

THE PRINCESS'S FEATHERS

3. Holy Communion

At first, no one spoke among the animals gathered there on the beach.

“Ironic, isn’t it? Those feral animals, having been given the sacred gift of speech, able to communicate amongst themselves for the first time — silenced by the weight of The God of Creation’s edict to them. You couldn’t get that Rabbit to shut up a moment ago!”

A scant chorus of laughs breaks out between the congregation at the bishop’s remarks. Among them is Sofl, who’s sitting next to me in the first row of pews at the palace’s chapel. We’ve stopped here to attend monthly communion, the most important ceremony the chapel performs. It’s part of Sofl’s routine to do so after Sunday breakfast.

When it comes to matters of the Church, he is quite devout. So, it would be unthinkable for him to miss such an important event. Luckily, these don’t take very long. Once it’s over we can head straight to his lab, and I can start gathering everything I’ll need for today’s trip.

The bishop is an elderly Ringtail who's performed this ceremony in the Chapel for as long as I can remember. Standing from the pulpit at the front of the altar, he readjusts his glasses and resumes the reading of scripture.

It was the Avian who spoke first.

'I do not trust Azurrel,' he said. 'I follow the path created for me by warm updrafts. They speak of a path away from the sky, one that grounds me to the moon.'

'I will trust Azurrel,' said the Lemur. 'If the gift of Ascendance is even half as grand as the gift of Communication, then it is a gift I willingly receive.'

'To walk on two legs and use my forepaws as the Lemur does would truly be a blessing,' said the Marten. 'And, to my Avian brother. Azurrel said you would keep your wings as they are now if you chose to Ascend. If you wish to continue following the endless journey of the sky, then you may do so freely.'

The Avian furrowed his brow in contemplation. Finally, it was the Rabbit's turn to speak.

'I-I will trust Azurrel,' she said, moved by their proposal. 'I wish to be free of the predators that have mercilessly hunted me and my kin for generations. A life where we can live in peace! To think, a life where it would be me who performed the hunting of the Fox. To always have a fresh supply of food. A life where my kin would feel safe, knowing at the end—'

The rabbit is interrupted by the tapping of the Lemur's tail against her back.

A few more giggles across the chapel. Again, Sofl is among them. He leans over and whispers to me, "The Rabbit is always the best part."

I smile and nod in acknowledgment. The bishop continues.

Exasperated, the doe apologized for her outburst.

The Lemur, the Marten, and the Rabbit have all agreed to The God of Creation's proposal to Ascend. Having made up their minds, they turned their muzzles to the only one who was still undecided: the Avian. He became anxious, feeling the weight of their eyes upon him.

Finally, he had made up his mind.

'If I am allowed to keep my wings and be free to fly among the sky as I can now, then I too will accept Azurrel's proposal.'

The rest of them were gay with excitement, relieved to know that their new friends would also be joining them.

'You have all chosen of your own conviction to Ascend,' said Azurrel. 'Very good. Please, follow me.'

And so, Azurrel took the animals up the bank of the sandy beach, past the palm fonds, and into the sacred grove.

The bishop closes the holy book and brings down his reading glasses that are attached to a strap, letting them hang from his neck. "Oh, heavenly Goddess. Pray for us as we seek to understand your eternal truths, now and forever always..."

At once, everyone in the chapel responds, "Praise Be."

The bishop pauses to let the message of scripture settle across the chapel and then begins speaking once more.

“Avians, Rabbits, Martens, and Lemurs. The ferals that day would go on to become you and me — The Ascended. Those chosen by The God of Creation to receive the sacred sacrament and evolve beyond our primitive beginnings. When Azurrel spoke to them that day... “

The pew creaks as I lean back into it. I don't need to pay attention to the homily, I've heard this one plenty of times before. A few seats down a Ruffed noble with the same idea tilts her head back and stares blankly at the ceiling.

The story of how Azurrel transcended everyone into modern animals and what separates us from ferals is universally understood. It's one of those things that regardless of where you come from, at an early age you'll be taught a version of the story that goes roughly the same way.

So, it's no surprise I'm not the only one who's getting a little bit bored hearing it retold once again from our church's perspective.

The reading of the holy book isn't even required during this ceremony. We could skip straight to the main event! But since communion is the most attended event at the chapel by far, the church always tries to throw in some scripture so the stragglers that don't regularly attend are forced to intake some of the words of the Goddess.

You know, stragglers like me.

Yeah, I don't get down to the chapel very often. It's not that I don't believe in our own religion. I do, but... once I become Queen? I'm going to have to take the whole thing very seriously. Much, much more seriously than I do now.

As a Princess, the only thing that's really expected of me is that I attend state events when it's appropriate for me to do so, and to stay healthy. It's not required that I come down here to the chapel, so I don't.

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That all changes once I ascend the throne. My mom is heavily involved in the affairs of the church. Officially, she's a Deacon. That means she attends weekly meetings about how it's run, makes important decisions about funding, and must have good attendance for services in the chapel.

In fact, she's sitting on the other side of Sofl right now. Mom may be able to get out of some of her regular duties if there are pressing state issues, but this

is the one ceremony she *must* be present for. That's because she is going to be an active participant in it very soon.

So, yeah. I'd like to try and stay away from here as long as I possibly can while I still have the freedom to do so. Mom doesn't really like it that I'm not as active as I could be, but she's never given me a whole lot of grief about it.

What's my secret? It's Sofl, actually.

He takes faith much more seriously than I do. As you probably noticed, he was way more into the reading of scripture than I was. Mom imparted to him at an early age the importance of regular attendance in the chapel. Combine that with not having the anxiety of knowing he'll need to play an important part in the church later in life and he fell right into it.

Which, you know, good for him! I'm glad he's able to find comfort in his faith. Even if I still wish he wasn't goaded into it by mom.

The chapel goes silent — a pause in the bishop's speech causes my idle train of thought about the future to dissipate. Sounds like he's wrapping things up and the main event is about to begin. All eyes in the chapel are about to be on mom, who's sitting only a seat away from me. I sit back up and try to make my hair and ruff look presentable.

The homily now finished, the bishop ambles his way slowly from the pulpit to the back of the altar, where a marble statue of the Goddess hangs over an ornate, golden box. He turns to face the congregation and announces, “The time has come for us to begin the Ceremony of Holy Communion. If the Monarch could please join me at the altar.”

Everyone present shifts their attention from the bishop to mom. With a dignified grace, she rises from her seat and makes her way past the mourner’s bench and to the foot of the altar. I push aside the uneasy reminder that I too will someday have to perform such lissome movements while the whole of Ellyntide is watching.

She bows her head to the bishop, and the bishop responds in kind. He turns to the box behind him — the tabernacle — and unseals it with a similarly elegant key from the pocket of his robe. Inside, two vessels are removed. Mother approaches the altar to accept a vessel, and the tabernacle is closed.

“The act of Holy Communion, the integral bond of communication between the Ascended and the Goddess Etain, is a tradition dating back centuries to the founding days of the Kingdom. It is our conduit to her holy wisdom, in the Goddess’ own voice.”

Basically, Communion is a friendly conversation between the Goddess Etain and the sitting Monarch. The Monarch gets to ask Etain for advice about matters of state, family affairs, anything she wants, really. In turn, Etain can offer her own advice and issue holy edicts for the faithful to follow.

The bishop will raise the sepulcher and recite a prayer to request Etain join the Monarch in Communion, and the Monarch will offer a prayer of their own. If Etain chooses to accept, Mother and the bishop will become very still, and say nothing for some time.

Once they begin moving again, Communion is over. The Monarch decides if they will share any of the details of their conversation or elect to keep it private. Most of the time mom does the latter, though Etain has been known to ask Monarchs to announce important events like changes to the holy book, the dealings of the other deities, or even intentions of War.

There's one other condition that can happen: Etain can decline to speak with the Monarch. Sometimes they just don't have a lot to talk about, I guess? Or Etain is upset about something and is intentionally ignoring them. But that's very unusual and has only happened a few times, ever. The Monarch really has to be messing up pretty bad for that to occur.

Currently, Etain has declined to talk to Mother for the past 3 months. That's unusual, but not unprecedented. Still, even though communion is the chapel's

most popular ceremony, there are more animals here than what's typical for one of these events. The pews are filled with people and the capacity is standing room only. A good 20 or so animals are hovering around the doors in the back of the nave.

The bishop raises the Sepulcher to chest level and begins the prayer in an even, steady cadence, underneath the effigy of the Goddess. "Blessed Etain. It is my privilege as Bishop of the Lordanou chapel to act as a conduit for Kelani Lordanou, daughter-of-Beatrix, and Monarch of the Kingdom of Ellyntide."

Mom follows the Bishop's lead, holding her sepulcher at chest level, "Goddess Etain, herald of the 19 prophets, chosen by Azurrel for all Lemurkind. We, the Ascended, seek your guidance in our time of need. Speak to me, so I may learn your truths!"

Simultaneously, mom and the bishop go motionless. A few in attendance gasp at the sight of their stiff bodies.

Etain accepted!

Sofi's tail shoots straight up in excitement and I practically have to push it out of the way to continue watching.

Now that I have a view again... hang on a second. Is mom moving?

The top half of her body is still motionless, but her legs are shaking ever so slightly. The Bishop, although a little farther away, appears completely still.

“Huh? Mother...?” asks Sofl to himself. He’s noticed it, too.

The voices of those around us begin to grow louder, including those of the two palace guard who are positioned at the front of the pews. I can see their muzzles moving as they talk to each other, though I’m not close enough to make out what they’re saying.

They’re not considering interrupting communion, are they? That would be unthinkable! The guards are there to prevent communion from being interrupted, not interrupt it themselves.

Without warning, mom’s body convulses. She drops the sepulcher and her body goes limp, collapsing to the ground along with the bishops. My stomach sinks watching her fall.

Whump!

All at once, screams break out and the whole of the Chapel rises in a collective panic.

“Mother!!” Sofl shrieks. The palace guard rush to mom’s side with Sofl sprinting directly behind them.

I stand there, watching this tragedy unfold in silence.

...

...What am I doing?! Why am I still standing in the pews?!

I shake myself out of the trance of simply observing this crisis and hustle to the altar, pushing aside other gawking animals as I go. When I arrive, it seems mom’s regained consciousness as the guards are helping her to sit up again.

Thank the Goddess she's still alive.

"Queen Kelani! What happened!?" asks one of the Guard.

Mom holds her hand over her right temple, groaning. "Ngghh..."

Hey! Don't go too quickly with her, guys. "Please take your time, mother," I implore over the guards.

I feel the presence of someone close to me. I turn to see Duncan, who's been watching the ceremony from the back of the nave, standing over me. He snaps his fingers and points to the Ruffed guard who isn't holding up mom.

"You. Give us a perimeter of at least 15 feet around the Queen. Nobody is allowed through until her physician arrives."

She gives a curt nod of understanding and heads to control the crowd of onlookers that's beginning to assemble behind us.

Behind the altar, some of the choir boys are helping the bishop to sit up. He's slower to rise but appears to be alright too. Taking over supporting mom's back, Duncan orders the other guard to check on the bishop and prevent anyone from approaching us from the back. That leaves me, Duncan, and Sofl around mom.

"Your Highness, are you alright? C-Can you tell us what happened?" stammers Duncan, trying to keep his cool. Sofl is hunched next to him and it looks like he could break out crying at any moment.

Again, mom says nothing. No longer holding her head, she stares straight past us with a disturbed expression.

Mom...

Is everything going to be alright?

Sofl takes mom's hand and clutches it. The sensation of touch jolts her back to reality.

“I saw the Goddess,” she breathes, barely audible over the commotion in the chapel. “She approached me with a terrible, awful gaze. Then, she turned away and left me there. Alone.”

Sofi blinks. “Huh? What did Etain say?”

“She said nothing.”

Mom stares at me with a morbid face.

“She said nothing!”