

THE PRINCESS'S FEATHERS

41. Welcoming Party

“Asha, this is Flat Rock.”

Rising through the atmosphere like the stigma of a Varecian Rose, Kuro introduces my first glimpse of Flat Rock as we pass through a bank of low-hung clouds. Though to call what I see simply a ‘rock’ would be a tremendous understatement... It’s as big as a *mountain!*

I find my breath taken away, contemplating the scale of the rock. True to its name, the entire left flank was utterly flat, running at an angle before reaching a small, horizontally flat peak. Contrary to the left side, the right was channeled and scabbed as if a giant hand had scooped out the mountain’s sections, one big handful at a time.

“It’s incredible!” I tell Kuro, flying on my left as we approach the large floating island in the distance. “I’ve never seen something in nature so perfectly flat. This couldn’t be natural, could it?”

She shakes her head. “Keuvra crafted Flat Rock so Kin would have a sanctuary to live in the sky, free from roving prey that would harm them, and sheltered from powerful winds that would blow them off-course.”

I see! That makes a lot of sense. The flat side of the rock is the windward side, which means all the wind gets channeled safely up and over the island. The leeward side would

exist in a zone of calm, safe air. I suppose that settles whether Keuvra is their leader or deity: He's both!

A thermal rushes up from a ridge below, giving us a gentle nudge in the island's direction. Enyll takes advantage of the boost, giving his wings two quick beats to free the rain built up around them. While me and Kuro hadn't had any issues flying here, Enyll struggled to keep up at times, straining to keep his labored breaths under control so I wouldn't hear him.

I actually feel a little bad for him. I want to ask if it's the rain making it more difficult for him to fly... but this is *Enyll* we're talking about, so I'm going to keep my curiosity to myself.

ROOOOARR!

As the island grows close, Kuro calls out ahead of us.

SKREEEAK!

ROORGH!

Two voices answer back, acknowledging our approach. Kuro explained to me that Kin would often announce their take-offs and landings as a safety precaution – when you're as big as a Dragon and traveling in a group, the clearings in Felra can get crowded quickly. I suppose that's true, though I personally believe they like how thrilling their calls sound, echoing through the open sky.

Flat Rock becomes focused, and I begin to make out more minor features. Clearings pepper the heavily forested island, populated mainly by low-slung, windswept trees. As I suspected, the leeward side of the rock appeared to be in a zone of calm air as much taller and larger trees were growing in its wake. The stone is dappled gray and black, polished over time by wind and rain to an almost glass-like shimmer. I scan the area for other Lithans and spot a few resting on some of the leeward cliffs. I wonder if they're the ones who called back to us?

Kuro picks a clearing nearly circular in shape a short distance from the rock. I'm the last to land between the two experienced Kin.

"So, where to from here?" I ask Kuro, shaking my feathers of excess moisture. The drizzle had subsided as we approached the island, but my wings still felt weighed down.

"All the dens are located on the other side of the rock," she says. "It's only a short walk through the forest."

"All right," I gaze around and inspect the clearing we landed in. The trees at the edges appear intentionally groomed, no doubt to make a landing in this clearing easier for less experienced flyers. Below that, the forest was dense an—

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Something catches my attention near a thicket. My eyes stop, and the bushes rustle. Although the underbrush is dark, I can make out a few peat-colored feathers sticking through the branches of enormously sized gorse. I tense my wings and inquisitively call, "Hello?"

"Uh-oh!" a young voice whispers. The bushes flutter, and the sounds of trodding talons follow, scurrying into the denser pockets of underbrush away from the clearing. I turn to gauge Kuro and Enyll's reaction and see them looking on with unconcerned expressions. A few seconds later, the source of the disturbance is gone.

I lower my wings to the side. "Seems we had a welcoming party."

"His name is Tott," Enyll grumbles, shaking his head. "That boy is a brat."

Kuro moves to stand by my side. "There's no need to raise your wings in provocation here. The only large creatures on this island are Kin."

I nod, remembering that Keuvra created this place solely for Kin. Anywhere I roam should be safe. "Do fledges normally greet you when you land?"

"No," Enyll says. "That's unusual. We should head into camp, something must be happening there."

Kuro signals to follow and leads us down a dark, tree-lined path through the forest, just large enough for two Lithans to travel side-by-side. The ground is trampled and free of obstructions, clearly indicating that this route is used regularly. I sniff the air for fresh scents of Kin, perhaps the fledgling who just ran away, but only take in the aromatic smells of damp wood and fern.

My mind wanders as we walk, and a tinge of anxiousness grows in my chest. Just how many Lithans live at their 'camp'? Kuro said we were only going to take a rest here, but what if one of them asked me about something I don't know?

"Kuro," I call out in front of me. "You're not going to introduce me to the flock here, are you?"

"No," she shakes her head. "I believe the elders at White Mountain should meet you first. They will know what's best for you."

What's best for me? Well, that's a bit ominous. I think I know pretty well what's 'best' for myself, thank you. When Kuro mentioned Keuvra and the Elders last night, she didn't want to elaborate on what might be expected if I joined their flock. If Keuvra is their leader, how much influence do the elders really have?

Enyll rustles behind me. "And if someone recognizes she's not Kin?"

“I’ll handle it,” Kuro answers quickly. “We’re heading straight to my sister’s den. Nobody will have time to notice her.”

We continue, passing under trees that explode in size and shape, the scents of Kin turning stronger and blending with the smells of burnt wood ash. The path begins to thin until it reaches an Elderus and seemingly ends. I’m about to ask Kuro when she leaps onto one of the tree’s gnarled roots and begins stepping from one to the next. I follow suit, finding that the tops are worn down and smooth. Just how many talons have trod these steps before me?

I canter over the roots, matching Kuro’s steps, so I don’t tumble off the side. She ambles around the corner of a huge one and disappears. When I trace her steps and find myself on the other side, I’m treated to a terrific view.

“Goddess above...!”

The path opens, and we find ourselves on the perimeter of the enormous Kin camp, perched in the shadow of Flat Rock. Fledglings bound and play at ground level, darting through the grass around a massive fire pit dug out in the center of the clearing. Along the far left side of camp, Flat Rock rises like a mountain, following a steep climb where dens were carved into the face of the rock on no less than five different terraced levels, giving plenty of space for Kin to rest on the rocks. My gaze is drawn skyward as a Kin lopes from one of the higher levels and gently glides into the grassy clearing.

I stand awestruck, amazed that such organized and lively settlements have likely existed in Felra since ancient times, utterly separate from the development of ascendant society. An agitated gruff from behind reminds me that I’m holding up the line into camp, so I follow Kuro’s lead and bound to the grass below. A moment later, Enyll follows.

“I’m going to find my sister,” he announces contentedly. “You and Asha can fly to White Mountain by yourselves.”

“Very well,” Kuro gives a curt reply. “I suppose I’ll meet you back at the del—“

“*She’s here, she’s here!*”

A caterwaul halfway up the rock’s side splits the air like a talon’s claw. We snap our heads skyward to see a peat colored fledgling gazing over a jagged ledge with wild eyes. “Everyone, the *Farlander* is here!!”

“What?!” I reflexively stumble backward, moving closer to Kuro’s wing. How does this petulant child know I’m a Farlander? And *why* is he announcing it out loud!?

All at once, young and old, the attention of the entire camp is diverted to our group of three. Kin emerge from the dens and the far unseen crevices of the scalloped rock wall, ruffling their feathers in anticipation of getting their first glimpse of the strange outsider. As they talk, a murmur rises from the growing crowd, pointing their wings and gazing squarely at me. My talons curl into the soft ground. I’m used to standing in front of large crowds of people, so why does this one feel so much more intimidating?

A wing nudges me from Enyll’s side. He moves close to my ear and murmurs, “Told you that boy was a brat.”

For once, I find myself in complete agreement with Enyll's aggravation.

42. Flat Rock's Introduction

"Skunkscent," Kuro grumbles. "I should have known the old woman wouldn't keep her muzzle shut."

My head tilts. "Old woman?"

Kuro angles her ears upwards. I follow them up the rock face to see Gima overlooking one of the ledges near a den, surrounded by a group of Kin staring at her with fascinated eyes. Tilting my neck forward, I overhear some of her raspy conversations. "...flew right up to the airship-prey, she did! And then she stared down the eyes of the prey, threatening it until it turned around like a scared *Grepo!*" The Kin swivel their faces between Gima and me, scarcely believing I was the same Lithan in the tall tale.

So, that's what happened. When Gima and Ykuvi arrived here last night, she babbled the whole story of how I chased away the Beatrix. Word quickly spread that a *Farlander* had done it, and eventually, the story reached Tott, who couldn't wait to let the entire camp know I'd arrived.

"Well, what do we do now?" I ask wearily, watching still more Kin emerge from another forested path on the opposite side of the clearing. Despite their curiosity, nobody seemed brave enough to come forward and talk to us.

Kuro sighs, tearing at the grass beneath her talons. She turns and says, “The only thing we can do. Introduce you to the flock.”

Trepidation courses through my feathers. “*Here?* B-but what about White Mountain? And the elders? Didn’t you s—“

“Let me do the talking,” she interjects my blathering.

“What? Kuro, n—“

“I told you I’d handle it. Trust me, Asha.”

She smiles, and I feel some of my anxiety dissolve. I don’t want to get too involved in their flock until I can talk to their elders. What if the Kin here don’t like me because I’m an outsider, which colors their elder’s decision on whether I can join them?

But I asked Kuro to trust me yesterday, so I suppose it’s only fair that I trust her to handle this situation. I dip my head and mutter, “Okay,” in a voice so meek she may not have heard it.

She swivels her head up and steps forward, roaring a call over the crowd. It echoes through the clearing and up the rock face, silencing the assembled Kin in its wake. The gazes of everyone gathered turn toward us.

“Brothers and Sisters!” she calls in a voice that carries far. “It seems the news of our visitor has arrived before she could.” I glance up to see Gima and Tott with regular expressions, seemingly unaffected by Kuro’s blatant call-out.

“So, allow me to give you a fitting introduction. This,” she says, angling her wing over my shoulders, “Is *Asha*. Born as a *Lemur* in the Farlands, she found herself the way you see her now after a tragedy close to her den. Unable to turn back and unable to communicate with those she once knew, she fled to Felra. Enyll and I found her just as a wretched False-Kin was about to take her life.”

Kuro pauses a moment to let her words spread. Even though she’s the one speaking to the flock, all eyes are on me. I hold my wings tight against myself.

She resumes while pacing through the clearing. “When *Asha* heard that an airship-prey was approaching Felra, she stepped forward and insisted she could convince it to leave. But when she flew up and approached the lumbering beast, the airship-prey was upset. Filled with seething rage, it *attacked* her!” Kuro plays up drama in her storytelling, snapping her jaws like she were a vicious prey feral. The younger ones around us gasp in shock.

“But *Asha* was smart. Being a Farlander, she knew how the prey behaved. She knew the *exact* moment to dive and avoid its attack. *Asha* returned to the prey’s face and snarled a fierce cry, warning it to leave. And so, knowing it could not harm her, and knowing it must always obey a Farlander, the airship-prey flew around and returned to the Farlands.”

That wasn't the most accurate storytelling — she left out some critical pieces of information — but by the Goddess, did she ever play me up as a hero! I sounded so gallant in her tale that even *I'm* convinced I acted like one. Once more, I can't help but wonder why she's stretching her neck out so far for me.

Kuro folds her wings and turns to walk back to my side. “A great tragedy was avoided because of our visitor. A visitor that doesn't know how to hunt or survive on her own. I intend to bring her before the elders at White Mountain and have them determine what will happen to her next.”

Silence permeated the hollow as Kin looked between themselves, unsure how to react. Despite Kuro's top-notch storytelling that painted me as a hero, there's still some lingering doubt. Should I step forward and say something as well?

“How could a Farlander possibly take the form of Kin?” A gruff voice from the crowd speaks up.

I'm about to answer when Kuro speaks up for me, “We're not certain, but Asha had a rock that shimmered like the lights of the Grandfather Tree while she changed. It's possible there could be a connection.”

My head snaps to face Kuro, unable to believe the huge nugget of information she just casually dropped. The ‘lights’ of the ‘*the Grandfather Tree*’? *What* lights!? *What* tree?! When I told my story last night around the campfire, I simplified the explanation of the Serpentine Diamond to say it was a unique rock that glowed like Maki while I was transforming. But it seems to dumb down that the story was unnecessary.

I'm about to ask Kuro about it when a younger voice from the crowd yells, "Use some of your Farlander words!"

My face twists. '*Farlander words*'? Just what are *those* supposed to be? I flick my eyes to Kuro for help, but she offers none, keeping her face steady. Guess it's my turn to speak. "...What do you mean, exactly?"

Some of the Kin flinch as I speak for the first time. I guess they weren't expecting me to speak the Lithan tongue as well as I do.

"Supposedly, you told the airship-prey special words that made it listen to you. If you're really a Farlander, then what were they?" another voice from the crowd, this time an older woman with a striking, almost pure white plumage.

So, that's what they want to know. I suppose my speech to the Beatrix sounded strange to the Kin on the ground. I used many words that are brand new to them, and Gima must have mentioned that in her version of the story.

I don't remember it perfectly, but I could recite most of it. "I'll tell them to you," I step forward from Kuro and Enyll's side, feeling the weight of a crowd fall on me again.

Kuro told such a gripping tale about me. There's no way I can't follow up her performance without a few of my own theatrics. I draw a breath and close my eyes, imagining myself in front of Beatrix's bow, allowing the same conflicting emotions I felt at that moment to course through me again.

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“Air Destroyer Beatrix!” I shriek, flaring my wings wide. The crowd winces. “I am your Princess, Asha Lordanou! I order you, as heir to the throne, and daughter of Her Majesty the Queen, to *stand down* and return to Fort Richter! *Do not* encroach the Northern Continent!”

The camp became quiet, filled only with the sounds of feathers shifting. I find myself back in the moment, and regret washes over me like cold water. Did I really have to act it out so dramatically to them? “Um, that’s what I told it,” I mumble sheepishly.

“Woooooww!!” A kit in the grass breaks the silence, fluttering her wings in excitement. She screeches, “I am *MAJESTY’S HEIR TO THE QUEEN!!*” while trying to imitate my voice. Some of the young ones around her join in with their own cries until a mother trundles forward and quickly silences the braying children.

I didn’t notice it until now, but there are nearly as many kits and fledges here as adults. I wonder why that’s the case? Maybe I should have been a little more reserved with my storytelling... things wouldn’t end well if some fledge believed all they had to do to scare an airship-prey was repeat the particular words I just recited.

“And, why has this *outsider* come here...?”

A warm, confident voice rises like steam from the back of the crowd. I see Kin parting their wings on a level close to the top of the rock. A stunning, almost crimson plumaged Kin emerges into an opening on the rock face that's visible to all. His face is angled like a rapier's edge, and his shoulders are broad like barrels. "Is she here to steal prey, as all Farlanders do? Or to corrupt us with her strange, Farlander ways?"

"Relmoon," Kuro curses under her breath. I take it that's his name and that Kuro has some beef with this smooth-talking Kin.

"And what of the Farlanders that knew her?" he continues, looking around and below him amongst the Kin. "When the airship-prey returns to its den, it will surely tell the Farlanders she once knew that she fled to Felra. It seems it will only be a matter of time before more prey return to fetch this lost girl."

The flock murmurs in hesitation, fledges and kits turning to their parents with looks of concern. I don't like the tone of this guy's voice, but if all you knew was the story Kuro just told, then it would sound like he's raising some valid concerns. I push my wing against Kuro as she's about to answer back. She stops herself and looks at me a pinch annoyed before flicking her eyes to the crowd in front of her, then back towards me. Her face softens and she nods, allowing me to continue.

"Airship-prey will not return to your lands," I address Relmoon the same way mom would address a foreign delegation. "It would be difficult to explain, but to send one from my region of the Farlands is a dangerous gambit. To do so twice would cost many lives."

There are certain treaties with Nortane that mom could argue allow her to send a ship through their airspace. Passage for scientific exploration of Felra has been permitted in the past, though only with small, unarmed vessels. Either way, there's no chance she would do something so risky twice; mom is not so reckless as to intentionally provoke a war.

Not content to tower above me, Relmoon leaps from the cliff and glides into the clearing at the base of the rock. He lands close to the firepit and strides forward with his wings splayed. “And yet, they sent one anyways. How can you be so confident they won’t do it again once they learn of your presence here?”

“Airship-prey are dumb but loyal prey,” I counter, feeling my feathers puff up as Relmoon’s hostile scent drifts over me. “We have special ways to communicate to them without talking. They are unable to talk back to us.”

Relmoon scoffs and rolls his eyes. He takes a provocative step forward and growls, “That’s absurd. How can you control ferals if not by talking to them?”

I sense Kuro taking a step forward to match Relmoon’s advance. I thought he was simply concerned for the flock’s safety, but now he’s being outright confrontational. I decide to offer him the unfiltered truth. “We command them with boilers, electrical circuits, valves, and steam superheaters.”

Understanding drains from Relmoon’s face. He thinks he’s not showing it, but I know better. I know his veiled expression from every noble who tried to humor me when I talked to them about plants. “If you are clueless as to what those are, then I suggest you leave matters of airship-prey to me.”

I may have become short, but I still know how to act like a tall girl.

Relmoon narrows his eyes at Enyll, utterly silent up to this point. He turns about and grunts, neatly folding his wings against himself. “Keep your Farlander riddles to yourself, daughter of Her Majesty the Queen. You may look like Kin, but you will never be one of us.”

Murmurs of agreement rise from some of the older Kin as Relmoon storms off, weaving his way through the crowd to one of the far exits from the camp. As he’s about to pass through the trees, he turns his head unexpectedly and calls back, “Warm currents, Kuro.”

She rumbles a sinister growl in response. More than ever, I’m sure that blood has been spilled between these two in the past.

“I don’t like that guy,” I whisper to Kuro as Relmoon slips from sight.

“Good,” she responds with an edge that could cut. I’m glad we agree about him.

While we spoke, the buzz between the crowd rose once more. The adults are talking about the points Relmoon brought up, pondering if the airship-prey would return and if a Farlander could indeed be Kin. So far, nobody has explained what will happen at White Mountain when I go before the elders and ask to join their flock. How worried should I be if the Kin at Flat Rock agrees with Relmoon?

It’s becoming clear that this is why Kuro played up my encounter with the airship. She must have known that it would’ve been a tough sell for the flock to accept an outsider — a *Farlander* — as one of their own. I watch as she scans them, looking up and down the rock face with a guarded expression. Why is this Dragon I didn’t even know a day ago doing so much for me?

“I for one, think we should welcome Asha!” A brighter, familiar voice calls out from the second level. I follow Kuro’s eyes, and my mood is lifted, seeing Ykuvi fixed wing to wing beside Gima.

“Keuvra teaches us to welcome those with capable wings. With nobody to guide her and almost no flight experience, Asha has made the crossing to Felra in harvestwing. With her kind heart and intimate knowledge of the Farlands, I believe she could be invaluable to the flock.”

“How has she been kind-hearted?”

A gravely, age-marred drakon echoes down from atop Flat Rock. I strain my neck to see far above the crowd and spot the eldest Kin yet, drenched in large, tawny dorsal feathers down his entire neck, black horns spring from the back of his jawline, and... *whiskers!* Long, flowing *whiskers* that trail down to the ground! Wow!

I suppose he must be the leader of Flat Rock. Just how many years has this Dragon lived?

“Asha was kind to me,” A demure woman with a stone gray plumage and a soft voice answers him from the second level, competing against the sounds of loose feathers to be heard. “When she learned I would be kitting in the spring, Asha insisted that she share a portion of her prey with me. Gima and Ykuvi presented it to me last night.”

So, this is Enyll's sister! I would have never guessed someone so soft-spoken could be related to the fiery Enyll. "Asha," she continues, lowering her voice perhaps by necessity. "I don't understand why you chose to be so kind to someone you've never met, but know that I appreciate you very much."

I straighten up, warmed by the praises of Ykuvi and Enyll's sister. "You're very welcome. Tell me, what's your name?"

"I am Fra, Daughter-of-Kadi," she mantles her wings halfway and dips her head. "Asha, if you are ever in need and close to Flat Rock, please seek me out. I would be happy to provide whatever assistance I can to help you."

Warmth fills my heart, seeing Fra smile in gratitude. All I did was share a bit of prey, and she's offered so much in return. This is way too much — I think she's the most adorable feral I've ever met! "Thank you, Daughter-Of Kadi. In my short time here, it has become clear that the bonds of kindness exist in Felra much the same as they can in the Farlands. I hope I can continue to earn the respect of all of you."

I smile, swiveling my head to face the entire crowd. It seems that once you earn their trust, Kin can be incredibly kind-hearted creatures. After everything that's happened to me the past few days... I needed something like this. The feeling of community, the support of people who care about me, and most importantly, *hope*...

I needed it so much.

“Most fascinating,” rasps the elder Kin from up high. “I would have never guessed that Farlanders could be such intelligent and compassionate creatures. Daughter-Of-Mecali, please escort Asha to my den. I want a personal word with her.”

Daughter-Of-Mecali? That must be...

“Of course,” I turn back to see Kuro giving a swift nod. “Asha, the Chevil has summoned you.”

43. The Summer Hunting Grounds

“Asha, I hope you’ll forgive me for believing Farlanders were incapable of kindness.”

Light from outside the den reflects off the edges of the Chevil’s tattered facial feathers, drawn into a kind-hearted smile. Summoned by the elderly Kin, Kuro and I flew to the highest den at Flat Rock, the one perched at the top of the rock itself. Kuro explained to me before we entered that the ‘*Chevil*’ is the leader of a Lithan settlement and is typically the oldest Kin there.

“Oh! It’s quite all right,” I chirp. “I felt the same surprise when I first met Kuro and Enyll. I had no idea Lithans could... well, any of this.” I gesture my wings open in a vain attempt to characterize everything around me – the den I was in, the camp I was at, the conversation I was currently having. “Farlanders believe Lithans are senseless monsters. The past day has been eye-opening, to say the least.”

A wicked wind blew smoothly over the rock above us, disturbing some of the down feathers near the den's entrance. It's cool and damp here, lit only by daylight filtering in from the outside. Feathers cover the ground, and though I can't quite make it out from here, there appears to be something in the back of the den that resembles bedding. It's no Lordanou Palace, but for a Lithan, I'd imagine it's pretty posh to have your den somewhere guaranteed to be safe.

The Chevil nods in understanding, twisting the long whiskers growing from his gray muzzle. "Untold seasons have passed between our people. We live on the same moon and follow the same god of creation, yet our paths have never crossed before. I believe we can learn much from each other, and you could be the key to that, Asha."

"I'm glad you believe that," I say with a tinge of anxiousness, remembering the one Kin who was hostile to my arrival at Flat Rock. "It seems not everyone is as open-minded about my appearance as you are."

"Well, Relmoon can be a feisty one. Isn't that right, Daughter-Of-Mecali?"

Sitting next to me this whole time, Kuro lifts her head and grunts. "Yeah, I guess '*fiesty*' is one way to describe that *mud eater*."

The tawny Lithan chuckles to himself, "Despite what you think, Relmoon is a sensible Dragon. I'm sure that, given enough time, he would warm to the idea of a Farlander."

I sure hope so. There's clearly some well-known hostility between Kuro and Relmoon, and I hope he won't treat me any differently just because Kuro was the one who found me in Felra. What would happen if I learned how to turn back to normal and some Dragon still

had a grudge against me? Would they follow me back to Varecia and try to cause problems? I'd better not get on anyone's wrong side while I'm here.

"By the way, Kuro. How has your den arrangement with Enyll gone?" The Chevil changes the subject. Was he the one who ordered Kuro to share a den with Enyll?

I glance over to see her slightly raised hackles. "As you predicted, the flock have been well-fed because of us. Asha can personally attest to our skill as a team when tracking prey."

"Good," he says contentedly. "I knew you two would be effective together. With that said... I'd like you to stay denned through frostwing."

"*What!?*" Kuro hisses. Her brow curls, and her wings droop to the ground in shock. "Share *my* den for *two whole seasons?!?*"

"Kuro..." the Chevil lowers his voice and keeps his tone steady. "I know this is disappointing to learn. But I don't have to remind you how many lives were lost in frostwing or how many mothers are brooding in greenwing. The flock must be fed, and you and Enyll are our best unpaired hunters."

Kuro stares into the ground below her, dragging her claws along the edges of stones. Her dejection drifts off and begins to make me feel bitter as well. When I asked Kuro about her den yesterday, she became quite distant from me. It was clear she wasn't enjoying living with Enyll, despite how efficiently they hunted together. I understand the flock needs to be fed in winter, but... surely there must be some other way. How can she keep her den to herself and still hunt with Enyll?

For the life of me, I wish I could interrupt their conversation and ask. But as an outsider, it would be inappropriate. I have to respect their ways and customs regardless of how painful it may feel to me personally.

The Chevil moves to nuzzle his face against Kuro's, but she doesn't respond. He pulls his age-marred face back and exhales softly, waiting patiently for a response. It seems it's also pained him to force this decision on her... I'm sure there's something between this two that I'm missing. Something painful.

A breeze rustles the down feathers at the den entrance, and I hear her breathing grow tenser. After a long silence, she finally answers, "...All right," into the stones below her, unable to bring herself to face the Chevil directly. He silently acknowledges her and dips his wings.

I wish I knew what was going through Kuro's head right now. It's not fair to sit and watch her in this painful moment after all she's done to help me.

Perhaps I should try shifting the conversation to another topic.

"Chevil..." I trail off, suddenly overcome with realizing just how weird it is that he doesn't have a given name. Then I feel stupid, realizing that I hadn't asked him yet. "Do you have a name you'd prefer I address you by?"

“Oh!” he laughs, the jollity of his voice fully restored. “Goodness, I so seldomly meet wholly new Dragons that I completely forgot to introduce myself,” he pauses and mantles his wings slowly before me. “I am Bonello, Son-Of-Amsuli, and Chevil of Flat Rock.”

“Princess Asha Lordanou, heir apparent to the Lilac throne of Ellyntide.” I reintroduce myself, mantling my wings back and dipping my head low. He seems amused at just how long my name is. “Bonello, I have a question. I wish to join your flock so that I may be trained on how to hunt and survive as a Lithan. Eventually, my goal is to find a way to turn back into a Lemur so I can see my family again. When I go before the Elders at White Mountain, do you think they’ll allow me to speak to Keuvra?”

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Bonello’s head tilts. “You don’t know how to hunt?”

I quickly apologize and give him an abridged version of the story I told Kuro last night, the one about food in the Farlands and how someone like me could live their entire life without knowing how to hunt. With the story finished, I look up to find that his expression had changed; his eyes narrowed, and his face was sour.

“I see,” he speaks slowly, scraping his talons against the ground as he rises. “A Farlander wishes to join the flock and become Keuvra’s Kin. I never thought...” he trails off and paces around the back of the den with his head held low in contemplation. After a pass around his bedding, he raises his head abruptly. “No, absolutely not. The Elders would never allow an *inferior species* an audience before Keuvra.”

My heart sinks hearing him deliver his verdict. “But I’m not a Lemur! I’m every bit a Lathan as you are!” How could you look at my feathers and still believe I was an ‘*inferior*’ species?

“You are still an outsider,” he rumbles, lifting his head high above mine. “Regardless of your appearance, you are unfamiliar with our stories and traditions.”

My feathers puff in frustration hearing another Kin act so closed-minded. “But you allow loners into your flock. You grant Kin like Ykuvi an opportunity to learn your ways but believe I’m ineligible solely because of who I was at birth.”

“A loner must live with the consequences of what *you* are responsible for.”

My body stiffens, hearing Bonello’s voice bellow through the corners of the den. I flick my eyes to Kuro and try to gauge her reaction to see if she might agree with the blathering of this senile old man. But while she’s intently paying attention to us, her expression is flat and guarded. She’s keeping her feelings close to herself. “How could I be responsible for something if we just met?” I ask Bonello, gritting my teeth to try and stop bitterness from seething into my voice.

He stares at me a moment before the disdain on his face softens a little. “No, I suppose it is not you, personally, who is responsible,” his feathers relax, and he ambles past me towards the hole in the rock that is the entrance to his den. He sits and folds his wings by his sides, staring off at something in the distance. “...But your Kin are.”

My agitation subsides a little. It sounds like he’s come to his senses about blaming me for something I didn’t do, but... what’s this about my kin?

“When I had just come of age, many seasons ago...” he trails off and clears his throat with a hoarse cough. “My father would take me deep into the Farlands searching for prey. They’re quite small there, as I’m sure you’re aware. But they were dumb, always plentiful, and we could hunt in sunwing without upsetting the competition for prey in Felra. I have fond memories of me and my father, our bellies full of easy prey, perched on top of mountains glowing in the planetlight...” he turns to examine me, allowing diffuse light to outline the age in his facial feathers. “Tell me, Farlander. Does that make you upset?”

So, that’s what this is about. He’s old enough to remember the days centuries ago when Lithans still visited Ellyntide regularly. “You took prey from our farmers, prey that was destined for us. But that was a long time ago, long before I was born. No, It doesn’t affect me.”

Nobody knows why Lithans stopped visiting Ellyntide and confined themselves to the northern reaches of Sarlain. But in hearing a Lathan tell the tale, it all begins to make sense. A pang of regret swells inside me, understanding where Bonello’s story will lead.

“Hmph,” he grunts in disappointment, unsatisfied by my response. “Back then, I found it strange. For all the prey we took, we were rarely challenged by Farlanders,” he pauses to reenter the den and adds, “But then the airship-prey came.”

A deep, frustrated sigh is released, and he begins pacing around me. “For a time, there were only a few foul-smelling beasts. We could avoid them, and they avoided us. But soon, they bred and swarmed the skies like mad starlings, chasing us down and making it impossible to visit the areas we once thrived in,” He suddenly stops and lifts his wings. “Why would you invite those miserable creatures onto your lands?!”

“We...” I hesitate, recalling that Kin believe Farlanders are consumed by airships. It would be futile to try and explain the entire story. “...Use airship-prey as transportation. We learned how to command them to fly to islands once only accessible by Avians.”

In reality, the invention of the airship fundamentally changed ascendant life on Jade. Lemurs, Martens, and Rabbits met face-to-face for the first time since the continents were raised. Our societies flourished as links of trade and culture formed between us.

It also heralded a dark chapter with the rise of nation-states and war.

But for Lithans, it's clear it also had a profound impact on them. Farmers soon realized that the farms close to aerodromes were far less likely to have their livestock taken by Lithans. Pilots were hired solely to patrol the agricultural areas of Ellyntide, and some of the more thrill-seeking ones would search out Lithans to chase them away. Nobody was sure why the largest predator species on the moon rarely fought back.

But now I understand their perspective. They see airships as noxious-smelling, lumbering monsters with armor that's challenging to penetrate and a body that explodes when it dies. For a creature already weary of the destructive power of fire, that's *terrifying*. Why would you risk your life to make the dangerous crossing to the Farlands, only to encounter measly prey and terrifying monsters?

Bonello sighs and shakes his head. “Some prey is still taken from the Farlands, but only a fraction of what we used to rely on. Competition with False-Kin increased, and the forswings became harsh.” He turns to me with eyes full of pain. “Do you understand what your Kin's selflessness brought to us?”

For a moment, the silence stretched between us. Outside, I hear the rising cries of kits and fledges playing in the grass below. How many of their voices will be extinguished by the coming winter?

“Yes,” I whisper. “It’s terrible to learn how the airship-prey impacted your flock. I wish there were some way our people could have communicated with each other sooner.”

Perhaps it’s because I have to be the representative of all ascendant animals in front of the flock, but I can’t help but feel remorse over the consequences of airship travel. How could we have known the pain we were causing them?

Bonello steps forward, moving in close to rub his muzzle against mine. For the first time, I feel the sensation of another Lathan’s feathers... another Lathan’s compassion. His scent, cool like the walls surrounding him, envelops and calms me. I reciprocate the kind gesture.

“Then you must understand how difficult it will be to convince the Elders to accept you,” he says, pulling his head back. “I believe we can learn much from each other, and I feel the pain of your plight. But to join our flock and truly become one of us... that is hard to accept.”

I nod slowly, wishing I could sink into the ground below me. I should have expected something like this. Why would they accept someone so wholly alien to join them? Maybe I was foolish to ever consider this plan.

“Kuro,” Bonello speaks up. “Take her to White Mountain. Her fate rests on the elder’s wings.”

Kuro makes a slight noise of acknowledgment, and her scent drifts over me again. “Come on,” she says softly. Reluctantly I stand, but there’s something I want to know before I leave.

“Bonello,” I say, raising my head back up. “Enyll said he would not vie for me. Would you?”

Enyll and Ykuvi talked about vying for me in front of the elders last night. I don’t know what the process of letting me into the flock entails, but having someone who thinks you should be there seems essential. If Enyll won’t do it, then I feel I’m going to need all the help I can get.

Bonello averts his gaze and stares off at something unseen. After a long pause, he sighs and says, “...I don’t know, Asha. I really don’t know.”

44. Watch Your Tail

Blue sky breaks through the clouds on the horizon as we depart Bonello’s den. After the outcome of our meeting, I wish I could say my mood was improving as much as the skies are. But all I feel is anxiousness over what’s to come at White Mountain. What will I do if I’ve come this far, only to be turned away at the last step? How will I survive, then?

Kuro paces along my side as we trot the narrow cliff face, our wings folded flat, so we both fit. “I’ve never heard Bonello speak so bitterly before,” she says.

“Well, I deserved it. He was in such a good mood until I started asking questions. Then I got upset and talked back to him about something terrible.” It was the loss of their summer hunting grounds; what an awful thing to be upset about him. I should have apologized.

“If it makes you feel better, I would have done the same thing.”

My legs lock up, unable to believe what Kuro just said. “Really?!”

She laughs at my shock. “He was being a jerk. Asha, you didn’t know about our history with airship-prey. I’d be upset too if someone started accusing me of things I never did.”

Well, that’s certainly what I thought at the time. But Kuro, talking back to someone as kind-hearted as Bonello? “I just can’t imagine you saying that to him.”

Her smile became wry. “You’d be surprised.”

She motions with her head, and we resume walking towards the large, flat crevice we landed in. A cool breeze blows over the top of the rock, ruffling the large hackle feathers of our necks.

I've seen glimpses of Kuro's negative side here and there. When she thought I was some crazy Loner, and then later when we were walking back to the campfire with the ember root. But for the most part, she's been nothing but compassionate to me in the short time we've known each other. It seems crazy to think she could be capable of doing something so... well. Getting moody and talking back to authority figures is sort of *my* thing, you know?

"Oh! Before we leave," the soot plumaged Kin speaks up. "Would you mind if I introduced you to my sister? She'd love to meet a Farlander."

I think for a moment, wondering if there's any downside to making a detour from our trip to White Mountain. It seems like the sun is still high in the sky, so we should have plenty of time to make the flight there. It might be worth it to get to know more of the flock. "I'd love to meet her."

Kuro's smile grows. "Great! I'll be right back." She straddles the cliff's edge with her talons and nearly bumps her wings into me. She leaps and glides over the scalloped terraces of the rock, landing next to a boy who quickly darts from her way on one of the middle levels.

I was beside myself for the first time since I met these feathery creatures.

High atop Flat Rock, I have a dragon's-eye view of everything. The fledges playing in the grass, the ember wood pit at the center of the large clearing, and all the cliff faces of the rock. It seems most Kin are still on the cliffs from the storytelling earlier — A group of mothers watching the fledges play in the grass, a few couples grooming each other's feathers, and...

My eyes fall onto one of the lower levels, where I spot a group of young Kin gathered around two adults on a large outcropping of rock. I squint to get a better view and make out the colors of their plumages: deep copper and slate gray.

It's Enyll and Fra!

They must be telling stories to the young ones! I'd quite like to fly down there and listen to them. I'd also like to thank Fra for her kind words earlier. They really helped assuage some of the older Kin's fears over me. Kuro said she'd be right back, but I'm sure she'll be able to spot me if she flies back to the highest level. I glide down and land a short distance behind the group; Ten or so kits and fledges gathered around Enyll, their ears perked forward to hear every word of his story.

"...The False-Kin was moments away from preying on Asha. If Kuro and I hadn't intervened, it surely would have finished her off right then and there. What a terrible fate for the unlucky Farlander, so far away from home..." he trails off and closes his eyes, allowing a dramatic pause to build, keeping the fledges on their claws with bated breath. "...But, the False-Kin wouldn't give up his prey so easily!!" he flares his wings and his yell echoes over the camp. The fledges flinch and gasp, thoroughly entranced by the story.

Is this really the same grumpy Enyll that I've come to know the past day? Where has all his bitterness gone? The scorn in his voice? All I see is a Dragon delighted to share the harrowing tale of what happened yesterday.

Now that I think about it, Kuro was also quite the dramatist when she told her side of the story earlier. And Bonello chose to say '*stories*' before '*tradition*' while talking a few minutes ago. It's becoming clear to me that stories, and the way they are told, are fundamental aspects of Lathan society. I would do well to keep this information in mind.

A gray wing bumps against Enyll's. He turns to the Kin next to him, who angles her ears forward towards me. Freed from the enchantment of storytelling, he looks up and realizes I've been standing just beyond the crowd of young ones this whole time.

"Oh!" he chirps in surprise. "It seems Asha has come to join us."

The crowd swivels their necks, and their faces fill with amazement seeing the star of the story standing just behind them.

"It's her!!"

"It's Asha!!"

"Hi, Asha!"

At once, the group abandons Enyll and his story to gather around me. The mass of chirping and cavorting Dragons can't help but fling questions at me.

"Do you really know everything about airship-prey?!"

"What's it like to be *EATEN* by airship-prey?!"

“Hey, Asha!! Can you teach me how to scare away airship-prey?”

A young girl nips the wings of the boy next to her. “Tott, no! *I* want her to teach me how to scare the airship-prey!! *SKREECH!!*” A puff of smoke leaves her nose as she screams directly into Tott’s face.

Oh, boy. It seems that even in Felra, I can’t escape being a celebrity. As I’m beginning to get overwhelmed by the deluge of attention, Enyll roars to silence them.

ROOARR!!

The young ones instantly turn docile and pivot to give him their full attention.

“Meno!!” he scolds, the sternness of his voice fully restored. “What did your mother tell you about using your smoke?”

The eyes of the group fall onto the cloudy blue Kit. She ruffles her feathers in embarrassment and mews, “Not to do it?”

Enyll’s eyes narrow. “You know the stories. What happens if you accidentally use your fire?”

“...Bad things?”

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“You must never use your smoke in camp, even as a joke. Do I make myself clear?”

Dejected, the girl flatters her feathers and droops her head. “Yes, Enyll.”

He grunts, lowering his wings back to his side. “Good. Now please, would the rest of you all back away from Asha? You’re acting like a flock of rowdy gulls.”

Fra bounds from the rock and addresses the group of retreating Kin. “Please, listen to Enyll finish his story. I’m certain you’ll have plenty of time to ask Asha questions later.” They flow around her and retake their seats in front of Enyll. He settles down and picks up from where he left off. “Now, then! Kuro and I knew we had to defend Asha...”

Fra trots up to me looking penitent. She has a floral scent to her, like blooming orchids. “I-I’m sorry, Asha. They’ve been all riled up since they heard what you said to the airship-prey.”

I chuckle a little to myself. Not at the kits being excited, but at how nervous Fra is over talking to a Farlander. “It’s all right. Would you believe me if I told you I’m used to it?”

Relief washes over her face that I didn’t take it personally. “Oh, are you? Well, I’m glad it didn’t bother you much. You must be a popular, um, *Lehmur* in the Farlands,” Fra smiles, and I catch myself smiling back. Now that we’re up close, I can tell we’re nearly the same height, though Fra edges me by a foot. *Dang it.*

“Yeah, I’m something like that!” My face flushes at how much of an understatement calling me ‘popular’ is. “Kuro and I are leaving soon for White Mountain, but before we go, I wanted to thank you for what you said earlier. I really think it helped convince Bonello to trust me.”

Of course, he’s still undecided whether he would vie for me in front of the elders. But he could still say, ‘yes.’ Think positive thoughts, Asha!

Fra’s feathers rise slightly. “Oh, Asha. I’m glad it helped you out, though I’m the one who should be thanking *you*. Offering some of your prey to a stranger was a very kind gesture.”

Gosh. Unlike her brother, Fra is just about the sweetest Dragon ever! I still don’t understand why sharing your food in Litan society is such a big deal, but I’m glad a simple act of kindness is helping everyone like me. “Well, I’m glad I could help!” I smile awkwardly, unfamiliar with receiving this much praise.

A fledge cries out overhead, trying to get the attention of their friends as they perform an acrobatic flight maneuver over the camp. “I’m curious,” Fra speaks up as I watch the

young Dragon spiral through the air. “You seem pretty persuasive, Asha. How did you convince Kuro to act so nice to you?”

“How did I convince her...?” my head tilts in curiosity.

“Enyll can’t believe how polite she’s acting. He thinks it’s the first time she’s *ever* acted nice to someone,” Fra speaks with a hint of disbelief like she had trouble believing it herself.

I stare at her in a daze. “The *first* time? You mean this isn’t how Kuro normally acts?”

Fra half-opens her muzzle to reply but stops herself before the words leave her mouth. Her expression deflates like a balloon, and she darts her eyes around the camp. Moving her head close to mine, she whispers into my ear, “I think we should talk about this somewhere else.”

Trepidation jolts me, and I nod slowly. “O-okay?” Is she being real? Kuro’s never been friendly to someone... *ever*? This is the same Dragon we’re talking about, right? The one I’ve spent the past day bewildered by because she’s been so kind to me?

I have to know more about this.

Fra lifts her wings and beckons me to follow. I follow in her talonsteps past the spellbound kits and into a small, bowl-shaped crevice along a sheer rock face. Sheltered

from the wind and far away from other Kin, this is obviously where Kin go when they want to keep their conversations private.

“You’re taking this awfully seriously,” I say as I step into the fissure. Ahead of me, Fra keeps her wings folded tight against herself so there’s enough room for us to fit.

She releases a sigh. “I’m sorry, Asha. I just don’t want *her* to hear us talking.”

“Kuro...?” I blink disbelievingly. “You’re worried about Kuro hearing our conversation?”

“Listen,” she talks slowly and stares directly into my eyes. “I don’t expect you to know this. But Kuro and my brother have a reputation of being... *difficult* to get along with.”

A lump forms in my throat. “Kuro acts... like Enyll does?”

“Yes, very much so.”

I stare at her muzzle agape, unable to locate my voice. Kuro? As challenging to get along with as Enyll? But how could that be? Enyll has been combative to the point of antagonism, but if what Fra’s telling me is true, then Kuro is just as capable of that sort of hostile conduct. I force myself to keep my voice steady. “What has she done? Just how ‘*difficult*’ can Kuro get?”

“Well,” she flicks her eyes back into camp to ensure nobody is listening. “I’m sure you noticed how upset she got when Relmoon started talking earlier. Those two have feuded with each other for many seasons.”

“Relmoon?” My body stiffens. “Well, I didn’t particularly like him, either.” He was even more hostile than Enyll was. Even though she was clearly upset at him, it felt good to hear Kuro give curt approval when I told her I didn’t like him.

“I know, Asha. But here’s the point I’m trying to make: As long as you’re around our flock, and around Kuro specifically, there will be certain Kin who treat you differently.”

“They’ll treat me differently...” I echo, beginning to understand what she’s trying to warn me about. She must have realized I have aspirations to join the flock, and my chances could be negatively impacted because I’m associated with Kuro, a Dragon that many of Kin dislike. “And, I’m already going to be treated poorly because I’m an *inferior species*.”

“Yes,” her low voice douses me like a cold rain. “I believe you will.”

My stomach churns, contemplating that the girl who’s been so lovely to me might actually be hurting my chances of getting into the flock. My chances of returning home and seeing my family again. Maybe allowing Kuro to help me was a mistake...

“Listen, Asha. I know better than anyone that my brother is actually a good Dragon. And I think it’s great that Kuro is treating someone nice for a change. You *should* trust her. It’s

just, um..." she trails off, and her voice grows distant. "...You should keep your tail in the air as long as you're around Kuro. Do you understand?"

I retreat a step and bump into the wall behind me. I've never heard her idiom before, but I understand its meaning perfectly: Someone might try to attack me because I'm a Farlander and because Kuro and I are nice to each other. I'm a *target*. And because of how small and inexperienced I am compared to other Kin, I make an *easy* target.

The only reason a puny Redaga didn't kill me is because Kuro and Enyll saved my life. If a much larger Lithan tried to take my life... well, they'd have no trouble doing so.

Kuro could be difficult to get along with, but she's bigger than I am. And, she seems to like me. If I'm allowed into their flock, then it might be a good idea to ask the elders if she can train me.

In fact, I think that's exactly what I'll do.

"Yes," I straighten myself and incline my head. "I do understand. Thank you for telling me, Fra."

Fra smiles, relieved I got the hint. I nuzzle my head against hers as thanks, and she responds in kind. The scents of blooming orchids and the warmth of friendship drift between us.

“Come on, let’s head back.”

Sunlight shines down as Fra leads me out of the crevice and back into the center of the rocky terrace. As we step around the storytelling rock, I spot Kuro perched by the ledge, noticeably by herself. Smelling our approach, she swivels around, and her face lights up.

“Asha! There you are!”

As we trot up, Fra’s face fills with apprehension. “I-I’m sorry, Kuro. Asha came to thank me, and I offered to show her around Flat Rock. I didn’t mean to—”

“Oh, you did?” Her feathers relax. “Thank you so much, Fra. I looked around everywhere for my sister, but I think she went out hunting this morning. I was worried Asha was bored out of her feathers!”

I give Fra a sidelong glance, and our eyes meet. We exchange a good laugh.

“Kuro, is that...?”

Off on the horizon, a jagged white cap rises through the haze to pierce a clear blue sky. Led to the top of Flat Rock, I initially thought it was a stubborn cloud that refused to part. But Kuro just revealed we’d be flying in that direction.

“White Mountain,” she confirms, standing to my left with her wings open. “So named for the snow on its peak that never melts.”

I snap at her in disbelief. “It’s covered in snow *all year*?”

“Oh, yes!” Kuro rears her head back, laughing at my astonishment. “Asha, White Mountain has been our flock’s home for generations.”

I gaze at the far-off peak in wonder. To think, a mountain that never sheds its snow! *Incredible!* Even the tallest mountains in Ellyntide lose their snowpack during the warm summer months. What happens to the snow if it never melts? Just how cold is it at the summit of the mountain? *What sort of plants grow in that environment?!* The scientist in me is screaming to learn more!

“Are you ready?”

An icy wind whips us from the north, heralding the direction we’ll fly. The path I’ve been flying this whole time, ever since this crisis began. White Mountain has always been the destination, and it’s finally time to go there.

Conflicting emotions course through me: excitement, apprehension, and grief. I look up at Kuro and nod confidently.

“Then, let’s fly!”

ROARR!

SKREECH!

We leap from Flat Rock just as a warm thermal roars over the top, effortlessly thrusting us into the sky. I call a friendly goodbye to the camp as we bank overhead, winging off to our northerly destination.

45. Lean on My Shoulder

Knock. Knock.

"Ah! One moment, please!"

Two slow knocks at the door. That has to be him. I wasn't sure he was truly going to make it, but it seems he has.

I rise from my reading chair and trot across the floor of my second-story flat, around the mess and the clutter that has built up, and towards the outside-facing door. Stopping on my way, I pause to ignite the gas lamp on the wall near the kitchen. It would be rude to welcome my guest in the dark that has permeated my home these past few days.

I adjust the lock and pull the door open to see a Dutch Rabbit in a wrinkled waistcoat gazing idly at the carpet. Slowly, he raises his head and grants me my first look at the man I spent so much time comforting that cursed night mere days ago.

His face is pale, and his hair unkempt, styled to be the bare minimum presentable in a gathering between friends. Bags had formed under his eyes, red and wrinkled, the telltale signs that fresh tears had flowed recently. Although I haven't known this friend for long, I'm confident that tardiness is not one of his qualities. Seeing the condition of his face, It's clear he got sidetracked by his emotions on the way here.

He stares at me blankly, uncertain how to react. I loosen a smile and hug him once more, and a moment later he does the same. He exhales and his grip tightens.

"Duncan," I pull myself back so he can view the relief on my face. "It's good to see you again. I'm so glad you came."

"A-As am I," he says, his voice meek. "...Officer Roland."

"Please, call me Finch," I softly correct. "We've been granted leave from our duties, after all."

He grimaces and inclines his head. "Yes, I suppose that's true... Finch."

I wonder how many animals he's spoken to the past few days? Musn't been a lot. With the state of his voice, I wouldn't be shocked to learn I was the first.

"Come inside," I say, gesturing my arm through the open door to welcome him. He lingers a moment longer and passes through the door. I follow his back and close the door behind us.

"Sorry about the mess," I apologize, feeling anxious over the trash that has built up around the furniture. "I tried to get it cleaned before you arrived, but—"

"It's quite alright," he murmurs, angling his ears behind him. I always see him wearing bowler hats in the palace, so it's strange to view his bare head. "I'm afraid I haven't been much better."

He enters the living room and stands in the center by the coffee table, gazing at the pictures hung on my wall. His movements are slow and labored like it's taking him all his strength to put one foot in front of the other.

"Can I get you anything?"

"Ah, um, no. No, thank you."

"Let me know if you change your mind," I smile. For the slightest moment, he flashed a smile back.

I return to my reading chair and quickly push aside some trash around the coffee table. Ah, what an absentminded thing to do in front of him. I don't even intend to put something there. Oh, well. It's not like anything has made sense these past few days.

"Sit wherever you like," I tell my friend, noticing his eyes wandering about the room for a place to rest. He eyes a spot on the green velvet sofa and slowly settles himself down. He sits with his legs close and his arms tensed to his sides, staring idly at the wall behind me.

"Well," I say, breaking the ice that has formed between us. "How are you holding up?"

For a moment, he says nothing, switching his gaze towards the wall, to me, and the floor below him. His expression was empty like his soul had been sucked away from him. After what he's been through these past few days, it may as well have.

"This is the first time I've left the palace since the day of the incident," he whispers, flicking his eyes towards the window. Even for autumn, It's an unusually dreary day with curtains of rain lapping against the sides of the window. Outside is the heart of the Crimson District, usually bustling with commuters and eager shoppers going about their day. But today has been eerily quiet, just as it has the past few days. Even though the Crown has ceased the period of mourning, it seems nobody's in the mood to return to normal just yet. "It has been difficult to bring myself to accomplish... anything productive at all, I'm afraid."

My fears of ceaseless closed-door debriefings turned out to be accurate, and I believe I've met every ranking officer in every armed forces division. Perhaps rightfully so, everyone was insistent on learning every scrap of information about the tragedy, no matter how small. I'd imagine Duncan's experience the past few days has been similar, despite the unassailable grief he must now contend with. To feign productivity is something only Duncan could accomplish, that much I am sure.

His eyes lower, and he stares into the dirty carpet. "I've had to sleep in guest rooms, asking for help from the guard to retrieve clothes from our quarters. I haven't yet had the strength to return there and sort through Calypso's personal belongings."

"Take as much time as you need," I remind him. "I don't care what anyone orders you to do."

He pauses to lift his head with a sigh. "I've been assured that I will have enough time to grieve. Queen's orders."

I feel numb at even the mention of her. Duncan's loss is heartbreaking, to say the least. But to lose the Princess in the same breath of senseless violence is an unspeakable tragedy for the Kingdom. "Have you spoken to her yet?" I dare ask.

"No," he quickly replies. "The Queen has not asked to see me. I dread the time I must go before her and explain the loss of her daughter. But I *will* do so. I must atone for my failure."

For a moment, we said nothing as the silence stretched between us. What was there to say? What could possibly dull the pain of the past few days? There's no bright side, no silver lining to it. Just inexorable pain and grief.

I wish I knew how to console him. I wish I knew him better.

He stares into a picture on the wall and releases a sigh. "The failure of the Beatrix has compounded our issues, I'm afraid."

"Oh?" On hearing of the Beatrix, I straighten myself up. "Are you aware of what's happened to it?"

This morning, it was announced on the radio that the Beatrix's subjugation mission had failed. And strangely, that's all they said. No details, no other information, just that it failed to locate and eliminate the Lithan.

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Such a senseless, petty response it was. Exploiting our only treaty with Nortane to send a warship through their airspace on flimsy pretenses. It's a wonder they haven't declared war on us for that act alone. Though I've kept the radio off since I woke this morning, by now they very well could have and I'd be none the wiser.

Duncan nods but keeps his gaze averted. “I’m afraid I can’t share the details. That it failed is all the information worth knowing.”

A pang of dejection weaves through me — I can’t help it, but I still feel guilty. I’m just a lowly Ensign, nothing in rank compared to Duncan. Why do I expect special treatment? But when I study Duncan’s face to try and glean any hints from his demeanor, something becomes apparent.

“It was a *catastrophic* failure,” I conclude, tightening my tail around my legs. “Something so terrible occurred that it can’t be shared with the public.”

He looks at me a moment, then frowns and turns his face away.

“The Beatrix was lost,” I say to myself, competing with the rain against the window to be heard. “You don’t have to share the agonizing details with me. I can’t imagine the misery of losing one of our warships, compounded wi—“

“The Beatrix still flies,” he corrects my monologue in his most vital voice yet. I silence my yapping muzzle, and guilt rips me that he had to raise his voice. Lowering it, he continues, “It still flies, though not without damage. The Lithan encountered it.”

I shift in my reading chair uncomfortably. Truly, it was able to locate the terrible monster in the vastness of the Northern Continent? I never thought such a thing could remotely succeed. But to have encountered the Lithan and failed must mean, “It took heavy damage.”

Duncan's face twists. He sighs and drops his elbows to his legs. "Finch," he runs his fingers through his hair, speaking almost normally. "I believe you and me, Bryant, Harper, and LaRoche, are all bonded together through the tragedy we experienced. We will always carry with us the events of that day."

I nod in understanding. I'll never, ever forget what I saw in the hollow for as long as I live. We will always have the shared experience, for better or worse, of being the first responders to what occurred there. It is a stigma we must carry until the end of our days. Duncan's reason for bringing it up is not lost on me; certain things transcend the boundaries of duty and rank.

"The Beatrix's encounter with the Lathan... defies conventional understanding. Like so many things about this damnable affair," he lowers his forehead into his white fingers and sighs. "The Lathan appeared promptly after the Beatrix arrived at the Northern Continent like it knew it was going to show up there all along. It flew in front of the ship's bow and..." he trails off, keeping his gaze drawn into the carpet below him.

"...And?" I ask gently.

"And it began *talking* to the ship," he says, frustration and anger building in his voice. "Yelling and braying like the s-sense-..."

His body begins to quiver, pain and emotion swelling as his misery returns. I bolt across the room and sit by his side, putting one arm around his shoulder and leaving the other for him to grasp. He returns to my shoulder, the place he spent most of that miserable night, trying in vain to hold off the tears once more.

Curse that beast!! If only it knew the pain and suffering it still causes. Conflicting emotions tap me on the shoulder, reminding me that mere moments ago I thought of the mission to subjugate the Lithan as senseless and petty. Yet I can't help but wish it had succeeded in ending that cursed feral. If our world were a just one, then the Lithan would be lying in a pool of its own blood.

"Please," I tell him. "You don't have to continue the story. I can infer what happens next."

He lifts his head and murmurs, "You deserve to know the whole story."

I watch him in silence. I don't want him to continue, but if he insists, then I will allow him. He will have to learn how to live with his grief, and I suppose this is part of it in some small way.

"The Beatrix wasted no time readying the cannons," he speaks slowly, trying to calm himself. He pauses to twist around and sit in a more dignified position. "But when they fired, the Lithan, it... it knew it was coming."

"*What?*" I hiss under my breath. "It *knew* the shot was coming?"

Duncan nods solemnly. "It fell into a steep dive right as the cannons fired. As a result... they missed."

I stare into him, scarcely able to believe his story. “*Missed?! How is that possible?*” I’d outright call it a lie if the precedent of the past few days hadn’t made the inane believable.

He shakes his head. “I don’t know, Finch. And it gets worse, I’m afraid. The Lithan came about to the ship’s bow, seething in anger. It screamed like it did in the weald, loud enough that it blew the windows of the pilot’s deck out. And, then...” he pauses to look me straight in the eyes. “*Fire.*”

My eyes go wide. “The *Lithan?*”

He nods solemnly.

I stare across the room, unable to locate my voice. Then, are the legends true? Lithans can *breathe fire?*

“Across the bow of the ship,” he continues. “A threat; a warning to retreat or its next attack wouldn’t miss. And so, unable to harm the beast and facing certain death if they tried, they retreated.”

...

I fall into the back of the couch, trying to process everything he's revealed to me. A Lithan that appears from nowhere, kills our Princess, dodges mortar rounds, and breathes fire?! What sort of unholy hellspawn is this monster?!

Duncan's mouth rises into a soft smirk. "I know. How could you possibly explain any of that to the public? You can't."

It would be a disaster, unquestionably. Melicola has already lambasted the notion of our Princess being murdered by a Lithan as a false flag for an invasion. They dispute there ever was a Lithan and claim Asha will simply reappear once we have control over the disputed island near their border. Even for Ellyntidians, what happened to the Beatrix is... challenging to comprehend.

We sat silently, staring at the walls and listening to the passing of steam carriages outside. All we had was our grief.

"What will you do now?" I ask, breaking the silence.

His whiskers twitch, and he thinks for a moment like he's never seriously considered the prospect until now. "Go before the Queen, I suppose. Beyond that, I don't know. I've failed her and failed to live up to my family's reputation. Perhaps my sister would be better suited to fill my role..."

"You'd leave the palace?"

He remains quiet, refusing to face me.

“Oh, no, no, no, Duncan...” I take him by his hands, clammy and cold. “Listen to me, Duncan. I don’t know if you’re aware of this, but among those of us in the guard... we look up to you. As a leader.”

His head swivels back to mine. “...You do?”

“Yes,” I tell him. “I’ve talked to the others in my unit, and nobody blames you for what happened. We all understand how insane this whole ordeal has been, and everyone is looking forward to your leadership in the coming days.”

Duncan works with the guard quite often and is well-respected among us. Some higher-ranking officers and nobles can be pretty challenging to be around, but not him. He treats us with dignity. It’s heartbreaking to hear he’s considering leaving.

His expression softens, and he removes his glasses to wipe away tears. Calypso and I, we talked about what would happen if one of us was lost in the line of duty. He told me once, *‘If I go, then I want a good show from you, Dunc. You better not let me down, alright?’*

I smile at Duncan’s colorful impersonation. It certainly sounds like something the Captain would’ve said.

“Do you believe in it, too?”

The resurrection of the soul? That in the afterlife, Lemurs will be shown the future events of those close to them? “I do.”

For the first time, he smiles ever so slightly. “I never took the time to learn Lemur’s beliefs on the afterlife. Finch, could you...”

“I’d love to.”

And so I explain to him what we believe, what will be shown to us in the afterlife, and the world that awaits us beyond this one. The great temple below the clouds of Maki, where all Lemurs come to live until the end of days. I can’t say I blame him for not knowing the whole story. Rabbits have a much simpler set of beliefs. But as I talked, I could see his grief beginning to fade. It brought him comfort that Calypso, and Asha, would still be following him in spirit.

“I think it would best if I returned to the palace,” he says after we finish talking, his voice more vital than before. “It won’t be easy to sort through Calypso’s belongings, but knowing he’ll be there with me... it helps.”

I smile, relief swelling that I could begin to calm his restless heart. We exchange passionate hugs, and Duncan rises to his feet. I re-ignite the light in the hall and follow him to the door.

He turns to look over his shoulder. “There’s one other thing you should know. About what’s happened.”

My tail tenses up. “There’s more?”

He nods. “I learned this morning they found rudimentary radio equipment around the hollow, buried deep in the grass. Finch...” he trails off, his voice turning rough again. “It’s not strong enough to communicate off-continent.”

I look at him in disbelief. “It’s not...? Then, who were they talking to? *Here?*”

“I don’t know, Finch. I just don’t know.”

46. Snowfell

You should keep your tail in the air as long as you’re around Kuro. Do you understand?

Fra’s warning has rattled around my head since we left Flat Rock. Could Kuro really be as difficult to get along with Enyll? Am I putting myself in harm’s way by being around her? It’s all so difficult to believe. She told me I could trust her, but...

What if Kuro isn’t being forthright about why she’s helping me?

Being a Lordanou, I know what it's like to have animals with selfish desires constantly trying to court your favor. Everyone always wants something – *'just a small favor!'* – from a member of the most powerful family in the Kingdom. When I was a teenager, the daughters of nobles swarmed like fruit flies to be my friends, only to disappear the moment I refused to buy them desirable clothing and jewelry.

Of course, I'm no longer in Ellyntide and no longer powerful. Quite the opposite, actually. But I'm all too familiar with the feeling of someone cozying up to get something from me, and... I get that from Kuro. What could a Kin want from a Farlander who's utterly useless as a Lithan? I don't know, but Fra's warning about Kuro's true nature was enough to trigger my defenses about her.

Flying to my left, I scrutinize her face as the wind whips her facial feathers. Could there be hostile intent lurking behind those eyes that I've yet to uncover? If so, will she reveal her true self while we're at White Mountain?

...

I turn away and sigh, guilt raking my consciousness. But she's been so accommodating and supportive of me, just like a *real* friend. I wish I weren't so suspicious of everyone I meet, but I've been hurt so many times...

"Asha, is something wrong?"

Whoops.

I loosen a smile. "It's nothing. I was just..." desperate to change the subject, I spot a bird flying over Kuro's shoulder. "...Kuro, have you ever seen a glowing red bird before?"

Shock fills her face. She whips her head around to where I was looking, then turns back with a more measured expression. "A *glowing* bird?"

"Y-yeah!!" I stumble, suddenly anxious that it wasn't familiar as I'd hoped. "When I first landed in Felra, I came across a strange, glowing bird. It began tweeting my name and led me to the den where the False-Kin was."

I'm still upset about that damn bird. I would've died if Kuro and Enyll hadn't been nearby and heard the fight!

Kuro thinks for a moment, and her face relaxes. "That's very strange, Asha. I've never seen a bird like that before. When we get to White Mountain, we can try asking an elder. They might know more about it."

I nod and wing into a gentle glide, pushed along by a thermal rising from a moonbound ridge. "Sounds like a plan. How much longer until we get there?"

Kuro scans the horizon. White Mountain has grown bigger since we left but still seems quite a flight away. For whatever reason, we've been flying considerably slower than we

did on our way to Flat Rock. She glances at the horizon and says, “About a claw’s mark on the sun.”

A what?

I stare at the sky to try and figure out what she’s talking about, temporarily blind myself, then quickly turn away.

Kuro chitters, “Right, right! You wouldn’t know what that means. It won’t be much longer, Asha.”

Ow. If I had to guess, she’s referring to the distance the sun travels in the sky. So, if I were to hold up one of my claws directly under the sun, it would reach the base of my claw in... 45 minutes? Maybe? If I’m welcomed into their flock, I’ll have to be taught all the words they use for measuring time and distance.

As we fly, the scenery below us slowly changes. The forests grow denser with more giant trees and fewer clearings, and at some point, we flew into a valley with gently sloping ridges flanking us on both sides. They seem pretty far away from us now but eventually come together and converge at a point on the horizon: White Mountain.

It makes sense that Lithans chose it as a gathering site. Besides the topographically prominent mountain, the ridges on either side point straight to White Mountain. Even for Kin who are bad at directions, White Mountain is a cinch to fly to.

With the clouds parted, I can see other Lithans flying around us. A pair is circling one of the ridges to our right, while another is flying low above the trees to our left. “Are all these Dragons Kin?” I ask.

“Yup. We’re flying through the Great Valley of Felra, which the Flock has claimed for generations. Most Kin live in dens scattered throughout this valley.”

“And not at places like Flat Rock?”

She shakes her head. “Flat Rock is where our young are raised. Once they come of age and find a mate, most come to live in this valley.”

Oh! So *that’s* why there were so many kits and fledges in Flat Rock! I thought there would be many places like Flat Rock, but it sounds like their flock is pretty decentralized.

I exhale, feeling a bit overwhelmed with just how much I’ve learned about Kuro’s flock and how much there’s still to discover. And to think, I thought I could pretend to be some lost, amnesic little Lathan in the hope Kuro would show pity and take me to Flat Rock. I was so naive!

I’m still unsure what her intentions are... but maybe it doesn’t matter. Perhaps the thing that’s important right now is just how thankful I am that she’s helping me. I could have never done any of this without her.

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

We lower ourselves from the sky for a landing in the middle of an alpine meadow nestled against the flank of White Mountain. Kuro told me the gathering site was located some distance below the snow line. Despite being nearly as high as the ridges surrounding the mountain, it seems we're merely at the base of this enormous mountain that eclipses in scale anything else located on the moon.

Before we found ourselves here, we had to quickly stop in the valley below to dig up ember root. Kuro explained it was customary to bring offerings of the flammable root to White Mountain, and the Elders would undoubtedly think less of us if we hadn't. When I asked why they wanted ember root specifically, she said it would make sense once we arrived. But now that we have, I'm struggling to find its logic.

The meadow is long and wide, filled with late-season tall grass, surrounded by evergreens on both sides, the mountain in front of us, and a rocky cliff to our backs. The most impressive feature in this scene is a tall pillar made of stone, seemingly carved away from a moss-covered rock wall. Don't get me wrong, the scenery here is *stunning*, as gorgeous as anything I've ever seen in nature. But I'm not finding the sense in bringing the ember root with us. Or any of the Kin that is supposed to live here.

"Where is everyone?" I ask with ember root rattling between my fangs.

"We haven't arrived yet," Kuro says.

"I thought you said it was located here?" As I speak, traces of wood ash enter my nose, too faint to tell where it's coming from. Is the flock located in the trees?

She turns with a wry grin growing across her face. “We’re almost there. It’s better to see White Mountain than be told about it.”

Kuro signals with a wing to follow, and we make our way over rolling hills towards the rock wall where the stone pillar stands. I glance up, taking in the incredible scale of the snow-covered mountain that seems to stretch upward forever. If I were a lesser creature without wings, I’d surely believe I could reach all the way to Maki from that great height.

We reach the top of an incline and I begin to make out the entrance to a den near the stone pillar. At least, I believe it to be a den until we get closer, at which point I realize it’s far too large to be the entrance to just a den. The hole in the rock is wide enough that I could easily fly through it.

“It’s a cave in the mountain?”

Kuro acknowledges with a smile.

The ground by the entrance is scoured down to patches of dirt and bedrock. How many Kin visit here? And just how *big* is this cave? A gust of air ruffles my feathers as we walk through the entrance, overwhelming my nose with the scents of Kin and wood ash. The path meanders through the rocks before opening up on the other side.

That’s when I get my first look at it. Not so much a cave, but a *cathedral*.

Easing through the rock for seeming miles, it towers above me like the domes of the great churches of Ellyntide. Stone pillars extend from the ground to just below the ceiling where great fires burn, illuminating the interior by the light of flame. The air is cool and crisp, filled with kin gliding around the complex, some as pairs, some alone, some calling greetings to those resting on the ground. The far walls of the cathedral are scalloped like the rock walls of Flat Rock, and I can make out the entrances to innumerable dens.

Closer to the ground, great stacks of interlocking stone rise from the floor, increasing in density until culminating at an enormous stone structure that's plainly visible even from this great distance. It's clear to me that this is some altar or stage where the elders, or maybe even Keuvra himself, must gather when addressing members of the flock. If the entire flock were to gather here, then this space must become entirely filled by Dragon. What a sight that would be!

"Asha," Kuro interrupts my slack-jawed awe. "Welcome to the White Mountain Aerie. The ancestral home of Keuvra's Kin: the Snowfell Flock."

I pry myself away from gawking and need a moment to locate my voice. "O-Oh, Kuro. It's... incredible. I've never seen anything like this in the Farlands."

Kuro grins, satisfied by my reaction. "Come on, let's offer our ember root. Then we'll go find my grandmother." Realizing we're still in the entrance, I bound to her with a bit of skip, playfully lashing my tail behind me, feeling elation for being the very first ascendant animal to discover this indelible space.

Kuro leads me inside to a small pile of the flammable root against a wall just by the entrance. To light a space this big, it's no wonder offerings of ember root are customary.

While adding to the pile, A black plumaged Kin flying from the direction of the edifice lands a short distance away. He calls to us, “Blue skies, Daughter-Of-Mecali. Have you come to visit your grandmother?”

“Warm currents,” replies Kuro. “And, I have. Please inform her that her granddaughter has urgent matters to discuss.”

The Kin’s expression remains steady as he flicks his eyes towards me and then back to Kuro. “Very well. Presently she is with Keuvra, so I will call on Uma to find her.”

My heart quickens at hearing the deity’s name mentioned. Truly, he’s here in the aerie? If the elders permit me, will I be able to speak to him without initiating communion?

Kuro acknowledges, and the black one returns to the air. “I thought we were going to talk to the elders?” I ask.

“We are,” she says with a smirk. “My grandmother is one of them.”

Oh!

Well, that certainly makes things convenient!

Kuro asks me to walk with her, and we begin a leisurely trot through the aerie. “The four oldest Kin in the flock retire to White Mountain to be our elders. When Keuvra isn’t present, they’re in charge and get to make decisions for the flock.”

“When Keuvra isn’t present?” I echo Kuro. “If he’s not always in the mountain, then where does he go? Hunting?”

“Well,” she says, taking a measured breath. “He’s still here. But Keuvra only appears to address the flock during the darkmoon gatherings. Otherwise, only the elders are allowed to speak with him.”

Darkmoon is the period occurring every month and a half when Jade is eclipsed by the planet Maki. The moon is enveloped in total darkness for thirty-four hours, lit only by prophets unobscured by cloud. In ascendant society, darkmoons are a tumultuous time marred in history by crime, assassinations, and the start of wars. That their deity appears simultaneously makes me curious about the flock’s traditions on those dark days.

This is a problem, however. If I remember the lunar calendar correctly, the next darkmoon won’t be for a few weeks. “So, what does that mean for me?” I ask hesitantly. “What am I supposed to do if I can’t be trained to hunt until after the next darkmoon?”

Kuro looks at me with a worried expression, then quickly turns away. “I don’t know. Nobody’s been allowed to join the flock without Keuvra being present,” she exhales and murmurs, “It rests on the elder’s wings.”

A lump forms in my throat. Even though the Elders make decisions in Keuvra's absence, the rules of their flock seem pretty cut and dry. I can't be trained until Keuvra is present, but Keuvra won't see the flock until the next darkmoon.

"There's one other possibility," she says while bounding a boulder in a single stride, turning to face me on the other side. "Keuvra can be asked to address the flock at any time if there's an emergency. It's unusual, but..."

I smirk a little. "Does a Farlander appearing in the body of a Lithan count as an emergency?" It wouldn't be the first one I've caused in the past few days.

Kuro flashes a smirk of her own but turns and resumes walking without answering my question. I take her silence to indicate once more, 'the elders will decide.'

So, everything comes down to the elders. But if one of them is Kuro's grandmother, that's a good sign, right? Kuro seems to like me, and surely she can do some convincing to get her grandmother to understand my plight. That might get one of them on my side, but what about the other three?

'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...'

On thinking of Kuro and the elders, a memory from the night prior is stirred. Just what was Kuro talking about? And didn't she say we would talk about it once we got to White Mountain?

“Kuro,” I say, catching up to be by her side. “Last night at the fire, you said we would tal—

SCREECH!

A Lathan’s call pierces our conversation and a heartbeat later a steely-colored drakon dives in for a surprise landing in front of us. Kuro reacts like lightning, splaying her wings and unleashing a fierce snarl at the sudden intruder. The Kin hits the ground and matches Kuro with a snarl of his own, blocking our path forward. Everything happens so fast that all I can do is recoil in shock behind Kuro’s outstretched wings.

“Daughter-Of-Mecali!” the boy announces, flexing his talons. “Just what have you dragged into White Mountain?”

47. Fight Me!

Kuro stares down the steel plumaged drakon with fierce eyes. “Don’t you have anything better to do, Moth? Or are your eyes too soot-filled to see I’m busy?”

Moth scoffs and maintains his aggressive stance in front of us. “You’re one to talk, Kuro. Tell me the truth, who is this sparrow? Is *he* your mate?”

I shoot a befuddled glance at Kuro. It seems she's not the only one who thinks Lithans with bright plumages must be male. But, um, what's going on here? Why are these two at each other's throats, and why does he seem especially upset at the prospect of me being her boyfriend?

I angle my head from behind Kuro's wing and counter, "I'm no boy."

Moth's face goes crooked hearing the pitch of my voice. "Hmph. Is she your choice to bring into the flock? I can't say I'm impressed. If I ever bro—"

"Get to the point!" Kuro bellows over the cocky boy and takes a provocative step forward.

Moth grins, pleased by Kuro's agitation. He flattens his feathers but keeps his wings ready. "Very well. The point I'm trying to get at, Daughter-Of-Mecali, is I happened to be flying overhead just now and heard you mention summoning Keuvra for an *'emergency.'* Then, I happened to hear *her* say something very... interesting."

Moth's gaze focuses on me. Reflexively I retreat a few steps before Kuro's wing gently brushes my flank. She flicks her eyes to me, then back in front of her. "This doesn't concern you. Step aside, and let us pass to my grandmother."

"Oh, but I think it does concern me! Because unlike like you, Kuro, I am a devout and steadfast member of the flock. I'm willing to do whatever is necessary to better its chances for survival... the things that you're unwilling to do."

Kuro unleashes a thunderous warning growl, her fiercest yet. I don't know what Moth is alluding to when he says Kuro is unwilling to help the flock, but it's an especially sore spot for her. Meanwhile, the noise from the argument is beginning to attract the attention of nearby Kin, with some landing nearby from other parts of the aerie to watch.

"I'd be remiss if I didn't do everything in my power to prevent you from wasting the elder's time with the blithering of some mad Lo—"

RAWRR!

Out of patience, Kuro lunges toward Moth with her talons outstretched. He wheels to his right and shoots into the air but can't avoid Kuro's claws in time. A puff of down feathers is ejected from the back of his foreleg, and blood flows freely onto the stones below.

"I challenge you!!" Kuro's anger rolls across the aerie like thunder. "Face me, or accept your position as a miserable coward!!"

I reel backward, shocked by the return of Kuro's fury. Her disposition has completely reverted to the one Fra warned me about!

Moth hovers in place in front of Kuro but doesn't seem upset by her attack. In fact, he looks quite pleased that he was able to provoke Kuro to erupt on him. He chuckles to himself in an almost sinister tone and announces, "I accept your challenge! I've always wanted the chance to prove just how weak you truly are!"

Kuro splays her wings and fluffs her feathers straight up, trying to appear larger than the steel plumaged Kin. Moth responds by letting out a brooding warning growl, and Kuro responds in kind with one of her own. Around me, more Kin are flying in to spectate the fight, stepping forward to form a broad circle around the two combatants. I glance around anxiously, watching their movements to see if anyone will step forward and try to dissuade the two from going at it, but nobody seems particularly worried. Their faces are filled with anticipation, and an electric buzz fills the air.

Why aren't they trying to stop this? Kuro can't get hurt in some petty fight! She has to help me go before the elders so Keuvra can be summoned! I step forward and call out to her. "Kuro! Please, do—"

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She whips her neck around and flashes a bare fang snarl just long enough to get her point across. *'Back off,'* she's warning me. My legs freeze, and I retreat a step, feeling foolish for thinking I could try to convince her otherwise.

"Hey, Moth! You're supposed to begin the spar on the ground!"

The crowd erupts with laughter as Moth is called out for improper form. His face wrings in agitation, and he lingers in the air a moment longer before Kuro loosens a snarl and goads him into landing.

A spar? So, this is a sanctioned fight that's allowed in the flock? I guess that's preferable to an all-out brawl as there seem to be rules you have to follow, but it only makes me slightly less worried. I can't stand to see Kuro get hurt after all she's done to help me. Though with no choice but to watch, I resign myself to anxiousness and retreat to join the growing crowd of spectators. Unfamiliar faces land on me as I join them, curious about who I am.

Moth screeches and launches off his haunches toward Kuro. She rolls to her left, but Moth manages to get a talon across the back of her wing, tearing a chunk of barbs from the tips of her long flight feathers. She pushes back off her forelegs and barrels into the side of Moth to knock both of them back into the rocky ground. Moth shrieks as his back legs jam against the hard stone, but Kuro performs a graceful roll to steady herself upright.

Sensing an opening, Kuro lunges with her claws out but pulls back at the last moment to avoid a late swipe from Moth's foretalons. Forced to reposition her weight, Moth takes the opportunity to scamper forward and launch himself toward Kuro. But Kuro anticipates the attack, taking advantage of her momentum from her course correction to give a quick pump of her wings and sail back out of the reach of Moth.

"Did she fly?" asks a woman to my right as Kuro lands back on her talons.

"No," responds a male. "She skirted the ground. It's fair."

Moth spits, visibly frustrated by the direction of the fight so far. He readies himself for another attack and tries to whirl around but slips against a patch of loose rocks and tumbles forward. Kuro immediately capitalizes, thrusting headlong with her jaws open toward the falling drakon. Off-balance and only capable of watching, he winces in horror as Kuro angles for his neck, only to pull back at the last second and perform a headbutt against his chest. As the two sail forward, Kuro's talon comes around and rakes the side of Moth's face, spraying blood against her head and adding more to the floor of the aerie.

I flinch at Moth's tormented scream as Kuro pushes him to the ground and lands on top of him. She keeps a talon against his chest and moves to slap the other against the middle of his neck.

"Yield!!" Kuro snarls in a familiar, visceral tone. Moth gags and gasps for air, kicking his rear talons in a desperate attempt to wane her off. But despite being the bigger Lithan, Kuro holds him firmly in place like he were a fresh kill.

"YIELD!!" Losing patience, she shrieks directly into his face. His resistance becomes weaker as his energy drains, but he refuses to give in.

Kin shift anxiously around me. Nobody is speaking of rules, so the match must still be fair, but some are beginning to get concerned for Moth. Why is he being so stubborn? Kuro's clearly won, so why won't he concede?

"Remember your mate, Son-Of-Ymaoi!"

A woman's voice commands from the back of the crowd, authoritative and stern. A group of Kin step aside, and a rough, ash-colored drakaina hobbles forward on an unsteady left foreleg. On hearing her, Kuro reasserts her talon to Moth's neck. He lingers a moment longer, his face turning pale, before finally breathing, "*Yield!*" Kuro relents, but not before using Moth's body as a springboard to bound away. Finally free, he snaps his neck up and gasps for air.

Kuro lands nearby and looks askance at the loser. “Featherbrain.”

With the spar decided, the crowd begins to disperse, chatting amongst themselves about the outcome. Kuro remains where she landed and watches a woman rush forward from the group. She stoops to console Moth, licking the blood from his face and crooning soft words of encouragement into his ear. With shaking forelegs, he slowly rises to his talons.

“I knew she would make it look easy,” a girl mentions as the crowd flows around me like water.

“Then why did you insist on watching?” asks a boy following alongside.

“I wanted to watch Kuro! She’s always so upset when she fights. It’s great!”

Moth stands erect and murmurs in pain, his head still foggy from the fight. The woman who approached him rubs her face into his flank, then shoots a deathly stare at Kuro. But by then, she had already turned away, refusing even to deign a glance at the two.

Gosh, she’s so... *cruel*.

And the worst part is that I agree with what she did.

Fra warned me that Kuro had a reputation for being difficult to get along with, and now it seems she has a reputation for fights as well. But it's apparent Moth was intentionally trying to provoke Kuro into fighting him. Were his reasons justified? Probably not. Kuro might have done something in the past to lessen the flock's chances of survival, but that's no reason to fight somebody over it. No, it's clear to me that the only reason Moth was begging for a fight was that he overheard our conversation from the air and thought he had cornered Kuro in a moment of weakness. He wanted his shot at the glory of beating the kin well-known for winning fights.

Well, he sure got a fight. I hope he's satisfied.

48. Sister Act

As the spectators take to the air, the ash-plumaged woman ambles forward, and Kuro moves to greet her. Long hackle feathers follow the entire length of her neck, and quadruple horns grow long from the back of her head, pointing nearly straight behind her. Tufts of unkempt feathers bunch up in spots on her face, and whiskers dangle from her muzzle down to the rocky ground. She stands slightly crooked, hunched against her good front leg.

After rubbing their heads together in greeting, the elderly one asks Kuro in a hoarse voice, "When are you going to stop getting into fights, dear?"

"As soon as Kin stop deserving them," she grumbles, giving her down feathers a quick brush with her fangs.

Feeling safe to approach, I trot up from the side and call, "Kuro, are you alright?" Out of the corner of my vision, I watch the eyes of the ash-plumaged Kin go wide.

“Yeah,” says Kuro, her voice cool like an autumn breeze. She averts her eyes and adds, “I’m fine.” I watch her for a moment, believing she’s about to follow up her response with something else. But instead, she stays quiet, refusing to even look at me. Why is she being so distant?

“Well, then. It’s good to see you, Kuro. Is *she* the urgent matter?” The elderly Kin angles her ears and studies me closely.

Kuro says nothing, stuck in her thoughts and staring into the distance. After an awkward moment, I speak up for her. “Yes, I believe I am. Are you Kuro’s grandmother?”

“Meldi,” she corrects with a hint of impatience. “Daughter-Of-Koco. Where did you find this Loner, Kuro? She smells faintly of the Farlands.” Instead of waiting for a response, she slides her gaze to me. “What’s your name?”

I give Kuro a sidelong glance and find she’s already looking at me. “Go ahead,” she says.

It sounds like it’s my turn to do the talking. I straighten my neck and roll my wings, sure of what happens next. “My name is Princess Asha Lordanou. I smell like the Farlands because... *I’m* a Farlander. Something terrible happened to me, and, somehow, I turned into a Litan.”

Meldi’s brow furrows, and she loosens her wings like she just encountered prey. “A *Farlander*?”

“Yes,” I reply, keeping my voice steady. “A member of the royal family of Ellyntide. I was born a Ruffed Lemur in the city of Varecia.”

Meldi flicks her eyes between Kuro and me like she was trying to determine if we were being serious.

“Enyll and I saw her lose consciousness right as a false-kin was about to take her life,” Kuro adds. “When we found her, the farland scent was overpowering. She had only been in Felra a few—”

“Jimbaldung,” Meldi interrupts. “Kuro, you fool. This fress may have flown from the Farlands, but someone told her what Ellyntide is.” She looks at me and continues, “If you’re a Farlander, then prove it.”

Prove it?

“Erm...” If I could change back to normal, I wouldn’t be here right now, you know?

“She spoke to an airship-prey,” Kuro says, reminding me that I *did* prove it. “One that her mother, the leader of Ellyntide, had sent to Felra. She used her authority to command it to leave. Me, Enyll, Ykuvi, and Gima all witnessed this.”

Meldi looks at me disbelievingly, still unconvinced. She sits against the ground and folds her wings tight. “What is the Goddess’ name?”

Oh, a pop quiz? That’s simple. “Etain.”

“And the deity for avians?”

“Scew.”

She scowls, studying my face for a moment before she continues, “What are *all* the Farlander kingdoms of the moon?”

“Ellyntide, Sarlain, Nortane, Melicola, Truce, and Mortha,” I reply without hesitation. “Oh! And we think Ryne is still there, though nobody’s gone down to visit them since ancient times.”

“Mortha?” she tilts her head. “That is not in our teachings.”

“They were established as a sovereign enclave in the 778 Richelieu treaty. Maybe that’s why?”

Her neck droops. “Fress, I understood nothing you just said.”

“Oh! Well, they’re a new kingdom, let’s put it that way.” They’re not *technically* a kingdom, nor is Nortane, but we don’t need to turn this into an exercise in pedantry. As if they would understand what a democracy is, anyways.

Meldi’s eyes narrow. She rises to scrutinize me, circling around and sniffing my feathers to locate perhaps anything that might expose me as being duplicitous. I keep my head pointed forward and allow this to occur without objection, aware that I’ll have to accept any vetting they perform on me.

“So, you *have* visited the Farlands recently. Suppose you return and fly straight from the crossing until you reach a long, claw-shaped island. If you bank right and keep flying until you reach land, which Kingdom would you be in?” Meldi settles on her haunches and a smug grin forms across her face. She must think she just asked a zinger of a question to show I’m a fake, huh?

Well, she didn’t. “You’d be in Ellyntide,” I say. Immediately, her entire face deflates. “That island is called Orkie Island. To the north is Fort Richter, where most of our airship-prey live. And to the south, the Ellynyide mainland and the edge city of Coleport.”

A ‘claw-shaped’ island? Obviously, that’s the crescent-shaped island where I spent the night and kindly asked some loggers to share the moose they killed. And turning right from there just leads you into Ellyntide — It’s precisely the same route I took to fly to Felra, but reversed! She couldn’t have picked something I’m more familiar with!

“Kuro,” Meldi rasps, moving to sit in front of her. “Precious few Kin are old enough to know still the route to our hunting grounds in Ellyntide Kingdom... I’m far too old for riddles, so please be straight with me. Did she really speak to an airship-prey?”

Kuro nods. “Yes, grandmother. I saw it with my own eyes. I have no doubt she is whom she claims to be.”

Meldi stares into Kuro a moment, then down at me. She releases a long breath and rolls loose stones under her talons. I’m sure if it were anyone but her granddaughter explaining this to her, she would never believe it. After a silent moment, she mumbles, “Well. This is certainly unexpected. My granddaughter has fetched a Farlander for me.”

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“We must call the elders and summon Keuvra,” Kuro takes a step forward. “Asha does not know how to hunt. She seeks admittance into the flock so she may learn.”

Meldi looks at me with disbelief. “You don’t?”

“No,” Kuro answers for me. “Last night, Asha explained how Farlanders *‘farm’* prey. It is... different from our ways.”

Meldi scoffs and shakes her head in disbelief. “So, a Farlander needs *our* help to hunt prey. I don’t see how she’s the flock’s concern.”

“She’s our concern because Keuvra allowed her transformation to occur! If she weren’t important, he would’ve stop—”

“No, no, no....” Meldi rises and holds a wing up in front of Kuro to silence her. “If Keuvra had something planned for this fress, he would have told us about her at the last gathering. I won’t summon the elders and call a gathering just for one Dragon.”

Kuro weaves her head around Meldi’s wing. “Asha can’t wait until darkmoon! She’ll die before then!”

Meldi chitters to herself, “How ironic. Don’t you see what’s happening, Kuro? First, the Farlanders chased us from our hunting grounds, and now they’ve come here for our prey!”

“But—!”

I brush a wing against Kuro to stop her. I appreciate her arguing on my behalf, but this is my fight to wager, not hers. She exhales sharply to calm herself but seems to understand what I’m asking. She nods and motions with a wing to continue.

“Meldi,” I speak in a reassuring tone. “Bonelo told me the story about your flock’s history with airship-prey. It’s... heartbreaking to learn, and I wish we could have communicated

with each other before now. But in my Kingdom, I'm someone who's very important, and my disappearance negatively affects tens of thousands of lives. I only wish to trouble you long enough to learn how to return to normal or at least communicate with my family in Ellyntide. Nothing more."

Meldi's expression softens a little, but only briefly, before turning resolute. Sensing I've failed to convince her, I brace myself for what's to come. "Fress, I'm sorry that you can't talk to your Kin any longer. But to summon the entire flock to the aerie, an emergency must affect the entire flock. Just because you—"

SKREEEAK!!!

A cry from above splits the conversation and silences Meldi's verdict. I barely have time to turn skyward before the source of the noise comes in fast for a landing only a few yards away from us.

"Frida!" Kuro exclaims with a relieved voice. "There you are!"

A pale gray Lithan gives her wings a quick shake and bounds forward. The smell of prey is fresh on her feathers, and dried blood covers her chin. "Hi, Kuro! Grandmother, our hunt this morning at Fro's Bottom went well. I brought you a young spikehorn!"

This must be the sister Kuro was looking for at Flat Rock this morning. Her feathers are scruffy like Kuro and Meldi's though a considerable shade lighter with streaks of black at the tips. She's smaller than me, though her horns are just poking above the hackles on the back of her head. Comparing her to the other fledges I saw, this must make her a teenager.

“Warm currents, Frida. It’s good to see you at the aerie.” Meldi smiles, seemingly relieved that Frita showed up. Or maybe she’s just appreciative of the food?

“Who’s he?” Frida asks, angling her ears toward me.

“She,” I correct.

“Who’s she?”

“Her name is Asha,” Kuro answers. “Despite how she looks, she’s a Farlander. Yesterday, she scared away an airship-prey.”

Frida flicks her eyes to me in disbelief and raises a talon like she were about to backtrack but keeps her legs planted. She scans me up and down and asks, “Really?! A Farlander?”

“It seems so,” says Meldi.

Frida’s eyes light up. “Seriously?! Oh, wow! She even *smells* like a Farlander!”

I chuckle a bit at her analysis and how little convincing it took to make her believe I'm a Farlander. Is it because she's naive, or is it because she trusts in her family?

Frida steps forward and dips her head. "Blue skies, Asha! My name is Frida. I'm Kuro's sister!"

"Warm currents, Frida. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance," I mantle my wings and dip my legs like I was performing a Lathan curtsy. It gets a solid laugh out of her.

"Oh, gosh!" she vibrates in excitement. "I've always wanted to meet a Farlander!! I have so many questions to ask!! Grandmother, will you summon the flock so we can all talk to her?"

Meldi settles against her haunches and shakes her head. "Well, no, dear. I'm not going to do that."

"Huh?" Frida's neck slumps, and her face deflates like a balloon. "Why not?"

"She doesn't believe the flock should help Asha," Kuro answers in a suggestive tone. Meldi shoots a deathly glare at her in response but chooses to remain silent.

Frida swivels between Kuro and Meldi, completely crestfallen, before turning to me. "Asha, do you need help?"

“Yes,” I say, launching a brief primer on my situation and how I arrived in Felra. While I explain my story once more, I occasionally hear Meldi gruff and shoot a bitter glance at Kuro. Why is she so upset at her?

“...Meldi was beginning her explanation right as you landed,” I explain, reaching the end of the story. For her part, Frida listened to everything quite intently, her expression turning severe as soon as I told her I didn’t know how to hunt. But now that I’ve caught up to the present, she’s become quite distraught. Her tail is swaying behind her impatiently, and it looks like she could erupt at any moment. “It seems that to summon the flock, there must be an emergency that affects the whole flock. So, I gue—”

“*Grandmother!!*” Frida hisses. I saw it coming a mile away, but the indignation in her voice still catches me by surprise. With her hackles raised, she lowers herself and growls, “Why won’t you summon the flock for Asha?!”

“No...” Meldi says, angling her ears back. “I will not fight my granddaughters over a *Farlander*.”

A fire rages in Frida’s eyes as she stares her down. “And you’re just going to let Asha die? She can’t survive unless we help her!!”

“Neither can our flock if we give shelter to every—“

“Is it because of tradition, Grandmother?! Every time the elders make a decision, it’s always ‘*tradition*’ this and ‘*precedent*’ that! Is it our tradition to kill the first Farlander we ever have a conversation with?”

Goodness gracious. What happened to the cute little girl who bounded up a few moments ago? Frida’s become a competently different Dragon! I’ve noticed that Lithans get into arguments with each other quite often, but it seems this one is managing to attract some attention from around the aerie. Is this what it sounded like the other day in the palace when I erupted on mom?

Meldi growls, “Our *traditions* are to prey on any Farlander foolish enough to cross our path. But you wouldn’t know that. You’ve never encountered one of the weak prey sp--”

Kuro interrupts, “*And welcome those weary Dragons with capable wings and fangs, wherever they—*”

Meldi interrupts Kuro with a snap of her jaws, and Kuro reels back in surprise. Before either of us can react, Frida moves like lightning and stands between us, outstretching her wings as a shield. Kuro and I fall into our own aggressive postures, ready to defend ourselves if necessary.

“Frida!!” Meldi snarls. “Stop this at once!!”

“No...” Frida shakes her head. “Keuvra is going to be furious when he finds out Asha died because we wouldn’t take in a Dragon in need. Can’t you see? We have to help her!”

We stare each other down as fervent growls rise, neither side willing to relent in their position. Could a fight really break out? I tense my muscles, ready to leap out of the way if one indeed does. I won't act like I've never resorted to violence before in these situations, but to arrive in the aerie and immediately get into a fracas with one of the flock's most revered Lithans isn't something I want to be known by.

But before things can turn hot, slowly, Meldi raises her head. "I will not... fight both of my granddaughters over a Farlander..." she pants, lowering her feathers back down. "So be it. If my granddaughters will it, then so be it. I will gather the elders, and Keuvra will be summoned."

I exhale while Kuro and Frida relax alongside me. Maybe it's because I'm around Lithans, but even for me, that was far too tense of a situation. My heart feels like it could jump from my chest and run away.

Frida shakes her wings and smiles. "Thank you, Grandmother."

"You're doing the right thing," Kuro adds. "Keuvra will--"

"Now!" Meldi snaps, the cantankerous tone of her voice fully restored. "If we are calling the Flock, then the voice of Kin must be used. Kuro, bring Asha with you."

Frida's eye light like fireworks. "Seriously?! Kuro gets to do it?"

Meldi nods and smiles.

Kuro stares with her muzzle agape before she forces herself to straighten up. “Mmh, yes! Thank you for the privilege, grandmother.”

“The voice of Kin?” I squeak. What’s going on? Why are they acting like the confrontation never occurred? And why is the ‘voice’ so important? But before I can inquire further, Kuro and Frida bound away and flare their wings open for take-off. “Come on, Asha!!”

W-what?! “Hey...! What’s going on?!”

The two sisters thrust into the air and take flight from the rock. I don’t even have the time to ask Meldi what’s going on before I realize they’re flying so fast that I’ll have to chase after them.

“Where are you going?” I call out, trying to catch up as they soar through the aerie.

Kuro angles her neck back and shouts, “To the top of the mountain! We’re going to summon the flock!”

49. Madrigal of The Sky

“Asha, look! It’s just down there!”

Frida banks to the left and tilts the tips of her flight feathers to point out our destination. “Keuvra’s Horn,” she announces. A jagged, snow-coated triangular peak at the very top of the mountain slopes down to a flat plain where exposed rocks and large boulders stop the massive formations of ice and snow from expanding. Here is where Kuro will summon the flock for the gathering — though I can’t say I know how she will do it.

Meldi mentioned the ‘voice’ of Kin. I know from first-hand experience that Litan’s voices can be quite loud. But loud enough to summon the whole flock from across an entire continent?

I chased the two sisters after they raced out of the aerie and followed them straight up the snowy face of the mountain. We had a strong thermal from the valley floor to carry us here, but it abruptly ended once we approached the top as strong, ice-chilled winds whipped from around the horn. Flying this high recalls my experience reaching the altitudes necessary to travel the strait to Felra... I’d hate to be the Kin who has to summon the flock when the skies aren’t so blue and peaceful.

Fighting against the gales, we lower from the sky, and Kuro lands on a boulder a few yards from the curving slope of the horn, followed shortly afterward by Frida. Kuro bounds to an icy crevice along an exposed rock wall as I come in to land. She shoves her muzzle into a crack and pulls out a mouthful of dark, oblong shapen ice.

A cloud of snow is thrown skyward by the force of my wings as I land a short distance from the sisters. “What’s that?” I ask.

“Twish wi—“

Kuro stops, chitters to herself, then drops the block of ice to the ground. “It’s ember root! Frozen in ice, of course. We keep a stock of it up here when we call the flock.”

I examine the block of ice up close. Ten or so roots, frozen in pale ice. “You’re going to start a fire?”

“Yeah. It’ll create a plume of smoke so Kin at the bottom of the valley are certain a gathering was called.”

She grabs the icy block with her jaws and steps onto a snow drift. Being familiar with the dustings of snow Varecia sometimes receives, my heart skips a beat as I expect her leg to sink and become trapped in the snow. But to my surprise, it holds Kuro’s weight perfectly, making loud creaking noises as she strides towards the cliff overlooking the valley.

“Hey, Asha,” Frida speaks up as she walks alongside Kuro. “Is there anywhere like this in the Farlands?”

“Nothing even close,” I tell her.

I've witnessed countless incredible things the past few days, but nothing quite as dramatic as the view up here. A gently sloping, perfectly circular U-shaped valley extends from the mountain's base and grows wider off to the horizon. I should be viewing this scene from the window of an airship, not the top of a snowy mountain!

I was beginning to suspect that my feathery Litan body was well acclimated to cold environments, and now that I'm up here, I'm all but sure of it. Despite it being cold enough for snow to stick to the ground, I only feel a slight chill under my feathers, and my talons don't have any trouble shifting on the compacted snow.

The Kin calls themselves the 'Snowfell Flock'... if Lithans are dragons of the snow, could Redagas be acclimated to a different type of climate?

Kuro wedges the frozen block in between a cluster of charred boulders near the cliff's edge. A vicious wind loosens a puff of snow into the air from somewhere below us, temporarily blocking our incredible view behind a curtain of snowflakes. When the wind subsides, she blasts the ice with a shot of fire and the roots ignite. A pillar of flame grows against the gusts of wind, and smoke bellows into the sky.

As Kuro and I watch the fire grow, Frida is conspicuously staring at her talons. "Um..." she mumbles to herself. "I'm sorry you had to watch us fight our grandmother, Asha. You must think our heads are full of sparrows..."

"Oh, Frida. It's fine, really..." I trail off, rubbing a wing against my neck. Gee, getting into huge fights with your family members? I wonder who else is guilty of that, *ASHA?*

“A lot of the older Kin can be really stubborn about traditions and stuff. It’s frustrating, but me and Kuro get into fights with her a lot.”

“Really?” I say.

“Oh, yeah. Don’t worry, there’s no hard feelings between us,” her face draws into a big toothy grin.

What a stout little pair, these two. Sofl usually supports my arguments with mom at a distance — never vocally while she’s in person. If Sofl had as much self-confidence as I did, mom would wilt like a varecian rose when we got into a shouting match. Always knowing the other would have your back so vocally... no wonder these two are so close to each other.

“Is that why you believed I was a Farlander?” I ask.

“Huh?” her face twists with a hint of disbelief. “What do you mean?”

A puff of smoke blows between us. “I’ve had to convince everyone — your sister included — that I was a Farlander. But you accepted it without hesitation when she told you who I was.”

“Oh!” she chirps and relaxes her feathers.

“You two are very close, I can tell.”

She chitters to herself and stares up at Kuro. “Well, I figured if anyone could find a Farlander and bring them to White Mountain, it’s Kuro.”

“Shut up...” she mumbles.

Another strong wind rips around the mountain and sputters the flames of the ember root. My gaze is drawn to the plume of smoke drifting higher into the sky. “What happens now?”

Kuro approaches the cliff with her wings half-open. She looks back over the tops of them and says, “The songs of Kin.”

My head tilts. “Songs?”

“Listen.”

The story has been taken without consent; if you see it on Amazon, report the incident.

Kuro pauses and looks out at the valley that stretches to infinity on the horizon. She rolls back on her foretalons and bunches her muscles. She rears her neck back and lets out a tremendous roar!

ROOOAARRRRRRR!!

The ground beneath me shakes as the roar vibrates the mountain like a bell struck by a hammer. I swirl around to see Keuvra's Horn oscillating, particles of snow and chunks of ice floating away, her roar echoing off of and projecting outwards in a glorious cacophony of noise. It sounds discordant like the horn was amplifying her cry. I bunch my legs to remain upright, and it feels as if the moon itself could be torn asunder by her call. It travels from the peak and returns to us on echoes as it bounces off the valley walls. It's just like when I cried out while circling for a landing around Owens Island, but far more powerful and far more extraordinary.

SKREECH!

Embedded in the echoes is a cry from somewhere to our left.

ROOARR!

SCRREEE!!!

Two more join with the first, originating somewhere close to the mountain.

RA-RARRR!

KREEE!!

ROOOARR!

One-by-one as the wave travels, calls from every point in the valley rise to join the growing chorus of noise. I attempt to count their voices but quickly conclude it's futile as tens— no, *hundreds* of Dragons sing forth, their voices compounding into a harmony of beautiful, discordant sound.

“The songs of Kin,” Kuro announces, surveying her orchestra. “A celebration of our prominence, and a lament for the lesser creatures of the moon. They sing to acknowledge a gathering has been called and will soon take flight to White Mountain.”

“Kuro, this is...” I trail off, failing to come up with adequate words to describe what I'm witnessing. “Well, it's *incredible*. How far will your voice travel?”

A large bunch of voices, perhaps twenty or so, join the song.

Kuro angles her wing forward and smiles. “There’s Flat Rock.”

I gaze off across the valley with my mouth agape. I already knew firsthand just how powerful Lithans could be, but this is far beyond anything I could have imagined. To think that we, ascendant animals, consider ourselves enlightened and technologically advanced creatures. What arrogance! Nothing in our creation comes close to the pure spectacle of an entire valley of Dragons singing harmoniously.

And then, one by one, just as Kuro promised, the rising voices are replaced by rising Lithans, taking flight from the dens and hunting grounds to make their way to White Mountain. The songs subside, it’s not long before the sky is filled with a swarm of Kin, all winging in our direction.

“Come on, Asha!!”

Frida, unable to contain her excitement, lopes from the cliff face and disappears somewhere below. Without hesitation, Kuro and I leap after her and join the growing mass of Dragons.

Back in the mountain, Kin have been slowly filtering in, finding comfortable spots to rest while the remainder of the flock slowly arrives from the far-flung reaches of Kin territory. Once the first Kin from the curiously named ‘Grandfather Tree’ announces their arrival, the gathering will begin.

While Frida left to join the crowd and find her friends, Kuro and I are resting on one of the lower levels of the humbly named ‘Gathering Stone,’ the massive stone edifice I saw when we first entered the aerie. Interlocking pillars of stone rise from the ground to form a tall stage, lit in the center by two ember root fires. This is where the Elders sit and address the flock during gatherings.

Visually, just like everything else here, it’s a genuinely impressive sight to behold – a tower of stone that must be as tall as the Lordanou Palace itself! Now, if only it had an equally as grandiose name.

I mean, *come on*.

The ‘*gathering stone*’? That sounds like a pebble you accidentally stepped on in a creek. They should have called it the ‘**Gathering TOWER!!**’ or the ‘**Stone ASSEMBLAGE**.’

,

Lithans aren’t the best when it comes to naming stuff. And if Kuro’s ‘*Featherbrain*’ insult earlier was any indication, they also need some serious help dispensing insults. Since we’re lying down next to each other, I almost want to interrupt her and give her an on-the-spot lesson about coming up with good burns. Unfortunately, she’s in the middle of a vital pep talk about what to expect during the gathering. I’ll need to follow the rules of conduct and know how the elders will conduct the meeting.

“So, after the Elders say their chant, the fires in the mountain will flicker like they’re about to extinguish. But they’ll remain lit, and then...” Kuro trails off, and a glimmer shines in her eyes. “That’s when Keuvra appears.”

On mentioning Keuvra, my attention is recaptured. “What part of the aerie does he come from? Will he land on the gathering stone with the elders?”

“Nope,” Kuro chirps. She looks to the ceiling above and says, “He appears above us.”

I follow her gaze, expecting to see some cave or opening in the rock where he could descend from. I look around a group of Kin gliding through the aerie and spot a few small openings, but nothing big enough for an adult Lithan to slip through. “Um, from where, exactly?”

“Well, Keuvra won’t be *physically* here,” she explains matter-of-factly. “His image will appear over the aerie.”

I cease staring at the ceiling to stare at Kuro. “His *image*?”

She lowers her head back down. “Mmhmm. Keuvra lives in the mountain, but only the elders are allowed to view his physical form. For the rest of the flock, we see an apparition here in the mountain.”

An *apparition* of Keuvra? So, he’s going to look like a ghost? Deities are supposed to have certain powers, but using them would interfere in our world, which the God of Creation, Azurrel, strictly forbids. Wouldn’t an apparition of himself be breaking those rules?

“Doesn’t the Goddess do something similar?”

Before I can answer Kuro's question, a Kin's voice calls out from above us, "Blue skies, esteemed elder!"

I turn up to see a tawny plumaged drakon hovering above a tattered, slate blue Kin. Kuro told me his name is Uma, the youngest of the four elders in the flock. He flew up to the gathering stone a little while ago and had been silently surveying the crowd ever since. The brown newcomer continues, "Brothers and sisters from the Grandfather Tree are arriving. We await your wisdom."

"Warm currents," answers Uma. His voice is warm and fierce, not at all hoarse like Bonello and Meldi's. "I will call the others, and the gathering will begin."

The airborne Kin acknowledges with a screech and turns to fly off and join the growing crowd. The air is filled with the dull murmur of conversation, and from our vantage by the rock, it seems the aerie is almost full of Lithans.

"The answer is *'no,'*" I tell Kuro, circling back to her question about Goddess. "But it sounds like the gathering is about to begin."

"That's right," she says, curling her tail around her. "I think I've told you everything you need to know for the gathering, so... I'll be watching with everyone else." Our eyes meet, and Kuro's face turns thoughtful for a quiet moment. A second later, her feathers relax, and she adds, "Good luck, Asha."

I smile, and she quickly returns the gesture. I want to tell her my thoughts and thank her for everything she's done to help me, but I have trouble locating my voice. Before I can loosen the words, she slips away and bounds down the rock, plunging into the growing crowd of feathers and fluff.

Ugh, why did I hesitate when I tried to speak? I don't know how my future is about to unfold, and Kuro and I may part ways after this gathering is over.

I never had the strength to tell Calypso...

...

She needs to know how much I appreciate her. My mind made up, I resolve to talk to her after the gathering. No matter what happens.

I sigh and try to temper the nervousness flaring inside my stomach. Somehow I've traveled from my home in Varecia to the inner sanctum of Lathan society, and I'll have a public audience with the dragon deity in just a few minutes. What will he say to me? Will I find out why I became a Lathan? Will he tell me how to turn back to normal? Or will he have some other plan in store for me?

With Keuvra on my mind, I swivel my neck around and look past the gathering rock, catching a glimpse of Uma passing through an opening in the far wall that's just big enough for a Lathan to pass through. Flanked to his left is a Kin with square shoulders perched curiously on a boulder, his eyes furiously darting around the aerie. A fledge flies in for a landing a short distance from the opening, causing the boulder-mounted Kin to raise his hackles and wings with an audible huff. But the fledge pays no mind to the

imposing Lithan, bounding away from him with a skip and flick of the tail to join her friends in the crowd.

You don't have to be a Princess surrounded by armed security your entire life to figure out what's going on here: That guy's guarding that entrance in the wall. And in remembering that the Elders are the only ones allowed to see Keuvra in person, I'm certain the deity must lie beyond there.

The flock is awfully serious about ensuring nobody sees Keuvra's physical form. I wonder why?

50. Ancient Rites

Meldi presides over the flock while sitting at the front of the gathering rock, looking down on them with eyes like a falcon. A few minutes ago, she and the rest of the elders arrived from the mountain's bowels. But instead of calling the start of the gathering, all she's done is stand at the front of the rock and silently gaze out over the aerie.

For their part, the flock has continued talking amongst themselves, waiting patiently and acting like nothing was out of the ordinary. Nearly every open patch of rock has been taken by a Lithan, from the floor of the aerie to the rocky cliffs on the far walls where the dens lay, to the towering spires where the ember root fire illuminates the buzzing cavern with flickering, warm light. Back in Varecia, we have similar venues for public concerts or events where the monarch gives a speech. But nothing close to the scale of a hollowed-out mountain, and nothing as spectacular as seeing it packed tight with a sea of fluffy Dragons.

Still on the lower levels of the rock, I've been able to listen in on their conversations. There's much talk of prey -- where it's located, how big it is, and the strategies used to

catch it. Some are catching up with old friends, asking about their dens or how a particular fledge is growing.

But the mood has shifted ever since the Kin from Flat Rock arrived. I'll hear a flare of surprise in someone's voice, closely followed by curious stares in my direction. The word '*Farlander*' has drifted through the crowd like waves spreading over a pond. Perhaps that's why Meldi hasn't started the meeting yet.

Then, as if she were listening to my thoughts, Meldi stands and issues an authoritative roar.

ROOOARRRRGH!

Despite her age, she effortlessly carries her ragged cry over the aerie, leaving a nearly silenced flock in its wake. The outliers finish their conversations, and hundreds of eyes are drawn to her. When there's only the sound of feathers shifting, she speaks in a clear voice that travels far. "Brothers and Sisters. It's wonderful to see you healthy and vibrant in harvestwing. Today we gather to summon Keuvra and address an unprecedented visitor to our flock. Asha, would you please wing forward."

I do as I'm told and take flight to a tall rock directly in front of the gathering stone as the curious eyes of the flock follow me. I want to say I'm used to situations like this — having so many pairs of eyes centered on me. But in Ellyntide, there were never any stakes that mattered, just the risk of temporarily embarrassing mom. Here in Felra, it's fair to say that everything comes down to this moment.

As I land, Meldi addresses me first. “Thank you, Asha. Now please, what is the name given to you by your Kin?”

“Princess Asha Eloise Lordanou.” Kuro told me to leave off my full title as ‘Ellyntide’ is protected knowledge.

Uma steps forward to join Meldi. “And where did you receive that name?”

“The Farlands.”

Concerned voices rise around me as the rumor of a Farlander is proven true. Curiosity compels me to swing around to see their response, but Kuro told me I needed to give the elders my undivided attention.

Meldi continues, “Three days ago, a tragedy occurred, and a Lemur named Asha was allowed to take the form you see now. She flew from her home deep in the Farlands and made the crossing unassisted.”

She pauses and allows her words to settle. Kin aren’t allowed to talk back to the Elders during a gathering, but the sounds of shifting feathers tell me everything I need to know. They’re anxious to speak.

“She was found by my granddaughter, close to death at the talons of a pitiful false-kin. And then...” she trails off, and our eyes meet. “Asha. Please, explain to the flock what happened next.”

My heart jumps. She wants me to talk about the Beatrix?! But Kuro didn't mention anything about giving a speech! Meldi's gone off-script!! Even the other elders are looking between themselves, a little perplexed. Mentally I prepared myself to answer questions from the elders, but now I have to talk about the Beatrix to *everyone*?! I stare at her, flabbergasted, but her eyes narrow to slits, signaling my objections have been overruled.

I have to tell the story to them.

Slowly, I turn about and face the flock, every set of eyes from every inch of the aerie fixated on me. Here on my lonely perch, It's like staring at every large crowd I've ever stood in front of and nothing like it at all. I scan them and try to find Kuro, but she's invisible in the sea of dull-colored feathers. I wish she were here to do the talking for me.

“Well...” I stumble, trying to find my voice. Trying to remember everything I was taught about public speaking. “H-Hello, everyone. I wasn't expecting to talk to you today. I...”

No, no, no. Ugh, why am I having such a hard time? Though I suppose all the public speaking lessons on the moon couldn't prepare me for playing up my story in front of a crowd of Dragons.

Who was that playwright Laurent and Bodie were talking about in the hollow? *Jakewell*? Well, whatever his name was, all his radio dramas are delivered with a distinct style that his fans love. I haven't actually listened to many of them, but I think I've heard enough to

do a convincing enough impersonation. If it's good enough for Ellyntide's audience, then it should be perfect for the Snowfell Flock.

I loosen my wings, clear my throat, and slip into a different personality.

And so, Ykuvi landed in the clearing where Kuro and Enyll found me. 'Blue skies?' asked Enyll. 'Absolutely not,' panted Ykuvi, short of breath from his panicked flight. His expression sunk, and his face turned pale. 'An airship-prey has been spotted approaching Felra!'

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Gasps rise from the crowd.

Yes, that's right! An airship-prey during harvestwing! The news sent Kuro and Enyll into a tizzy, wondering why an airship-prey would appear so suddenly. But I knew the reason. As a Farlander, I know all the secrets of airship-prey, including why this one arrived...

I talk and talk and talk some more until I'm blue in the face from emoting myself and playing up the tale as much as possible. One Kin, I couldn't tell who, tried to speak out when I got to the part about threatening the Beatrix with fire. It sounded like they were having trouble believing an airship-prey could easily be scared. But Meldi quickly silenced them and encouraged me to continue. I get to the end of the story and dip my neck to the crowd, studying their reactions closely. Some of the Kin around my age are enthralled by my storytelling, staring at me with their faces wide in amazement. But a sizable portion of the older crowd looks more stoic. More judgmental.

Uma's voice sounds behind me, "Thank you for your colorful story, Asha. The flock is grateful you drove away that awful beast."

I whirl around and nod to acknowledge him, but... he thought my story was *colorful*? I didn't overdo it, did I?

Khosa, an elder with impressively long, gold whiskers sticks her neck out to speak. "So, we arrive at the matter at hand. It seems Asha does not know how to return to her original form, nor does she know how to hunt. She wishes to join the flock and be taught how to survive."

A chorus of jeers grows around me, ignoring the rule not to speak out. My spine twitches at their harsh words.

"But she is not one of us!"

"That's blasphemy!"

"She should never be allowed!"

Khosa raises her teeth and answers a fierce growl to subdue the crowd. “Hold your tongues. Our rules for allowing loners into the flock are inadequate to gauge a Farlander. This is a matter Keuvra alone must decide.”

Uma nods to Meldi and opens his wings. “So, to that end, by Meldi’s grace, we will summon Keuvra. Let us prepare.”

Slowly, the Elders step away from the front of the rock and move towards a fire pit in the center. Uma stands directly above and shoots a sprig of fire, igniting the ember roots inside. My heart skips as I watch the flame grow tall around them, at least twice their height.

The four elders stand in a circle and intone a chant, “*Almighty, ancient Keuvra.*” At speaking their words, the fire rapidly grows in size.

Meldi speaks alone, “A Farlander has appeared in the image of Kin. We seek your guidance — help us understand this unprecedented event.”

The elders spread their wings wide and chant, “*Almighty ancient Keuvra!*” As they speak, the nature of the fire changes completely — strange blue flames, shimmering in opaque light, grow from the base of the fire and swirl upwards like a vortex. I glance around and watch the faces of the Kin around me, but none seem particularly surprised by this exotic display of fire. Lacking time to contemplate it, I stifle the curious, scientific part of my brain that’s screaming to learn more about this, quite frankly, *magical* display.

Uma raises his voice as the blue flame dances mere feet from his face. “The Farlander wishes to join our sacred flock. Tell us if we should grant permission to the outsider from far-off lands.”

“Almighty, ancient Keuvra! Appear before us!”

A pillar of fire explodes upwards, cascading to the ceiling, spreading outwards over the rocks and the crevices. I hold my breath and turn to watch the fires near the base of the rock flicker.

Nothing happens.

Confused, I swivel around and look at the flames on the tall spires to see if they’re flickering. But they burn just as steadily as they have all day.

“Where is Keuvra?!” A single voice cries out, and the crowd becomes rowdy with apprehension. The elders stare amongst themselves in confusion as feathers fly, their wings still open from the ceremony.

“What’s going on?!” I shout over the commotion. This can’t be what’s supposed to happen, right? None of the fires in the mountain flickered!

Khosa drops her wings. “Uma!”

“Right!”

Uma leaps from the back of the rock and glides to the guarded entrance on the far wall. He lands and rushes by the guard I saw earlier, his face swelling with concern.

The anxiety of the crowd begins feeding into my own fears. What happens if Keuvra doesn't appear? Can they try to summon him again? Or am I just out of luck? Unwilling to wait for answers, I grit my teeth and fly forward to confront the elders on the gathering stone.

“What's going on!? Where's Keuvra!”

“Asha!!” Khosa hisses. She splays her white wings wide and growls, “Return at once!! Only the elders are allowed on the gathering stone!!”

“Not until you tell me what's going on!”

Meldi approaches with her wings open in an aggressive posture, but her face is more measured than Khoas's. “Fress, something is wrong. Keuvra should have appeared to the flock by now, but he hasn't. Uma is going to his den to check on him directly. Now please, return!”

My feathers bristle hearing her response. I accept that they're following ancient traditions, but I'm not going to sit around and watch my chances of learning something about my transformation dissolve. Forget the ceremonies. Just have Keuvra come out and address the flock directly as the elders do!!

Meldi bares her teeth as her impatience rises. I want to object further, but I'm handily outnumbered, and a confrontation with the Elders would be the end of me. Maybe Uma will return with Keuvra now that the ceremony has failed? If that's the case, then I don't want to be seen breaking any of their rules when he returns. I lower my feathers but say nothing as I turn around and glide back to my perch.

The flock is still buzzing with conversation as none of the elders have spoken yet, but they don't seem concerned enough to try something as daring as flying to the gathering rock as I did. Glancing around, it seems quite a few Kin are glaring at me rather cross for my little stunt. Well, whatever! Be as angry at me as you want. You don't have an entire Kingdom grieving for your apparent death as I do.

A few minutes pass, and there's still no word from Uma. My agitation for the elders begins to subside and be replaced by impatience for Uma to return. Idly, I glance around the aerie and try searching for Kuro again. I don't care if the flock hates me for what I've done, but if Kuro is upset...

"Uma's returned!"

A Kin speaks out somewhere close to me. I whirl around to see Uma exiting the elder's dens with nobody trailing behind him. He takes to the air and screeches to call the flock's attention.

SKREEECH!!

He comes in fast for a hard landing while the aerie becomes quiet, waiting with bated breath to hear what news he brings. He ambles past the extinguished fire pit without acknowledging the other Elders and stands at the front of the rock.

“Keuvra is still present in the mountain,” He announces, his voice frail after the sprint from the elder’s dens. “I have spoken with him, and he does not wish to appear at this time.”

What?!

So, that’s it?! I’m not going to get to see Keuvra?! Around me, the flock reacts with similar shock to the news.

“This has never happened before,” Meldi says gravely. “Brother, why won’t he appear?”

Uma shakes his head slowly. “He did not provide me a reason.”

Khosa exchanges a suspicious glance with Meldi. “And what about Asha? What are we to do with her?”

“Concerning the Farlander, he had this to offer:” Uma pauses to draw a careful breath and raises his blue head to meet the flock.

“The fate of the Lordanou rests on your wings. I will return once the matter has been settled.”