

THE PRINCESS'S FEATHERS

51. Diplomacy

Hushed voices echo through the aerie as the flock processes Keuvra's edict. Glancing around, it seems everyone's eyes have settled on me again. *'Once the matter has been settled?'* What could that possibly mean? The first part of his edict makes more sense, *'The fate of the Lordanou rests on your wings.'* The elders, or more broadly the Flock, must decide what will happen to me. I'm unsure if that's better or worse than having a deity decide.

Perhaps it's for the better — the deities have been treating my family like a rotten boiler as of late. First, it was the Goddess refusing to talk to my mom for the past three months. Then she seemingly forced her to collapse in the chapel. Now the Dragon deity has outright rejected an audience with me, an event that has apparently never happened before. What makes the Lordanou family so toxic that nobody wants to talk to us?

Meldi sits and allows her wings to droop. "It seems Keuvra has deferred judgment to us. For what reason is not ours to know." The elders exchange worried glances. Even stoic Ashene, the fourth elder who may as well not have existed to this point, looks unnerved.

"Keuvra is our flock's leader," Khosa says. "During normal times of absence, he defers decisions to us, the four eldest members of this flock. Although his decision makes little sense, it is his decision to make and ours to respect."

Meldi nods solemnly. "Then we alone must decide whether Asha will join the flock... as uncomfortable as that is."

Why is it so hard for them to make the decision themselves? Don't they always do stuff like this when it's not a darkmoon?

Uma raises a wing to get my attention. "If it us who will vet her, then I would like to begin by asking the Farlander... mmh, remind me what your full name was again."

I mantle my wings and dip my head once more. "Princess Asha Eloise Lordanou, heir apparent of—"

"No, no, no," he interrupts. "That name will not do. Your Farlander complexities have no meaning here."

Meldi looks at me expectantly. "Asha, Daughter-Of...?"

"Kelani. Daughter-of-Queen Kelani."

"Daughter-Of-Kelani," Uma corrects. "That is your name."

And just like that, my new name was decided. *Asha, Daughter-Of-Kelani*. Who knew getting a new name could be that simple?

Uma continues, “You wish to return to the prey species you once were. What is your plan for doing so?”

My plan to turn back to normal? Well, I don’t have one of those yet. It’s only been a few days. I’ve been rather busy just trying to stay alive. I pull my wings tight against myself and reply, “The truth is... I’m uncertain what my plan is.”

Collectively, the elders seem disappointed by my response. Attempting to save myself, I quickly follow up with what I’ve already done. “Before I flew to Felra, I tried to talk to my family and those I used to know. I wanted to...” I trail off, remembering they’d have no idea what the royal ‘library’ is. “...To hear the stories from ancient times. To see if an answer might lay in their wisdom. I also wanted to contact the goddess for her guidance. It was my hope I could speak to Keuvra and ask him as well.”

“Hmph,” Khosa grunts. “Suppose you join our flock and learn to hunt and ‘*survive*’ as you say. How will you contact your family when you have failed to do so once before?”

“That’s a good question,” I reply. “I have some ideas. I realized earlier today that... well, I need to test some things first. But there’s another way I could talk to my family that doesn’t involve speech.”

Meldi lifts her neck high and studies me, flexing her talons against the ground. “To communicate, but not through talking. You’re awfully determined, Daughter-Of-Kelani.”

“Awfully *delusional*,” Khosa adds with a hiss. “You come to White Mountain seeking the flock’s help with no plan, no direction. And yet you insist you can find a way to reverse something that has never happened before.”

I stay silent for a moment, staring past the elders and across the aerie, trying to think of a suitable response. She has a point. “I’ll admit, I’m kind of an idiot for thinking I could just...” I stare at the ground and shake my head. “I don’t know, fly around long enough and hope to discover a way to return to normal purely by chance. But as soon as I give up and resign myself to remaining a Dragon, I’ll be giving up on my mother, my family, and the Kingdom I swore to protect. If there’s a possibility I could turn back to normal, no matter how small, then I have to keep trying.”

Uma’s cobalt eyes fixate on mine. “And should you fail and find yourself stuck as a Lithan?”

“Then...” I trail off, contemplating the grim possibility of being truly dead in the minds of everyone I used to know. “...I don’t know. I will ride those winds when they blow beneath me.”

The elders contemplate the metaphor I invented on the spot, and their faces turn softer as understanding washes over them. I exhale a small breath of relief and relax on my haunches.

Uma inclines his long neck outwards to gaze around Meldi. “You’ve been awfully quiet, Brother Ashene.”

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The oldest Kin in the flock stirs. He loosens tattered feathers, grey and old, longer and more numerous than any other Kin, and speaks slowly in a gravely voice that echos across the aerie. “To welcome someone into our flock, one responsible for the loss of our summer hunting grounds... I would offer it is blasphemous even to consider.”

Just as Bonello predicted, an Elder is objecting because they believe I’m the girl who invited all the airship-prey into the Farlands. “It’s heartbreaking to hear what happened to your flock because of airship-prey,” I say quietly. “But please understand, I was not alive all those seasons ago.”

“Perhaps,” says Khosa. “But your kin rules your Kingdom, and your descendants were responsible for their propagation. To welcome with open wings someone so related—“

”We are not here to judge the actions of Asha’s ancestors,” Meldi rebukes sharply.

Khosa ripostes, “Nor should we allow someone who has the authority to send the airshi—“

Rrrgh.

Uma growls over the two ladies to hold their attention. At once, they silence and swivel their long necks around to face him. He folds his slate wings and says, “I do not wish to

debate the consequences of things long past. But If we turn away this Farlander and impart a bitter taste in her heart, what is preventing her from taking her forbidden knowledge elsewhere? Would she corrupt some pitiful exile? Or return to the airship-prey's den and tell them where Flat Rock, The Grandfather Tree, or White Mountain is located?"

Well, that's an interesting point. However, I couldn't imagine doing any of those terrible things, not after meeting so many kind-hearted Kin who have no say on if I'm allowed into their flock or not.

"Any enemies of the flock, prey or exile, will be crushed," Khosa growls, baring fangs at Uma. "Are you suggesting the flock is weak?"

"I'm suggesting we avoid senseless violence and death."

"The affairs of a Farlander, a prey-deity, or the weak Farlander kingdoms are no concern to us." Khosa rises and ambles to the edge of the gathering stone to examine me more closely. Instinctively I bunch my muscles at her provocative approach but keep myself perfectly still, allowing this on-the-spot examination to continue. She scans my head from afar, and I follow her eyes as they move down my neck and over the rest of my body. "I believe if Keuvra had planned something significant for this fress, he would have appeared before us and made it known. But to defer the to us the matter of assessing this... prey creature..." she trails off, and her eyes narrow. "No. I will not risk upsetting our leader by honoring him a hapless prey animal responsible for so much pain." She stares at me a moment longer before turning her head sharply and walking away.

"Then the matter is settled," Meldi announces. "Without unanimous consent of the elders, a Loner can not be welcomed into the flock. Asha," her face settles into a glum expression. "I know this is not the outcome you were expecting. I'm sorry."

Huh...?

So, that's it?! I can't join them because one Dragon disagreed?

The faces of the Elders turn sullen and conflicting emotions rake my heart. Sorrow at watching my chance to see Keuvra dissolve. Horror at the realization that I'll now have to teach myself how to hunt and survive on this inhospitable continent. Outrage at the fact they would hold against me something that happened so long ago I wasn't even alive to witness it.

I slam my eyes shut and grit my teeth in anger. All they talked about was how they felt about *me*

. My fitness to join their flock is not their decision to make, damn it! It's supposed to be Keuvras! He's the only one who could possibly understand how vital my ascension to the throne is! Talons scrape against the ground from somewhere around me, heading in my direction. Kuro, Meldi... I can't tell whom they belong to. Are they coming to comfort me? Or are they stepping forward to escort me from the aerie?

I can't allow this opportunity to slip away from me!

“Wait!”

I open my eyes to see the elders craning their necks with curious expressions. Forcing my head up, I attempt to hold my voice steady. "If you allow me into your flock, I will reopen your summer hunting grounds!"

Behind me, the crowd stirs with emotion, and Khosa stares at me with wide eyes. "What?!"

"When I return to normal," I speak slowly, attempting to summon my inner *Queen Kelani* with her clear, even-keeled diplomatic tone. "I will command our airship-prey to leave Kin alone. You will be welcomed onto my Kingdom's land and allowed to hunt as you once did, free from interference."

Thanks to Bonello's warning, I was able to formulate a plan ahead of time in case the elders blamed me for the loss of their hunting grounds. While there's nothing I can do to atone for the actions of my family in the past, I can at least make amends now. The least I can do is welcome them back to the hunting grounds they once thrived in.

The elders look at me curiously. Uma quirks his head and asks, "And you could make due on this promise, Daughter-Of-Kelani?"

"Yes," I say. "As Princess, this is within my authority. Once I return to normal, I will command them as soon as I return to my home den."

I lied.

As Princess, I have **no** authority to issue orders to military or civilian vessels. I wouldn't have needed mom's approval to charter an airship to the Eastern Weald if I did. If the elders take me up on my offer, I'll be forcing mom to make a tremendously consequential and dangerous order when I return home. Obviously, there would have to be some caveats. There's no way our farmers would allow their livestock to be plucked by Lithans like they were centuries ago. And what happens if Kin ignore our rules and starts taking livestock anyways? How could we possibly punish them? How would we even communicate with each other?

But none of that will matter if I never return home, ousted from the flock's lands and left to die on this damn continent. Whatever the repercussions of this offer may be, we'll have to live with it.

Meldi steps forward. "And you would not offer this to us otherwise?"

I keep my head held high but say nothing in response. Offering excuses or reasons to justify my actions would show weakness.

From Enyll calling me inferior, Khosa thinking I'm weak, and everyone in between who thinks I'm some lowly prey animal, it's clear to me that Lithans are a proud species that value strength above all else. That's why the flock is so fascinated with how I scared away an airship-prey and why Uma is concerned I'll summon more. To have the power to command the biggest threat to their dominance is a strength they can't equal.

Khosa's tail lashes behind her. She lowers her head and growls, "This is treachery! A Farlander, of all creatures, making demands of—"

“Khosa!” Meldi hisses, ambling on her bad leg to confront her. “Don’t be a stubborn kit! This may be my granddaughters’ only chance to experience the summer grounds!”

Khosa grits her teeth and veers around to face Uma, who signals a nod of agreement. She moves onto Ashene, who’s watching the scene unfold, stoic as a statue. After an awkward moment of silence, he says, “Yes.”

Khosa grumbles in response and flares her wings in frustration. “Fine. Allow her into our flock. Claim prey can become Keuvra’s Kin. We’ll see what happens when she disgraces him with how weak she truly is.”

52. Carved in Stone

I exhale the most hard-fought sigh of my life, trying to calm my racing heart. I haven’t been welcomed into their flock just yet, but getting the elders’ approval is perhaps the biggest hurdle to overcome.

“Asha,” Uma speaks up, talking over the murmur of conversation from the crowd. “Before we continue, you should know what will be expected of you as a member of this flock.”

I nod to signal my agreement.

Kuro told me this would be the next step: A verbal agreement that I would respect and follow the rules of the flock. I’ve been steadfast in maintaining that I would agree to join them no matter what, and I even went so far as to suggest I ask the elders to skip this part of the process because it wouldn’t matter. No matter what, I have to join them.

But Kuro was noticeably anxious about my enthusiasm.

'Asha,' she said. 'I really think you should listen to the elders if you make it that far.'

'Why?' I asked, quirking my head. 'Kuro, I have no other choice. I'll have to accept your rules, regardless of their inconvenience.'

In response, she turned her head and averted her eyes.

'What?' I said. I knew she was hiding something that made her uncomfortable. 'What's so bad about them that you can't just tell me?'

Her brow furrowed, and she shook her head. 'No. It would be best if you heard it from the elders. I won't tell you.'

Kuro warned me last night that *'certain things'* would be expected if I joined the flock. It sounds awfully ominous, but what other choice do I have? My alternative is to die alone on this continent, so there is none.

Uma continues, “If Keuvra does not wish to share his thoughts on your arrival, then we will hold you to the same standard we judge every other member of this flock. To that end, you must come of age.”

Khosa grumbles, “By crossing from the Farlands, she has already passed one of the trials.”

“But she wishes to return to her Kin in the Farlands, to one day become a Lemur again,” Meldi speaks over the two in a concerned voice. “This is why we needed Keuvra’s guidance!”

Wait, what?

This is why they needed to summon Keuvra? Because I want to return to Ellyntide once I become a Lemur? A dread builds in my stomach, rattling my voice as I dare ask, “Is that a problem?”

Meldi turns towards me, and her red eyes meet mine. Although she’s a Lithan, I’ve seen her expression before; it is the look of a heartbroken mother who knows she’s about to deliver terrible news. “Fress... if you were to join our flock and become Keuvra’s Kin, then... you would be expected to start a family. To join our flock is a *lifetime* commitment.”

What?!

The force of her words smacks me like a locomotive, draining the air from my lungs. My legs falter and slip, and my stomach wrenches. In order to survive, in order to turn back to normal and lead Ellyntide... I have to commit myself to be a member of their flock *forever*?

I...

“But I can’t possibly do that!”

How could they expect me to remain in their flock forever? What am I supposed to do when I turn back to normal? A lemur is only useful as prey on this continent. They won’t insist I *remain* a Lathan, will they?!

And how could I commit myself to a partner when my goal is to turn back to normal?! It wouldn’t be fair to my partner or me. I’ll be so small compared to them when I’m a Lemur! How would we love each other? Would they even retain feelings for me? To say nothing of what the response would be when I returned to Varecia with a Dragon for a partner!!

There’s also the lingering matter of... well. Expecting me to start a family and raise children is a huge thing to ask when I don’t even know if I can reciprocate romantic feelings for men. I know I can for women, but... are those types of relationships allowed here? Would they even know what I was talking about if I asked? I don’t think I’ve seen any same-sex couples here. What if they don’t allow them?

“Asha...” Meldi stares at me with pain in her eyes. “I understand how difficult this is to accept. But these are ancient rites that have existed for generations. To raise kits to adulthood is essential to the flock’s survival.”

Survival, huh. So that’s what it comes down to.

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Framing it that way, there’s no need to ask if they’ll allow same-sex couples: they won’t. Even if someone in the flock has those preferences, they’ll still have to take a mate with the opposite sex to raise children.

“The way I see it,” Uma says. “You have little choice but to accept this path – to join our flock as a Loner and come of age. Even if you discovered a way to control when you turn back to normal, the crossing to the Farlands may already be impassable.”

I-impassable!?

I flick my eyes between the elders in disbelief. “How?! I just crossed it yesterday!”

“In harvestwing,” Uma continues. “The winds in the crossing grow stronger with each passing day until it is no longer safe. Daughter-Of-Kelani, you seem naturally adept at flying, but even you must have had considerable difficulty yesterday, isn’t that right?”

I nod absentmindedly, recalling just how difficult it was to gain altitude in the strong gales at Archer's Point. "I completely lost control of my flight trying to find calm winds. I almost gave up and landed."

Uma's expression turns grave. "Then you are already aware of how dangerous it is to make the crossing. Soon the winds will blow so fierce as to make it impossible. It will not be safe again until greenwing."

"Until greenwing? You mean I could be stuck in Felra *until next spring?!?*"

The elders look at me in silence, their expressions filled with bitter truth.

I stare into the ground and grit my teeth. A torrent of negative emotions flood my head, and tears form in my eyes. I've come so far and endured so much to get to this point... But the deities have turned their backs on me, I've been given an edict I can't possibly live up to, and I could be stuck in Felra for *months*.

What have I done to deserve all this?

Why does the very worst outcome always happen to me?

Why...

...

“Then, I accept!”

There is always a choice.

“I’ll seek a mate and come of age! I’ll do whatever it takes!”

So, I’ll choose to make the best of it.

“If this is the path the deities want me to take, then so be it!”

Wherever the winds may carry me.

With tears flowing from my eyes, I force myself to meet the elder’s faces. The deities may have forsaken me, but if their goal is to stop me, they’ll have to kill me. I told myself that for the good of everyone I’ve ever known, I could never give up on them. And just because things are getting hard, just because *unexpected events* are standing in my way... for them, I won’t.

Uma watches me for a moment before his expression changes. He seems pleased. “So be it,” he rumbles slowly and authoritatively. “Daughter-Of-Kelani, you will be expected to start a family and come of age.”

Fine.

The elders can expect as much as they want from me. But as soon as I figure out how to turn back to normal, I’m hightailing it off this rock and never looking back.

“We recognize that courtship can be a lengthy process. But understand that until you are mated and whelp, you will have fewer privileges in our flock.”

I exhale a little. That gives me some time, at least.

I don’t know precisely how old Kuro and Enyll are, but if those two are around my age and still single, then it’s clear Kin are allowed plenty of time to seek a mate. With any luck, I’ll be long gone before anyone can get upset at me for being single.

Of course, I don’t know what ‘*privileges*’ Uma is referring to. But Kuro and Enyll are not *dead*, so the penalties for being single can’t be insurmountable.

Uma continues, “As you have flown from the Farlands unassisted, you have already passed the trial of flight. The trial of might, to hunt and butcher a False-Kin alone, will still be expected of you.”

This worries me a bit. I’m bigger than a Redaga but smaller than every other Lithan I’ve come across. If killing a Redaga is challenging for even regular-sized Lithans, what does that mean for me? How hard would I have to train to kill one by myself? I suppose Fra was able to pass the trial, and she’s close to my size, but...

When I recall the fight I was in yesterday, I can only think about the look on his face as I lost consciousness. That insidious look of opportunism... it mirrors the look on Orié’s face as he thought he was about to kill me in the hollow.

...

I hope I’ll be far away from Felra before they expect me to fight a Redaga again.

“Do you accept these conditions, Daughter-Of-Kelani?”

Without question. “I accept.”

“Good,” says Meldi, hobbling to the front of the rock. “With her acceptance, Asha has secured our blessing. But to be welcomed into our flock requires the support of Kin. For

those who have met Asha since she arrived in Felra, raise your voice if you would allow her into our flock.”

“I would!” A powerful and familiar voice — the one I wish was beside me this entire gathering — wastes no time answering Meldi’s call. I cast about and scan the crowd, following the line of turned heads straight to the source.

With a smile on her face, Kuro raises her head high. “I believe Asha will make a wonderful addition to our flock. She is smart, headstrong, and her intimate knowledge of the Farlands will be a boon to our survival.”

“I second Kuro!”

Before I can even react to her kind words, another familiar voice rings. I glance to Kuro’s right and spot Ykuvi among the crowd. “Our willingness to accept outsiders into our flock is essential to its survival. Asha has an unquestionable talent for flying, and I believe she could be taught to hunt as well as any other Kin.”

“She has my support!” Gima adds, standing next to him.

Oh, gosh. Gima too?! Last night Ykuvi said he would vie for me, but I was less sure how Gima felt. The old woman came through!

“Asha was kind to me!” Fra yells, straining her voice to be audible across the aerie. “She shared her prey with me! Please allow her to join us!”

The elders glance between themselves. Meldi nods to Uma, who glances over his wing and nods to Khosa. Despite looking at me askance ever since the gathering began, it seems her resolve is fading. She must be surprised at just how much support I’ve garnered in my short time here.

I exhale, feeling warmth spread flush across my heart. Even I’m a bit surprised by the reaction so far. I knew these four would probably vie for me, but to hear them say such kind words fills me with strength. It’s finally starting to feel like things are going to work out. Now, will anyone else speak up about me?

“I respectfully object.”

From the back of the aerie, a bitter voice echoes and puts a swift end to my short-lived enthusiasm. A Kin wings forward and lands on another elevated platform of interlocking rocks far to my left. I recognize their nearly crimson plumage, and my stomach churns.

53. Of Keuvra

It’s Relmoon.

Calling me out at Flat Rock wasn’t enough, it seems. He had to do it again in front of the entire flock! What on Jade does he think he’s doing?

“Son-Of-Zuki,” Khosa chides, clearly irritated by his appearance. “We seek approval for Asha’s admittance. It is not customary to object.”

“But object I must, esteemed elder. If you would only allow me to speak my concerns.” There’s something perceptibly sinister lurking beneath his calm and measured tone. It’s not unlike the voice Orlando uses when speaking to mom.

“And you have met Asha since she arrived?”

“I have.”

Khosa looks to me for confirmation. Unfortunately, we had talked to each other in Flat Rock, so I incline my head. She then glances at Meldi and Uma, who keep their faces straight. If they feel a certain way about allowing Relmoon to bend the rules, they’re holding it close to themselves. Khosa grunts and quickly says, “Say your piece.”

Relmoon tips his wings to acknowledge and turns to face the flock with a determined expression. “Brothers and sisters! I have a simple question for you: When was your last encounter with a Farlander?”

The crowd remains silent as they contemplate his question. To speak out without first being directed by an elder is forbidden (though clearly, it’s possible to bend that rule.)

“Ah, yes. I see some of you licking your chops. For those lucky enough, you believe your last encounter with a Farlander was at the end of a successful hunt. Keuvra teaches us that Farlanders are hapless prey animals, beholden to weak deities and foolish ideals. For countless generations, that is how we have coexisted: Hunter and hunted.”

Across the aerie, some of the Kin are nodding in understanding. Like it was in the hollow, Relmoon is striking a chord with a particular group of Kin.

"But the truth is, you are experiencing an encounter with a Farlander right now. This..." Relmoon draws his left wing towards me. "...*Thing*, this abomination of feather and claw that Keuvra refuses to deign an appearance to, is not a Dragon. It is every terrified Rabbit that fled to its den and every foolish Lemur who dared fight back against a brave child of Keuvra.”

Hushed voices of approval are stirred from the crowd as Relmoon pauses. Instead of identifying the dissenters, I keep my gaze averted and hold steady on the crimson Kin. I have to appear strong to the flock, even in the face of someone who questions the validity of my very existence.

“Princess Asha Eloise Lordanou may learn our stories, butcher False-Kin, and gallivant under Maki’s glow for a mate. But she is not Keuvra’s Kin. She never will be. And quite frankly...” Relmoon turns about to face the gathering stone behind him. His eyes narrow. “I’m having trouble believing why our esteemed elders even considered this girl.”

Uh-oh.

Fervent growls rise across the aerie at Relmoon's provocation, reverberating against my chest and causing the mountain itself to tremble beneath my talons. It seems to question the legitimacy of a Farlander is all well and good, but to go after the elders is a step too far for many of the minds he was trying to convince. Still, his expression is unwavering as the vocal opposition fails to affect him.

For their part, the elders are equally unmoved by Relmoon's insubordination. Meldi and Uma are sitting with narrowed eyes, while Khosa looks on with a neutral expression. Ashene is sitting alone in the back of the stone, as pensive as ever. After a tense moment passes, Meldi moves to whisper something to Uma, who nods in agreement.

Armed with his approval, she rises to her talons. "I would like to ask *you* a question, Relmoon: Are you old enough to remember your grandmother, Fracolo?"

Relmoon quirks his head and considers his response carefully. "No, I don't. I was a young kit when she died."

"I figured as much," Meldi scoffs. "If she had lived longer, Fracolo would have shared stories of the seasons when her and I flew to the far corners of the moon. Your grandmother loathed airship-prey more than any Kin I knew, and she lamented the loss of our summer hunting grounds until the day she passed onto Maki. She wished you could fly there too, Relmoon."

"If Keuvra intended us to return to the summer grounds," Relmoon says, "He would offer a way to drive back the airship-prey. The fact that he has not is an indication of the flock's strength. We do not need the summer grounds or the help of outsiders like Princess Asha Eloise Lordanou."

“Don’t be a stubborn kit,” Meldi growls. “Our flock is not invincible.”

Relmoon raises his voice, “More Kin agree with me on Asha than you think!”

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Rggh.

From the back of the rock, another rumble interrupts the bickering, silencing Relmoon and Meldi. The eyes of the aerie are drawn to Ashene as he strides forward to stand wing-to-wing beside Meldi. He heaves a heavy breath and studies Relmoon carefully.

“Son-Of-Zuki,” he speaks slowly. “Your skepticism of Asha is admirable, and I share many of your concerns. But I have felt the bitter winds from the north and heard the birdsong in the trees. I know their twittering well — Azurrel heralds us a dark and cold frostwing, one where prey will be scarce, and Kin will be lost. We have a need for every soul with talons to prepare for the coming season, even those whose talons they are not yet comfortable with.”

Ashene’s gold eyes fall onto me. There’s wisdom in his face, the wisdom of someone who has lived for untold years and survived just as many harsh winters. I don’t care if Dragons

like Relmoon or Ashene dislike me — Felra is not my home. In time, they'll be a memory to me. But at least Ashene is willing to recognize my existence has purpose. I respect him for that.

For a moment, Relmoon is slow to follow up Ashene's unusual appearance. But before he can open his muzzle, Khosa grunts to gather the attention of the other elders. They form a group, and after a hushed conversation, Khosa ambles forward again to speak. "Relmoon. We recognize the concerns you and others have about Asha's admittance. We are willing to rescind the requirement Asha remain a member of this flock until Keuvra can provide us his guidance."

Wait, seriously? They'll allow me to leave the flock and return home?!!

Khosa stares down at Relmoon. "Is that acceptable?"

Relmoon ponders his response for a moment. He slides his head around, briefly pausing to hold his gaze on me and then to someone in the back of the aerie. He swivels back and says, "Yes. I believe it would be."

I exhale. *They'll allow me to leave!* Thank the Goddess! And to think, the Dragon I have to thank for this wonderful change of events is the one who hates me the most!

"So be it," rasps Uma.

Meldi looks especially relieved as well. She dips her wings and says, “I’m pleased to hear it. With Relmoon’s concerns addressed, we may continue with Asha. If anyone else would vie for her, then raise your voice.”

“I will,” a gravelly drakon calls out with confidence.

“A-As will I,” a younger, cocky voice follows from the same spot. I recognize their voices but refuse to believe my ears until I follow their calls to the back of the aerie. I have to see who’s speaking with my own eyes.

Bonello sticks his neck out above all the other Kin around him. “If brave Ashene can support this girl, then so will I. Let’s see if she can bring back the summer grounds!”

Standing next to Bonello is... *Enyll*. Enyll!! “Asha was kind to my sister,” he says, keeping his head low. “Just... just give her a chance.”

I can’t believe it! Enyll’s vying for me! It sounded like that was the most uncomfortable thing he’s ever done in his entire life, but he did it! I turn back to the gathering stone and catch a glimpse of Ashene nodding to Khosa, who in turn nods slowly back to him.

“Then it’s settled,” Meldi declares. “The support for Asha’s admittance is overwhelming, and all parties have been satisfied.”

“Daughter-Of-Kelani,” Uma speaks slowly as elders look down on me. For the first time, his eyes seem gentle. “From this time forward, and for as long as you fly these lands, you will be known as a member of the Snowfell Flock — *Kin-Of-Keuvra*.”

Feathers shift as the elders and the majority of the Dragons in the aerie slowly dip their heads in unison before me. Taken entirely by surprise my muzzle goes slack-jawed, and I feel something comparable to goosebumps across my feathers. I really shouldn’t be in this much awe at their display of respect — I am a Princess, after all. But I can’t help but be overcome by warm and glowing joy, a type of reverence I’ve never felt before, least of all from a crowd.

Tears form in my eyes as I might to hold back wonderment. “T-thank you,” my voice wavers. I wish I could tell them just how grateful I am, but this is all the words I can muster.

“Then there is one final matter that must be decided,” Khosa says as she raises her head back up. “If she is to come of age, then Asha must be trained. We will ne—”

“I will!”

A strong voice cuts off Khosa. I whirl around to see — who else? — Kuro flying forward with a big, stupid grin across her face. She lands next to me and confidently declares, “I am the one who will be her mentor.”

“The one who found her,” Khosa muses. “How quaint. Does this suit you, Asha?”

“Mmmhmm!” I was only about to ask her if Kuro could train me. Of course it does!

“Very well then,” Khosa says in a weary voice, growing weak from talking for so long. She raises her head and addresses the crowd at large. “The relationship between mentor and apprentice is sacred – to pass stories and tradition to the next generation of Kin is essential for the flock’s survival.” She pauses to look down at Kuro and me. “You have successfully mentored many Dragons, Kuro. An explanation of your duties is not necessary. But as for you, Asha, your task is simple: Respect and follow Kuro’s wishes. The future of this flock rests on your wings.”

I tip my wings to signal my agreement. Not that I’m very great at following authority, but I thi—

Eh!?

My heart skips a beat, taken by surprise as Kuro rests a wing gently across my flank. “I’ll make Asha into a fine member of the flock. You’ll see!”

I gaze up at Kuro, brimming with confidence, then back toward the soot-colored wing draped over me. I’m feeling it again... that same fuzzy feeling I felt at the pond when Calypso placed his hand over my shoulder. It seems I can feel it as a Lathan too.... but, why? Why do I sometimes react profoundly to the sensation of touch?

Melid addresses the flock in a loud and clear tone. “Then, with that, our emergency gathering has concluded. Warm currents... and Asha.” she pauses to smile at me. “Welcome to the flock.”

The elders dip their heads and mantle their wings. Meldi, Uma, and Khosa begin slowly pacing to the rear of the gathering stone, but Ashene remains still. Instead of rising, he angles his neck upwards and stares at the ceiling like he were expecting something to happen. After a silent moment, his chest feathers relax, and with a considerable effort he clambers to his talons to join the others, his tail swaying thoughtfully behind him.

54. New Kin on The Rock

As the Elders turn away from the crowd, the hum of conversation grows across the aerie once more. I watch them fly away from the gathering stone in a daze, still attempting to process the enormity of everything that’s just occurred. Of everything I’ve just accomplished.

I did it. I really did it. Even without Keuvra’s help, I’m one of them! And Kuro is going to be my mentor! I can hardly believe that everything’s worked out!

Kuro’s wing brushes against my flank and pulls me back to reality. “Asha!!” she’s smiling as wide as I’ve ever seen her. “Come on! Everyone’s waiting to see you!” I gaze down at the base of the rock we’re perched on. While plenty of Kin are taking to the air to leave, a crowd of noisy onlookers has formed, with more flying in from other parts of the aerie. The object of their curiosity is me.

“Hi, Asha!”

“Jump down, Asha!”

“Come talk to us!”

I loosen a smile. Even in Felra, my celebrity status follows me. I’d like to have some time alone with Kuro so we can talk about our training and my plans to communicate with my family... but I suppose it can wait. Even though I’ve found a way into their flock, it’s clear there are plenty of Kin who don’t entirely accept me. I think it would be worth it to spend some time with a crowd and try to clear the air about who I really am.

“Sure, let’s talk to them,” I tell Kuro. “Could you clear a spot for us?”

Kuro gives me a stiff nod and leans down to command the crowd. “Alright! Everyone, form an opening!”

As the Dragons part, my attention is drawn across the aerie to the rock where Relmoon was perched. He’s since returned to the ground, caught in an ambush by two fledges hovering just above his wings. A peat colored drakaina bounds forward, and the two embrace each other with an affectionate kiss and head rub.

So, Relmoon has a family. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised since it’s a requirement in the flock. But how can someone difficult like Relmoon be mated while Kuro remains single?

With a clearing formed, we lope down and enter the fray of wings and feathers. Questions fly in my direction as soon as my talons touch the ground — about my transformation, what it’s like to be a Farlander and my encounter with the Beatrix. I answer them one by one while Kuro stands to my side like Calypso often did while we were out and about in Ellyntide. Because I was never formally introduced to the public, I never had to worry about talking to journalists like mom routinely did. But I was trained how to do it, and for all the moon, this feels exactly like what I was conditioned for. Who knew my first real-world experience would be in front of a crowd of Dragons?

As I talk, I notice a copper-plumaged drakaina slide her way into the crowd of Kin. Unlike the others, her interest seems to be drawn to Kuro. As she reaches the front, I sense Kuro shift uneasily next to me. When I finish answering a question about feeling pain while I transformed (I didn’t,) she brushes her wing to get my attention before I can choose the next question.

“Asha,” she speaks softly. “The woman who just approached.”

Understanding her request, I turn my gaze to the Kin in question. “Yes, you who just walked up? Hello, did you have a question, too?”

“Oh!” she squeaks like a cat, wavering her wings. “Well, um, I actually needed to talk to Kuro.”

I glance up at my mentor, who seems quite rankled. She exhales and settles against her haunches. “Kuky. I think I know why you’re here.”

“Yes, that’s exactly right, Kuro. You told me you would mentor my daughter Frope the next time you took apprentices. I’m here to remind you of that promise.”

Did she make a promise to mentor two Lithans at a time? Is that even allowed?

“Reminding me isn’t necessary,” Kuro replies in a steady tone. “But Frope is a fledge and hasn’t come of age. Asha and I will be talking about many things she isn’t allowed to hear.”

“Well, I know that. That’s why I spoke to your grandmother before I flew over here. She wants us to meet so we can all discuss it.”

Kuro’s head pulls back slightly. Clearly, she didn’t appreciate Kuky going to her grandmother first. She turns to me and asks, “Will you be alright by yourself for a few minutes? I’ll get this sorted out.”

“Would another apprentice slow us down?” I ask wearily. “Kuro, you have to train me as q—“

“I know.” She says, rising to her talons to join Kuky at the crowd's edge. The two greet each other and slip through the mass of Kin to find a spot to take off.

Well, this is concerning. I had no idea Kuro had preexisting commitments to train someone else. I suppose I can take this to mean that training two dragons at a time is allowed, but what does that mean for me? I have to learn everything I can as quickly as possible before the crossing to Sarlain becomes impassable. I can't afford to be slowed down by another Dragon who doesn't have the weight of a life-changing deadline.

An older drakon speaks from the front of the group as Kuro and Kuky take flight behind them. "Pity you're not a boy, Asha."

My feathers rise. "I beg your pardon?"

"Kuro's never taken a mate," answers the man. "Nobody takes this long to decide. Instead of mentoring, she needs to be raising a family. It's bad for the flock's survival that she hasn't whelped any kits."

Oh.

Well, um, I'm charmed that you think I'd make a good enough guy. To date Kuro. I guess. But mating and starting a family is the last thing I'm looking to do during my visit to Felra.

"Oh, Agith," A woman next to him chides. "Everyone Kuro mentors becomes fabulous at hunting. And you know it's just as important to feed the flock as it is to populate it. I'm certain she'll find someone she likes, eventually."

“She’s taking too long,” Agith growls. “Far too many seasons. When I was her age, we had already brought three healthy kits into the world. An indecisive sister deserves to have the elders decide for her.”

I retreat a step. “Decide a mate *for her*? That’s barbaric! The elders wouldn’t really do that, would they?”

Instead of responding, the crowd exchanges sullen glances between themselves. “What? What is it?” They’re all keenly aware of something on the tip of their tongues — something they’re unwilling to share with me. Why?

“Asha,” a tawny drakaina speaks up. “Could you please tell us more about your old life in the Farlands?”

And now they’re trying to change the subject! I fold my wings flat against my sides and wonder if I should press the issue further before quickly deciding against it. I wanted to talk to the crowd to improve my image in the flock, not make it worse by accusing them of hiding things from me. It’s not like I need to get involved in their politics, anyways. I may have become a member of their flock, but I’m still just a visitor to Felra. I’m only planning to be here for a short while.

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“Well,” I say, forcing myself to relax a little. “My Den in the Farlands was huge. For a Lemur, I mean. Over seventy Farlanders can sleep in it...”

“Hi, Asha! My name is Frope, Daughter-Of-Kuky!”

The pure white fledge mantles her delicate wings and dips her head low before me. Having just landed on top of the gathering stone, I need a second to catch my breath before I can craft a response to this surprise introduction. “Oh! Um, pleased to meet you, Frope! I wasn’t expecting to meet you up here.”

“Asha,” Meldi stands across from Kuro and me, rasping with her cantankerous voice. “We thought it would be rude not to invite you while we discuss Frope and what she means for your training.”

“Well, thank you for including me.” It seems like a reasonable explanation for why I was called to the top of the gathering stone so suddenly. I was in the middle of an explanation about ‘*locomotive-prey*’ when I found out I had to wing up here and join them.

Enyll grumbles, “And why am *I* here, exactly?”

“Someone had to get Asha,” Kuro grunts. “But more importantly, Kuky wants me to train Frope alongside Asha. There isn’t enough room in my Den for three adults, and one fledge.”

“So someone has to leave,” Kuky adds.

Faster than a lightning bolt, faster than possibly anything I've ever witnessed in my entire life, Enyll's demeanor flips. His eyes go wide, and his muzzle curls into a shocked smile. "R-Really?! You mean I can return to Flat Rock?!"

"Don't leap without wind," Meldi warns. "This is Asha's decision to make. She's the one who's trying to return to the Farlands as quickly as possible." She flicks her eyes to Kuro, whose expression remains steady. "And should she return, I suspect you'll be paired with Kuro again."

Enyll's face changes again, staring at me like a dog begging for table scraps. H-hey!! Dude, don't do that!

"Well," I chuckle to myself, "I appreciate you looping me in on the decision."

"Kuro told me you needed to be trained as quickly as possible," Kuky says. Standing beside her daughter, she angles a wing over Frope. "She's a good kit, and I promise she'll be able to keep up with you."

Frope's wings droop, "Mom, I'm not a kit anymore..."

"You're young enough," she scolds. "And none of your friends are being trained yet, are they?"

“Well, no...” Frope says, rolling stones under her talons. “Not until greenwing.”

“Then I suggest you be grateful to Asha and Kuro for this opportunity. It’s not every day someone is allowed to start their training to come of age in the middle of harvestwing!”

Frope stares at me and forces an unconvincing smile. “Umm,” she stumbles. “I really wanted to train with my friends in Greenwing, but—”

Kuky loosens a growl, and Frope flinches. “Ahh, I mean! I would very much like it if I could train with you and Kuro. I loved hearing your story about the airship-prey, and it would be *so cool* if you could tell me more stories about the Farlands, and tell me all about—“

“Frope,” Meldi deadpans. “Remember what we discussed. You have not come of age.” She swivels her eyes onto me. “Asha won’t be able to share any stories with you.”

Point taken. That is totally fine with me, though! My priority is to learn how to hunt, not tell stories to children.

“Ah, yeah...” Frope’s wings droop once more, and she looks awfully downtrodden. “But that’s okay! Because I’m still going to come of age before my friends! And I can boast about how I trained with Asha!”

Kuky dips her wings expectantly at me. “Well, Asha? What do you think?”

So, it’s my decision to make. Should I allow this mildly petulant fledge to join us while Kuro trains me?

Obviously, I need to learn how to hunt as quickly as possible. But it’s also important to foster a good relationship with the flock. No matter what happens while I’m in Felra, our relationship with Dragons will never be the same again. If I don’t leave a favorable impression on them, then it could cause problems later. Suppose I do make contact with my family, only to discover I can’t turn back to normal. If I’m stuck as a Lithan for the rest of my life, then I’ll probably need the flock’s help as I age.

At the same time, if I don’t learn quickly enough, the window of opportunity to contact my family may pass. I wasn’t lying when I told the elders I had some ideas for talking to them, but they’re time-sensitive. If I have to wait until spring, then certain conditions may change, and the chance to reunite with my family may disappear forever.

I guess it all comes down to speed. “Kuro,” I say. “Will training Frope slow you down?”

She shakes her head. “She won’t. I’ve trained fledges like Frope before. I know how to teach them.”

Okay, then. Next question. “Have you ever trained more than one Kin at a time?”

“...No,” she exhales, appearing frustrated with herself. “But the lessons I teach for hunting in the Farlands don’t require a lot of personalized training. As long as there’s enough prey for you and Frope, there’s no reason to think we’ll be slowed down.”

“Hmm...” I stare at the ground in contemplation

So, it sounds like I should be alright if we take Frope in. I’m a little worried about her lackadaisical demeanor, but I was a teenager once before, too. Behavior like that can’t be helped when you’re that age.

Besides, the alternative to having Frope in the den is having Enyll, and he’s arguably an even more significant risk. He and Kuro have been at each other’s throats the entire time I’ve known them, and a brawl nearly broke out between them after they saved my life. Few things would slow down Kuro more than a wound inflicted during some petty squabble with Enyll.

That’s what Kuro would want too, right? To no longer have Enyll in her den? She was so crestfallen when Bonello told her she had to share her den with Enyll for another season. Gosh, she must really want me to invite Frope to train with us, right?

I glance up at Kuro and find she’s staring at me intently for a decision. I can see it on her face – she wants me to say ‘yes.’

So, I will. “Alright. We’ll bring Frope with us.”

Everyone present exhales, pleased with my decision. Kuky's wings perk, and she looks pleasantly relieved. Frope is smiling from ear to ear, and Kuro is trying (but failing) to appear modest about it as she averts her eyes and stifles a grin. Enyll looks like he could begin crying with joy.

"Very well, then," Meldi says quickly. It sounds like she's ready to move on from this discussion. "I'm not going to repeat myself about the important relationship between mentor and apprentice. You've been through this plenty of times, Kuro. And Frope, do you remember what I told Asha earlier?"

Frope smiles proudly. "Yup!"

"Good," Meldi continues. "It can be daunting to train more than one at a time, but if anyone can handle it with grace, it's you, Kuro."

Kuro nods, "Thank you, grandmother."

"Well!" Enyll chirps, shaking his wings out. He's acting like he just won the lottery. "If there's nothing else needed from me, then I'll be on my way to Flat Rock! Warm currents, Kuro!"

Kuro's face grimaces like she just witnessed rotten carrion. "Um, sure, whatever," she grumbles.

With a spring in his step and a tune in his throat, Enyll spins around to saunter toward the edge of the stone and take off. But before he can disappear, there's something I need to ask him. "Hey, Enyll?"

He freezes in place. Agitation creeps across his face before quickly being stifled. He glances over his right wing and asks in an artificially chipper tone, "Yes? What is it?"

"Why did you vie for me in front of the flock? You told Ykuvi you weren't going to at the campfire last night. What changed your mind?"

All the enthusiasm in Enyll's face drains away. His wings droop, and he stammers, "It—it's all Fra's fault! She forced me to do it!"

Frope lets out a resounding scoff. "Don't be so ashamed, Enyll. We know you have a *crush* on Asha."

Eh?! Frope...?!

My head whips around, taken by surprise at Frope's sassy little out-of-character remark. At the edge of the stone, Enyll's body flinches, and he appears even more shocked than I am. Pale skin turns beet red, visible through copper facial feathers. "What?! N-No, I don't! Why would I have a crush on a *Farlander*?"

Oh, man. That's your defense, Enyll? You know you at least have to say something like, 'While Asha is pretty for a Farlander,' right?

Kuky looks similarly unimpressed. "Well, you *are* single, Enyll."

"And have been for many seasons," Meldi adds.

"You could've moved out of my den much sooner if you had taken a mate," Kuro doesn't look the slightest bit amused.

The copper drakon retreats a step and nearly tumbles off the side of the rock. He checks behind his wing and quickly repositions himself a few steps forward to a safer position. "But, that's not...!" he glances between us, understanding he's vastly outnumbered. "This is absurd! Asha, don't you agree?"

Sorry, Enyll. I appreciate what you did during the gathering, but you blew this one. "Why do you care what I think? I'm just some ugly Farlander."

Enyll recoils like someone punched him in the gut. His face twists, and he curses, "Damn it!" before stumbling to take flight from the edge of the stone. He ascends quickly, nearly crashing into another Kin mid-flight as he flies straight to the opening on the far wall that leads outside.

As Enyll leaves, I see Frope's muzzle curl into a devious little smile. On second thought, I think she and I will get along just fine.

55. Bedtime Stories

"So, do you think I'll be able to return to the Farlands in time?"

Flickering light from the fires of the aerie shines around me and illuminates Kuro against the darkened interior of our den. We parted ways with Frope after our meeting on the gathering stone as Kuky wanted to spend one last day with Frope before she came to live with me and Kuro. As for us, we decided to spend the night in the aerie instead of flying all the way back to Kuro's den in the lower valley. After everything that happened today, we were both exhausted.

"Well, that depends on you, and how fast you learn to hunt." Kuro settles into one of the bedding piles that were left behind by the last group that stayed here. "I wouldn't want you to fly all the way back to the Farlands only to find you didn't train enough to catch prey."

That's certainly a concern. Uma told me it won't be long before the crossing to the Farlands becomes impassable for the season. If I fly home and discover I'm no good at hunting prey, I won't be able to return to Felra. I'm as good as dead. But at the same time, if I spend too much time training, I could be *stuck* in Felra until next spring. As the border dispute with Melicola continues, who knows how much things could change in my absence?

I sigh and settle onto my bed of dried foliage, moss, and feathers. “I have to learn as quickly as possible. Each day I spend in Felra is another day of anguish for everyone I know back home.”

“I understand,” Kuro answers softly. “I’ll teach you only what you need to know to hunt in the Farlands. Prey is much easier to catch there, so there’s less I have to teach you.”

“So, you’re saying I’ll have plenty of time to make it back?”

“I think you will.”

Kuro smiles, and I return the gesture. At least one of us is feeling optimistic.

I yawn and settle my head down in front of me while Kuro works to preen her wings. I stare at the rocky walls of the den, focusing on nothing in particular, allowing my mind to wander. To process the enormity of everything I’ve accomplished to make it this far.

Sunday morning at the breakfast table seems like a lifetime ago. When I scrambled onto that train out of the palace it was early afternoon, right after lunchtime. Now, late on Thursday night, I’m at the heart of Lathan society, fully accepted as one of their own. Who else in all of history has ever had a more consequential sequence of days than I just have?

Gee, I’m so lucky.

Why me? Why did it have to be Princess Asha, the second most important animal in the Kingdom that gets turned into a Dragon? Why couldn't it have been Calypso, the gallant knight with a heart of gold who excels in battle? I can only imagine how amazing he'd be as a Lathan! I'm just the spoiled, unlikable Princess whose only job was to live long enough to succeed her mother, and I couldn't even do that.

"Asha," down feathers fall like snowflakes from Kuro's muzzle as she pulls her head back from her wing. "Do Farlanders tell stories to each other?"

"Of course we do," I raise my neck, welcoming the chance to distract myself from my turbulent thoughts. "We tell stories all the time, in lots of different ways."

Kuro chitters, "I knew you had to. The way you told your story about the airship-prey was so exciting! I bet you've heard countless wonderful stories in the Farlands."

"Well..." I trail off. "There's one in particular I've been thinking about a lot lately."

"Really!?" Light gleams off of Kuro's eyes from the fires outside. "I'd love to hear it! Nobody has ever heard a story from the Farlands!"

"It's not a happy story," I warn, sitting up to stretch my wings. "It's a bedtime story we tell our kits, one that's supposed to teach a lesson. Is that alright?"

Normally, I don't think I'd share a story like this. Children's fairy tales are always a little bit cruel, and this one is no exception. I'd much rather tell something positive, but this story in particular is eerily similar to the insane situation I now find myself in. If Kuro wants to hear a story, then this is the one I'd like to tell her.

Kuro blinks. "A bedtime story?"

I stare at her a moment, trying to figure out what she's asking before I remember she doesn't know what a 'bed' is. "Right, right," I say. "You wouldn't know that. It's a story that's told at night when our kits are falling asleep."

"Oh, like a den story?"

"Yeah, I think it's something like that," I grin, humbled that there's still so much I have to learn about Lathan culture.

Kuro stretches her wings wide to her sides before pulling them in back with a yawn. "Well, I'm almost ready to fall asleep, so I think I'm a candidate for one of your '*bedtime*' stories."

"Alright then," I chuckle, imaging Kuro as a tiny little fledgling, staring up at me with curious eyes as I tell her a riveting story from the Farlands. "This is a bedtime story my mother used to read to me when I was young. It's called,"

The narrative has been illicitly obtained; should you discover it on Amazon, report the violation.

Felicia The Squirrel

Once upon a time, there lived a little Ringtail named Felicia,

Always outside playing, sometimes in great peril,

Felicia loved the outdoors, but cared little for ferals.

Felicia hated the squirrels that lived in her yard,

“Miserable pests!” she claimed while watching,

Throwing sticks and stones, delighting when they ran,

Offering them food, only to pull back her hand.

Then one day, a vengeful spirit saw Felicia,

“Petulant girl! You’ll regret what you’ve done!”

With a snap of his paws, a spell was cast,

And poor Felicia looked at herself aghast.

Diminutive in size and fluffy in texture,

A short, bushy tail, now her closest companion,

Felicia cried, “But, I can’t be a squirrel!”

The spirit cackled, “Then you should’ve been kind to ferals!”

Felicia ran to the squirrels she once teased,

“Please! I don’t know how to be a squirrel!”

But unlike Felicia, the squirrels did not groan,

They happily took her in as one of their own.

Felicia the Ringtail was never seen again,

So think of poor Felicia the next time you see a Squirrel,

Don’t you believe you’ll be kind to ferals?

“...And, that’s the story,” I finish up, folding my wings to back to my sides.

To my surprise, Kuro’s eyes have gone wide as discs in a mix of amazement and shock. “Asha...” her voice wavers. “This story, did it... did it really happen?”

“You know...” I smile and down at still unfamiliar talons. “If you had asked me that question before I became a Lithan, I would’ve said, ‘*don’t be ridiculous*’. The tales we tell our kits are supposed to be fantastical, *made-up* adventures. But after everything that’s happened to me these past few days... I don't know. Sometimes I feel like I’m Felicia, and becoming a Lithan was penance for something I did wrong.”

I don’t know who wrote *Felicia The Squirrel*, or how old the story truly is. But the similarities to my own situation are too coincidental to ignore. To be clear, I’ve never done anything genuinely awful like throw rocks at the local wildlife. But it sure does feel like I’m the victim of some kind of grand punishment, and I’ve simply yet to met the vengeful spirit who caused me all this grief.

Could Felicia’s story be a cautionary tale based on a real event, something that was mistaken for fiction and passed down through the generations? Most of our knowledge of ancient Ellyntide was lost during the Nortanian occupation two centuries ago. We know very little about the history of the serpentine diamond— who forged it, when it was forged, or how it was forged are all questions that time forgot the answers to. But the shimmering light I saw when I transformed was downright *magical*. Could such wonders have been possible in ancient times when the ring was forged?

Kuro sighs and shakes her head. “Maybe that story is real, maybe it isn’t. But as long as you don’t give up,” her muzzle curls into a soft smile. “I doubt the story of Asha will end like Felicia’s.”

Warmed by Kuro’s gentle encouragement, my anxiety dissolves. “I sure hope you’re right.”

That night, after we laid our heads to rest, I dreamt of Calypso.

Long strands of grass passed by our waists as we walked side by side through a vast, open field on a warm summer day. Calypso was wearing his dress uniform, sword at the ready, while I adorned an evening dress trimmed with lilac lace, the one made to signify my title as heir to the throne. I was a Lemur again, and for all the moon it felt like I had never turned into that cursed beast of a feral.

And yet, somehow, I still possessed the memory of Felra. Of transforming, of being rescued by Kuro, and of joining the Snowfell Flock. I wanted to share the tales of my grand adventure with Calypso, so I tapped my tail against his shoulder.

That goofy grin of his. As wide as I'd ever seen it.

I tried to speak, but something caught my eye; a shimmer of iridescent light at the edge of my vision. I turned to see what it was, but all I saw was an endless sea of tallgrass wafting gently in the breeze. When I turned back, Calypso was no longer standing there. He had vanished without a trace.

Then, I woke up.

Back in our den at White Mountain, Kuro's scent is stale. Through the haze of fizzled sleep I recognize she likely left to go on a late-night hunt. We were so busy after the gathering concluded that we didn't stop to partake in some of the communal prey. I suppose that's alright. Knowing Kuro, she'll save me some scraps for the morning. Keeping my eyes closed, I shift into a more comfortable position and wait for sleep to return.

...

That was an awfully weird dream I just experienced, wasn't it? It felt strangely lucid, more like a distant memory than a wayward dream. And for the first time since I left the hollow, I had a dream with Calypso that wasn't a terrible nightmare. I felt... genuinely comforted, standing side-by-side with him again. Like he was still protecting me from afar.

...What a senseless response. Calypso is *dead*. How could I be so naive as to feel reassured by a mere dream? Agitated with myself, I shift until I find another spot in the bedding and wait for sleep once more.

...

Somewhere nearby, feathers shift. Feathers that are not my own.

I sniff the late-night air, but the only fresh scent is my own. I open my eyes and find that a shadow is being cast in front of me. Thoroughly confused, I whirl myself around. Standing in the entrance of the den is a red bird dappled in glowing light.

That bird.

“Good evening, Princess. I hope this isn't an inconvenient time for a conversation.”

56. Strange Denfellows

“You...!” I hiss, jumping to my talons . ”Fweghing bird!!”

“Unfortunately, this was the only time—“

My jaws snap in the place where the bird should be. Expecting a warm gush of blood to follow, I instead come up with a mouthful of empty air. After a heartbeat of confusion, a throat is cleared behind me. I cast about to find the bird standing in the bedding I was sleeping on just a moment ago.

As if nothing unusual had occurred, it continues, “...This was the only time I could contact you with discretion. I suspect from this point forward, you will be around Kin frequently. I’m afraid our conversation can not wait.”

I stand there panting, wings half open, waiting for my adrenaline to subside and my rationality to return. Allowing my instincts to react for me, I couldn’t stop to consider what I was seeing before me: Yes, it’s that damn bird I saw when I first landed in Felra. The one that led me on a crazy chase through the forest that ended in a confrontation that nearly killed me. But here it is again, talking to me in my den at White Mountain.

And it’s acting quite cordial. He continues after I fail to reply, “Perhaps I should introduce myself. My name is Gust.”

“Gust...?” I growl, still overcome with feral emotion. Whatever he is, it seems futile to try and attack him. “That sounds like—“

“An Avian’s name?” his tail feathers quirk. “In a past life, perhaps. Perhaps not. The name of a creature who doesn’t exist is of little consequence.”

Avians typically name themselves after things found in the sky, like weather phenomena and the names of prophets. But, “A creature who doesn’t exist?” My eyes narrow. “What’s that supposed to mean? And how do you know who I am?”

“You will find no other birds on Jade like me,” he explains. “I am one of a kind, a being that exists only when necessary. If you could allow me to be curt — I know who you are because I am a liaison of the deities.”

“The *deities*?!” My muzzle drops, and my heart quickens. “You’re a holy being?!”

He grins. “In a manner of speaking, yes.”

I stumble backward in shock. By the Goddess! I knew this bird was weird, but I didn’t think he was *divine*!! My mind is overwhelmed, contemplating the ramifications of this. I always believed my first encounter with a divine being would be with Etain once I became Monarch, not some glowing little bird! But if Gust was sent here by the deities of all people, that must mean...

“You’re... you’re here because I turned into a Lathan, aren’t you?”

“Well...” he ruffles and runs his beak over his chest. “I’m afraid I’m just as clueless as to why this incredible change occurred to you, Princess.”

“Really?” My head tilts. “But didn’t you say you were divine?”

“I am. But, let’s just say that my... erm, *rank*, is quite low. I am not omnipotent, nor am I privy to the conversations of the deities.”

I examine his tiny body closely. I can tell there’s much more to his story. “...Go on.”

Hopping down from my bedding, he trots across the ground and explains, “As you know, the deities are strictly forbidden by Azurrel from interfering on Jade. It is the foundation of their existence to influence from afar, never to interfere directly. However, from time to time, events transpire which require... a *nudge* in a certain direction. That is when I’m called upon.”

Interference? On Jade? “And, this is allowed?”

“Within reason.”

So, the deities are allowed to interfere in exceptional circumstances. By the Goddess, what a revelation! It feels like every tenant I've ever been taught in church is being deconstructed before my very eyes. But... "Why, what for? Why would they need to 'nudge' things a certain way?"

"I'm not told why situations must be influenced, I am simply the vessel to carry out their wishes."

"Wait a second..." I say, reminded of a certain sordid encounter involving a bird and a chase through the forest. "Back at Archer's Landing. Was that...?"

"Princess," he warbles with feint hesitation. "Our encounter at Archer's Landing — I should apologize for being duplicitous. It was necessary our interactions began the way they did."

"*Necessary?*" I growl. "Your little stunt nearly led me to my grave at the fangs of an angry Redaga!"

"Tell me, Princess. Now that you understand how the Snowfell Flock views outsiders, what do you believe would have occurred if you hadn't happened across a storm of Kin by chance? If it hadn't been necessary for Kuro and Enyll to save your life?"

If Kuro and Enyll hadn't saved me...?

Well, as I now know, Kuro would still be quite curious about my claim to being a Farlander no matter how we met. But if Gust hadn't led me to the Redaga, I probably would have stayed in the field and tried to investigate the Litan scents I smelled from the air. I don't know if I would have come across Kuro that day, and I'm not even sure I would have seen the Beatrix approaching the continent. Who knows how the events of that day would have played out if I hadn't been there to scare it away?

Truthfully, the only reason Kuro and Enyll even interacted with me was because they saved my life, and Kuro wanted to ensure I wasn't hurt after the fight. And even then, she got terribly upset when I tried to convince her I was a Farlander.

I can still remember how... *frightening* she looked at that moment. It makes me uncomfortable to even think of her being upset at me. I only want to know the sweet and accommodating Kuro I've felt safe around since then.

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But even after Kuro realized I was telling the truth, getting the rest of the flock to treat me with respect was a fight. I owe so much to Fra and Frida for what they did to help me. Heck, I owe a debt of gratitude to Enyll, even if it's true that Fra had to *'force'* him to vie for me. So many things had to happen in my favor to get this far. So many things that...

I glance at Gust, still waiting patiently for a response. Then, it all falls into place.

He led me to the Redaga on purpose! The whole thing... getting attacked by the Redaga, having to be saved by a storm of Kin, the timely appearance of the Beatrix... it was

orchestrated so I would have a chance to prove myself before the flock! And it totally worked! Here I am: Asha, Daughter-Of-Kelani, and Kin-Of-Keuvra!

“Ah,” Gust smiles. “I see you’re beginning to make sense of what happened.”

You’re damn right I am, magic bird! But it wasn’t Gust who decided to lead me to the Redaga. He was ordered by one of the deities, one who was methodical in ensuring I would be discovered and have my chance to earn the trust of the Lithans. “...Who was it?” I ask. “Which one sent you?”

He shakes his head. “That information is not mine to share, I’m afraid.”

Drats. I might better understand their motives if I knew which deity it was. Etain and Keuvra won’t talk to me for some reason, so it probably wasn’t one of them. But if not them, then who? Why would one of the other species’ deities take an interest in me? Why did they want me to join the flock? And how does all this tie into the attack in the weald and my transformation into a Lithan?

“Princess,” Gust speaks over my racing thoughts. “I hope it’s clear now what my purpose is and why this event occurred. It appears you needed some help to begin your admittance into the flock.”

What?! Like I’m going to admit I couldn’t have done it alone! "Yeah, well!" I fold my wings neatly and rub my muzzle into my chest. "I would have found another way to get them to accept me."

The bird trills a hearty laugh. “Your naivete is surpassed only by your dogged determination, Princess.”

I roll my eyes and settle against the ground, feeling comfortable enough to relax my guard. “So, why did you appear to me tonight? I can’t imagine you showed up to laugh at my stubbornness.”

“I haven’t,” he says reassuringly, settling onto the ground to match me as a ball of fluff. “I know our first encounter was not conducive to building trust, but I suspect this won’t be the last time we interact with each other. So, should you see me again, please follow my lead.”

“Alright,” I say.

His little face turns serious. “But most importantly, I must reiterate the necessity for discretion. Please do not, under any circumstances, reveal my existence to anyone else.”

My body stiffens. “Anycircumstance?”

“*Any* circumstance,” he echoes.

“W-What if I already mentioned you to Kuro? While we were flying through the Great Valley?” Hey, please don’t get upset at me for that! I had no idea!

The bird releases a sigh. “Yes, well. Unfortunately, I couldn’t contact you until now. Thankfully, it appears Kuro forgot to ask her grandmother about me.”

Oh, yeah! I was so caught up in everything else that happened in the aerie that I completely forgot she was going to talk to an elder about Gust. Thank the Goddess, she didn’t! But Kuro is so kind, it wouldn’t surprise me if she apologized about forgetting tomorrow morning, then offered to ask Meldi about it. “And what should I do if she asks about it later?”

“I suspect if you tell her you no longer care about it, she’ll soon forget the event ever occurred.”

Really? “Mmh, alright.” I’m not so sure she’d drop the subject of a strange glowing bird appearing at the same time as a peculiar Lithan claiming to be a Farlander, especially with how enamored she is by the Farlands. But Gust’s the divine one here, so I guess I have no choice but to take his word for it.

He dips his dainty little head. “I appreciate your cooperation. I have been able to carry out my duties over the years with very few incidents, and I’d prefer to keep it that way.”

“Over the years?” I inquire, tilting my head forward. “Just how long have you been in service to the deities?” I should try to learn as much as possible from Gust while I have the chance. Even for a Monarch, it’s not every day you get to have a conversation with a holy being.

“Well, let’s just say I am intimately familiar with your family, the Richelieus, and many others.”

My heart quickens. “...My mother?”

“I’m afraid I’ve not had the pleasure of a face-to-face conversation with Her Majesty. Your grandmother, however, was quite amicable as Princess.”

Beatrix... despite what most animals seem to think, I know very little about my grandmother. The wound from her passing was still fresh when I was young, so mom never talked about her much. And as the years passed, I never took it upon myself to learn more than what the heir to the throne would need to know about the last reigning Monarch. To mention her name in the presence of mom was almost considered taboo.

Gosh, I’ve barely thought about mom all day. I wonder how she’s doing right now? I wonder how everybody back home is doing? “Um... could I ask you a favor?”

His beak turns crooked, and his face becomes stern. “Well, that depends on what you’d like to ask.”

“I won’t ask you to turn me back to normal or to tell me why I became a Lithan. I know you wouldn’t do those things, even if you could. But ever since this happened, I’ve been... um...” I lock up, feeling the negative emotions coursing through me again.

“Take your time,” he says softly. Even though he’s a tiny little bird, I can still see the sympathy painted across his face.

I nod and give myself a moment before continuing, “Well, I haven’t been doing very well. I’m just... worried sick about everyone back home. If it isn’t too much to ask, could you please tell me—”

“Hey, Asha!”

My voice seizes, hearing someone else behind me. I twist around to see Kuro standing at the den’s entrance with prey in her mouth. Upon seeing my face, her expression drops. “Whoa! Are you alright, Asha?”

“Y-yeah, I was just...” I frantically try to devise an excuse. She can’t know what I was doing! I flick my head around and find that Gust has disappeared without a trace. “Well, um. I dreamt about Calypso, the Lemur who saved my life when I was attacked. It was...”

“Asha...” She drops the prey to the ground and steps forward with a worried expression. “You don’t have to tell me about the dream if it’s painful, alright?”

I nod silently and look away. I won’t push this conversation any further if she won’t.

After Kuro examines me closely for a moment, her expression evens out. “Alright, then. I was restless and couldn’t sleep, so I flew out for a late-night hunt. Would you like some prey?”

Kuro shares her prey, and we settle for the night once more. Despite how sleepy I am, my thoughts keep me awake for some time longer, too busy contemplating the meaning behind Gust’s appearance. What does it signify that a deity had to interfere on Jade just for me? Why did they want me to have a chance to earn the flock’s trust? And why did they choose to do that instead of helping me return to normal?

And what a strange creature Gust is! He claims he’s not omnipotent, but his knowledge of what I’ve been doing the past day would indicate otherwise. He knew I mentioned him to Kuro and that she forgot to ask Meldi about it. If he really isn’t omnipotent, then how did he know? Does that mean he’s just watching me all the time?

...

I lift my head and gaze around the den. Warm, flickering light shines in from the aerie to reveal... Kuro sleeping away peacefully in her bedding.

...What a creep.

I lay my head back down, and eventually, heavy thoughts become too much of a burden. They become disparate, and my body subsides into a deep sleep.

57. Happy Returns

“Well, here it is. Welcome to my den!”

Kuro tilts her wing forward, leading my gaze around the clearing below the busy canopy of a sizeable elderus tree. Similar to the one I found near Archer’s Point, the ground here is well-manicured, with only sparse thickets and young deciduous trees growing no taller than a quarter my height. A talonpath through the underbrush follows into a small, grass-filled depression in the ground that leads to the far end of the clearing where the elderus’ massive trunk lies. Even from our spot at the edge of the clearing, I can smell the stale scent of Kuro and Enyll emanating from the hole in the roots where they sleep at night.

“It’s... nice!” I smile, hazarding a guess. It’s only the second elderus den I’ve ever seen.

“Isn’t it?!” Kuro smirks. We walk side-by-side as we trot down the path toward the tree. “This den has been in my family for generations. It was my mother’s and Meldi’s before her. So, I’m very particular about the way it looks. I forced Enyll to work hard in greenwing and clear out all the new growth. We haven’t had any ambushes since last harvestwing.”

I give her a sidelong glance. “Ambushes? Is that why you remove the underbrush?”

“It’s one of the reasons,” she says. “If it becomes too crowded under one of these old trees, its growth can be stunted.”

I stop in my tracks. “*Stunt* the growth? You mean elderuses can grow *bigger* than this?”

Kuro looks over her wing and blinks. “Elderus...?”

“It’s what Farlanders call this tree species,” I explain. “Though there’s only one other tree like this in the Farlands, and it’s not this big. It happens to grow at my den in Ellyntide.”

“Really! I never knew there were old trees like this in the Farlands.”

“And I never knew our tree could be considered small.”

We both pause, our eyes locked together in morbid fascination. I can’t believe I’m conversing with a Lithan about elderus trees. Didn’t professor Willow give me some advice if I found myself in this implausible situation? Boy, would he be jealous! With the professor’s astonished face in my head, I laugh and bound forward to rejoin Kuro by her side. “There’s still a lot we have to learn from each other, isn’t there?”

“Mmhmm,” she nods. “I’m looking forward to all the stories you have yet to tell me.”

We resume down the path, gingerly stepping over the rotten trunk of a fallen cedar. This den, this clearing, this tree... it will serve as my home during the coming days. Perhaps longer. I once thought I could make it this far in Felra of my own volition if I just... tried hard enough. I was such a fool.

“Is that why you’re doing this for me?” I ask out of the blue.

Her head tilts. “Doing what?”

“Helping me out,” I clarify. “You insisted you introduce me at Flat Rock, and then you leaped at the chance to be my mentor during the gathering. Kuro, we’ve only known each other for a few days...”

“But I’ve never met a Farlander before,” she says, bringing her head close to mine. “You’re right. I loved that little story you told me last night. Asha, you’re just... interesting to be around.”

I stare past her face and into the distance. For some reason, I was expecting a different response from her. But why would I? For as long as I’ve known Kuro, she’s had an insatiable curiosity about the Farlands. Of course she’d want to spend as much time as possible around the first Farlander anyone’s ever met.

“Well, listen,” I clear my throat, forcing myself to meet her face. “I never got the chance to tell this to Calypso, but I really appreciate all you’ve done to help me. The past few days have been life changing, and I never thought I would land in Felra and make such an important friend this quickly. So, thank you.”

I exhale, relieved of that particular weight from my chest. I’ve wanted to confess my friendship since last night, but it never felt like the right time until now.

Kuro stares at me, having trouble locating her voice. “Asha...” she trails off. I’m sure I’d see her cheeks blushing if feathers weren’t in the way. “I... um. Thank you, Asha. I-I don’t know what to say.”

“Thank you is enough,” I smile. I wasn’t expecting anything more than that.

Keeping my gaze forward, we pace the rest of the way to the tree in silence. I don’t want to glance over and risk weirding her out more if she’s feeling uncomfortable. Honestly, was she really not expecting me to thank her? She must be like Sofl; terrible at taking compliments.

“Well,” Kuro breaks the silence as we approach a lithan-sized hole against the roots of the elderus. “This is where we sleep.” She angles a wing inside. The ground lowers into a depression and is covered in a shallow mix of dried foliage, moss, and down feathers.

“It’s just like the tree we slept in the other night,” I observe, stepping forward to get a peek inside.

“Most of our root dens are like this,” Kuro explains. “Enyll doesn’t like having this much fluff in his den, but it’s the way *I* prefer it.”

I chuckle a little to myself. It’s not difficult to imagine Enyll arguing with Kuro over an idiosyncrasy like den bedding. It almost makes me feel bad about him.

“Asha...” Kuro’s voice fizzles, the tone of it unexpectedly turning serious. “Would you...” the words slip from her mouth, and she averts her gaze. Her tail is swaying rapidly through the grass.

“Kuro?” I take a cautious step toward her. What is she trying to ask?

“...It’s nothing.” she exhales sharply. “Forget I asked. I’m going to take a nap. Why don’t you acquaint yourself with the area around the den?”

Um, okay? That was weird. I’ve never seen Kuro act like this before. What was she trying to ask that was so difficult?

I smile all the same. “Alright. There’s some stuff I wanted to do around the tree anyways.” It’s around the middle of the day, so I guess she wanted to take me hunting or show me something else in the area. But truthfully, I’m rather anxious to test a few things and need some time to myself.

Kuro seems relieved, quickly flashing a smile before turning to slip into the comfort of her den. With time to myself secured, I promptly set off and get to work.

After trotting a short distance away from the base of the elderus, I gaze back to view the twisting roots of the tree. I examine them closely and frown, dissatisfied by my work so far. I huff a sigh and trot back to the tree for another pass. It must be perfect if I have to

do it this way! Carefully, I raise my wing above my head and use the claw to score another mark against the bark.

“Asha?”

I whirl around to see Kuro standing at the base of one of the elderus’ more extensive roots, her hackle feathers ragged and unkempt, illuminated by a sunbeam passing through the canopy above. “What are you doing?”

“Oh!” I chirp, taken slightly by surprise. “You’re just in time. It’s not perfect, but I think I’m ready to show my work to someone else.”

I tilt back my head, beckoning Kuro to follow. She tips her wings and marches with me back to my viewing position a few yards from the base of the elderus. “You’ve been busy,” she mumbles, realizing the extent of my work. She shakes her head, trying to knock away lingering sleep, and blinks a few times to get a better look. “What is this?”

“It’s the Goddess language.”

Kuro’s head tilts. “The Goddess language?”

“Do you remember when I told the elders I knew another way to talk to my family, one that didn’t involve speech? This is it.”

Kuro's brow furrows in contemplation. She squints but can't make sense of what I've done. "You marked it like a guiding tree, but there are no guiding trees in the Farlands."

"Well, that's the idea. Us Farlanders have symbols like the ones you leave on the guiding trees. But instead of a few symbols, we have hundreds of them! And when we combine them, they form the words of an entire *written* language."

I've been so caught up in the aftermath of everything that's happened that I completely forgot I could still write a message in the Goddess language. It wasn't until Kuro explained the guiding trees that I remembered, and in that moment, a plan formed in my head.

Kuro stares at me with a curious expression, then back toward the tree. "An entire language with guiding tree symbols..." she trails off. "So, you're going to leave a message for your family and tell them it's you?"

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"I think I can do that, but first, I need your help. When I initially transformed into a Lithan, I thought I could still speak our spoken language. But it turns out that wasn't the case." I still have no idea why Lithans now speak the Goddess language and ascendant animals speak nonsense. It seems I can still write the Goddess language with my claws, but how can I be sure?

Kuro inclines her head. "What do you need me to do?"

"Okay, can you see where I was marking the tree?" I point my wing forward to where I was standing.

"Yup," she says.

"Now, on the tree. Do you see a circle?"

"Yes."

"And, is there a little point inside of it?"

"There is."

"Perfect!" I chirp. "Now, to the right of that symbol. There should be a straight, vertical line," Using my wing, I draw the line in the air. "It makes kind of half-circle to the left of the line, and then to the right is a dot. At the bottom of the vertical line is another line straight to the right."

"Mmm..." she squints and angles her head forward. "...Yes. I can see that."

“Wonderful! Those two symbols spell, ‘*Ah-sha!*’ That’s how you spell my name in the Goddess language!”

What a relief. All that carving was making my claws sore! Of course, just because Kuro and I see the same thing written on the tree doesn’t mean an ascendant animal will, too. What if the same force that caused Lithans to speak the Goddess Language also affected the written language? I don’t think there’s any way to be certain unless an ascendant animal tries to read a message I write. But knowing that Kuro sees the same thing I do gives me the confidence to risk another encounter back home.

“Oh... oh, wow!” Kuro’s face brightens with wonder as she swivels her gaze between me and the tree. With a little hop, she bounds forward and approaches the trunk to examine the words up close. She raises her right wing and traces her claw over the grooves left in the bark. “*Ah-Sha!* I know Farlander guiding tree symbols!”

“Letters,” I smile. “And Farlanders don’t put them on trees, actually.”

“You don’t?” her head tilts. “Then, how will you contact your family? If you can’t carve a message onto a tree, then where else can you do it?”

I smile hesitantly. Try as she might, Kuro can only view the world through the primitive experiences she’s familiar with. To understand my plan once I return to Ellynside, you need to be familiar with the politics of the moon and how the different nations view each other. How can I possibly simplify something so complicated in a way she’ll understand?

“Well,” I say, clearing my throat. “I think my biggest problem is contacting my family without scaring them half to death.”

Kuro nods thoughtfully. “Farlanders are easily terrified.”

“I belong to a powerful family in Elyntide. If I show up at my home den unannounced, my mother will freak out and tell the Farlanders who protect her to kill me. I can’t approach them directly.”

“So, if you can’t get close enough to write a message to your mom, what else can you do?”

I smile a devious, toothy grin. A small part of me has ached to admit this out loud since I changed form. “I’m going to become the scary monster Farlanders think I am. But I won’t be scaring my family or anyone in Ellyntide.”

Without warning, I leap from Kuro and bolt through the underbrush to clamber onto one of the enormous roots of the elderus. When I find myself at the top, I gaze down and declare, “I’ll terrorize our enemies!”

“Your enemies?” Kuro echoes, her eyes wide as discs. “Just who are your enemies?”

“*Nortane*,” I growl, my heart seething with contempt just uttering their name. “Before I transformed, my Kingdom was in a dispute over territory: a floating island, drifting

conspicuously from Nortane's lands into ours. My mother declared the island belonged to us, but Nortane wasn't keen to give it up."

Kuro stares at me a moment before understanding dampens her like a cold drizzle. Her expression turns grave. "Asha..."

"They sent their airship-prey to patrol the skies around the island, so we sent ours in response. Back then, nobody had ordered their airship-prey to land on the island and claim it. To do so would be seen as provocative, an act that could lead to fighting. But that was before I transformed and before a Marten, a Sable, and an Owl from Nortane killed Knight Captain Calypso Durham."

Kuro raises an eye. "You want revenge," she concludes. "Revenge on those who took your friend's life. And now that you're Kin—"

"I want to see my family," I rebuke, bitterness overcoming my voice. "I *have* to see them again. But I'll never get close as long as they believe I'm the monster who killed Princess Asha. But maybe, just maybe, if I appear as an ally against Nortane, they'll reconsider."

It's not enough to write a message somewhere saying I'm the Princess. I have to be there, standing next to what I wrote, or nobody will believe a Lithan did it. But I haven't forgotten the terror festering in the eyes of the Sifaka I encountered on the airfield in Rhl — Anyone who sees me in person will be too overcome with fear to think straight. Instead of appearing in Ellyntide without warning, I first have to rewrite the narrative on who I am and make them believe I'm more than a witless beast.

Silence stretches between us as Kuro processes everything I've said, our eyes locked in a deathly serious stare. Although we come from different worlds, it seems the ideas of territory and revenge are universal. Finally, she asks, "What exactly are you going to do?"

"Farlanders believe Lithans are territorial ferals, and I intend to show them one. I'm going to fly to the disputed island and roost there. If any airship-prey from Ellyntide approach, then I'll leave them alone. But if any from Nortane do... I'll kill them."

"What?!" Kuro retreats a step.

My claws sink deeper into the roots. "I'll shoot down their entire fleet if I have to. Calypso is dead because of Nortane. I don't care how many prey I kill. And as the body count rises, Ellyntide will realize I'm leaving their prey alone. They'll realize I'm taking sides. And that's when I'll compose my message to them: When they're capable of seeing me as more than just a monster."

Kuro shakes her head, and her eyes wander from mine to the underbrush below. "This is... trying to kill airship-prey alone is insane."

"You know I can do it."

"It's too dangerous!"

"I don't care."

Her tail slams against the ground. “Asha, you could die!”

“I’m already *dead* in my family’s eyes!!”

My voice bellows across the clearing, disturbing resting flocks of birds into flight. Kuro looks equally as disturbed, causing conflicting emotions to rake my heart. She isn’t my enemy, that much I know. But why is she questioning my plan? Can’t she see this is the only way I can reunite with my family? She wouldn’t stand in my way, would she!?

Why... why won’t she...?!

I growl, forcibly trying to calm frayed nerves, but it’s no use. I stomp my talons and thrash my head about, but nothing changes. I’m breathing too fast, I’m too on edge, and my restless heart won’t relent. Seething, I force myself to meet Kuro’s gaze. “If I die attacking Nortane, then the only thing that will be lost is a single, helpless Lithan that never even belonged in Felra in the first place.”

“But you’re my *friend*!!

”

Kuro’s face twists in horror, and her emotions can no longer be contained. Time slows as she turns and flees, disappearing around the corner of a root. In a breathless moment, all my anger and rage dissolve into nothing.

It happened again; my emotions took control of me. But this time, it wasn't the instincts of the feral I've become that forced me to react with blind rage. This time it was just me – Asha. I thought Kuro was questioning me, and I thought she was objecting to the validity of my plan to reunite with my family. But I was too upset about Nortane to see what she was really concerned about:

Me. She's upset because she doesn't want her friend to *die!* Regret fills my heart that I could become so enraged at someone so close to me. I have to stop her and apologize!

I tumble from the root and practically crash into the ground below, failing to gain traction on my landing. Heaving frantic breaths, I stumble to my talons and sprint towards the root she disappeared behind.

I'm so stupid,

I'm so stupid,

I'm so fweghing stupid!

As I round the corner, I half expect to see the tips of Kuro's tail feathers disappearing into the forest beyond the den. Instead, her spiced scent fills my nostrils once more. I flare my wings to a halt and find Kuro standing in a bed of flowers a short distance from the bend in the tree, facing away from me. Hearing my frantic approach, she slowly angles her head around. It looks like she could break out crying at any moment.

“Kuro...” I trail off, burdened by grief. How could I do this to her?!

“I know,” she whispers, her sullen expression hanging like a storm cloud. “You don’t have to tell me. Your life is in the Farlands, not here. And it’s none of my business trying to interfere in it.”

Gosh, Kuro.

I shake my head fervently. “Please, don’t blame yourself. It’s my fault.” I take a step towards her but quickly seize up. Just now, I felt an overwhelming urge to comfort her by rubbing my head against hers. But as much as we’re friends, we don’t have *that* sort of closeness with each other. I don’t want to worsen this situation by making her feel even more uncomfortable. I’ve already messed this up enough.

A heavy sigh escapes me. It feels like I can’t do anything right. “I got carried away... I let my anger control me again. I thought you were trying to stand in my way because everyone back home used to do that. I couldn’t fathom that someone would... *care* about me.” the words slip from my mouth, and I avert my eyes. Why am I having such a hard time admitting something so simple?

Kuro watches me silently, her expression unchanging. After a wordless moment, she slowly raises her head from the flowers.

“Kuro,” I sniff. “I’m sorry.”

She paces a few steps toward me, then stops and averts her eyes. A moment later, she looks back and draws a careful breath. “This... isn’t the first time you’ve become this upset?”

I shake my head. “It used to happen more when I was young. With my mentor’s help, I learned how to temper my emotions and recognize when I was losing control. But when I thought about how Calypso died and how Nortane was responsible...” my voice fades as I stare into Kuro’s face. Her expression had softened while I was talking. “Well. These past few days have been difficult, to say the least.”

“I understand what it’s like to get really upset. Like when...” her voice quickly loses strength, and she averts her eyes once more. It seems like she remembered something uncomfortable.

I decide to help her out. “Like when losers like Moth challenge you?”

She loosens a smile. “Yeah, that’s one of them.”

Our feathers relax as the tension between us begins to fade. We have far more in common than either of us realized.

“I think your plan to kill airship-prey is dangerous, but I won’t try to stop you,” Kuro pauses to gaze into the canopy above. Around us, birdsong is beginning to return. “I’m

lucky my grandmother and sister are still on Jade. But if there was some way to see my parents again...”

A foul feeling spreads over my stomach as I realize Kuro’s parents are no longer living. As it turns out, she perfectly understands what I’m going through right now. Arguably, she understands it even better.

Although our situations are similar, we’re not an apples-to-apples comparison – my family, home, and cats are all still in Varecia. I may be dead in their eyes, but I can still hope to someday reunite with them. However awkward a reunion with a Litan may be. But for Kuro, that possibility has been extinguished.

“But, Asha,” she continues, the strength in her voice restored. ”You’ve been welcomed into our flock. We may not be Ellyntide, but if something unexpected happens on your journey to reunite with your family, then... please promise me you won’t sacrifice yourself. Your life can still have meaning here, Asha.”

Something *unexpected*, huh? I stifle a laugh. What an ironic choice of words.

I haven’t thought a lot about what would happen if I couldn’t reunite with my family. Quite frankly, I don’t *want* to think about it. The only thing I want to be focused on now is my training and returning to Ellyntide as quickly as possible.

But...

“Alright,” I promise. “I won’t do anything reckless.”

My family and my commitment to the throne will always be more important than anything here. But I can at least agree not to be irresponsible while defending Ellyntide. If things turn hopeless, if it truly seems like I’ll never return home, then... I’ll think about it. I’ll consider staying in Felra for the rest of my days.

Kuro smiles. Seeing her smile gives me strength. For her, offering my safety is the least I can do.

“Friends?” she asks.

“Friends,” I smile back.

58. My Attonement

“Commander. Her Majesty will see you now.”

As the Ringtail guard pulls the gilded door open, I scrutinize her expression closely. Finch assured me that the Palace Guard respects me, so I suppose it truly is sympathy painted across her face. On the other paw, to face the Queen of Ellyntide after failing to protect her daughter’s life, I suppose even my enemies would show pity.

I step into the dimly lit room, and the door closes with a feather touch behind me. Inside, the curtains are nearly shut, illuminating small sections of the Queen's reading room in disparate beams of morning light. The air is thick with the familiar smells of chamomile – I have recently learned it to be the flower Lemurs use when mourning the dead. Through the darkness, I can hear the fabric of Her Majesty's clothes rustling, though I cannot locate her as my eyes haven't yet adjusted. The only other noise was the sound of my heart racing against my chest.

Suffice it to say I've been dreading this moment. To atone for the greatest failure in my family's storied history serving the Lordanous is a task I alone must face... but face it, I will. With no more time to prepare myself, I brace for the worst and draw a careful breath. "Your Majesty."

"Duncan," a meek voice sounds through the dark as I begin to make out the Queen sitting on a floral print couch in one of her morning wrappers. Chamomile endows the vases surrounding her, and various books are strewn about the area. Her face comes into focus, solid as stone, filled with deep wrinkles and an unkempt ruff. "Please, sit with me."

I approach the couch opposite her and reposition a book so I can sit down. As gently as my legs allow, I sit and sink into the cushion. They're cold, just like the rest of the room. "Your Majesty. I am s—"

"Colonel Durham was the finest knight I've ever known," she speaks over me in a commanding voice, the one she typically reserves for speeches. "He served my daughter with honor and distinction, and the Kingdom is worse off in his absence." I nearly fall backward in surprise, failing to anticipate the Queen bringing up Calypso's passing first. "Please, tell me you are surviving his passing."

I reposition myself so I'm sitting straight up again. After a moment of contemplation on how to respond to this unexpected start, I locate my voice. "Mother and I are in communication with the Durhams. Funeral arrangements are being planned as we speak."

“Good,” she says quickly and relaxes her tail around her legs. “Ariana will know what’s best... but you, Duncan. I asked about *you*.’

“Well...” I trail off, still off-put by the way this conversation has begun. Why is she so concerned about *my* well-being? “Me and Calypso, we talked about this. What would happen if one of us was lost in the line of duty. He loved being a knight, and he willingly accepted the risks. The past few days have been challenging, but... he would have wanted me to continue my work with the crown. So, if you would have me, then I will.”

I wouldn’t say I’m fit for work just yet. The nightmares have been unsettling, to say the least. But my visit to Finch’s flat pulled me back from the precipice. With some more time, I want to continue my work and make Calypso proud.

“I’m pleased to hear,” she says. “I don’t need to tell you how much the situation with Melicola has deteriorated. I’ll be relying on your expertise in the coming days, Duncan.”

My muscles tense. The international situation has indeed become grave, but praise from Her Majesty was the last thing I expected to hear after failing to bring her daughter home safely. I should be on the receiving end of a verbal evisceration right now.

Something is dreadfully wrong with the Queen.

“Your Majesty,” I say, pulling down my waistcoat. If she won’t directly address the matter, then I must. “I appreciate your confidence in me, but... It is misplaced. I promised

to deliver your daughter safely from the weald and failed. I am responsible for the gravest failure in my family's history serving the crown. For this, I am boundlessly repentant and willingly accept any judgment that results from my failure."

Her Majesty stares at me in silence with a face like stone. Slowly, without saying a word, she reaches to take one of the large books from the coffee table. I watch through the dim light as she flips it open and realize it's a photo album. What is she doing?

"You know, Commander," she turns a page and smiles at one of the photos. "Your mother believed she was doing the right thing, ignoring my wishes and sneaking photographers into the palace. At the time, I cursed her for it. But now that Asha's gone..." She closes the album and folds her hands neatly on top of it. The bags under her eyes look sullen. "Duncan, do you know why I chose only to have two children?"

I shake my head slowly. Her decision has become a great source of contention on talk radio over the past few days. I recall that even the late Princess had expressed her frustration about the pressure it put her under.

"It's because the Goddess promised me Asha would be a great Monarch, one of the finest Ellyntide has ever known," her voice becomes frail, as if it had returned to its natural state. "I wanted her to have a sibling so she wouldn't be lonely, but I never thought..." She slides her gaze away from mine and onto a framed illustration of the late Queen Beatrix propped on a nearby side table. History has repeated itself in an unbearably cruel way.

"Etain has forsaken me," she whispers, tightening her grip on the album. "My lifestyle of excess — the clothes I own, the jewelry, the drinking... she warned me it would lead to my downfall. But I refused to listen. I thought I was in control of myself. And as penance, she sent a beast from the Northern Continent to take my daughter away from me. Don't you see, Duncan? There's nothing you could have done to save Asha's life. This was judgment from on high. I'm such a fool..."

I exhale slightly. I'd heard murmurs that the Queen didn't hold me responsible, but I refused to believe I'd be forgiven for such an indefensible failure. As heart-wrenching as it is to see the Queen at the height of her misery, I can't help but feel grateful she spared me of blame.

"You did what you thought was right." It seems inane the Goddess would punish her for the indulgences that other Monarchs have freely enjoyed.

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Her Majesty buries her eyes and frowns. "I thought I could keep it under control, that she was simply reminding me of the illness. But the Goddess seems less forgiving than any of us thought."

Unbeknown to even the late Princess, Her Majesty has been battling the effects of cirrhosis for some time now. It boggles the mind that the Goddess would punish her instead of allowing the illness to take its course, or that she could interfere on Jade with such hostile intent. But the events of the past week give little reason to suspect otherwise.

"Duncan," the Queen's voice turns inquisitive. "Have you had any strange dreams as of late?"

Strange dreams? "Nothing but nightmares, I'm afraid."

She flashes disappointment but quickly corrects herself. “Last week, I had one that felt all but real. I was soaring through the sky, chasing a glowing red bird as it weaved dappled light across the clouds. Eventually, I came upon the bow of the Beatrix, and I found myself aboard the pilot’s deck. I gazed out the windows to search for the strange bird, but instead, I found the Lithan approaching astern, blind rage festering in its eyes. I turned to order the guns fired, and the Lithan exploded in a brilliant cloud of feathers...”

“You sent the Beatrix to the Northern Continent based on a premonition?” Try as I might, I fail to mask the astonishment in my voice. Her Majesty is known to be superstitious to a fault, but to risk so much on the whims of a mere dream is downright negligent!

“I thought it was foolproof, that there was no way a Lithan could break through the armor of the Beatrix. I thought Etain was testing me, as she’s tested other Monarchs. And I thought if I took that cursed monster’s life, my daughter would be returned to me. Duncan, If you had experienced such a lucid dream, one that seemed to foretell the future, wouldn’t you have done the same for Calypso? Wouldn’t you take the risk to bring back a loved one, no matter how unlikely it seemed it would work?”

I ponder her question for a moment before quickly ceasing the effort. I was in such a miserable state before I visited Finch’s flat. If I’d experienced a lucid dream that seemed to present a way to bring back Calypso, then... I would have believed it, too. Unwilling to admit I’d fall to such illogical whims, I puff a sigh and look away.

“Life goes on, Duncan. You learn how to move past the grief; to smile, to laugh, and to love again. But the wound never fully heals. There’s nothing shameful about wanting to do everything to prevent that misery.”

Feeling no urge to continue the line of conversation, we sit in silence for a time. Eventually, Her Majesty places the photo album on the table and begins idly rearranging the Chamomile. “All our attempts to commune with the Goddess have failed,” she says, with a tinge of bitterness rolling off her tongues. This is a revelation to me, though not a surprising one. Doubtlessly, she’s attempted communion in secret many times over the past week. “If Etain has truly forsaken me, then the only thing left is to make my mother and daughter proud.”

Make them proud...?

Hesitantly I ask, “What will you do now?”

“Weatherlight believes she can sic her dogs from Melicola against my Kingdom. She’s WRONG!!” I flinch as a vase is launched from the table, Her Majesty’s anger exploding. She storms to her feet and stamps around the broken porcelain, her tail lashing behind her. Approaching a window, she growls and stops to tear the blinds open. Daylight floods the room, revealing a maleficent side to the Queen I’ve never witnessed before. “You’ve maintained a relationship with the Morthan parliament, correct?”

I writhe in fear as her plan materializes in my head. “I-I have kept on professional terms with them, yes.”

“Good,” she flips around to seek another window. “I want you to tell them we’re not interested in diplomacy.”

What?!

“But, Ma’a—“

“The Goddess has pestered me for peace all my reign!” she shrieks, nearly separating another set of curtains from the wall. “If Etain’s turned her back on me, then she’ll have war!”

My stomach drops. How can I be hearing these words spoken? Her Majesty has been steadfast and conservative in her approach to foreign policy her entire reign. Even after her mother’s assassination, she made a concerted effort to attempt diplomacy before a war with Sarlain was inevitable. This proclamation heralds an unsettling new direction in her reign.

It all began two days ago. Mortha, the nation of Rabbits, announced their intention to send a delegation to Varecia and help calm tensions over the disputed island drifting into Ellyntide airspace. Weatherlight, President of the Confederation of Nortane and Melicola, had sent airships to moor on the disputed territory as retaliation for the Beatrix violating their airspace. They did so, announcing they would defend their sovereign territory with force. Most animals, myself included, believed Her Majesty would back down given her traditionally conservative slant and the anguish she’s faced these past few days.

But I was wrong, frighteningly wrong. In the absence of the Princess and the Goddess, Kelani has taken leave of her senses. Surely she must understand that to oppose the Confederation, a nation much bigger than Ellyntide, would be suicide. And yet, to order me to send away our only lifeline at preventing a national catastrophe...

I swallow hard. “Your Majesty. To oppose the Confederacy—“

“I don’t care,” she growls, baring teeth. “Crow Wing was operating in the middle of Ellyntide with advanced communication equipment. They were performing intelligence gathering, noting the flight patterns of military vessels traversing between Varecia and Rhl. Don’t you see? They’re preparing for an invasion!”

“But—“

“Contact Mortha and tell them we’re not interested! That’s an *ORDER*, Commander!”

The ferocity of her voice stabs like a rapier, pushing me back into my seat. It’s taken a while to get here, but I’m finally on the receiving end of the verbal assault I expected.

The identity of the animals found in the weald has yet to be definitively proven. Most believe they were members of Crow Wing, Nortane’s state intelligence organization. But positive identification has remained elusive, complicated by the dismembered state the Lithan left them in. A Marten, a Sable, and an Owl... with company like that, it’s no wonder most animals assume they’re Crow Wing. But the communication equipment they found isn’t powerful enough to reach off-continent, let alone the Confederation. The riddle of the weald doesn’t add up, yet Kelani is throwing caution to the wind and assuming dangerous conclusions. She’s committed to using their bodies as a pretext for war.

But what can I do? I’m just following orders, right? I dip my head to Kelani and tell her, “As you wish, Your Majesty.”

For starters, I could lie. So, I did.

I'm not going to contact Mortha. A war against the Confederation is suicide. If Kelani won't listen to me, then there's but one animal alive who stands a chance at getting through to her and preventing this catastrophe. I must seek her out at once.

The Queen examines me for a moment. She tightens her wrapper, turns away and murmurs, "Good," before skulking across the room, her tail swaying behind her thoughtfully. "My mother and daughter are watching from the temple," she announces, referencing the holy realm Lemurs ascend to in the afterlife. "I will show them how strong our Kingdom is. With or without the Goddess."

Ice forms in my stomach. To hear a Monarch speak so openly about abandoning the Goddess is one of the most chilling things I've ever heard.

"I should be on my way," I say, rising to my feet. So much for my protracted return to service. "I will need some time to craft a response to the Morthans." Truthfully, there's little time to spare. To enlist the one person who can convince Kelani will be... difficult. I watch the Queen for a response, but she's staring out a window with a stoic expression. Feeling I have nothing more to add, I turn to leave.

"I would enshrine Calypso as a hero if I could."

I whip around to see Kelani continuing her silent vigil. Why would she mention that now, of all times...?

...

I turn and pass through the door to the hallway, closing it shut as gently as possible.

59. Playing With Matches

All good Dragons know it's crucial to hold their fire close to their chest. But what should happen if you do not? Brothers and Sisters, listen now to the cautionary tale of Raku, the foolhardy Kin who became a warning to us all.

Long ago lived a Dragon named Raku, Son-Of-Ebou. From a young age, Raku's flame was restless. Always used to hunt, always at the ready to impress his flock mates. But despite his skill, Raku cared little about using his fire responsibly. 'Keuvra's edict does not matter to me,' he thought. 'Even a fool must acknowledge my skill, for not once have I caused a runaway burn.'

One day, the flock's elders approached Raku with troubled faces. 'Reckless featherbrain!' they scolded. 'Why do you so heedlessly disgrace Keuvra's edict?'

'Because I am strong,' answered Raku. 'From the concealed dens of Litsha to the Gryhawks that soar above, no prey is safe from my scorching flames. Are the mothers not well fed in harvestwing? Or the fledges that frolic in greenwing's creche?'

'The creche will burn if you do not cease,' warned the elders. 'The power of fire must be respected!' But Raku's ears were full. Foolish Raku continued to use his fire with reckless abandon.

One day at Relno's Leap, Raku was hunting Spikehorn. He stood at the wood's edge, surveying a great herd of prey. 'This shall be easy,' he thought. 'I'll use my fire to block their escape, as I have always done. And th—'

"Hey, Kuro!!"

The soot-plumaged drakaina seizes up. "Huh?" she stammers, her head still caught in the engaging act of storytelling. Evening sunlight shimmers through towering pillars of rock behind her, illuminating the hackle feathers of her neck in a divine-looking glow. Gazing down from the rock she's perched upon, she tilts her head and asks, "What is it, Frope?"

Sitting to my left, Frope droops her wings in disappointment. "That's not how the story goes!"

A few days have passed since Frope joined Kuro and me for training. After some initial sessions in the forest around her den, she flew us to Tall Spires, a small settlement nestled high atop the mountain ridges lining the Great Valley. Here, the land is barren and rocky, almost devoid of all vegetation save for the occasional pocket of alpine shrubs growing sparsely between cracks in the stone. A few Kin make their dens in the caves here, but this area is primarily known among the flock as a training ground for their fire. With nothing significant that can catch on fire, it's the perfect place to practice.

According to Frope, fledges don't normally train up here; proficiency with fire is not a requirement to come of age. But after I reminded Kuro I attempted to use my fire against the Redaga in self-defense, she became noticeably concerned and insisted we take a trip here. It seemed like a fair proposition – thanks to my inexperience, I may have burned Owens Island to the ground. But evidently, there's more to our fire than just using it safely. After we flew in a few minutes ago, Kuro began by telling us a well-known story that fledges are told. That is until Frope interrupted her.

Caught off guard, Kuro's tail quirks. "I'm telling the story wrong?" Instead of being agitated, there's a hint of amusement in her voice. "Which part am I getting wrong, exactly?"

Frope flicks her eyes at me and sighs.

"First of all, Raku wasn't hunting spikehorn. He was hunting kerin. If he were hunting spikehorn, he wouldn't have needed to use his fire. Secondly, why would he stand at the edge of the field and not on the cliffs above? Why do you think that place is called 'Relno's Leap,' huh?"

Kuro doesn't seem the least bit phased and replies confidently, "That's the version of the story I was taught. And besides, the finer details aren't important. It's the ending that matters."

Frope rolls her eyes. "You learned a *weird* version, Kuro."

Gosh, Frope sure is a sassy girl! And for her part, Kuro seems to be taking her backtalk in stride. She flashes a smile at her, if only for a moment. “Then we will continue with my ‘weird’ version. Asha, listen carefully. This part is important.”

From there, Kuro finishes telling the narrative without interruption. Raku takes to the sky and hunts the spikehorn like he’d done many times before. But as soon as he uses his fire to trap his prey, a great wind blows, pushing the flames off-course. They sail into a grove of trees, and a forest fire erupts.

Keuvra appears before Raku, scolding him for ignoring his edict. Raku pleads with Keuvra to show mercy, but it’s no use. Raku is banished from Jade and never seen again — divine punishment for disrespecting his wishes.

It’s an interesting story, though I’m unsure how I feel about it. On the one hand, Gust revealed to me that the deities can interfere on Jade in certain circumstances. Keuvra appearing out of the blue no longer seems as extraordinary as I thought. But on the other hand... he *kills* Raku! *Poof!* Gone! The deities are supposed to guide their species, not execute them!

Of course, this story could just be fiction — A tale written to dissuade Kin from using their fire recklessly. I suppose it doesn’t need to be true as long as it accomplishes that.

Kuro continues after finishing the story. “Keuvra’s edict allows us to use our fire, but only sparingly. Fire is extremely dangerous — a single stray ember can cause entire forests to burn, displacing an already scarce population of prey. You must never use your fire while hunting, no matter how tempting it may be. And fire may only be used in self-defense as a last resort to save your life.”

Kuro's eyes settle on me. At least I wasn't breaking any rules when I fought the Redaga. Not that it would've mattered because my fire completely fizzled when I tried to use it.

Mental Note: Remember to ask her why it didn't work.

"Asha, you have already resorted to using your fire, once in self-defense, once as a threat, and once out of curiosity. Hopefully, you will discover a way to turn back into a Lemur. But until that day arrives, you must know how to use fire safely and responsibly!"

From there, Kuro trains Frope and I in the practical uses of fire: Igniting ember root fires, illuminating dark spaces, and snow removal. Lighting ember root fires is easy for both of us, as it only involves controlling your fire to create a small, little burp of flame. For some real-world experience, Kuro has us practice by igniting the shrubs that grow between the cracks in the stone. I'll be able to keep myself warm when I return to Ellyntide!

After some gentle encouragement to pay attention, Frope can produce the small, controlled flash of flame necessary to illuminate dark spaces. But I find it much more bothersome, and for a while, I'm only able to produce wild streams of flame with little control over their size. I suppose Frope has the advantage over me, having lived her entire life thus far as a Lithan.

Even though we're friends, Kuro is unrelenting as a teacher. When I perform a technique wrong, she's right there with a stern wing, knowing precisely what I did wrong. It's clear she's taught these lessons to countless Kin before me, and I start to understand why she took Frope's storytelling criticisms in stride: She really knows what the fwegh she's talking about!

It reminds me of the training sessions Calypso used to give me. I'm sure I'm in good hand—er, *talons*, under Kuro's wing.

Eventually, I can produce a smooth (and small!) flash of fire from my mouth. When I return home, I'll be able to navigate by the cover of the night! With the first two techniques out of the way, there's only one left: Clearing snow.

It's not surprising to learn that Felra becomes buried in snow during winter. Kuro told me that even the entrance to White Mountain — a hole large enough for multiple Kin to fly through — can become completely sealed by avalanches and blizzards. Knowing how to clear snow is a life-saving skill for a Lithan! Though anyone can produce a large blast of fire, to do so with control takes skill.

Kuro explains as we walk to another peak at Tall Spires. "A long, long time ago, Kin were not taught how to control their fire. They believed it was '*weak*' to tame the mighty power of flame. But as prey decreased and winters worsened, they were forced to change."

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I nod thoughtfully, pondering just long ago that was. "Your lessons about fire have been refined for generations. It's no wonder there's so much to learn."

"That's exactly right," Kuro says. "Oh! And be sure to give yourself a full preen if you know you'll be clearing snow. Your body is far less likely to scorch with fresh feathers."

“Really!?” How could that be?

“Asha, I’m certain you wouldn’t know this, but your secretions help dispel flames from your body.”

Secretions...?

“Oh!” I chirp. “You mean the stuff that comes out of the oily nipple, right?”

Kuro and Frope stop walking.

Like a rickety wooden gate caught in a cool autumn breeze, the Kin slowly crane their necks around towards me. Their faces are painted with a kaleidoscope of contrasting emotions: Shock, amusement, and morbid curiosity.

Slowly, Kuro ratchets her muzzle open. “...The *what?*”

“Erk...” I stagger backward, realizing the grave error I’ve committed. I accidentally mentioned that dumb name I invented when I discovered how to preen myself! I let my guard down – I should *never* share the stuff that goes on inside my head!

“Asha...” Frope grins like a madwoman, tilting her head in close to mine. “What did you just call it?”

“That’s...” They stare at me, waiting patiently for a response. Argh, they aren’t going to allow me to get away without an explanation, are they? I clear my throat, wishing I could sink into the ground below me. “It’s, um. The name I invented. When I first saw it. I didn’t know what else to call it, okay?!”

“That is...” Kuro trails off, trying to withhold a laugh. She averts her gaze and lightly stifles a chitter before it can get out of control. “That is an interesting name for it, Asha.”

“Oh yeah?!” I puff my chest feathers, trying to reassert my dignity. “Then what do *you* guys call it, huh?”

Frope shrugs her wings. “I always called it the drip nip.”

...

...

...

Once we finish rolling around on the ground laughing (I still don't know what it's *actually* called...) we arrive at the peak Kuro was initially leading us to. She brings us to a cliff overlooking a steep rock wall that curves inward towards a large crevice that scales straight up to the top of the peak. Even as a Lithan, it's awe-inspiring.

"Keuvra's Scarp," Kuro announces, angling her wing towards the crevice. "When the flock decided to train the accuracy of their fire, they realized there was no safe place to do so. And so, Keuvra appeared at Tall Spires, tearing the mountain asunder with his mighty claws."

Well! That sure explains why this formation didn't look natural. Like most of the architecture in Felra, Keuvra had a talon in creating it.

Kuro continues, "From here, Kin launch their fire over the precipice and into a cave that lies in the center of the crevice. If you skillfully aim your fire with the right intensity, it will disappear into the mountain. If you miss or the shot is too strong, it will spread out over the rocks. Understood?"

Frope and I nod in understanding. It seems simple enough. Being able to aim your fire accurately is essential, of course. But as I learned at Owens Island, it's just as essential to control the flame's intensity. After a brief demonstration of the technique by Kuro — which she performs flawlessly — Frope was the first to try. The first few times, she's able to get her fire in roughly the right spot but can't aim it perfectly and with the right intensity. But after a quick lesson from Kuro about controlling her flame in large bursts, the very next blast of fire sails cleanly over the precipice and disappears without a trace into the mountain.

"Heh-heh!!" she smiles, ruffling her wings in satisfaction. "Finally, mom will allow me to melt the snow around our den!"

Then, it was my turn. And for my part, I do... poorly!

While I can aim my fire close the hole in the rock, it's not close enough for any of it to enter. Kuro pulls me aside for a brief talk, explaining some pointers about controlling my neck muscles when launching fire. Then after a brief moment to collect my thoughts, I roll my neck back and tickle fire muscle to unleash another fiery blast!

Nothing happens.

I try to tickle it again, and still, nothing occurs. A familiar feeling of inadequacy douses me like cold water.

"Have you lost your fire?" Kuro asks, sitting a short distance away next to Frope.

"Yeah," I say. "This is what happened when I tried to use it against the Redaga!"

Kuro steps forward a few paces to examine me up close. "Well, you are quite small," she muses, staring down at me. "Asha, it seems you don't produce fire the same way most Kin do."

"I don't?"

She shakes her head. “A Kin’s fire is sustained by the prey they eat. For most Dragons, as long as they’re well-fed, they’ll never have to worry about losing their flames. But for some, their bodies can only produce a small amount. It seems you’re one of the unlucky ones.”

“Oh,” I scoff, mildly annoyed. “As if there weren’t enough things unusual about me.”

“It’s not an impairment!” Kuro roars, the vehemence of her voice completely catching me by surprise. “You can still live a normal life without producing a lot of fire! That is, um, if you wanted to live your life as Kin.”

Kuro lowers her wings and gazes away, trying to keep herself calm. Out of the corner of my eye I spot Frope, shocked as I am. What the hell was that all about? Kuro yelled at me so loud it sounded like I was getting a lecture from mom.

“Your explanation makes sense,” I say, preventing the conversation from lingering and becoming even more awkward. “I had very little prey on my journey to Felra, and it was all carrion. But before I confronted the airship-prey, you shared a piece of the Redaga with me. That must have refreshed my fire.”

“Exactly,” Kuro’s voice is steady, but her eyes are focused elsewhere. “Fish are also good prey to eat when your fire is gone. Luckily, there happens to be a stream nearby.” She draws her wings open and turns to stand at a ledge overlooking the Great Valley. “Frope, please stay with Asha. I’m going to hunt salmon so Asha can continue training.”

Frope dips her wings. “Y-Yeah, sure th—“

ROAR!

Instead of waiting for her to finish, Kuro calls her take-off and dives from the rock. She flaps hard to find a thermal and eventually settles into a descending current to lower herself into the forested valley below. Once she’s safely out of range, I whip my head to Frope. “What the hell was that about?”

“Beats me,” she shrugs her wings. “I’ve heard Kuro can act weird, but I’d never seen it before until now.”

How strange. This may be the first time Frope has witnessed this behavior, but not me. Last week when she showed me around her den, she interrupted the tour to ask a question, only to become flustered and quickly change the subject. It struck me as weird, but I didn’t think too much of it at the time. Kuro’s usually quite confident in herself, so why does she sometimes have strange lapses?

Wait, could she...? “Does Kuro have the same handicap I do? The one about making less fire?”

Frope stands to her talons and stretches them out in front of her. She yawns, pulls herself back up, and with a quick shake of the head she answers, “If she did, someone like Relmoon would never shut up about it.”

She has a point. Kuro's skills as a fighter and teacher seem well respected, even among those who dislike her. Instead, they have to attack her for minor things like being single and being unable to grow the size of the flock. If there were some obvious physical disability she had, I would've heard about it — a lot.

Frope turns to me with an opportunistic grin. "Hey, you can finish the rest of your training without me, right?"

"Huh?"

She unfurls her wings and steps toward the edge of the cliff. "One of my friends lives in Tall Spires, and I wanna say hi to him. So, I'm going to do that while you finish with Kuro! Bye!"

"What?! H-hey!!" I shout, but it's too late. Frope leaps from the cliff and quickly locates the same thermal Kuro found moments earlier. She rides it up into the sky, then flies over the top of the ridge we walked down from, disappearing behind the rocks without so much as a wave goodbye.

Well, um. That was a bit rude. Couldn't she have waited a little bit longer?

Alone on the rocks and with nothing better to do, I preen myself until Kuro's cry from the valley breaks the silence. Winging up, she lands next to me and looks around confused. Before she can ask, I tell her, "She went to see a friend."

Kuro stares at me for a second, then shakes her head and releases a sigh through a mouthful of fish. “Then we’ll continue without her.” She drops the fish to the ground and motions with her wing. “Eat these, and your fire should return.”

After quickly swallowing the fish, I find I can make fire again! But despite some additional advice from Kuro, my aim is no better than before. After many failed attempts to hit the right spot, Kuro eventually has to return to the river and fetch some more fish. By the time she arrives back, the sun is beginning to lower behind far-off mountain peaks, giving us precious little daylight to continue. After the second round of fish, my aim finally straightens up and I can get the fire onto the hole.

Then, miraculously, on my second attempt at trying to get the intensity of the fire right, I watch as fire sails through the hole and disappears without a trace.

“Huh? Did it work?!” I stare at Kuro in surprised shock.

“You did it!”

“I did it...?! I did it!!”

“You did it!!”

I don't believe it! After failing for so long, I get the strength of my fire right on the second try?! How is that possible?! Actually, I don't care!! I'm just so relieved I finally got it! I flutter my wings and cry out in relief!

SKREEEECH!

Kuro chitters at my display of joy. Bounding forward, her spiced scent falls over me once more as she angles her head down to give me a congratulatory nuzzle.

Her face is warm, and her feathers softer than any I've felt as a Litan thus far. She holds her head against mine for just a moment, a moment which passes entirely too fast. As she pulls away, I jump up and give her a playful little nuzzle of my own.

"Eep!"

Caught by surprise, her face twists into a flustered expression I've never seen from her before. I can't help but giggle at it, an act that only makes her even more rattled.

"W-well, then," she says, trying to lower her feathers and regain composure.
"Congratulations, Asha. I knew you'd get it eventually."

"Yeah!!" I smile. "Thank you for believing in me! I couldn't have done it without all your encouragement. Or, your fish."

Kuro flashes another bout of emotion before settling into a more gentle smile. “Why don’t we go find Frope? We’ll find some prey and settle down back at our den for the night.”

“Okay!”

After that, we return to the center of Tall Spires in our search for Frope. I feel light as a feather, content with myself after working so hard to pass the trial. I guess I overwhelmed Kuro a little bit there, but too bad! I can’t help but be happy my training is going well.

60. The Hunt

My name is Her Majesty Princess Asha Eloise Lordanou XIX, heir apparent of the Lilac Throne of the Holy Kingdom of Ellyntide. I am the 27th heir in our Kingdom’s long and storied history, a proud legacy that extends back centuries to ancient times. Someday I will ascend the throne as Monarch and preside over millions of souls.

SCRREEECHH!!

YI-YIP ROOARR!!

Presently, my chest feathers are being sprayed with blood from the ruptured coronary of a dying *Litsha*, a quadrupedal feral clad in thin tan fur that lives on the continent of Felra.

As piercing screams fill the damp morning air, I continue my unyielding assault against my prey, aided by my hunting partner Frope, a young Litan fledge who's also learning how to hunt for the very first time. As she holds the prey's forelegs steady, I rake bloody claws deeper into the feral's chest, shredding it to pieces and causing still more blood to stain the forest floor. The air is heavy with the scents of fear and death – our prey is scared and knows its life is about to end. How wonderful. Prey tastes better when it dies afraid.

Oh, I almost forgot: I turn 24 years old next week!

...You don't find this macabre sight befitting for a woman of my stature? Well, I respectfully disagree!

Since I began learning how to hunt, it's become somewhat of a morning routine: Wake up, preen my feathers, get a drink from the river, murder ferals for breakfast. What else do you expect me to do? I can't rely on a cadre of the Kingdom's finest chefs to serve breakfast hot and ready the moment I step into our family's dining room anymore. If I want something to eat out here, I have to kill it myself.

Up to now, this is how most of our hunts have gone. Kuro will scope out a potential area for prey, directing us where to go and how to approach it. Sometimes we stay hidden in the underbrush, waiting to ambush prey as it passes. Occasionally, we throw caution to the wind and chase headlong after it. Despite being a fwehging Dragon, I'm pretty quick on my talons! Once we have prey in our sights, Frope and I take turns. One of us will pin down the feral while the other moves to make the killing blow. It's a nice system, making it easier to practice attacking the vulnerable points of prey while having to worry less about getting hurt ourselves.

Rrrgghh...

Back in the moment, it seems my prey is giving up. Or death is simply taking hold. I smack a talon against its chest to stop it from twitching and lunge for the neck. The wailing stops, and the Litsha goes limp. Viscera flies as Frope and I waste no time getting to work on our prize.

Breakfast is served.

A few moments into the meal, I smell Kuro's scent approaching on the breeze. Snarfing down another mouthful, I tilt my head to see her bounding around the corner of a giant sequoia. Her face brightens at witnessing the outcome of our hunt. "Well done, you two! You've become quite the formidable team."

Without lifting my head, I dip my wings to signal appreciation, and Frope does the same. I have come to learn that Lithans *never* interrupt a meal to talk. They find it quite rude.

Kuro approaches and surveys our kill. As the fresh blood on her muzzle and chest feathers would indicate, she's been out killing her own breakfast. "I think it's time to advance your training. You've both proven yourselves ready to hunt for prey alone."

I flutter my wings in excitement, quickly swallowing the last mouthful of meat. "Really?! Oh, that's wonderful!"

Our training is progressing quickly, as me and Frope have only been allowed to hunt with each other as a team for the past week. At least, I think it's been a week. I've been gone

from ascendant society long enough that I'm no longer sure what day of the week it is or how many days have passed since I transformed. But that's okay because being able to hunt alone is one of the critical skills I'll need to rely on when I return to Ellyntide. If I can learn this as quickly as I learned to hunt with Frope, then it won't be long before I'm flying across the strait to Sarlain territory.

Kuro looks down on me like mom used to when I was young. "Asha, We'll start by teaching you the most important technique for hunting in the Farlands: Swooping."

"Swooping?" What's that?

Frope raises her head from the Litsha and licks her chops clean. "It's when you dive out of the sky and snatch prey with your talons!"

"That's right," Kuro says. She beckons with her wings to follow and starts trotting back toward the clearing we landed in. I follow her as she explains, "Thanks to Asha, we now know Farlanders herd prey into large groups to farm them. This is an important source of prey for us as well."

I see! So Lithans have a name for their technique to prey on our livestock. I feel bad knowing I'll be stealing from some poor, innocent farmer, but it really is too enticing of an opportunity to pass up. A lot of livestock gets butchered for food anyways, right? Once it becomes known that I'm the Princess, I'm sure they'll understand why it was necessary.

Frope kicks away a bone with her hind leg and catches up to Kuro and me. "All that easy prey! You don't know how lucky you are, Asha."

I ruffle my wings of some of the morning moisture built up around them. “Tomcat, under my authority as Princess, I hereby permit you to visit my den in the Farlands anytime you want. I will personally assure that our farmers bring out the easiest prey just for you!”

Tomcat growls in delight. “Heh-heh! I’ll hold you to that offer!”

Kuro looks over her wing with abject confusion. “Tomcat?”

“Heh-heh!” Tomcat straightens her neck and grins. “That’s my Farlander nickname! Asha gave it to me!”

“Your nickname is *Tomcat*,” Kuro repeats herself like she was having trouble believing her ears. “Asha, what’s a Tomcat? And why did you give Frope a nickname?”

“Receiving a nickname from a Farlander Princess is a grand honor,” I lie. “And Tomcat reminds me of my pet cats, Bro and Pro. They’re feisty, sassy brothers that fight against each other one moment and then groom each other the next! It’s a very fitting nickname, I assure you.”

My explanation appears to have done nothing to clarify the situation to Kuro as she’s staring at me with her head tilted and her mouth slightly agape. She gazes down at Tomcat, deferring for help.

“Okay, so I was confused too,” she says. “But according to Asha, Farlanders keep prey in their dens and *never* eat them! Ever! Instead, they think of them as like, their friends, and they call them ‘*pets.*’ It’s *really* weird.”

Oh, that’s right. In Felra, the idea of keeping your dinner around as companionship is absurd. “I’ll have to explain it to you too, Kuro.”

We trample through a patch of juvenile *pinaceae* and find ourselves back in the clearing we landed at, one of the smaller ones we’ve come across during our travels. With barely enough room for all three of us to stand in it, me and Tomcat wait at the edge of the trees to allow Kuro to lead the way.

“Tonight,” she smiles, unfurling her soot-plumaged wings. The sun rises behind her, outlining her feathers in gold and casting a slight shadow in front of her. “I’d love to hear it. But I think you’d agree your training comes first?”

“Always,” I say. “Lead the way!”

“There. By those trees. They’re stepping out to graze.”

Kuro angles her ears forward, pointing the way toward a herd of spikehorn departing the safety of a copse of sequoia trees. The deer-like creatures bend their tawny heads towards the sky, showcasing an impressive display of antlers as they watch for predators like us.

“Can they see us?” I ask, crouched on a mighty branch next to Kuro and Tomcat.

“Not from this distance,” Kuro says. “Their vision is poor, so we’re safe to watch from here.”

After leaving the forests of the Great Valley, we rode the thermals over the mountains, stopped to mark a guiding tree, and landed at the edge of a vast, grassy plain on the border of the Flock’s territory with Loners. Until now, me and Tomcat have only been taught how to stalk and surprise prey in the underbrush of the forest. So it came as a surprise when Kuro *flew* us into the interior of a sizable elderus tree, settling down on a truly colossal branch near its base.

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That’s right: A tree branch that can support the weight of *three Dragons*. It’s impossible to overstate just how big elderus trees are!

Once inside, we navigated around the tree trunk, passing from branch to branch until we came to another clearing in the foliage, a window to gaze at the plains and what prey might be lurking there. According to Kuro, Kin groom elderus trees in advantageous locations like this so they’ll have a window to watch prey from a distance without being seen.

“Heh-heh! Oh, man!” Tomcat licks her chops and fidgets in anticipation. “This is awesome! They’re just sitting there, waiting for us to prey on them!”

“Easy, fress,” Kuro brushes a wing against her. “Their vision may be poor, but there’s always one of them watching the skies. If you’re careless and approach them the wrong way, they’ll sound an alarm call and flee to safety.”

“What’s the correct way?” I ask.

“Wait for them to migrate away from the trees. Then, when they’re out in the open, approach fast and take them by surprise. Spikehorn are quick, but a diving Kin Sister is quickest,” Kuro grins. “Asha, I’d like you to try hunting them first.”

“Eh? You’re not gonna show us how to do it?” Until now, Kuro has consistently demonstrated new techniques before allowing us to perform them.

She shakes her head. “It won’t always be like this — easy prey on a warm day from the vantage of an old tree. Asha, you’re going to be alone in the Farlands right as prey is becoming scarce and frostwing’s settling in. I’ll give you some advice this time, but being able to improvise in a difficult situation is critical.”

I nod thoughtfully and keep quiet. Roosting on the disputed island this winter is going to be tough. I don’t know much about that island and what I’ll find there. It could be teeming with prey, or there could be none at all. Most floating islands aren’t big enough to support a stable population of ferals, and some don’t even have water sources. If I have to return to the mainland to drink and hunt for prey, it’ll be far more challenging to execute my plan of being a big, scary Lathan.

Kuro continues, "Approach them from a high altitude and fall into a dive, pulling up at the last moment. If you time everything right, you'll have plenty of time to grab a spikehorn and carry it away. Asha, You're naturally adept at flying, so I think you'll have no trouble pulling this off."

Well! I'm glad somebody around here has confidence in me because I sure don't. I think I'm pretty good at flying, but falling into a steep dive straight toward the ground is something I've never done before. But for all the risk it entails, there sure is a nice payoff at the end. After spending the past few days rummaging in the dirt for prey, being able to fly down and scoop it up like a potted plant sounds lovely.

"Well, alright then," I say, ruffling my feathers in anticipation. "I'll try my best!"

I hop to the front of the branch and allow myself to see as clearly as possible. Roughly fifteen spikehorn are scattered about in front of the copse, slowly grazing their way farther from safety. Just as Kuro predicted, one of them has their head on a swivel, scanning the skies back and forth for someone like me to show up. How should I approach without them spotting me?

I could stay here and watch them for a time, waiting to see any openings in the lookout's movements. But another predator could swoop in and prey on the spikehorn before I even have a chance to take off. Not only do I need to time my descent correctly, but also my approach. Hey, Tomcat! Why did you act like this was going to be easy? It's a lot harder than it looks!

As I study my prey and its surroundings, I notice a route over the landscape that will conceal my approach. But to successfully snag a spikehorn, I'll have to perform two

dangerous flight maneuvers I've never attempted before. It's a risky gambit, but If I'm successful, my prey won't stand a chance.

My stomach rumbles, and my heart quickens. For all my training thus far, me and Tomcat have split the prey we catch. Small meals — nothing of the sort that's satiated me like those first few days in Felra when Kuro offered me whole carcasses. Armed with hunger and the fervent desire to make my mentor proud, I push aside fear and leap through the canopy, taking flight and exiting into the open sky.

I drop low enough to obscure myself below a tall ridge separating us. I bank right and skim the tops of trees, riding the hill for a time before making my way up and over the top to the other side. My placement is good — I spot the spikehorn to my left, roughly a mile away. I fly low and silent, low enough that my wings nearly clip the tops of trees on down strokes. When I reach a certain point, I wait for the telltale sensation of warm wind ruffling my chest feathers.

...

There!

I pivot the tips of my flight feathers and soar upwards, riding a sun-driven thermal in a steep climb toward the clouds. I pump my wings hard, gaining altitude as fast as possible. I cast a glance past my left wing and spot the copse behind me. I see the spikehorn, oblivious to the danger rising above them, but not their lookout. For the lookout has made a critical mistake, standing too close to the edge of the copse. In allowing themselves a broad view of the plain in front of them, they have sacrificed a crucial blind spot behind them.

When it feels like I've reached the right altitude, I settle into a glide and bank to my left. If the lookout happened to spot me leaving the tree, they didn't consider me enough of a threat to alert the others. So far, so good! But now I have to perform the most dangerous move yet: A steep dive over the trees, coming in at just the right angle to pick off one of the spikehorn on the far edge of the group. As I study the landscape, a feeling of familiarity overcomes me.

The skies over Rhl; The night everything changed.

After the searchlights found me, I fell into a dive towards the ground, pulling up at the very last moment to glide over the treetops and onward towards the airship hangars. Despite having only learned to fly a few hours prior, I executed this incredibly dangerous maneuver on the first try. How the hell did I do that?! Maybe everybody here is right, and I really am kinda good at flying.

I can do this. I just have to believe in myself!

My confidence restored, I draw a breath and pull my wings back to fall like a stone. I angle my approach to conceal my descent as long as possible until it's far too late for my prey to escape. The ground approaches fast, just as it did in Rhl. But I know what to expect! When the trees get uncomfortably close, I tilt my flight feathers, heaving my body upwards to even out just over the copse. As the spikehorn come into view, a caterwaul erupts, yelling and cavorting as they turn on their hooves to escape to the safety of the trees. But it's too late. I drop altitude and hook my foretalons around the flank of a calf.

GR-RAR!!

It convulses, writhing in pain as claws tear through supple flesh. I reach to wrap my hind talons around it, an— ah! OW!!

SKREAK!!

Hot, stabbing pain sears the bottom of my left hind talon as I realize I've hooked it on the antlers of the spikehorn. It flails its head, piercing into the side of my talon and inflicting even more pain. Agh, I have to get it off me somehow!! Abort, abort!!

I give my wings a quick pump and fold them inwards to shield myself from the full force of what's about to occur: an intentional crash landing! My body smacks into the moon, scattering a cloud of dirt and debris across the field. The spikehorn hits the ground with me, the force of the impact dislodging its razor-sharp antlers from my talon.

As I have some prior experience with suddenly returning to Jade, I knew to give myself a quick flap to even out my descent. Instead of cratering into the ground, I slide across it and use the momentum to flip myself back onto my talons and face my prey before it has a chance to recover.

ROOARR?!

Kuro's worried cry rings through the chaos of the fight. I pay it no mind — I'm fine. The only thing I'm focused on is making sure she sees prey in my jaws when the dust settles!! I lunge through the cloud and find the spikehorn wobbling to its hooves, its intricate antlers snapped to pieces like icicles broken from the roof of a building. It stands to roughly a quarter my height, making it a formidable enemy with the remains of its razor-sharp headgear. Though not as dangerous as before, I can't afford to be careless.

SCREECH!!

Don't you dare try and run away, witless prey feral! To my surprise, it doesn't, and instead lowers itself into a headlong charge directly toward me! Its speed takes me by surprise as I attempt to snap onto its flank while deftly avoiding its piercing horns. At the last moment, my prey veers away, and my jaws latch onto nothing but clean air. As it reels around and hones in for another attack, my hindleg suddenly buckles under searing pain. I shriek as the wound on my talon reopens, upsetting the momentum of my counter-attack. The spikehorn instantly capitalizes, moving with lightning speed toward the injured leg. It knows that's where I'm vulnerable!

I push off my good leg and flap my wings to afford an additional boost away from the charging feral. The spikehorn is quick, but not quick enough — I hold my breath as its horns miss my leg by mere feet. If I hadn't broken its antlers during the crash, I'd be in a world of hurt right now. As I drift away, it wails in frustration and tries to pivot and catch me in a compromising position. Instead, its hooves slip on the grass beneath it, causing it to tumble sideways and nearly topple over.

Another critical mistake. This time it's fatal!

With my strength nearly depleted, I bound off my good foreleg and sail toward the spikehorn with open jaws. At the last moment, it realizes what's occurring and tries to dodge with one final push in the opposite direction. While it's good enough to avoid the reach of my fangs, the spikehorn fails to account for my wing directly overhead. The claw on my wing flies down and tears its flesh asunder from shoulder to hip — a deadly trick I learned from the Redaga! My prey stumbles forward, tipping over its hooves and trying to stay upright with the last of its strength. But it's no use. For a breathless moment, I watch as the spikehorn raises its foreleg in one final act of defiance, one last whimper of pain before collapsing to the ground with an inglorious thud.

The dust clears, revealing an empty field of dry grass, bushy shrubs, and a long patch of loose dirt. The rest of the herd are long gone, retreated to the safety of the forest beyond the copse. It's just me and my prey – my very first solo kill.

SCREEEECHHHH!!!

I let out a gallant cry – I did it! I can't believe it, my plan actually worked! I've hunted prey by myself!

ROOARR!

RAAARGH!

I whirl around and spot the elderus in the distance. Though it's too far away to see them, I know Kuro and Tomcat are ecstatic. I wish they could be here to celebrate with me. They've wanted me to succeed just as much as I have. I jump towards the victim of the hunt and begin tearing it to delicious bloody shreds. Of all the ferals I've preyed on so far, I'll savor this one the most.

My name is Asha, Daughter-Of-Kelani. I'm just a visitor, someone passing through on their long journey home. But at the conclusion of my first successful hunt, home feels a lot closer.

