficial to my Kingdom and the people I'm destined to one day lead. As their Princess, it's a duty I must never forget.

A cool breeze from the north blows through the trees, and the meadow is silent. I stand and approach my reward.

For the first time in days, I eat.

30. Archer's Point

Ahead of me, a vast and unbroken expanse of empty sky and wind-whipped clouds, utterly devoid of land masses, ebbing and flowing tempestuous, reaching out into infinity.

Below me, a jagged tip of gold and brown, jutting into the endless expanse like a dagger's edge, the northernmost influences of ascendant civilization itself.

The strait to the Northern Continent, and the northern edge of the island of Samsivik.

Archer's Point.

Here is where I will leave this world and travel to another.

After my meal at the logging camp, I departed the crescent-shaped island and resumed flying north. As it had been for most of my journey thus far, the overcast skies provided good cover to fly discretely through the northern islands of Sarlain.

Not that I'd have much to worry about in the short term if I was spotted by someone. Besides Lathan sightings being a somewhat frequent occurrence here, I'm the Lathan that

killed Princess Asha. For taking the life of the enemy's Princess, they'd pin a medal to my chest feathers if they felt they could safely do it.

With less to worry about I flew at a more leisurely pace, dropping through the clouds more often and lingering there longer to get a better view of what was around me. I knew I needed to preserve my energy for the crossing, and whatever awaits me on the other side. Eventually, I came to land on a small island near the strait, giving me a front-row seat to my next task.

What we know about the Northern Continent is that it's unlike anywhere else on the Moon. The tales of Avians who've snuck into the continent are well known, as are the incredible, alien things they witnessed there: Beasts the size of locomotives, iridescent plants that glow pale in the light of Maki, and trees towering higher in the sky than even our great Elder Tree. A land as fascinating as it is dangerous, anyone who ventures there rarely returns, and those who do often report being driven back by angry Dragons before they can land.

I'd be lying if I said it doesn't make me excited. To think, I'll be the first animal to travel freely through the Northern Continent! Me, me, me — Asha Lordanou!

I still don't know if other Lithans will welcome me, or if we'll even be able to understand each other. But being one of the continent's extant species means I should be able to pass through without setting off any alarms with the natives.

At the very least, I should be able to survive easier over there. I'll no longer have to worry about running into airships or angering our centuries-old enemy. Presumably, the prey over there will be a lot more acclimated for a creature my size, and might even be easier to hunt.

I haven't forgotten about my responsibilities to the throne and my family, of course. But how could I, a naturalist at heart, not be looking forward with bated breath to the sheer thrill of what's to come? How many completely new plant and animal species are over there, just waiting to be discovered?

With excitement pushing me forward, I rise to my talons and stretch myself until my whole body goes taut. I've been resting here for a while, regaining my strength so I'll have enough energy to make the entire crossing. Flying over clear sky has proven to be largely uneventful so far, but this is going to be the longest stretch yet, and the strait to the Northern Continent is completely free of islands. If I begin to get fatigued or mess up my flight halfway, it could be fatal.

There's also the issue that the strait to the Northern Continent has dangerous gales, and only airships of a certain size can perform the crossing. I'm not nearly as big as one of those airships, so how's a Lithan like me going to do it safely?

As it turns out, there's a trick! It involves *air currents!*

Whenever I think about the air currents that exist between the continents (basically never...), I think back to a helpful little drawing I made back during my grade schooling when I was first learning about them. It was... um... oh, yeah!

There it is!

...I really liked drawing smiley faces on stuff back then, huh?

I was like, 7 years old. And still in my 'princess' phase. Come on.

Look, the important thing is, right there next to the island I drew, there's an area of calm winds (blue colored) sandwiched between two faster gales (red colored). If I can position myself safely in that area, then I should be fine!

So far on my journey north, I've been able to guess my way into it with some trial and error, but the winds in the crossing to the Northern Continent are a whole other level. If I misjudge entering them here, the gales could easily blow me off course into a dangerous situation.

I take a deep breath, feeling as rested as I'll ever be, and walk forward to scan the skies in front of me. There are only a few more miles of Sarlain below me before I encounter the winds of the strait. Hopefully, that will be enough space to safely insert myself into the area of calm winds.

I bound toward the edge and thrust into the sky, beating my wings hard to gain altitude against the powerful gusts. I decide to circle back around the island and find myself facing inland over the island of Samsivik.

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

KREEAH!

I call across the island, a farewell for anyone who might be listening. I'm leaving behind everything I'm familiar with, everything I've ever known.

Mother, Father, Sofl... I won't be gone for long. I promise.

I come about, turning north towards what lies ahead. Even while I'm still over land the wind whips my body like a rag doll, making my ascent more difficult than usual. I seem to be at the right altitude, but as I approach the strait the winds only grow stronger. I try dropping in altitude, thinking I'm flying too high, but there's no change.

Then, something catches my left wing.

It could have been a bird, it may have simply buckled under the force of the gale. But my flight stalls and I feel myself being dragged backward. Flapping my wings hard I attempt to regain my composure but the wind only pushes against me harder until I lose all control of my flight!

I panic, tumbling through the sky like a stone with no way to control myself. In a tizzy, I lash my wings, desperate to find a pocket of calmer winds to stabilize myself. But the world around me is spinning too fast, dropping too precipitously for me to find balance.

Desperate for any solution, the thought of the last time I was in mortal danger races through my head. The fight back in the hollow – the moment I transformed. That time, I

allowed the rage festering inside me to take hold, allowing my instincts to determine how I would react. I would have died if I hadn't done that.

For a fleeting moment, I stifle the panic coursing through my veins, leaving conscious thought behind. I allow the beast inside me to react.

My wings open wide, letting the wind push me unabated. I tumble about, holding them steady in place until they lock, letting the wind pass freely over them. Slowly the tumbling begins to subside until I feel myself flipped around violently by the wind. Where before I would have lost control, I suddenly find myself back in total control of my flight.

Instead of fighting against the gale, I feel it push against my back — a force to stabilize myself.

I fan my tail feathers wide, wasting no time regaining the altitude I'd lost. I wish I could stop and try to process the calamity that just occurred, but the winds are gusting as strong as they've ever been, and there's little time to dwell. I look down and see the edge of the island rapidly approaching below me. If I try to circle back over land to give myself more space before reaching clear air, I run the risk of losing the flight stability that nearly cost my life to achieve.

I have to keep fighting upwards!

Almost over clear air, It's obvious the pocket of calm winds isn't at its normal altitude. Could it exist somewhere higher at the crossing to the Northern Continent? What if it doesn't exist at all, and Lithans simply have to fight these nightmarish gales the whole crossing? It couldn't possibly be that, could it?

I strain against the wind, struggling to make progress. Now higher than I've ever flown before I feel the air getting thin, making my breathing rough and labored. For the first time, a chill grows under my feathers, aching tired muscles that are already fighting a losing battle against the tempest.

I can't keep this up much longer. There's no way I can fly like this the entire length of the crossing. How do Lithans do this!? Am I simply not a good enough flyer? My wings flutter, but it feels like I can no longer push myself.

Dread runs through me, more chilling than the air around me. What if I can't make the crossing? What is my plan 'B' supposed to be? How could I—

As my mind races, I feel a calmness overtake me just below the top of the cloud deck. A warm breeze pushes against me and my wings relax, allowing my flight to stabilize and glide along with minimal effort.

...I did it. I've made it to the calm winds!

And just in time!! I was so close to giving up and turning around! My muscles are still sore from losing control, but I think if I exert myself as little as possible, I can still make the flight.

I'm not sure how long this is going to take. I think I recall reading in a book somewhere that for airships, it can take the better part of a day to fly the entire crossing. I fly much faster than an airship though, so it should only take... a few hours?

Let's go with that. My course is locked in — there's no turning back.

I flew for longer than I'd ever flown before, giving me plenty of time to ruminate on things.

There wasn't much to look at, after all. Above me were nothing but gray clouds, and below me was the drop to the true surface of the moon. Down there, it's said that the moon is almost entirely covered in *water*, as far as the eye can see. Now that I've been up here flying above it, I can't disagree. Pale blue stretches out in all directions to the horizon, completely unbroken with not a speck of land in sight.

Where did all the water come from? Could the continents have truly existed down there during ancient times? If so, why didn't they all drown in the water?

After a while, I grew tired of pondering questions without answers.

For now, I've come upon a large fog bank that appeared suddenly and obscured my vision entirely. I want to drop below it and get a better angle on where I'm heading, but during my flight, I discovered the band of calm winds only exists in a very narrow space — if I fly so much as a few feet up or down, the winds begin to pick up considerably. It's fortunate that I even fit into this space at all.

I swivel my wings, trying to ward away soreness. Another warm breeze blows on me from below, giving me a moment to glide through the air and stretch out my wings. I may have been spry when I took off from the mountain top yesterday morning, but nearly 2 full days of non-stop flying have begun to take a toll on me. How much longer can I really go on like this, even in calm winds?

A terrible thought crosses my mind. What if I've been flying in circles just offshore Archer's Point this whole time? I've tried to fly straight as a rapier, but how can I be certain? Without any points of reference to guide me in the strait, who's to say I haven't been chasing my tail this whole time? If I'm truly lost, how could I possibly get myself back over land?

I become restless, anxious to drop down to see if the fog bank clears below. I know better than to test the gales that exist all around me – to do so at this stage would be certain death. But how much is too much? When's the point where I have to admit to myself I've been going the wrong way?

Then, as if the Goddess herself saw my apprehension and reacted, the fog abruptly ceases.

Sunlight shines down through patchy cloud work, temporarily blinding me after my trek through the gloom of the clouds. An uncomfortable moment later my vision adjusts, and my concerns about where I'm heading dissolve like the fog around me.

For the first time in what must be hours, I see something more than endless blue and gray. A great curve of land off on the horizon, and a small extension of brown and gold jutting into the expanse. Its identity can't be mistaken:

Archer's Landing.

The bottom tip of the Northern Continent.