

The Princess's Feathers c 71-80

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"Asha, is this a brassicaceae?"

Nakino angles his wing to highlight a large patch of dried plants growing at his talons. I trot over the cool, damp grass and join him by the forest's edge to look closer.

"Hmm," I mumble, lowering my neck to inspect the remains of a crusty inflorescence that transitioned to spreading seeds quite some time ago. Low clouds cover the sun, making the job of identification slightly more complicated than usual, though not enough to prevent me from making an identification. "Four petals, no stipules, and a superior ovary. You're getting good at this, Nakino."

"Ah!" he chirps, filled with relief. "Thank you, Asha. This is ayonell, and it's useful to the flock. Let's bring it back with us."

I nod and quickly retreat a step. As he's done many times this morning, Nakino lowers his head and ratchets his jaws open to the width of the plant patch. He grabs hold of the plants at the base of their stems using his dull, front-facing fangs. With a gingerly tug, the entire patch is separated from the ground and placed on a nearby bank of grass for retrieval when it's time to return to the Grandfather Tree.

With tomorrow being my final day in Felra, I've decided to perform some extra work for the flock by helping Nakino forage for winter supplies and ember roots. He didn't ask for my help this morning, but I insisted I join him anyways. I realized recently that I should be performing as much outreach with the flock as possible, and helping Nakino forage was one of the first things that came to mind. What if I can contact my family, but there's no way to turn me back to normal? My relationship with the flock could become critically important in such a situation. I should do everything possible to foster a friendly, lasting rapport with them.

And besides, diplomacy with foreign nations is a vital role of a Princess! Mom can no longer claim I'm not helping her run the Kingdom!

In all seriousness, I wanted to help Nakino out. He's learned so much from me the past few days, but there's a limit to what I can teach him in his den. Fieldwork is mandatory when you're a botanist, so this morning, we set off from the Grandfather Tree and flew south to an isolated forest that Kin rarely visit. Prey is scarce in this corner of Felra, so the only Kin who visit are Nakino and the other healers.

With the ayonell set aside, we continue our search along the edge of the deciduous forest, Nakino watching the ground under the now bare trees and myself treading through the grassy clearing we landed in.

"What do you use ayonell for?" I casually ask, stepping over a felled tree.

"Fangaches," he answers before shoving his head into a thicket near his talons. He reemerges a moment later and continues, "I crush the seeds on strips of moon bark, have the Kin chew the bark for five flaps, then spit it out."

“Have you considered mixing it with dream borage? If it works for fangaches, it should also be effective for sore throats.”

“Yes!!” he snaps unexpectedly. “But it’s not effective!”

Um, okay. I exhale sharply, momentarily put off by Nakino’s curt response. It can be difficult to work with him and his sudden mood swings. But despite his sour personality, I’ve learned that Nakino genuinely cares about the Dragons he treats. When he lashes out, it’s usually because he’s frustrated with himself. There’s no need to get upset in return.

Still, I don’t want to aggravate him further. I draw a careful breath and attempt to respond in a cheery voice. “Well, what if you added some usnea lichen? That would increase its potency and hold the ayonell powder, right?”

Nakino stops walking and stares across the clearing in short contemplation. “...I’ve never thought of that before. That’s a good idea.”

That’s more like it! It’s encouraging when he considers my ideas and doesn’t seem so closed-minded. Of course, by this point, he’d be a fool not to. I’ve taught him so many new things that he has no choice but to respect my botanical knowledge.

The black drakon sighs longingly and stares out across a forest bare of leaves, brown and empty. “It’s not going to be the same without you, Asha. I’ve learned so many new things from you... it really feels like this is just the start of something bigger.”

I smirk, feeling a strong sense of pride grow inside me. If nothing else, my visit to Felra will have a long-lasting impact on the flock. It’s super exciting to imagine all the fantastic things Nakino’s about to discover with his newfound understanding of botany. What unknown species will he identify? What new treatments will he develop? If things were different, I would savor the opportunity to stay in Felra and make those discoveries alongside him.

But things aren’t different, and the duty to my Kingdom remains — a duty I can not ignore. As I approach Nakino and stand beside him, I look over the same empty forest. “My life and my family are elsewhere. At least we had the chance to share what we could.”

A silent wind blows through the trees, creaking limbs and casting stubborn leaves to the ground. It seems even the forest is upset about my imminent departure.

Nakino shakes his head and tips his wings, signaling to follow. “Come on. Let’s get to the end of this tree line, and then we’ll fly back.”

We continue on, surveying the area for familiar plants. But as I come across a thicket of sunny bush, I sense something unusual. The unmistakable feeling that someone, or something, was watching me. As I turn to ask Nakino, I catch his head in the act of whipping away from me, moving with such incredible speed that it’s impossible to discern the expression on his face.

...

Was he...

He was *checking me out*, wasn't he?

...

My heart barrels against my chest, knocking me from my daze and shuffling my talons along. He was checking me out!! I can't believe it! It's been so long since I caught a boy staring at me! Not since I was a Lemur, at least! My mission to search for familiar plants dissolves as questions rapid fire through my head like steam bullets. What should I do?! Should I say something to him? What does it mean if a Lithan likes the way I look?

...Am I even attractive for a Lithan?

I... I guess I should have anticipated something like this, right? Nakino is single, and we've spent so much time together these past few days, bonding over our mutual appreciation for plants. Like Kuro, he must be under a ton of pressure to take a mate and start a family. So it only makes sense he'd have a crush on the mysterious, azure-plumaged Farlander who taught him a few new tricks, right?

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Right.

I suppose the natural follow-up is how do I feel about him?

I stop walking and focus on the ground below me, momentarily pretending to have located a familiar plant. Concentrating on the blades of grass, I allow my mind to wander and probe my thoughts... my *feelings*.

...

My thoughts quickly dissolve, and my feelings are cast aside.

The fact of the matter is they're irrelevant. I am the Princess of Ellyntide, and my only friend was murdered in cold blood by a band of thugs from a hostile enemy nation. My family believes I'm dead, and my brother is wholly unprepared to saddle the responsibilities that should be mine. They are what's important – not some drakon half a moon away in Felra.

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

Kuro was right. You only get one family, and once they're gone, they're gone forever. I'll sacrifice everything to see them again, no matter how enticing this continent and the Dragons who live here may be. When I fly away from Felra tomorrow, I won't look back.

With my mind made up, I lift my head and shuffle after Nakino, earnestly continuing my search for useful plants.

...I wonder what he was staring at? What do Lithans find attractive, anyway? Thank the Goddess he didn't try to flirt with me. I don't know the first thing about flirting.

Eventually, Nakino is able to locate a usable patch of Sassefron, but there's not much else in this section of the clearing. I was warned this may be the case, as there are typically few usable plants this late in the season. Late autumn storms have already blown apart much of what remained from the summer, so we're lucky to find anything. For what it's worth, though, I'm satisfied with what we've found, and I'm sure it will help the flock during the winter.

...I wonder how Lithan courtship works? Do they act like other ferals, having to prove themselves to a potential mate through dances or displays of beauty? *Oh, man.* I already have striking beauty with my exotic plumage! Does that mean if I tried to court someone, I—

...

My legs freeze and every feather on my body fluffs in alarm. The putrid stench of death has wafted into my nostrils from somewhere upwind – at least four or five dead ferals, all recently killed. Instinctively, I fall into a defensive position and allow a brooding growl to escape me. Out of the corner of my eye, I spot Nakino, quite shocked over my sudden aggression. He’s about to open his muzzle and ask me something when his face twists in shock, then turns wild.

GRRRRRR...

Quick as a lightning bolt, he leaps to my side and extends a steely black wing in front of me like a shield. He snarls like thunder, shaking the ground beneath us and easily drowning out my puny little grumble. Despite being the healer of the Grandfather Tree, Nakino is one of the largest dragons in the flock, easily dwarfing me in size and muscle.

“Asha!” he rumbles. “Stay close. There could be a pack nearby.”

My eyes dart about, scanning the clearing for ferals beside us. “Lithsa?”

He tastes the air, but his face grimaces. “Can’t tell, the scent is too faint. We may be dealing with something else here.”

My heart pounds against my chest, reviving painful memories of the last time I needed to be protected while foraging. Litsha are only a threat to Kin if they gather in large packs. But if it's not a pack of Litsha, what else could it be? There's bigger prey in Felra that can threaten Kin, but I've been told they only live in the vast plains around the Grandfather Tree, far away from our spot near Vito's Forest. I take in another whiff of air but fail to draw any conclusions about who's been here before us. The only sure thing is that the death scent originates from underneath an elderus at the end of the tree line, where the clearing and the forest come together to end at a nearly vertical rock wall.

Argh, what should we do? This situation is dangerous, and I can't afford to get hurt the day before I fly home. We could retreat to the air, but then we'd abandon all the samples we've collected. With the breezy autumn weather, there's no guarantee it will still be here if we decide to return later. Our whole trip will have been for nothing.

"It's coming from underneath that elderus," I say, flicking my ears forward. "If all we find is prey remains, then we should be safe, right?"

Nakino growls, squinting to examine the tree with more clarity. "Maybe. But we need to be extremely careful. Asha, You wouldn't know this, but I hunt as well as a sprained grepo."

"*Really?*" I ask, turning to him in momentary shock. How can a drakon so big and muscular be a poor hunter?

He snorts and turns his head away. “There’s a reason I became a healer. Let’s keep it at that.”

“Fair enough,” I say. If he doesn’t want to elaborate, that’s fine. Now’s not the time for a story, anyways. “Let’s approach the tree, but stay in the open. We’ll take to the air at the first sign of trouble.”

Nakino studies the tree for a moment longer before he relents, “Alright,” and lowers his wing. “The first sign of trouble. No more.”

Acknowledging with a silent tip of my wings, I begin walking forward with my head held low and my muscles tensed, ready for any outcome. I only manage a few steps before Nakino hustles in front of me, taking the lead and keeping his wing half-open, prepared to deploy into shield duty if needed. It pines me I can’t protest and remind him I’m better at hunting prey, but we need to be completely silent. Against the decaying foliage of autumn, he and I stand out like sunflowers against a blue sky.

We walk along the edge of the tree line with our senses high until we reach the top of a knoll. From here, the grassy clearing flows gently down before disappearing under the low-lying branches of the elderus. Unlike others in Kin territory, this tree hasn’t been groomed by Kin, so its lower limbs are still intact. As a result, the area directly underneath is wholly obscured.

A wave of anxiousness crashes against me. If we go any farther, we’ll be coming perilously close to the stench of death. But before I can ask Nakino about continuing, he takes a brave step forward and descends the incline. Stifling my

fears, I take a deep breath and stalk after him. Before long, the branches begin to thin, revealing the area under the tree.

“What the...”

Nakino’s talons freeze, and his feathers rise in alert. My heart skips a beat, and a potent cocktail of curiosity and fear compels me to look closer. As I move to stand by his side, the scene below the tree comes into focus: At least five violently butchered Litsha are strewn about the underbrush of the tree. Unlike the neat kills Kin perform, their viscera has been ripped from their bodies and scattered like confetti over the ground. What’s more, there’s evidence of other prey. Bones are thrown like toothpicks to nearly all corners of the tree, and feathers – perhaps those of a Lithan – cover the ground.

Usually, the sight of abandoned prey would have me drooling. But *this* is deeply unsettling. What could kill an entire pack of Litsha? And why would they be left here, abandoned underneath an elderus?

“By the Goddess...” my voice becomes almost breathless. “Nakino, have you ever seen anything like this?”

“Absolutely not,” he whispers. “This doesn’t make any sense. Why was all this prey just left here? And why haven’t the scavengers cleaned it up?”

“We should leave,” I suggest, feeling myself retreat a step. “I-I can’t afford to get hurt, Nakino.”

“Right,” he says, unfurling his wings. “Asha, let’s head for—“

SKREECH!!!

A shrill cry splits the air like a talon’s claw from somewhere above us. Fear lances my heart as I turn skyward to see a shadowy object hurtling toward the ground like a meteor. At the last moment, it opens its scaled wings to slow its descent and impacts the ground behind us, causing a cloud of dirt and debris to be ejected skyward. Expecting it to hit me, I close my eyes and flinch but feel nothing. When I reopen them, I see Nakino’s wing stretched out and deployed into shield duty. And beyond his wing lies a Dragon, walking on its wings, scaled the colors of blood red on its underside and burnt soot on its body, a crazed fire burning in its eyes.

Redaga!!

The Princess's Feathers

At that instant, the scene erupts in motion.

Instinctively I become a ball of fluff, every feather raised on high alert as my body falls into the attack posture. My wings fly open, and I heave a fierce warning snarl toward the scaled intruder. I'm no longer the terrified little girl who nearly died the last time she encountered a Redaga. This time, I'm ready to fight!

SKREEE!!!

Conversely, and much to my dismay, all the bravery Nakino demonstrated just moments ago has dissolved into nothing. He slinks away and rears his head skyward to scream... something. I'm not exactly sure what he's doing, but he sounds pretty distressed.

REEEAK!! REEAK!!

"Nakino!!" I snarl, holding my eyes on the Redaga. "What are you doing?!"

"Asha!!" He screams back, his voice brimming with unbridled panic. "We can't fight it! We must flee!"

I quickly shake my head. "We have no choice! You fly too slow, and—"

Without warning, the Redaga lunges forward with lightning speed and snaps its jaws in the place where I used to be. I land on my talons a few feet to the left and

quickly hop backward to give myself some space from my wild opponent. The Redaga flips its head around and issues another blistering snarl but keeps its talons planted to the ground.

I can't say I blame Nakino for being scared. As the intruder studies me with savage, distended eyes, I study back, finding its body far more muscular than the tree-dwelling Dragon I fought last time. Moreover, I haven't been able to smell *her* until now. Somehow this cunning, rage-fueled drakaina has done something to mask her scent. Not only is she physically imposing, but she's clever to boot.

None of this means we should fly away, though. The fact of the matter is Nakino is quite the ponderous flyer, and I'm certain he can't outfly an angry Redaga. Besides, unlike last time, I'm far more prepared to fight. I know how fast Redagas move, and I have some familiarity with the tricks they might employ. Admittedly, my training from Kuro has only consisted of hunting lesser prey. When fighting Dragons head-on, I'm at a considerable disadvantage. But it's better than nothing. And besides, I have Nakino by my side! Unlike myself, he's already come of age in the flock. Of the trials to come of age, one involves preying on a Redaga alone and without help. It won't be easy, but as a team, we can take down a single Redaga. We just have to believe in ourselves!

Unfortunately, faith has long since departed Nakino. Now on the opposite of the Redaga, he fidgets with concern and yells, "Asha, please!!"

I unleash a deep warning growl in his direction. "Nakino!! We have to fight! You've killed a Redaga before. You can do it again!"

Growing tired of our banter, the Redaga screeches and lunges toward me, this time quicker than before. An outstretched talon grazes the tips of my left wing, tucked away just in time to avoid being torn to shreds. Nakino gasps as I throw my talon out to attack but come nowhere close to making contact with my scaled foe. Stumbling backward, I find myself back where I started by Nakino.

Not that I'm pleased to see him. "Are you going to help me, or what?" I snarl.

"Asha," he trembles as the Redaga stares us down. "I never killed a Redaga."

"What?!"

"I found one dead from a fall and doctored death wounds. It was the only wa—!"

Without warning, the Redaga charges forward again! I brace myself for the attack, but at the last moment, she feints a move toward me before bouncing off her hindtalons to strike Nakino. The gambit proves successful as claws rake his triceps, and feathers fly.

RAARGH!!

He yowls in pain and stumbles backward, flailing wildly to escape the next blow. The Redaga rears back to deliver it, but not before I can sneak a counter-attack of

my own, leaping forward to deliver a glancing swipe against the skin of her wing. My claws tear a wound far too short, but the release of blood fills me with a visceral satisfaction. Among the pleasures of being a Lithan, few are as gratifying as inducing wounds in the flesh of worthy prey.

My attack is effective, breaking up the Redaga's follow-up on Nakino. Realizing she's surrounded, she leaps skyward and flies a few feet to safety, landing gracefully on a nearby boulder. As I scamper to rejoin an ailing Nakino, she twists her neck to briefly inspect the wound I left on the back of her wing. Her face fills with agitation, and she bares her teeth to issue a fierce challenge squared at me.

"Nakino!!" I screech, ignoring the bleating prey. Several lacerations have been carved against his shoulder, staining the black feathers of his foreleg deep indigo. Nakino grits his fangs and winces in pain, but his attention isn't on me. Once panicked and afraid, a change is occurring inside him. Fear changes to desperation, to anger, and finally to fury. He lowers his head and issues a baleful roar at the Redaga, as savage and awesome as any I've heard before.

ROOOAARRRR!!

The ground shudders, causing me to nearly retreat a step. Something insidious has happened to Nakino's voice. Something I heard once in Kuro and something I felt once in myself. Perhaps I should be thankful he is on my side this fight. At least, I think he is. His golden eyes flick to mine, and he slurs something incomprehensible and guttural, not quite resembling speech. Before I can ask if he's still himself, he takes off sprinting towards the Redaga with a renewed purpose, his bravery restored.

But the Redaga isn't waiting around. She bounds around to scale the incline, then turns back to pounce when Nakino is in range. The two Dragons collide head-on and collapse, tumbling down the side of the knoll in a swirling mass of scales and feathers, claws and fangs. The Redaga rolls to her right with fresh wounds as Nakino stumbles over his wing, momentarily breaking up the battle. The Redaga lunges to seize on his error, but Nakino rolls onto his hindlegs to deftly avoid the attack and propel himself forward. But the Redaga is quicker, dodging to her right and altogether avoiding the attack. She's so caught up in the fight that it's not until the last moment that she notices my furtive approach from behind. I spring forward with talons outstretched, but she launches herself into the air and sails downslope to give herself breathing room and avoid being double-teamed by me and Nakino.

Granted a momentary respite, I glance at Nakino to assess his condition. His body has new wounds, though none as bad as the first attack on his left shoulder. Blood flows freely from the open wound, forcing him to shift his weight onto his right foreleg. That bastard, Redaga! This was only supposed to be a short little trip, and now Nakino's been injured in a fight we never should have—

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A collision occurs in front of my body.

Nakino grapples the Redaga with bloody talons and uses his incredible strength to block her from executing a lightning-fast attack against me, one I didn't even see coming. He repels the attack, flinging her to the ground and sending her tumbling down the incline. She rolls out of her descent, but not before Nakino can shield himself in front of me with his wings splayed wide.

“RRGH... Asha!!” he pants, locating his voice. He flails about and snarls, “Don’t wor... rgh.... let go!!”

“What?!”

“You have to... **RRGH—! ROOOOARRRR!!**”

Language departs and is replaced by another baleful roar. Though he could only manage a few words, their meaning is clear. I’m allowing myself to overthink, to get too distracted by things that aren’t important. I have to let go of my rationality. I have to trigger my bloodlust!

I first experienced it when I transformed into a Lithan, but the visceral sensations I felt frightened me into ever using it again. From time to time, I’ve allowed myself to partially devolve and give myself an advantage in battle, but never fully. I was terrified I’d lose any semblance of my original self and become a witless, feral beast. But against this Redaga, I have no other choice. If Nakino can claw back his rationality, I have to believe I can too.

As my heart thunders against my chest, I allow myself to slip away. My fangs grit like a vice, and a surge of blood races to my head, clouding my vision and corrupting my thoughts. I curl my talons into the grass and let go of everything that made me a Lemur. Language and reasoning break down, reduced to feral instincts and thoughts of bloodshed. The concern for my safety dissolves...

...

...and the anxiety of reuniting with her family evaporates. Nothing remains in Asha but hatred and the insatiable lust for prey's flesh.

SKREEEEECH!!!

Her shrill wail pierces the air, surprising Nakino and Redaga alike. Who knew this little fress could sound so ferocious? She scampers around Nakino's inky black wings and crouches at his side, ready to engage their scaled foe. In response, the Redaga hesitates – two disorganized and unwilling Kin now stand as one, ready to join the battle in earnest. Having failed to quickly dispose of the weaker one, a new plan forms in her head. She lowers her neck into the grass and tenses sculpted muscles, conceding the feathered pair to move first. It's a risky move, but she's confident.

The Kin launch into motion as quick as falcons, racing towards the Redaga with jaws wide in anticipation. She lies motionless until the very last moment, leaping into the air and spreading her scaled wings wide for a hasty takeoff. The Princess leaps into the air to pursue but can't quite snag hold of the Redaga's rising talons. She stumbles as she returns to the ground, giving the Redaga a pivotal moment to fall like a stone and dive out of the way of a charging Nakino. But instead of delivering a counter-blow, the Redaga flips around and waits for Nakino to charge like an angry bull into another attack.

The ponderous drakon and the inexperienced drakaina; her dawdling is intentional, for she has seen Dragons like these before. Experience is necessary when living deep inside the flock's territory. From her perch on the branches of the elderus, days could pass before she saw another feral travel through the clearing. The churning of an empty stomach sounds all too familiar to her.

But scarcity begets opportunity. For hungry scavengers searching for prey, the stench of carrion is intoxicating. Led by their nose to the base of an inconspicuous elderus, the sight of half-butchered prey is impossible to resist. In this part of Felra, going days without a full meal is not unusual. In their haste to capitalize on unguarded prey, they rarely notice the dark shadow drawing over them.

A pair of Kin is no ordinary prey. In earlier seasons, the loner Redaga would remain concealed, allowing these grander Dragons to pass unharmed. But as frostwing approaches, the predators of Felra become restless, eager to fill their bellies before prey retreats until greenwing. A pair of Kin could sustain her for months, and having assessed these two, she is confident she can take them. All she has to do is wear down their mettle. First, she'll end the slow one. He'll be the first to tire as she eludes their attacks and fools them into charging headlong. And once he's disposed of, the plucky one will offer no challenge. She is stunted and weak, dictated by petty emotions. The death of the former, clearly special to her, will drive her to madness.

Communicating without words, Nakino and Asha act in concert with one another, her training with Frope having prepared her for this moment. As Nakino rears himself for another charge, Asha yelps, announcing her intent to circle and prevent the Redaga from escaping. But as he bristles in fury, he can't help himself from taking off at full charge. As he races over the dead grass, his black wings rise, rapidly slowing his charge in an attempt to confuse the Redaga. He changes direction at the last moment and finds himself facing the side of the Redaga as Asha approaches her rear. He slams his talons into the ground, attempting an abrupt stop. While the Redaga attempts to decipher his strange behavior, she'll never sense Asha approaching from behind.

A lesser Redaga may fall for this, but not her. She has been keenly aware of Asha's approach, perfectly anticipating the feathered Dragon's ruse. Instead of reacting as they wish, she casts about suddenly and lunges towards Asha with her wing claws outstretched. Taken by surprise, she limbers off her talons to evade, but the Redaga is far too quick. She reaches in and tears a fresh wound below Asha's wing, causing... *purple* blood? What?!

Asha wails in pain as she tumbles to the ground, exposing her left side to a deadly counter-attack. But the Redaga is too shocked by the blood pouring out to react. What Dragon bleeds *purple*? Who is this strange, bright blue Lithan? Her confusion proves costly as Nakino arrives at that moment, a few seconds later than he would have preferred. He grapples onto her back and throws her to the ground, his hind talon ripping a chunk of skin from her critically important wing as she falls. She screeches, flailing in pain against the far bigger drakon. In her panic, she drags her wing talon forward and slices the side of Nakino's muzzle open, causing him to release his grip and flail backward.

The Redaga scampers away from Nakino, now trembling in pain with his muzzle buried into the grass. As she pulls herself up, she flicks her gaze to her left wing — along the bottom and halfway to her talon, blood is dripping from a claw-length tear. For a Dragon, injuries to the wing are the most severe. A grounded Dragon can only hunt meager prey and is vulnerable to roaming packs that would otherwise not pose a threat. Holding her breath, she tests a flap and feels a slight lift at her rear talons. For now, she can still fly. But on the cusp of frostwing, another injury like this would mean certain death. She snarls in anger, partly at these feathered Dragons and partly at herself for not taking them seriously.

But she has scant time to react, as Asha is already to her talons, racing forward with wings flared to exact revenge on the Redaga. The scaled one lowers herself against the grass and readies for the strange, purple-blooded Dragon — she will not make the same mistake twice. This time, she *will* kill her. But as Asha races up

the incline, she fails to see a fell tree hidden deep in the grass. Foretalons smack against wood, and her face twists in pain as she tumbles toward the ground, rolling on top of herself through the tallgrass. The Redaga squeals in delight and launches herself into the air. She intends to make this quick.

Writhing in pain, Asha knows the gravity of the mistake she's committed. With no time to run or clamber to her talons, she forces herself onto her back, splaying her talons to the sky in a desperate attempt to prevent the Redaga from taking her life. Her eyes widen as the Redaga's shadow draws over her.

ROOARR!

Crimson streaks the sky and slams into the Redaga, knocking her off her collision course with Asha. She gasps at the sight, then rolls over to watch the two objects collide into the ground at the bottom of the incline. Dirt and grass are thrown skyward into a hazy cloud, partially obscuring the outline of a crimson-plumaged drakon standing above the Redaga. It is a Dragon that Asha instantly recognizes:

Relmoon.

Having performed the flawless takedown, he slashes at the face of the Redaga to silence her panicked yowling. She kicks and screams, heaves and writhes, trying in vain with all her strength to force Relmoon away. Unlike the other Kin present, she can sense the murderous intent in his eyes — he has preyed on pitiable False-Kin like her before. With death drawing near, she flails her head to avoid the inevitable, but it's no use. Relmoon lunges for the side of her neck and clamps down hard, exploding warm blood into his mouth and over his neck. As the

Redaga's body convulses involuntarily, he watches with disgust as the fire in her eyes dims.

Scarcity may beget opportunity. But in Felra, hubris invites death.

April Fools: With Apologies to Sharks

Frigid air howls through the exposed opening of Kuro's elderus den, disturbing me from a restless sleep. I raise my head, heavy as a cinder block, and shake away the late autumn snow that accumulated on me while I slept. As I open my eyes, the scene before me comes into focus. Snow drifts have formed at the foot of the den, and icicles are beginning to grow along the charred bark that forms the ceiling. To my left is Kuro, curled into a ball, sleeping softly with her wing draped over my body. I smile, watching her chest rise and fall as she takes shallow breaths. Kuro's rhythmic sleeping was my only source of comfort as I lay in my bedding, unable to fall asleep, too disturbed by the resurgence of terrible nightmares. Despite my troubling dreams, this would still be a typical morning in Felra.

Except on this morning, something feels... wrong. *Dreadfully* wrong.

I swivel around, searching the den for signs of something unusual. Did prey sneak in overnight to hide from the snow? Or have their scents drifted in from outside? We aren't being attacked, are we? My racing heart slowly calms as I realize none of these are true. But if prey isn't here, then what's going on? Why do I feel so unusual?

And then, apropos of absolutely nothing, a *screen* appears in the air in front of me. As my eyes adjust to the sudden, artificial light, the disembodied voice of a woman rings clearly through my head.

<Hello, and welcome to The System! You are level 1.>

“Oh, for crying out loud.”

“Mmmh...” Kuro murmurs peacefully, shifting against her warm bedding. “Asha?” she asks with eyes still closed. “What’s the matter?”

“Kuro,” I command. “Wake up.”

Too upset to rouse her gently, I kick her in the shins.

“OW!!” she cries, instantly sitting up. With a bite to her voice, she scowls, “Asha!! What are you—“

At that instant, the same transparent screen appears before Kuro’s sleep-deprived face. She winces at the light, and her face turns dour. “...Oh, skunkscent.”

“A menu screen?!” I chide, angling my wing towards the MOTD. “What is this crap? What the *hell* is going on?! **ZANG!!**”

As if on cue, the uncomfortably pink head of a scaled drakaina shifts into view at the foot of the den. “*Gooooood* morning, Gamers!” the author exclaims with a cheeky forced smile, strutting into view. “Hey, listen, I’m sorry you guys had to find out this way, but the story got canceled.”

“Canceled?!” I shriek.

“They canceled us?!” Kuro nearly doubles backward in shock. “But we’re still in the middle of the novel! A chapter, even! How could they cancel us *now*?!”

“Well, the unfortunate truth is we just weren’t popular enough,” Zang explains, shaking her head in dismay. “Boilerplate fantasy web novels that don’t adhere to a hot gimmick just aren’t a good way to attract a lot of readers. You gotta have a *REALLY* good story to stand out, and regrettably, this one ain’t it. If I hadn’t made fundamental changes to the plot, the investors would have backed out. All of us would be out of a job.”

Kuro stares at her, struggling to find words. “So... you’re saying we’re a LitRPG now?”

“With an isekai back story.”

I blink, trying to imagine what strange, far-off world I was transported from and how ham-fisted the explanation would be to account for the story starting at breakfast in the Lordanou Palace instead of having me hatch from a spider monster's egg or something else inane.

"This is ridiculous," Kuro pouts, stamping her talons against the ground. "Nobody is going to continue reading this web novel with a plot change this dramatic!!"

"See, that's where I think you're wrong," Zang quips, starry-eyed and fanning her scaled wings wide in front of her. "I believe it offers a fresh new approach in the world of LitRPGs! Think about it: A web novel framed as a straight fantasy romp with no foreshadowing of what's to come, only to have its world torn asunder as the nefarious Administrator of The System finally appears in chapter 73! Why did it take them so long to show up? And where was The System in the previous seventy-three chapters? Hoo-hoo, the only way you'll find out is to keep turning the page, dear reader!"

"You're insane," I detest. "I refuse to go along with this!"

"Look, could you at least give it a try? I worked really hard on the magic system, and I promise it's a lot of fun."

I release a strained sigh and look to Kuro for advice, but she's just as uncertain as I am. I can't say I blame her; this is a heart-wrenching decision. She's been with me on this journey ever since chapter 33, and it really feels like we've nurtured

something worthwhile and relevant. Is this really what all our hard work comes down to? The annihilation of our sensibilities on the love of the craft solely to appease some farcical, groveling capitulation to capitalism?

Zang chimes, "If you say 'no,' then I need your desks cleared out by five."

"Alright, fine," I sigh, throwing my wings up. "I'll try out your System."

Zang's face lights up, and she flutters her wings in delight.

Kuro steps forward to stand at my side. "If she's doing it, then count me in, too."

I smile in relief and rub my muzzle against Kuro's neck. Even out of character, I can always count on her to be at my side.

"Oh, wonderful!" Zang exclaims. "Yes, this is splendid news! The story can continue! Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to janitor the system and make sure it's working and in tip-top shape for your adventure! Ta-ta~!"

Zang dips her head in parting grace, casts about, and disappears in a puff of plot convenience.

“SSSSIIIGHHHH!!!! Let’s just get this over with,” I grumble, instantiating the MOTD back into existence with a flick of my wing.

<Hello, and welcome to The—>

“Yeah, yeah, not my first LitRPG,” I dismiss, stepping out of the sanctuary of Kuro’s den and into the chilled morning air. “What do I have to pick first?”

<To begin your adventure in FELRA, please select a Class.>

“Alright. What are my options?”

<Classes available at your level include: Warrior; Warrior Cat; Mage; Cleric; Nekomata; Witch Doctor; ~~Spelling Cat~~>

Without warning, the window becomes corrupted and blips out of existence, and the disembodied voice of the woman is cut off abruptly. Not like actually cut off, however. Because that would be barbaric.

“Aw,” Kuro pouts. “I wanted to be a Nekomata!”

“What the hell just happened?” I plead to nobody in particular.

<Sorry!> Zang apologizes inside our heads. <The System just had a blue screen and crashed. I'm going to force-close and reboot it, so please wait a moment, okay? Thanks!>

With the author momentarily distracted, Kuro angles her head close to mine for a hushed conversation. "She's not a very good software engineer, is she?"

"Nope," I respond, shaking my head.

"Why doesn't she just poach some intern from another department? That's what everyone does for their first System."

She just shrugs her wings and sighs.

"Hey," Kuro grumbles, breaking the fourth wall to stare into the camera in your mind's eye. "Asha was the one shrugging, not me."

Whoops, sorry about that! Got a little confused there. I'll try to be more careful from now on, okay?

"Yeah, whatever."

At that fweghing instant, the System finishes rebooting, and screens reappear in front of our faces.

<Hello, and welcome to The System! You are level 1.>

“Enough stalling,” I say, using a standard dialog tag for the first time in this chapter. “I’m picking Warrior Cat as my class.”

“What?!” Kuro shrieks in surprise.

<You have chosen ‘Warrior Cat.’ Now applying class template...>

As the window disappears, my body is enveloped in a dazzling, pure light. I feel lifted skyward by an invisible force, spreading my wings to their sides in a sort of Lithan T-pose. Compelled by something hidden beyond far, I shut my eyes and feel my consciousness and my body slowly altered. Memory by memory, limb by limb, byte by byte, etc, the very fabric of my soul is shaped and changed into something familiar. Something distinctively *mouse-brained*. My wings return to my body, and my feathers slowly become soft fur. My ears shift into points on top of my head, and whiskers grow from my muzzle. Keeping my eyes closed, I sense the light around me dim, and my paws touch the soft ground once more.

Unlawfully taken from NovelBin, this story should be reported if seen on Amazon.

<DING! Class template successfully applied. You are now a Warrior Cat!>

I reopen my eyes, seeing the world for the first time through a new lens.

<DING! You have mail! WARRIOR_CODE_FINAL_REVISION_C.pdf has been delivered to your INBOX.>

<DING! You have mail! WARRIOR_CLANS_COMMITTEE_BYLAWS.pdf has been delivered to your INBOX.>

<DING! You have mail! MAP_PARTICIPATION_FORM.pdf has been delivered to your INBOX.>

<DING! You have mail! SECRET_LIST_OF_ERINS.pdf has been delivered to your INBOX.>

The new world is obscured behind an avalanche of pop-up windows. Guess some things never change. I sigh and dismiss the notifications with a flick of my azure blue paw.

Kuro, now towering over me like an airship, stares down at me in supreme shock. “Asha...?” she asks, lowering her head to my level. “Are you alright? How do you feel?”

I stare past the blades of grass and up at my dear friend. No... she is something else to me now. For the first time, I see her as not just a friend but a compatriot — a clanmate of the Snowfell Clan.

“Great StarClan, it really worked!”

I lift my paw and gaze around to inspect my new body. Azure blue fur covers me from muzzle to tail, save for the cream-colored socks on my paws. I mean, like, sock fur. Not actual socks, okay? I wasn't sure I would become a real clan cat, but here I am! I'm ready to go on border patrols, hunt for fresh kill, and get into forbidden romances with cats from other clans!

"Hey, Asha," Kuro growls a few feet from my face. "Say a *reaaaaaaaly* bad curse word."

"A *really* bad one?" I ask, grinning like an idiot. "Oh, I know *plenty* of those. Way more than fwegh. For example, Fox-dung."

A sinister smile curls across Kuro's muzzle.

"—Wait!! That wasn't...!"

"HAHAHAHA..." Kuro falls to the ground and rolls around in laughter.

"You, weasel-hearted...!" I hiss, pointing an accusing claw at her. "You knew I would get censored!! How!?"

“Oh, Asha,” she chitters, trying to calm herself down. “Isn’t it obvious? You’re a Warrior Cat! They don’t know any twoleg swear words! And besides, did you really think you could get away with profanity in a children’s book?”

“But this isn’t a Children’s Book!” I protest. “It’s a web novel! The internet is packed to the brim with profanity, so I should be able to say whichever fweghing swear I want!”

“You’ll say nothing unless I approve of it, Asha!!”

The familiar voice of a young nicknamed drakaina calls out from behind me. I swirl around the underbrush and expect to see her standing there, but I find no one.

“I’m up here, mousebrain!”

Realizing the voice is coming from above me, I gaze up to see a shaggy pure white she-cat perched on a floating cloud with a distinctive, cheery face depicted on it. A sinister grin grows across the she-cat’s face as our eyes meet. “Well, Asha!! I see you’ve also picked Warrior Cat as your class!”

“StarClan’s kits!!” I yowl in surprise. “Tomcat?!! What are you doing here!? And where did you find that lakitu cloud?”

“Heh-heh! Zang made me the Administrator of her system!” she boasts, grinning from ear to ear. “I flew over here to tell you and Kuro, but since you also picked Warrior Cat as your class, we have no choice but to fight like we were battling for sunningrocks!! Also, I found the cloud backstage, and Zang said I could have it.”

Zang!! That no good, Hello Kitty themed...!! I hiss in disgust and sink my claws into the ground. How could she make Tomcat the Administrator of The System? I’m the protagonist of this novel! I’ve had the most page time by far, so the readers are the most familiar with me and my character development. Tomcat didn’t even show up until chapter 54!! She’s a midboss at best, not an Administrator!

“Tomcat!!” I hiss, pointing an accusing claw at her. “As the main character of this web novel, I will defeat you and retake my rightful role as Administrator!”

“Is it cool if I watch you guys?” Kuro asks quietly from behind.

Tomcat waves her paw dismissively. “Yeah, thas’ cool.”

The ground trembles as Kuro settles into the grass behind us.

“Now, then!!” I announce to nobody in particular. “We’re in a LitRPG, not by the lake. What spells are available to me?”

<Available spells include: ‘Fireball,’ ‘Heal,’ and ‘Acquiesce.’>

I hold my muzzle in my paw, carefully examining the list of spells. Although I'm quite curious about what 'acquiesce' is, flinging a fireball up Tomcat's nose sounds like the perfect response to her debauchery.

"Alright!!" I screech, jumping into an attack position. "I cast Fireball!!"

At that moment, warmth tickles the tips of my right forepaw. I hold it out in front of me and watch as a searing flame forms in the shape of a sphere. I cast aside the sudden realization that I could've produced a pillar of flame the size of a building if I had just remained a Lathan. While that may be true, it wouldn't have been as absurd as a Warrior Cat casting a fireball, and we must always strive for the obtuse in our lives.

With the fire swirling on my paw, I stare down Tomcat. "FIREBALL! GO!!!"

I fling my paw forward, and the fireball travels through the air all of 3 feet in the air before fizzling into nothing.

"Huh?!" I blink, unable to believe my attack failed. "What the hell just happened?"

Frope's face glows in delight. "HA HA! Don't burn down the forest, *Ashafur!*"

Oh, heck, that's a good one.

"Huh?" asks Ashafur.

"...HEY!!!"

Oh, come on, it's perfect!

"Yeah!!" Tomcat agrees. "'Ashafur' is one letter removed from Ashfur! The name totally suits you!"

"Tomcat, what are you talking about?!" I hiss. "Argh, forget it! This isn't fair at all! Why didn't my fireball work?!"

"Well, you're only level 1," Kuro rasps from behind. "This is a LitRPG, remember? You gotta grind your skills before they become useful in battle."

Fox-dung, that's right!! All I've been able to do so far is pick a class. I haven't had time to act as the audience surrogate and stumble my way around an unfamiliar fantasy world while leveraging the vast pool of knowledge from my past life to

become ludicrously overpowered and make my way up in The System before eventually learning how to break the system itself and deify as it's newest Administrator! I'm really jumping the gun fighting the Administrator right away, aren't I?

"Enough exposition!!" Tomcat yells. A halo of Fireballs forms around her head and begin twirling rapidly. "We're almost at the target word count for this chapter, so it's time for you to DIE!!"

"Eep!" I squeak, falling on all fours to dodge Tomcat's fireballs as they hurtle toward the ground at full speed. Relying on the knowledge we both learned hunting, I roll to my left to avoid the first attack and spring off my forepaws to dodge the second. Her fireballs explode on the ground and quickly ignite the tinder-dry grass. I glance behind me and watch a small brush fire envelope the scene.

"What?!" Tomcat yells in feigned surprise. "I thought fire would save my clan? Heh-heh!"

I open my muzzle to call out Tomcat for such a poor joke but am immediately interrupted as another blast of heat sails over the tip of my tail. I dive out of the way as the brush fire grows larger.

"These are not my kits, Ashafur! HA HA HA!"

What?! Ugh, that joke doesn't even make sense!! Tomcat, you...!

<DING! New quest added: Draw an exciting chapter illustration for the ongoing fight!>

At that instant, a sheet of paper and a box of cat-sized crayons puff into existence and land on the ground before me.

“Oh!” I mew in surprise. “Y-You want to commission my art for this chapter?”

“I think that’s precisely what’s happening,” Kuro says, joining me at my side.

Tomcat initiates an impromptu cease-fire and floats down to join us. “Are you an artist, Asha?”

“Well, no...” I say, feeling my tail brush against the grass behind me. “I drew a piece of art earlier in the novel, but it was very basic; a child’s drawing. I haven’t improved as an artist at all since then...”

Kuro lightly brushes the tips of her wing feathers against me. “Asha, it doesn’t matter how ‘good’ of an artist you are. If you can draw, you’re an artist, and your labor has value.”

“Yup!” Tomcat agrees. “C’mon, I like watching artist streamers. I wanna see your art!”

As I stare at my friends, a pang of anxiousness runs through me. I’ve never done art commissions before, will they really be supportive? But it’s a quest item, so I suppose I have no choice but to do it, right?

“Alright,” I say, cautiously approaching the box of crayons. I pry open the cover with my fangs and wedge a blue crayon between my paw and dewclaw. Laying in the grass to get into a better drawing position, I get to work drawing an elaborate composition of the ongoing battle — Tomcat and myself locked in combat, while Kuro sits off the side as a silent spectator. After a few minutes of drawing, my work is complete.

“There!” I announce. “What do you think?”

“It’s...” Kuro’s voice drifts off, and a muffled chitter escapes her. “Well, it’s certainly a drawing.”

At hearing her stifled laugh, I feel my heart sink a little. But before I can feel too anxious about Kuro’s passing judgment, a hearty cackle breaks out beside me.

“PFFFFFFFFFFFFFFTTTT... HA HA HA! GREAT STARCLAN, WHAT IS THAT, ASHA?!”

I stare at my so-called friend, unable to believe her response. “Tomcat, what the hell?!”

“Heh heh! Oh, Ashafur...” she says, wiping a tear away with her paw. “I know you aren’t an artist, but what is this?! Seriously???”

“Alright,” I huff, supremely frustrated. I drop my paws and announce, “That’s it, I’m out. You guys have fun the rest of the novel, I quit.”

I hiss in frustration and proceed to exit stage left. This novel was fun while it was still following the original storyline, but now it’s just ridiculous.

“Huh?” Frope looks at me, confused. “Ashafur?! You can’t leave now! We’re still fighting!”

“At-will employment!” I remind, waving my tail in parting as I trot out the shadowy back door of the stage and shift the narrator’s responsibilities to the third party.

“HEY!!” Frope yells, holding her paws in front of her face like a megaphone. “Come back here!! I’m going to go Hollyleaf on you, Ashafur!!”

She stares at the back door, anxiously awaiting a response that never comes. A cold breeze blows through the door and closes it shut without a resounding thud that echoes through the clearing under the elderus. The scene becomes silent as only Frope, Kuro, and the hopping woman remain.

“Was I too hard on her?” Tomcat asks in a somber voice, staring up at Kuro.

Kuro allows her wings to droop and averts her eyes. “You kinda were, Frope.”

“Ugh...” Tomcat frowns, realizing the error of her twisted ways far too late. “I’ll be honest, Kuro. If Ashafur’s no longer in the story, then I really don’t wanna continue, either.”

Despite the tough news, Kuro can’t help but crack a smile at her apprentice. “Wrapping things up quick, eh?”

“You know it,” Frope says, turning the cloud around. “I’ll catch ya later, okay?”

“Yeah. See you around, Frope.”

Frope flies off, waving to Kuro as she sails around her head and exits out the same door Ashafur used a moment earlier. With the two clan cats removed from the story, Kuro is the only one left underneath the elderus. She sighs longingly and

gazes across the empty clearing, pondering what she should do now. She could try to put out the brush fire that's currently raging out of control, but it all seems so pointless. What's the sense of carrying on without Asha? Who could possibly care about the story now? May as well stick a fork in it.

"Well," Kuro says aloud. "Smoke em if you got em'."

After The Princess's Feathers set burned to the ground, the actors said goodbye and went their separate ways. Asha quickly landed another leading role as *Silhouette*, the clandestine love interest of Shadow in the *Shade Touched* reboot, now available on NovelBin! Kuro bounced around for a while before getting a role in the *So I'm a Spider, So What?* sequel as a 'trollsonataratect' (Your guess is as good as mine.) Duncan left the web novel business and can be found maining Braixen at *Pokkén* friendlies. I ran into Horatio the other day. He's looking great for his age!

73. Relmoon To The Rescue!

The ghostly howls of Kin rise like steam from beside the massive elder tree. Away on the knoll, Asha watches with bated confusion as Nakino and Relmoon lift their heads skyward to issue a dissonant, mournful cry.

RAAARRRRRR....

ROOOORRRR.....

When False-Kin are slain, it is customary for true Kin to announce their passing to all nearby – An ancient tradition that is not so much a dirge but a proclamation that the threat has passed. As Asha hears their cries, unbidden instincts engage. Compelled to join them, she raises her head into the air.

SKEEEEEEE.....

When the Redaga stops convulsing, Relmoon lowers his head and licks his chops clean of blood. With the fight over, he scans the surrounding area to see precisely who he's saved. Roughly three wings away is Nakino, the Grandfather Tree's healer. As Relmoon's gaze falls onto him, his head returns to a level position. He looks flustered, bug-eyed in shock as blue blood drips from a talon-length laceration across the side of his muzzle. Relmoon exhales in relief – he survived the fight. Losing a healer on the eve of frostwing would be an unimaginable loss for the flock.

He then recalls the Redaga was moments away from pouncing another Kin. He turns to look up the side of the incline and spots none other than the Farlander herself, lying on the opposite side of a felled tree trunk, her head tucked in the grass and rocking gently back and forth. He growls under his breath at the sight of her. Still, she's alive. Recognizing what she must be going through, he decides to check on Nakino.

“Son-Of-Yzori,” he speaks in a cool voice filled with faint relief. He moves to stand by his side and inspect the wound on his left foreleg. “Are you alright? Tell me what happened.”

Nakino growls in pain and holds his muzzle against thick fends of grass to slow the bleeding. “False-Kin ambushed us,” he croaks. “She hid in the tree and used raven’s thistle to mask her scent. We couldn’t smell her until she landed behind us. We were trapped and couldn’t flee.”

Relmoon grunts. Ever since he smelled the butchered pack of Litsha, he knew the False-Kin had to be responsible. But something besides prey has piqued his curiosity. “Raven’s thistle,” he echoes. “I didn’t know that could mask scents.”

“In large enough quantities,” Nakino explains. “This is the only part of the flock’s territory where it’s established enough. The False-Kin—”

GRRRR...

From the side of the knoll, a strained growl rises over their conversation. Nakino looks up and gasps, concern surging over his other party member.

“Oh, Asha!” he cries, straining to rise to his talons. But as soon as weight is applied to his injured leg, he feels a stinging pain that sends him tumbling back to the ground. “Agh!! Skunkscent...!” he growls, gritting his fangs in pain.

“Save your strength,” Relmoon says, brushing his wing gently against Nakino. He turns away and frowns, silently wishing it hadn’t come to this. “I’ll check on her.”

As he walks up the incline toward Asha, a wry thought enters his head. ‘*Now we’re even,*’ he thinks to himself. The realization he’s saved the despicable outsider from Ellyntide fills him with perverse glee. Petty as it may be, no longer can *Kuro* claim to be the only Kin to have saved this child of the Goddess from certain death. And when the stories are told of the foul visitor who took the form of Kin, they’ll surely mention his name – not Kuro’s.

Still between the grass and shrubs, Asha’s head is bobbing back and forth. Her eyes are clenched, and her talons curled against the ground. Despite her distressed state, Relmoon doesn’t seem concerned by it.

“Princess Asha Eloise Lordanou,” he announces in a dry voice as he approaches.
“Are you alright?”

...

...

...*Princess Asha Eloise Lordanou?*

That’s who I am, right?

I open my eyes to see Relmoon standing before me with a rankled expression and his muzzle covered in Dragon's blood. What's *he* doing here? Was he the one who knocked the Redaga out of the sky? His plumage is the same color, but...

Pain forces my eyes shut. As if my wounds from the fight weren't bad enough, I must contend with a splitting headache. Ugh, what the hell happened to me during the fight?

"It seems you're alright," Relmoon suggests with a hint of impatience.

"Yeah..." I trail off, still puzzled by the crimson Kin's sudden appearance in the middle of nowhere. "Relmoon, what are you doing here?"

"Saving your lives," he huffs, fluffing his chest feathers. "I was returning to Flat Rock from the edge of Felra and heard alarm cries. I flew to investigate and found you and Nakino fighting that dreadful False-Kin."

I gaze past Relmoon and spot the Redaga lying motionless at the bottom of the incline. A fatal wound is visible on her neck, with fresh blood flowing into a small puddle in the grass. A few yards to her left is Nakino, lying in the grass and cleaning the wound on his left foreleg with a muzzle full of coarse bluestem grass. He stops to gaze up the incline, and his face fills with relief. I smile and tip my wings to him.

So, Relmoon saved us. I suppose I better thank him. As I clear my throat to speak, he looks up from preening his chest. I locate my voice and tell him, "Um, thank you, Relmoon. You saved our lives."

His eyes turn away, and he exhales flatly, "I did only what any worthwhile Kin would have done."

Um, okay. A simple '*You're welcome*' would've sufficed. But instead of continuing his arrogant routine, Relmoon decides to help me again. He steps forward and lowers himself, resting his flank gently against my side. "We need to get you up, Farlander. Lean against me."

As I'm in no condition to refuse, I do as he says and push my weight against him. As he rises, I rise alongside him, hissing gently as I flex sore muscles and still-fresh wounds. My eyes shut in pain, temporarily forcing me to rely on my other senses. Relmoon's scent is crisp to a fault, like a cloud of snow blown directly into my face.

"You used the gift," he casually remarks.

My eyes open. "Come again?"

“The gift that Keuvra grants all Kin,” Relmoon explains as we stand fully upright. He pauses to let me catch my breath, then steps away. Freed from his side, I squirm a little on my bruised foreleg but remain upright. “Didn’t Kuro teach it to you?”

I shake my head. “She’s never mentioned anything about a gift.”

Relmoon rolls his eyes. “*Of course*, she didn’t. I guess it’s up to me.” He sighs, beckons with his wings to follow, and slowly walks down the incline toward Nakino.

Grimacing through untreated wounds, I put one talon before the other and join him by his side. “Did I use the gift to act like a feral?”

Relmoon nods. “When Azurrel granted Lithans the Gift of Communication, it dulled our feral sensibilities. We became stunted, more prone to rely on slow decision-making instead of lightning-quick instincts. But when Keuvra deified, he granted Kin the Gift of Regression — the ability to temporarily suppress the Gift of Communication and become feral once more. When Kin do so, we become faster, and our fighting skills are enhanced.”

So I really was feral back when I first transformed into a Lathan. And this explains why I couldn’t talk or think straight during the fight. That’s incredible! Who knew you could just *turn off* a gift from the deities?

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Relmoon continues, “With training, It’s possible to regress and retain the ability to speak more easily. Kin who achieve this become exceptionally strong.”

“I take it you’re one of them?”

“Of course,” he smirks a toothy grin, possibly the most genuine smile I’ve ever witnessed from Relmoon.

He seems like one of the strongest Kin in the flock, so that doesn’t surprise me. It’s a shame I only had enough time to learn how to hunt because being able to control my feral emotions would be super helpful. When Relmoon preyed on the Redaga, he made it look easy! At least I won’t have to worry about other Dragons when I return to Ellyntide.

As we reach the bottom of the incline, Relmoon stops unexpectedly. He turns to me and pleasantly remarks, “You must be preparing to fly home soon.”

I stare at him momentarily, too confused to think of a worthy response. First, he explained regression, and now he’s initiating small talk! I thought Relmoon hated my guts! Why is he being so friendly all of a sudden?

I push aside my dismay and tell him, “I’m planning to leave tomorrow, actually.”

“Oh, really?” His eyes go wide in surprise. “Before I flew here, I passed the crossing to the Farlands.”

“Seriously?!” I exclaim with equal surprise. “How are the winds? Is it still safe for me to leave?”

The elders warned me that the zone of calm winds, the perilously slim section of winds I flew through to reach Felra, would eventually disappear for the season. Terrified at the prospect of being stuck here until spring, I’ve asked almost every Kin I’ve met if they believe I’ll be able to make the crossing so late in the season. While everyone agreed that I would, nobody has visited Archer’s Landing to confirm if it’s safe.

“Oh, yes,” Relmoon nods. “I was flying high enough to feel calm winds against my feathers. But I must warn you, Farlander. They will not blow for long. You must leave tomorrow and not a day later.”

I exhale as nearly all the weight is lifted from my wings. “I understand. Not a day later than tomorrow. Tonight will be my final night in Felra.”

Relmoon smiles again, surpassing his record for a genuine smile set just moments ago.

This is great news! All my time learning to hunt and teaching herbalism won't be in vain. I can fly home to Ellyntide, defend our Island, and get this mess sorted out, all while hunting my own prey. The news lifts my spirits and puts a spring in my step just long enough to remind me that I'm still injured from the fight. The bruise on my right foreleg shouldn't slow me down tomorrow, but the injury under my left wing might. Nakino needs to look at it, but how can he with Relmoon hanging around us? Even though I'm leaving tomorrow, he can't know about my purple-colored blood.

As we approach the healer, he looks up from tending to his wounds. "Oh, Asha..." he exhales, letting his wings relax. "It's good to see you up. Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," I say, lying through my fangs. "Nothing you can't take a look at later." I stare into Nakino's face, hoping he realizes the double meaning of my words.

He opens his muzzle to say something, then quickly shuts it. "Ah," he says after a moment's contemplation, flashing the smallest amount of concern. "Well, I'm glad that you're safe. If it weren't for Relmoon, we'd be prey for that mud-eating False-Kin."

Relmoon ignores the compliment to ask instead, "And yourself, Son-Of-Yzori? How are your wounds?"

"I need to rest, but the bleeding on my leg has slowed," he says, examining the laceration up close. Blood has soaked the black feathers surrounding the wound,

giving them a thick, oil-stained appearance. “Give me a claw’s mark on the sun, and I’ll be ready to fly.”

Relmoon gazes at the sky, then nods in acknowledgment. “Very well. We will butcher the False-Kin, fill ourselves, and bring the scraps to the Grandfather Tree. Communal prey is becoming scarce.” He steps away from Nakino, then faces me with an alluring gaze. “Come with me, Farlander. I will teach you how to butcher this miserable creature.”

Before I can say anything, he turns and begins walking toward the body of the Redaga. I bound after him, again confused by his sudden, outgoing nature. If Kuro were here, I’m sure her feathers would bristle angrily. Is that why he’s being nice to me? Because he thinks I’ll tell Kuro?

If that’s the case, then he’s underestimated me. I’ll always be loyal to Kuro, far more than I’ll ever be to Relmoon.

Still, as we tread over the dead grass of the clearing, I can’t help but feel a little comfortable around Relmoon. Kuro sure hates him, and he was vehemently against me joining the flock. But maybe he’s not so bad? He has a steadfast loyalty to Keuvra and the flock, but I have my loyalties to The Goddess and my Kingdom. Maybe I’ve misunderstood him like the flock misunderstands Kuro?

If that’s the case, why *does* Kuro hate him so much?

As I catch up to Relmoon, an uncomfortable realization dawns on me. If I leave tomorrow and find a way to return to normal, I'll never learn why the two Dragons who saved my life hate each other so much. It's one of those vexing questions that will bother me for the rest of my life. I've never asked Kuro about it because it's a sensitive subject for her. But if Relmoon is in a good mood, maybe I can ask him instead?

As we approach the Redaga, I gather my strength. Kuro would be furious if I asked her this question, but what about Relmoon? Will he be civil and tell me the truth?

"Relmoon," I speak up, my voice frail from anxiousness. "Can I ask you something?"

Stepping over a log, he gives me a curious stare. "You may."

"Why do you and Kuro hate each other?"

Relmoon tilts his head bemusedly. "*Why* do we hate each other?"

"Yes," I say, trying to sound firm. "Before I leave Felra, I have to know."

"And why exactly must you know?" he asks in a foreboding voice. It feels like Relmoon is staring down at me for the first time.

But I won't allow him to intimidate me. "Because Everyone says Kuro is difficult to get along with, but I gave her a chance, and she's always been kind to me."

Relmoon watches me for a heartbeat before breaking into an uncontrolled chuckle. After catching himself, he continues, "Well, that is not surprising to hear, Princess Asha Eloise Lordanou. Kuro is nice to everyone at first."

"...At first?"

"Oh, yes," he nods. "And it seems nobody has bothered to tell you that she and I were once mated."

I nearly trip over myself. "*What?!*"

"If you must know," he says, settling into the grass before the Redaga. "We were paired with each other on couple's night. She was as sweet as a dew flower back then, and quite ferocious. We decided to spar with each other at the end of a long walk under Maki's glow. It was a fierce fight, and we traded blows back and forth. But in the end, she misjudged a pounce, giving me the upper hand. I forced her into a gracious yield."

I stare into the distance, unable to believe the words I'm hearing. Kuro and Relmoon, together on a date? It seems impossible to be true. Admittedly, I've

never heard of this '*couple's night*' before. But what else could it be besides something romantic?

The crimson drakon continues, "Kuro was the only Kin who could match me in a spar. She loved the challenge, and so did I. After the gathering ended, she chased me around for days, begging me to move into her den. So, I did."

They... really were mated, weren't they? That's what happens when you move into a den, right? Why else would she chase someone for days?

"But soon..." Relmoon drifts off. He pauses to fold his wings tightly against himself. "Something in her changed. To this season, I don't know what it was. The way she looked into my eyes... I can't explain it. She was no longer the sweet Sister who wanted to stand by my side. Eventually, we got into a fight at White Mountain. We tore each other to pieces, and one of us would have died if Kuro's Grandmother hadn't intervened and protected her. The elders banned us from sparring, though I'm sure you've noticed every Brother in the flock trying to get my revenge."

I stare at the ground, too shocked to speak. Everything he says makes perfect sense. Why they hate each other so much. Why every boy in the flock tries to fight her. Why didn't I think of it before?

"Even poor Nakino has a Kuro story," Relmoon says, looking over his shoulder at the timid healer.

I spin around to face him. “You do?”

Across the way, Nakino’s face fills with unease. “I-I was also paired with her on couple’s night. Things started off fine, and she was very nice to me, but... well, I guess I did something wrong because she became very upset with me. After she finished screaming, she flew from the Grandfather Tree. She left me there all alone.”

I grit my fangs and shake my head in disbelief. “Why... why would she do that?”

“Kuro is simply cruel,” sighs Relmoon, rising to his talons. “A bully at best and heartless at worst.”

I spring to my talons and nearly scream, “Then why is she kind to me?!”

“Because she’s *using* you, Princess Asha Eloise Lordanou.”

As Relmoon’s words echo across the clearing, a cold wind from the north blows around us. Kuro’s.... using me? Why? In a bitter voice I ask Relmoon, “What use would she have for me?”

“I can think of many things,” Relmoon says, pacing around me. “To certain members of the flock, you are a fascinating creature. The stories of your visit to

Felra will be told long after you return home. Perhaps Kuro simply wants to be the Kin mentioned in those stories.” As Relmoon turns to step toward the Redaga, something comes over him. He chuckles quite heartily and adds, “Well, no longer can she claim to be the only Kin who saved your life.”

I release a long sigh. Somehow, I doubt fame is something Kuro’s interested in. But she does have an intense interest in the Farlands, so I know there’s some truth to Relmoon’s suggestion. But what does acting nice to me have to do with being mentioned in stories? It doesn’t make sense.

I thought I would gain some insight into Kuro’s behavior, but Relmoon’s story has only left me with more questions. Why did she break up with him? Just how much conflict was in their relationship? I’m only in Felra for one more day, but could she betray me, too? I wanted to know the truth about Kuro and Relmoon, but this is an uncomfortable truth to accept.

Still, I’m thankful to have learned it. As Relmoon stands over the Redaga to examine it, I step forward and tell him, “Thank you, Relmoon. I hope you weren’t uncomfortable sharing your story.”

“It’s quite alright,” he sighs, a faint smile creeping across his muzzle. “Now, let us forget the past and teach you how to butcher this pitiful creature.”

As Relmoon begins his lecture on the Redaga, I find concentrating difficult. My mind is stuck elsewhere, too busy contemplating the ramifications of what I’ve learned. With only a day left before I return home, it seems like everything I’ve accomplished is hanging in the balance.

The Princess's Feathers

Wet snowflakes collide into icy wings as we pass through another cloud bank on our way to the edge of Felra. The stubborn cloud cover has made navigating the frigid skies bothersome, but brief glimpses of the forest below are enough for Kuro to guide us. Flying to my right, she hasn't said much since we left the Grandfather Tree early this morning. But then, neither have I, for I've been far too confined to my thoughts, recalling every incredible detail that happened to me these past few weeks.

Kuro flicks her ears to follow and descends, disappearing as she slips through the bottom of the cloud deck. I follow her lead through a blanket of white, feeling cold drops of moisture pass over my facial feathers. Then the clouds part suddenly, revealing Kuro above a familiar curve of land, a small extension of brown and gold against an endless sea of swirling gray.

Archer's Landing. The place where the adventure of a lifetime began and where it will now end.

Our final night at the Grandfather Tree was... awkward. Nakino and I agreed to keep our Redaga encounter a secret. I didn't want Kuro to know Relmoon saved us, and Nakino didn't want the flock to know how weak he is. Kuro arrived in the evening, ready to listen to as many stories as I could tell. But I felt quite distant, and I'm certain Kuro noticed it. As I told her the story about Professor Willow and his botany program, I watched her expression slowly flip from fascination to concern. All told, I could only recite three stories before claiming I was tired and wanted to sleep. By then, her enthusiasm had waned, and she seemed equally prepared for rest.

I wish I could have talked longer, I really do. But ever since my encounter with Relmoon, his ominous warning has been playing in my head like a needle stuck against a phonograph.

'Because she's using you, Princess Asha Eloise Lordanou.'

It seems crazy to think she would do something to betray my trust just as I'm leaving Felra, but did Relmoon feel the same way after moving into her den? Am I just the next Dragon caught in her crosshairs? Questions like these have been swirling inside my head ever since yesterday. But now that we're over Archer's Landing, I feel somewhat relieved. Nothing is keeping me in Felra any longer. Even if she tried to do something now, I could simply fly home.

As she brings to land by the continent's edge, I can't help but stare at her. Relieved of my fears, I can focus on saying goodbye to the friend I'll never forget.

ROOAR!!

Kuro calls our landing, screaming against the howling gales blowing from the strait. We settle down next to a windswept rosewood fir and shake our wings of the ice that accumulated during our flight. Finding ourselves atop a ridge, I stare out across the strait. The clouds are tempestuous, churning and roiling against an endless sea of mottled gray. Can I really fly in these conditions?

“Well,” Kuro says, approaching my side. “This is it.”

I take a deep breath and slowly release it. “This is it. I’m going home.”

I glance over to see Kuro staring across the strait, devoid of emotion. What is she thinking about? Is she bottling her feelings?

“There’s still time to join me,” I suggest.

The guise drops, and she loosens a gentle smile. “My life is here,” she says. “And yours in Ellyntide. With your family. That is the way things are meant to be.”

I exhale, feeling my fears assuaged. She’s faithful until the very end. I should have trusted her more from the start.

Kuro scans the sky, watching clouds whip in from the strait. “I’ll fly up and check the winds,” she says, opening her wings. “You need to conserve your energy for the flight.”

That would be helpful. “Thank you, Kuro.”

She smiles like the sun, a ray of light against a world of gray. “I’ll be right back!”

Kuro calls her takeoff and leaps into the air, catching a ground-level gust that quickly draws her into a rising thermal. I observe her movements as she climbs into the sky, trying to commit every graceful detail of her flight to memory. This may be the last time I witness a Lithan soar through the air. I don’t know what awaits me when I return home. The disputed island, attacking Nortane, making contact with my family... there are so many ways my plans could be foiled. I want to remember indelible moments like this while I still can.

Kuro soars in the air, rising and falling gracefully on the wind. Moments pass, then minutes. Still, she flies the same paths back and forth. It occurs to me just how long she’s taking to locate the calm winds. Has their presence diminished since yesterday? Relmoon warned me that I must leave today, so they must be a very thin current of air... right?

Finally, Kuro begins her descent. As she approaches ground level, I strain to see her face, anxiously looking for any indication of how the flight went. Unexpectedly, she fails to call her landing and glides down before me. Her face is grave like she had just discovered a corpse.

“Kuro?” I ask, holding my breath.

“Asha...” she drifts off, barely audible over the howling wind. She averts her eyes and murmurs, “ I— I can’t find them.”

“You can’t find what?”

“The calm winds. They’re not there.”

They’re... not there?

“But...” my voice dissipates like the wind sucked it from my throat. “...That’s not possible.”

Kuro shakes her head slowly. “Asha, I searched up and down the sky. I don’t understand why, but... they’re gone.”

Gone?

How could they be gone...?

If the calm winds are gone, then that means...

“I’m stuck here.”

I’m stuck in Felra for the next *six months*. I won’t see Mom, Dad, Sofl, or Duncan until next spring. My plan to defend the disputed island and appear as an ally to Ellyntide is ruined. If Mom has started a war as retribution for my death, as she did for my Grandmother, it could be *over* by the time I return home. Countless lives lost, and our cities attacked, all because I missed my window to return home by a single day?

“Asha...” Kuro says, taking short and erratic breaths, moments away from breaking out into tears. She approaches and lowers her head to nuzzle it against mine. “Oh, Asha, I’m so—“

“*Don’t touch me.*”

I whip my head away before she can get close.

“Huh?” Kuro blinks.

“*You’re lying,*” I seethe, all my misery channeled into hatred. “The calm winds are still here.”

Kuro stares at me in disbelief. “Asha?!”

“*Relmoon* warned me about you,” I snarl, lowering my head and stepping backward. “He said you were using me and that you betray everyone you meet. Well, now I see the truth, Kuro. Because without me, you have to allow Enyll back into your den.”

“*What?!*” Kuro shrieks, rearing her head in feigned shock. She’s *acting* like she’s hyperventilating, but I know better. “Relmoon? You talked to Rel—”

“*Don’t lie to me, Kuro!*” I shriek, flaring my wings wide. “Relmoon flew past here yesterday! He told me he felt the calm winds!”

So, this is how it ends. This is how Kuro betrays me! I didn’t want to believe Relmoon when he said Kuro deceives everyone she meets. I didn’t think she had a reason to betray me... until I remembered Enyll. I had almost forgotten about the copper drakon and the stipulation Meldi made at White Mountain: When I leave Felra, Enyll returns to Kuro’s den.

Who could forget their snide remarks and constant bickering? Kuro would do *anything* to keep Enyll out of her den, and a convenient lie about the winds is a small price to pay for her sanity. Why would a Dragon care about my family and my Kingdom? *All she cares about is herself!*

For a heartbeat, Kuro is unable to respond to my accusation. But then she stiffens up, folding her wings and turning deathly serious. “Asha, I’m *not* lying!!”

“Admit it, Kuro!! You told me how much you loathe Enyll! You’ll do anything to keep me in Felra!”

Looking desperate, Kuro raises her voice and yells, “Asha, that isn’t true!!”

“This is pointless,” I growl, throwing my wings down in frustration. How gullible does she think I am? Frustrated and tired, I turn away to face the endless expanse of clouds. “I’m going home. Goodbye, Kuro.”

I leap into the sky and pound my wings, channeling frustration to give me a head start on my long journey home.

“Asha, *wait!!*”

I ignore the Dragon I once considered my friend and quickly gain altitude against the winds. I can’t believe she would wait until now to betray me! Once, I thought Kuro’s kindness was too good to be true. I wondered if she would end up like every other ‘*friend*’ I had back home, like every noble who tried to use me and my family’s influence for their whims. Little did I know my intuition was right, and she was simply waiting until the right moment to betray me. I should have listened to my instincts!

With thoughts of anger propelling me forward, I face the brunt of the winds head-on. They're just as strong as before, though I find it harder to maintain an even flight. Nakino treated the wound the Redaga left under my wing, but it hasn't fully healed. With each flap against the gales, pain lances the side of my body. I have to persist!

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But I find them conspicuously absent as I reach the altitude where the calm wind should be. Confused, I try climbing higher, only to be blasted by more intense winds. Could the winds have migrated to a different level? Where was Relmoon flying yesterday when he—

WHOOOSH!

My world turns sideways as a great gust of wind, more potent than any I've felt before, blows me into a tumbling mess of feathers and claws.

ROARR!!

Kuro's cry rises over the winds as I fall from the sky. Too panicked to be upset, I recall what happened the last time the winds of the strait blew me off course. I strain to hold my wings open and allow my body to fall with the wind instead of against it. Slowly, the tumbling begins to slow, and the winds whip my body

around, flipping me into an upright position where I regain control of my flight. But I haven't gone unscathed from the fall. Fresh blood flows from the wound under my wing, and I feel it tear open farther with each flap.

ROARRRRR!!

Kuro!! Argh, Why is she...?

I wince in pain, nearly losing control of my flight once more. I have to find some way to tolerate my wound, but how? As my mind searches for answers, I gaze into the roiling clouds above, watching them race off the strait at speeds that don't seem possible. As I do, a grave realization dawns on me.

...How?

How could I possibly find respite in all of this chaos?

...Was Kuro being truthful?

...

I've really missed my chance to return home, haven't I?

...

My wings nearly give out from underneath me, weighed down by searing pain and the realization of just how wrong I was. I drift like a stone until I'm forced to flap and keep my flight stable. Would it really be so bad if I tumbled into the ground, though? Not only have I missed my window to return home and see my family, but I've made a complete ass of myself to my dearest friend, the one who proved how loyal she was to me time and time again. How could I say such cruel things to her? Why am I always such a fool?

"Asha!!"

Believing I deserve everything bad that comes to me, I collide with the ground and tumble through the grass before coming to an undignified stop in front of the windswept rosewood. Dirt and debris cover my tattered body, but I couldn't care less. I bury my head into the ground and sob, defeated and broken. I'm stuck in Felra, and my only friend surely hates me now. Why do the worst things always happen to me? Why does everything I do fail? How can I ruin everything I touch?

I wallow in my misery until a force is applied to my back. Claws dig into my shoulders, holding me in place. Instinctively I squirm, trying to dislodge whoever, or whatever, is on top of me.

“Hold still,” Kuro commands in a voice brimming with frustration.

“Wha...?”

“I said, *hold still!*”

She sinks her claws deeper, forcing me to squeak in momentary pain. Unwilling to find out just how deep they can go, I stop writhing and allow her to rest on top of me.

And then something unexpected happens. A tongue and a pair of fangs begin working the feathers on the back of my neck. The barbs are straightened, returned to their original shape, and licked clean. My feathers... they're being preened?

“Kuro?” I croak.

“I'm grooming your neck,” she responds flatly.

“Wh... why?”

“Because I can’t stand seeing you this upset.”

She... doesn’t want to see me upset? Why? I’ve done something truly unforgivable to her. Why would she offer me kindness? Frightened and confused, I try to shake her off my back again. But this time, she growls in response and pushes me further into submission.

GRRRR...

Feeling my resolve wither, I allow the unexpected grooming session to continue. Slowly, as Kuro makes her way down my neck, my breaths become longer and less erratic. But confusion turns to misery as the realization of my situation settles in. I’ve truly missed the window to return home by a single day. My plan to defend the disputed island from Nortane has failed. I’ve failed Mom, I’ve failed Sofl, and I’ve failed Duncan.

But worst of all, I’ve failed Kuro.

In the depths of misery, I bury my head in the grass and sob uncontrollably.

Lying in silence next to the rosewood, Kuro and I watch the clouds in the strait drift across the sky. After my neck had been thoroughly groomed, she laid beside me, our bodies touching, and draped her wing across me. I was still too miserable to acknowledge her gesture, but in time I lifted my head from the grass and tried to regain some semblance of calm. Does Kuro hate me now? Will she leave me to

fend for myself in the flock? The questions flow through my head like blood from an open wound, but I'm far too scared to speak up and ask them.

Eventually, a cold breeze from the north blows through us, and Kuro stirs. In a voice strained with emotion, she asks, "How much did he tell you?"

I draw a long breath and quickly exhale. It feels wrong to speak to her again so soon, but she deserves to know about my encounter with Relmoon. I gather my strength and say, "He told me you were mated."

Kuro remains silent and unmoving, her gaze fixated on the clouds. She's not objecting, so it must be true.

"And after he sparred with you on couple's night, you chased after him."

"He *what?!?*" Kuro gasps, staring at me incredulously.

I recoil a little at her response, still emotionally fragile. I frown and nod silently when I recognize her anger isn't directed at me.

Kuro grits her fangs and soars to her talons like a voracious gust of wind. "That mud eating..."

“Kuro?”

“All Relmoon does is LIE!” she roars, smacking her tail against the ground in frustration. She whips her head around to face me and growls, “Relmoon chased after *me*. He begged me to allow him into my den. All he wanted to do was spar so he could *beat me*! That’s all he cared about!” She steps away and flails her wings in frustration. “Did he mention the kits?”

I tilt my head. “The kits?”

“No, of course he didn’t!” she yells, throwing her wings up in frustration. “After he lived with me for a season, Relmoon was ready for kits! In a single season!! I told him ‘no,’ and he turned completely mad!”

He asked her to raise kits? Isn’t that normal? “I thought you had to raise a family to remain in the flock?”

Kuro shakes her head. “If you don’t want kits, you can appeal the rule before Keuvra. It rarely happens, but Meldi told me I have the right to ask him.”

So, despite all those lectures I was given by the elders, the rules of the flock aren’t set in stone. Or at least, the rule about whelping kits isn’t. If I’m spending winter

in Felra, could I try to appeal that rule, too? Better yet, could I appeal having to take a mate altogether?

“Asha,” Kuro continues, moving to stand at my side. The anger on her face has been replaced by remorse. “I should have told you about Relmoon. I’m sorry you had to get involved this way.” She releases a sigh and stares at the ground. “And I’m sorry he lied to you about the winds.”

Wait, she thinks Relmoon *lied* about the crossing? But why would he lie to me? I’m only guilty of being Kuro’s friend! (At least, I think we’re still friends!) If Relmoon lied, does that mean the crossing has been unsafe for longer than a day?

I release a sigh of my own and settle into the grass. This is all too stressful to think about. I should be flying home to Ellyntide, not sitting in Felra worrying about drama in the flock. As I feel myself getting lost in my thoughts, Kuro returns to my side again.

Well, what should I do now?

Part of me wishes I could remain at Archer’s Landing, waiting for the exact moment the calm winds return. But since that’s unreasonable, I have to return to the flock. More specifically, I have to *survive* with the flock. Staying in Kuro’s den during the winter is the safest option. But what about Relmoon? If I stay with Kuro, will I get drawn into their conflict? What about Relmoon’s account of their relationship? Who’s right? Who’s lying?

Those two Dragon are awfully similar, aren't they? Both of them are fantastically strong, and both of them can claim to have saved my life. Kuro seems to be misunderstood by the flock, but I could have misunderstood Relmoon just the same. Kuro has a fiery interpretation of what happened when she was with Relmoon, while his side of the story is much more measured and calm. Is Kuro being driven by blind hatred? Was Relmoon lying about his story, too?

Stuck in my thoughts, I barely notice Kuro drape her wing across me. Her spiced scent drifts into my nostrils, reminding me of our happier times together. If Kuro is lying about Relmoon, is it wrong to remain with her? If I take sides with Kuro, will I invite more Kin to hate me?

Maybe none of this matters. It seems Kuro doesn't hate me, and I have to survive until spring. No matter what. So even if she's lying, I have to trust her.

'Life is full of unexpected events. You can choose to let the negatives define you, or you can choose to overcome them. Embrace the positive aspects you can control!'

But I *want* to trust her. So, I will.

'And remember, Cream Puff: There's always a choice!'

Feeling contented, I scoot closer to my friend and fill my nostrils with her scent. Recalling the times we were close, I rub my head into her chest feathers and

release an unsteady sigh. My life has become infinitely more complex since I left home. But when I'm close to Kuro, it feels like everything will be alright.

I close my eyes. A heartbeat later, Kuro's head curls against mine.

As nightfall approaches, the sun hangs low behind an overcast sky. Losing track of time, Kuro and I have been watching the clouds roll past, keeping our bodies close to one another, never saying a word. At one point, I thought I should ask her about our plans for the winter. But it never felt like the right time to interrupt the silence. Being around Kuro calms me, and I desperately need tranquility today.

But it's getting dark. As much as I wish I could wait here until spring, we need to return to the flock. I pull myself away from Kuro's side and loosen my wings. "I guess we should fly back to your den."

Kuro is silent for a moment before nodding in agreement. "We should inform the elders you'll be spending frostwing with us."

Ugh. The thought of seeing the elders again fills me with an incomparable dread. The last time we spoke, they were quite pleased with my progress in learning how to hunt. They looked forward to the time I would leave Felra and secure their access to their old hunting grounds. But now I must stand before them as a failure, hoping they'll believe my excuse for being stuck in Felra. They were already suspicious of me, so how will they view me now?

Kuro seems to have noticed my dour mood shift. She smiles and asks, “Aren’t you happy we get to spend more time together? Because if I’m honest, I’m really happy about it.”

I give her a look. Too soon, Kuro.

Realizing her mistake, she frowns and averts her gaze. “Asha, I was ready to watch you fly home today. If we had never met again, then... things would have been alright. I want you to reunite with your family.”

Kuro stares skyward and then turns her head away from me. Her wings stir, and the feathers on her neck flatten. Is she trying to say something?

“But... since you’re still here, I just....”

She turns to face me with an expression I’ve never seen before — a peculiar cocktail of calm contentedness, fear, and longing. She lowers her head in front of mine and passes the feathers on her neck — the most fragrant — past my nostrils. My senses are overwhelmed, full of the spiced scent I’ve come to know so well. She curls her head around mine and buries it against me, rubbing fervently into my neck feathers.

“Hm?” she raises her head above mine and smiles softly. Looking down with eyes like sunshine, she asks, “What do you think? Don’t you feel the same, Asha?”

I blink, trying to think of what to say. What is she asking me? She never finished her sentence. But she's staring at me so intently, ready for my answer. What should I do?

"T-the same about what?" I stutter.

Disappointment flashes across her face but quickly passes. She smiles and says, "...Nevermind. I'm just happy you're here, Asha."

Confused, I loosen a smile. Why is she trying to hide her disappointment? If she wanted a truthful answer, why was she acting so coy? Why does Kuro act so weird sometimes? Well, whatever. Maybe I'll figure out what she was asking some other time.

After all, we will have plenty of time to ourselves in the coming months. I flew to the '*Northern Continent*' with the goal of finding others like me and learning how to live in this new body. But after today's events, I find myself with a new goal: *Survival. At any cost.* No matter what happens this winter, I have to endure until spring. The calculus may have changed, but I can never falter in my commitment to my family and Kingdom. Everybody at home is counting on me!

But, for what it's worth, I'm happy Kuro is by my side. With her help, I'm confident we'll survive the coming winter. On a sunny day in spring, we'll return to this place and say our goodbyes in earnest.

The Princess's Feathers

Commander Almandoz,

I sincerely hope this letter finds you well. Before I address the concerns raised in your previous correspondence, I find it necessary to provide an update on a matter which has understandably fallen by the wayside in recent times.

As you will recall, you contacted me concerning the issue of an Elder Tree sprout discovered on the morning of that unholy day. I am pleased to report that despite the impossible odds against it, the sprout is healthy and growing strong here in the University's moon sciences lab. Additionally, my efforts to lobby the Board of Directors were successful – 'Asha's Tree' has been thusly named and will be provided a plot of land on the University's west side grounds this spring. As the last gymnosperm the Princess observed in the garden she loved ever so dearly, the board unanimously agreed the tree would serve as a permanent monument to an extraordinary life so tragically taken away from us. I look forward to the day you can observe the young tree's brilliance in person.

Onto the matter at hand. I have had some time to consider the nature of your proposal, and I must admit that I do not find myself qualified to act on it. I am, chiefly, a botanist. However, I can understand the nuances involved in such a matter. Therefore, I wish to propose a meeting in person to discuss it further. I understand you must be quite busy given the situation abroad, so I would have our engagement in the Palace Garden to avoid any undue travel on your part. Listed below are some proposed times for your consideration.

The late Princess once confided in me the location of her favorite plant – the Varecian Rosebush located at the southwest corner of the native plant gallery she so dutifully cared for in her spare time. I'll see you there.

Bernhard Willow

I refold the letter and drop it on my desk, feeling a sense of satisfaction. I was concerned about the response I would receive in contacting – of all animals – the professor at the heart of Princess Asha's attempted foray into public education. He's not wrong. A botanist is hardly the person I need to execute my plan. But it seems my intuitions were correct, and the man feels he owes a due to the late Princess. To think, A tree as epic as the legendary Elder Tree, named in remembrance of Asha! It makes me smile, imagining how jubilant she would have been to learn the news. She never quite knew it, but there were those who cared deeply about her.

Truly then, Willow understands just what is at stake and why his participation is so vital.

Perhaps I should have just called the man instead of resorting to a letter. Then again, his concern for discretion was correct. There may be undue suspicion from the public should our plans become known. The fact of the matter is this is a personal endeavor to give meaning to Calypso's sacrifice – Nothing more. Involving the Queen or other resources from the crown is wholly unnecessary, if not negligent. While the Morthans successfully convinced Her Majesty to stand down from war, Nortane has yet to relocate their ships from the vicinity of the disputed island.

But, should our efforts be fruitful and we uncover the serpentine diamond on that cursed ground in the hollow...

...

...Well. We will cross that bridge should we arrive at it.

I grab my trusty pen and remove the cover to the inkwell, eager to craft a response to the professor. The time has come to put my plan into motion!

“Oh!” I say, stopping at the corner of a chest-high plant. “There you are, Professor!”

Peering around the leafy shrub, I spot Finch and the tall Fisher Professor at the end of a decorated garden path, standing beside a well-manicured Rose bush. Several days have passed since mailing my response to the professor, and the time has finally arrived for our meeting. I hope I haven’t kept them waiting for long.

“Commander,” Willow smiles and waves his paw. “We meet again. It is good to see your face.”

I exhale as I approach the group, trying to catch my breath after jogging from the palace. It's been some time since I visited this section of the garden, and I found myself somewhat lost. I had to stop and ask one of the groundskeepers for directions. "My sincere apologies for running late. I'm afraid Her Majesty's meeting with the Eternals ran longer than expected."

"The Knights Eternal?" Willow echoes, his thick brown tail swaying behind him. "I suppose such is expected when they're involved."

"Their meetings usually go long," Finch says, adjusting their uniform. As ordered, they escorted the Professor to this secluded location in the middle of the garden, away from those who might overhear our conversation. I hesitated to enlist their help with this personal endeavor for several reasons. However, besides being one of the survivors of the tragedy, I imagine their insatiable curiosity about my work schedule would eventually lead them to uncover my plans.

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I place my work bag against the ground and clasp my hands together. "Well, then. Thank you both for showing up today. We are here to discuss the tragedy."

"That's right," Willow nods. "And I must say, I found your offer of an off-the-record expedition... intriguing. But I am less certain how I, a botanist, can be of service."

Well, that's easy. "The way I see it, of all the animals who knew the Princess, you understood her penchant for botany better than anyone else. Your eyes may see something in the hollow that the investigators did not."

"Perhaps," Willow says, undoing the buttons on his tan sack coat. He opens his muzzle to continue but then pauses to gaze over the hedges surrounding our location in the garden. In a subdued voice, he continues, "I must confess that I have not read the report. I do not particularly wish to meddle in the crown's affairs...."

"I will take all the necessary precautions," I assure him in a confident, normal tone of voice. "You have my word that an airship and a pilot will not strain the Kingdom's resources. Thanks to the Morthans, the situation abroad has calmed down."

I will, of course, need to enlist Max, the only pilot I could possibly trust for this mission. Like the rest of us, he was pretty rattled after the tragedy in the hollow. Still, I do not anticipate any opposition to performing a favor such as this one.

Willow's brow furrows — he seems unconvinced. "For now, it has calmed. But King Finn has praised Nortane's response to the tragedy, and there is still much speculation about Crow Wing's involvement. During our labs at the University, I often overhear my students talking amongst themselves about the tragedy. Some have even asked me about my relationship with the late Princess...."

"Then you understand why this is so important," Finch says.

“I understand the risks that your plan carries....” Willow replies, his voice drifting off. He averts his eyes and droops his shoulders. “You see, I am not a man who prefers to rock the carriage. And what you two are proposing is a considerable rattle.”

Well, then. I can't say I blame the professor for being anxious. Finch and I are in service to the crown, soldiers who stood before the Queen and swore an oath of loyalty to the late Princess. It is our duty to protect the Kingdom with our lives, if necessary. But Willow is a citizen, a Fisher with a sultry accent who spends his days in the classroom teaching students. Even with my assurances, to travel secretly to the scene of an international crime is a considerably big ask. If our plans were to come under public scrutiny, then his career and everything he's worked for could be jeopardized.

“Professor,” Finch says, curling their tail into a spiral. “I understand the risks of joining us on this mission. I really do. But you were one of the few animals close to the Princess. Don't you think she deserves a better legacy than the Lordanou who died young and lost the serpentine diamond?”

Willow seems contemplative, holding his muzzle in his hand. His eyes wander in thought, but he offers neither endorsement nor rebuttal to Finch's argument. Does he know of the Lemur's belief in the afterlife? That in death, they watch us from beyond far? Finch has given their piece on the Princess, so perhaps I should offer mine on Calypso.

“I believe Colonel Durham would have sacrificed himself before giving up the Princess to thugs.” On mentioning my spouse, Willow's eyes snap to me in attention. “And if it wasn't for the Litan, Princess Asha might still be with us. She

was prepared to offer herself as hostage should the situation arise, and the Queen prepared to pay the ransom. We may not return the Princess, but we may retrieve the diamond. And I'm certain that would reverse the Colonel's sacrifice."

Willow stares at me with a face like a stone before lowering his head. "Let me tell you something," he murmurs, barely audible over the groundskeepers chatting away in another garden section. "On the day everything went so wrong, I saw the Princess here, in the garden."

He stops to gaze at the rose bush, which was Asha's favorite. It seems exceptionally cared for, even among the garden plants, growing up the side of a white trellis that arches over the pathway. He smiles, extending one of his fuzzy paws outward to hold the remains of a flower, withered and brown.

"I was here to observe the sprout of the Elder Tree," he says, studying the rose. "And she happened to pass through before her trip to the eastern weald. She became ecstatic when she saw the sprout..."

Willow's voice dissipates, and his face turns dour. I snap my eyes to Finch and spot them staring back at me. Why would Asha's excitement cause Willow grief?

"I joked with her... that if she should ever encounter a Lihan, she should ask it how to sprout an Elderus. I never thought..."

He closes his palm and rubs his claws into the dried-up flower, disintegrating the petals. As he opens his paw, the wind whips through the garden, suffusing flaky remains like snowflakes into the crisp winter air. “Of all the days for a Dragon to reappear in Ellyntude, of all the places... I’m sure you’ve thought the same, Commander.”

I frown but remain silent. I, too, have ruminated endlessly over such unsettling thoughts. But I never knew the Professor had his own story to share about the Princess on that cursed day. It was a harmless joke, nothing more than a terrible coincidence. But as I have come to learn, it’s far too easy to appoint blame on yourself when closure is so elusive.

Willow squares his shoulders and straightens his back. “So, despite my reservations, I will join your mission. For the Princess and all those who died that day.”

I exhale in relief. I was beginning to worry his story was a long-winded justification for why he couldn’t join us. “Thank you, professor. I look forward to working with you.”

“Yes, of course. Ensign!” Willow whips his head and stares down at Finch. “Please, escort me to the entrance of the palace.”

Finch recoils a little in surprise. “A-Already?”

“Yes,” Willow answers firmly, buttoning his jacket almost recklessly. “We must rid me of this place and the bad thoughts it brings. I only wish to dwell on the future and the prospect of our success.”

Finch nods slowly in acknowledgment, flicking their eyes to me and passing on a peculiar gaze. I agree — even by my standards, the professor has a particular way with words.

As Willow grabs his briefcase, I step to the side to allow them to leave. “I’ll send you a letter once we have a ship?”

“Yes,” he says simply as he passes by without giving me a second look, one hand holding his bag and the other his bowler hat to keep it from blowing away. He rounds the corner past the leafy plant with Finch on his tail, and the two disappear from view, leaving me alone beside Asha’s treasured rose bush. As their footsteps grow soft, I gaze into the dried-up flowers, momentarily captivated by their complexities. Is the Princess pleased by our efforts? Is Calypso?

As sure as the seasons, these flowers will bloom again.

The Princess's Feathers

"Daughter-Of-Kelani! Despite your assurances, you remain in Felra. *Why?!"*

Khosa's voice bellows across the aerie as she provocatively flares her vintage gray wings to her sides. With the eyes of the elders staring down at me like hungry hawks, I recite a practiced excuse, the best one I could invent in the day since my failed departure at Archer's Landing.

"I-I was too late. Son-Of-Zuki told me the winds were still calm and that I had at least another day to fly home. But the winds were too strong when I arrived at the ledge."

Yes, that's right: Facing down the elders on the gathering stone in White Mountain, I'm throwing Relmoon under the bus. And he deserves it, quite frankly! It makes me feel a pang of guilt, knowing I'm accusing the drakon who saved my life. But even if he wasn't lying about the calm winds that day, he assured me the winds were safe, and I could fly home. I trusted him — it's his fault, either way!

"I flew up and felt the winds personally," Kuro says, standing beside me. "Even for someone skilled like Asha, it was far too dangerous. The calm winds have retreated until greenwing."

"*Hmph.*" Khosa grunts, issuing a look of reproach. Her eyes flick to Kuro and then back toward me. "You blame Zuki's son, yet it is clearly *your* fault. You were warned the crossing would become dangerous, and yet you dawdled until the beginning of frostwing."

"But the winds should be calm," Meldi objects, stepping forward to Khosa's side. "Kin have returned to Felra this early in the season before. Do not blame Asha for what she could not have known."

Khosa grunts, rolling her eyes and throwing her wings high. She gripes in a viciously sarcastic voice, “Very well then, Meldi. This child of the Goddess is our problem for another season. And the matter of her presence will remain unsettled.”

The ‘*matter of my presence*’ is the ominous message Keuvra left at my first gathering: ‘*The fate of the Lordanou rests on your wings. I will return once the matter has been settled.*’ Clearly, Khosa believes that Keuvra will return to the flock once I fly home. If she’s right, then it could be months before that happens.

“She could be our ‘*problem*’ far longer should she wish to stay,” Uma says, standing in the back of the rock by the perennially silent elder, Ashene.

“Yes...” Khosa muses, perhaps reminded that it was *their* idea to force me to join the flock in the first place. “But Asha does not wish that, does she?”

I shake my head fervently. Absolutely not!

“Then, in the meantime, Asha will be a contributing member of the flock, as it was always expected of her,” Meldi says, appealing directly to Khosa.

Khosa studies Meldi for a silent moment before swiveling her gaze onto me. “I should hope your commitment to our summer hunting grounds has not waned?”

My heart quickens, remembering my promise to the elders — a promise I can no longer keep. I led them to believe I could talk to airships and used that as leverage to convince them to allow me into the flock. At the time, I was desperate and blissfully naive. I believed that once I returned home, it would only be a matter of time until my family learned of a way to turn me back to normal. Once I was a Lemur again, all I had to do was convince Mom to allow Kin to hunt in Ellyntide.

But nothing seems sure anymore — even returning to my original form. What if I'm truly trapped in the body of a Lithan? What if I can't contact my family and tell them I'm alive? I convinced the entire flock I could simply talk to airship-prey and command them to ignore Kin. What's going to happen when they find out I lied?

“Of course it hasn't,” I tell Khosa, trying to remain calm. “Once I return home, I will command our Airship-Prey to leave Kin alone. Your hunting grounds will be restored.”

Mom had a saying back home: You can't turn your tail to a good lie. Even if it seems hopeless, and I know I'll never see my family again, I have to feign confidence. I have to sell them my lies until the bitter end.

Khosa studies me a moment before dipping her head. “Good. Prey is already scarce. There will be no shortage of hungry muzzles to feed in greenwing.”

A pang of guilt grows in my heart, understanding just how devastating my lie may become. They're counting on me to help feed the flock next season. How many Dragons could go hungry because of me?

"Until that time," Uma says, raising his voice and looking at Kuro. "Daughter-Of-Mecali. Please ensure Asha is useful to the flock and contributes as any member would."

Kuro tips her wings in understanding. "We will hunt communal prey, just as Enyll and I would have done."

"Good," Uma says, pausing to draw a breath. "In addition, we expect *both* of you to participate in Couple's Night."

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Kuro's feathers bristle in shock. "*What?! Couple's Night? But that's not fair!! Uma, you—*"

Before she can explode in anger, I brush a wing against my soot-plumaged friend. Her body seizes, and she whips her gaze to me, fangs bared, a feather's edge from going to war against the elders. As much as her fierce response makes me anxious, I could never ask Kuro to risk her standing in the flock by screaming at the elders for me. Thankfully, she keeps her muzzle shut and yields to let me speak.

“What is couple’s night?” I ask the elders in a more civil tone. Supposedly, Kuro and Relmoon met each other at that event.

“When Maki rises in frostwing,” Khosa says. “Unmated Kin assemble at the Grandfather Tree. As you have discovered, our flock is spread wide over Felra. For some, it can be difficult to encounter others and fulfill their obligation to start a family.”

Kuro scoffs loud enough for Khosa to hear it and pause her explanation. Her eyes narrow, and she stares down at Kuro but keeps herself firmly planted to stone. At the same time, Meldi’s feathers rise, and her muscles tense like she were ready to spring onto Khosa. Something unspoken is festering between them.

But before tensions can boil over, I force the conversation to continue. “So, you’re saying I have to go on a blind date with someone.”

Khosa pries her gaze from Kuro long enough to stare at me and tilt her head sideways. “You will be paired with a mate until morning. If Farlanders call that a ‘*blind date*,’ then you are correct.”

“Close enough,” I say, adding an uneasy chuckle.

Ugh, a blind date? The *last* thing I'm interested in right now is romance! I only want to survive until spring and get off this continent. I knew I would have to follow their traditions when I joined the flock, but why did blind dates have to be one of them?

"This is jimbaldung," Kuro pouts, perhaps sensing my displeasure. "Asha shouldn't have to participate! She's—"

"She *will* participate," Uma interrupts with a low growl, raising his wings slightly. "As long as Asha is a member of this flock, she will abide by its traditions."

Khosa adds in a stern voice, "We will not compromise on this, Daughter-Of-Mecali."

Kuro snorts in response. Her talons curl, scraping claws against hard stones. She bristles and stares at her Grandmother longingly, silently pleading for her to intervene. But instead of a reprieve, Meldi narrows her eyes and remains quiet. Clearly, her request has been denied.

Kuro growls and flails her head in frustration. She's awfully concerned about me participating in this event, but why? While I appreciate her fighting so hard for me, this is a little too much. I brush my wing against hers, and she immediately seizes up. Her head whips around to face me, thoroughly agitated.

"It's fine," I say quietly. "I'll attend Couple's Night willingly."

Kuro's frown deepens, but her feathers soon relax. She folds her wings and bumps her head against my neck in solidarity.

Going on a blind date with some random drakon is such a terrible idea, but if it's a stepping stone on my journey to return home, then so be it. I promised myself and the Elders I would do whatever was asked of me in the flock, and I'm not going to back down on that promise now just because I don't like it.

After a few remarks from Khosa and Uma, our impromptu meeting concludes. As the elders scale the side of the gathering stone to depart, Meldi remains unmoving in the position she held for most of the meeting. With narrowed eyes, she gazes at Kuro, sitting motionless beside me in the same vacant act. After a time, Meldi rises and turns to leave the stone without so much of a tip of her wings.

"Let's go," Kuro growls, keeping her eyes fixated on Meldi's back before tearing her gaze away. She turns to leave, and I follow in tow.

As we depart down the opposite side of the rock, my gaze is drawn to the ground where Uma and Ashene are approaching a tall entrance on the back wall of the aerie. A tawny drakon with squared shoulders nods in passing as the ragged old Dragons step into the dimly lit passage. Within seconds they're shrouded in darkness and disappear.

The elder's den... it seems like ages ago when I last saw it during my initial visit to the aerie. Supposedly, Keuvra lives in the mountain somewhere beyond those

walls. Why does he have to be summoned by some mystic ritual? Can't he just walk out here and address the flock directly? My life would be so much easier if I could only ask him a few questions.

"Hey, Kuro," I speak up as we land beside each other on the ground.

Kuro folds her wings and asks, "What is it, Asha?"

"That entrance over there," I say, flicking my ears towards the back wall where the drakon guard is perched. "That's where Keuvra lives, right?"

Kuro gazes forward, then looks at me with pronounced suspicion. "Yes..."

"So, why can't we go back and talk to him? I mean, if I'm only—"

"Asha," Kuro cuts me off. "You must never enter the elder's den. It is strictly forbidden."

"Well, why?" I persist. "Is there some horrifying secret about Keuvr—"

“Asha,” Kuro lowers her voice, and her eyes narrow. “Don’t joke about it.”

I blink in visceral confusion. ‘*Don’t joke about it?*’ Am I talking to the real Kuro? It’s not like her to be this concerned about anything.

She continues, “I’m serious, Asha. It would be…” her voice dissipates, and she turns away. “It would be very bad if you entered the elder’s den. Promise me you’ll never go there.”

Okay, something is definitely wrong with her. “Kuro, what could be such a—“

“*Asha!*” she snaps.

“A-Alright, alright!” I stammer, the vehemence of her voice rearing my head backward. “I promise. I won’t go in there, no matter what.”

Kuro exhales and rubs her head against mine. “Thank you.”

Still confused, I give her a faint rub in return. What’s so special about the elder’s den? Kuro is always so lackadaisical about the flock’s rule. I’ve never seen her this nervous about following them. Doesn’t she understand how important this is to me? I lost everything when I became a Lithan, and I still don’t even know why it happened. The answers are waiting for me beyond those walls!

Honestly, she's beginning to sound like Mom.

And because of that, the rebellious little girl inside me feels more compelled than ever to find some way to sneak inside the elder's den. But the adult inside me knows there has to be a reason for Kuro's anxiousness. I just haven't discovered it yet. Despite our misunderstandings, she always had my best interests in mind. So, I'll force myself to take her word. I won't sneak into the elder's den.

For now.

The Princess's Feathers

Snowflakes swirl around me as I pass my head through the dense branches of a mallows shrub. The sudden snow shower has coated the underbrush in a light dusting of snow, muffling my talonsteps as I stalk prey through a heavily forested section of the Great Valley. With prey becoming scarce, Kuro and I have begun to hunt the areas where Kin seldom go. For Dragon like her, hunting the ungroomed forests is practically impossible. Sequoias and cypresses grow low, casting thick branches to the upper layers of the underbrush. Try as she might, she's simply too large to make it through the impenetrable wall of foliage. But not me! My diminutive size makes navigating these tight spaces possible, allowing me a chance to force prey from their hiding spots and into Kuro's waiting jaws.

Perhaps I should be happy I'm making myself useful to the flock. After all, we're hunting for communal prey to bring to the Grandfather Tree. The ferals we

butcher will go on to feed those too old or infirm to hunt for themselves. It's a noble prospect for sure, but I'm not at all content with myself. I'm frustrated! All I've been able to think about the past few days is how much I wish I weren't here. I'm the Princess of Ellyntide! I should be at home in the palace, helping Mom by the warmth of the fireplace in our family's reading room. Instead, I'm cold and wet, stalking prey through the underbrush of Felra like a flea-ridden dog.

This is so degrading.

I sigh quietly and step over the rotting trunk of a felled redwood, continuing to follow the scent of fresh prey. As thoughts of home fester inside my head, I lose track of the task at hand and don't even notice a boulder lying deep in the grass.

SKREEK!

My foreleg collides, and I wail in pain, immediately aware of my costly mistake. I tumble through the underbrush until my wings snare on a thicket of mallowshrub. Hanging by my feathers, I hear the forest come alive with motion as birds take flight and prey scampers to safety.

Ugh! I could smell a family of Jimbal up ahead! I was so close to preying on them! Argh, that fweghing boulder! Why is there one sitting in the middle of the forest, anyways?

"Asha!" Kuro's worried voice echoes through the underbrush. "Are you alright?!"

I strain to raise my head through the branches and call out, “I’m a little bruised, but I’ll live!”

As Kuro fights her way to my location, I pry my wings from the mallows shrub and lower my head to leave the underbrush, pacing along until I come upon the base of prominent sequoia that’s free of dense vegetation. I call out again to guide Kuro, and a few moments later, she steps through a thick patch of oshbush.

As she lays eyes on me, her face relaxes in relief. “There you are. What happened?”

“There was a boulder in the underbrush,” I explain, signaling to the ground. “I can’t believe I didn’t see it.”

A dusting of snow falls from Kuro’s wings as they relax to her sides. She steps forward to join me and says, “Ungroomed forests hold surprises. Don’t worry. We’ll find prey soon.”

I huff in frustration and preen the feathers on my chest. We’ve been hunting since early this morning but haven’t caught so much as a grepo. Winter has barely started, and we’re already having trouble locating prey. Is this just the beginning of bad times? How hungry will we become in the coming months?

“Come on,” Kuro says, trying to remain upbeat. “Let’s head back to the clearing. I know another place to search.”

As she dips her wings to leave, I swivel around and gaze through the thickets, trying to catch a glimpse boulder that ruined my day. How did I miss it? I’m pretty good about spotting obstacles while hunting. As I retrace the steps I took in my mind, I spot the felled redwood that I stepped over. And there below it is a pale-looking boulder, resting by a pile of snow-dusted leaves and dried oshbush. It’s shaped like...

...

Wait a second...

...

“Kuro?” I call out, keeping my eyes fixated.

“Hmm?” she calls back. “What is it?”

I flick my ears forward, showing the way through the thickets to the boulder’s location. Kuro returns to my side and gazes across the same mottled brown and gray expanse.

“Do you see that?” I whisper.

Kuro stares at me and asks normally, “See what?”

“The boulder.”

“Umm... yes.”

“Kuro, that’s not supposed to be here.”

“What is?”

“The boulder!”

Her muzzle curls into a coy smile. “Asha, why shouldn’t—“

“Here,” I interrupt, stepping past her. Using my jaws, I tear a path through the thickets and lead Kuro to where I tripped. As we approach, the supposed boulder comes into focus, and its true identity becomes clear.

I fail to contain a gasp. “Goddess above.”

A wall of stone blocks eroded by nature and time is nestled between the shrubs and grasses. The finer details become visible as I stick my head in for a closer look. Stacked in line five high, they form what appears to be a chest-high wall. The pitted stone is covered in dense moss and thick vines, but its origin can’t be mistaken. Ascendant animals laid these blocks!

Kuro levels her head with mine. “Asha, what is it?”

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“It’s a stone wall,” I answer. “Or the foundation of a building. Here, in the middle of Felra!”

She blinks. “I don’t understand.”

“Kuro, these are the remains of a Farlander den!”

Her face flares in disbelief, alternating between myself and the wall. “How?”

“Look here,” I say, brushing my wing across the stone. As I do, my feathers stand on end – in a certain way, this is the closet I’ve yet come to returning home.

“These are what we call stone blocks. Remember when I told you Farlanders build things with raw materials? This is a perfect example. This stone was mined from a quarry, cut into these rectangular blocks, and assembled here to make a den.”

“So, this was part of a Farlander den.” Kuro snakes her head around the branches of a mallowshrub and smells the wall. “It sure doesn’t smell like one. But how did it get here? No Farlanders have ever been this deep in the flock’s territory.”

“I don’t know!” I say. “Judging by the condition of the stone, it’s very old. It must have been laid down hundreds of years ago, maybe even in ancient times!”

Kuro studies the blocks carefully but doesn’t seem particularly impressed. Doesn’t she understand how significant this is?

“Kuro, this is the archaeological find of the century! None of our stories mention anything about this! It changes everything we know about Farlanders in Felra!!”

She pulls her neck back and gazes at the entire wall length. “So what?”

“So what?!”

“So, this stone means Farlanders came here long ago, maybe before the continents rose. Who cares?”

I stare at my friend, unable to believe what I’m hearing. How could she possibly dismiss the importance of this discovery? I thought Lithans had a great reverence for their past!

Perhaps sensing my shock, she continues, “If Farlanders weren’t important enough to be told in our stories, then they weren’t doing anything important in Felra.”

“Kuro,” I chuckle to myself. “I thought you were fascinated by Farlanders?”

She shrugs her wings. “They’re still prey.”

With Kuro’s blunt admission, I begin to understand her perspective. For the flock, ‘history’ begins and ends with their stories; the tales passed down through generations of Kin and the divine knowledge Keuvra shares with them. But for ascendant animals, history is not just stories. It’s all around us! The cities we live in, the buildings we inhabit, and the treasured items we pass down to family members and loved ones. To put it bluntly, we’re materialistic.

But there are no material objects in the flock. They're ferals, utterly dependent on the natural world around them. Kuro can't understand this discovery's importance because it is just a pile of rocks to her. Why would it be anything else? She's never seen the objects we Farlanders cherish and how they can be a tangible link to our past.

And when you think of it that way, is it any wonder that stories are the most valuable commodity in the flock?

"You're sure thinking about something," Kuro observes, interrupting my thoughts.

"Have I ever told you the story of the serpentine diamond?" I ask. Perhaps she could understand me better if I told a story. "It's the rock that changed me into a Lithan."

A certain glimmer reflects in Kuro's eyes at mentioning the prospect of a story. Slowly, she shakes her head and looks at me with a yearning desire. As expected, Kuro is always willing to hear a new tale from the Farlands.

"The serpentine diamond was a national treasure of Ellyntide," I explain, turning to lead Kuro back to the sequoia. "It too, was merely a stone. But to me and my Kingdom, the diamond was as important as a family member. Our stories tell us that generations of Lordanous have worn the diamond since ancient times. The heir to the throne, who would someday lead the Kingdom, wore the diamond to signify their status. I too, was wearing it on the day I transformed."

As we pass through the thicket I tore open, I glance to my left. Kuro is staring intently, enamored by the story I've told so far. "But despite the significance of the diamond, what I've told you is all we know about it. Nobody knows when the diamond was forged. We don't know who made it or why. And there's certainly no stories of it turning Lemurs into Lithans."

"How could your Kin forget such important stories?" Kuro asks in faint disbelief, dipping her head under a low-lying redwood branch. "Aren't stories important in the Farlands?"

"Nobody knows for sure," I answer, sitting beside the sequoia's trunk. "Many generations ago, our stories were lost when Nortane invaded. Nearly everything we knew about Ellyntide before the Great Freeze was lost."

Chilled branches moan as an icy wind hisses through the underbrush, sending snow flying from the sequoia's branches. As the snow collides with my feathers, I ruffle unconsciously — thick as they are, I'm still cold. But before I can complain, a thick soot wing drapes over my body, and a warm head rubs against my neck feathers. I crane my head around and rub back to thank my friend for the kind gesture.

"Kuro," I say, forcing myself to stay on topic. "The point I'm trying to make is that history isn't so black and white. Stories can be forgotten even if they're important and even by those who wish to tell them. This wall isn't unimportant just because there are no stories about it — its story is waiting to be discovered. Kuro, don't you see? The reason for my transformation might lie in this wall!"

Kuro stays silent, contemplating everything that I've told her. She lifts her head and gazes across the forest for so long that snow accumulates on her feathers. Is this the first time she thought history was more than just stories? Finally, she says, "I've seen other dens like this."

"Really?!" I squawk.

She inclines her head. "We find them while hunting. I always believed they were strange-looking rocks. I never thought they could be linked to Farlanders."

So, this isn't even the only den in Felra! Unbelievable! Feeling a second wind of excitement, I stare out across the forest with Kuro, trying to imagine the continent teeming with ascendant animals. "How did they get here? Were they hunted as prey, or did they coexist with the flocks peacefully?"

"Asha," Kuro says, pulling her wing back and shaking it of snow. "Deep in Loner territory, there's a place with many of those Farlander stones piled high. So many that Loners live inside it. I always thought it looked like a Farlander den."

I stare up at my friend and blink, trying to remain calm. "Kuro, why didn't you mention this earlier?!"

“I didn’t know!!” She stammers, raising her wings in mock defense. “I thought it was just a pile of rocks. But it really could be a Farlander den, right?”

“Yes,” I say, folding my wings flat and turning away from the sequoia. “And you’re going to take us there. Right now.”

“*Right now?*” she hesitates.

“Right this instant!” I insist. “If it’s really a Farlander den, then who knows what’s inside? This could be the first lead we’ve had on explaining my transformation!”

Buildings in Felra! I can’t believe this was under our muzzles this whole time! When I first landed here, I was quite arrogant in thinking that I could stumble around the continent and figure out why I became a Lithan. For the past few days, I’ve felt awfully foolish about it. But maybe I was right all along. There has to be a connection between ancient animals in Felra, the serpentine diamond, and my transformation. There must!

But before I can get too excited, Kuro douses my enthusiasm. “First, we must attend Couple’s Night,” she says, sighing heavily. “The journey to Loner territory takes multiple days. We won’t make it back in time.”

“Fwegh it,” I say, waving my wings dismissively. “I don’t care. This is so much more important than—“

“It would be unwise to skip it,” Kuro cuts in. “I did so once before and paid a terrible price the rest of frostwing. I know how important this is to you, Asha. But it can wait. There’s plenty of time until you return home in greenwing.”

I stare up at Kuro, trying to gauge her expression. Calling it a *‘terrible’* price to pay is awfully vague. But her face looks measured and earnest, like whatever punishment was truly awful. It’s not like her to simply accept the flock’s rules. I already know that unmated Kin have fewer rights in the flock, so who knows what misery could be imposed on me?

“Fine,” I growl. “We’ll go after Couple’s Night. But not a day later!”

“Of course,” Kuro says softly. She smiles and lowers her head to rub it against mine. I return the gesture, allowing her scent to fill my nostrils and calm my racing heart. I can’t believe we finally have a lead on why I became a Lithan! It will be a long Couple’s Night, and I’m not especially thrilled to be mated with someone until morning. But if that’s what I have to endure to find out why I became a Lithan, then so be it. Besides, Couple’s Night can’t be that bad, right?

The Princess's Feathers

“Okay, explain to me again how this works?”

Kuro exhales a sigh, then draws a breath. “You’ll be called before The Grandfather Tree’s Chevil, Sefri. You’ll announce your name, your age, and something personal about yourself. Then, she picks your mate for the night from the crowd of bachelors.”

“And there’s nothing I can do to get out of this.”

“Believe me, I’ve tried.”

I release a long sigh and stare across our empty den at the Grandfather Tree. It’s the afternoon before Couple’s Night, and I’d rather be anywhere but here. “I really, *really* don’t want to do this.”

What a waste of time. I could be doing something useful tonight like learning how to fight other Dragons, or helping the flock survive the winter by hunting for prey. But instead I have to go along with this pointless blind date ritual! Don’t they understand that I’m flying home in the spring and nothing is going to stop me?

Laying beside me, Kuro nuzzles her head into my neck feathers. “They can make you spend time with a bachelor, but they can’t make you enjoy it.”

“What do you mean?”

She smirks a grin full of fangs. “You can be a little rude to the boy you’re paired with. I do it all the time.”

A *little* rude?

I suppose that corroborates Nakino’s story about the night he was mated to Kuro. Though if the doctor is to be believed, then their night ended after Kuro screamed at him and flew away. That’s more ‘*mean*’ than ‘*rude*’. Still, there’s a certain appeal to intentionally ruining my compulsory date. Besides the fact that I’ve just... never been on a date before, I can’t imagine what would happen if some lovestruck boy began swooning over me everywhere I went.

“Okay, maybe...” I smile half-heartedly, imaging the heartbroken look on some poor drakon’s face. “But what about you, Kuro? Everyone knows i’m leaving the flock in greenwing, but you’ve got the rest of your life to look forward to. Why aren’t you taking tonight more seriously?”

Kuro may dislike blind dates, but remaining single is far worse. Kin who don’t take a mate have reduced privileges, and forced dating is just the start. Wouldn’t it be a huge weight off her wings If she finally found someone close to her?

Kuro’s smile dims slightly, and she turns to stare out the entrance of our den. The afternoon sun is beginning to dim, and it won’t be long before the ceremony begins. “I tried that once with Relmoon,” she mumbles softly. “And it didn’t work out. I guess... I haven’t been paired with the right Kin yet.”

So, she's still waiting for someone to sweep her off her talons. I've never been in love before, so I don't think I can relate. "But, that means tonight could be the night you finally meet him, right?"

Kuro remains silent, lying motionless as she stares through the entrance of the den.

I rub my wing against her flank. "Promise me you'll take your mate seriously. When I fly home, I wanna leave behind a happy Dragon."

At that utterance, Kuro swivels her head towards me. She grimaces, seemingly shocked by something I said.

I tilt my head. "What is it?"

Kuro frowns slightly and shakes her head. "It's nothing. I just..." she stops, and her face curls into a gentle smile. "It's just I sometimes forget that you're leaving in greenwing. We make a great team, you know?"

Ah.

Well, I suppose that's true. Kuro and I have butchered more prey for the Grandfather Tree than any pair of hunters the past few days. As prey becomes

more and more scarce, I can tell our efforts are appreciated, despite the fact that I'm a Farlander.

"I'll try to take my mate seriously tonight," Kuro continues. Her muzzle curls into a curt smile. "But, no promises."

I'm not sure why, but Kuro seems unusually sincere right now. That's great! I wasn't kidding, I'll be so much happier leaving Felra if I know she found someone special to her. I already know the night is going to be miserable for me, but if it can be special for Kuro, then I'll be happy it happened.

Under the canopy of the ancient Grandfather Tree, a scruffy old drakaina steps forward to the mossy ledge of a mighty root. Tawny and tattered, bearing whiskers that drape to the ground, her feathers tell a story of old age and countless seasons illuminated by the mysterious, pale orange lights of the oldest tree on the moon. Loosening her wings in avid anticipation, she gazes down at the crowd of young Kin assembled before her. The Grandfather Tree's Chevil stretches her long neck and issues a rolling cry to call the crowd to order.

ROOOARRR!!

Sefri's call echoes across the clearing, silencing the singles on the ground and the numerous spectators gathered on the lowest branches of the great tree. When all is quiet, Sefri folds her brown wings and smiles to the crowd. "Blue Skies, Brothers and Sisters. Welcome to Couple's Night. As your Chevil, I have the distinction of leading many of our flock's most cherished traditions. But of them all, Couple's Night is my favorite. Many of your fellow Kin met their lifelong mates on Couple's Night. Some of you may do the same this evening."

Sitting beside me with her wings folded tight, Kuro grunts loud enough to momentarily steal the attention of some nearby singles. Ugh, why is she still being stubborn? I wish I could scold her, but she's already attracted enough unwanted attention.

Sefri continues, "To take a mate and raise kits is one of the most sacred duties for members of this flock. Despite this, many of you live in the far reaches of our territory and rarely have an opportunity to visit other Kin. For your sake, and for those who have trouble finding their mate, we hold Couple's Night."

An inward grumble escapes Kuro, loud enough that only I can hear it. I brush my wing against her side to try and comfort her, but she doesn't respond.

From there, Sefri explains the rules of the night. First, the drakons will introduce themselves. Once the bachelors have spoken, the drakainas wing forward to introduce themselves and be assigned a bachelor. Once you have your mate, you're free to go anywhere as long as you both return to the Grandfather Tree in the morning morning. Supposedly, most couples decide to stay at the Grandfather Tree or travel somewhere close.

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With the rules out of the way, it's time for the bachelors to step forward. One by one, each drakon flies to the base of a rotting elderus stump, the one me and Kuro

passed on our first visit to the Grandfather Tree. I recognize some of their faces – Kin I’ve seen in passing around Felra. The answers to the personality question are predictable – young drakons favor flying fast, fighting, and hunting prey. Of the lot, none of them stand out to me.

Except Nakino. Oh, yes. Much to my chagrin, he’s present tonight in the crowd of bachelors. I’ll happily go on a pointless date with any of the boring drakons as long as I don’t get paired with him. I caught him staring at me the day we went foraging together. *He has a crush on me, I’m certain of it!* Of all the Dragons here, he would enjoy a date with me the most. And that’s not good.

Why, you ask?

I’ve had some time to consider my feelings for Nakino, and they remain unchanged; I feel nothing for him. I want to stay friends with him, but in a strictly professional sense. He’d be the first to admit that working together, we make a great team. My formal training in botany, paired with his practical knowledge of Felra has nourished tangible benefits for the flock.

But if his feelings for me get out of control, then it could be all for naught. What if we decide to try dating, only for my feelings to never blossom? What if we break up and it isn’t amicable? Back in Varecia, I sometimes lent an ear to the service workers who were having relationship troubles. I met my favorite line cook, Roscoe, after taking the shortcut through the service hallway and finding him in tears outside the kitchen. A recent breakup had turned ugly, and in the ensuing mess, his dearest friends turned their backs on him. He was devastated.

I can't allow something similar to happen to me and Nakino. Our contributions to the flock are far too important. When I get called before Sefri, I won't say a thing about plants.

Eventually, all the Brothers are called forward. As the Sisters fly to the stump, I watch them with anxious eyes, hoping Nakino will be paired long before I'm called forward.

Eventually...

"Kuro, Daughter-Of-Mecali. Please wing forward."

Stormclouds form in Kuro's eyes as Sefri summons her. Slowly, she clammers to her talons and draws open her wings. As she prepares to take off, I notice the eyes of the Dragons around us. Most of them are watching Kuro with guarded expressions, but some are eying *me*. I meet the gaze of a mottled gray drakaina, and she quickly shifts her eyes to Kuro. Why was she staring at me? My name wasn't called!

Kuro does as she's told and takes flight to the elderus stump. As she lands, a blanket of silence falls across the Grandfather Tree. Single and spectator alike watch with bated breath to see who the most difficult Kin in the flock will be paired with.

"Kin of Keuvra," Sefri speaks in an even tone. "Please introduce yourself."

“Kuro, Daughter-Of-Mecali. 171 seasons old. I...” Kuro’s calm and commanding voice dissipates unexpectedly. She pauses in contemplation, smirks to herself and says, “...I really like the Farlands. A lot.”

Heads turn to their nearest neighbor and whispers rise among the singles, the first time such a disturbance has occurred this evening. What are they mumbling about? I glance around, straining to hear their conversations and notice *more* sets of eyes peering curiously toward me. They’re not talking about me, are they?! I’m the only Farlander here of course, but what does that have to do with Kuro saying she likes the Farlands?

“So it would seem,” Sefri says, raising her gravelly voice to gather the crowd’s attention. “I remember your mother, Kuro. You loved to hear to her tales of the Farlands, isn’t that right?”

Kuro inclines her head, but her expression remains steady. “All the time.”

“There’s a nice boy from Craggy Bottom who’s quite the storyteller. His name is Skysiss, Son-Of-Tull, and I would like him to be your mate tonight.”

Sefri angles her wing past the elderus stump and onto a young drakon perched near a group of bachelors. As the eyes of the flock fall on him he ruffles slightly, partially obscuring his head behind his wing. His plumage is a striking striped white and auburn, accentuated further by vivid gold eyes. I don’t understand

Lithan attraction, but if striking plumages are part of the equation, then this guy must be quite handsome.

Handsome or not, Kuro isn't impressed. Her steady expression sinks into a glum frown as she gazes upon her mate for the night. She thanks Sefri in a banal voice and flicks her gaze to me, perhaps as a silent farewell. She takes flight from the stump and disappears into the crowd to perch by her mate.

"Asha, Daughter-Of-Kelani. Please wing forward."

Like a needle being lifted off a phonograph, the conversations around the tree cease. Young and old, singles and spectators, every pair of eyes descends onto me. With a laborious sense of urgency I unfurl my wings and take flight to the rotting elderus stump.

As I land, Sefri wastes no time. With a certain glint in her eyes, she announces, "Child of The Goddess. Please introduce yourself."

Was she looking forward to this? I push the thought aside and perform the Lithan equivalent of a curtsy, mantling my wings and dipping my head low. "Princess Asha Eloise Lordanou. I'm 24 years old, and I—"

"*Years?*" Sefri squawks uncharacteristically loud. "Fress, do you think I understand your strange Farlander words? Tell us, what is a year?"

Oh, um, right. They use seasons in Felra to mark the passage of time, not years. “A year is four seasons long, and it’s what we use in the Farlands to determine age. So, in seasons, I would be... um...” Rusted mathematical gears, abandoned for years, slowly groan to life inside my head. After a brief computational moment, I arrive at an answer. “...96. I’m 96 seasons old.”

“NINTEY-SIX?!” Sefri cackles. “Oh, you are *far* older than 96 seasons, Asha! Closer to Kuro’s age, I’d imagine!”

Whaaaat?

Me and Kuro? Close in age?

I always knew she was older than me — I could smell it the first time we met. But if she’s 171 seasons old, that makes her 43 years old! If she were a Lemur, she would be nearly the same age as Mom! But, thankfully, she’s not a Lemur. And as far as I can tell, Kuro is comparatively young for a Litan. So, if 43 years is considered young, how long can Litan live for?

How long... could *I* live for?

Before the thought of outliving every animal I've ever met is allowed to stew in my head, Sefri keeps talking. "Now then, Daughter-Of-Kelani. Tell us something about yourself."

Oh, right! I've got the perfect answer. "...I also really like the Farlands!"

Scant laughs rise from the crowd, and even Sefri seems amused by my awkward response. But I was being obtuse on purpose — like hell I'm going to mention my love of plants before the flock and risk getting paired with Nakino!

"Oh, Asha," Sefri chuckles, ruffling her feathers in amusement. "Everyone knows you like the Farlands. But I've heard some interesting stories around the tree about you! It seems you have quite the knack for plants!"

...

Oh, fweghing hell.

"Messi told me all about the time you help mend her injured wing. And just yesterday, Kikk mentioned you helped create a new treatment for sore throats!"

"Ah, yes," I chuckle, feeling my feathers rise in apprehension. "I've been rather busy, haven't I?"

Don't pair me with Nakino.

Don't pair me with Nakino.

Don't pair me with Nakino.

“Daughter of Kelani, the flock is grateful for your contributions.” Slowly, Sefri rises to her talons and gazes down on me like a judge. “You already know our healer, Nakino. But I strongly suspect your time together has only just begun. Tonight, I would like you two to explore your feelings for each other. Child of the Goddess, until sunrise, you are mated to Nakino.”

Like a falling gavel, Sefri’s verdict echoes across the tree. She gestures her wing and points the way towards the black plumaged healer, sitting among the bachelors with a dumbstruck expression. As our eyes meet, his feathers relax and his face glows.

I struggle to imitate a smile.

I lope from the stump and rejoin the crowd, landing a short distance from the Dragon who used to be just a friend. He wastes no time trotting forward to join me.

“Oh, Asha...” he trails off, trying to sound modest. “What a surprise. I-I guess we’re mates tonight, huh?”

“Yeah,” I sigh. “I guess we are.”

79. The Secret In The Mountains

After the final bachelors are paired, Sefri advises us on how to best enjoy the night. With a dip of her head and a mantling of wings, the event concludes, and we’re sent to wherever our inhibitions might take us. As Kin filter around me in search of an opening to take off, I study their faces. Some couples seem pleased with their curated mate, but most have looks of unease, still unsure of how the night will go.

Then I spot Kuro.

Plastered with grief, she’s walking beside her mate for the night, Skysiss. Her face is curled into a frown, and her wings are drooped so low they’re nearly dragging leaves along the ground. Even by Kuro’s standards, she seems particularly upset with this arrangement. And for his part, Skysiss seems even worse, failing to hold back a supremely terrified expression under his facial feathers. Observing this scene, I struggle to think of a time when I felt more confident that something would fail.

Kuro hesitates unexpectedly, and our eyes meet. A longing smile grows across her face, and I find myself equally as relieved. Oh, how I wish I could comfort her! It pains me to see my friend upset, even with the knowledge she's intentionally ruining her night. She deserves so much more than this.

But before I'm allowed to feel too much solidarity, a head rubs against the top of my neck.

"Mmmh..." Nakino hums, smelling my feathers.

My whole body flinches, lanced by a primal terror at the sensation of unexpected touch. I whip around to face Nakino, a millisecond away from slicing his muzzle off.

"Um?!" I ask pointedly.

"Oh, Asha," he mumbles dreamily, his head hovering a few feet above mine. "I didn't mean to startle you. It's just... did you know how good you smell?"

I blink, scarcely able to believe the words I'm hearing. A thousand negative emotions flood my flustered head, all howling for Nakino's blood. "Dude! You can't just touch a girl like that! I don't care if we're mated for the night, don't be such a creep!" is what I want to yell at him, but self-preservation holds me back. Who

knows what untold trouble I'd find myself in for tearing off Nakino's face thirty seconds into our date?

Instead of choosing violence, I quickly avert my eyes and gaze at Kuro. And instead of Kuro, I find a Dragon bristling with fury, a millisecond away from going utterly feral. Her wings are raised, dripping with aggression as every feather on her body stands on end. She looks at me silently, waiting for the order to shred Nakino to pieces. Recalling the trouble I'll face for ending the night in violence, I quickly shake my head. She frowns in disappointment but lowers her wings willingly.

"Yeah," I sigh longingly. "I've smelled some nice Dragons before."

"Hm?" Nakino asks.

"It's nothing," I quickly follow up, returning to face him. "So, what do you want to do tonight? I don't know what Dragons like to do on dates."

"Well," he says, ruffling his feathers to try and regain his composure. "Some couples like to go on all-night flights. Last year, I went on a hunt with Frakia and caught my first Litsha! And some couples retire to their dens early and—"

"We are *not* doing that," I say firmly.

“Oh, no, no,” Nakino corrects himself. “I don’t wanna do any of those things, either. There’s something I want to show you tonight, Asha. It’s my personal secret that I’ve never shown anyone else.”

His *personal* secret? Is he...?

...

...Er, no. He just told me he didn’t want to do that.

“Well, that’s awfully vague,” I observe, staring at the inky black drakon. “What’s your secret?”

He shakes his head. “I can’t tell you.”

I stare at him with my muzzle slightly agape, unable to respond.

“Not yet. I can’t tell you about it yet.”

“...And, why can’t you just tell m—“

“You have to see it in person,” he stammers. “Trust me, Asha. I promise it’s something extraordinary.”

...

Yeah, um, okay. *An extraordinary* secret. I can practically feel my eyes rolling about their sockets. “Nakino, why don’t we just do something normal tonight? I wouldn’t mind a long flight to—“

“No!!” he snaps, throwing down his wings.

As Nakino’s voice echoes under the tree, all the couples who hadn’t yet taken flight stop to crane their necks around and stare at us. As their eyes fall onto me, I feel myself slinking backward, wishing I could disappear into the ground below me.

Conversely, the eyes of the flock have done nothing to dampen Nakino’s resolve. “Asha,” he speaks calmly. “If you could just—“

“Fine,” I sigh, throwing my wings up in defeat. I turn around and try to put as much space between him and me as possible. “Whatever. Let’s spend Couple’s Night checking out the special thing you can’t tell me about.”

As I march away from Nakino, my feathers bristle in agitation. First, he violated my personal space by acting like we were close to each other. And now he completely embarrasses me in front of the entire flock! As if being a Farlander wasn't enough, now everyone will gossip about how awkward our date was. This is *precisely* why I didn't want to get paired with him! I tried to remain his friend, but how am I supposed to do that now?

And the worst part is, he probably doesn't even know why I'm so upset!

I just want to be friends with him. Nothing more. Is that really too much to ask? You can still be close to someone without involving romantic feelings. Just look at me and Kuro! We're close to each other, but never in a romantic way.

(And it's not like she could act on any romantic feelings, anyways!)

Sensing that he's following me, I lope into the air and quickly gain altitude. When I turn back, I see Nakino rising just a few yards behind me. Instead of confusion, his face is brimming with concern.

Him? Concerned? Yeah, right. That act won't work on me. "Lead the way," I growl.

Nakino hovers in the air momentarily, studying me with a troubled expression. Eventually, he flies past and leads me through an opening in the lower branches of

the Grandfather Tree and into the night. As we reach open air, the light of a cloudless Maki falls against us, illuminating our feathers ghostly pale as we ride the chilled winter currents back to the Great Valley.

“Nakino, don’t tell me your secret is a cave.”

Carpets of dried moss and snow-covered ferns cover the ruddy stone walls of a cave entrance high in the mountains of the lower Great Valley. With no scents to guide him, Nakino led me through the dense underbrush of an ungroomed montane forest to reach this far-flung point.

“It’s not a cave,” Nakino says, flattening his feathers. Slivers of planetlight shine through a canopy of redwoods, illuminating his face in a faint green glow. “It’s what’s on the other side. Don’t worry. It’s only a short walk.”

I stifle a sigh and briefly consider an aerial escape through the trees. If Kuro can get away with being rude to her mate every Couple’s Night, so could I. But we’ve flown far from the Grandfather Tree, and a small part of me is curious to discover just how underwhelming Nakino’s ‘*secret*’ truly is. I’m sure Kuro would love to hear about it, too.

I gaze inside the gaping maw of the moon, trying to determine its length. As I do, a cool breeze blows against my feathers, carrying strange and unfamiliar scents. A *polystichum* I haven’t smelled before, a *bauhinia* that I... wait a second... a *bauhinia*? I haven’t smelled one of those since I left Sarlain!

“Oh, yes,” Nakino growls in delight. “This is just a small taste, Asha.”

I blink, more surprised by Nakino’s sudden change in composure than the admission of more alien plants. Where did all that confidence come from? Nakino is timid and cowardly, not warm and self-assured. Confused, I hold my wing out and allow him to lead the way.

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“Close your eyes,” Nakino speaks in a hushed tone as we step through the mouth of the cave. “Don’t worry. I’ll guide you.”

I give him a sidelong glance. What’s with all the suspense? If there are some strange plants on the other side, then that’s interesting, I guess. But why play it up? I briefly consider if I should argue with him more, but I decide to play along and follow his directions. The sooner we get this over with, the better.

As my eyes shut, something strange happens. I’ve become used to Nakino’s indistinct scent these past few weeks. But here, at this moment, it smells different – a solid and musty smell, like walking into a fern-covered grove of old-growth cedars. A moment later, I feel his heavy wing rest gently against my back, and my heart flutters again in that uniquely strange way. I can’t help but exhale a tiny squeak.

“I’m right here,” Nakino assures me in a voice smooth like honey. “Walk with me, Princess.”

Princess!?

But nobody’s ever addressed me by my royal title in Felra! How did he...?

Before I can recall when I told Nakino about royal titles, he begins moving. I feel him take a step forward, and I follow in kind. Then another and another still until we settle into a gentle trot. As we walk, he tugs his wing gently to guide me around boulders and through the flattest parts of the cave. The only sound is our breaths, my slowing heart, and the soft patter of water against cool stone.

Who is this calm and confident drakon? What happened to the timid healer who was too scared to fight a Redaga? The one that allowed Kuro to excoriate him verbally?

I want to consider these questions more, but my senses are overwhelmed with new scents. He’s leading me somewhere beaming with plants I’ve never smelled, much less seen. I’d heard tales of the strange plants of *The Northern Continent* as a Lemur but seldom seen few as a Litan. I always thought it was because I arrived in autumn, but perhaps I’ve simply visited the wrong places.

For the first time tonight, agitation and anxiousness are replaced by anticipation. What wonders lie up ahead? I lean into Nakino's wing, placing my trust entirely in him. He rubs his feathers gently against my flank.

Soon, a strange light begins to filter through closed eyes. Not quite moonlight, but something else entirely. Iridescent and bright, like staring into the city lights of Varecia on a cool summer evening. The echoes of dripping water fade, replaced by the familiar sounds of the forest at night. My talons tread over soft ground, and Nakino frees me of his wing.

“Open your eyes, Asha.”

I do as I'm told and am greeted by an astounding sight.

A grove of fantastic, glowing plants surrounds us. It stretches into the darkness, illuminating the area in a calm, cerulean glow. Many of the plants here are familiar, but there are some I've seen nowhere else, species utterly new to my trained eye. I see ferns, bushes, shrubs, and flowers flourishing as if they're at the peak of the growing season. How can such wonders be possible at the beginning of winter?

I gaze skyward, expecting to find ourselves enclosed inside another cave. Rock walls surround us but don't fully envelop the area. The faint glow of Maki shines through an opening big enough for a Dragon to fly through, though it would be difficult for more giant Dragons like Nakino. That's why the air is so cool here; there's an open sky! So, where's the dusting of snow that was present outside the cave? This grove should be a lifeless, barren rock. But it's flourishing!

“By the Goddess...” I whisper, trying to take it all in. “Nakino, what is this place?!”

“An enclave of rare plants,” he smiles. “One day, while foraging for snowberry, A vicious wind blew through the valley. Chilled to my feathers, I was forced to land and took refuge in the cave we just traversed. While waiting for the storm to pass, I saw a light at the other end of the cave and decided to explore. I was shocked when I found myself here.”

To think, a place as unique as this could be unknown to everyone in the flock but Nakino. Longing to explore it, I gaze up at Nakino. He smiles and nods in approval. Slowly, I step away from his side and examine a towering fern growing half my height. As I stick my muzzle in for a closer look, my nose bumps into a leaf, and the whole plant dims.

“Eep!” I squeak in surprise.

Nakino chuckles and moves to stand beside me. “For some reason, the plants in this grove are unaffected by the changing seasons. What’s more, on nights when Maki isn’t full, I’m unable to locate the entrance to the cave, no matter how long I search. I wish I knew why.”

“Nakino, this is...” my voice dissipates as I struggle to find adequate words. “It’s incredible. Why didn’t you tell me about this sooner?”

Nakino smirks. “Asha,” he breathes, stepping closer so he’s standing directly above me. His blue eyes lock with mine — has it taken this long to notice how radiant they are? I smell his scent, perfectly mingling with the scents of the grove around us. “I knew how special this place was the moment I discovered it. I could have shown it to anyone, but I wanted to save it for the one I felt close to....”

“And I’m that Dragon,” I hazard a guess.

“Yes,” he whispers. “Asha, when you first walked into my den, I...” he trails off and shakes his head. “Well, let’s just say you have no idea how alluring your plumage is. And when you told me why Messi wasn’t healing, I...”

As his voice dissipates again, I bury my head into his chest feathers — the highest point I can reach. His racing heart begins to slow, and a moment later, he rubs his head against my own. As we share a tender moment, a tiny voice inside my head bleats that we shouldn’t get close — he’ll only feel worse when I fly home in the spring. But how could I choose to ignore him? He’s pouring his heart out for me.

After what seems like hours, I pull my head back and break the silence. “You’ve never met someone like me before, have you?”

“Never,” he whispers. “I could visit every island, fly through every valley, and never find someone quite like you.”

As Nakino stares down, a strange sensation overtakes me. A warm and fuzzy feeling that I've never felt before. Nakino's opened up to me in ways he's never done before. I'm someone truly special to him... it feels good to be that person in his life. It makes me feel happy, too.

"I know why other Kin don't like me." He murmurs, trying to find his voice. His face turns glum, filled with shame and resentment. "I'm difficult to get along with. I feel detached from the flock and make bad decisions. But even at my worst, you've always been kind to me, Asha. And when I'm alone with you, I feel a confidence I've never felt with anyone else. I..."

As Nakino looks down at me, something changes. It seems he's about to weep before his face tightens with resolve. He closes his eyes, and his muzzle slowly opens. As he lowers his head before me, something deep inside my body compels me to join him. I draw open my muzzle and close my eyes. The sounds of the forest grow softer, vying for presence against the beating of fervent hearts.

We kiss.

With our muzzles locked together, a particular curiosity grows. I open my eyes to find Nakino's closed tight in ecstasy. He's really enjoying this, isn't he?

Do I feel the same as him?

I release my muzzle and pull back slightly. As Nakino releases, he keeps his eyes closed a moment longer and exhales in bliss. Slowly, his eyes reopen into slits, reflecting the glow of the grove around us. As they focus on me, concern forms across his face.

“Is everything alright?” he asks.

I nod slowly. “It is. I just, um, never expected my first kiss would be with a Lithan.”

“I never expected my first kiss would be with a Farlander.”

A smile curls across his face, and I can’t help but mimic it. We chuckle to ourselves.

“Okay, but... did you enjoy it?” Nakino asks, relaxing his feathers. “Your first kiss?”

I stare up at him for a moment, anxious about my response. It worries me, but he deserves to know the truth. “I did. It was nice.”

“That’s great!” he exclaims, nearly falling backward into a glowing thicket. “Oh, Asha. I’m so relieved!”

I force a smile. I’m happy that... well, I could make him happy. But something doesn’t feel right. Why am I not enjoying this tender moment as much as he is? *Should* I be enjoying it as much as him? Ugh, what can’t I understand...?

“I’ve got an idea,” Nakino announces suddenly, rising to his talons. “Asha, there’s something in the valley I forgot to show you. A special plant that only grows around here. Why don’t you explore the grove while I look for it?”

Eager to find any exit from this suddenly uncomfortable situation, I nod in agreement. “Okay. Sure.”

“Ah, thank you!” Nakino steps beside me and rubs his head gently against mine. “Asha...! Oh, I love you, Asha!”

All I can do is smile.

Nakino casts about and darts through the entrance of the cave. As the echo of talonsteps fades, the familiar sounds of the forest grow around me. Alone with my thoughts, I relax my wings against the ground and release a shaky sigh. It feels like I’ve landed in a valley I can never fly out of.

The truth is, I know why I can't enjoy this moment: The guilt of exploring romance hangs heavy over my heart. How could I be so careless? I can't date a Dragon! When the seasons change in spring, I'm flying home to Ellyntide and leaving Felra forever. And the longer Nakino believes there's something special between us, the harder it will be to tell him there isn't.

But that's the problem. I wasn't lying.

When we kissed, I enjoyed it. I really did.

Does enjoying a kiss mean I have romantic feelings for him? Or do I just enjoy kissing? Am I confusing feelings of friendship with feelings of romance? I've never been in a relationship before, so how could I know? What does it feel like to be in love?! Agh, this is all so confusing!

I settle against the ground and exhale, trying to calm my racing thoughts. Nakino told me to explore the grove while I waited for his return. Would that help me relax? Admittedly, I'm deathly curious about the plants here. He wasn't kidding. This grove is incredible! It defies all known science! But I'm anxious to understand my feelings for Nakino, no matter how complicated the truth may be.

I close my eyes and draw deep, calming breaths. *Think, Asha!* How do I really feel about him? Concentrate on the familiar sounds of the forest. Let them relax your mind and uncover the truth.

...

...If Nakino's feelings for me are so ardent, then what about Kuro's?

We engage in much of the same behavior. The head rubs, the nuzzling... arguably, me and her are far closer than me and Nakino.

If that's the case, then... could that mean...

...

...!

Quicker than a bolt of lightning, I react.

I launch from my talons, flare my wings, and dodge to the immediate left. As I sail recklessly through the air, an unseen pair of claws extend outward to catch the side of my foreleg. Hot pain lances my body as a fresh wound is torn against my hind leg.

Impacting the ground, I screech and tumble into a patch of glowing ferns. When the rolling slows, I jump to my talons and shriek in defiance at my surprise attacker. Who's here?! Prey? Redaga? Locked in a daze by adrenaline and instinct, I can scarcely believe what's standing before me.

A red— no, a crimson-plumaged Kin stands before me with his wings splayed, and his head lowered in the attack position. He gazes toward the injury on my leg with wild eyes, and his eyes narrow to slits.

RRARRGGHH!!!

Relmoon?!

What's happened to him!? He's lost control!

80. Tail In The Air

Everything happened so fast. I was beside myself, concentrating on the sounds of the forest to uncover my true feelings for Nakino. Deep in focus, I heard an unusual sound — fongs of grass folding under heavy talons. I may be a Farlander, but I've been in Felra long enough to know when the forest doesn't sound right. When I realized I was no longer alone, I barely had time to react.

Something's happened to Relmoon. Not only can I no longer smell his scent, but he's gone completely mad! Standing before me with his wings splayed and fangs bared, he looks supremely upset and ready to dive into another attack. Based on his roar, it sounds like he's used the gift of regression. But why? What is he doing here? Why would he attack me in the middle of the forest? We were on good terms the last time we met! He must have used the gift of regression and failed to regain control! It's the only explanation that makes sense!

But there's no time to plan my next move. Relmoon bunches his muscles and launches toward me with his jaws open wide! Instincts engage and propel me into the only reasonable course of action: a hasty escape! I flip open my wings and leap into the air, every muscle burning to get me out of there as quickly as possible. But before I can get too high, Relmoon pivots his foreleg to reach out and rip a chunk of flesh from the tip of my tail. I screech in pain but force myself to continue flying through the opening in the rocks where prophetlight shines through. As I emerge into the crisp night air, Maki's pale glow falls against my feathers.

SKREAAK! SKREAK!!

I cry into the dark, silently pleading that Nakino will hear my frantic alarm call. The memories of my previous fights against Dragons are still fresh. Even against those smaller Redagas, I was easily outmatched. To try and fight Relmoon -- a Lithan with the fighting prowess to match Kuro's -- is suicide. My only hope is to try and outfly him long enough for Nakino to find us or for Relmoon to regain control.

I turn back to see how much air I've gained on Relmoon, only to find him mere yards from the tips of my tail feathers. How did he catch up so fast?! With little time to react, unknown instincts engage and flip my body around to face him. Relmoon rears his talons forward to ensnare my own, locking us into close-quarters combat. Frantically I lunge for his shoulder and wonder why Relmoon isn't

attacking in kind. But then my neck rears back, pulled apart as Relmoon ceases flapping his wings, forcing us to hurtle like a stone toward the ground. I flap my wings to counteract, but Relmoon's simply too heavy. I try to detach my talons, but Relmoon curls his grip tighter. What is he doing!? We're going to crash into the trees!

"Relmoon!" I screech, trying to break his feral spell. But he remains silent, staring at me with savage, distended eyes.

As the ground races towards us, I feel Relmoon's weight shift. Instantly, his plan becomes clear: He's trying to flip his body around and use the momentum to dislodge me from his talons, hurtling me toward the ground like a meteor. But I won't let him! I stop flapping my wings and rear my body in the other direction, attempting to unhook my talons and free myself. The gambit pays off as I fall away from Relmoon and manage to add a solid kick to his stomach. I flip around and tilt my wings into a steep climb, narrowly missing the tips of the redwoods below.

Regaining altitude, I turn my head back and expect to see Relmoon reeling from the force of my talons. But again, he's only a few yards away and quickly closing the gap. How is he keeping up with me? I thought I was an adept flyer! As I pound my wings harder, pain lances the side of my leg — a not-so-subtle reminder that Relmoon attacked me there. The surge of adrenaline and panic have stifled just how much pain I'm truly in. If it wasn't for that, I could—

SKREAKK!

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Blistering pain shoots up my tail as Relmoon latches onto the bottom of my tail feathers. It shocks my muscles cold, causing my wings to buckle and my flight to stall. As my body spirals into freefall, another surge of pain shocks me as Relmoon clamps his jaws down farther up my tail. I howl in pain as the moon hurtles toward me, unabated.

SCREECH!!

WHUMP!!

Through reeling pain, I feel a gust of air against my feathers. Relmoon's jaws detach, and his body is ripped away from mine. Confused, I force my eyes open and catch a fleeting glance of pale gray and crimson red disappearing into the dark forest below. Was that Nakino!? Kuro? Free of Relmoon's grasp, I regain control of my flight and slip through an opening in the trees, following the savage cacophony of two Dragons fighting. Navigating by Maki's faint glow, I find a slight clearing between two stunted sequoias and land in the gloomy underbrush. Strained roars bellow from beyond a pitch-black thicket. I dive through it and emerge on the other side to see two dragons fighting on the ground – Relmoon and a smaller, pale gray drakaina.

It's Frida!

Did she hear my alarm cry? What is she doing here?!

Kuro's sister has the upper hand in the fight, standing on top of Relmoon and slashing furiously at his stomach. She must have rammed him out of the sky and carried him to the ground! Wasting no time, I sprint to her side and dive on Relmoon's hindlegs to prevent him from kicking Frida off. The collision with the ground has taken its toll on the seasoned drakon – crimson feathers are stained mud brown, mottled with streaks of blue Dragon's blood. But even in his injured state, there's plenty of fight left in Relmoon.

With his hindlegs contained, Frida's in position to restrain his forelegs. She attempts to pounce on one, only to have Relmoon flare the other against her back. Despite the repeated attacks on her flank, Frida bites into the leg she has control over, trying to subdue Relmoon to his senses.

“Stop!!” Frida hisses through a muzzle of feathers. Relmoon responds by taking another swipe at her flank, causing her to clamp down harder. This is unbelievable! How much pain can one Dragon take? Feeling I have little choice, I join Frida and clamp down on Relmoon's hindleg. Fresh blood explodes into my mouth, exciting my predator senses. I bite down harder and feel a perverse pleasure in hearing Relmoon wail in pain.

RAARRGH!!!

The nearby thickets explode with motion as a steely black drakon emerges from the clearing; it's Nakino! He looks at Frida and me, then dives onto Relmoon's body with another furious roar. Beaten and bruised, adding one of the biggest drakons in the flock proves too much for Relmoon's resolve. As the struggling subsides, he heaves heavy, frantic breaths. He's still wound up, but his

sensibilities are returning. I release my jaws and lick my chops clean but keep my talons firmly planted against his hind legs.

“You...!” Nakino snarls, throwing open his wings.

“I saw him!” Frida hisses. “He tried to kill Asha!”

Nakino whips his head around to face Frida, eyes bulging. His eyes narrow to slits, and a growl like thunder from his chest causes the forest floor to tremble. He lifts a talon from Relmoon’s stomach and clamps it around the bottom of his neck, drawing streaks of cerulean blood against crimson feathers. Relmoon’s breathing seizes, and he struggles for air.

“What did you do to her?!” Nakino demands.

“Wait!”

My plea diffuses Nakino’s fury, but only slightly. He whips his head around to face me with bared fangs and sinister eyes, the eyes of a Dragon a heartbeat away from extinguishing life.

“R-Relmoon,” I stutter, trying to compose my thoughts aloud. “He didn’t mean to attack me! He lost control of his regression... right?”

Somehow, Nakino's muzzle sinks into an even deeper frown — a potent mix of anger and bewilderment. Confused by his response, I cast a glance at Frida. She takes a moment to shake away the blood dripping down her head and seems equally confounded by my question.

From beneath Nakino's talon, Relmoon's gagging slurs into a series of exasperated chuffs. Nakino closely examines Relmoon's pallid face, then grumbles something under his breath. Reaching his limit for inflicting senseless pain, Nakino slimly lifts the talon against Relmoon's neck, causing him to inhale a great gasp of air. But instead of returning to normal breathing, his chuffing continues. And as his voice returns, I realize what he's doing.

He's laughing.

“Heh-heh-hah-hah!”

Nakino reapplies pressure. “What's so funny?”

Relmoon struggles under the larger drakon's talon, and his strained laughing subsides. Seemingly satisfied, Nakino lifts his talon again to allow Relmoon to speak. He lifts his head slightly from a bed of dried grass and gazes past Nakino to address me.

“Princess Asha Eloise Lordanou,” he croaks, forming coarse words. “I failed to tell you... regression... you will always regain control.”

Regression can't be permanent? I gaze at Frida for confirmation, and she slowly nods with a sympathetic expression. So, if Relmoon didn't lose control of himself, that means...

“Oh, yes.” Relmoon's muzzle coils into a depraved grin. “You should be *dead*, Farlander.”