

THE PRINCESS'S FEATHERS

61. Breaking The Spell

Felra.

A wholly unexplored continent, obscured from the rest of the moon since the beginning of civilization itself – an unbroken, unspoiled monument to life outside of the reaches of technology and greed.

Except, erm, not really.

For generations, the siren call of adventure led countless animals to explore ‘The Northern Continent’. While most of those brave animals failed to reach land, some lucky explorers slipped past the watchful eyes of xenophobic Kin and territorial Redaga. The most infamous of these attempts was the McKerras expedition – a flotilla of small, lightly armed, and fast-flying airships that set out from Sarlain on a scientific journey to explore as much of the continent as possible. They believed advances in technology could make their ships faster than a Dragon and able to withstand attacks from their powerful jaws.

Almost thirty years ago, six vessels approached the southern edge of the continent by the cover of fog. With their next-generation boilers, the ships were quieter and faster than any that came before them, providing a crucial advantage as they snuck into the continent over an area I now know to be called, ‘Vito’s Forest.’ Besides surveying the landscape, they were able to land and collect samples from one of the many clearings Lithans created.

But six noxious-smelling airships don't go unnoticed forever. At first, they were accosted by two Lithans who worked to attack the lead vessel. The other ships deployed their steam gunners in response, but none could land a shot against the swift-flying Dragons. Soon, others arrived, and it wasn't long before all but one of the vessels was swarmed by Lithans attacking all sides of the hull. The ship that landed to collect samples had the foresight to retreat to a safer distance when the flock appeared. The captain was later branded a coward, but his cowardice gave him a head start for the strait back to Sarlain. The last thing they saw was the lead vessel of the expedition cratering into the ground, exploding into a fantastic ball of smoke and flame.

On the night of my arrival in Felra, I promised Kuro I would explain the 'truth' about airship-prey. I have a tremendous respect for the flock's culture and beliefs, which is why it feels so... slimy? Maybe that's the wrong word. But I can't help feeling bad when I play along with them and act like airships are living, breathing ferals. Part of my acceptance into the flock was based on that belief, and it bothers me every time I think about it.

I need to set the record straight, which is why we've arrived at the crash site of The Mezonnia: the lead vessel of the McKerras expedition.

When I first proposed we visit the area, I was expecting Kuro to tell me the event happened long before she was born. After all, even though she calls me fress, we seem to be around the same age. So it surprised me when she exclaimed, '*You know about that?!*'

'Y-Yeah,' I said. '*Everyone in the Farlands knows the story of the McKerras expedition. Why?*'

'*Asha, I was there!*'

She was young — barely a fledgling by her estimation. Kuro was with her mother when the cries from the forest first reached Flat Rock. Enthralled by the tales of the Farlands she had heard all her life, she insisted she wing along with her to see the fantastic beasts with her own eyes. After a brief argument, her mother relented, and they flew side-by-side to Vito's Forest.

“Here,” says Kuro. She angles her ears, pointing across the overcast sky towards a small, tree-covered island. “This is where I saw the airship-prey die.”

Obviously, Kuro was far too young to fight during the battle. So she watched it from afar, giving her a unique vantage point as five airship-prey ‘died’ before her eyes — what an incredible sight that must have been. Even before we arrived at the small island, I noticed the land below us change. Usually, the forests of Felra are old-growth with dense ground cover, interspersed by the occasional clearing that Kin groom for their own uses. But here, above Vito's Forest, large swaths of land show burn scars characteristic of large fires. It twists my stomach into knots, thinking about all the destruction those ships caused.

Now past the island, Kuro tips her wings and leads us into a descent towards the ground, giving me a better sense of the scene below. The trees still standing are young and sparse, growing up in between the charred forest that came down that fateful day. As Kuro leads us over the top of a knoll, we get our first glance at what we came to see.

Tomcat gasps, “Is that—”

“Yup,” I answer. “The remains of an airship-prey.”

Aluminum litters a vast swath of discolored ground where no tree grows, twisted, warped, and piled on top of one another like discarded children's toys. While all the organic material has long since withered away, the rigid frame of the vessel is still partially intact, rising from the ground like the bones of a gigantic ribcage. Presented to them this way, it's no surprise Kin believe airships to be feral beasts.

Tomcat swallows hard and shakes her head. "Kuro, I-I don't know about this."

"There's nothing to be afraid of," Kuro reassures her with a steady voice. After a moment's silence she adds, "Right, Asha?"

"It's completely safe," I say, aware I'm answering both of them. "Let's land in the middle of the wreck. Keep an eye on your talons and watch for the aluminum beams."

"The what?"

SCREECH!

I snatch the initiative from Kuro and call our landing. If I'm going to teach them what an airship truly is, then we may as well start now. As we lower from the sky, I spot a small area of ground free of the wreckage and bring us down. I'm the first to land, flanked by Kuro and Tomcat shortly thereafter. As they stretch their wings from the flight their heads pan around, switching their gazes anxiously from the piles of debris to the looming frame of the ship. While no trees grow, the ground is thick with vegetation and a heavy carpet of moss covers the lower reaches of the frame. Green tendrils hang like scruffy fingers from the rusted beams of the ship.

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Tomcat sniffs the cool air, and her face grimaces. “What *is* that stench?”

“Prey scent,” Kuro replies with a tinge of disgust. “Even in death, airship-prey smell rotten.”

Tomcat shoots a glance toward me, perhaps deferring for an explanation. But instead of offering one, I simply nod in response. Who am I to disagree — all this rusting metal smells awful to my Lithan nose.

Tomcat gingerly steps over a twisted pile of aluminum and examines the lattice frame of the ship up close. She stretches her neck to smell a piece of hanging moss, draws a breath, then taps it with her snout. It sways forward gently before returning to tap her against the nose.

“*Ooohhh!*” she shivers, snapping her neck back and stamping her talons. “I can’t believe we’re in the *stomach* of an airship-prey!! This is so creepy! Asha, how can you stand being eaten by them when they’re alive?!”

“Well,” I say, clearing my throat and drawing a breath. As usual, my work is cut out for me. “I have a bit of a confession to make: Farlanders aren’t eaten by airship-prey. Airship-prey aren’t alive.”

“*What?!*” Kuro gasps. “They’re all *dead?!*”

“They were never alive to begin with,” I clarify. “Airships are creations of Farlanders, built with raw materials to serve a singular purpose: allowing Lemurs, Martens, and Rabbits to fly.”

Kuro’s body turns stiff as a snake plant. She exchanges a disbelieving glance with a speechless Tomcat and takes a provocative step forward. “That’s impossible. And, it’s not what Keuvra teaches us! Asha, how could you possibly claim such a thing?!”

“Kuro,” I keep my voice steady, trying not to sound too arrogant. “Haven’t you ever wondered why Farlanders have such weird dens?”

“O-Of course I have,” she replies, trying to keep her own voice steady. “But what does that have to do with airship-prey?”

“It means you’ve considered Farlanders *create* things you don’t understand. Where on Jade do you think we find the materials to build our dens?”

After a silent moment of contemplation she concedes, “...I don’t know. Sometimes your dens smell vaguely of fallen trees, but the colors are way too strange to be from any tree I know.”

Locating her voice, Tomcat rejoins us and adds, “I always thought your dens were grown. Like how Kuro’s den is in the roots of an old tree.”

Hmm. It seems they’re capable of understanding things can be created, but they still default to natural explanations. Perhaps a visual aid would help? “Come look at this,” I say, beckoning with my wings to follow.

I lead them to one of the larger piles of debris situated under the frame of the ship; twisted, heat warped aluminum beams and charred steel from the armor of the vessel. I examine it up close as Kuro and Tomcat approach, hoping to locate any markings left in the Goddess language – partially to prove this material has been altered by Farlanders, and partially to verify if I can in fact still read the Goddess language. But the aluminum is too heat-warped, and the steel plating never had markings to begin with. Drats. Time for plan B!

“This is aluminum,” I say, holding my wing low over one of the beams. “And this is steel. These materials don’t occur naturally on Jade. Instead, Farlanders created them. To create them, we...”

Wait a second. How *do* you create aluminum and steel? A furnace? Or something?

I fluff my feathers. “...use a *very* complicated process. But this is some of the stuff we use to make an airship. And our dens smell faintly of trees because we make them out of trees! We cut them down, run them through like, a sawmill, and then you pound some nails with a hammer, and...”

I trail off abruptly. Kuro and Tomcat are staring at me with blank expressions. “Er, sorry. Went a little too fast. The point I’m trying to make is that these aren’t a living creature’s bones. They’re just... stuff. Stuff that Farlanders learned how to cobble together to create something that can fly.”

Kuro stares silently at the pile of debris and releases a long sigh. She steps forward, runs the tips of her feathers over one of the beams and closely examines the flakes of rust imparted on them. “It’s not that I don’t believe you, Asha. It even makes a bit of sense if you remember the story of how Felra was raised.” She shakes her wing of the rust and folds it back against her. “But Keuvra teaches us airship-prey are alive, the very same prey I’ve been teaching you how to hunt. Why would he mislead us about what they truly are?”

“I’ve been wondering the same thing,” I say, staring at the sky. “I’ve thought about it a lot, and I’m still unsure why. If he didn’t want Kin to know the truth, then why is he allowing me to tell it?”

I should be on the receiving end of some divine judgment right about now. There has to be a reason why Keuvra withheld the truth from the flock. Of course, the deities are under no obligation to reveal *anything* to ascendant animals – their job is to guide their respective species within the rules Azurrel established. But why would he so flippantly mislead them? As usual, it seems the more I learn about my impossible situation, the more questions arise.

Kuro looks away and gazes off into the trees beyond the wreckage. She must be having a tough time trying to internalize this revelation. I can’t say I blame her.

Tomcat releases a sigh of her own. “This is... this is so much to take in. Airship-prey being dead, Farlanders creating their dens... hey, Asha!! I haven’t come of age yet! Aren’t you, like, not supposed to talk about this stuff?”

“Kuro told me a list of everything we can’t talk about,” I explain. “But there’s so much stuff you don’t know about the Farlands, and Meldi never said I couldn’t talk about that!”

“Heh-heh! I like your style, Asha!”

Frope brushes her wing playfully against mine. I take a step back an— AAH!

SKREAK!!

Hot pain lances the side of my foreleg.

“Asha!!”

Incapable of reacting, the world tumbles as my leg buckles under intense pain. I flail, trying to prop up the front half of my body but end up faceplanting the ground.

“Oof!!”

I grit my teeth, feeling warm blood trickle down the side of my leg. What the hell just happened!?

“Asha! Are you okay?!”

With my head still stuck in the weeds, I smell Kuro and Tomcat’s scents hovering above me. My leg is in incredible pain, but I’m not dead yet. I strain a painful growl and twitch my wings to acknowledge them.

“I-I think she cut her leg on one of the bones!!”

“Skunkscent! Frope, check how bad it is!”

Writhing in pain, I pull my wing back and allow Tomcat to examine the wound. I feel the warmth from her head, but she’s not saying anything.

Kuro’s feathers rustle impatiently. “Well? How is it?”

“Kuro,” she croaks. “You better take a look at this.”

Huh? What's going on?

Rapid movements follow. I hear Kuro shove her head through the underbrush.

“What the...”

“Kuro,” I grit my teeth and force myself to talk over the pain. “Is it bad?”

“Asha, it's... it's your blood.”

Huh?

What about my blood?

Through overwhelming pain, I grit my teeth and drag my head through the weeds to see what the issue is. As my neck twists around I see Kuro and Tomcat hovering just above my left foreleg, the cause of their concern instantly apparent. A long and jagged laceration has torn open the side of my foreleg from flank to knee. And there, streaming from the wound, is blood.

Purple blood.

62. Bandage

I stare at the wound on my leg in a mixture of dismay and amazement. My blood is *purple*? How can that be? When I was a Lemur my blood was red, so it must have changed colors when I became a Litan. Curiosity briefly overwhelms the sensation of pain, inviting me to reach my head in low for a closer look. But pain wins out in the end, causing another jolt of pain to lance my leg.

My painful growl jolts Kuro back into the moment. “Frope!” she snaps. “Fetch some clean moss! We have to stop the bleeding!”

“R-Right!”

As Tomcat bursts away to search the area, Kuro gets to work and rips up a few mouthfuls of underbrush with her jaws. She leans in close to the wound and murmurs through a clump of dry foliage, “This may sting.”

“Can’t be any worse th— *AH!*” I hiss in pain as she compacts the wound with the makeshift gauze. When the stinging subsides, I open my eyes to find the green and brown plants quickly staining purple.

“It’s not slowing down,” Kuro announces staidly. Without flinching, she closes her wing halfway so her flight feathers slide on top of one another, then pushes them into the wound. Expecting the worst, I grit my teeth, but the wave of pain quickly subsides. Kuro’s soot-colored feathers begin to turn black as they absorb more blood.

Ugh, that fweghing rusting junk! I let my guard down for just a second, but now I’m paying the price. Big time. What’s going to happen to me now? I’m stuck in the middle of Felra without any modern medical care. It’s clear Kuro has some rudimentary knowledge of first aid – she knows she has to stop the bleeding or else I’ll be in serious trouble. But will feathers and moss be enough? What happens if I don’t stop bleeding? Or if I’m too injured to fly?

Just then, Tomcat reappears with a long strip of moss dangling from her jaws. She carries it towards us and drops it to the ground. “I can get more if this isn’t enough. There’s plenty of moss growing around here.”

Kuro nods and releases her wing from my leg. She grabs the moss with her jaws and quickly compacts it onto the wound. Once it’s securely in place, she raises a foretalon against it and pulls her head away. For a breathless moment, we watch the moss, waiting to see if it changes color. To our supreme relief, it stays green.

“The bleeding has begun to slow,” Kuro announces, relaxing her features. “Asha, you’re going to be alright. But you need to rest here a while.”

“A while?” I echo hesitantly. “How long is a while?”

“For a wound this big, a few hours at least. Maybe overnight.”

Frope's wings stiffen. "Overnight? Are we going to be safe from prey here?"

Kuro looks away and stares through the trees beyond the ship's frame. After a silent moment of contemplation, she says, "We may need help from the Grandfather Tree."

The Grandfather Tree? Kuro mentioned that place during my introduction in Flat Rock, but we haven't flown there yet. Still, if Kuro believes we need help, then this is a far more serious situation than I thought. So far, the prey we've hunted in the forest was nothing that me and Tomcat couldn't handle ourselves. What feral lurks in the dark of the night that could make even fierce Kuro concerned? I prefer to remain clueless.

"Kuro," I say, trying to shift into a more comfortable position. "If you let go of the moss, will it stick? I think I could fly if we have to leave before sundown."

She shakes her head. "It'll slide off. Someone has to hold the moss in place until the bleeding stops. No matter how long it takes."

Damn it. Argh, this is so unfair! I had the best medical care in the Kingdom back in Vaercia! Am I really going to be defeated in the middle of Felra over something as trivial as not having a bandage?

...

Wait a second.

I

'm a botanist, damn it!

I sniff the air and gaze around the crash site, examining the trees as best I can from my position on the ground. I smell *tiliaceae* beyond the ship's frame, a few *sequoioideae* south of here... *Ah!* There's some *pinaceae* to the north, just beyond the edge of the wreckage! I'm not sure how effective it will be, but maybe the sap from a bilea spruce could act as a rudimentary adhesive and hold the moss in place, just like a real bandage! It's certainly worth trying!

Seeing as I'm in no place for field work, all we need is a willing volunteer. "Tomcat, I need you to do me a favor."

"Huh?" Her ears perk up. "Oh, of course, Asha. What is it?"

"I need you to find a certain type of tree called a bilea spruce. The leaves are green and sharp, kind of like the leaves that fall around Kuro's den. But the best way to identify it is by its reddish-brown bark. It'll break off into little flakes if you rub your claws against it, and none of the other trees around here do that. When you think you've found it, I'd like you to use your talons to tear off a few strips of bark and bring it back here."

Tomcat blinks, and her muzzle drifts agape. She gives Kuro a sidelong glance and asks, “Is her head full of sparrows?”

“Trust me,” I say, trying to impart confidence. “There’s something in the bark of those trees that’s useful to us. I can smell them nearby – it will only take you a few minutes to find one.”

Tomcat’s face twists slightly. It seems like she’s still not convinced. “Riiiiight. Kuro, do you have any idea what she’s talking about?”

The soot-plumaged Litan stares at me a moment before swiveling her gaze onto the pure white. “No, I don’t. But I think you should do what she says. We’re going to be stuck here for a while, anyway.”

“Oohhhhh-kay. Hunting for tree bark! Mom is never going to believe this...”

After giving her directions on where to search, Tomcat tips her wings and trots off toward the northerly tree line. As she disappears beyond a patch of dense thickets, Kuro settles down next to me, deftly balancing herself as she maintains pressure on the moss.

“Frope could stand to trust you a bit more,” she sighs wistfully as if she was somehow at fault for her behavior. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m okay!” I smile, trying to raise her weirdly dour spirits. “I broke my arm once working in the garden, and this isn’t half as bad as that. I think I’ll need to rest my leg for a little while, but I’ll live!”

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Her face curls into a half-smile. “Mmh. That’s good. We should take you to the Grandfather Tree once you’re fit to fly. There’s someone there who can look at your leg and make sure it’s healing right.”

“That’s a good idea! We haven’t flown there yet, anyways.”

Kuro’s smile fades, and she looks away without adding anything else. My attempt to cheer her up failed, and it’s obvious something’s really bothering her. Something deeper than just Frope’s behavior. I tilt my head closer and ask, “Is everything alright?”

“Asha,” She responds promptly as if mom had addressed her, and with a face just as serious. “You didn’t *‘talk’*

to the airship-prey, did you?”

Oh.

So that’s what it is.

I release a long sigh and regret fills my chest. I knew she would eventually come to this conclusion, but not this quickly. Revealing the truth about airships was simple — reckoning with my lies won't be.

“No,” I say, staring at the ground. “No, I didn't. All I had to do was threaten the airship and avoid it when it tried to attack. All that talking I did was just an act so you would understand.”

I pause to gather my thoughts and keep my head low. The memory of our first encounter and how furious she was resurfaces — I can't stand to see how upset she must look now. After a few seconds of silence, I'm able to relocate my voice. “There wasn't enough time to explain the nuances of Farlander politics or how airships aren't living creatures. And I'm certain you wouldn't have believed me even if there was. I had to do *something* to get you to trust me, and claiming I could talk to the airship was the first thing I thought of. I'm... so sorry for misleading you.”

I force myself to raise my head and meet hers. Kuro is staring at me with a complex expression I can't quite decipher, one that surely belies her disappointment.

“Listen, Asha. I—“

RAARR!

Tomcat's call splits the air like a falcon's cry, startling Kuro and me from our intent conversation. We crane our necks in unison to see Tomcat stepping out of the grove of trees with a stack of bark wedged between her teeth. "I got it!" she announces, galloping forward to deliver the sticky clippings of bilea spruce promptly.

But as she approaches and drops the bark near Kuro's flank, she has no trouble recognizing the massive mood shift between us. "Ohhhh-kay. Not sure why you're acting like a bunch of *wingdragers*, but you could at least be happy I found this tree stuff. It's so sticky, I can't get it out of my mouth!! *Pweh!! Pfft! Pbbbbtt!*"

I chuckle a little to myself. I can always count on Tomcat to improve my mood. "I'm sorry, Tomcat. Thank you for finding the bark. I promise it'll be useful to us."

"So, what's your plan?" Kuro asks me without a hint of malice in her voice. It catches me by surprise.

"Well," I say, checking my own voice to make sure it sounds equally as amicable. "When someone gets cut in the Farlands, we place something called a '*bandage*' over the wound. It's kind of like that moss you're holding, but with one key difference: The sides of the bandage are covered in some sticky stuff that secures the bandage to your fur. That way, you don't have to hold it until the bleeding stops."

Tomcat stares at me like I'm speaking *Lagoran*. "So..."

Suddenly, Kuro's face brightens like the sun. "You're going to use the tree's sap to hold the moss in place!"

“Yes! That’s exactly right!”

“Oh, wow!” Kuro looks like she just caught prey. “I didn’t know sap was useful for anything!”

Tomcat gives her chest a quick lick and flicks her gaze between me and the bark. “I still don’t understand what you two are talking about.”

“I’m sure it’ll all make sense once we show you. Kuro, could you remove the moss from my leg?”

Kuro acknowledges with a swift nod. I don’t know what she was trying to tell me before Tomcat interrupted us, but all her animosity seems to have vanished into thin air. I... I think I can relax a little.

But only just a little. Even though the bleeding has slowed considerably, my leg is still quite tender from being cut open. As Kuro eases her pressure against the moss, I curl my talons into the ground, bracing myself for the same sensation as a bandage being torn away. Gently, she uses her jaws to grab the side of the moss as she releases pressure from her talon. With a quick flick, the moss is pulled away and tossed to the side. My body winces, and I hiss in pain, but it’s not as bad as I expected.

With the moss taken care of, we angle our curious heads forward to inspect my exotic-looking blood up close. No longer heaving in pain, It’s possible to make out some minor

details I didn't notice before. My blood is a dark, plum-colored purple, shimmering metallic against the overcast sky with a silver-colored sheen.

"Have you ever seen anything like it?" I ask.

"Never," Kuro answers slowly, awe reverberating in her voice. "Dragon blood is blue, and prey's blood red. That is the natural order of things."

I first noticed the blue blood of Dragons after preying on the Redaga that tried to kill me. At the time, I just assumed I was similar and thought nothing of it. But to be purple-blooded makes some sense: If you combine blue and red pigments, you get the color purple. The red blood of Lemurs and the blue blood of Lithans — A physical marker of what I used to be and the soul that lingers.

Kuro draws a wing forward and drags the tips of her feathers below my wound, collecting a small sample of drying blood. She examines it closely and says, "I think it would be best if we kept this between ourselves."

"Yeah..." Tomcat trails off despondently, watching the blood drip from Kuro's wing. "Asha, a lot of Kin are still suspicious of you because you're a Farlander. If one of them found out you're purple-blooded..."

"I understand. They would have another reason to think I'm not a real Lathan. It would be a terrible situation."

Relmoon warned the elders there were others in the flock like him — those that disagreed with their decision to let me join the Snowfell Flock. I wonder just how many there are? If I made enough of them upset, could they organize and retaliate against me? Or worse, convince the elders to expel me from the flock? I have to do everything possible to avoid drawing the ire of those Kin. My blood has to be a secret from everyone.

Tomcat turns to Kuro. “What about her leg? How can we get her to Nakino’s den without anyone noticing?”

“Nakino?” Who’s that?

“A Brother at the Grandfather Tree who knows the most about remedies,” Kuro answers. “A wound this large must be properly cleaned to prevent infection. As for the rest of the flock, if Asha’s idea for a bandage works, then we’ll have nothing to worry about.”

It sounds like Nakino is the flock’s doctor. It may not be the modern medical care I got back home, but at least it’s something. Besides, I know better than to question the efficacy of herbalist medicine. Sofl would never forgive me!

But, um, there’s still a problem. “What about Nakino? If he treats my wound, he’s going to see my blood.”

“Let me handle him,” Kuro rumbles ominously. “I’ll make sure he’s quiet.”

I give Tomcat a sidelong glance and find her engaged in the same act of hesitation. What was that all about?

“Now then,” Kuro continues in a chipper tone as if Nakino were never mentioned. “Asha, how do we make your bandage?”

Putting the doctor aside as quickly as Kuro did, I give her instructions on constructing the makeshift bandage with a clean strip of moss. It’s as simple as it sounds: gather sap from the bark Tomcat collected and rub it into the sides of the moss. Then, hold it against my leg until the sap bonds to my feathers. After some sticky talons and a bit of patience, it was time to try standing up.

I place my foretalons in front of me and pivot my weight to the front of my body. Slowly, I try to pull myself up while putting as little weight on my hind talons as possible. I grit my teeth as searing pain overcomes my injured leg, but keep pressure applied and hold myself steady. I did it!

Tomcat angles her head down to examine the moss up close. “I don’t believe it! It isn’t falling off! Asha, how do you feel?”

I’m starting to get better, but the pain is still quite pronounced. Failing to contain a grunt of pain, I mutter an unsteady, “I’ll live!”

“You should rest longer,” Kuro suggests, taking a concerned step forward. “Just because you can stand up doesn’t mean you’ll be able to land.”

Taking her proposal as permission, I release the pressure building on my injured leg and return to the ground, not quite as nimbly as I left it I exhale in relief and shake my wings out. “Okay, yeah, I do need to relax a bit longer. But the bandage helps! I’ll be fit to fly in no time.”

“Good,” Kuro exhales, rubbing her face into mine. I press back in appreciation. “Frope, why don’t you stay with Asha while I hunt you both some prey?”

“Sure!” she says, settling in the grass next to me. Kuro dips her head in parting and bounds away, flapping her wings playfully as she darts off past the frame of the airships and into the tree line beyond, all of the animosity that existed between us dissolved into nothing. The kind and supporting Kuro I’ve grown to rely on has returned. We never returned to the conversation about the airship, so does that mean she forgives me? Or maybe she never held it against me in the first place?

Whatever the case, it seems I’ve bandaged more than just my leg.

63. Family Matters

My last interaction with the Queen was unsettling, to say the least.

In all my time working with Her Majesty, I had never observed her to be so reckless, so dictated by emotion when it came to decision-making. It was clear just how profound of an impact the loss of the Princess had on her rationality. Such a response might be forgivable if we weren’t on the precipice of a war where our defeat would be assured — a war the Queen seems hell-bent on initiating.

My attempts to convince Her Majesty otherwise were quickly dismissed. If she is unwilling to listen to me, then there's but one animal left who can prevent this catastrophe:

My mother, Ariana. The prior Head of Staff who served monarchs for over four decades.

Enlisting her help won't be easy.

Usually, communicating with my mother would be a trivial affair; a quick call on the phone would happily suffice. But in the aftermath of the tragedy in the weald, my father has been less than amicable to my existence. Mother has only been able to call when he's not present, and I wouldn't dare risk the chance of calling myself and having him pick up on the other side.

Oh, sure. I wasn't lying when I said my family was in communication with the Durhams over funeral arrangements. But that effort has largely been spearheaded by mother. As if the misery over losing my partner wasn't enough, father chooses to fixate on the damage to our family's reputation for failing to protect the princess. So far, nobody – not even the Queen herself – has blamed me for her passing. But to him, it matters little.

To think that the security of the Kingdom could be thrust into jeopardy by one man's petty ignorance!

And so this afternoon, I find myself on Oak Island, the elite residential neighborhood in Varecia where my parents live on our family's estate. A trip to my parents, even with the cloud of hatred that is my father, would typically be an ordinary affair. But today is different. Today is the Rabbit holiday of *Sorcuth*, the festival of family and good tidings. To enlist my mother's help, I will have to face my extended family's scorn for failing to protect the Princess and tarnishing the Almandoz name.

I set out from the air transfer station and make my way along the forested lane, past the towering hedges and gated fences of other residences. It seems silly that such measures would be necessary on an island where outsider access is by invitation only. But the animals here are such that even preventing your neighbors from seeing your wealth and luxury is preferable.

Eventually, I reach the bend in the road where *our* family's wealth and luxury are located, passing by the metal gate left open for today's expected visitors. With no steam carriages allowed on Oak Island, the entrance is only big enough for a drawn cart to pass through. The hike up to my parent's house is pleasant, at least. Groomed fruit trees line the pathway, surrounded on both sides by fields of freshly cut grass, fallen leaves filling the air with pleasing autumn scents. I pass by the pond, and around the stone wall that separates the fields from our home, a two-story country estate that my parents love to flaunt was very expensive to build.

I trot up to the path to the front door and take a moment to collect myself. I don't know how well I'll be received, but I'm only here to talk to mother. If father confronts me, I'll see myself out, but not before I talk to her. With the very fate of the Kingdom in the balance, I can't be concerned about lasting damage to our relationship.

Knock knock.

It's strange to knock on one's door, one I've allowed myself into countless times before. I feel like a visitor in my parent's home for the first time.

“Helloooo!! “Come o— oh!” A cheery voice rings as the door swings open to reveal a small doe with peppered, shoulder-length hair and large, circular glasses. She’s wearing a trained tea dress adorned with thick green velvet and brown trailings – not *too* formal, as I understand it.

“Aunt Torie,” I smile, relieved it isn’t dad. “It’s been a while.” While she answered the door in the Goddess language, I replied to her in *Lagoran*, the language spoken between Rabbits.

“Duncan!” she exclaims as the joy drains slightly from her face. “Oh, I wasn’t expecting to see you today.”

“It’s not a problem, is it?”

“Well, no, of course not. It’s just…” As she trails off, her ears droop slightly to their sides. “Well, come on in.” She pulls the door open and beckons with her ears to follow. I enter the front chamber and close the heavy wooden door behind me.

Inside, the sound of the door closing reverberates through the quiet house. In front of me, a long oak stairway draws along a curved side wall to the house’s second story, where the bedrooms are located. Oil paintings cover the plaster-trimmed walls, adorned with cuts of lavender and satchels of dried-up flower buds to give the room a pleasant aroma. Lavender is mother’s favorite flower; she loves to hang it when guests visit. I hand Torie my frock and get to work unclasping my boots.

“We just cleaned the floor, you know how your uncle Myron is about brushing his feet.”

“Oh, yes,” I say, kicking a boot into the side closet. “Is my mother home?”

Torie shakes her head. “I’m afraid not. She left a little while ago but didn’t mention where she was going.” She angles her ears to follow, leading me down a well-lit hallway adorned with oil paintings towards the kitchen. “I think she needed to pick up some more rhubarb for the mousse.”

“Mother loves her rhubarb,” I chuckle hesitantly. Mother gets her rhubarb from Arvilla, the Ruffy down the road with an immensely sized garden. Under normal circumstances, this wouldn’t be cause for concern. But Arvilla is well-known for talking up a storm whenever there’s company, and mother is known for her conversational quirks. An errand involving those two could drag on until sundown.

“Oh, goodness!” Torie exclaims as she enters the kitchen. She hurries past the counters, entirely covered with ingredients and cooking utensils, around the table and towards one of the three wood-burning stoves against the outside facing wall. She peers inside, jiggles the ash gate, and watches as the flames regain their strength. “Phew! The fire almost went out. Your mother would’ve been devastated if the soufflé failed.”

“Heh-heh,” I chuckle half-heartedly. “Oh yes. That would have been terrible.”

“Duncan,” Torie’s face turns sour as her hand falls gently against her hip. “I know you didn’t come for your mother’s soufflé. What are you doing here?”

Hmph. Guess the jig is up. So much for cordiality. “I need to speak with my mother in private.”

“In private?” Torie’s eyebrows furrow. “Deary, I’m certain you have telephones at the palace.”

“Our only receiver is in the kitchen,” I say, pointing directly toward it. “Our conversation requires discretion. It concerns national security.”

A glint of surprise colors her face before turning sour again. “Duncan,” she lowers her voice to a whisper and closes the gap between us. “Just what are you doing, handling matters of state?!”

“It’s my *job*,” I deadpan.

“So soon after the tragedy?”

“Queen’s orders.”

“She believes you’re fit for duty?”

“Quite.”

Torie blinks, then quickly averts her gaze in contemplation. “How could that possibly be the case? After everything that’s happened?”

“*Your auntie is right.*”

My heart stops as a new voice echoes outside the kitchen, interjecting our conversation like a scythe’s edge. It’s *that* voice, the scruff and elderly voice I least wanted to hear today. The slow plodding of heavy footsteps follows, each once raking my soul with dread.

A case of theft: this story is not rightfully on Amazon; if you spot it, report the violation.

I turn to see an elderly buck strolling around the door to the kitchen. Not so much a Rabbit but a pile of rags and bones, tattered and disheveled, barely able to support the morning robe wrapped around him. His face is slack-jawed, and his fur gray and unkempt, as if he had just rolled out of bed. Or a grave. It’s not difficult to imagine him returning to life solely to make mine miserable.

In a voice that belies his age, he rumbles with contempt, “You’ve got stiff ears coming here, boy.”

“Father,” I respond half-heartedly. “Am I no longer welcome in the very home I grew up in?”

“Maybe you shouldn’t be, Duncan. Do you have any idea how much damage you’ve caused to your family’s reputation?”

Predictably, father believes *he* is the singular victim of the tragedy in the weald. I straighten my back to try and appear as tall as possible. “I have done no such thing. You should direct your anger towards that *monster* from the Northern Continent.”

“*Hrmph*,” Father grunts as he strolls into the kitchen like the walking dead. “Blaming your failures on everyone but yourself. *As usual*. If you had any sense, you’d have resigned so your sister could take the position.”

I cast a glance at Aunt Torrie, standing near the stoves, curious to see how she’s processing this undignified assault on my character. To my dismay, her face is plastered with a scowl just like father’s – surely she agrees with everything he’s said. I’d be remiss to expect her help, but even a crumb of sympathy for the sorrow I’ve been subjected to would suffice.

Recognizing I’m alone in this fight, I square my shoulders and turn back to father. “Annie no longer wants the role. And even if she did, the fact remains that I’m the most qualified to navigate Her Majesty through this crisis.”

For a brief moment, father looks genuinely surprised before chuckling to himself, “You aren’t qualified to choose your clothes in the morning. And you think you can still help the Queen?”

I flail my arms in frustration. This is going nowhere. Father is singularly interested in making my life worse. “You can believe whatever you want. Once I finish talking to mother, I will happily leave your sight.”

Father slinks around the counter in the middle of the kitchen and stares down at me with a face like death itself. “You’ll leave now.”

“I will do no such thing.”

“Get out.”

“You don’t understand!!”

I pull myself back from his face – unaffected. Cold as stone, until it twists into an expression almost smug. “I understand you perfectly well,” He says, stepping towards the outside-facing window in the center of the kitchen. He stops to admire the oak tree outside and continues, “You’ve been this way for ages.”

Such a waste of time! This argument has devolved into pointlessness. I could see myself to one of the other rooms and quietly wait for mother to return, but now I’m curious. Curious what a sclerotic old man like him could possibly know about me. “What are you babbling ab—”

“You thought the military could fix you,” he says, slowly crossing his arms. “And for a while, you were right. ...Almost right. They called you an exemplary cadet, pinned medals to your chest, and promoted you all the way to Commander. But in the end, you’re still the insubordinate boy who deserted this house fifteen years ago.”

What a feckless argument. My past — as checkered as it was — is a long and distant memory. Thank God. It’s not even worth justifying a response, but I know a certain part of my conscience won’t allow me to stay silent. Not to him. “I am no longer the broken soul I was back then.”

“Then why does everyone around you die?”

What?!

His heartless words hit me like a brick, knocking the air from my lungs and nearly pushing me backward. I always knew my father to be cruel to a fault, but to lay at my feet the deaths of my best friend, my partner, and the Princess... I can’t believe this. How could somebody be so heartless, so cruel to their son?

Father smirks, clearly pleased by my shock. He folds his hands behind his back and continues, “First, it was that best friend of yours. You thought you could leave him alone, even though you knew he was doing—“

“Leave Isadore out of this,” I warn, strained emotion seeping into my voice.

Father smiles like a petulant child. “What’s the matter? Don’t like being told the truth?”

“Why are you doing this?!”

“Because,” he responds plainly, pulling the sides of his robe closer. “Your failures have consequences, Duncan. Three animals lie dead at your feet.”

“Stop this,” I mutter, burying my hands into my face. The terrible memories of the night I found Isadore mix with the memories of finding Calypso, suffocating my thoughts.

But he doesn’t, and instead continues in a soft voice, “One of them Kelani’s daughter, the other that *lamentable* Knight of yours.”

“Shut UP!!” I explode, dropping my hands and forcing myself to see him. To show him my fury.

“Or what?” He grins, stepping out from around the counter. He strolls forward with a smug little gait and asks, “You wouldn’t try to *hit* your old man again, would you?”

“Keep talking and find out,” I challenge with a voice like steel, rationality departing me. If father’s goal was to break me, then he is succeeding. I know this, and yet I don’t care. I

won't allow him to execute who I am. Not in front of my family and not in front of those I've lost.

What must Calypso be thinking, watching me now from beyond far? How much pity must he harbor, seeing his dear bunny reduced to sordid emotions long buried? Isadore's death shook me out of my turbulent years — I realized if I continued that life, it wouldn't be long before I too injected too much in the back of some decrepit alleyway. Calypso couldn't believe the stories from back then — imagining the Queen's trusted right hand as a directionless, drug-toting youth was too outrageous. But those days are not as far behind me as he thought. Perhaps I've given him some perspective today.

And then there's the Princess. Heh, how poetic. Is this how she felt that morning when she was moments away from tearing a canyon-sized rift between herself and the Queen? I told her on the Blue Daemon I spoke up to prevent that breach, but the truth is that I sympathized with her vitriol for a parental figure — I was all too familiar with those intense feelings, courtesy of the man standing before me. Her and I were far more alike than she ever knew.

I never got to know Asha very well, but here against father... I'd like to imagine she's rooting for me.

The stage is set, and the audience is seated. They're waiting to see how the obedient, perfectly-composed yes-boy responds to this assault from his miserable father. So, whatever's about to happen... I have no regrets.

Father frowns at my sudden confidence and shoves his face straight into mine. "You don't deserve to be Kelani's head of staff, and you never have. You're a *failure*, Duncan. And the longer you stay there, the closer—"

“Alonzo!!”

A familiar voice from behind me interjects the conversation, putting a swift end to father’s charade. My hand falls gracelessly to my side as I spin around and see mother standing in the doorway to the kitchen. With a travel sack around her shoulder and a half-opened traveling coat, her fawn-furred face is cold with shock at the scene unfolding in the kitchen. But to me, her arrival is like sunshine emerging from parting clouds. My savior has arrived!

“Mother...!” I gasp, trying to quell the hostility stuck to my tongue.

“Torie?!” She asks aloud after noticing the quiet spectator of our group. “What in the blazes is going on here?”

Trying to retain control of the situation, Father quickly rumbles, “Our insubordinate son decided to pay us a visit. I told him to leave immediately, but—“

“Ohhh, *no!*” Mother screeches like a hawk, stamping into the kitchen and staring up at father. “I heard what you said to him! I don’t care what he did, you will NOT cause a scene on Sorcuth!! We’re supposed to come together as a family today, not be torn apart at the seams!”

Father looks distraught but keeps his distance. “He was about to—“

“That’s enough!” she dismisses, making slicing motions with her hands. “I don’t want to hear it, Alonzo! You’re going to frighten away our guests before the celebration even starts!”

“Guests?” Torie asks sheepishly, all the snootiness in her voice dissolved.

After releasing a breath to calm herself, mother answers, “Yes!” in the Goddess Language. She turns to direct her voice through the kitchen doorway and continues, “Everything is fine! Come on in!”

Heavy footsteps trod down the hall, and two Ruffies emerge in the doorway: A tall, middle-aged couple in well-worn, pedestrian clothing – not at all the type of attire you’d expect to see worn on Oak Island. The male has a grizzled ruff and dons a dirty flat cap, and the woman the most ordinary travel dress imaginable. Indeed, these Lemurs are not from our exclusive island, or even Varecia. They’re the Durhams: Calypso’s parents.

“E-Elias,” I mutter in surprise, strained emotion overpowering my voice.

Seeing me, his face wretches in pain. “Oh, Duncan.”

He lumbers forward and embraces me with a hearty bear hug – the same hug that Calypso used to comfort me. I bury my face in Elias’ coat as the pain from that day rolls into my head like a dismal fog. Since then, we’ve spoken over the phone but have yet to see each other in person.

“I’m so, so sorry,” he whispers, rubbing his hand into my hair. Is this what it feels like to have a *real* father?

“Elias used a pay phone to call me from the transfer station,” mother explains. “Even though I told the station ahead of time, nobody believed they were invited onto the island.”

I swivel my gaze between mother and Elias in shock. His assured expression confirms her telling of events. “That’s horrible!!” I say.

Elias looks down at me with gentle eyes and smiles softly. “It’s not the first time it’s happened, and it won’t be the last. What’s important is we made it. And so did you, Dunc.”

Gosh, what a lovely man. I sniff, wipe my nose, and return the smile as a part of my soul is mended.

Mother steps forward and places her hand on my shoulder. “And what about you, dear? I’m sorry I didn’t send you an invitation, but I know how difficult things have been. What compelled you to join us?”

“Well,” I say, straightening myself up. Finally, we can get down to business. “I came today because you and I must speak in private. It concerns Her Majesty.”

After flashing surprise, her expression turns as grave as a cemetery. More than anyone else alive, mother understands the gravity of this request. No doubt she's been glued to the radio the past few days, as everyone has. She has to know Kelani hasn't made a *public* decision yet about the peace delegation from Mortha.

"Torie," she commands solemnly, unlike the voice she used in the palace all those years ago. Her eyes are locked with mine. "Finish preparing the soufflé. Duncan and I have matters to discuss."

64. The Grandfather Tree

It's not an exaggeration to say Felra has some big trees. Like, *really fweghingmassive*.

So when Kuro mentioned we'd be traveling to the Grandfather Tree to have my leg cleaned, I thought I knew what to expect. During my stay in Felra, the clouds have occasionally parted to reveal the grand gymnosperm on the far-off horizon, towering above everything in sight. It was like seeing the Elder Tree from the window of the Blue Daemon, something I'd experienced countless times before in my life as a Princess.

But as we wing through a dense cloud bank and glide into clear air, the tree is revealed in the most dramatic fashion possible. I gasp as I see it, my breath taken away by the unimaginable scale of a tree so large, you'd be forgiven for confusing it with an isolated mountain. It stands alone in the middle of a vast treeless plain, a towering waymark surrounded by a grove of far lesser, normal-sized trees. From the lowest branches that appear more extensive than some elderuses, to the slightest wind-whipped tips at the top, straining to touch their spindly tendrils to the cloud deck above, this tree is INCREDIBLE! My mind hums like a steam boiler, bursting at the rivets with questions. Is it *Elderus Lithanteum*? How old it is it?! And how could something this big even be *alive*?!

Tempering with boundless enthusiasm, I glance past my left wing to spy Kuro and Tomcat, butchered prey in their jaws, staring ahead with the same steady expressions they've held since our flight began. To them, the largest living organism on the moon must be an everyday occurrence – nothing out of the ordinary on a continent filled with extraordinary things. If only they knew a fraction of my heart's awe.

Kuro and Tomcat are the first to land just outside the grove surrounding the ancient tree. While excitement is tearing at me to join them as soon as possible, I have to be careful. The improvised bandage we created in Vito's Forest has held during our flight, but my leg is still injured. If I land too fast, I could reopen the wound, hurt myself even more, and ruin our chances of a subdued entrance to the Grandfather Tree. The alien nature of my purple blood must remain a secret to our small group – and the flock's doctor, Nakino.

Descending slowly, I flap my wings and create a small windstorm in the grassy field below. My good leg touches the ground first, followed by the front half of my body, and finally, my bum leg. It's one of the softest landings I've ever performed, yet I can't help but wince in pain as weight is reapplied to my wound.

“Ack!”

My offering of prey is ejected from my mouth as I stumble forward, my talons failing to find traction against the damp autumn grass. Somehow, I can plant my claws into the ground and locate the traction to remain upright.

“Asha!!” Kuro yelps, quickly throwing her prey to the ground. She jumps through the grass and quickly props her flank against mine to keep me upright. “Are you okay?”

I grit my teeth and murmur, “I-it doesn’t hurt as much as before. I can walk.”

Kuro exhales, and her face relaxes. Taking a step back to assess my condition, she lowers her head and examines my injured leg. “It seems your bandage held during the landing.”

Tomcat steps forward to join us and drops her prey to the ground. “I honestly can’t believe your plan worked. Nakino is gonna be sooooo jealous.”

“Jealous?” I echo.

“Nakino is...” Tomcat’s voice drifts off. She briefly flicks her gaze away before returning to me. “Well, you’ll see what I mean when we meet him.”

Kuro snorts, and her face twists in annoyance and disgust. “Come on. Stay close to me, and nobody will notice your leg.”

I nod, ignoring her agitations to grab my offering from the grass. There’s some beef between Kuro and Nakino, but I won’t have to wait long to find out what it is. I wonder if it’s like her rivalry with Relmoon? Or if it has something to do with Tomcat’s ominous warning?

With Kuro leading the way and Tomcat on my tail, we make our way through the field and slip into the grove surrounding the Grandfather Tree, following a well-traveled path through the underbrush. As it often is in Felra, I pick up the scents of those who’ve

traveled before us: plenty of adults, but hardly any fledges and kits. While Kuro has often explained the threat posed by organized bands of prey, I can't smell any of them here. I wonder how often they pose a threat?

The woods grow dense as we walk, turning day into dusk, and before long I strain to make out Kuro's sooty plumage against the gloomy backdrop of trees and ferns. Not that I'm in danger of losing her — How could I lose track of a scent like hers? — but isn't it a little too dark to live in here? It's the middle of the day, and I can barely see Kuro in front of me.

My concerns are soon addressed as the smells of the forest change, and I sense we're underneath the grand tree. A warm light fills the forest around us as we make our way around a bend in the path, colored like fire but without the flickering qualities of a flame. Almost like... a light bulb.

As the trees begin to thin, I strain to make out a grove of strangely shaped trees trunks up ahead: Devoid of branches, twisting and writhing in shapes that shouldn't be possible for a trunk to achieve, covered in thick lichens and drooping mosses. What on Jade could these trees be? I'm dying to ask Kuro, but the butchered prey in our jaws limits our conversational ability.

With the forest fully illuminated in the unnatural glow, we begin trodding up a steep embankment. And when we reach the top, I'm greeted with yet another fantastic sight: The aerie of the grandfather tree, immense in scale to even the aerie of White Mountain, illuminated by the steady glow of radiant flames scattered around the tree's base.

Kin soar through the air under the well-manicured base, flying to the lowest branches where groups of adults perch and groom one another. The ground is nearly clean of foliage, sparsely populated by the occasional rotting elderus trunk. But the most striking element of this awe-inspiring scene has to be the roots of the epic tree. What I mistook for tree trunks are actually roots themselves, twisting in scale to dizzying heights taller than any building in Varecia, making the Kin perched on their moss-covered flanks look more

like children's toys than grand Dragons. It's here where the dens lie, hollowed out of the natural junctions where roots split off and come to an end, forming a patchwork similar to the dens at White Mountain.

"By the Goddess," I whisper to myself. I've thought about this a lot lately, but what an unforgettable sight. I don't even notice the prey slipping from my jaws until it lands on the ground below me. Sensing that my slack-jawed wonderment is holding up Tomcat, I quickly grab the offering and catch up to Kuro, tempering my limitless awe at the scene before me.

Unlike our arrival in Flat Rock, our entrance to the Grandfather Tree is significantly more subdued. Thank the Goddess. As we walk to the communal prey pile at the base of an old elderus, a few Kin on a high-up branch seem to take notice of me, angling their wings and speaking in hushed growls to the Kin around them. But everyone else seems to be going about their business like we weren't even there. Have they not noticed us, or are we being ignored?

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Looking around, the Dragons here are much older than those living in Flat Rock. No doubt, they're the ones most suspicious of my Farlander heritage. The most likely to be furious about my purple-colored blood. Remembering what Kuro said earlier, I skip ahead and walk by her side so my injured leg is facing inwards, away from prying eyes.

Two of the strange lights flank the pile of communal prey on both sides. After contributing my offering, I trot over and inspect one of them up close. Rising from the base of a heavily weathered boulder, the flame has most of the qualities of fire: It's pretty hot, smells like a fire, and I'm sure if I tossed in something flammable, it would ignite. Its flame is steady in appearance, more like the flame you'd find in a gas burner.

But the boulder is just that: A rock sitting next to a giant, rotting elderus stump. The flame begins a few inches above the stone with no visible ignition source or wires or tubes that could supply fuel to keep it burning. The idea of a fire stone is preposterous, yet here is one happily burning away and destroying everything I thought I knew about fire.

“The lights of the Grandfather Tree,” Kuro announces with a tinge of amusement. She approaches my flank and continues, “Don’t Farlander dens have lights, too?”

So, she’s familiar with the concept of lights. I wasn’t expecting that. I pull my head back and answer, “Yes, our dens have lights. But they need a source of energy to operate. Your lights don’t make any sense. How do you power them?”

“Power?” Her wings droop in confusion.

“You can’t just create light from nothing, Kuro. Fire needs a source of fuel. Otherwise, it will snuff out.”

“*My* fire creates light by itself,” Tomcat boasts as she rejoins us. “I think your Farlander lights are just dumb.”

Dumb? What?! That doesn’t even... ugh! Okay, if this is going over their heads, then there’s no point in explaining the concept of an ‘electrical grid.’

Tomcat teases, “You’re funny when you’re flustered, Asha.”

“Hey, shut up!” I tease back, brushing my wing playfully over her back. “Okay, forget about how they’re powered. Are those marks guiding tree symbols?”

Oh, yeah. There’s also a bunch of strange carvings on the side of the boulder.

Smoothed down by untold years of weathering, they blend into the stone almost perfectly. But from what’s still visible, the symbols look very strange, unlike anything Kuro taught me about. Guiding tree symbols are logical, easy to understand, and easily imparted onto tree bark by Lithan claws. These symbols are much more complex, carved in a size that would be difficult for a Lithan to write, and full of right angles, dots, and curves. I called them guiding tree symbols, but they resemble characters in an alphabet more closely.

Kuro shakes her head. “Nobody knows what those symbols mean.”

I blink and stare at her nonchalant expression. “Seriously?”

“They’ve been around as long as anyone can remember,” Tomcat says, shrugging her wings. “Even the stories have nothing to say about them.”

I swivel my gaze between my feathered friends and the downright magical stones on the ground. “But the flock has a story for everything, right? How can there be nothing about this?”

Tomcat flicks her ears dismissively. “It’s really not a big deal, Asha.”

“What are you talking about?!” I pout, stamping my talons into the ground. I can’t believe this. How can they not understand the importance of a downright magical fire stone with strange symbols written on the side? “This is *huge*! Carvings like these shouldn’t exist in Felra! And neither should I! What if this is some clue to my transformation?”

For a moment, Kuro and Tomcat are silent as the realization this could be significant dawns on them. On a continent where everything is fantastic and immense, it must be easy to miss the importance of something small.

“Well,” Kuro says, speaking up over a gust of wind blowing through the grand tree above us. “Maybe we can ask Keuvra when he appears at the darkmoon gathering. Until then, there’s not much we can do about it, so just be patient, okay?”

Kuro smiles softly, assuaging some of my anxiety. As is customary, the flock will gather at White Mountain during the darkmoon in a couple of days. But if Keuvra actually appears, I’ll be able to ask him why I became a Lithan. And if that happens, I won’t even need to ask him about these strange lights.

“Alright,” I say, returning the smile. It’s funny how Kuro always knows the right things to say to me.

“Yeaaaaah...” Tomcat says, switching her gaze between Kuro and me. “I’m going to go find one of my friends. I’ll see you guys later, okay?”

“Huh?” I stammer as Tomcat turns and bounds away from us. Is she leaving already? But we just got here! “Tomcat, just how many friends do you have in the flock?”

“Oh, I’m friends with everyone!” she chirps, opening her wings for takeoff.

“She’s not kidding,” Kuro says. “Everyone knows Frope.”

Tomcat asks, “Don’t you have a lot of friends back home, too?”

“Um, yeah?” I quickly lie, puffing my chest feathers out. “I’m the Princess! Everyone knows who I am.”

Tomcat stares at Kuro and smirks a toothy grin. “See? Asha knows what it’s like to be popular.”

Kuro gives me a sidelong glance. Did these two have some conversation about me when I wasn’t around? I wonder what it was about?

“Bye-bye!”

Elderus needles are blown like confetti as the pure-white fledge calls her takeoff and leaps into the air. I sigh softly as she climbs upwards, ascending higher until she reaches the base of the great tree’s branches. It seems like whenever we go places, Tomcat is always so quick to desert us.

“Well,” I say, turning my attention back to Kuro. “At least that gives us more time to ourselves, right?”

She smiles that warm smile I’ve come to rely on. At least I can count on Kuro to be at my side.

“Hello? Is anyone home?”

As I call out into the dimly lit den, the musky scents of dried plants and damp wood overwhelm my nose. My eyes adjust to the pale light brought in from the outside by a hole in the ceiling where two branching roots separate. Water drips down long strands of hanging moss growing through the opening, collecting into a puddle on the lumpy wooden floor. A mix of carpet moss, dried foliage, and feathers are strewn about in a great mess, only coming together in a few organized piles to form something resembling bedding. The air is still, but I’m certain there are Kin here.

Instead of a sensible response to my inquiry, I hear back the anguished moan of a young drakaina emanating through a crevice in the far corner of the den. Suitably worried, I look to Kuro for guidance, standing by my side at the entrance to the ground-level den. But her face is straight as a bamboo shoot, not at all concerned by this development.

“Yes, *yes!!*” a drakon’s voice calls out from beyond the room, harried and impatient.
“We’re further back in the den!”

Before I can ask if that was Nakino’s voice, the Kin who’s supposed to clean my leg, Kuro enters the den with a low snort. Trailing behind her, we slip into the back and discover a short passage to another dimly lit room wide enough for only a single Kin. As Kuro reaches the other side, the aromatic scents of dried herbs blast my nostrils, instantly evoking a scene from my faraway home in Ellyntide: the dimly lit room, the pungent smells of drying foliage... this place is just like Sofl’s lab.

Then it dawns on me like an exploding bomb: *Nakino is their herbalist!*

Aghast at my revelation, I thrust inside to find a chestnut-plumaged drakaina lying on her side against a large root with her right wing splayed open, straining to move it forward. Above her and with his back turned to us, a scrawny drakon observes the patient’s wing with a rankled expression. He sighs and lets his tattered black wings droop to the ground, rustling the remains of a dried-out shrub near his talons.

“You need to flex your wing forward, or else the snowbalm won’t be effective!” he scolds.

“Nakino!” she pleads. “This is as far as it will go! T-that plant you applied earlier, the... um....”

“Blood cress,” he answers.

“Right, the blood cress. When you applied it the last time, I could flex my wing past the injury. But this time, I can’t. It just hurts too much. I’m sorry...”

Nakino stares silently at the patient. He lowers his neck and inspects a joint on top of her wing up close, sniffing a tender area of exposed feathers.

“Something’s wrong,” he announces, frustration coloring his voice. “I need to double-check my stocks and ensure they haven’t spoiled. But first, I have to greet the Sister who just entered.”

“O-of course, Nakino.” The woman dips her head and carefully refolds her wing against her side.

“Now, then!!” Nakino rumbles, flaring his wings as he lumbers to his talons. “I would very much appreciate it if...”

As he turns around to greet us, Nakino’s gaze sails straight past me and lands on Kuro. Reacting as if he had seen a ghost, his voice dissipates, and every feather on his body stands still. If I could see his skin, I’m certain it would be as pale as a fresh snowfall.

"Oh," he mutters breathlessly. "I-it's you, Kur—"

"*Nakino*," she growls, overpowering his voice. "We need to talk in private. *Now*."

65. Doctor's Appointment

Nakino flinches and retreats a step at hearing Kuro's demand. "Talk *in private*? B-but Kuro, I'm with—"

Kuro lowers her head and bares fangs, issuing a baleful growl as loud as any I've heard from her.

GRRRR...

"Alright, alright!" Nakino squeaks, lifting his wings in front of him like a shield. "We can talk in private!"

Seemingly satisfied, Kuro ceases her threat and relaxes her feathers. "Good. Now come with me."

She beckons with her wings to follow and exits toward the passage into the front room. After taking a moment to exhale from the confrontation, Nakino quickly follows after her,

hanging his tail low behind him. It's not until he's nearly past my shoulders that he finally notices I exist.

"Oh!" he chirps with surprise. "It's... *you*." As he runs his gaze up and down my body, his face settles in a strange way I've never seen before, even as a Lemur. Is he just surprised to see I'm really a Lathan like him?

"*Nakino!*" Kuro bellows like thunder from outside the room, smacking her tail against the floor. Fear lances Nakino, thrusting him back to reality and propelling him quickly out of the room.

With the timorous doctor out of the way, I have a moment to take in my surroundings. The second room of Nakino's den is mainly like the first — piles of formed bedding are strewn about the floor, and a hole in the ceiling allows in pale light. Besides the passage back to the front room, two more rooms stemming from this one. One to the left and one to the right. The room on the left seems to be broadly similar to this one. If the drakaina on the floor is any indication, this area is used to treat patients.

Then there's the room on the right. The pungent odors of decaying plants, many unfamiliar to my enhanced Lathan senses, are drifting away and basking the area in a most pleasing medley of scents. If this den is the equivalent of Sofl's lab, then that's the room where the stocks of plants are located.

This is...

Um.

There's something I need you to understand.

Discovering an entire room of decaying plants utterly unknown to science is the stuff botanists dream about. This is the *motherlode*. A jackpot in every sense of the term. It could take years, *decades* even, to completely decode the secrets of the specimens in this room. Our understanding of plants on Jade could be fundamentally altered forever... And I get to be the one who unearths it all. Me, me, me: Princess Asha!

I square my shoulders and stretch my wings, gazing into the storage room with bated breath. I'm sure this Nakino guy won't mind if I take a quick look inside, right? Besides, I'm sure there's a whole slew of things I can—

“Um...”

The drakaina on the floor speaks up, interrupting my in-progress botanist epiphany. I give her my attention and try not to look too agitated.

“Are you the Farlander?” she asks coyishly.

Well, I suppose I can't fly under the radar forever. “Guilty as charged,” I confess, letting my wings droop gracelessly to the floor.

She stares at me and blinks.

Um, right. That expression makes no sense to her. “I mean, yes. Asha, Daughter-Of-Kelani. Pleased to meet you.” I mantle my wings and dip my head.

“Oh, I had a feeling it was you,” she says, loosening up. “Those blue feathers of yours really stand out.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“My name is Messi, Daughter-Of-Flea, “ she says, tripping her good wing. ”Did you get hurt, too?”

Feeling that my moss bandage is still present, I whirl about and raise my wing to present the injured leg. “It’s just a scratch. I’m only here to get it cleaned up.”

Messi stares at the bandage for a moment but doesn’t give it any extra thought. “Oh, well, that’s good. You must not be used to your new body yet, so let me give you some advice: Don’t take a nap near the edge of a root! You’ll fall off and end up like poor old me. Being stuck to the ground is miserable!”

Having been recently granted wings and the ability to fly, I’d have to agree. “I’ll keep that in mind,” I chuckle to myself, imagining how graceless a Lithan tumbling off a

Grandfather Tree root must have looked. “Nakino mentioned using something called blood cress. Is that it?”

I angle my wing toward the leafy shrub, roots and all, left on the floor near the chestnut woman.

“Oh, yes. That’s what he was using. But for some reason, it isn’t working today. He needs to loosen my wing before he can rub snowberry into the injury.”

“Snowberry?” I echo. “But that’s....”

It couldn’t be the same snowberry that grows in Ellyntide, could it? I suppose that wouldn’t be too unusual – I’ve seen other plants in Felra that also grow in Ellyntide. But if it’s the same plant, then how can we have the same name for it?

That *definitely* shouldn’t be possible... right? More intrigued than ever, I inspect the blood cress up close. Although it’s a common family member, this species doesn’t grow in Ellyntide. So, what gives?

Messi seems amused by my curiosity. “There’s more in his stocks if you’re interested.”

I raise my head and peer inside the room, getting my first clear glimpse of the numerous stocks of plants stuffed into innumerable slim crevices on the wall.

“As a matter of fact, I am.”

“So when Tomcat returned, all we had to do was get the sap off the spruce bark and apply it to the back of the moss. It stopped the bleeding, and the bandage has held ever since. Pretty neat, huh?”

Nakino stares down like a Crow as I tell the harrowing tale of how I was injured at the wreck of the Mezonnia. After Kuro finished her lecture, a wide-eyed Nakino led me to his den’s farthest, most private room. Located in the back of the stock room, there’s just enough room for my leg to be cleaned.

Despite the vividness of my storytelling, he doesn’t seem at all impressed. “Mmh. Yes, I know how to apply a moss bandage.”

Oh? “You do?”

“Most of the flock are unaware of the technique as I’m only able to use it away from my den,” he says, giving his chest feathers a quick lick. “The Grandfather Tree, and the trees surrounding it, don’t produce enough sap to use them here.”

“Oh,” I deflate. So much for being able to impress him with that trick. “Well, that’s unfortunate.”

Nakino reaches for the plant he brought into the den, slipping its woody base stem between his dewclaw and the rest of his talon. Whoa, what?! I didn’t know Lithans could hold objects like that!

“So, tell me,” he says, resting on his hind legs and using his other talon to inspect the plant like he was reading a book. “This purple blood of yours. You never noticed it until now?”

I shake my head. “Nuh-uh. I’ve only had a few scratches since I became a Lathan. And I don’t think any of them were deep enough to bleed through my down feathers.”

“Sounds like you haven’t had any tough fights yet.”

“A False-Kin almost murdered me,” I remind.

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He just grunts as he returns to the ground on all fours.

Sheesh! This has to be what Tomcat was warning me about: his awful bedside manner! Kuro must have had a particularly unpleasant experience to dislike him so much.

With the plant inspected, he stands over my injured leg and pulls up a corner of the bandage with his fangs. “This is going to sting,” he mumbles.

“Alright, g— *Ah!*”

Without waiting, he rips the bloodied bandage from my feathers, exposing the wound. Once the stinging subsides, I twist my neck around to join Nakino in inspecting my leg up close. The bleeding has subsided, allowing the blood to settle into an unpleasant shade of purple and black.

“Have you ever seen anything like it?” I ask.

“Absolutely not,” he dismisses.

Nakino turns and uses his jaws to gingerly rip a small branch from the medicinal plant, causing a flurry of dried leaves and wilted flowers to suffuse over the ground. He then dips the branch into a small depression on the floor where rainwater collects and waits until the leaves are completely soaked. I’ve never seen the plant he’s using before, but with just a quick glance, I can tell that it has therapeutic properties.

This is shaping up to be a very awkward doctor’s appointment. But that’s okay because I think I know how to start a conversation with him. As Nakino returns and lowers his neck to clean the wound, I begin, “When I was a Lemur, my blood was red, and—“

“Believe me. *I know.*”

After staring at me a moment longer, his agitation subsides. He uses his tongue to reposition the branch to the front of his jaws and returns to work, rubbing the leaves against my wound in long sweeping motions to soak up the blood.

Well, that was rude! But whatever. This guy is nothing compared to the nobles back home. “If you combine the colors red and blue, you get purple, right?”

He stops, gives me a sidelong glance, and then continues without saying a word.

“Well, *I* think it makes sense, anyway.”

Okay, now he *really* wants me to shut up. Time to deploy the real conversation starters. “What are those leaves you’re holding?”

He stops and stares at me, unable to figure out why I care. “Sassefron.”

“Do you use it to treat wounds?”

He looks at me like I'm the biggest idiot he's ever seen.

Yes, well. I suppose that was a dumb question, after all. He throws the bloodied branch aside and reaches around to grab another. My wound is cleaning up quite nicely, and barely any surface blood is left. As he turns around and cleans the wound, I casually mention, "In the Farlands, we'd classify it as a member of the *Rosaceae* family."

He stops and stares at me like I'm speaking Lagoran. "The *what?*"

I angle my wing towards the plant at his side. "*Rosaceae*. We categorize all the plants that exist according to a taxonomic system. I can tell that's a *Rosaceae* by its shared evolutionary characteristics: stipulate leaves and the five sepals and petals on each of the wilted flowers."

He scoffs and chuckles to himself, nearly dislodging the branch from between his fangs. "That's a lot of Farlander nonsense if I've heard it. Why would you need to know all that?"

"When you learn enough about plants, you begin to understand what nature favors."

He watches me a moment; his face cemented in a dour frown. But as he turns back from tossing away the blood-soaked branch, I see his expression has softened. He asks, "What else do you know?"

"I know why the drakaina in the other den isn't healing."

His muscles tense. “Why.”

“You’re confusing blood cress with elderberry. The elderberry stems are covered in trichomes — an evolutionary adaptation that looks like tiny hairs. The stems of blood cress don’t have any.”

Nakino’s neck recoils, and his wings droop like a spider plant. Without saying a word, he bounds into the stock room and runs his wing over the wall, searching the innumerable crevices where plants have been untidily stored away... all except the blood cress, which I inspected during his lecture with Kuro. When he reaches it, he pulls out a large wad of plants with his jaws, drops it to the ground, and inspects them up close.

“You’re right...!” he soon exclaims. “There are two different plants mixed together! I can’t believe I...”

He flashes a face full of surprise at me, grabs a sample of blood cress, and races back into the room where Messi is resting. Hey! What about *my* wound?

“Uh, Doc?” I call out.

There’s no response, only the muffled voice of Nakino speaking. Understanding I have no choice, I quickly check my wound — hardly any blood left. If I cover it with my wing, I should be safe from prying eyes. I clamber to my talons, hobble past the stock room, and emerge on the other side to see Kuro and Nakino standing over Messi.

“Now, try flexing,” Nakino mumbles with a branch of blood cress in his jaws.

Slowly, Messi extends her injured wing. She reaches the farthest point it moved last time, grits her fangs in pain, and then slowly pushes it farther. “It’s... It’s working! I can flex my wing again!”

“Keuvra’s blessing!” Nakino exclaims, throwing the blood cress to the ground. “Now, we just have to apply the snowberry!”

Oh, that’s simple. I take a step forward and say, “Wait here. I’ve got this.”

Kuro blinks. “Huh? Asha?”

Before Nakino can object, I bounce away toward the stock room. Even as a Lemur, I could find snowberry with my eyes closed. So pulling it out of the wall here will be a piece of cake! After a few moments of scanning the crevices, I recognize its distinct, white-colored fruit poking out of a hole near the top of the ceiling. I yank out a full-sized plant and carry it back to a wide-eyed Nakino.

“Is this enough?” I ask, dropping it to the ground.

“How did... yes, that’s enough.”

Getting straight to work, Nakino rolls a large clump of berries onto a patch of leaves and stamps with his foretalon. He then lowers his head and blows a flame just above the smushed concoction of berries and leaves, heating it till it nearly ignites. He blows away the excess heat, gathers some of the freshly crafted balm on his wing talon, and rubs it into the wounded area of Messi’s wing.

“Oh!” she chirps as it’s applied. “Yes, it’s still warm. I can feel it working!”

She flexes her wing again, extending it smoothly past the point she could barely reach last time. “Nakino,” she says, then turns me. “*And Asha.* Thank you, both.”

“You’re very welcome,” I say, dipping my wings.

“Y-yes, I’m glad you’re feeling better,” Nakino flushes, rubbing the top of his wing against his head. For the first time there isn’t a trace of agitation in his voice.

Like a creaking door, Kuro swivels her head towards me. Her face is painted with surprise. “How do you know all this stuff about plants?”

“Well,” I smirk, feeling my cheeks flush warm. I haven’t told Kuro *any* of this. “I’ve been fascinated by plants since I was a little girl. When I wasn’t doing Princess stuff in my den,

I was always outside in our garden planting flowers, landscaping, all kinds of stuff! It was my full-time hobby.”

Nakino asks, “And that’s how you knew what Snowberry was?”

“Oh, yes. I... um...” Remembering they don’t know about books, it takes me a moment to think of a concept they’re familiar with. “...I heard all the stories about plants. There are a lot of animals in the Farlands who know about plants, you see. We call them ‘*botanists*.’”

“I see...” Nakino trails off, deep in thought. “You’re just like me, aren’t you?”

“Well,” I hesitate, seeing Kuro’s face turn sour. “A little bit. I guess. But I was never a healer like you. I just like learning about plants because they’re neat!”

For a moment, Nakino is quiet before exhaling and dropping his head low. He begins pacing slowly to the other side of the room, then lifts his head suddenly. “Asha,” he says, turning back around. He flicks his eyes to Kuro and continues, “I would like you to stay here and rest for a few days.”

Kuro reacts like she is attacked, splaying her wings and taking a provocative step forward. “Is she still injured?”

“Y-Yes,” Nakino stutters, nearly taking a step back himself. “Her wound has cleaned up well but hasn’t begun healing. A-and the Grandfather Tree doesn’t produce enough sap, so I can’t make her a new ba—“

“I’ll find more sap,” Kuro rumbles, taking another step.

“But that’s not all!” the doctor quickly ripostes. “I-I think it would be beneficial if Asha shared her knowledge of plants with me. I mean, with us. The flock.”

Wait, he does? I just got here, and he already wants my help?!

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Kuro snorts. “Asha has to finish her training. If she doesn’t, then she—“

“Kuro, wait.”

I place my wing gently against her side. As soon as my feathers touch her, she whips her head around, and I nearly flinch at what I see: fangs bared, ears curled back, the full breadth of her fury directed towards me. The side of Kuro I haven’t seen since we first met and the one I never wanted to see again. I know she doesn’t mean it — I caught her in the middle of being upset at someone else. But seeing this side of her staring back at me again, I can’t help but feel my heart ache.

...I wish I could make her happy...

...Not right now. I bottle my emotions and set them aside. This is too important.

I draw a measured breath and stare into Kuro's eyes. "I want to help him."

"*What?!*" She hisses.

"My training with plants could be invaluable to the flock's survival! I never healed Farlanders with them, but my brother did. And he taught me most of the things he knew."

The anger begins to fade from Kuro's eyes and be replaced by something else. An emotion I can't quite describe. Heaving quick and erratic breathes, she stumbles, "B-but we have to finish your—"

"If I'm not fully healed before my flight home, then it won't matter how much training you give me. There is no Nakino in the Farlands. So, I might as well make myself useful to the Flock."

Kuro grits her teeth and grunts, reacting like I physically attacked her. Can't she see how beneficial this could be to the flock? Why is she having such a hard time accepting it? Out of the corner of my eye, I see Nakino stepping forward with a glint in his eye, ready to speak up and say something. I flick my eyes toward him and frown, stopping him dead in his tracks.

“Kuro,” I say, stepping forward. “We could save lives!”

She watches me for a moment, unchanging, before slamming her eyes shut. Slowly, her feathers begin to relax, and she settles back against her haunches. “Fine,” she murmurs. “Once you’re fully healed, you’ll have to say your goodbyes. It won’t be long before the crossing to the Farlands becomes impassable.”

So, this will be one of the last things I do in Felra. So be it. “I understand.”

“But, please,” she pleads, angling her head close to mine, close enough to feel her warmth. “I want to be with you on your last night here.”

My heart skips a beat. “*You do?*”

She nods. “There are so many things about the Farlands I have to know. I-I could listen to your stories all night long if you’d allow me.”

Ohhh, so that’s what this is about. With Tomcat around, there hasn’t been much time to share my stories with Kuro — there’s so much stuff Tomcat can’t know because she hasn’t come of age. And given how hostile she’s been to Nakino, hanging around his den isn’t an option, either. For Kuro, my final night will truly be her last chance to learn as much as she can about the Farlands. Her last chance to satiate the curiosity that compelled her to trust me when everything was telling her not to. No wonder this is such a big deal to her.

“Okay,” I smile. “I promise we’ll spend my last night together.”

She smiles back and chitters the way she often does. As she nuzzles her head into mine, I take in her spiced scent, allowing it to calm me.

“Soooo,” Nakino says, clearing his throat and reinserting himself into the conversation. “What else do you know about plants, Asha?”

I can’t help but smile a big, toothy grin.

66. Lineage

“Almighty, ancient Keuvra! Appear before us!”

Just like last time, the pillar of fire explores upwards from the Gathering Stone, spreading its great blue flames over the ceiling of the White Mountain aerie. As they fan outwards over the porous rocks and dissipate into nothing, my gaze falls to the base of the rock where the fires that illuminate the mountain burn bright. I hold my breath, waiting to see if they’ll snuff out and herald the arrival of not only the Dragon deity but the answers to questions that have plagued me since I became a Lithan.

But it too is just like last time. The fires flicker and dance as if nothing at all magical had occurred. I exhale, feeling my wings droop to the ground in defeat — Keuvra won't appear today.

The mood around the aerie is similarly somber. Keuvra failing to appear once was unprecedented; to not appear twice seems unconscionable. But before the crowd can get rowdy with apprehension, Meldi and Khosa speak to assuage them of their fears, announcing Keuvra is still present in the mountain and will reappear once the time is right.

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

What *is* my fate? What does the flock have to do with it? I can't help but wonder if my presence in Felra is impeding Keuvra's return.

The gathering soon concludes after some remarks from the elders. Meldi looks at me and nods, signaling my participation in the event is no longer required. Still crestfallen, I unfurl my wings and slowly glide to the ground where Frida and Nakino are waiting for me among the crowd of departing Kin.

"Asha..." the voice drifts from Kuro's younger sister as I land on a nearby boulder. She looks as deflated as I am. "I'm sorry he didn't appear."

I hop down and flutter my wings, trying to feel upbeat. "It's okay. I'm sure he'll return after I fly back to my Kingdom."

Before she left me at the Grandfather Tree, Kuro and I agreed that my final day in Felra would occur after the upcoming darkmoon gathering. Besides a few loose ends needing to be tied up (most importantly, the promise I made to the elders about sharing Ellyntide's prey,) this would be my last chance to commune with the Dragon deity before I returned to Ellyntide. So much for that part.

"Keuvra could at least tell us why he won't appear," Nakino grumbles, "Such a waste of time."

I can't help but smirk at Nakino's predictable grumpiness. Over the past few days, we've worked tirelessly to exchange as much botanical knowledge as possible. He's come such a long way with understanding our taxonomic system! And in turn, I've become much more familiar with the flora of Felra, learning about all the plants Nakino is looking for and how he uses them to take care of the flock. Through it all, I've learned that despite the thorniness of his personality, there's a drakon underneath that's compassionate about those he cares for. In a certain way, I admire him.

As I rejoin the group, Frida tries to remain optimistic. "I'm sure there's a good reason he hasn't."

"Not good enough," Nakino says, kicking a stone under his talons. "Asha leaves in a few days, and we might never see her again."

"Well, you'd better make the best of your time left with her! What are you two going to do now? I heard Gish caught live prey for the flock to play with."

“Let’s look for Kuro,” I suggest. At mentioning her name, I sense Nakino tense up next to me. “I want to find her before the sun reappears.”

I was certain Kuro would return to the Grandfather Tree to fly with me today, but she was nowhere to be seen when the call from the top of White Mountain echoed through the lower valley. Nakino and I ran into Frida when we arrived, but we couldn’t locate Kuro before the elders spoke.

“Ugh! I was certain she would fly over here after you went before the elders. I don’t know where she could be!”

“Well, let’s walk around and— *oh!*”

I nearly squawk at something nipping the tips of my tail feathers. Expecting a talon to have accidentally trampled it, I twist my neck around only to find nobody there. It’s not until I lower my gaze that I see a fledgling with her body slumped into a playfully threatening stance, fangs bared.

“*Hee-hee!*”

” she growls. “Hi, Asha!”

“Well hello, little one!” It seems my tail was mistaken for prey.

She relaxes and stares up at me, her face beaming. “Your story today was so neat!! I wanna hear another one!!”

The tale of my encounter with the Beatrix was such a hit at the last gathering that I was asked to tell a new story today. So before the summoning ceremony, I flew up to the Gathering Stone and recounted the showdown in the hollow and how I mysteriously transformed into a Lithan. It seems I captivated at least one young listener.

Still, I chuckle hesitantly. She must be unaware I’m leaving soon. “Well, if I tell another story, I have to do it in front of the entire flock, you know?”

“Ohhhhh,” she deflates, drooping her wings. “I understand. Well, you should listen to our story instead! Cina is telling one about Keuvra!”

Oh, really? “Is that so?”

Frida steps to my side. “Hey, that sounds like fun!”

“No, it doesn’t,” Nakino grumbles.

“But Cina’s such a great storyteller! And besides, Asha’s never heard the story about how Keuvra became a deity, right?”

I shake my head. “Never!”

“Then it’s settled!” Frida announces. “Little Fress, would you please lead the way?”

“Hee-hee!” she giggles, her spirits fully restored. “Alright! Follow me, Asha!!” Without waiting a moment longer, she turns and darts away from us.

Frida begins following, then stops to look back. “Asha, let’s look for Kuro afterward, okay? I think it’s a good idea for you to hear this.”

I nod in agreement. While I’m still in Felra, I should try to learn as much as possible about... everything! Perhaps there’s a clue in Keuvra’s story as to why I became a Lithan? I think even Kuro would agree it’s a good idea.

The little fledge bounds through the thinning crowd, humming a tune as she walks, playfully bobbing her wings up and down. Eventually, she leads us to a jagged outcrop of rock where a group of noisy fledges have gathered in a semi-circle around a grizzled old drakaina. As we approach the back of the group, the pale-gray whiskers on her muzzle twitch.

“Well, well,” she muses in a ragged voice, opening her eyes wide enough to look beyond the tufts of slate feathers surrounding them. “This is most unexpected. Little ones, it would seem we have a special guest.”

The crowd of kits and fledges twists around. Like moths to a flame, their eyes are drawn to me.

“It’s Asha!!”

“Asha, what’s it like having hands?”

“Can you make Lemur noises?”

“Hey, Asha! What was it like being dumb prey?”

Before I can become overwhelmed, a low growl from the area of the outcrop causes the ground to tremble, quickly silencing the nattering fledges. But instead of being upset, Cina’s expression is just as cheery as before. “I hope you young ones can appreciate just how special an occasion this is. Child of the Goddess, I am Cina, Daughter-Of-Tekoosh. ”

“Asha, Daughter-Of-Kelani,” I say, mantling my wings. “Thank you very much for allowing me to listen to your story. This one says you will be telling a story about Keuvra.”

I angle my wing toward the fledge we followed, standing at my side. She smiles a big, boastful grin.

This book was originally published on NovelBin. Check it out there for the real experience.

“Young Etoli is correct,” she says, flicking her ears to beckon Etoli back into the group. She giggles and jumps forward over the wing of a lounging boy and takes a seat on the hard ground. “It is a story that all Kin are told as kits, one they carry with them for the rest of their lives. It is about Keuvra, but also our history as a flock. For our past is intertwined with him just as our future.”

Cina signals with her wings for everyone present to lie down and get comfortable. Frida and I have no trouble following her request, but it takes a moment and a huffy grunt for Nakino to comply.

“Our story today is called,”

Keuvra and the Three Domains

Untold generations ago, long before the Sons and Daughters of Keuvra, our flock was one of many great Dragon clans of Jade. In those times before ascendant animals, it was the Dragons who ruled the Moon! Every island, every mountain, and every place the wind blew was our domain. We stalked prey on the land, in the sky, and at the sea — a lake of water so

impossibly vast, one could fly for days and never see land. Prey was limitless, and the land was warm. It was truly paradise.

It was then that Azurrel, the God of Creation, appeared. They came before the Dragon clans and offered them the Gift of Communication and the Gift of Ascendancy.

“What?!” An unbidden gasp escapes me. Dragons were offered the gift of Ascendancy? *Before* Lemurs?! It’s not until the eyes of everyone present are drawn to me that I realize the gravity of my mistake.

“That’s right,” Cina mews without a trace of hostility. Instead, she appears somewhat amused. “Daughter-Of-Kelani, I sense that your Goddess has taught you a... *different* telling of events.”

“Yes,” I exhale, relieved I wasn’t scolded for interrupting. “But I would prefer to hear your version first before discussing mine. It was rude of me to interrupt. Please, continue.”

Cina remains unchanged and nods silently. Before she can resume the story, a wing brushes against me. I glance to my left and find Frida smiling like an idiot, plainly amused by what just occurred.

“Gee, thanks!” I whisper.

The gift of Communication, the gift to speak the way we do now, was readily accepted by the great Dragon clans. And to continue speaking over great distances, we have kept parts of our primitive tongue.

Fascinating! I've known from the moment I met Kuro that Lithans had the gift of Communication. But I've often wondered why we can roar like ferals or why I feel myself sometimes growling, even when I'm not consciously thinking about it. It's just the useful, feral parts of communication we kept.

But what about Redagas? They're Dragons too, right? So, how come the one I fought didn't understand me when I tried talking to it? Perhaps they're called *Flase-Kin* by the flock because they are lesser, witless Dragons who couldn't be given the gift of Communication.

But when offered Ascendancy, the Dragon clans refused. To prey on the land, in the sky, and at the sea — that was the essence of a Dragon. And to deprive us of our essence would render us Dragons no more. And so, Azurrel searched elsewhere, finding others willing to receive their gift: Lemurs, Martens, Rabbits, and Avians — The ascendant creatures of the Farlands we know today. Stricken from their feral ways, they walked upright on two legs. The Avians, once compatriots to Dragons in the sky, began new lives on the ground. The Dragon clans pitied those hapless creatures and preyed on them mercilessly.

Meanwhile, competition between the great clans was fierce. Our Snowfell Flock was considered minor -- a weak contingent of foolhardy Dragons from the north. But it was during this chaos that Almighty Keuvra, Son-Of-Athe, appeared. From the summit of White Mountain, he quickly ascended to power in the flock. And with his cunning wit, he commanded the flock into battle. One by one, battle by battle, the other clans fell before Keuvra and the Snowfell Flock. And when the final drop of blood was spilled, it was Keuvra standing last. For the first time, the Dragons of Jade were united as one. And their leader was Keuvra.

But all was not well. While Keuvra fought for White Mountain, the moon itself began to change. Slowly the land grew cold, chilling prey to their bones. Then the sky grew inhospitable, grounding all but the grandest prey. And finally, the seas, once a source of endless bounty, turned to ice. Our paradise had become a bleak, frozen Hell.

In our darkest hour, Azurrel appeared once more, bearing a radical proposal: Follow his teachings, and he would rend the islands themselves from the moon, lifting them into the sky and away from the storms below. But Keuvra was suspicious, fearing the flock would become subservient to Azurrel. All the blood spilled to unite the Dragons in harmony would be for naught.

Keuvra negotiated, and a compromise was reached. Five mortals were chosen to deify and represent their species before the God of Creation. Malfex, the Marten. Jaya, the Rabbit. Scew, the Avian. Etain, the Lemur. And Keuvra, the Dragon. To this day, they watch over us all as our stewards.

And so, the continents did rise. The land warmed, and the skies calmed. Our sea had become the lakes, the streams, and the rivers. The grand aerie you sit in now was carved by Keuvra, a gift to his flock for protection from harsh winters. And on Maki, Keuvra raised the Land of the Next Life, the final home for all Dragons. To us, the Sons and Daughters of Keuvra, we owe him our existence. For he protects us from beyond far —on the land, in the sky, and at the sea.

Cina folds her wings and dips her head, signaling the end of the story. The young crowd exhales and glances between themselves, unsure how to process the grand tale they just heard. Even in Ellyntide, the story of how mortals became divine and continents rose is a big shock to young audiences.

“Daughter-Of-Kelani,” Cina addresses me with a curious gaze. “Now that our story is told, I am curious to hear your perspective.”

“Well,” I say, feeling the eyes of the crowd drawn to me again. “It’s very similar to the story The Goddess teaches us about why the Conti— I mean, why the *islands* were raised. But in our version of the story, the ascendant animals unite to negotiate with Azurrel. Dragons are only mentioned leaving the Farlands to roost in Felra.”

It’s fascinating how similar our stories are. The flock’s account of the Great Freeze is identical, and they even have their own version of the afterlife on Maki. But it’s just like the story of how animals ascended, the one I heard in the chapel on the day I left Varecia: Everyone has their own version that flatters their particular species. In our version, Azurrel appears to the Lemurs first, and it’s the Lemurs who convince Azurrel to allow Etain to deify. The flock’s version made it sound like everyone would have frozen to death if not for Keuvra!

“How could the ascendant animals unite?” A young drakon asks. “I thought they hate each other and fight all the time?”

“Well!” I say, just a little flabbergasted. Where did he learn that from? “It’s true that we fight each other — a lot. But we’re trying to get better! At the Goddess’s urging, my mother has been working on a peace treaty with one of the other Kingdoms.”

Yes, she *has* been working on the peace treaty. Ever since I was a little girl. Mom has been unwilling to concede the territory we gained during the fourth war, and the King of Sarlain is reluctant to admit that he staged the assassination of my grandmother. Despite some incessant pestering from the Goddess, almost no progress has been made in the past decade.

On second thought, maybe that wasn't the best example of how civilized we are.

"But what surprised me the most," I say, continuing the original conversation. "Was that Azurrel came to offer the Dragons the gift of Ascendancy before Lemurs. None of our stories teach us that."

Cina's eyes narrow slightly. "Does that trouble you? That Azurrel chose Dragons first?"

"Not at all," I quickly follow up. "I'm sure it would bother some of the Lemurs I know back home. But, now that I've lived as a Lithan for a little while, I think I understand Azurrel's reasoning."

Besides being the Apex predator of the moon, a single Lithan's power is astonishing. Why wouldn't Azurrel pick Lithans first? It is a matter of pride for some Lemurs that all the other enlightened species received their hands from us — They view us as the 'progenitor' species. I wonder how they'd react learning we were Azurrel's plan B?

Cina's mouth curls into a gentle smile, pleased by my response. "All of Azurrel's creations have their role on Jade. It is the role of Kin to be the strongest and to prey on all others. Azurrel's offer, and our rejection, are proof of this truth."

A wing dark as night brushes gently against my side. "Hey," Nakino says. "I found Kuro."

The healer angles his ears behind him, pointing the way across the mountain to a crowd of Kin gathered close to one of the stone towers that lights the aerie. In the center of the group, the wings of a moss-colored Kin are raised over the crowd, darting back and forth to a cadence of shrieks and roars.

“Ah,” Frida sighs longingly. “There she is. Getting into another fight.”

Anxiety tightens my chest. Was she getting into fights instead of looking for me? Or did another cocky boy try to challenge her while she was looking? But more importantly, is she alright?

“Thank you for sharing your story,” I say, tipping my wings to Cina. “But, um, we need to make sure Kuro is okay.”

“I see,” Cina says, chuckling to herself. “Very well, then. Know you are always welcome to listen to my stories, child of the Goddess.”

I tip my wings in thanks before the group, then turn to take off in search of my friend.

67. Of Darkmoons and Dark Thoughts

ROAARR!

Kuro launches herself toward the arrogant boy with talons splayed. Lunging to his left, he pivots his wing just in time, but not before Kuro can land an indirect blow that tears away more precious flight feathers. As he makes contact with the ground, he hesitates, flicking a glance at his wing. To lose a spar against Kuro would be embarrassing, but to lose the ability to fly would be catastrophic. His trepidation proves costly as Kuro bounces off her right hindleg and lands another glancing blow against his leg. Moss green feathers stain blue as blood spills from another fresh wound.

“Frida,” I ask quietly, sitting to my side in the crowd of spectators. “You’re her sister. Why is she like this?”

Without taking her eyes off the action, the gray Kin frowns and sighs longingly. “She’s just... always been this way. Quick to get into arguments and quick to fight back. It doesn’t help that the boys can’t stand losing to her.” After a moment’s silence, she adds, “There’s nothing wrong with a fiery personality, though.”

I recall my first encounter with Frida and how loudly she screamed at her Grandmother for refusing to summon the flock. Truly, these two are cut from the same cloth.

“Then what about me?” I ask over the sound of Kuro’s opponent yowling in anguish. “Everyone says she’s difficult to get along with, but she’s always been kind to me.”

For a moment, Frida is silent as she watches the fight draw closer to a conclusion. She turns to me with a reassuring glint and says, “I think you should personally ask her that question.”

I stare into her a moment, wondering why she's acting coy. I'm certain Frida knows the truth — she has to. She's Kuro's sister! If anyone knows how that girl works, it's her. So why deflect the question back at me? She wants to help Kuro, right? If someone asked me why Sofl is so timid all the time, I would totally tell them! Ugh!

“Yield...!!”

But before I get too upset, a meager voice signals the end of the spar. Kuro is pinning the boy into the ground with one foretalon against his head and the other on his shoulder — A closer fight than last time, but the outcome is the same. With the winner decided, the crowd begins to thin, and the boy, torn and bloodied, slowly clambers to his talons. Kuro watches him from afar, an ever-present reminder of who he lost to.

Our group watches as well, waiting for Kuro to finish her stare-down. But after a few moments, I grow impatient. Snatching the initiative, I step forward and call out, “Hey!”

Kuro snaps out of her vigil and turns to me dumbfounded. “Asha—!” she growls, her body language indicating she's happy to see me, but her voice stuck in a menacing register. If not for our friendship, I would be adequately frightened.

“Blue skies, Kuro!” I bound to her side and rub my head into hers. She holds her head steady for a brief moment before pushing back against mine. I feel her warmth, and a wave of happiness washes over me.

“Warm currents,” she croons gently into my ear.

I pull my head back and nearly gasp at what I see. Small patches of feathers are missing from all over her body, and a sizable, bloodied gnash is bleeding out on her left foreleg. “Oh! Kuro, are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” she flatly dismisses, giving her chest a quick lick.

“She’s endured worse,” Nakino says, stepping forward with Frida to inspect Kuro’s wounds closer. “A few scratches are nothing Kuro can’t handle.”

It sounds like Nakino has treated far worse battle scars on Kuro, which means there’s someone in the flock who can match Kuro’s fighting prowess. I wonder who it is? Well, I’m not going to press the issue by asking her. Kuro’s eyes are narrowed, and she seems a bit agitated (More so than usual with Nakino around.) Meldi scolded her the last time she got into a fight, so she must feel self-conscious about getting into another.

While Nakino is strangely calm around Kuro, Frida’s a different story. Hackles raised, she’s visibly irritated by her sister’s behavior. “Kuro!” she snaps. “We were looking for you everywhere before the gathering started! Where in greenwing’s creche were you?”

Kuro flicks her eyes to the boy, now limping, and shakes her head. “Sorry. I got distracted.”

While I'm certain Kuro can handle her sister's *fiery* personality, I think now is the right time to intervene and ask her something important. I smile and quickly ask, "Hey, Kuro? Could we talk in private, please?"

At that utterance, the eyes of everyone present grow wide as sunflowers.

"H-huh?" Kuro stammers, dumbfounded by my impromptu request. "Y-yeah, of course we could, Asha."

"Good," I say, flicking my ears upward. "Let's fly to one of the upper dens, okay?"

"Yeah..." Kuro nods, still surprised but looking relieved.

Frida steps forward and inserts her head between Kuro and me, the look on her face menacing. In an almost pleasant voice, she inquires, "*Asha?*"

"I didn't mean to tear Kuro away from you so quickly. I just wanted to ask her a few questions!" I smile. "I hope that's okay."

Slowly, the passive-aggressiveness fades from her face as she recalls our conversation a few moments ago. "Oh!" she chitters, the malice in her voice dissolved. "Yeah, that's just fine!"

It better be, because I'm not wasting any time! I'm going to find out once and for all why Kuro's acted so nice around me!

"This has been an incredible adventure full of memories I'll cherish forever..." I drift off, momentarily caught up in my thoughts. "...But I'm ready to go home. My family has to know I'm safe. And I'm ready to change back to normal and return to my old life as a Princess."

After departing Frida and Nakino, I led Kuro to one of the upper dens of the aerie where we could have some space to ourselves, away from the jubilant activity of the gathering. I intended to ask why she's acted so nice to me, but somehow our conversation drifted back to me and my time in Felra.

If you encounter this tale on Amazon, note that it's taken without the author's consent. Report it.

Perched on the rocks outside the den, we have a birds-eye view of everything below us—stories being told, songs being sung, races through the air... even a fight or two. After living among them these past few weeks, I feel connected to their flock in a way I would never have thought possible. Given enough time, I might even think I belong here.

But this is not my world. My role is that of a Princess, leading a mundane existence until she can rule her Kingdom from a throne of lilac. For everyone I've ever known and all those who would look to me as their Monarch, I owe them my unyielding commitment to return home.

Laying at my side, Kuro is silent for a time, watching the Kin below with a sedate, if not stern, expression. Finally, she asks, "What will you do when you become a Lemur again?"

Oh, that's easy. "The first thing I'll do is take my role as Princess much more seriously."

Kuro looks at me, a tinge surprised. "You didn't before?"

I wince and look away, guilt raking my chest. "Not as much as I should have. On the day everything happened, I forced my mother to let me leave the safety of our den. I was convinced I would be safe and nothing bad could happen. I was such an idiot...."

Admittedly, nobody could have predicted the insanity of what happened in the weald that day. But if I had just played it safe and stayed home, I'd still be Lemur. It's my fault, and I have nobody to blame but myself.

"Were you and your mother close?" Kuro asks after another pause.

I frown and shake my head. "We got along better when I was young, but our relationship soured the past few years. I'm afraid it would be difficult to explain why."

"Oh yeah?" she boasts. "Try me."

She really wants to know, huh? Well, I'm not sure how much I want to tell her. I'm far too embarrassed to admit that mom thought I was unfit for the throne... that particular revelation still haunts me.

"Maybe I'm overthinking things. She thought I wasn't taking my role as Princess seriously enough, and I felt like I couldn't because we disagreed on so many things."

I pause mid-thought to gaze into the aerie. A group of adults have gathered by the warmth of an ember root fire, engaged in the act of mutual grooming. Ten or so Kin, all huddled close enough to be nearly on top of each other, taking the time to preen the feathers of all those around them. Are they friends? What if they're strangers? They have so much trust in one another, yet I couldn't trust my own mother.

I exhale sharply and pry my gaze away. "Perhaps our disagreements are something I should have tolerated."

"Well," Kuro says, stretching her foretalons out in front of her. "You shouldn't allow your mother to push you around."

I smirk a little. That's about the most '*Kuro*' response imaginable.

"But for your family, I think sacrifices are necessary. They're the only family you've got, you know?"

Yeah, they *were* the only family I had.

I turn away, trying not to show the emotion on my face. Working in Nakino's den and discussing botany with him has made me terribly homesick. The past few nights have been especially difficult to get through. I miss everyone dearly... none of them deserve the pain of believing they've lost me.

"But hey, it's okay!" Kuro chirps, trying to sound upbeat. "Everyone's going to be so happy when you return home!"

"Yeah..." I trail off. "Even though I..."

...

"Asha?"

"Kuro..." I murmur, keeping my face turned away. "I've never mentioned this before, but... back at home, I was not well-liked."

She inches closer and asks in a solicitous voice, "You weren't?"

“No...” I say, feeling my throat clench. Painful memories tempered with guilt begin flooding back to me. “My mother and I fought all the time. I was intentionally rude to all the nobles, and I had a reputation for being a spoiled brat who screamed until she got her way. Quite frankly, I deserved it.”

“Asha...”

“I remember on the day I left home, I was in public, and some woman mocked me for the clothes I was wearing. I became furious and started screaming at her in the middle of public, and...” my voice fizzles as a grave realization draws over me like a storm cloud blocking the sun. I turn back to Kuro with a horrified expression. “Is that my legacy? Will I be remembered as the spoiled Princess who screamed at a woman over something as petty as her outfit?”

She looks at me, forlorn and glum, but offers no answers.

I stare into the ground and curl my talons so tight it feels like I could crush stone. “By now, my brother has become the new heir to the throne. He’s timid but well-tempered and obedient. I’m sure the nobles will be happy I’m gone now that—“

“Asha, stop.”

Taken by surprise, my head jolts up with tears streaming down. “Huh?”

“I don’t care how much you were disliked or how much you fought your mother. Nobody wanted to see you *dead*.”

My neck jolts back in shock. The way Kuro emphasized ‘dead’... for some reason, it took my breath away. I try to talk back, but no sound is produced.

“Everyones makes mistakes and has regrets. But your family loved you, Asha. And despite your imperfections, they would do anything to bring you home. So please, don’t say hateful things about yourself. It’s not true, and... it makes me unhappy to see you this way.”

...

Is... is that why...?

But... Kuro would know all this far better than I would, wouldn’t she? After all, she’s actually lost her mother and father. I haven’t. There’s still a chance for me to reunite with them and return to my old life. Realizing this makes me feel awfully stupid – stupid enough to call myself an idiot. But Kuro told me not to say hateful things about myself. And she’s right.

“Um... I’ll try not to,” I murmur. “Thank you, Kuro. Sincerely.”

Kuro smiles, and I feel a weight lifted. It seems I can always count on her to raise my spirits. I asked to be alone with Kuro to find out why she was so kind to me. But the truth is, I don't need to ask. I already know the answer. Simply put, she cares about me as a dear friend would—a *real* friend. I couldn't recognize it because I'd never had someone like her in my life before.

I rub my head against Kuro's, and she returns the favor, lending me warmth and kindness. She's a very important Dragon to me.

And I'm going to miss her.

Sharp talons scrape over cold hard stone, sending a chill across my spine for the first time since my arrival in Felra. I lay against the boulder and shiver, feeling a light dusting of snow beneath my already icy feathers. The frosty alpine air belies what should be a late autumn day. Perhaps it's simply the shadow cast by Maki, chilling the slopes of White Mountain to a typical winter's day as the planet trundles along, taking the better part of a day and a half to transition the entire length of the sun. Darkmoons, rarely enjoyable in Ellyntide, are downright execrable in the winter.

But soon, the air warms. A kindred soul joins me on the boulder and lays beside me, spreading her soot-plumaged wing over top of me.

"Here," she smiles. "I'll keep you warm."

To accomplish that, the wing isn't necessary. But I appreciate the sentiment.

In contrast to the apathy of Farlanders, The Snowfell Flock views this routine celestial occurrence with great reverence. When Maki eclipses the sun, it represents the death of the individual soul on Jade. And when the sun reappears a day and a half later, it is the rebirth in the afterlife on Maki: Islands like Felra, innumerable and vast, floating gently above the clouds, filled with enough prey to satisfy every member of the flock that's ever come before us. They say that when the sun reappears, the souls on Maki watch us down below on Jade. And so, after the Darkmoon gatherings, the flock departs the warmth of the aerie to wait on the mountainside, ready to greet them.

Just then, I notice something off in the distance. "Look!" I call out. "Here comes the sun!"

I angle my wing forward to point across the cliff face, over the valley, up the ridges surrounding White Mountain, and onward towards Maki. The faint glow of sunlight surrounding the pale green planet begins to change, and the horizon starts to brighten. Across Felra, I watch the transition from night to day occur instantly, speeding fast across the landscape as the moon itself draws closer and closer to the planet's edge. As it approaches the home of Kin, the eyes of the flock are drawn skyward.

The mountain is bathed in the benediction of light.

68. Urban Reconnaissance

As I feared, my return to public service was quicker than I anticipated.

After explaining the dire situation, my mother marched down to the palace and convinced Her Majesty to alter course and allow the Morthan's visit. I was outside the reading room during their conversation, so I do not know the finer details. But as was typical for mother during her tenure as head of staff, I could hear her fiery resolve echoing through the palace chambers as she traded jabs with an equally fervid Kelani. I suppose four decades of service earns you the right to scream at the sitting Monarch of Ellyntide. I only wish some of that resolve had rubbed off on me.

A crisis has been averted, but the situation remains tense.

It was soon announced that the Morthans would visit the Kingdom in a matter of days. As one of the few palace staff who speak Lagoran (and an even scarcer number of Rabbits,) I had to begin the preparations for their visit at once. Typically, diplomatic meetings such as these occur at the Woburn House on the neutral island of Truce, halfway between Ellyntide and Sarlain territory. But mother insisted we demonstrate to the Nortanians we are capable of peaceful relations with other nations. And so the meeting is to occur in Varecia, the first time such a diplomatic event has been held here in decades.

But as for today, I must tend to a more personal matter: The inquiry into the death of Princess Asha. A report has been prepared and is scheduled to be released to the public later this evening.

Later this afternoon, myself and the other survivors of the tragedy will be debriefed on the principal findings. As to what they may entail, all that's certain is none of us will be indicted for what happened that day. *Thank God.* But as for its conclusions on Crow Wing's potential involvement and the Lithan's interference, I am just as clueless as the rest of the public. I've been so preoccupied with my own affairs that I'm unsure how the public views the forthcoming report.

This presents a problem.

As head of staff to Her Majesty, I am expected to provide insight into the public's perception of an issue as to allow her to make more informed policy decisions. Usually, I accomplish this task by listening to talk radio or conversing with the service staff in the palace. But the past few weeks have left me scarce time for either activity. I have been recovering from the tragedy the best I can, chasing my mother or confined to my desk in the palace.

To remedy this problem, I've traveled to one of the famous cafés of the crimson district, Zelda's Corner. As it's routinely overflowing with noisy patrons during the morning rush, it has become my go-to method to listen in on the actual conversations the public is having. I suspect I'll have no problem discovering what they think about an event as profound as the tragedy in the hollow.

After a short wait outside, I ask to be taken to the counter near the back. The walls here bounce back conversations, making my job easier to perform. As I'm led to my seat, I look out over the tables and booths packed with patrons, sipping their morning coffee and indulging in sweet-smelling culinary treats. After the period of mourning, it's encouraging to see Varecia return to life. I've learned that normalcy is not something one should take for granted.

I sit at the counter and order my usual: Coffee and a blueberry muffin. By the time I finish with them, I should have plenty of helpful information to provide Her Majesty. After a few moments of furtively concentrating on the patrons around me, I can focus on a Ruffy and a Piney, two booths to my left. I saw them as I was being led to my seat, and the two males seemed to be close friends, the type who open up about current events.

Their conversation starts off lurid, as talks between young men often are. But after some time...

“So, are you excited about the report?”

There! I knew they’d get to it eventually!

The Pine Marten quickly retorts, “No,” and after a brief pause, explains, “Nothing good can come from it.”

“Do you think they’ll accuse Nortane of killing the Princess?”

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

“I don’t think it matters what the report says. There will be the official line and then the actual line, you know? There’s no way they’ll tell us what *really* happened that day.”

“What really happened? Why would they try to hide what happened in the weald?”

Yes, good point, Ruffy — why *would* we hide it? It’s in our best interest to reveal everything we know about the tragedy. If a foreign presence was operating in the weald, then we should be shouting it from the mountain tops. And if we can glean any information about the Litan... well, I believe that’s in the interest of everyone living on Jade.

After another pause, a fork is tabled, and the Pine Marten continues, “There are always secrets, Ansel. Things they don’t want us common folk knowing about.”

I can’t disagree with that. There are matters that even I’m unaware of, information so sensitive that it can only be shared between the Queen and the heir to the throne. But I have to believe the truth of the hollow will be known for Calypso and Asha’s sake.

“And might I add, there are a lot of very valid questions floating around about how the Princess’s trip was planned and carried out!”

...

Oh, really?

“Uh-huh,” The Ruffy scoffs in coincidental suspicion. “Such as?”

“For example,” The Pine Marten pauses and drops his paws to the table. “The Princess went to the middle of freakin’ nowhere because she likes *plants*? And she had to get some rare tree out of the Eastern Weald? Give me a break!”

I gasp so loud that the Sifaka beside me looks up from her plate. He doesn't...?! How could he—!

“And another thing! They had the Captain of the Legion of Dragons with her that day, right? But then they only assigned two other guards? For the Princess of Ellyntide? It's like they *wanted* to get her killed!!”

No. That is not true. **No.** That simply isn't true. If Calypso wasn't there, then we would have needed more guards. But he was, so we didn't. That's protocol. That's what's in the book. We did everything to the letter that day. I was right! Everything was perfect! It's not my fault. None of it is my fault. And even if it was my fault (which it isn't,) the Lithan—

“Coffee and a blueb—“

“AH!”

Startled, the Ringtailed waitress juggles my coffee in her hand and nearly spills it. “Whoa!! Are you alright, hun?”

I stare at her, panting, trying to form words. “Y-yeah,” I mumble sheepishly. It seems I got lost in my intrusive thoughts. How regrettable. Sensing the nearby conversations have stalled because of me. I quickly offer an apology. “Sorry. I'll be fine.”

The waitress gives me a dubious stare as she tables my order. “Coffee and a blueberry muffin. Let me know if you need anything else.”

I impersonate a smile long enough for her to leave.

I shamefully lower my head, hoping to somehow avoid the patrons' curious gazes. How thoroughly embarrassing; I've once again allowed my thoughts to control me. I suppose I should have expected this reaction from the public — many of the palace's day-to-day procedures are structured in a way that wouldn't make sense to the casual observer. But they are in place for a reason and have worked quite well. I fear I should prepare myself to see more unfounded criticism like this in the future.

I take a few moments to gather my thoughts and tear apart pieces of the muffin. Nibbling on food helps me concentrate. Keeping my head forward, I rotate my ears towards the booth and refocus on their conversation, prepared for whatever they might discuss.

I tune in to hear the Marten in the middle of a sentence. “—know that when they found the body of the Sable, her cloak had been neatly torn away and placed alongside her body? Now, I am no expert on Lithans. But I'm *preetty* sure they couldn't care less about vanity.”

“What are you getting at, exactly?”

“Nothing, really. It's just... weird. Everything about this whole tragedy is weird.”

The Ruffy pauses to release a strained sigh. “Well, that’s certainly true. The Queen could stand to learn a thing or two from that monster. Maybe if she didn’t care so much about her damn dresses, then Asha would still be alive.”

“Blame the media, Ansel. The Lordanous have always been under a ton of scrutiny. Did you read the Varecian Tribune the day after the tragedy? Their idiot fashion correspondent happened to see the Princess in Dragon’s Gate Station. She couldn’t help but pen a scathing critique of the clothes she was wearing as she *died*.”

Finch showed me that article. Supposedly, Calypso and the Princess ran into the woman after we got separated in the station. What an utter sociopath. I wish I could’ve been there to join the Princess in telling her off.

“Oh, she was wearing the riding outfit that day, right?”

“Yeah, that’s the one. She called it ‘*unbecoming of royalty*.’ Can you believe that crap?”

“Well, that’s because it was.”

The silverware rattles as a cup is forcibly tabled. “See?! Now you’re doing it, too!”

I nearly choke down a piece of muffin. My God, how can our own citizens have such a callous disregard for the Princess's life? Despite her imperfections, she was still the Princess, the soul, and the future of this Kingdom! Not some disposable character from a storybook!

If I remain in this café any longer, I may become ill.

I slip a wad of bills under my still-full mug, grab my coat, and exit through the establishment's front door without giving a second glance to its patrons.

69. Flawed Conclusions

Later that evening, at my desk in the palace, there's a gentle knock on my office door.

I put down my work and announce, "Come in." There's no need to ask who it is. They visit my office so routinely that I have become accustomed to their distinct, two-tap knock.

The papers scattered around the room flutter as the door swings open to reveal Finch, dressed out of their uniform into ordinary street clothes, their face full of moral purpose. "I got my hands on the official report," they say, closing the door behind them with a little too much enthusiasm. They whip out a folio from beneath their second-hand pea coat, pull back the zipper, and present its contents to me. "This is it. Hot off the presses!"

I briefly inspect the cover of the shoddily-bound book before unceremoniously tossing it to my paper-covered side desk.

Finch blinks in surprise. “Well, aren’t you going to read it?”

I shake my head as an apathetic sigh escapes me. “We all learned the significant findings during the briefing today. You may think differently, but I would prefer not to revisit every precise detail of that dreadful day.”

Clearly, Finch is of a different character than I am. Regardless of the finer details that the report outlines, its sordid conclusions are clear and certain: A detachment of Crow Wing was operating in the weald, performing a covert reconnaissance mission for Nortane. The Princess’s security detail was ambushed by them and killed while defending her. The Princess, still living, was taken hostage and held against her will. As Crow Wing began preparations to ransom off the heir to the throne, an unprecedented act of cosmic irony occurred as the first Lathan to appear over the skies of Ellyntide in nearly two centuries landed, taking the lives of all who remained. To even contemplate these events unfolding brings me an immeasurable pain that I can not articulate, even to myself.

Despite what should be obvious, Finch grimaces, dissatisfied by my response. “But Dunc, they didn’t talk about everything. And that’s the problem.”

They grab the report from my desk and flip it open to a page somewhere in the middle. It seems I will be subjected to all the excruciating details, regardless of my wishes. Very well, then. I have learned the futility of attempting to dissuade Finch when they encounter something unjust.

“Listen to this,” they say, tapping their finger loudly against the page. “*Due to a lack of sufficient evidence, we cannot provide a satisfactory conclusion for why Her Majesty’s*

blood is absent from the crime scene. This analysis extends to the four-inch long lacerations present on the neck of Individual 1.’ That’s the Pine Marten.”

I shrug my shoulders and roll my eyes halfway. “Yes, well, that doesn’t surprise me at all, Finch. I’m afraid nobody will ever know the complete picture of what occurred in the hollow that day.”

Why belabor the details? Crow Wing was responsible. Calypso, Princess Asha, and two fine guards are dead. That is all that truly matters.

“Okay...” they say, grabbing a chair to sit in. They sit down and scoot in close to me. “But they make no effort to explain why the only trace of the Princess was her shredded clothes, why the Owl was still wearing his outfit, or why the Sable had her cloak torn off.”

“We could toil our heads all day about the state of their clothing,” I sigh. “It won’t raise them from the dead.”

“Can’t you see how *weird* this is?” they ask, imitating a brick wall. I stare back at them silently, feeling no response is necessary. *Of course*, it’s strange. But there’s nothing either of us can do about it.

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“When Sarlain assassinated Queen Beatrix, they scoured the crime scene for weeks, meticulously extracting every possible detail to form a report that was only released months later when they felt it was ready.” Finch slams the new report shut and flings it across my writing desk, causing a flurry of papers to scatter about. “This thing took a thousand shortcuts and was released in just a few weeks!”

“Finch,” I say, straightening myself from repose. I believe they have earned the privilege of a brief lecture. “The inquiry into Beatrix’s assassination was excoriated on its release. At the time, the fourth war had been ongoing for months. The public believed the report was a waste of the Kingdom’s wartime resources and its conclusions redundant. It was a domestic headache for the newly crowned Queen.”

I know this obtuse facet of historical context thanks to my mother. She often reminds her friends that she opposed the maligned report months before the public did, and tried in vain to get Kelani to see her way. It’s not hard to understand why mother was right — we had been engulfed in conflict with Sarlain for months. An official reminder of the reason why wasn’t necessary.

“The fact of the matter is this new report is politically motivated. It exists to sway the public’s opinion against Nortane and God forbid, make the transition to wartime easier to digest.”

Finch exhales sharply and looks away, curling their tail around their legs. For someone such as them who can’t stand injustices, this is a difficult pill to swallow.

“You’re right. There are numerous discrepancies and overlooked details in the report. Quite frankly, Colonel Durham and The Princess deserved so much more for their lives than a flimsy justification for an unwinnable war. But those are the cards that have been dealt to us. All we can do now is try to move on from the tragedy as best we can.”

Finch frowns, crosses their arms and stares at their feet in silence. There's no easy way to accept the truth of what happened in the hollow, but everyone must accept it eventually. As for Finch, I'll allow them as much time as they need.

"No," they say suddenly, rising to their feet and throwing down their arms. "You're wrong, Dunc."

Oh, am I? I tilt my head to the side and angle my ears forward. I'm listening.

With a fire burning in their eyes, Finch continues, "Animals like us, those of us who work in the palace; we have the privilege of serving the crown in ways others do not. *We* can choose to let their deaths be in vain, or we can choose to do something that honors them."

Something that honorsthem, huh? "What are you proposing?"

"You have an ear to the Queen. Convince her to form a special investigation, one that's hidden from the public's eye, solely to address the discrepancies of the report. I don't believe for a second that Crow Wing was acting alone in the weald. I think Colonel Durham and The Princess witnessed something *far* stranger than Crow Wing. And if we don't act now to find out what it is, then the truth will be lost forever!"

They still don't get it.

I exhale, remove my glasses and clean them against the side of my vest. In a methodical, almost patronizing voice, I explain to them, “Even if I were to suggest something such as that, the commission into the tragedy has already been dissolved, and their resources re-appropriated elsewhere. It would be a headache to assemble another team.”

Finch looks throughly unconvinced. “Kelani is the Queen. If she says ‘hop’ they’ll say ‘*which branch?*’”

“It’s not that simple,” I reply, shaking my head.

Finch angles their head uncomfortably close to mine. “Why.”

“Because the report is final say on the matter, and it would raise questions among the nobles why the Queen is dwelling on something that is supposed to be resolved.”
Bordering on exasperation, I pause and adjust my voice to sound more authoritative. “And I don’t need to remind you that the last thing the Her Majesty needs right now is more attention.”

Finch scoffs, throws their arms in the air, then opens their muzzle to say something before quickly shutting it. Something they might regret, I’d wager. Their face twists in dissonance before they rise from the chair and shove the report back into their folio.

“Alright,” they say, practically pouting. “Alright, fine, Commander. Just promise me one thing.”

I nod slowly. For Finch, that much I can do.

“In the report, there was no mention of the whereabouts of the serpentine diamond.”
They button their coat and turn to face the door. “A national treasure, revered for centuries and worn by countless Lordanous. Passed over like it was a piece of garbage.”

Feeling exhausted, I remain silent.

“Think about it.”

They draw the door open and slip through, closing it shut behind them just as loud as when they entered. The wooden chair creaks as I lay back and sigh, rubbing my hands against the backs of my ears. Perhaps I should have anticipated such an obstinate response from Finch. And perhaps I should expect to see others with a similar sentiment in the coming days.

Life was so much simpler when Calypso was here.

...

I slip on my glasses, reassemble my papers and return to work, quickly forgetting that Finch's visit ever occurred.

70. L'Arbre et la Lune

Darkness descends, and the land is covered in a ghostly pale glow.

Maki has risen.

I find myself outside the palace later that night, for what reason I do not know. By the light of the planet shining dimly through the branches of the Elder Tree, I see that I'm in the courtyard out back, close to the tree-lined paths leading to the palace's rear portico. It's cold outside, and I do not particularly wish to be here. There is still much work to be done concerning the Morthan's visit. What could have led me here in the first place? Worryingly, I have no memory of how I arrived.

I shake away the surreality of the situation and quickly return to the stone path. For a late autumn night, the air is unusually crisp. I know this because I'm not wearing a coat for some reason. Irritated, I hold my hands against my arms and rub them together to warm myself up. Rabbit fur or not, it's chilly out.

And then, something far more unusual happens. A glimmer of iridescent light shimmers off the corner of my eye, reflecting from somewhere beneath the Elder Tree. Turning to face the source, what I see defies explanation.

It is a small, red bird.

But this is no ordinary winged creature. Perched on the groomed hedges surrounding the great tree, it emanates a dazzling dappled light that illuminates the surrounding area in a pale blue glow. The excess of light makes it plain to see that the gaze of this otherworldly creature is fixated squarely on me. I stop in my tracks, completely unprepared to respond to this impossible situation. What is this bird, and why has it appeared to me?

Wait a second...

I've heard about this bird before. Didn't Kelani...?

Twaasha!

Without warning, the bird calls out to me and takes flight! It leaps into the air and flies around, leaving a trail of glowing light as it races under the canopy of the Elder Tree.

"Wait, come back!!"

I take off after it, sprinting through the grass and bounding over the waist-high hedge where the bird perched. I land on the other side and continue the chase, following the trail of light underneath the great branches of the Elder Tree. Normally, this area is maintained as a public space for the royal family and the palace workers. But somehow, the grass is up to my ankles tonight, slowing my pursuit down considerably. Has the grounds crew been slacking off? I push aside the thought, resolving not to let it slow me down. Something compels me to chase this bird as fast as my legs will carry me.

It weaves me underneath the tree, over stumps and logs, and around thickets and bushes. The Elder Tree is massive, but it seems like I've been running much longer than I should be. As my resolve begins to wean, the bird cries out and summons an intense burst of speed, piercing through a thick grove of bushes and small trees that block the path up ahead. I throw caution to the wind and use my shoulder as a shield and thrust headlong through it.

Emerging on the other side, I expect to find myself on the far side of the Elder Tree. But what I see instead makes my heart stop.

Perched below the imposing sight of a full Maki is the Eastern Weald hollow — the place where everything went so wrong. A primal panic explodes in my chest. How could I find myself here? What sorcery brought me all the way from Varecia? As much as I dread reliving the horror of that day, I can't help but gaze into the hollow.

To my great surprise, the interior has changed. Gone are the brambles surrounding its interior, those suffocating walls of thorn and bush that trapped the Princess's party on that terrible day. In addition, the ground had been smoothed into a flat layer of grass, erasing all trace of the fatal encounter. It's here that I find the elusive bird perched in the grass above a dazzling glowing feather.

I struggle to take in this otherworldly scene. Surely, I must be dreaming. But to dream so vividly of a world steeped in symbolism? The only conclusion I can draw is that the bird has brought me here for a reason, and that reason is the feather lying in front of it. I have to discover the truth of what happened here.

I draw a measured breath and step forward, only to tense up. The memories flow like fresh blood from mental scars torn open. This was the ridge where I encountered the beast on that nightmare of a day, and it was here that I first gazed at the horrors in the hollow. All my senses are screaming at me to flee, but I have to endure. I have to learn why I've been brought back here.

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Summoning all the bravery I can muster, I place one foot in front of another...

The bird watches me with an expression like stone as I slowly descend into the hollow. Last time I flung myself down these slopes, nearly tumbling face-first into the brambles. Although the thickets are gone, I resolve to be far more careful. The bird is the only one here, yet I can't help feeling it's one of many souls watching my every move, waiting to see how I approach this unbelievable situation.

After reaching the bottom, I slowly step forward into the center of the hollow, gazing down at the feather in front of the bird. Shimmering iridescent, nearly as long as I am tall, I recognize it as one of the feathers of the Lithan. On that day, the hollow was littered with feathers like these, visual proof that Crow Wing attempted to fight back against the beast. But why present this to me now? I look to the bird for guidance, but it simply stares back at me with the same guarded expression. Perhaps I could take its silence to mean this feather is mine to discover.

Still, there is one thing I must know. I stare into the bird's unchanging eyes and ask, "Are you the one who flew in the Queen's dream?"

The bird quirks its head sideways but offers nothing in response. Somehow, I get the impression this creature could speak to me if it so desired. Perhaps our meeting tonight is not related to Her Majesty. So be it.

I kneel and inspect the mysterious feather lying on top of the grass. It's beautiful, in a sense. Far thicker than any avian equivalent, its barbs are arranged in an intricate, alternating pattern of dazzling whites near its base, gradually turning black as it runs to the tip. I graze the back of my hand against it and discover it's covered in an oily sheen that radiates the light in a kaleidoscope of colors. And it's at this point that I notice the light emanating is actually coming from beneath the feather rather than the feather itself. I pick it up using both hands and gasp at what I find underneath.

Burrowed into a swirled pocket of grass is a glowing ring – the serpentine diamond!

Dumbfounded, I glance to the bird for help. But once more, it offers me nothing but a piercing stare. Could its silence indicate the diamond is for me? Slowly, I set the feather aside and retrieve the diamond from the ground. As I do so, the glowing dims, causing me to flinch slightly. After receiving another blank stare from the bird, I inspect the missing treasure of Ellyntide up close. It appears exactly as I remember it on the hand of the Princess, undamaged in any way by the attack that took her life.

“The diamond is intact,” I announce, still fixated on the object. “What does this mean?”

SKREEE!!

The silence of the hollow shatters as the bird rears its head skyward to issue a fierce cry, somehow initiating the vehement shriek of the Lathan that sent me tumbling to the ground

in pain. It takes flight, lunging with impossible speed, banking hard to the left as it zips past my head in a flurry of feathers and light. It climbs in altitude on a northerly path away from the hollow, illuminating the night sky in a portentous glow of dappled light.

“Wait!” I yell, springing to my feet. “Please, come back!!”

I take off after the bird with the diamond held firmly in my right hand. How could it leave without saying a single word? Doesn't it know how important this is to me? Oh God, please come back!

As I enter the field beside the hollow, the world around me changes supernaturally. The grass dies, grows backward, and fizzles beneath my feet. Quicker than a heartbeat, Maki sets, rises in another section of the sky, then dims out of existence. Soon the distance between the bird and me stretches outward into an impossible gulf, separating us by miles. The bare ground trembles as the world begins to disintegrate around me, wrenched apart into crumbling chunks, dragged downward into a void darker than the blackest night. As I watch the bird become another speck of light on the horizon, I gasp for air, feeling myself descend into the abyss.

My eyes open.

I see a familiar setting in a darkened room beyond warm bedsheets.

I rise fast as lightning, sending Bro and Pro tumbling from the top of my bed onto the floor below. I sit there panting, struggling to catch my breath and slow my stampeding heart. Gods above, what the hell just happened to me?!

That wasn't a dream. There's no way something so vivid, something so *real*, could be a mere dream. But if that wasn't a dream, then what the hell was it? I slam my eyes shut, silently pleading the strange world I witnessed would return to me. Moments pass, but nothing happens.

Wait a second... *the diamond!!*

I tap my pajama pocket, feel around the duvet and search beneath my bedsheets. But despite my best efforts, I can't locate the diamond. Even though I held it firmly in my hand when that world ended, it doesn't seem to have returned with me.

Bro returns to my lap and rubs his face against mine, the warm sensation of touch bringing my rationality back into focus. I had an intensely vivid dream, just like the one Her Majesty experienced a few weeks ago. What's more, the strange bird she witnessed in hers was also present in mine. Questions race through my head about the meaning of this profound experience. Why present the diamond to me? Does the Lithan's feather have some connection to it? Who was that strange bird, and where was it flying to?

After sitting in silence for a time, an uneasy conclusion draws over me. Feeling conflicted, I gaze at the empty side of the bed. On nights like these he would lay beside me, warmly inviting me into the comfort of his arms.

What would you have me do, Calypso?

...

'We can choose to let their deaths be in vain, or we can choose to do something that honors them.'

...

I fall against the covers, determined to quickly return to sleep. Tomorrow will be a day rife with planning.

I have to return to the weald.

The diamond is still there!