

THE PRINCESS'S FEATHERS

31. The Northern Continent

I pump my wings to gain speed, feeling a second wind of energy as the far-off land comes into view. I've dreamed of moments like this, flying into new lands with promises of exploration and adventure. But I always thought I would do it from the comfort of an airship once I became Queen, limited to the parts of Ellyntide that I hadn't yet visited. To instead do so under the power of my own *wings*, given a temporary reprieve from my responsibilities to the throne? And that glistening new land was the *Northern Continent*?

Why this might be the closest thing I've felt to euphoria.

My heart sings, warmed by the light filtering down and the breeze blowing beneath my wings. I can't help but call out a friendly greeting to anyone who might be listening on the ground at my destination ahead.

As I approach the continent, the first detail I can make out is the grass at Archer's Landing. Golden and brown, flowing in the breeze much as it did on the windy island in Sarlain. Certain that it's just as windy down there, I decide to look inland for a spot that's sheltered from the wind.

That's when I notice the trees.

Specifically, how *big* they are.

At this altitude where the winds are calm, the windswept trees in Sarlain looked like unkempt weeds. But here at the Northern Continent, they're sentinels, spiny tips towering into the sky above even the redwoods I slept under in Ellyntide. What's more, further back in the forests appear even taller trees, rising to seemingly impossible heights. I'm certain my days of squeezing under the lowly branches of maples and cypresses are over.

I never got to see the Elder Tree from this altitude. I wonder how it would compare to what I see now?

Finally, after nearly 2 full days of travel, I glide over the edge of the continent. I release a sigh, relieved that for once a part of my journey ended unceremoniously.

I bank down, departing my sea of calm to re-enter the gales. An eddy of rising wind passes beneath my wings, bringing a host of strange and alien scents to my nose. I smell the pollen of late-season flowers, dreamy and calming — a member of the borage family if my enhanced nose is to be trusted. I sense a stream somewhere, flowing gently over damp and muddy ground. Should be a good place to stop and get a drink before continuing.

Then, I smell... something strange. Something *familiar*. A musty, earthen smell that I'm certain belongs to a feral I know, but one I've never encountered before. I listen to my instincts, hoping for guidance, but their advice is unclear — the source of this smell could be a friend, a threat, or neither of them.

I need to investigate this once I land.

I pick out a patch of trees a safe distance from the edge and go in for the landing behind them. As I approach the ground and smaller details become more clear, I gasp at the realization of just how many of the sweet-smelling flowers lie below me. I flap tired wings hard and a great cloud of petals is ejected into the air.

My talons touch the ground, and a perfect landing is executed.

I did it!!!

The continent joins me in my celebration, raining down flower petals like confetti. I stand mesmerized, watching them flutter and drift into the flower beds.

When they all return to the ground I exhale, dipping my neck in exhaustion. Although flying has become second nature to me, that was still a grueling flight to make. The scent of flowers rise around me, making me drowsy, and making me wish I could settle down in the beds for a quick nap...

But, I have to keep moving. I came out here to get help from other Lithans, and I have to do everything I possibly can to get their help and return to Ellyntide as quickly as possible. My thoughts, and my guilt, won't allow me to rest until I see this quest through.

...But I am pretty thirsty from such a long flight, so I should at least allow myself that. Once I'm rehydrated I can focus on that strange scent I found.

My plan decided, I sniff the air and gather my bearings. It only takes a moment to locate the stream I smelled from the air during my descent. I set off across the field in its direction, giving me some time to take in my brand new surroundings. Thick bunches of grass cover the ground and bunch up into tussocks, broken up by the occasional patch of shrubs or dreamy-smelling flowers. Visually, this windswept plain near the edge of the continent is not that different from the ones that exist in Ellyntide. Where it differs though is the scents flowing through the air.

It's really quite striking. *Everything* here smells different, even the same plants I saw growing in Ellyntide!

I hop down a low-slung escarpment and locate the stream my nose picked up. Even for autumn, the water's running low, but there's enough of a trickle for me to take a sip. I weave my head around the reeds at the edge of the bank and indulge in a well-deserved drink.

Tweesha!

The chirrup of a bird grabs my attention. Confused, as I hadn't smelled any other ferals nearby, I raise my head and face the source of the sound. Across the stream and perched at the top of a water reed is a bird I've never, ever seen before. Nearly the size of an eagle, the bird is clad in gorgeous red feathers that taper down to shimmering, iridescent wingtips. So striking is the sheen of its feathers and beak that it seems the bird itself is glowing.

Holy cow. I knew there would be some unusual ferals living here, but this is far beyond anything I was expecting. I've never seen a creature as beautiful as this before! Much less

one that smells like seemingly nothing at all. As if sensing that my attention had been averted, the marvelous bird swivels its head and its golden eyes meet mine.

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Twaasha!

Huh...?

Just now, buried in the sound of its chirp, I thought I heard the bird say my name. But... that couldn't be possible, could it? I stretch my neck out, hoping it speaks again.

Aasha!! Aasha!!

There!! It trilled my name as eloquently as any native speaker of the Goddess language!! Just what kind of bird is

this?! Before I can react further the bird takes flight, streaking across the prairie like a falcon and leaving a shimmering trail of loose feathers and dappled light in its wake.

“H-hey!! Come back here!”

I thrust over the stream and give chase, following the falling beads of light over the rolling hills of grass. The bird weaves up and around obstacles with ease, effortlessly able to perform split-second maneuvers that should be impossible for any creature with wings. Its speed and agility make it too risky to take to the air myself, forcing me to stick with an on-talon chase.

Exhaustion begins to get the better of me. I cry out to the feathered speedster, "Please, stop!!" But instead of obeying it simply banks another hard turn to the right, heading straight for the tree line. Knowing I'll lose it if it flies into the forest I feel a burst of adrenaline, giving me the energy for one final sprint.

Just when it seems I'll lose pace the bird slows, taking its time to fly up and choose the perfect spot to land in a tree at the edge of the forest. It glides and perches on a branch of a sequoia, ruffling its feathers at me in perhaps some perverse amusement over the amount of effort it took for me to keep up.

Still panting from the sprint, I mosey up to the tree. "How... how do you know my name?"

The bird stares at me and blinks. It twists its head around and begins twittering as any feral bird would.

My patience withers. "Hey!! You can't fool me, dumb bird!! I heard what you said back there, now tell me how you know I'm Princess Asha!"

It responds by simply preening its backside as if I'm no longer there.

Am I losing my mind? I didn't just imagine it speaking the Goddess language, did I? After everything that happened in Rhl, It's difficult to know what to believe. Perhaps I really am arguing with some lesser bird. A lesser bird that glows and shimmers in the light of an overcast sky.

I study the feral for a moment, watching to see if its behavior changes. I'm about to give up and turn on my way when a flare of surprise jolts the bird from its flank. It ruffles into a ball of fluff and screeches, "*ASHA!! ASHA!!*" before launching itself into the forest.

Properly agitated, I snarl a curse and thrust under the tall trees, refusing to let the bird escape. The first time might have been an aberration, but now there can be no doubt: this creature knows who I am and is trying to lead me somewhere!

Mottles of color, gold and brown, rush past me on all sides. I switch my gaze between the twisting path ahead and the trail of light weaving through the branches above, straining to keep pace and overcome tired legs heavy with exhaustion. Just when it seems I've reached the limit of my stamina the bird screeches, vibrating its wings like a hummingbird to achieve a stunning burst of speed. It sails ahead, over a low-hanging branch and banks left behind a tree trunk.

Bounding over a thicket I emerge on the other side only to find that the trail of light had terminated unexpectedly, leaving no trace of the magical glowing bird. I flare my wings and skitter to a stop, instinctively scanning to see if it had escaped into the canopy above.

But something besides the bird catches my eye. The needles on the branches of one of the trees above me... I've seen their distinct, bushy green distribution pattern before. *Lots* of times before, in fact.

No way. Could it really be...?

I draw my gaze moonbound to survey the area around me, only to have it immediately drawn back up again. I'm not just standing under a grove of disparate trees, I'm standing under *one* tree. An immense, unimaginable specimen of *Elderus Lithanteum* –

the same species as the Elder Tree in Varecia!

I take a step back in a futile attempt to scan the full circumference of the tree's base. Its lowest branches are so high off the ground that if I had reason to, I could take off and go for a flight entirely underneath them. Their tendrils flow back and originate from a truly immense trunk, easily the largest I've ever seen, sprouting from a gnarled mess of roots at its base.

My interest in locating the bird completely dissolves. This is *incredible!!* What's more, my senses locate the same strange scents I smelled during my descent. But unlike those stale scents, these are fresh. Whichever feral they came from, it's been here recently.

That glowing bird... it was leading me here on purpose, wasn't it? It seems I owe it a debt of gratitude.

After taking a moment to ponder my next move, I decide to investigate the source of the strange scent. As much as I'd love to take a detour and explore the *elderus*, this scent

could be a lead in locating other Lithans. If another Lithan has been around here recently, then I need to locate it before it leaves. Who knows if I'll ever find that magical, glowing bird again? This might be my only chance to locate another member of my species.

Sniffing the air, I get a clearer picture of the scents surrounding me. The profile of this area matches what I can see with my eyes: a patchwork of strange shrubs and thickets grew immediately underneath the tree, and a spattering of tall oak and sequoia surrounds the perimeter. Despite the room for trees to grow underneath the elderus, the area is suspiciously clear of them. There are no other feral scents besides the strange one, which seems to be coming from the roots of the elderus.

An investigation is in order!

I approach the base of the tree, keeping my senses and my wings tensed in case I walk headlong into a Lithan. As I get closer, the scale of the roots becomes clear; specifically, they're taller than even *me*, a full-size Dragon! What's more, the strange scent seems to be originating between one of the crevices where the roots fold alongside one another. In that corner appears to be a hole big enough for a Dragon to walk through.

Then it hits me, plain as day: This whole time, I've been smelling one of my own.

This is the scent of A Lithan.

It all makes perfect sense to me now. Why my instincts were giving me mixed signals about what I was smelling. Why it smelled familiar, despite never having smelled it before. I've never been around other Lithans, so how could I have known?

What's more, It seems I've been led to one of their *nests*. Putting aside how amazing it is that Lithans make their nests out of the roots of an elderus... what should I do, now? Knock on the front door and see if anyone's home?

I recall all the things that could possibly go wrong meeting a Litan for the first time. Will we be able to communicate with one another? What happens if they're totally feral and attack me on sight? Or if they consider me an enemy?

Perhaps I should call from the outside. That will give me enough room to retreat in case things go wrong. I position myself directly in front of the maw of the nest and bunch my muscles. A whole lot is hinging on this first interaction going right.

"Hello...? Is anyone in there?" I call into the darkness.

A breathless moment passes. I angle my ears forward to listen for any signs of movement from the nest, but there are only the gentle sounds of the forest around me. "If someone is inside, could you please come out?"

The wind blows through the elderus above, causing the branches to moan as they sway. I relax a little, feeling more certain that the nest is abandoned. "Well, okay. If nobody's home, then I'm—"

Rrrrrgh.

Light glimmers off a pair of serpentine eyes as a gurgling growl escapes the nest. My body freezes, lanced by the same fear the animals in Ellyntide must have felt seeing me flying through the sky. The beast within rustles and a heartbeat later a scaled, brown head emerges from the dark. Black claws protrude from its rugged jawline, and horns grew on its head in much the same way as mine. Green eyes narrow into slits and the creature snorts in disgust. It ambles into the light of day, lurching forward on transparent wings, its body covered in brown and black scales.

With fear coursing through me I retreat a step. This is no Lathan nest I've discovered. It's a nest belonging to the *other* species of Dragon on the Northern Continent:

Redaga!!

32. Outwitted

Panic envelopes me and my heart stampedes. How unlucky am I that the first Dragon nest I discover on the Northern Continent belongs to a Redaga?! I never even considered the possibility of running into one!!

"Whoa there," I say, fumbling another step back. I should at least try appealing to reason. "Let's not get started on the wrong foot. Can you understand me?"

The Redaga twists its head and blinks. It gruffs something under its breath, ambling forward a few paces to stretch and scream a defiant roar.

ROOOARRGHH!!

I flinch, surprised at just how loud another Dragon can be. Its aggression makes it all but certain that it couldn't understand a word I said and is instead quite upset that I interrupted its nap.

Damn it, this is bad! If I were well-rested, I think I could defend myself from the Redaga. It seems our understanding of how small these Dragons are is correct, as it appears to be three-quarters my size. Additionally, it lacks the large foretalons that I possess and instead ambles around using its wings for balance against the ground.

But I'm not well-rested — I'm exhausted. And, much like hunting, I have no idea how to fight in this body. I was able to defend myself back in the hollow, but a Marten with a sword is no comparison to a full-grown Dragon with scales for armor. And if it possesses fangs like my own, then all it would take is one miscalculation to give me a serious injury. If that happens, I'm good as dead.

Before I can think of what to do next the Redaga charges forward with fangs bared! It snaps its jaws at my left shoulder, barely missing the tips of feathers as I lunge to the side to avoid the attack. I quickly turn about and face my enemy with a fearsome snarl.

The Redaga hesitates, if only for a heartbeat before it lowers its head and begins pacing around me. I may not be trained in how to fight, but I do still have the self-defense training given to me by Calypso. The Redaga is clever; I know from his training that it's looking for an opening, waiting for the right moment to come at me when I'm off-balance. I begin circling in kind, making sure my body is facing the same direction as the scaled drake.

Of course, Calypso only trained me in defense strategies that would bide my time. The assumption was I would only have to defend myself long enough for someone from my security entourage to come and save me. That's never going to happen out here.

Quite frankly, I have no desire to fight a Redaga, ever. Certainly, not right now. If I can make my way back to the field where I entered the forest and take off, would the Redaga take flight and chase after me?

I snarl another warning and the Redaga flinches, taking a sudden step backward.

Yes... It's scared of me. It knows how much bigger and more dangerous I am. Based on what I know of feral behavior, if I retreat, it won't try to follow me. I exaggerate a sniff to bluff a threat, masking its real purpose of drawing in the scents under the tree. If I can get a fix on those flowers I smelled when I landed, I'll be able to follow it back to—

My thoughts are tripped up — literally, by a buried log I couldn't see — causing me to stumble forward. The Redaga seizes my blunder and rushes forward with incredible speed, its jaws outstretched to attack! Lacking any control with my talons I pump my wings as a last resort to push myself out of the way, but it's not quite enough as the Redaga manages to extend its wing claws far enough out to cut open my right leg.

I yelp, tumbling clumsily onto the ground. When I feel the moon beneath my talons again I thrust myself off my haunches and twist to get back upright. The Redaga lurches forward again but quickly pulls back, realizing its opportunity to capitalize had already passed.

I bare teeth and hiss in pain, reeling from the force of the impact. Blood runs over my feathers from the cut, which doesn't feel deep, but it hurts all the same! The Redaga stares at the wound with wide eyes, seemingly distracted by something about it. I stifle the urge to look around and see what's so interesting about my leg, knowing to do so would open me up to another attack. It's a moot point anyway because I was able to relocate the scent of the dreamy flowers from the field. Time for a dignified retreat!

I turn about and take off running, letting the scents guide me in a direction away from where I entered the area below the tree, around the twisting roots of the elderus, and to the opposite side. The Redaga screeches and gives chase, but doesn't seem to be able to run as fast as I can. Unwilling to give them an advantage I plunge through an oversized thicket and into the forest.

Angry roars echo like thunder against the sounds of talons running through dried autumn foliage. Exhaustion quickly settles in and slows my escape to a brisk jog. After a few panicked moments, it seems I've put enough distance between myself and the Redaga that I can slow down a little. The forest here is dense with felled trees the size of buildings and thickets that are as tall as me. The botanist in me sees families and genera unknown to science, exactly the type of exotic flora I expected to find here. But I'm far too scared, far too exhausted to give it any more than a passing thought.

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Eventually, the sounds of the Redaga fade and cease entirely. I check the scents every few moments to make sure it's not creeping up from behind for a surprise attack, but can only make out the muffled smells of the forest and the dreamy flowers blowing through the trees. After a while, the floral scent grows stronger, and the canopy begins to thin. I slow to a more gingerly trot, trying to preserve my energy for the flight ahead. I'll have to fly deeper into the continent from here until I pick up the scent of more Lithans.

Through the trees ahead I begin to make out pale sky. Breathing a sigh of relief, I walk around the last tree and push myself through some low-growing trees to a grassy clearing on the other side.

ROOAARGGH!!

Panic flares in my heart seeing the Redaga standing square in the vast clearing, its neck held low and its wings splayed, roaring a sinister threat.

It was waiting for me?! How...?! How could this be?!

I've severely miscalculated the resolve of this Dragon. Not only did it predict where I would go, but it must also have figured out a way to get into the sky from the forest. There's no other explanation for how it could have made it here faster than I could run. If that wasn't confounding enough, it found some way to mask its scent so I couldn't smell it in the breeze while I was approaching the clearing. I thought I was escaping, but instead, I was running straight into a trap!

I don't know what it sees in me — my inexperience or my exhaustion — but it knows I'm weak. It knows I'm an easy *kill*. If I take off now and try to flee, it'll simply fly after me until I'm forced to land from exhaustion. Then it will confront there and my death will be assured.

There's no other choice, I have to fight the Redaga here!! I curl my talons into the grass and issue a response to its challenge.

SKEEEECH!!!

Once more I let go of the rational part of myself, allowing my instincts to control my actions. The predator in me is tired of being abated, frustrated with running away. It sees the Redaga as a lesser feral, a witless beast that is meant to be culled by a superior Dragon like myself. It demands *blood*.

I thrust forward, pouncing at the Redaga with my foretalons aimed for its neck. Anticipating my strike it quickly dodges to my left, snapping jaws towards my shoulder but coming up short. Taking a vital moment to reposition its wings for its next attack gives me another opening to slash at the Redaga. I aim for the wings, hoping to hinder its mobility, but it aptly pulls back once more. I continue trading swings at the Redaga, each time missing as the drake dodges, never making any attempts of its own to counter-attack. After the 4th failed blow I desist, forced to stop from over-exerting myself.

Rationality interrupts my instincts as the Redaga's face turns coy. Staring down the pied dragon with labored breaths, I understand its strategy: It's leading me on, allowing me to flail about and make attacks it knows it can dodge. I might be bigger and more powerful than the Redaga, but its smaller size makes it more nimble, and more easily able to predict my moves and avoid them. It knows I'll eventually tire and that's when it will start to fight back.

Damn it. I can't attack the Redaga head-on, I'm far too exhausted and it's far too quick. How am I going to win this fight? Isn't there anything else at my disposal I can use? My thoughts quickly arrive back at yesterday: Owens Island, and the towering inferno of flame and smoke.

I could use my *fire* against it.

I haven't dared risk trying it since yesterday for fear of causing another catastrophe. But if the alternative is to die here at the fangs of some ignominious beast then I will happily take the risk of more environmental destruction.

The Redaga is quick, so I'm going to have to act just as quickly using it. Watching my movements carefully, the Redaga's eyes follow me as I pace around with my head held high. I feign dismay, acting like I'm out of ideas on what to do next. I want it to put its guard down and shift into an offensive stance. At that moment when it thinks it has the upper hand, that is when I'll use my fire.

The Redaga snarls, trying to goad me into another fruitless attack. I answer back with a low grumble, and the Redaga's tail begins lashing against the grass behind it. I see its haunches tense for another thrust towards me.

Now's the time!

I twitch my neck back, tickling the fire-producing nerve in the back of my throat and expelling smoke from my nose. The Redaga goes bug-eyed and shrieks, guessing correctly what it is I'm about to do. It tries to rear back and flee, but it's too late! I snap my neck forward, letting my maw fling wide open.

Nothing happens.

I tickle the muscle again, but only a minuscule puff of smoke leaves my mouth.

The Redaga chortles with glee, lifting its head out from the cover of a wing. I nearly trip recoiling backward to the trees, panic swelling in my chest. What happened to my fire breath?! It worked so well yesterday when I nearly burnt down Owens Island, why can't I produce even a spark now?!

There's no time to assess what went wrong. The Redaga senses my panic and capitalizes, launching itself headlong towards me with a piercing shriek. I try to evade but the drake's seen me dodge enough times to anticipate it, dragging a wing claw against the ground to cause its body to rotate sideways. Its long tail flings around from the back like a whip and strikes the side of the head.

Thick pain shrouds my head as my neck careens backward. I'm too hurt to react, too disoriented to notice the back of my head colliding ingloriously into the side of a tree trunk.

THWUMP!

The force of the trunk splits my head and I collapse to the ground, rapidly losing awareness and feeling. In my wrenching stupor, I see the Redaga standing tall a short distance from me, its face filled with depraved joy.

Beyond its shoulder, there's... something else, now? I plead with my body to move but my thoughts are turning cloudy, and my muscles seize. The Redaga bears down with jaws wide as my consciousness falls into the arms of darkness.

33. First Contact

For a time, all was still and dark.

Then, movement.

Fleeting images, shooting past me like a train racing down the tracks. Too fast to truly infer their meaning. Too far away to reach out and interact with them.

A brown shape, perhaps the Redaga, standing over me. I try to cry out, but no sound is produced. Then, a gray and red shape, appearing somewhere in front of me and taking up my field of vision. Is that what I saw beyond the Redaga? Has another come to help finish me off? I strain to stand up and flee, but my muscles are locked stiff.

Rapid movements. Shrieks and roars. A chorus of lonesome howls.

Once more, all was still and dark.

Feeling and consciousness return to me on a hacking cough.

Thick and acrid smoke filled my lungs, making breathing almost impossible. Sensing a source of heat close by I attempt to open my eyes and escape, but the burning smoke is simply too much. Throbbing with pain I flail my head about, frantically searching for fresh air, but find none.

“You overdid it, featherbrain.”

What?!

“Shut-up. The smoke roused her, she’ll live.”

Whatwhatwhat?!

I understand someone else's speech for the first time in two days. Two distinct voices; a gruff male and a haughty female, speaking the Goddess language to each other as perfectly as I’ve ever heard it spoken before. They aren’t speaking that strange dialect!! Have I returned to normal?!

Still disoriented from blacking out, I attempt to flex my right palm to test its function. But instead of feeling my fingers move, I nearly lose balance and topple over myself. I have to slap my talons to the ground to keep myself standing upright.

...Nope. Im still a Litan.

But if I can understand language again, and the boy called the girl a, '*featherbrain*', then surely that must mean...

Sensing that the source of the heat is no longer there, I rub my eyes clear of the soot that's built up around them. They open slowly and the scene before me comes into focus. Reflexively my head jerks back in shock at what I see.

They're Lithans!

Lean and muscular with a soot gray appearance, somehow I can tell just by glancing that the larger Lithan directly in front of me is the female of the two. Her feathers are predominantly dark gray with patches of lighter plumage on her face and neck, the same color as the flight feathers of her sprawling, tattered wings. The dorsal feathers of her ears extend back far to a point, and her horns are a different shape and a longer length than my own.

She dips her wings and her expression turns soft. "Take it easy, fress," she chuckles at my surprised reaction, calling me a name I've never heard before. Despite her amusement, there's a certain gentleness reflecting in her merlot eyes. "We were in the sky when we saw you hit that tree. Knocked you out cold, it's a good thing we happened to be nearby and heard the fight."

So, that's what happened to me. The shapes I saw beyond the Redaga as I was losing consciousness were these Lithans coming to my aid. They were able to stop just as it was about to make the killing blow. I blink, realizing that this sweet-sounding Lithan just saved my life.

Her voice is cool like a spring rain shower, and gentle as a butterfly landing on a rose petal. A distant memory from kit hood is evoked – the nights mom spent sitting near my bed, crooning lullabies by candlelight to help me fall asleep. How could she be the same Lithan that told the boy so flatly a moment ago to shut up?

Sense returns to my nose and I get a whiff of her scent, almost as sweet as her voice. She smells of apples and cinnamon, parties, and good times. The rosy scents of autumn itself.

Beyond her attractive scent are traces of the smoke that invaded my lungs moments ago. I trace its source to the ground next to the dark Lithan where a dry and woody tree branch is smoldering smoke into the air. She must have used her fire to ignite it, waving the smoke around to wake me up.

This is... so much more than I would have expected from feral animals.

Not only do Lithans possess the gift of speech from Azurrel, but they're intelligent enough to recognize that smoke can be used as an irritant to wake someone from sleep. Or in my case, loss of consciousness.

I cast a furtive glance past the gentle woman and down to the victim of her scorn. A male colored deep copper with strips of black running down his back and over his wings, and a piece of ligament dangling haphazardly from his jaws. He's presiding over the Redaga that attacked me, now dead and torn open.

Lithans treat Redaga as *prey*? What a delicious feast that must be. Please, eat as much of the bastard as you like.

The boy looks up from his meal and his dark eyes narrow. “What were you doing fighting False-Kin, anyways? It’s reckless to take on one yourself.”

Again they mention a word I’m unfamiliar with, but I take it to assume he’s referring to the Redaga lying at his talons. Why is it ‘False-Kin’? Who’s kin, exactly? And why are they illegitimate?

Also, what’s a ‘fress’?

It’s clear I’m waking up into a world utterly different from my own, one I have no knowledge of or experience dealing with. But if there’s one thing that seems to bind us it’s the bonds of decency and kindness. Despite the tone of the copper male, these Lithans went out of their way to find me in my time of need, risking their lives to save mine. Once again I’m humbled by those stronger than me.

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I need to give them my gratitude for saving my life. But, um, how should I do this? Talking to these creatures, I shouldn’t be as forthright as possible. Not yet, anyway. They need to know who I am and where I’m from, but I don’t want to overwhelm them off the bat with information that won’t make sense. They’ve already done so much for me, and soon I’ll be asking them for even more help.

Let's take things slowly. This is only the first time someone has ever spoken to a Litan, after all. *No pressure.*

"T-thank you. For rescuing me," I breathe, having trouble locating my voice under my nervousness. So much is riding on me getting this conversation right. I look up to gauge their reaction and feel the weight of those evocative Litan eyes staring back at me for an explanation. "Um, I was at..."

Wait a second. I can't call it an *elderus* tree. They have no idea what a '*scientific name*' even is. Um...

"...The *big tree* back there," I improvise, pointing my tail in the direction I came from. "I tried calling inside the root of the tree because it smelled safe, and the False-Kinwas there. It attacked me."

The copper male raises an eyebrow, then shoots a glance in the direction I pointed with a grunt. "Shifty vermin. Hiding in dens and ambushing Loners..."

Another new word, '*Loner*'. And the hole in the roots I found was actually a den? Well, I suppose that makes sense. But why did I smell the scent of a Litan outside of it? Shouldn't my senses have known a Redaga was in there and warned me?

The male turns back to address me. "You need to be more careful on these lands, Loner. You're not safe from them here like you are in your territory."

A sternness grew in his voice, mentioning territory that evidently belongs to me. I suppose he takes it to mean that *I'm* a Loner, whatever that entails. But how could he know that just by looking at me?

I turn to the female, hoping for some kind of reprieve. But instead of the compassion she showed earlier, her expression had turned cold. Is she disappointed in me for some reason? If there's land elsewhere in the Northern Continent that's supposed to be mine, does that mean I'm trespassing on her territory?

No... as I stare deeper into those dark eyes, her true feelings reveal themselves. She's not disappointed in me at all.

She *pities* me.

Who could blame her? To her, I'm just some lost, confused little Lathan that's far from her territory and roughed up by a Redaga. So helpless, she needs to rely on some strangers to go out of their way to save her life.

Well... she's not wrong. She's more right than she'll ever know.

"...I see."

I stare into the grass below me. Painful memories of home and the reasons I'm so far away from it stew in my head. I know I haven't disappointed her in the slightest, yet it still *feels* like I did.

Why does it bother me so much?

There's a movement among the Lithans, but I'm too downtrodden to raise my head. I hear the sound of something being ripped apart, and then the spiced scent of the female grows close.

Whump!

A slab of juicy-fresh Redaga meat drops in front of me. Confused, I turn up to see the female Lathan standing in front of me. Her expression had become gentle once more.

"Here," she says. "You haven't been eating well for harvestwing. This will help."

For the first time, I watch her mouth curl into a sweet little smile.

I stare at her, even more confused than I was earlier. She's just... giving me some of their prey? Why? What did I do to deserve compassion?

I spot the copper Lithan behind her, his lip raised like the most offensive thing he'd ever witnessed just occurred. "She's not a fledgling, *Kuro*. She can fend for herself."

Kuro grunts, pivoting to face the male and airing her wings wide in an aggressive stance. "*Enyll*, you're no better than that Redaga if you can't have some common decency for Loners."

WOW.

Enyll snaps his jaws and lets out a furious snarl that shakes the moon. Kuro simply rolls her eyes, keeping her talons planted in front of the angry male. The two stare at each other for a tense moment, tails lashing against the grass behind them. It seems that a fight is about to break out when Enyll yields, flattening his feathers with a loud grunt. He buries his head into the body of the Redaga and Kuro neatly folds her wings, satisfied by the outcome.

Okay, first of all...

Kuro and Enyll? Those are lovely names. I've never heard anyone with names quite like those before, and they're really interesting. Lithans know how to pick them.

Secondly...

GREAT burn, Kuro!! I wish everyone who thought I was a tremendous jerk to Orlando could've seen that one! The aggressive stance, the delivery of her line, the genuine scorn she harbored, *well done!!*

Really though, I'm kinda shocked at how fast a small squabble between those two almost escalated into a full-on fight. Enyll seems to have a short fuse with Kuro, and Kuro seemed all too happy to provoke him. I wonder what the relationship between them is like and why they were flying with each other?

Kuro turns back and notices the still untouched prey left on the ground. She seems surprised I paid attention to their argument instead of immediately taking a bite. Without acknowledging I quickly reach my head down and get to work. Kuro may have noticed it anyway, but I don't want to admit to them just how hungry I am.

"Besides," Kuro says with a tinge of arrogance. "There's plenty of meat to go around. Your sister expects a brood in the spring, does she not?"

Enyll tries to respond, but the words come out garbled. He swallows the prey he's chewing on and replies, "She does."

Understandable reaction. This Redaga is the freshest prey I've had yet, and it's *scrumptious*.

"Then we'll fly to Flat Rock from here and let her know. Better a Sister finish this off than a pack of *Litsha*."

Enyll nods. “May as well. It’s unusual nobody has replied to our knell.”

It sounds like they’re going to leave and find Enyll’s sister instead of allowing me to finish off the Redaga. It seems that being a ‘Loner’ in the Northern Continent means you don’t have rights to the prey caught by certain other Lithans. Clearly, Loners are treated like lower-class citizens here.

Kuro mentioned something called ‘Flat Rock’... is that some kind of Lathan camp, or settlement? Could it be only other Lithans from ‘Flat Rock’ are allowed to eat the prey Kuro and Enyll hunt? Am I a Loner because I don’t belong to a settlement?

Either way, I need to keep talking to them. If being a Loner means I’m somehow different from the Lithans that live in this territory, then this might be my only chance to interact with them. The next group of Lithans I encounter could be downright hostile towards Loners. If I can’t win against a Redaga, then there’s no way I’d survive a fight against an angry Lathan.

What if I asked to join them in Flat Rock? Would they allow me to fly with them?

If Flat Rock is some kind of Lathan settlement, then maybe there’s a way I can learn how to hunt there without giving away the fact that I’m a Lemur from Ellyntide. I don’t know how Lathan society works, but it’s clear the bonds of kindness and compassion exist here. If I played dumb and acted like some poor, unfortunate Loner who lost her memories after hitting a tree too hard, would they be sympathetic to my cause?

I don't know what I could offer them in return, but... I'm a Lemur from Ellyntide. I possess the knowledge and wisdom of a royal Princess with the best schooling in the Kingdom. My comprehension of science and technology is perhaps centuries ahead of theirs. There's gotta be *something*, some skill I can offer that's hugely beneficial to them.

Enyll is distant and doesn't seem to care about me a whole lot. But Kuro has already demonstrated her sympathy towards me. I'll start by talking to her.

"Um," I project my voice forward so I can get their attention. The two natives swivel their gaze. "You're very kind for sharing your prey with me. Thank you... Kuro."

Kuro's expression quirks. Worried I might have said something inappropriate I dip my head to reiterate my thanks.

"I'm curious," she says, examining me with an inquisitive eye. "What were you doing in the Farlands, Loner?"

"The Farlands?" What's that?

Amusement swells in her face. "You can't hide it from me, your feathers reek of them. You'd never flown there before, isn't that right?"

Wait, the *Far Lands*? Does she mean...

“It stays with you a few days, the scents from those islands.”

Oh!

...Oh, man.

She knows.

34. The Farlander

I should have known, too. The flora here is completely different from where I've been the past few days. Add to that I've been flying through airship plumes and sleeping under redwoods and accidentally lighting forests on fire... of course I'd smell like an outsider to them! No wonder they think I'm a Loner!

Enyll chuckles to himself, “Well of course she wouldn't know that, Kuro. As if loners ever get to smell their own.”

Kuro's ears twitch and she flicks her gaze to Enyll. He grins and raises his copper wings in a shrug.

Was that supposed to be an insult? Did I just get *burned* by a Lithan?

Kuro turns back to me with her friendliest expression yet. “I’ve never heard of a Loner visiting the Farlands. So, what were you doing there? Hunting?”

Oh, gosh. Now I’ve really been put on the spot. What should I tell her? Should I still lie and act like I have no memories of my time in the Farlands? Or will she see through it like she saw that I had been there recently?

Lying is still my best option, I think. How could I possibly explain to them who I am and where I’m from? It’s not like memory loss makes a whole lot of sense, either. I could just tell her I only remember certain things and what I was doing in the Farlands is one of them. Then I just need to pivot the conversation...

...

I stare deep into Kuro’s face and those inquisitive, Lithan eyes of hers.

When I was still a Lemur, I occasionally had to attend posh dinners or other formal events where the royal family would be present.

It happened to me all the time — I’d be beside myself, trying to avoid all the attention mom loved to attract. Someone would approach me and try to strike up some small talk

with the future Queen. I'd tell them about my time volunteering in the garden, or maybe some of the botany books I was reading.

I could watch the interest drain from their faces as I rambled on.

But in Kuro, I see the same spark of curiosity I saw in people like Professor Willow when we talked about plants, or in Sofl when we worked in his lab. There's a genuine, heartfelt desire in her to learn more about those strange lands on the other side of the moon.

How could I possibly lie to her, then? I know I have to do everything I can to safely return to Varecia, but how could I deceive someone so kind and pure?

"Um, w-well," I stumble, anchoring my talons to the ground, still unsure if I'm really going to tell them the truth. "I'm from... there. I—I live in the Farlands." The words leave my mouth as if someone else spoke them.

"What?!" Kuro recoils like a wing slapped her in the face.

Enyll wheezes, nearly choking on a piece of meat. "*Live* in the Farlands?! Is your head full of sparrows?"

Erk! I knew this was going to happen! Why did I think being honest was the right thing to do!? What's wrong with me?!

Kuro's eyes narrow and she takes a defiant step toward me. "Just where can you live in the Farlands and be safe from those *monsters* that roam the sky?"

'*Monsters*' that roam the sky? Could she mean airships? Surely Lithans aren't concerned by the threat an airship poses, right? They could down one in seconds with a single blast of fire!

"I live in..." I trail off in thought. Again I want to lie to her and try to salvage the conversation, but I just can't bring myself to do it. "...Ellyntide. I flew from the mountains on the far end of the southern continent."

Kuro's face goes crooked. She swivels around and appeals to Enyll for help, but the boy seems just as confused. "What's a continent?" he asks.

"*Ellyntide*... I've heard that name before, but I c—" Kuro abruptly stops mid-sentence. A second later she turns to face me, all the kindness in her heart dissolved. Her brow furrows and she opens her wings wide. "How did you learn that name, Loner?"

"What?" I squeak, gasping for air. Unconsciously I retreat a step, but the soot-plumaged Lathan matches me and adds another two paces to close the gap. Her sprawling wings cover the sun, and it feels like they could stoop down and suffocate me.

"Ellyntide. That's a *Farlander* name," she growls. "Only *Kin* who come of age learn knowledge of the Farlands."

Wha...?

Farlander? Kin? Argh, I wish I knew what she was talking about!! Damn it, Asha, why didn't you just lie to them?! Why am I so stupid?!

Enyll flattens his ears and steps out from behind the Redaga. "You can't be *Exiled-Kin*, you're too young. If you were exiled, I'd recognize your face."

Kuro nods. "That's right. I'd recognize you, too. So tell me the truth, Loner. Where did you learn that name?"

Oh, man. This is bad. This is almost as bad as it was back in the hollow. It might even be worse because this time I can't rely on my instincts to come to my rescue and save me. All the goodwill I'd built up with Kuro has completely disappeared. If I had just lied to her then surely she would have believed me! They don't *need* to know I'm from Ellyntide, they just need to help me long enough so I can learn how to survive!

I feel the urge to turn and flee, but there's nothing but dense forest behind me. And even if there wasn't, where would I go? If I could somehow flee Kuro and Enyll, would anyone else truly help a Loner like me? Would I even survive long enough here to locate someone else?

I... I have to be honest and tell them the whole truth about who I am. The truth of my royal lineage, the attack on the hollow, and my supernatural transformation. For

whatever reason knowledge of Ellyntide seems to be forbidden information here. So much that they've gone completely cross at just my mentioning it. But If there are teachings of Ellyntide and the 'Farlands', could there also be teachings of my family? If I told them I'm a Lordanou, would they know what that means?

It's a long shot — and I feel like I've been saying this a lot lately — but what other choice do I have?

There is always a choice, but this one isn't particularly pleasant. But I *will* choose it.

"Um... well, I..."

No, no, no, this won't do at all. I have to project confidence to them. Mom never carried out diplomacy with a hostile kingdom stuttering like a child. She spoke slowly, and with distinction. This situation is no different, and so I should do the same.

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I ruffle and shake away my apprehension. Muzzle up. Back straight. Feathers and wings relaxed. Chest out.

"Kuro," I say, staring straight into her. Our eyes lock. "You have been wonderfully kind to me, so I won't try to deceive you. I should tell you my name. It's Asha, Asha Lordanou."

I pause to gauge their response. Enyll's face is stony, but Kuro's brow is raised. Has she heard of my family's name, too?

"I know Ellyntide because... I was born there. As a Lemur, in the city of Varecia. I am a member of the royal family and a Princess."

I pause again. Enyll's expression is wavering towards annoyance and Kuro looks more confused than ever. Damn it, I think I'm losing them!

"Two days ago something terrible happened to me and, impossibly, I became..." I open my wings wide and curve them inwards like they were wrapping around me. "...This. I took the form of a Lithan."

I pause once more, but instead of looking at Kuro and Enyll to see their reaction, I avert my eyes to the grass below. I can't possibly make the next request looking them straight on. Not when I know how just how cross they are right now.

"There's no easy way for me to make this request, and I'm sorry to drag the affairs of my world into yours, but... I need help. I don't know how to live this way, hunting for prey and being self-sufficient. I have to find some way to survive and let my family know I'm safe. It's imperative to so many people that I live to safely return to Ellyntide." I raise my head to meet Kuro and Enyll's gaze. "Please, I'm pleading to you... help me!!"

Silence stretches between us.

Enyll is staring at me incredulously as I'd expect, but Kuro... Kuro's face is firm. This time, I don't need to second guess what she's feeling.

She's disappointed in me.

I feel my heart sink as she releases a sigh and shakes her head. "And here I thought you weren't one of the weird ones..."

"Kuro..." I trail off. My wings collapse, feeling numb. How could she hear my story and still say no?

Enyll growls, "We're wasting our time, Kuro. Some rotten exile spoke the words of Kin into her ear and now she's gone completely mad."

Completely mad?! "That's not true!" I object. "Kuro, you—"

"Agreed," she raises her voice to drown out my own. "Leave her to her madness. We fly to Flat Rock from here."

Common sense departs me and I thrust headlong towards the natives, shoving myself in-between them to prevent them from leaving.

“Wait!”

Kuro tenses, quicker than a heartbeat, baring teeth and raising the hackles on her neck. Reflexively I pull back into my own defensive posture, raising my wings to try and appear bigger than the larger, soot-plumaged Lithan in front of me. A thunderous growl rises from Enyll, as menacing as any I’ve ever heard before.

Threaten me all you want, I don’t care. If I can’t get through to these Lithans and convince them to help me, then I’m as good as dead anyway. For those back home who are grieving for me now, I’ll risk my life if it means the chance of seeing them again. A life where I can’t return home to my family is a life not worth living.

“Kuro,” I say, panting heavy and locking my gaze with hers. “You’re profoundly curious why I smell like the Farlands.”

She stares at me a moment before flicking her eyes to Enyll, then back towards me.

Adrenaline surges through me. Why is she being so stubborn? Why won’t she just admit that she wants to learn more about me? I try to suppress it but a growl escapes me in frustration.

“Yes, that’s right. You’re just embarrassed to admit it. Tell me, would a Loner stricken with madness truly be fit to make the crossing from the Farlands?”

Kuro says nothing, and her expression is unwavering. Behind me, Enyll shifts his wings uncomfortably.

“I can tell you everything. If you’d just listen, I—“

“Listen to *me*,” Kuro rumbles in a voice that drowns out my own. “I’ve had enough of your nattering, Loner. Return to your lands, wherever they may be.”

I shake my head. “Kuro, ple—“

“SILENCE!!” she shrieks, opening her wings wide and lowering herself into an attack posture. I try to hold steadfast, but the sheer power of her voice echoing through the field is enough to make me cower in fear. For the first time, I truly understand why Lithans are such feared creatures.

She lets out a brooding warning growl. “*Leave. Now.* If I so much as see a feather of yours in Kin territory again, I’ll—“

SKREEEEECH!

A sharp call from above interrupts Kuro's threat. Everyone present turns skyward to see a blond-colored Lathan circling down from the sky, flapping its wings hard and coming in fast.

"Hmph," Enyll grunts behind me. "Well, it's about time someone responded."

'Responded'? Do they mean...

My stomach knots at the realization. Did they hear Kuro shrieking and come to help her?

Kuro grumbles, raising from her crouched position. "Good. Maybe he'll be able to get through to this featherbrain."

"Enyll!! Kuro!!" the blond Lathan yells as he descends, coming in fast and flapping his wings hard for a landing an order of magnitude quicker than anything I've been able to do so far.

Enyll glances toward me and Kuro, neither of us willing to loosen our aggressive stance. He scowls, then trots forward to meet the newcomer. Dipping his head in greeting he asks plainly, "Blue skies, Ykuvi?" as if we weren't even there.

In front of me, Kuro hisses under her breath.

Ykuvi flicks anxious eyes toward us but doesn't seem overly concerned about the situation. "I'm afraid not," he says, short of breath. "Down by Vito's Forest, an airship-prey has been spotted off the edge."

"A-Airship?!"

I gasp, unable to believe my ears. There's an airship *here*?!

"Of all times...!" Enyll cries, splaying his wings wide. "That wretched beast!" Hearing nothing from Kuro I turn to see her staring at Ykuvi, eyes wide and mouth agape.

"No, no, no..." I mutter to myself, panic exploding in my chest at the realization of just where that airship came from.

The territory directly south of us is Sarlain, but this can't be one of their vessels. Sarlain wouldn't retaliate against a single Lithan stealing breakfast from a logging camp. Appearances by Lithans in Sarlain are far too common. A Nortanian ship would have absolutely no reason to come here, so it can't be that, either.

No, there's only one place that ship could have come from.

"It's my mother!" I announce to the Lithans. "Kuro, my mother sent the airship here! Can't you see? She's looking for *me*!"

That's a ship from Ellyntide. Mom sent it here to try to subjugate me for taking her daughter's life. *My* life.

Oh, mother, have you gone completely *insane*?! Sending one of our ships across enemy airspace to avenge the death of your daughter?! The territory directly off the edge of the Northern Continent is considered neutral territory, but to get there you have to fly through Sarlain or Nortane's airspace. Either she flew through the country we're currently in a border dispute with, or she flew through the Kingdom we're technically still at war with. Either way, mom's just done something indefensible.

Ykuvi looks at me and folds his ears. "Enyll?" he asks, deferring to the copper plumaged Litan.

"Ignore her," he says. "That one's gone mad."

Requiring no further explanation, Ykuvi nods. "Okay. Come on, we must chase it away at once!!"

Enyll acknowledges, and the two males unfurl their wings for take-off.

KREE!

ROOAR!

They call out to the sky above them and thrust into the air, catching a breeze and flapping hard to gain altitude over the tree line. When they pass overhead they bank right and begin flying in the direction of the edge of the continent, leaving me and Kuro alone in the field.

Why is Kuro still here, how come she didn't take off with them? I relax my aggressive posture and to my surprise, Kuro does the same. She sighs and turns to me with a worried expression. All the aggression and anger I saw in her just moments ago has been replaced by genuine concern. Surely, she intends to join Ykuvi and Enyll, so why stay behind with me?

"You're going to chase away the airship-prey?" I ask softly, still shaken from our confrontation earlier.

"Of course," She nods. "They steal prey and attack Kin."

Her voice had become docile, more like the one I heard when we first met. Is she truly that concerned about the airship?

...Wait a second.

A twisted idea enters my head. One so completely deranged, I just have to suggest it to her.

“Let me handle it,” I say. “I’ll talk to the airship-prey and tell it to leave.”

Her face twists in disbelief. “...You can do that?”

I nod. “Yes. I’m a Farlander, Kuro. I know everything about the airship-prey, including how to communicate with them. I’ll make it leave before it can fly into your territory and hurt anyone.”

Kuro pauses, unable to reply. I see the dissonance in her face, the conflict roiling in her head. A part of her doesn’t want to believe me, but there’s something else that’s telling her she should.

“Please,” I say, taking a step forward. “You can trust me, Kuro.”

A breath of silence passes between us. She looks to the ground and releases a sigh, then back towards me.

“Alright. Follow me.”

35. Trust Me

For the first time, I'm flying through the sky with someone else besides me.

It hasn't been easy.

After she agreed to let me 'talk' to the airship, Kuro wasted no time thrusting into the air, effortlessly able to find a way to climb through the currents and begin flying south. I followed after her but found it much harder to locate the updrafts she was so easily able to ride on. Straining to gain altitude, by the time I flew high enough to match her she had already gained a considerable lead on me to the edge of the continent. It took me a few moments of fast flying to catch up to her.

It's clear Kuro has untold years of flying experience over me. Ykuvi had an impressive landing back in the clearing, too. Just how skilled are the flyers of this 'Kin' they keep talking about?

We fly side-by-side, our wings only a few yards apart. Looking over I see Kuro staring back at me a little cross. "Y-You took off way faster than I could," I explain, short of breath.

"I didn't take off any faster than I normally do."

"Kuro, you've been flying your entire life. I didn't even have feathers until a few days ago."

Kuro looks away, her expression unchanged. But after a moment she starts beating her wings less to slow to a more gentle glide.

“Thank you,” I reply softly. She stays silent keeps her head pointed forward.

We fly low, skirting just over the tops of trees. I suppose Kuro is flying this low intentionally because she believes she'll be less visible to the airship. It's strange to consider that mighty Lithans, the apex predator of the moon, are worried about the threat posed by a single, very flammable airship. But it makes sense if you think about it.

When Enyll called the airship a '*wretched beast*', I realized that Lithans don't see airships as... an airship. They believe they're just another feral animal like themselves. A very strange and bad-smelling one, I'm sure. As ferals, how could they understand the notion that something is 'created' by hand with raw materials? They don't even have hands!

That's when I got the idea that I could 'talk' to the airship and tell it to leave. Of course, I won't actually be talking to the airship, but I am going to threaten it.

Flying through enemy territory to try and attack a Lathan off the Northern Continent... whoever's unfortunate enough to be on that ship has got to be scared out of their wits. Surely they understand just how daft of a mission they're on.

They were ordered to come all the way out here just to find me. If I fly out and confront the ship over clear air, they won't have a reason to fly inland and harass other Lithans.

So, all I have to do is threaten the ship and become the big, terrifying monster they think I am. I'm almost certain they'll turn around, tails tucked between their legs, and return to Ellyntide.

It bothers me a little bit, having to do things this way and not be completely forthright.

It's not that I'm lying to Kuro... at least, I don't think I'm being duplicitous. But how could I explain the nuance of a veiled threat and the politics around the ship being here? It's just easier to simplify things in terms they already understand — they believe Airships are feral animals. The easiest way to explain what I'm doing is to say I'm 'talking' to the feral. If it achieves the same result, does it matter how I communicate it to them?

We continue flying until we bank to pass a large *elderus* that's been blocking our view of the sky in front of us. A great wind whips our feathers as we pass to the other side, and the trees begin to thin down to a grassy, windswept plain. Off on the horizon, just as Ykuvi claimed, is an airship floating silently in the sky.

"Goddess above," I say to myself. "Mother, what have you done?"

I thought mom would have sent a smaller vessel like one of our lightly armed scout ships. Something that flies fast and has a better chance of moving through enemy airspace discretely. But what I see in the sky before me isn't just an airship. This is an *Air Destroyer*.

A ponderous, beast of an airship that's more than twice the size of the Blue Daemon. Slow flying and armed to the fangs with steam cannons, they're easily the biggest ships in the

fleet. Mom's decision to send this class in particular shows just how seriously she's taking the threat of Lithans retaliating against it. Either that or she just really wants me dead.

"Your mother sent the airship-prey?" Kuro asks as I gaze at the sky.

"Yes," I say. "My mother is the Queen of Ellyntide — our leader. All our airship-prey follow her orders."

"And it'll listen to you over her?"

See, I *knew* she wanted to learn more!

"It will," I say simply. Kuro is curious, but I don't want to elaborate too much about how this is going to go down. The truth is, I'm not entirely sure myself.

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Below us a group of Lithans are standing next near a windswept oak, watching the ship hover off in the distance. Enyll, Ykuvu, and a smaller, chestnut plumaged drakaina. As we approach them Kuro cries out below, just like Ykuvu did before his landing in the clearing. We land a short walk from the oak and approach the group from behind.

“Foul-smelling beast. Why do they just fly around in circles?” asks the Chestnut plumaged Lithan, a female with an older-sounding voice. The horns on the back of her head are longer than everyone else’s, curving around to point forwards.

“Who knows,” says Enyll. “Airship-prey are as senseless as the Farlanders who allow themselves to be eaten by them.”

Wait, what?! *Eaten?*

...Ohhhh, he means the platforms on the exterior of airships! Airwomen sometimes exit the cabin to get a better view of things in the sky, or to inspect a particular piece of machinery located on the hull. Lithans must see this happening and think the airship is eating and regurgitating animals.

...That’s actually quite morbid to think about. It seems the more I learn about Lithan perspectives, the more I understand why they’re so terrified of airships.

The reason this one is flying around in circles isn’t difficult to understand, though. “It’s waiting for orders on what to do next,” I speak out to the group.

The Lithans turn their necks and Enyll looks repulsed to see me. “You, again?!” he kvetches.

The chestnut Lithan tilts her head. “Who’s this?”

“Some despicable, maddening Loner that *Kuro* seems to have become friends with,” Enyll says, casting a dubious glance past me and onto Kuro.

“She has nothing to do with this,” I growl, moving to stand in front of the bigger, copper drakon. “I’m here because I want to stop the airship-prey before it hurts anyone. I’m going to talk to it and tell it to leave.”

Enyll scoffs. “*Talk* to an airship?!”

“That’s right,” I counter.

“How can you talk to an airship-prey?” asks the chestnut Lithan without a trace of hostility. Out of the corner of my eye, I spot Ykuvi starting to act concerned about something.

Enyll waves a wing in a dismissive manner. “Ignore her, Gima, This one has completely lost her mind. It’s Impossible to talk to airship-prey.”

Irritation begins growing under my feathers. “You can believe whatever you want. I’m going to fly out there and tell the airship-prey to leave. If you don’t like it then stay here and watch me.”

“You’ll do no such thing,” Enyll growls, opening up his wings to block me. “A mad Loner like you will only provoke the monster into flying inland.”

I’m getting tired of this dude. “I’m a Farlander, I know how to talk to airship-prey. It’ll leave if I order it to return to Ellyntide!”

Gima and Ykuvi exchange disbelieving glances at each other but stay out of the exchange.

Enyll bares his teeth and lowers into an attack stance. “Again with the Farlander nonsense! If you take one step further towards that airship—“

“Enyll,” Kuro calls out to interrupt him. He pauses, staring with an eyebrow raised as Kuro moves to stand next to me. “Let her do it.”

“*What?*” he hisses, his expression plummeting. “Kuro, have you los—“

“If she’s telling the truth, then the airship-prey leaves and nobody gets hurt. If she’s lying...” Kuro trails off. She locks eyes with mine and hisses, “Then the flock has one less Loner to deal with.”

I nod slowly. Point taken.

Enyll continues growling for a moment before he loosens and lowers his wings. “Alright, fine. We’ll do it *your way*, Kuro. I’ll be glad to explain to your grandmother why we had to kill an airship-prey and start a forest fire in harvestwing.”

I hate to admit it, but I can understand Enyll’s concern. Clearly, Lithans know from past experiences that when an airship ‘dies’, it explodes in fire. An explosion here in the middle of autumn (or harvestwing as they seem to call it,) when everything is dry and kindling would be a disaster. Enyll has good reason to be apprehensive of the airship flying over land and retaliating. It’s misplaced apprehension, of course. Their mission was to fly out here and look for me. If I come to them instead they won’t have any reason to fly inland.

Gima shakes her head disbelievingly. “Wait, wait, wait. This fress... she really thinks she’s a Farlander?”

“It’s a long story,” I concede. “But, yes. A few days ago I was a Lemur living in Ellyntide. Somehow, I took this form.”

She examines me for a moment, looking me up and down like I were some kind of specimen in my brother’s lab. “You know of forbidden knowledge, and yet you are not Kin,” she rasps, squinting age-marred eyes. “I’ve lived enough seasons to have heard every long story that’s ever been told by a stranger. Nobody learns that information unless they are told by someone else.”

“Or she’s telling the truth,” Kuro offers.

Gima furrows her brows and frowns. “She speaks of impossible things. How can you of all Kin believe her, Kuro?”

“I agree,” adds Ykuvi. “Prey becoming Lithan... that’s absurd. The only logical explanation is some bitter exile spoke of the Farlands to her.”

Enyll rolls his eyes, amused that their concerns mirror his own. He steps away from the group and works to preen his wings on the leeward side of the windswept oak. At least these other two Lithans are being civil instead of downright hostile. The more Enyll opens his muzzle, the more I understand why Kuro seems to have something against him.

Kuro remains silent, ruffling her feathers slightly. Seemingly giving in to their objections she looks down, deferring to me for a response to Gima and Ykuvi.

Well, um, alright then. What should I tell them?

I exhale, feeling the weight of skeptical gazes bearing down on me. As a Lemur I was always one of the tallest girls in the room, but as a Lithan I seem to have become comparatively short. For the first time in my life, I feel small.

“I don’t expect you to trust or believe me,” I tell them. “The truth is, I don’t understand how this could have happened to me, either. But Enyll and Kuro showed me the bonds of compassion exist here in your territory as they do in mine. They saved my life and offered me prey. Telling the airship-prey to leave is the least I can do to repay that kindness.”

The two Lithans stare at me in silence, their expressions softening a little. Umm, that sounded rather poignant. It wasn't too sappy for them, was it?! Man, that sounded just like something mom would say in some speech to a crowd of people! I just made it up on the spot!

A breeze from the edge blows through us, and I take in another whiff of the acrid scent of the airship. It seems like it's changed course. Unwilling to give them any time to object, I dip my head to the skeptical drakes. "Well, if you'll excuse me."

36. Showdown In The Clouds

I turn to Kuro, wondering if she has anything to add before I leave, but her face is as expressionless as it's ever been. She's holding her thoughts back in front of the skepticism of the others, but I know deep down she has faith in me. She wouldn't be putting herself on the line if she didn't.

I wish I knew why Kuro felt this way about me, a total stranger in her world. I appreciate her more than she realizes.

I flash a smile to her and bound over the grass until a breeze catches my back feathers. Leaping into the air a strong thermal gusts out from the interior of the continent, thrusting me skyward. I rise over the trees and glance off to see the air destroyer looming ominously in the sky, its bow now pointing inland on a slow and deliberate course into the heart of Lathan territory. It seems that even without my intervention, the airship-prey has been provoked into being aggressive. Funny how that happens.

SKREEEECH!

Hey!! It's me you're looking for, right? Well, here I am! So leave these poor Dragons alone, okay?

Oh, yes. I understand the supreme irony of what's occurring right now — the Princess of Ellyntide, flying off to confront one of her warships and prevent it from attacking a hostile enemy of the Kingdom. There's no shortage of surreal things about the current situation I find myself in, but acting against my own Kingdom's instruments of war as an enemy has to be the most insane. This is categorically against everything I've ever sworn to uphold as Princess. But to earn the trust of these Dragons and live to see another day, I'll happily do it. I'll threaten my people with violence and become the monster they fear. Whatever consequences await me when I return home, I'll accept them.

The winds are calmer here than at Archer's Point, but it's still a struggle to gain altitude into the strong headwinds. I climb until I reach the height of the airship, right within the slim zone of calm I took to reach the Northern Continent. Catching my breath, I can see that the air destroyer had moved within a mile of the continent but rotated its forward propellers horizontally to hover in place. It seems they heard my cry and realized they no longer had any reason to try something so daring.

I bank left on a direct course to intercept, keeping a close eye on the movements of the steam cannons. Their firing order was once demonstrated to me and mom on a tour of these ships, so I know the distinct visual cues to look for when they're being armed. I can tell the turrets are in the lowered position, which means they haven't begun the arming sequence yet. I'm safe to approach, for now.

I inspect the airship as I approach, looking for anything unusual that could be a threat. This appears to be a typical air destroyer with thick, gray armor covering the whole of the hull from bow to stern, and the steam propellers...

...

My eyes stop and fixate on one part of the ship in particular.

Mother, did you...

I pull my wings back and stop to hover in place, examining the symbol near the ship's bow that indicates the vessel's name. It is a red rose – the symbol associated with the reign of my late grandmother. This is the Air Destroyer *Beatrix*.

My heart collapses knowing the significance of sending *this*

ship in particular on a mission of subjugation. For taking the life of her daughter, mom is calling on the ship named after her mother, the cruel victim of an assassination plot twenty years ago by agents from Sarlain. This isn't just a mission of petty revenge for her – it's penance.

I've understood for some time that my family has to believe I'm dead. But to see it confirmed to me with such a stark example... it's almost too much to bear. I turn my head away from the ship, unable to take it all in. For the life of me, I wish I could turn around, fly back to Varecia and tell mom I'm safe.

...

I force myself to face the ship. If I truly want a future where I return home and tell mom what's happened to me then I can't settle now. As painful as it is, I need to scare this ship into leaving the Northern Continent.

Slowly, I fly forward toward the bow where the pilot's deck is located. This may seem like suicide, but I wasn't joking when I told Kuro I know everything about the airship-prey. Besides knowing how the cannons fire, being the heir to the throne means I also know how our ships will react if approached by an enemy... even if that enemy is a Dragon.

In the past, Lithans have attacked smaller, less armored vessels by attaching themselves to the side of the ship and using their talons and jaws to attack. They plan to lure me in and wait for me to try in vain to get through the thick, plated armor of the Air Destroyer. Once the cannons have accumulated enough steam, they'll order gunners to the outside platforms and fire on me. Once their bullets break me off, the cannons will be ready, and... well, no more Princess Asha.

Of course, I'm not going to do any of that. Whatever they have planned, I'm certain none of their contingencies have me staring down the pilot's deck to bark orders at the vessel's commanding officer. But that's exactly what I intend to do. They don't need to understand the orders I'm giving them, I just need to put on a show for the Lithans and convince the airwomen that trying to fight back against me is futile.

I position myself about a half-mile ahead of the air destroyer, close enough to take in the foul-smelling vapors of the propellers, but far enough away that I have a good view of the two forward-facing cannons. I always thought these ships were massive as a Lemur, and even now as a Lathan I still feel small compared to them.

Hovering in place, muscled tensed and nerves high, I lock eyes with the glass windows of the pilot's deck. I double-check something in my throat — I think it's working, now — and feel confident enough to proceed.

“Air Destroyer Beatrix!! I am your Princess, Asha Lordanou!”

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

I pause for a moment, giving the people I swore to protect one final chance to make contact with me. One last sliver of hope that maybe, just maybe, they’ve become privy to what’s happened and this is actually a mission to contact me.

...But the moment soon passes, and the ship doesn’t react. Begrudgingly, I continue. “I order you, as your Princess, to *turn back* and return to Ellyntide airspace! Do not encroach the Northern Continent!”

Once more, there’s no response from the ship. I strain to look through the glass to the pilot’s deck, but there’s too much glare to make out anything inside. I glance at the turrets, looking for the tell-tale signs of their arming sequence, but they remain in the lowered position.

“If you do not comply, I will—“

At once, the forward turrets whir to life with a mechanical chunk, interrupting my orders. They rise into the ready position, pivoting to point their barrels squarely at me. The arming sequence has begun! Will I turn and flee?

Absolutely not. I'm just going to keep acting like a dumb little Lathan that knows nothing about ascendant technology.

I recall what the Lieutenant told us about the firing sequence. Right now, pressure from the steam generators is being transferred to the forward accumulators near the bow of the ship. Once there, a superheater will process the steam in preparation for firing. Once the correct temperature and pressure have been achieved, the turrets will visibly 'lock' in place. When that happens, I have a countdown of—

Click!

Click!

...!! They just locked!!

Four...

Three...

Two...

Now!

I tent my wings, dropping like a stone into a steep dive below the ship. A heartbeat later I sense a brilliant flash of light above me and the deafening sounds of two steam cannons thrash my ear drums.

I flap hard to even out my descent before I plunge too far into the gales. Looping around to the front of the ship, I quickly regain altitude to face down the pilot's deck once more, this time at a much closer distance. I expected them to do this, but I'm still going to act upset.

Really upset.

Shrieking as loud as my lungs will allow, I'm shocked by the power my voice carries as the windows of the pilot's deck shatter and explode outward. A confetti of glass and steel is suffused into the air and drawn to the back of the ship by the suction of the steam propellers, revealing the cockpit and the dazed expressions of the animals inside, the whites of their eyes plainly visible.

But I'm not done being angry just yet.

I pull my neck back and tickle the special muscle in the back of my throat. Heat begins to build and to my supreme relief, *this time*, fire is produced. My jaw flings open and a column of flame shoots into the wind, harmlessly sailing past the starboard bow of the ship and into the open sky where it dissipates into nothing. Feeling like I've made a credible threat, I extinguish the blowtorch and stare down the completely exposed pilot's deck.

“Air Destroyer Beatrix!! This is your final warning! I order you: *Stand!! Down!!*”

Bedlam erupts inside the ship. A Fisher screams something unintelligible and the officers inside scramble. A Ringtailed woman runs past a Marten picking himself up off the floor and begins frantically punching something into a machine on the back wall. The Marten stumbles into the pilot's chair and begins turning a sequence of knobs and levers which correlate to loud creaks emanating from the interior of the ship.

A Ruffy consoles a Lopear, still reeling on the ground from the force of my shriek.

Sensing they're finally taking my threats seriously I bank to the side and rise in altitude over the ship, fighting the gales to fly around in circles and give them plenty of room to retreat. Gazing down to keep a watchful eye on their movements, I spot two curious Ruffies poking out from one of the outside decks on the side of the ship. Terror fills their faces when our eyes meet, and they quickly retreat to the safety of the interior decks.

Slowly, the ship ambles itself so the bow is pointing away from the edge of the continent. The steam propellers shift vertical and throttle up to full speed, taking the ship away from me. I watch it as it glides through the air, the proverbial tail tucked between its legs before slipping silently into the fog.

I've done what I set out to do, but it sure feels like a hollow victory. I'm relieved it didn't come down to actual violence, but to see the abject terror I caused in those I swore to protect is... difficult to process.

I lower out of the sky and towards the edge of the continent, wondering just what type of reaction I'll receive from the Lithans when I return. I told them I could get the airship to leave, but it ended up taking quite a bit of, erm, *persuasion* to get it done. I hope I didn't come off as weak to them.

When I find myself back over the continent I lower down and glide low to the ground, trying to appear modest about what just occurred. As I approach the windswept oak I begin to make out the four Lithans I left there, all standing in a row in front of the tree. It seems they were watching the scene above with great interest. I land nearby and approach them with my head held high, their faces brimming with concern. "The airship-prey has left," I announce. "It took some persuasion, but I convinced her to return to Ellyntide airspace. She won't be returning."

There was silence among the group, nobody quite sure how to respond to the news that an airship-prey had been simply told off into leaving.

"Fress..." Gima speaks slowly and with shock in her voice. "How did you do that?!"

I smile at the older drakaina. "I told you, Gima, I'm a Farlander. Airship-prey obey my orders."

She stares at me, unable to respond. A heartbeat later she exchanges a befuddled glance with Ykuvi.

“You threatened it with fire,” Enyll speaks up, his voice cool like water. “It wouldn’t listen to you otherwise?”

I shake my head. “It would not. Airship-prey are temperamental, but they understand the threat posed by fire. Flame is their weakness, and a single blast in the right spot could kill an airship-prey in seconds.”

Enyll winces, shocked by the revelation that an airship-prey could be wounded so easily. It’s true, though! One shot of fire to a row of steam propellers and the ship would list on its side until it fell out of the sky. I wonder how many Lithans have been injured in the past trying to fight airships by tearing them apart with their talons? How much destruction has been caused by airships exploding in their territory? To learn that there’s a weakness to those beasts that could stop them before they even reach the continent has got to be moon-shattering.

Enyll’s eyes narrow calmly. For the first time there isn’t hostility staring back at me, but deep-seated respect.

Finally, there’s Kuro. She’s kept her wings folded and her expression steady, but I can tell she’s trying to stay modest. Out of everyone, she believed in me and put herself on the line in front of the others. Of course she’d be pleased to find that her faith was well placed. Perhaps now I’ll be able to find out why she harbored that trust in me.

I flash another quick smile to her. I could swear she flashed the quickest one back.

Ykuvi's wings rustle. "*Farlander*," he asks. "What's your name?"

A smile grows across my face hearing them address me that way for the first time. "My name is Princess Asha Eloise Lordanou, heir apparent to the Lilac Throne of Ellyntide." I dip my head low and mantle my wings wide before my new friends. "But please, just call me Asha."

37. Kindling

"This is ember root. When you set it on fire it burns for a long time."

Kuro gestures a wing towards the hole in the ground she just dug with her talons. At the bottom is a meandering, dark-colored root running through the moon that originates from a nearby shrub.

"Hmm! A thick, fibrous structure with a deep black tinge to the epidermal tissue, how curious..." I mumble to myself, examining the sample up close. "Just how long will a sample burn when ignited?"

Kuro blinks. "You're really not from around here, are you?"

I stare at her, shaking my head slowly.

She exhales and loosens her wings. “Well, I’m not sure how long they’ll burn. I always kick moon over the root when I no longer need a fire. Days, maybe?”

“*Days?!*”

Kuro looks at me like all the fire in creation should burn for days at a time.

“Please,” I say, moving out of the way. Kuro shoots me a quirky glance and lowers her head down into the hole. Using her jaws, she separates the root structure at the side of the hole, then on the opposite end.

“Alright,” she says, holding the root in-between her fangs. “This is all we’ll need. Let’s head back.”

I nod, skeptical that a single root can provide all the light needed for a campfire. But after all the trust Kuro put in me today, I think I can afford to place some in her.

We set off for the clearing where Enyll and Kuro saved my life, making our way through the underbrush, the warm scents of late afternoon hanging in the air like fresh fuchsia. By this time of day, the forest was turning dark, making Kuro’s plumage invisible against the strange and unfamiliar environment. I jog a short distance to close the gap between us and keep myself from losing sight of her completely.

After I convinced the air destroyer to leave, I asked to return here and finish off the remainder of the Redaga that Kuro and Enyll killed. Flying for 3 days straight and scaring away an airship had left me exhausted and in need of a full meal. After some convincing from Kuro, Enyll agreed to let me eat the rest of the Dragon, and so all five of us set off back here.

By the time we arrived the sun was setting, so Gima suggested starting a fire with something called, 'ember root'. She wanted to see my face while I explained the whole story of what happened to me and how I got here. Apparently, this root is quite common in the Northern Continent and is used by Lithans when they need a fire for warmth or visibility. While Enyll and Ykuvu worked to dig out a safe spot to burn the root, me and Kuro left to retrieve one from the forest.

A fuel source that burns for days... to think, this is only just the beginning of the amazing things I'll find out here. It makes me giddy all over again just thinking about it.

Kuro steps through a patch of ferns that would be taller than me if I were still a Lemur. Despite being by ourselves, she hasn't spoken much during our walk through the forest. She was so friendly to me when we first met, but now she seems quite passive. I wonder why?

"I hope I can explain everything before I get drowsy tonight," I chuckle to myself, trying to engage in some small talk with the larger female.

"Mmh," she mumbles with the root in her mouth, keeping her eyes focused on the path ahead of her.

“Kuro,” I ask, moving closer so I can be heard more clearly. “Are you and Enyll partners?”

She freezes in place and cranes her neck towards me. “*Partners?*”

“Y-yeah!” I stutter, not expecting quite that response from her. “Like, um, you know. Bonded together. *Mates.*”

“Oh,” She says flatly. “**No.**”

She snaps her neck forward and begins walking again. I stand there for a moment, feeling stupid for even asking the question. *Of course, they aren't partners, Asha!!*

“Oh! Well, um, I didn't think you were,” I say, trying to save face and catch up to Kuro. “But then why were you two flying together when you saved me?”

“Enyll is my den mate for the season,” she explains, with the tiniest huff of frustration in her voice. Is she frustrated because I asked her the question, or because she didn't want to be den mates with Enyll? “We hunt well as a team, and the mothers must be well fed for frostwing. So, we work together.”

That makes sense, I can imagine prey becoming scarce in the winter. For mothers who are expecting in the spring, they must be well fed now while prey is still abundant. Teaming up the best hunters to maximize the amount of prey they catch is certainly a good idea. If Kuro and Enyll aren't partners though, do Lithans in bonded pairs do the same thing?

“Do all, erm, *Kin* have den arrangements like that?” Ykuvi explained to me I should refer to them as ‘*Kin*’ from now on instead of simply ‘*Lithans*’.

“No,” she says. “Just the ones who don’t have mates.”

The author's tale has been misappropriated; report any instances of this story on Amazon.

Oh!

...I see.

So that’s why it’s a bit of a sore subject for her. They are both single, and neither of them particularly like each other. Even if there was another *Kin* they had eyes on, they wouldn’t be able to spend any personal time with them because of their den arrangements. I’d be a bit cross about that, too. Unwilling to continue the line of conversation further, I hold my silence.

We move under the trees until we pass through a thicket and find ourselves back in the clearing. Not far from the Redaga, Enyll and Ykuvi are preening themselves next to a newly cleared patch of moon. On the far end, Gima is taking advantage of a break in the clouds, holding her wings half open to warm herself in the last rays of sunlight the day had to offer.

“Alright, are we ready to begin?” Kuro asks of the assembled Kin.

“Oh!” I chirp. “Just a moment!” I bound past Enyll and Ykuvi and over to the remains of the Redaga. When we arrived here from the edge of the continent I had my fill on the rest of its meat. Being my first full meal in two days I’m certain I could have finished it off, but I wanted to save a piece for someone in particular.

I rip off the final edible chunks attached to a thigh and carry it over to Enyll, who’s still at work preening the flight feathers of his left wing. “Here,” I say, dropping the meat near the side he’s busy with.

Enyll lifts his wing to get a look and stares at my offering. “What’s this?” he asks pointedly.

“It’s for your sister,” I reply, swaying my tail back and forth. “I felt bad for eating the rest of the false-kin when she deserves it more than I do, so... I saved this for her.”

When we were here earlier in the day, I overheard Enyll mention that his sister was expecting a brood in the spring and wanted to save the rest of the Redaga for her. But after I explained I had been flying for days and hadn’t eaten a full meal in just as many, he agreed to let me finish off the remainder instead. That was very generous of him, but it made me feel sour eating prey that was destined for his sister.

Surprise flashes in Enyll's eyes. "Asha..." he trails off, trying to collect himself. After our confrontation at the edge of the continent, I think I'm the last Lithan he was expecting compassion from.

"I know it's not much..." I confess, tearing at the grass below with my talons. I ended up eating more of the Redaga than I thought I would. I should have saved a bigger portion for her...

"No, no," Enyll retorts, shaking his head. "It's fine. My sister needs all the prey she can eat before frostwing. Um, thank you, Asha."

Ahh!

He appreciates it! He appreciates *me!* I smile and shake my wings out in satisfaction.

"But we're not flying to Flat Rock until tomorrow morning," he continues. "Leaving fresh prey out overnight will only attract scavengers. It'll be gone by sunrise."

"Oh," I deflated, letting my wings droop to the ground. "Fwegh, that's right. I forgot you can't leave food out in the wild."

If Enyll's raised eyebrow is any indication then this must be some extremely basic knowledge for a Dragon. Well, cut me some slack! Until this whole crisis happened, the most removed I'd been from Varecia was the times we went to our family's summer home

on an island in the middle of nowhere. And even then, it's not like I was allowed outside to wander very far from the house. I'm about as familiar with what to do in the wild as Enyll is with piloting an airship.

"Enyll," Ykuvi stirs, lifting his head from preening. "Me and Gima will leave for Flat Rock tonight. We'll bring Asha's offering with us so your sister gets it."

Enyll looks across the clearing to see Gima approaching the group. "Is that alright with you?"

"Yup," she says, shifting herself between Enyll and laying down next to Ykuvi. The two Kin – whom I now recognize to be older than the rest – brush up and nuzzle their heads together. "I wanted to sleep there tonight, anyways. It's not a problem."

Enyll inclines his head. Not used to receiving compassion he mumbles, "Mmh. Um, thank you, everyone."

"If you're flying tonight then we should start before it gets late," Kuro suggests, dropping the root into the center of the dirt clearing.

"I'll say!" says Gima. "I'm ready to hear this fress's story." According to Gima, 'fress' is a slang term used by Kin women when addressing a girl younger than themselves. Kuro called me that earlier, I wonder how much older she is than me?

Kuro nods and moves in close to the root, positioning her face at an angle almost directly above it. She draws a breath and coughs, allowing a small wisp of fire to escape her mouth. It falls onto the root and ignites it instantly, simmering and popping as the flame spreads and grows in size.

“Eep!” I squeak, caught off-guard by the speed of the reaction. I was expecting it to combust slowly like the wood you toss into a wood-burning stove. But in just a few seconds the entire length of the root is engulfed in a flame that climbs past the tips of the grass. Incredible!

The fire taken care of, Kuro lays down near Ykuvi and splays her talons out in front of her, resting one on top of the other. Thinking that to be a good idea I move to settle directly across the group so all four can see me, and mirror Kuro’s relaxed pose. It’s pretty comfy, actually.

With that, the scene was set: Four Kin ready to hear the tale of the Farlander who was thrust into the body of a Lithan. The first time our cultures have ever mingled.

“Well, then,” I say to the group. “It’s, um, difficult to know where to start.”

This is the first time I’ll be sharing the story of what happened to me in the hollow. Turning into a Dragon through supernatural means by an enchanted ring would be a hard enough story to tell to an ascendant animal. So how am I supposed to explain it to a group of enlightened ferals?

Perhaps I should get a better grasp on what they know about us, first. Then I can tailor my story around the things they're already familiar with. "Let me ask a question: What do your teachings tell you about how Farlanders live?"

Ykuvi cocks his head. "How you live?"

"That's right," I say. "I've only just begun to learn about Kin, but I'm certain our way of life is quite different from yours."

Kuro's nose wrinkles. "The teachings of the Farlands don't tell us how you live," she explains. "Whenever I fly there, Farlanders run to hide in their dens. I've never seen one that wasn't doing that."

"How come you make your weird dens so close to one another?" Gima blurts out. "That's *stupid*. Prey know to stay away from areas with lots of predators. You won't even catch a squirrel that way."

"Oh, well that's—"

She keeps talking. "And another thing! How come you herd prey around in large groups but never eat them? You have to know we just come and take them all the time, right? Why don't you do something about it, huh?"

Before I can explain horse and cattle pastures, Enyll cuts in. “Enough of your insipid questions,” he growls over the blond plumaged drakaina. “Do you want to hear Asha tell her story or not?”

Gima’s hackles rise and she returns a hiss to Enyll who responds in kind with a short grunt of his own. The two stare at each other, brows furled and lips drawn for a tense moment before relaxing themselves and backing down. Ykuvi keeps a close eye on Enyll, but Kuro seems unmoved by the verbal tussle.

Sheesh. Kin sure do a lot of bickering amongst themselves. How can they be so kind one moment, and then at each other’s throats the next?

Kuro’s wings rustle. “Please, Asha. Tell us what happened.”

I nod and release a breath. I’ve got my work cut out for me.

It’s clear that Kin see Farlanders in the same image as themselves – feral creatures who hunt for prey and live off the land. The fact that they believe airships are living beings means they can’t even comprehend our technology for what it is. I’m going to have to do some serious dumbing down for my story to make sense to them.

“Well, it all happened two days ago...”

38. The Northern Continent...?

And so I explained to the Dragons the events of that fateful day I changed, simplifying the story as much as I could with elements I knew they would be familiar with. I told them who my mother is and why being a ‘princess’ of Ellyntide is important, but skimmed over many of the other events like the incident in the train station and our flight out to the weald. Knowing it would simply confuse them if I tried to explain how a lichen could be used to create ‘medicine’, I simply told them we went to the weald as a favor for my brother.

For my sake, when it came time to tell them about the battle in the weald, I kept Calypso out of the story. I didn’t want to get emotional in front of them, so I told them my ‘protection’ was slain and I was cornered with no chance of surviving the attack.

The story went well from there – it wasn’t necessary to simplify things like my attempts to hunt for prey or learning to fly for the first time. But when I got to the realization that I needed to find other Lithans to survive, Enyll had an objection.

He spoke up suddenly during one of my explanations. “Hold on a second. What’s ‘*The Northern Continent*’? You used that word earlier, *continent*. What does it mean?”

“*Continent* is our word for a really big island,” I explain, looking across the fire. The sun had set by then, casting darkness over the clearing. Light and shadow danced across Enyll’s coppery face as I continued the explanation. “We consider the whole island you live on to be a continent, and we call it the *Northern Continent*.”

Ykuvi blinks. “That’s your name for this place? Farlanders call our territory the ‘*Northern Continent*?’”

“Y-yeah,” I stutter, not expecting his flabbergasted response. “Is something wrong with that?”

For a moment the Kin exchange worried glances and speak in murmured voices. “What’s wrong?” I ask again, worry growing that I’d spoken something taboo.

“Fress,” Gima rasps, the fire from the ember root shimmering in her eyes. “This land is not called the Northern Continent. This is *Felra*.”

I wince at the elder Kin’s rebuke, spoken with a certainty that made it seem she were scolding a petulant child. “*Felra*? Is that your name for it?”

“It is the name from ancient times,” Enyll explains. “Like your ‘*Kingdom*’ is called Ellyntide, this land is Felra. How could you not know that?”

I stare into his face, struggling to find words for a response. “I-I don’t know! I’ve never heard that name before in my life! We’ve never called it anything but the Northern Continent!”

How could the Northern Continent be called Felra? It’s called ‘The Northern Continent’ because no nation claims sovereignty over it, so there’s nobody to give it an officially sanctioned name. Questions fly through my head, torn apart by the revelation that something so fundamental to our understanding of the moon could be wrong. What does it mean if a name exists and we just didn’t know about it? Why don’t we know about it?

“Hmph. Your foolish Goddess must have misled you,” Enyll says, offering a possible explanation for my quandary.

It unnerves me to even consider the possibility, but he has a point. If Felra is the true name of the Northern Continent, why hasn't Etain spoken of it during communion to correct us? Still, more questions fester inside me as I contemplate the implications of this news. What other information might be withheld from us? Is Flera some kind of forbidden place for us to visit? Was mom's fall in the chapel the other day a warning from Etain? If she was warning her about something then why didn't she—

“Oh, dear. Enyll, you've hurt the poor girl's head.”

Ykvui's comment and the subsequent laughter from the Kin bring me back into focus. It seems I had drifted off and stopped responding to them. “Goodness,” I apologize, dipping my head with a speed as I'd just messed up in front of a crowd at a state dinner. “I'd, um, gotten a little lost in my thoughts, there. Sorry...”

For the first time in a while, Kuro smiles at me. “It's okay, Asha. Please, continue where you left off in your story.”

My embarrassment dissolves hearing Kuro's encouragement. I nod and straighten myself up so I can continue talking.

I continue with the story, detailing the accidental forest fire, my flight across Sarlain and over the strait into what I now know as Felra. For their part, the Kin sat and listened to me in silence, offering no input as I described places and scenarios they were no doubt already familiar with. Enyll's face formed a frown as I described approaching the *Elderus* tree, but he remained silent until I wrapped things up.

"The next thing I knew, my lungs were filled with smoke and I was coughing up a fit. When I opened my eyes, Kuro and Enyll were standing near me with a smoking tree branch. And that is..." I trailed off, releasing a breath. "...the story of how I got here."

I pause and let my words settle with the Kin. Enyll stares into the ground while Ykuvi and Gima exchange worried glances. Kuro keeps herself focused on me, though I can't quite make out what she's thinking through her stoic expression. Perhaps she's figured out what I'm about to ask them.

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"There's a lot of Farlanders who are grieving for me right now," I tell them. "I don't know if I can return to normal, but I at least need to learn how to live in this body. To understand what it's capable of so I can hunt for prey, and survive until I can figure out a way to let my family know I'm still alive. I... I need your hel—he—"

I try to speak the words to ask them for help, but emotion overcomes my voice. Tears begin flowing and I dip my head, trying but failing to appear strong in front of the older, more experienced Lithans. When I looked at them in the eyes and asked for help, all the trauma from the past few days came to a point inside my head, overwhelming me with too much negative emotion.

I shouldn't even be here right now.

I just want to tell mom I

'm safe.

...

I shake away the tears and force my head back up to face the Kin. “I—I need your help. I will do whatever you ask of me as long as I will be taught how to hunt and live as a Lithan. I don’t know what I can offer you in return, but I’m certain the knowledge I possess by being a Farlander will be useful to you in some way. Please... help me!!”

Silence drifted between the Kin. They rustled and looked between themselves, unsure of how to react until Kuro spoke up. “We must take her to White Mountain.”

Gima’s expression turns resolute, and she nods solemnly to Kuro. “The elders will know what’s best for her.”

“White Mountain? Elders?” I stare at them blankly.

Kuro nods. “Those who hunt well and live fruitful lives retire to White Mountain to live out their twilight as elders. They will decide if you’ll be granted an audience with *Keuvra*.”

Wait, *what!?* “Keuvra, your deity?!”

“Keuvra is the leader of our flock. Only those who are his Kin are allowed to be trained by other Kin. The decision on whether you can be trained to hunt rests on his wings.”

My body winces at the bombshell of a revelation Kuro just dropped. Keuvra is their *leader*? I thought he was their deity!

All the ascendant animal species of the moon follow a deity who acts as a representative for their kind in front of Azurrel, the god of creation. Our holy book suggests that Lithans have a deity named Keuvra, but it seems he’s actually their leader. Or... he couldn’t be both, could he?

Whatever the case, my mind is made up. I jump to my talons and flare my wings wide. “Then I’ll do whatever is necessary to become Keuvra’s Kin and join your flock! I am a devout follower of the Goddess, surely I would be worthy in Keuvra’s eyes!”

I don’t even know what joining their flock entails, or what sort of stipulations they may impose on me. But it doesn’t matter. If this is my best shot of learning how to live as a Lithan and being able to see my family again then I’ll do it unconditionally.

What really entices me though is getting an audience with Keuvra. If he truly is their deity as well as their leader, then this might be my best chance of learning an explanation for why I turned into a Lithan. Maybe he could even tell me how to turn back to normal?

“Asha,” Kuro speaks in a flat voice. “Certain things will be expected of you if Keuvra accepts you as his Kin. I know you’re anxious to return to your family, but...”

My body stiffens up. “But...?” I ask, inching my head forward for a response. Why is she bringing up returning to my family? They’re not going to ask me to stay here and do favors for them, will they?

She stares at me a moment before her face draws into a smile. “Let’s talk about it more once we reach White Mountain, okay?”

I hesitate for a moment before returning the smile. “...Okay. We’ll talk about it then.”

I don’t like where Kuro is going with this line of conversation, but I guess there’s nothing I can do until we talk about it tomorrow. If I need to perform certain favors to appease Keuvra, then so be it.

But Felra isn’t my home. If necessary, I’ll join their flock and play by their rules, but this will only be a temporary engagement. Once I have the skills needed to survive on my own, I’m bidding my farewells and returning to Ellyntide. If Keuvra is a deity, then surely he knows about my duty to the throne in Ellyntide. Surely he understands the necessity of me being there.

“Alright, then. Asha, we should stop by Flat Rock and then fly onto White Mountain,” Kuro says, turning to Enyll. “Would you agree we can reach there by the quarter sun?”

Enyll stares into the cinders of the ember root with a tepid expression. After an awkward moment, Kuro tilts her head and grunts, but the boy stays quiet.

Ykuvi seems to take a particular interest in his silence. “What troubles you, Son-Of-Kadi?”

“Farlanders vying to become Kin...” he trails off, shaking his head in disbelief. He lingers a moment before whipping his head to face Ykuvi. “This is blasphemous! How could an inferior species possibly become Kin?”

Inferior species? Does he think Lemurs are a lesser animal?!

“She looks nothing like an inferior species to me,” says Ykuvi. “In fact, she looks and smells quite like us. Tell me, Enyll. Am I any less a member of the flock because I was once a Loner?”

Enyll’s brow furrows. “That has nothing to do wi—“

“—Doesn’t it?” Ykuvi asks, tensing his haunches. “Asha has flown the crossing from the Farlands *in harvestwing*. With no mentor to guide her, she has already passed one of the trials to come of age. Does Keuvra not teach us we should welcome those willing with capable jaws and wings?”

Enyll ducks into a defensive posture and loosens a hiss. He holds his stance for a heartbeat, flicks his eyes towards his left side, then slowly relaxes. "It is the elder's decision to make," he growls. "But I will not vie for her unless Keuvra does."

Ykuvi rumbles, "Suit yourself, Son-of-Kadi. I for one will be."

Enyll scowls a moment longer before slinking away from the group. He shoots a bitter glance toward me as he rounds around Kuro's back and into the inky dark clearing. Just when it seemed like Enyll was starting to warm up to me he goes ice cold again. He doesn't sincerely think I'm still inferior to him just because I used to be a Lemur, does he?

Gima watches him and sighs, then turns to rest a wing against her mate's flank. "We should leave for Flat Rock, hun."

Ykuvi returns a warm smile. "You're right, we should."

"And I'm going to sleep," Enyll announces from the clearing. He opens his wings and gazes up into the night sky. "I'll be at the den, Kuro."

"Very well," Kuro responds as if she were pleased to hear it. "Blue Skies, Enyll." She looks to him for a response but receives none.

“Goodnig—“ The thrusting of wings cuts me off as Enyll rises in altitude over the trees. I watch him briefly, perhaps a part of me hoping he’ll look back and acknowledge me, but he continues flying until his shape becomes invisible against the sky.

I hear Ykuvi sigh and turn to see him standing into a long stretch with his forelegs out in front of him. “Don’t be discouraged, Asha. Enyll has always been a prickly one, he’s just concerned about what’s best for the flock.”

“I understand. Thank you, Ykuvi.”

After that, we said our good-nights to Enyll and Ykuvi who took off for Flat Rock with the piece of prey I saved for Enyll’s sister. With everyone else gone it was just me and Kuro who remained.

39. The Girl Who Dreams Of Another World

“Did Enyll really mean that? Does he think I’m inferior?”

Left to ourselves at the fire, me and Kuro sit next to each other by the flame of the ember root, keeping our feathers warm against the chilly autumn night. The air has an uncharacteristic edge for autumn, and I suspect winter arrives early in Felra.

“I don’t know. Enyll’s a bit of an idiot most of the time,” she chitters to herself, shaking her head. “But it’s true that Keuvra teaches us we’re the most powerful predators on the moon.”

“Do *you* believe that?”

“Of course I do. But, I don’t think you’re inferior, Asha. If Keuvra didn’t want a prey species to have the body of a proud Lathan, he would have stopped you from taking it. There has to be a reason you became one.”

A purpose to why I became a Lathan...?

“I’ve never thought of it quite that way,” I whisper. “My purpose in life was to lead Ellyntide as Queen. Why would I be pulled off that course and given this body?”

I’ve only considered turning into a Lathan to be a terrible curse. What use would a Princess turned Lathan even have? I can’t be understood by any of the animals I used to know, and I’m a burden to the Dragons I can now communicate with. I don’t know why she thinks Keuvra could have stopped my change from occurring, either. The deities are strictly forbidden from interfering in our world, and even the information they share during communion is filtered.

I stare into the fire and release a sigh. It seems the more I learn about myself and Felra, the more questions arise.

“Keuvra will have the answers,” Kuro speaks in a reassuring tone. We gaze into the fire as the sounds of the forest grow around us, insects chittering strange noises long into the

night, feeling warmth in front of me and next to me. It feels like I'm not alone for the first time in days.

"Kuro," I ask abruptly. "Why did you trust me?"

She turns an eye. "Hmm?"

"You had no reason to offer me kindness today. Something anchored you to listen to me even when the others flew away."

Her gaze swivels to the fire and the trees beyond. "Well, you were right," she says, rising to her talons. She signals with a wing to follow, and I stand to join her. We walk into the clearing, away from the light of the fire to see Maki rising above the treetops. Kuro gazes up and greets the planet, her forefeathers turned ghostly pale in its glow.

"I've been fascinated with the Farlands ever since I was a fledgling," she says. "My mother used to take me to the top of Flat Rock and tell me stories... the one about the Farlands was my favorite. I loved hearing about the land where strange prey walked on two legs and got eaten by airship-prey. When I got older and ca—"

"Teehee."

Kuro's reverie is cut short by a laugh I failed to contain. "What's so funny?" she demands, puffing her feathers up in agitation.

"Oh Goddess," I pant, desperately trying to stifle the inane mental image of an airship with a toothy maw chewing on a hapless Rabbit. "I'm so sorry, Kuro. But, um, airships don't eat us. That's preposterous."

She stares at me in disbelief before her face draws into a gentle smile. "You'll have to explain the truth to me, sometime."

"Of course," I smiled back. "I can tell you everything you've ever wanted to know about the Farlands."

"I'd like that."

I look up and our faces meet. It feels good knowing my intuition about her curiosity was correct.

We resume walking through the grass, side by side under the planetlight. "But, um, that didn't answer my question. Why trust a Farlander?"

Kuro turns her head to me and gives me a look. It seems she wasn't expecting me to push the question. "Well, I'm not really sure. But even before we smelled the Farlands on your feathers, we knew there was something unusual about you."

“Unusual? In what way?”

She smirks and looks down my back. “It’s your feathers. Bright blue, like the color of warm summer skies. I’ve never seen a plumage like yours before.”

I ruffle in surprise. “Really?!” I look different from a normal Lithan?

She chitters to herself at my reaction. “Bright feathers are for the birds, Asha. Kin were given dull feathers by Keuvra so we would blend in better with the environment. Sometimes boys have bright colors, but never girls.”

I stay silent for a moment, surprise holding back my voice. “When I was a Lemur, my hair was the same shade of blue. That can’t possibly be a coincidence.”

“Your hair?” Kuro asks. “That’s the fur that grows on Farlander’s heads, right?”

“Tee-hee, basically.” Hair isn’t the same thing as fur, but I’m surprised she knows about it at all.

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Ever since I saw my reflection back in the weald, I've wondered why my feathers are the same shade of blue as my hair. In a way it makes sense — blue was the brightest color on my old body. As Kuro pointed out, if you were trying to create a plumage that was well-suited for blending into the sky on a sunny day, I'd have it.

But black was the dominant color on my old body, not blue. If dull colors are the most common for Lithan plumage, then shouldn't I be mostly black?

A chill breeze blows across the field. "After we killed the False-Kin and got a better look at you, I was convinced you were a boy. But when I heard you coughing and realized you were a girl..." she trails off and looks back up at Maki. "I don't know. It was like something told me I could trust you. That probably makes no sense..."

"No, no. I get it," I say, looking up at Kuro. "I've had some strange intuitions before, too."

Planetlight glistens off Kuro's eyes as her gentle gaze slides to meet mine. We stare into each other a moment, neither of us moving, neither of us speaking. My cheeks flush and I murmur, "I'm, um, glad yours turned out to be true as well."

Small prey racing through the grass steals our attention. Reacting on instinct I flinch like I were about to pounce but pull myself back when I sense Kuro hasn't moved. I turn to see her stiff as a snake plant, watching the furtive feral skitter to the safety of the forest.

"Too small?" I ask.

“Yeah,” she replies, her voice cool. “If I were hungry and desperate I would chase after prey like that. But, not tonight.”

I laugh to myself, remembering how desperate I’ve been the past few days. “No wonder I flinched and you didn’t. Can you believe I haven’t even killed live prey yet?”

Kuro stops and looks at me funny. “You’ve never killed prey? I thought you said you killed the Farlanders that attacked you?”

“Well, yeah, but they—“

My voice locks up and I stare blankly at Kuro, lost for words with a pit forming in my stomach. Her expression paints unspoken words that say, ‘*Yes, that counts.*’

“...I suppose you're right,” my head lowers, weighted by conflicting emotions. “I’ve lived my entire life seeing ascendant animals as my family and friends. Even though I’m a Lithan, it’s... difficult to think of them as food.”

“That’s too bad, Farlanders are satisfying prey,” She chitters and licks her chops like she was remembering a particularly satisfying encounter with an unlucky ascendant. To think, the kind girl in front of me could be capable of such barbarity against people I’ve known my entire life.

...As if I'm any better, now. Back in the hollow, I was ecstatic to get another taste of Starla's flesh. I so much as thought of her as a *snack*.

Perhaps sensing the dissonance in my head, Kuro opens her wings and announces, "I've got an idea. Wait here a few minutes, okay?"

Eh!? "Kuro!? W-Where are you going?"

"Trust me" she growls in delight. "I wanna get you something. You're gonna love it." She turns and bounds to the forest on the opposite side of the clearing, becoming invisible after stepping away from the glow of Maki. Kuro's scent slowly drifts from me and I find myself alone for the first time since the fight with the Redaga.

I settle into the grass, preening my chest and letting my mind wander, thinking about mom and how much I wish I could share with her all the incredible things I've discovered today. In just a few short hours I've learned more about Dragons than any ascendant animal has in centuries! I'm the first Lemur to talk to a Lithan and learn about their customs and culture! There's so much I still need to do in Felra, but all I can think about is what I'm going to do when I return home and see my family again. Oh, what stories I'll be able to tell!

A shriek and a rustling of the trees interrupts me, followed a minute later by Kuro emerging into the planetlight with a small feral scuffed between her front fangs. Covered in fur with tufts sticking out of long ears, the creature kicks and screeches from being held, but can't break free of Kuro's grasp. "Here," she says, gingerly placing it onto the grass in front of me before smacking it down with one of her foretalons. "You think you haven't killed live prey before? Well, here's your chance: your very first prey-kill."

The feral stares up at me with discs for eyes.

It looks... awfully like a Rabbit, this creature. And it's probably not far off in size, either. How many rabbits have I known that could pass for this feral?

It's strange. Killing ferals to survive is what I've been begging Kuro to teach me all day. But now that I've been presented with the chance to *actually*

do that, I'm hesitating. Why did she have to bring me the one feral that looks like people I knew back home?

"It can be difficult for fledglings to make their first kill," Kuro's voice resonates as I stare deep into helpless eyes. "But this, a *jimbal*, is one of my favorite prey animals. Do you remember how the Farlanders tasted? I promise it's just as good."

Memories of the fight return to me. The fear-scent I smelled as Starla tried to escape. The taste as I bit into her neck. The satisfaction I felt finishing her off.

My ears fold and a deep growl escapes me. The fear scent of the jimbal has rekindled the predator instincts festering inside me, the ones I felt so unsettled by. My prey yelps and squirms, sensing that its life is in mortal danger. It has good reason to be afraid.

My head lunges. It takes only a second to finish the act.

Kuro releases her grip and leaves me to my reward: my very first prey-kill. I lay in the grass and waste no time indulging myself, ripping apart the jimbal like I was tearing the wrapping paper from birthday presents.

“So you *can* kill prey,” she chitters with an almost cat-like purr. “Do you like it?”

Unwilling to stop and give her a satisfactory answer, I simply growl in response. It really is just as good as Starla was. And to think, once I’m able to hunt I’ll be able to eat this prey whenever I like!

Kuro fluffs her wings in satisfaction. “I knew you would, I’ve used that prey to entice countless fledglings. Everyone changes their mind for a chance to eat more jimbal.”

It doesn’t take me long to finish the rest of my prey, leaving behind only a few disparate bones. Ready to move on, I struggle to rise to my talons, overcome by sudden sleepiness. I can’t help but exhale a large, toothy yawn.

“We should retire to the den for the night,” Kuro offers.

I nod drowsily. “Yes, please. This has been a long and tiring day.”

I stare across the field fully bathed in Maki's glow, scarcely able to make out the fire at the far end. Kuro folds her wings and we begin walking back. "So, How do you feel about killing prey now?"

"I won't have trouble in the future," I quickly reply. "I only hesitated because the prey you caught looked familiar to me."

"Good," she says. "Felra won't be like your home in Ellyntide. You'll be expected to kill your prey, here."

"*Kill my prey...*?" I mumble to myself, trying to figure out what she could possibly mean by that remark. Then it hits me: She thinks I've had other animals hunt prey for me my entire life, and that's why I struggled to kill the Jimbal.

Well, that's not even remotely true. "Kuro, I need to explain to you how food works in the Farlands."

I'm not as helpless as you think I am.

"It's different?"

"Very!! Most Farlanders couldn't imagine hurting a prey animal, much less killing one."

“That sounds absurd. How can you eat if you don’t hunt prey?”

“Well! You see, there are these animals called ‘farmers’, and what they do is....”

40. Markers

After we extinguished the fire, we flew from the clearing on a return trip to the very same Elderus I discovered the Redaga sleeping in. Enyll explained to me that it’s unusual for prey to hide in Lithan dens, but it happens often enough that you need to be careful when approaching one – even if the ‘*scent marker*’ is fresh. Whatever that means.

Guided by the pale light of Maki, we came upon a stream winding through thick evergreen trees and walked the rest of the way to the den. We did without planetlight, I was convinced I wouldn’t be able to follow Kuro through the invisible maze back to the tree, but once she gave me some advice about following sound and scent, I was able to keep pace with her.

“We follow the paths of those who came before us. Over time, our scents become so ingrained that you need only your nose to navigate the darkest of nights.”

After my experience finding the doe in the weald, it makes sense. I tracked it through the grass like I was following an invisible line drawn by its scent. So when I turned off my thoughts and allowed my senses to guide me, it became second nature to keep up with Kuro. Lithan noses are incredible!

When I smell the distinct, fresh scent of *Elderus* above me I sense Kuro's posture tighten up. Wings move in the dark and I suspect she's on alert, well aware that a Redaga was hiding here earlier today. Enyll's scent is quite clear, so I'm unsure why she's being so cautious.

Fwoosh!

I gasp, surprised at a sprig of flame escaping Kuro's mouth. It flies through the air just far enough in front of her face to light up the surrounding area and give us a good view under the tree. Just as quickly as it appears, the fire fizzles into nothing and the area goes dark again.

"No fair," I quip, now confident that there were only Lithans under the tree. "When I use my fire it causes a natural disaster. You'll have to teach me how to control it like that."

"If we're allowed to," Kuro reminds, keeping to her flock's rules of not being able to train outsiders.

I follow in her talonsteps until we reach the hole in the roots where the den is. Enyll's scent is strong, mixed with the smells of damp moon and the sounds of slow, relaxed breathing. Kuro releases another flash of fire and I'm offered my first interior view of the den. From the entrance, the ground recedes into a slight depression where clumps of leaves and other bedding lay. Enyll was resting along the back wall with his wings slightly open against the ground, sleeping peacefully. Although I only had a brief glimpse, it seemed like there was only enough room for two Lithans to sleep there.

“Alright,” Kuro speaks in a hushed voice. “You go in first. I’ll let you be on the bottom tonight.”

“I’m sorry, come again?”

Kuro pauses a moment as if she were confused about what I was asking. “Enyll is sleeping against the back wall. I’ll sleep near the entrance, and you’ll be in-between us. If you fold your wings, I’ll rest mine on top of yours so you stay warm.”

“Oh!” I reply. She’s going to use her wing like a blanket. That makes much more sense. “Um, thank you. Is this how Kin normally sleep?”

“In dens this small,” Kuro sniffs. “We don’t have enormous ones like you Farlanders.”

I chuckle to myself, imagining a building as ostentatious as the Lordanou palace built to house a single bedroom. “I’ll have to explain how our dens work, too.”

Trotting into the pitch-black den I feel a layer of soft, loose feathers under my talons. I lay down next to Enyll and he rustles half-asleep, slurring something indecipherable. A wing rests across my back.

“Enyll?” I whisper into the dark. There’s no response.

“He’s already out,” Kuro says, laying down and drooping her wing on top of me. “Trust me, Enyll is a restless sleeper. He goes in and out of sleep faster than you can flap a wing.”

“Mmh,” I reply, sluggish and drowsy. “I just wasn’t expecting him to rest a wing on top of me.” We lay with feathers nearly touching each other, the warmth of our bodies quickly absorbing my energy to stay awake.

“Kin watch out for each other,” Kuro whispers with boastful pride. “Even Enyll has the decency to keep another Lathan warm.”

I exaggerate a scoff. “Decency from Enyll, I can hardly believe it,” My sarcasm lands and Kuro buries her head in her fluff to stifle a chirrup. It wasn’t clever, but I’m glad I got her to laugh.

She pulls her head out and exhales a deep yawn. “I’ll see you in the morning. Fair dreams, Asha.”

“Goodnight, Kuro.”

I lay my head against my foretalons, processing everything that’s happened to me since I woke up in Sarlain, confused about who I was. It’s been one breathless moment after the

other ever since I declared my intention to help Sofl at the breakfast table on that innocent morning. I think of everyone else who was around me at that moment... Mom, Dad, Sofl, Duncan... I hope they're holding together in my absence.

I draw a long breath, taking in Kuro and Enyll's scents. The scents of friends.

I'm so grateful to not be facing this crisis alone anymore.

My mind begins to wander, contemplating what whole new experiences tomorrow will bring. How will the flock receive me at White Mountain? Will Keuvra and the elders be sympathetic to my story? It's not long before my consciousness subsides and drifts into a deep slumber.

I woke the next morning to the sounds of feral shrieks rising from the forest.

Stumbling out of the empty den into the cool morning air, I followed Kuro and Enyll's scents to the forest surrounding the Elderus. My hunch about where they'd gone was proven correct when they returned through the trees a few minutes later holding prey in their jaws. Three feline-looking creatures with short brown fur, thin tails, and large, round noses. They called them, '*Litsha*' – I suspect if I were still a Lemur they'd be almost double my size. But for now, they were simply breakfast, and they made a tasty one.

We left for Flat Rock shortly afterward, rising high through a drizzle with Kuro leading our group of three. With the gain in elevation compared to our low flights yesterday, I began to get a better sense of the biome in this region of Felra: The low-slung deciduous forests I saw when I arrived here slowly changed to tall conifers, and still larger Elderus

trees began to scatter the landscape like confetti. The air is damp and thick with the smells of fresh pine and abundant prey.

After an hour or so of flying, we come upon a clearing at the top of a ridge where a cluster of peculiar dead trees grew. Different from everything else around us, their branches are completely stripped, leaving only a few disparate twigs still attached to their sides. Curiously, while we glide overhead the stale scent of other Lithans becomes quite pronounced.

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RaRAK!

Just when I was about to ask Kuro about it, she cries out for us to land. Following her lead, we lowered from the sky and sat in the center of the grassy clearing.

Around my talons are numerous slabbed tree stumps, blackened and charred by fire, burned down low enough until the montane grass and shrubs nearly covered them whole. Beyond Kuro's wings is the trees I saw from the air, which I now recognize to also be affected by the fire. Brittle and gray, at the center of the roughly ten scorched trees is one standing much taller than the rest that... appears to still have foliage growing from small branches near the top! It's still alive!! Clearly, this scene was created by Lithans using their fire to alter the environment. But, why?

Perhaps sensing my confusion, Kuro turns to address me. “Asha,” she says, ruffling her feathers of the rain that built up on them during the flight. “If you’re going to spend time in Felra then you need to know about the guiding trees.”

I flick my gaze to the gray trees beyond and then back towards her. “I take it they’re the dead ones behind you?”

“Just one of them,” she corrects. “There’s one on this ridge, and many others located around Kin territory. Come,” she beckons with a wing to follow.

We tread over the damp ground, our talonsteps muffled by decaying autumn grass. The morning drizzle had begun to dampen the aromatic scents of the ridge, but the stale Litan smells were overpowering and impossible to ignore. With my enhanced nose, I can make out at least 20 distinct dragons – males and females, young and old, all of them have stopped at this ridge sometime recently.

Kuro approaches the large tree in the center of the group, the one I now recognize as alive. Based on the size of the trunk, it appears to be a member of the *sequoioideae* family that’s unfamiliar to science. Charred bark encircles the trunk, extending upwards until it fans off into a series of tangled sprigs that grew long, spiny leaves in a spiral distribution. It seems the top half of the tree was removed while burning and allowed to grow back into its current state.

“This is the guiding tree,” Kuro announces, staring straight up its trunk. “The flock’s territory is vast. We use guiding trees to mark the edges of that territory, and to signal the routes to large settlements in case Kin become disoriented and lost.”

“Which happens more than you may think,” Enyll adds, approaching my side. “Bad weather can confuse even the most experienced flyer.”

I nod in understanding. A scenario like that isn’t difficult to imagine after flying through that fog bank yesterday. I wonder what sort of extreme weather could cause someone experienced like Enyll or Kuro to get lost?

Kuro uses the claw on her right wing to point to the center of the trunk about halfway up. “Asha, can you see the marks on the tree?”

I step in closer to get a better look. Above her wing claw are four long and vertical claw marks, deeply engraved in charred bark. Above that, another engraving of a horizontal line stretching across the bands of the sequoia.

I incline my head and she continues, “These marks are not natural. They were *created* by Kin to *communicate a message* to Kin who are lost. This mark...” she pauses to run her wing claw against the tree and deepen the horizontal engraving, “...Represents Flat Rock. A single line across the tree will always mean Flat Rock.”

I nod absentmindedly, aware that I’m being talked down to. Kuro has never mentioned if she’s trained fledglings before, but I get the distinct impression this is a speech intended for those who don’t yet understand symbols and the meanings they can possess. How quaint. I wonder how she’d react if I told her Farlanders have entire alphabets of symbols with multiple, complete written languages?

Hmm.

“Below that, of course...” she pauses to stand upright on her haunches and lean against the tree. She raises her foretalons to the top of the claw marks and drops to the ground.

RNNNKK!

“...Up-and-down claw marks. Claw marks on a guiding tree indicate the direction you must fly to reach the destination. When claw marks are vertical, you fly straight. So, to reach Flat Rock from this ridge, you would fly straight on from this tree. Does that make sense, Asha?”

“It makes perfect sense,” I reply. “You engraved the tree with your claws so the bark doesn’t grow back over the symbols. And you’ve allowed this tree, the biggest in the grove, to survive your fire. It will stand and continue to be a waypoint while the roots of the dead ones wither and eventually cause the trunk to collapse.”

Kuro ruffles slightly. Erm, sorry, couldn’t help myself. “Yes. Yes, that’s exactly right,” she says with a hint of surprise. “Do Farlanders do something similar?”

“We manipulate the environment in many different ways,” I explain. “Knowledge of how trees grow is essential to our way of life.”

A growl is loosened from Enyll and he brings his head in close to mine. “Don’t be so *arrogant*, Asha. You should be grateful we’re mentioning the trees to you, It’s for your safety.”

Wha...?

I recoil a little, taken aback by Enyll's sudden accusation. Um, excuse me? Just how was I being arrogant? Why are you blaming *me* all of a sudden?

...

I'm... not sure what just came over me, there. I guess I must have sounded ungrateful after Kuro talked down to me. I force my hackles to lower and exhale. "Um, sorry, Enyll. I didn't mean to come off that way. I appreciate everything you and Kuro have done for me."

I wasn't trying to sound ungrateful, but I guess it just... came off that way. Back in the palace, nobles would routinely talk down to me because they knew how much it upset me. Once I realized what they were doing I learned to let it slide... Most of the time. I couldn't sit around and watch my brother get abused by somebody like Orlando, no matter how much I knew they were doing it intentionally.

But this isn't the palace, and these aren't nobles. They're ferals who couldn't even begin to comprehend civilized society and the things my education taught me. But despite the gulf of knowledge between us, they're treating me like a fledgling because, in a lot of ways, I *am* still a fledgling. I don't know how to hunt, I only just learned how to fly the other day, and I know nothing about their flock's lands or traditions. I need to be more conscious of this as they teach me new things... the last thing I want to do is wear out my welcome.

Enyll retracts his head and grunts, seemingly unconvinced by my apology. “Uh-huh, sure thing. I’m ready to leave once you are, Kuro.”

“You’re in luck,” Kuro scoffs, lowering her head but keeping her gaze fixed on Enyll. “That’s all I needed to show her. We’ll reach Flat Rock soon, you’re more than welcome to visit your sister while I take Asha to White Mountain.”

The two Lithans stare at each other for a tense moment before Enyll breaks away, turning to trace his steps to the center of the clearing where the winds are stronger. For whatever reason, Kuro didn’t seem to take any offense at my arrogance. Instead, she got upset at Enyll for *his* attitude. She really isn’t fair to him, is she?

I dip my head toward her all the same. “Thank you for showing this to me, Kuro.”

She smiles, making me feel better about my lapse. “Come on, let’s go.”

I turn around and pace back towards the center of the clearing where Enyll is preening his wings, waiting for us to catch up. But after a few steps through the grass, I don’t hear Kuro trailing behind. I crane my neck back to see her rear end crouching next to the guiding tree, and.... and she’s....?!?

“K-Kuro...?” I croak.

Her face grew concerned. “What is it?”

“You’re peeing on the guiding tree.”

A damp breeze blows through the clearing, setting free wet leaves from a nearby pin oak. They glide through the air and settle in the grass between me and Kuro while she stares at me perplexed. “I’m *marking* the guiding tree.”

“...You’re peeing on it.”

The feathers on her brow curl. “Asha, how else do you expect me to renew the scent marker?”

Wait a second... the *scent marker*? Where did I hear that bef—

...

...OH.

I dip my head so fast that it nearly gives me vertigo. The smell of the den where the Redaga was lying in wait. The stale scents of Lithans I smelled when we were flying overhead just now. Asha, *you idiot!* Lithans *marked* those areas with their urine!!

“Um, yes, I suppose that’s the only way, isn’t it?” If Kuro could see through my feathers she’d find cheeks flush with embarrassment. Here I was, thinking only a few moments ago about how smart and intelligent I was... they have every right to talk down and treat me like a dumb little fledgling!

She finishes up her business and trots back over to me. “Honestly, do Farlanders not scent mark? How do you know where you’re going when you travel?”

“We have different ways of getting around,” I force my gaze up to meet hers. “Ones that don’t involve, um, leaving our scents.”