

THE PRINCESS'S FEATHERS

81. Fear-Scent

A repugnant, putrid feeling forms in the pit of my stomach and grows to encompass my entire body. Relmoon was in control of himself the whole time. *He consciously tried to kill me.* He stalked us from the Grandfather tree, waited until I was alone, and went for the kill. All the soothing pleasantries he sang after saving my life were a trick. And I feel for it! Everything he said was a lie!

Nakino snorts and reasserts his talon against Relmoon's neck. "You dung-eating...!"

"Nakino," Frida interrupts.

Nakino relents and swivels his head toward Frida, calm and collected. She lowers her eyes and murmurs over Relmoon's gasps, "He deserves judgment, not vengeance."

Nakino stares at Frida, silently refusing to shift his talon.

"Featherbrain!" Frida chides. "Do you want to be punished, too?"

With a sharp growl, Nakino removes the talon from Relmoon's neck and returns it to his stomach with a forceful pound. Relmoon heaves like a dying Grepo and wretches under our combined weight. After a few difficult moments, his breathing returns to normal.

With Relmoon finally subdued, Nakino's feathers begin to relax. "We need to alert the Grandfather Tree to Relmoon's treachery. Frida, can you fly?"

Unease grows across Frida's face. "Relmoon got claws on me." She draws her left wing open to reveal her flank. Dragon's blood flows freely from several talon-length lacerations. "I'm not sure if I can takeoff."

Nakino's brow furrows, and he shakes his head. With Frida disqualified, Nakino slides his face to me. As our eyes meet, an air of relief blows through him. "Asha, are you alright? What in Felra happened?"

"After you left the grove, Relmoon ambushed me," I say, wincing in pain. I lift my wing and present my injured leg to Nakino. "I tried to flee, but Relmoon was too fast. If Frida hadn't intervened, I don't know what would've happened." My gaze shifts to the pale gray fledge. "What are you doing here, anyway?"

"Well," Frida mumbles, averting her eyes. "I was just... really curious! About you and Nakino, and how your night was going."

"You were spying on us," Nakino observes coyishly.

“Maybe!” Frida shrugs her wings. “But Asha, it’s a good thing I was around to hear your cry for help, right?”

“It was,” I say. “Relmoon took a few bites from my tail. I was having trouble fighting back.”

“I should have taken a few more,” he quips.

RRRRGH....

Nakino rumbles in fury, curling his talons deeper into Relmoon’s chest. Relmoon grits his fangs to stifle the pain, but the larger drakon’s claws are too much. He flails his head and wails in pain.

RAARGH!!

“Silence!” Nakino snarls a few feet above Relmoon’s face.

If I were still a Lemur, I’m sure I’d be mortified by Nakino’s brazen cruelty. But here in Felra, after lying to my face and attempting to take my life, I find myself numb to Relmoon’s suffering. In a way, his cries remind me of the screams of dying prey. Hearing them brings me a serene sense of pleasure.

But Frida doesn't share my enthusiasm. She growls scornfully, reminding Nakino of the consequences that await. He grunts and releases his talon, allowing Relmoon to breathe more freely.

Frida's gaze swivels from Nakino to Relmoon, and she shakes her head in dismay. "You monster... how could you attack Asha?"

After taking a moment to gather his strength, Relmoon grumbles, "Isn't it obvious?"

We exchange glances, hoping somebody knows what he's babbling about. None of us respond.

"I should have known," he scoffs. Relmoon lowers his head backward and rests it leisurely against the side of a mallowshrub. "Well then, off you go to fetch Sefri and some of our *esteemed* elders. I'm sure they'll be just as clueless, and I do not wish to explain myself twice."

I exhale a frustrated sigh. This is insane. Relmoon had the feathers beaten out of him, but he's still acting like an arrogant fledgling. How much abuse can one Dragon take?

Nakino exhales and turns to address Frida and me. "I don't trust you two alone, even if he's injured."

Frida asks, “If none of us can return to the Grandfather Tree, then what should we do?”

The answer stays elusive as Nakino frowns and averts his eyes.

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“I wish it wasn’t Couple’s Night,” Frida sighs. “Everyone is flying around the tree. There’s nobody out here but us.”

Frida’s right. Most of the flock was at the Grandfather Tree to watch the ceremony. If none of us can leave, then what should we do? Damn it! Isn’t there anyone out here who can help us?

...

Maybe there is.

I crane my head away from the group and turn skyward.

“Asha?” Frida asks inquisitively.

SKREAAAK!

My earsplitting cry echoes through the forest and into the chilled night sky. It fades on the wind, replaced by the thunderous drone of innumerable flocks of birds stirred to flight by the power of my voice. As their wingbeats fade, the deep cry of a familiar drakaina returns to us.

ROOAARRH?

Frida’s face illuminates like a full Maki. “It’s Kuro!”

I can’t help but smirk. “I thought she might be flying around.”

Nakino sighs and lets his wings droop to the ground. “She must have deserted her mate. Again.”

As much as I wanted Kuro’s date to be successful, I had a feeling she was setting herself up for failure. Why else would she brag about how rude she acts on Couple’s Night? And when I saw who she was paired with — that poor, terrified drakon — I knew her night was

already over. I told myself I'd be upset if this happened, but in light of recent events, I've had a change of heart.

With the three of us feeling a second wind of relief, I glance to Relmoon, still restrained beneath our talons, and find an astonishing sight. For perhaps the first time in his life, Relmoon looks oddly disquieted. His face is distressed, and his half-folded wings are raised slightly off the ground in apprehension. Most surprisingly, I can smell traces of fear-scent — he's *scared!*

Oh, what a shame!

As far as I'm concerned, Kuro can do with Relmoon as she pleases. I might even join her.

A few minutes later, we spot the faint outline of a Dragon against the hazy glow of Maki. It descends through the trees and lands in the clearing next to us.

"Asha?" Kuro calls into the night. As she follows our scents, the thickets begin dancing with motion. "Asha, why do I smell—"

Kuro's voice is extinguished as her body emerges through the underbrush. Her eyes shift through the three of us restraining Relmoon, then fall onto the crimson Dragon himself. Her eyes bulge like balloons before narrowing to slits.

"...*You.*"

Kuro tries to fight the rage exploding inside her, but powerful emotions prove too much. “*You...!*” she seethes, emerging from the thickets. “You tried to hurt her, didn’t you?!”

Relmoon’s hindquarters squirm beneath my talons. *Idiot boy*. I sink my claws into flesh, and the squirming stops.

“Relmoon ambushed Asha while we were separated,” Nakino says plainly. “He tried to kill her.”

GROAAWL!!!

Kuro roars, exploding forward with a fury I’ve never witnessed before. She tears open her wings and lunges for Relmoon!

“Kuro, wait!”

Kuro halts her charge mere feet from Relmoon neck. She flicks cold eyes to Frida, fangs bared and hungry for flesh.

“Please, don’t,” Frida says softly. “You know what happens if you hurt him.”

A low and brooding growl thunders from Kuro's throat. She holds her gaze on her sister and lowers her wings slightly. Is she yielding?

"Kuro," Frida continues. "We need you to fly to the Grandfather Tree and tell Sefri what happened. Asha and I are too injured and can't restrain Relmoon alone. Us three must remain here and ensure he doesn't escape."

"Or kill Asha," Relmoon quips again, a tinge of amusement in his voice.

"I should kill *you*, Relmoon!!" Kuro bellows.

"But you won't," Relmoon frowns, exaggerating disappointment. "Isn't that right, Kuro?"

She stares at Relmoon, unchanging in posture. Kuro could end Relmoon's life in a heartbeat if she pleased, but something is holding her back. What was Frida talking about? What happens if Kuro hurts Relmoon?

"Ah, yes," Relmoon says with a contented growl. "Calm your bitter heart, Daughter-Of-Mecali. You can't so much as lay a feather on me. Or have you already forgotten your Grandmother's warning? As Princess Asha Eloise Lordanou wasn't there, allow me to repeat it. She said—"

ROARR!!

Kuro's furious snarl puts a swift end to Relmoon's speech. She drops her head and lunges, clamping fangs around Relmoon's neck!

"KURO!!" I shriek.

Relmoon gasps, slams his eyes shut, and writhes under my talons. But just as quick as she lunged, Kuro pulls back, clamping a muzzelfull of crimson feathers. She didn't bite his flesh!

Kuro grunts, "Sefri will never believe me unless I bring these as proof. Nakino!"

The black drakon flinches, startled by the power of Kuro's voice.

"Keep them safe until I return," she says, dipping her head and turning to leave.

"R-right." Nakino stammers, unease clouding his voice. "I'll do anything to protect my mate."

Kuro stops with one talon held in the air. She holds her gaze on Nakino for a heartbeat but says nothing. Then she flicks her eyes to me, and her expression softens.

My heart skips a beat as our eyes meet. Oh, for all the moon, I wish I could talk to her alone! To share with her everything that's happened tonight and tell her just how much I loathe Relmoon. But he needs to be dealt with first. He deserves the elders' judgment and everything terrible that comes his way.

Kuro's face tightens with resolve. Apparently, my expression said enough. She puts her talon down and dives through a thicket. A few moments later, she's gone.

With the immediate crisis over, the three of us exhale — we can focus on keeping Relmoon restrained until the flock arrives. On the subject, I gaze down to assess Relmoon's condition. His eyes are closed, and his head is rolled back against a mallowshrub. He moans quietly to himself, exhausted and in pain. It seems his arrogance finally caught up to him.

"He'll be off his talons for a while," Nakino declares, relaxing his feathers. "Asha, Frida. Keep him restrained while I locate some moss. I must tend to your wounds."

"Right," Frida nods.

Nakino looks at me, and I nod in kind. Leaving us alone with Relmoon is risky, but I would like to stop bleeding everywhere. If the flock arrives and discovers my purple blood, then an already terrible night could become truly catastrophic.

Nakino steps off Relmoon and studies him carefully, watching to see if he'll spring to life. After a few moments, he's convinced of his pacification and turns to search the area. As Nakino shoves his head into a nearby thicket, Relmoon stirs beneath my talons. My heart quickens, but the movement soon stops. I look up to find that Relmoon has merely shifted his wings into a more comfortable position.

Well, that's fine. I guess.

I curl my talons anyways, and Relmoon shrieks in pain.

82. Exile

The flickering light of an ember root flame reflects cleanly off the eyes of Meldi and Khosa as they emerge through the thickets and into the crash site. Despite assurances from Frida, I was concerned the eldest members of the flock wouldn't arrive all the way from White Mountain. But here they are, wide-eyed and weary, ready to dispense whatever judgment may be necessary for the crimson drakon.

After a painfully long wait, Kuro returned with Sefri and a host of other Kin from the Grandfather Tree. Even with a muzzlefull of Relmoon's feathers, Sefri was suspicious of Kuro's motives. It took Tomcat and a friend I hadn't seen in some time, Fra, to convince Sefri to abandon Couple's Night. Once she arrived and saw that Kuro wasn't inventing stories, a Kin was sent to alert the elders at White Mountain.

Clearly, I'm not the most popular Dragon around here. But it's nice to know some are willing to stand up for me.

With everyone present, the impromptu gathering parts, clearing a path for the elders to advance. They step into the clearing, hastily groomed from dense forest to provide enough room for all twelve Dragons present. With everyone's attention undivided, the only sound is a crackling ember root fire and muffled talonstops trodding over a blanket of freshly fallen snow.

As the elders slowly pace forward, I can't help but study the faces of the assembled Kin. That is, all the Kin except Nakino and Kuro. Ever since the delegation from the Grandfather Tree arrived, my two friends have been stuck to me like glue — Nakino tending to my wounds and Kuro watching over me like a guard dog. As the sound of the elder's wingbeats drew near, they both sat beside me to offer their protection. I'm unsure if the gesture is really necessary, but I do appreciate it.

Khosa's pointed gaze falls onto Relmoon, standing in front of the roaring ember root fire. Flanked on both sides by square-shouldered drakons, his feathers are torn and dirty with scant traces of dried Dragon's blood — Nakino tended to his wounds, but only once Sefri forced him to do so. As the two elders approach, Meldi leans into Khosa's ear and whispers something inaudible. Khosa nods, and Meldi steps away, turning to sit by Sefri's side. The two elder Dragons nuzzle the heads in greeting, leaving Khosa alone to determine Relmoon's fate.

She approaches the crimson drakon, then stops unexpectedly with one talon held in the air. She tilts her neck forward and sniffs the air directly in front of Relmoon. Her brow furrows, and her eyes narrow to slits. With a flick of her ears, the drakons guarding Relmoon step aside. Khosa's long whiskers dance as she samples the air once more, and a curt growl emanates from her chest.

"I can barely smell you, freck."

“Raven’s Thistle,” Nakino answers, drawing the crowd’s attention. “Relmoon rubbed it over his feathers to conceal his scent. That’s how he stalked Asha without her noticing.”

Oh!

Raven’s Thistle conceals scents!? I didn’t know that! Relmoon is hardly the botanist type, so where did he learn that from?

Khosa twists her back head around to stare Relmoon in the face. “Son-Of-Zuki,” she speaks wearily in a voice brimming with disappointment. “Why did you attack her?”

Relmoon releases a breath and rolls his eyes.

“Because...” he says, stepping past Khosa to stand in the center of the clearing. *“I have felt the bitter winds from the north and heard the birdsong in the trees. Azurrel heralds us a dark and cold frostwing, one where prey will be scarce, and Kin will be lost.”*

I recognize those words. Ashene, one of the elders, spoke them during my first visit to White Mountain, the one where the elders debated my request to join the flock. That line was his justification for allowing me in.

Relmoon gazes up through a light snowfall and opens his wings. “Here we are. Frostwing has only begun, yet prey is elusive. With each passing day, hunting parties return with less and less game. It won’t be long before snow buries the flock’s territory and our

fledges trill wearily for prey. It would seem dear Ashene's foresight was, unfortunately, correct." Relmoon pauses to lower his head and address the flock directly. "But have you stopped to consider 'why'?"

Across the clearing, the only response is the errant wandering of eyes.

"An unusually harsh Frostwing?" Relmoon asks, pacing slowly along a row of Kin. "No, no. The answer, Brothers and Sisters, has been under your talons this whole time." Slowly, his head turns until his golden eyes lock with my own. "*The fate of the Lordanou rests on your wings. I will return once the matter has been settled.*"

Keuvra's message to the flock? What does that have to do with frostwing? I'm anxious to watch the crowd and see how they're reacting, but I find myself unable to look away from Relmoon's piercing gaze.

"I believe," Relmoon continues, beginning a slow pace in my direction. "This child of the Goddess, this *prey-animal*, was given the form of Kin as a test. How would the proud Brothers and Sisters of the Snowfell Flock react when an outsider appeared in their midst?"

Krrrrrh.

Kuro issues a faint warning growl as Relmoon draws close. Without slowing down, the crimson drakon pivots on his talons to stride towards Khosa instead.

“The answer, it would seem, is our *esteemed elders* would welcome Princess Asha Eloise Lordanou with open wings.”

Relmoon pauses to stare at the scraggy elder, silently provoking her for a response. But Khosa remains silent, her stone face frozen in a reproachful frown. Showing cracks of frustration, Relmoon flicks his head about and continues with a more urgent cadence.

“This girl may look harmless, but it would seem wherever the Farlander goes, trouble follows. First, it was the poor, hapless Lemur ordered to protect her life. Confronted by the enemies of her Kingdom, he was mercilessly slain.”

What?!

Relmoon’s blaming *me* for Calypso’s sacrifice?! How could he..?!

“As she fled her Kingdom, Airship-Prey stalked her to our territory, threatening every creature in Felra with untold destruction. She has attracted the attention of pitiful False-Kin, putting the lives of honorable Kin at risk. And now, with frostwing upon us, prey has become scarce, threatening us all with starvation.”

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This is insane. How could anyone reasonably blame me for the loss of prey? I didn’t ask to be turned into a Lithan, you know? It’s not my fault if there’s a harsh winter in Felra! All I

ever wanted was to return home and see my family again! But if Relmoon has his way and convinces the elders I'm some kind of threat, then... argh, damn it, Relmoon! Whatever he's trying to do, he can't succeed!

A wing drapes across my body — without looking, I know it's Kuro's. Is my anger really that noticeable? I know from experience back home that animals tend to take me less seriously when I get upset. I should be doing everything I can to stay calm, but how can I just sit around while Relmoon assassinates my character in front of the flock?

Relmoon steps over a felled redwood to approach Meldi and Sefri. "I believe the Farlander knows how dangerous she is but chooses to hide it behind a web of lies. I won't deny that I stalked her with the intent to kill. But once I laid eyes on her *blood*, she retaliated against *me!*"

"Liar!!" I shriek, leaping into the clearing with bared fangs. "I did no such thing!"

Like a bomb detonating, a savage roar explodes across the clearing, and every Dragon present erupts into motion. Kuro and Nakino leap forward to stand beside me as Relmoon flips around and stares at me with a sardonic grin. Hisses and growls rise like hot steam from every corner, causing all present to fall into a defensive posture with wings opened and fangs bared. Everyone's ready for a fight!

Relmoon rises above the crowd and cackles, "Show them your wound, Asha! Let them see how different you truly are!"

"Your wound?" Meldi asks as the growls begin to subside. "Asha, what is he talking about?"

Erk...!

My body seizes, and a grave realization draws over me like a storm cloud. *He saw my purple blood!* After he attacked me in the grove, he noticed the blood dripping down my leg and became furious. But instead of bleating about it like a spikehorn, he waited until the elders arrived and tricked me into getting upset! My feathers flatten, and I take an unsteady step backward. This is bad. Relmoon just flipped the narrative and made my overreaction sound incredibly suspicious. Argh, damnit! I can't get out of this!

Khosa's eyes narrow. She flicks her ears at Nakino and commands, "Remove her moss."

At first, Nakino doesn't respond. He keeps his feathers flat and stares down at the elder. But after a sharp hiss from Khosa, he slowly rises to his talons.

"I'm sorry," Nakino whispers as his head passes my ear. He lowers himself, grips the bandage with his fangs, and pulls. I squirm at the separation but hold my face as firm as a stone.

A hushed chorus of gasps escapes the crowd of Dragons. My stomach twists as the truth I never wanted to be revealed is laid bare before the flock. From now on, they'll always see me as different from themselves.

Relmoon smirks, pleased by the crowd's response. "Ask yourselves — is this the blood of a pure Dragon, a true Sister of Keuvra? Or is the blood of an outsider, someone who never should have set a talon inside the flock's territory?"

Relmoon's question pacifies the crowd into an uneasy silence. Even Kuro and Nakino seem unnerved.

"Generations ago," Relmoon continues. "Us proud Dragons, the Kin of Keuvra, willingly rejected Azurrel's gift of Ascendancy. We pride ourselves in the way we live. But this outsider, this *thing*... she threatens our way of life and purity of spirit."

"What does *that* have to do with Asha?" Kuro challenges in a defiant voice.

"Oh!" Relmoon chirps, flipping around to face us. A smile more sinister than a serpent forms across his muzzle. "I'm delighted you asked, *Kuro*. As you've yet to fulfill your duty to whelp kits, you wouldn't understand the heartbreak of witnessing your daughters scrounge in the dirt like pitiful Jimbals for any morsel of prey."

Relmoon pauses, hoping to provoke Kuro into a response. But she stays silent, not so much as lifting a feather in retaliation. After all the lies Relmoon has told, I find his sob story difficult to believe. I'm certain Kuro feels the same way — she must be using every ounce of restraint not to talk back.

Relmoon's face droops, though only slightly. He tightens his wings and saunters over the grass to stand before Khosa. "With each passing day, my kits grow weary with hunger, pleading incessantly for prey I'll never find. You asked me why I attacked Asha. It was for *them*!

To restore our prey and fill their bellies! The meaning of Azurrel's message to the flock is as clear to me as a parting rain storm — Asha is the *'matter'* he spoke of, and if you do not resolve that matter, then *I will.*”

Relmoon's heartless words settle across the clearing, and once more, the only sound is the dancing flame of the ember root fire. I glance around, watching the faces of all the Dragons assembled. They seem stoic and contemplative — could they truly believe Relmoon's inane ramblings? What if Khosa believes he's right? What could happen if the flock thinks I'm the root of all their problems?

Relmoon couldn't be right... could he?

Is that why I transformed into a Lithan? Am I really just a pawn in the Dragon deity's scheme to test his flock?

Like a cold boiler warming to life, Khosa loosens the snow built around her wings and clambers to her talons. “Son-of-Zuki,” she growls in a voice marred by age. “*The winds of hatred blow sideways to Maki.* Do you recognize that saying?”

Relmoon lifts his head slightly as Khosa circles him but offers nothing.

“I'm certain you do,” Khosa chuckles. “It is from the story, *'Keuvra and the Tall Towers.'* In it, a friend of our leader succumbs to the jealousy that often follows when a prospective mate chooses to be with another Kin. Soon his hatred consumed him, leading him down a path of recklessness and revenge. Keuvra tried to warn his friend of the dangers of jealousy, but it was too late. In his *arrogance*, he became reckless. And soon, he was struck down.”

Khosa pauses to flick eyes on Meldi. A somber expression forms across her face, and she nods slowly. Khosa swivels back to Relmoon with a certain glint in her eye. “You are not the first Kin this flock has witnessed with an insatiable arrogance,” she scolds. “I find it despicable.”

Relmoon’s face twists, but he keeps his muzzle shut.

Khosa steps in front of Relmoon, raising her head high above his. “You had the chance to air your concerns with your elders. But instead, you chose to ride the winds of hatred.”

“You would not have listened!” Relmoon growls. “The Farlander had to be dealt with!”

“Despite her appearance, Asha is a member of this flock!”

Relmoon jumps to his talons and snarls, “She’s a THREAT!”

“SILENCE!”

Khosa’s roar thunders through the forest, disturbing accumulated snow from the branches above the clearing. Relmoon flinches and rears his head slightly, but his expression is resolute. Try as he might to hide it, he wasn’t expecting the elderly Kin to act so fierce.

Khosa lowers her wings but keeps her fangs bared. “You claim to be acting in Keuvra’s name. But If you followed Keuvra half as much as you claim to, then you would know the members of this flock do not attack one another!”

I hold my breath, expecting another volley of fiery objections from Relmoon. But surprisingly, he remains silent and unmoving, staring deep into Khosa. Has she really pacified him?

“You are insubordinate, reckless, and a scourge. Someone such as you has no right to call yourself a Brother of Keuvra.” Khosa grunts and flattens her feathers to try and calm herself. The elder Kin growls with a tone of finality, "Son-Of-Zuki, from this time forward, are you *exiled* from the Snowfell Flock. Fly from these lands and never return.”

Khosa’s judgment falls like snowflakes across the clearing, holding it equally as silent. With his fate decided, Relmoon’s feathers lower, and his tail stops swaying through the grass. There’s a distinct look of acceptance scrawled across his face — I get the impression he knew this would happen all along. He snorts, folds his wings, and stares at Khosa’s iron face a heartbeat longer before stepping away. Relmoon ambles across the clearing with his head held low, refusing to deign a glance at the shocked Kin surrounding him. As he approaches the thickets to leave, he stops and turns to address his former flockmates one final time.

“Our leader, our prey, and soon the flock,” he speaks in an unsteady voice brimming with contempt. “You will regret this!”

Savage eyes stare across the clearing and lock with my own. But the crimson drakon holds them for only a heartbeat before swiveling his gaze onto the Dragon sitting beside me:

Kuro. Relmoon's brow furrows further, and unfettered emotions begin to crack through his resolve. He tears his head away and walks through the underbrush until his tail disappears into the night.

83. Friends In Upset Places

As I open the doors to the Queen's reading room, I'm greeted by the uneasy stares of a group of officers posted on the opposite side of the hall. Like everyone else, they have been waiting to hear the Queen's response to the latest crisis. I hold my face firm and step into the hall, refusing to grant them any indication of just how poorly my joint meeting with the Queen and the Admirals of the Air Squadron went.

Last week, the Queen was bullish on giving the disputed island near Nortanian territory an official name. Maritime law dictates that we plant our flag on the island – an archaic but symbolic gesture of our intent to defend our sovereignty. A mission was devised to send the Beatrix – recently returned to service – to perform the task. But as she approached the ledge of the island, a Nortanian vessel flew through a cloud bank and fired warning shots across her bow. As her orders were not to start a war, she retreated. To make an already tense situation worse, Nortane announced *they* had planted their flag on the island, giving it the name '*Quixotyl La,*' a word from the ancient Parrot beak that roughly translates to '*Queen's Folly.*'

Needless to say, Kelani was livid. Furious, even.

As I presented her with a litany of safe options for a response, she became increasingly unhinged, insisting provocation was the only way forward. A radio address to the Kingdom has been scheduled for tomorrow morning, and her orders from that point forward are clear: Should Nortane attempt to land on the Island, we will defend it by force.

As if things weren't dour enough, for the first time in the history of the Kingdom, the ceremony of Holy Communion — our way of speaking to the Goddess — has been closed to public viewing. The Queen's attempts to seek her guidance have fallen on deaf ears, which has sparked rampant speculation among the public. The Kingdom was plunged into chaos the last time something remotely similar happened.

Now, more than ever, I find myself anxious about the future.

I step into the hallway, ignoring the guards to return to the residence wing where my office is located. As I round a corner to pass the map room, I spot Lieutenant Tobin walking towards me from the opposite end of the hall. What luck! He's just the Ringtail I was hoping to see. I raise my hand, and he waves his tail back.

"Commander," he greets me in a cheery voice as we approach. "I think I know what you're going to ask me."

"That's right," I tell him. "Max has had a rough time since the tragedy. It would really help if he had a chance to pilot with his son."

Despite the state of affairs internationally, our covert plan to return to the Eastern Weald has been progressing smoothly. It's true — Max is still shaken from the tragedy in the weald and his subsequent encounter with the Lithan over the skies of Rhl. But once I explained our plan to retrieve the Serpentine Diamond, he understood my logic and agreed to help. He even suggested the idea of a day out with his son as an excuse for needing to borrow a ship. Obviously, asking for a military vessel right now would be out of the question. But requesting a small, easy to fly training ship fits perfectly with our needs.

Still, I have to go through the proper channels to procure one. And that channel is standing before me in the form of Lieutenant Tobin. But as I await his response, Tobin's tail droops, and he averts his eyes. "Well, I'm afraid I have some sour news. I passed on your request, but it was denied."

"Denied?" My brow furrows. "By whom?"

"Not sure," Tobin shrugs. "All I know is it was by someone higher than me."

"There's no need to hold him in suspense, Lieutenant."

The strained voice of an arrogant-sounding man rises from behind me. I spin around to find a Pine Marten in a bowler hat exiting the entrance to Map Room. He has a briefcase at this side and a mouth that lowers into what could be mistaken as a permanent scowl. I know this man's complexion well.

"Lord Orlando?" I ask in dismay. "*You* denied me?"

"I took it upon myself to divert your frivolous request into my wastebasket," he says, approaching Tobin and me at a leisurely stroll. "These are tense times, and you are needed by the Queen's side."

It's been some time since I've encountered the well-known nemesis of the late Princess. Not since the morning of the tragedy, I'd wager. But Lord Orlando isn't an officer of the

Air Squadron. He has a background in the steam gun business but obtained most of his wealth by purchasing large swaths of rental properties in Varecia. How could he deny my request for a civilian airship?

Unless...

“...You’re assigned to the 22nd wing?”

“By order of Her Majesty,” Orlando says, using the back of his paw to brush the dust from his coat. “As you know, there have been many changes to the Air Squadron since the Lithan caught us flat-footed. I was given special dispensation to assist Colonel Holt with matters of procurement and distribution. When your request for a ship came across my desk, I took it upon myself to save the colonel the hassle of throwing it away and did it myself.”

The 22nd wing is the division I requested a ship from; they routinely deal with small and light airships. But this is a rather rotten maneuver by Her Majesty. Lord Orlando has been vying for the Queen’s favor for some time now and appears to have gotten it. Bureaucratic blessings such as this are not unheard of in Kelani’s reign — acquiescing the nobles to some degree is inevitable. But allowing a civilian with only a tenuous history in arms distribution to assist policy decisions is preposterous!

“Lord Orlando,” I say, pulling down my waistcoat. “With all due respect, I am entitled to spend my leisure time however I please.”

“Your *leisure* time does not entitle you to the assets of the Air Squadron,” Orlando scoffs.

Tobin steps forward and says, “Well, surely we can loan out a civilian training ship for an afternoon?”

“That is *my* decision to make,” Orlando ripostes, imitating a brick wall. “And my decision is that our Kingdom is hurtling towards a crisis, and we need all available resources at home. That includes the Commander, whose work is integral to the Queen.”

I contain a stiff laugh under my breath. “You act as if I am not allowed a respite from my duties.”

Evidently, my labor is invaluable, yet not valuable enough to merit a simple time-off request. If men like Orlando had their way, we would still have 40-hour work weeks and no basic income.

“Commander,” Orlando speaks slowly like he were talking down to a child. “Please do not take this wrong way, but I believe you had a satisfactory respite after bereaving your husband.”

What?!

...

I stare at Orlando in paralyzing shock, unable to believe what he just uttered. He thinks my time grieving was... how could he...?

“Whoa, hey now....” Tobin trails off, resting his hand gently against my shoulder.

But I’m not paying any attention to him. I raise my voice and seethe, “How could you say that?! How could you be so cruel?!”

Orlando’s frown deepens. “Commander...”

“Losing the Colonel was the most difficult event of my life,” I say, emotion clouding my voice. “And you’re treating it like I went on holiday!”

“Commander, I *asked* you not to take it the wrong way!”

“No...!” I counter, raising my voice further. “My misery is not some line item on a time card!”

“Commander!!”

Orlando's voice echoes across the walls and down the hall, causing a passing group of palace guards to pause and take notice. For a brief moment, nothing further is said, and all is quiet except for the exasperated chuffs of Orlando's heavy breathing. He seems genuinely upset, though not as upset as I am. He reminds me of father — a pitiful man with a heart of hatred.

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Orlando's face tightens with resolve, and he speaks with a hushed fury. "I *asked* you not to get upset! But instead, you ignored me, and now you are causing a ruckus unnecessarily!"

Such a detestable man, Orlando. I can't believe I'm being embarrassed in the middle of the Palace by a non-commissioned noble! If it weren't for his relationship with the Queen, I would bury him myself right this moment. Instead, I must stand tall and endure this assault on my character. Being a Commander of the Air Squadron, there are other, less physical ways I can end his farce.

Orlando continues, "Just because you took time to grieve, that does not mean—"

"HEY!!"

A young voice full of hatred echoes like thunder from down the hallway. I strain to look past the taller Pine Marten and spot a Ruffy emerging from the map room, his fists clenched and his face turgid with anger. Small in size and dressed in a fine brown waistcoat, his identity is unmistakable, though his temperament is not.

“P-Prince Sofl?” Orlando gasps.

“Leave him alone!” the young Prince bellows, marching forward. “What gives you the right to talk down to a Commander of the Air Squadron? Huh?”

“Prince Sofl, I was merely—“

“NO!” he shrieks. “You have no rank, Orlando! You didn’t earn a uniform! So shut up!!”

Orlando stares at him, flustered and unable to respond. The Prince has been notably absent the past three months, even to those of us working in the palace. But despite his disappearance, all are aware of the weight that now lies on his young shoulders. Fourteen years old and the singular direct heir to the Lilac Throne. To say that he possesses a certain privilege would be an understatement. The Queen has been fiercely protective of her remaining kit – to question his newfound authority would be suicide.

Sofl lowers his voice but keeps his fangs bared. “Go,” he murmurs, pointing forwards past Tobin and me to dismiss the noble. Orlando hesitates but soon grabs his briefcase from the ground and turns to leave. As he strolls past, our eyes meet. I can almost swear there’s fear lurking inside them.

As Orlando’s pawsteps trail off, I find myself more shocked than relieved. Is this really Prince Sofl? What happened to the timid boy so burdened by anxiety that he hid behind Princess Asha in public? I’ve not once heard the Prince raise his voice, much less in anger.

It would seem that in his sister's absence, he's taken on her mantle as the palace antagonist.

Whatever the case, he dispatched Orlando with bravado. "Your majesty," I say, breathing a sigh of relief. "Thank you for—"

"Please do not address me that way, Commander."

I hesitate, not anticipating such a curt response from Sofl. Though, perhaps I should have. The late Princess did not prefer her royal titles, either.

"My apologies," I say. "What would you prefer I address you by?"

After a silent moment of contemplation, Sofl answers, "...Prince will do."

I dip my head in acknowledgment. "As you wish, Prince."

"Now, then," Sofl says, adjusting his waistcoat to regain composure. "While you are here, Commander, I would like to discuss something with you in private."

I give Tobin a sidelong glance and catch him engaged in the same act of surprise. I haven't so much as laid eyes on the Prince since the evening of the tragedy. What could he want with me?

I suppose this is mine to find out. I dip my head and say, "Of course. Please, lead the way."

Sofl beckons with his long tail then turns quickly to leave. He leads me across the palace and into the residences wing, down the long hallway on the first floor, and into a locked bedroom. At least, I believe it to be a bedroom until the door swings open, and I'm greeted by the pungent, earthen smell of Sofl's herbalism lab.

It's been quite some time since I've entered this room. Judging by the state of affairs inside, the same could be said of Sofl. The Prince ignites the gas lamp near the door, revealing a thin layer of dust covering everything in sight. Books are strewn about the tables in the center of the room, with one rather large, dust-coated example opened prominently next to a pad of paper. Cuttings of plants lay nearby, long withered and dead. Even the solar calendar between the bookcases appears to be from last summer.

As I close the door behind me, the Prince wastes no time. "Commander," he says, standing in between the tables with his back facing me. "I read your account of the tragedy last night."

Last night...?

My account was written a few days after the tragedy, as soon as I was capable of composing it. It would seem The Prince has needed far longer to gather his strength and revisit the horror of that afternoon.

“Did you...” he trails off, his voice unsteady. “Did Asha really open up to you?”

I release an unsteady breath. I’ve been questioned endlessly about the events of that day, but this is the first time someone has asked about my meeting with the Princess. “As we left her quarters on the Blue Daemon, I knew something was... different. I could see it on her face, the way she looked at me had changed.”

Sofl remains silent and unmoving. As I would expect — if he has read my account, then this is not new information.

I step forward to join the Prince at the table. “After we landed in the weald, The Princess was upbeat and friendly. She insisted I join her on *‘flower picking duty.’*”

Sofl averts his head, but not before I catch a gentle smile growing across it.

“Before they departed the Blue Daemon, I called back Bristleb—“

Erk...!

Oh, how embarrassing. I got a little caught in the moment there. “Um, Calypso,” I quickly correct myself. “I called back Calypso, and—“

“Wait.” Sofl turns to face me. “Bristle-*who*?”

“Bristlebody,” I squirm, scratching the back of my neck. “The Princess came up with it, It was her new nickname for the Colonel that day. She was quite adamant about using it.”

Despite my fumbled excuse, mournful emotion swells in Sofl’s face. “Asha liked nicknames,” he whispers.

Slowly, the Prince turns away from me and approaches the window closest to the bookcases. He draws the curtains, allowing pale gray light to filter into the room. He gazes silently across the snow-covered front lawn of the palace — he must be looking to the garden, where the Princess could often be found.

“Did Asha have a nickname for you?” I ask softly.

Sofl shakes his head. “She never chose nicknames for those close to her.”

Sofl’s tail lowers, and his fur relaxes. He’s beginning to feel comfortable with me.

“Once, I asked her why I didn’t have a nickname. She told me she didn’t want to stop calling me ‘*brother*.’”

I join the Prince at the window and rest my hand gently against his shoulder. His guard has lowered, and his voice is calm — this is more like the Sofl I remember.

“Commander,” he speaks softly. “I don’t know who else to tell this, but... the official report. It doesn’t make any sense!”

Oh, really?

“They never found Asha’s body,” Sofl continues as pain clouds his voice. “No blood, no footprints... It’s like she vanished without a trace! How could they call off the search for my sister?!”

“Prince.” I pull my hand away from Sofl’s shoulder. “I find that I share your concerns.”

Sofl’s body freezes. He turns to stare at me with a longing expression on his face.

“Really?”

I nod, then lower myself to eye level with the young prince. “Before you confronted us in the hall, I was speaking to Lord Orlando about securing a ship. Some days ago. I received a vision in my dreams. From whom, I do not know. But in my vision, I encountered a strange bird who led me to the hollow and the diamond itself. It was lying in the grass, waiting to be discovered.”

Sofl's eyes light like beacons. "...Really?"

I nod. "My vision felt as real to me as our conversation does now. So, I approached a group of animals I trust about performing our own, off-the-record investigation of the hollow. I believe if there's any chance my vision could be true, then... it would be negligent not to investigate."

Sofl draws his hand across his chin in quiet contemplation. He stares across the lab with an empty gaze, holding his thoughts close to himself. I know the Prince to be quite analytical with a keen scientific mind. Is he taking my taking my account seriously?

"Commander," he finally speaks, focusing back on me. "I don't believe Asha is dead."

"...You don't?"

"No," he says, stepping past me and into the room. "I don't know what happened that day, but... I know Asha would never do anything to endanger herself. And if something did happen to her, she would do everything in her power to return home."

Sofl must be referring to the well-known incident where Asha escaped the palace as a teenager. Whenever asked about it, she was fiercely adamant that she wasn't trying to put herself in danger and always intended to return home safely. As her brother, I suppose Sofl would understand Asha's motives better than anyone.

But his belief poses some interesting questions: If Asha isn't dead, where is she? Could she be held against her will in Nortane? How did Crow Wing flee the Kingdom without being caught? And then there's the most curious factor of all:

The Lithan.

Could its appearance in the weald have some connection to Asha's...

I pull myself away from my errant thoughts. To even consider the possibility of Asha being alive seems mad. But then again, I would've thought the same about a vision sent to me in my dreams.

Sofl approaches the desk in the middle of the room. He runs his hand across the dusty tome, then stops as his fingers reach a certain line. "Until I see her body..." he growls, baring fangs in pain. "I'll never believe she's gone!"

A cloud of dust suffuses into the air as Sofl slams the book shut. "Give me a day. I will speak to my mother and see that you get your ship."

"T-thank you!" I exclaim, floored that he would go out of his way for me. Having the support of the Prince changes everything!

“Commander, I can not order you to do this, but... work with your group and scour the hollow. Should you find the diamond, please bring it to me as soon as possible. Tell no one in the palace.”

Tell nobody...?

I’m not sure I understand Sofl’s aversion. Still, by rights, the diamond is his. “As you wish,” I acknowledge with a dip of my head. “This changes our plans considerably, I should begin the preparations at once. If you’ll excuse me, Prince.”

Sofl’s face tightens with resolve, and he nods. As I move to leave the lab, the Prince calls from behind me.

“Commander.”

I stop to look back and find that Sofl’s expression has softened. “...Duncan,” he corrects himself. “Thank you.”

He loosens a smile, and I find myself doing the same. I draw open the door to the lab and close it shut gently behind me.

84. Absolutely Free

“What about prey? Asha, there’s gotta be something I can do for you.”

Kuro looks down at me with warm eyes, eager for my response. I wish I could make her happy and tell her I’m hungry... she’s been trying so hard to accommodate me while I heal from Relmoon’s surprise attack. But if I’m being honest with myself, I’m not at all hungry. Nakino brought me a spikehorn leg after waking up this morning, which has kept my stomach full. I appreciate everything Kuro’s doing to help, but—

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot Tomcat sitting past Kuro in a darkened corner of the den. She’s staring at me with a fire in her eyes, vigorously nodding up and down. If she could somehow speak telepathically to me, she would surely be yelling, *‘Asha, you featherbrain! Just say yes!’*

What is Tomcat doing...?

...

Knowing she’ll be upset if I decline another offer for help, I turn back to Kuro and mumble, “Mmm, you know, I am a little bit hungry....”

“Jimabl it is!” Kuro declares, opening her wings. “I’ll be back soon with a muzzleful, okay?”

“Okay,” I nod, relieved to see Kuro’s smile return. “Thank you, Kuro.”

The soot-plumaged drakaina lowers her head, and we nuzzle. I take in the spiced scent of her feathers, allowing it to calm my frazzled nerves. Between Couple's Night and getting ambushed by Relmoon, it feels good to be surrounded by something so familiar. Kuro pulls her head back, filled with a second wind of energy and purpose.

"Warm currents," she speaks softly, then turns about on her talons and exits with a spring in her step.

By the cover of a heavy snow squall, we returned to the Grandfather Tree early this morning. Nakino was anxious to begin treating my wounds right away, but I was exhausted after the chaos of last night. Half-conscious and unable to keep my eyes open, I slipped past Nakino and Kuro — both engaged in an argument about something or another — to retreat to the bowels of Nakino's den. Warmed by the interior roots of the tree, I fell into a deep slumber as I laid down. When I awoke this morning, I was treated to an astonishing sight: Nakino and Kuro, sharing a den and sleeping beside me! I could scarcely believe my eyes!

I'm not sure what happened between them as I fell asleep, but it feels good knowing my friends care so much about me.

This morning was a whirlwind of activity. As soon as he stirred from sleep, Nakino was on his talons and treating my wounds. In addition, news of Relmoon's treachery spread fast, as a concerned Fra, Ykuvu, and Gima soon visited me. Tomcat arrived when Nakino left to triage some Dragons feeling ill, and she's been keeping me company ever since.

With Kuro off to hunt, I have an opportunity to ask Tomcat about her behavior a few moments ago. I gaze across the den and ask, "Tomcat, why—"

“Asha, you have to stop doing this to her.”

I blink, confused by Tomcat’s abrupt change in tone. “I’m doing something to her?”

“Yes!” Tomcat exclaims, rising to her talons. “Kuro’s trying so hard, but you’re always flying one cloud ahead of her.”

Flying one cloud ahead of her...?

I sit in silence, unable to find adequate words. This has to be something important. Tomcat never acts this seriously. But what is she talking about, and what does it have to do with Kuro?

“Listen,” Tomcat says. She lays down beside me and neatly folds her wings. “I know it must be uncomfortable to think about these things. And, maybe they don’t do that in the Farlands. That’s fine! But you’re breaking her heart by refusing to acknowledge her. She deserves to know.”

“Tomcat, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“W-What?!” she stammers, almost shocked. “You mean, you really don’t know?”

“About what?”

“About Kuro’s huge crush on you?”

What.

Every feather on my body seizes. My stomach churns and freezes to ice. The moon itself stops spinning around Maki.

...Kuro has a crush on me?

“Ohhhhhhh, man,” Tomcat growls, ruffling her feathers in delight. “You *didn’t* know! This makes so much sense!”

“W-w-whu—“ I stutter, completely incapable of forming words. “W-what are you—”

“I thought you were just ignoring her advances on purpose! Like, maybe you didn’t wanna break her heart and tell her you aren’t interested in other drakainas? Hardly anyone is.”

What...

How... how can this be?!

“F-f-f-fr—“

Kuro... has a crush on me?

Over and over, the words repeat inside my head. Thinking back, I recall the times we were close and see them in a wholly new light: The first time we visited her den. Our fire training at Tall Spires. When she groomed my neck while I sobbed into the grass at Archer's Landing.

She... wasn't just being nice?

Kuro has feelings for me? *Romantic ones?*

'Don't you feel the same, Asha?'

“Frope!” The words spill like water from my muzzle. “H-how can Kuro have a crush on me?!”

Frope laughs, “*She likes you, featherbrain.*”

“N-no, not that,” I say, shaking my head. “I mean, Meldi said every Dragon in the flock had to take a mate and raise a family. She made a huge deal about it! But Kuro and I can’t whelp kits if we’re mated to each other!”

“Well,” Frope says, ruffling slightly. “It’s very rare, but you can go before Keuvra and ask for his permission to be mated with another drakaina.”

“You need permission?!” I squawk. “That’s barbaric!”

Frope shrugs her wings. “Those are the rules. If you can’t whelp kits, then you need to ask Keuvra. Don’t you do something similar in the Farlands?”

“Absolutely not! You can be mated to whoever you want in my Kingdom!”

Okay, okay... some Rabbits get weird when it comes to interspecies relationships. But same-sex marriage is perfectly normal in Ellyntide and always has been! To be fair to Frope, a certain part of me understands why you might need to ask for permission. I’ll never forget the pain in Bonello’s voice as he recalled how the flock gradually lost their

summer hunting grounds. If you can't raise a family, you're diminishing the flock's chances for survival.

Still, seeking permission to love someone... that rubs me the wrong way. I can't accept that.

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"Okay, fine," Frope says, flattening her feathers. "But, seriously, Asha? Everyone's noticed how affectionate Kuro acts when you're around her. I saw it right away! Haven't you wondered why I always flew off to find my friends? It's because I wanted you to have some alone time with Kuro! Honestly, did you really have no idea?"

"No!" I exclaim. "I thought Kuro was being nice to me because she's my mentor. And, um, we're really good friends."

"But you knew Nakino had a crush on you," Frope says.

"Yeah, because boys are supposed to have crushes on me! And besides, I saw a pile of Kin mutually grooming each other at the last darkmoon gathering. I thought stuff like grooming and head rubs were normal in the flock!"

I was raised in the Lordanou Palace, where — needless to say — animals don't break down in the halls to share their tongues. The customs of ferals are so different from the ones I was taught as a kit. How was I supposed to know when I landed in Felra what was normal and what wasn't?

I continue, "Even when Kuro groomed my neck, I thought—"

"WHAT?!" Frope shrieks, squawking like a bird of prey. "Kuro groomed your neck?!"

I stare down at Frope, the power of her voice having caused my neck to rear back as far as it will go. "...Yes?"

Frope's wings vibrate, and her tail twists like a propeller. "Asha, that's... that's the most romantic thing Kuro could have done to you!"

My heart collides with my chest. "R-really?"

"Listen," she says, lowering her feathers and forcing herself to take a breath. "Grooming the body of another Dragon is just, like, a polite thing to do. I sit in those large groups sometimes, and it's nice to get your feathers preened by somebody else. But grooming another Dragon's neck is... it's so romantic! It's impossible to do it yourself, so to put your trust in someone to preen the feathers that everyone sees the most... it's a big deal, Asha. Kuro wouldn't have done that if she wasn't serious about becoming your mate."

I stare wide-eyed across the den, trying to internalize the gravity of everything Frope's told me. For the first time, all of the strange interactions I've had with Kuro are beginning to make sense. "She's been dropping hints since last season, but I've been blind to them because I'm a Farlander. And, well," I chuckle inwardly. "I've never been in a relationship before. My first kiss was last night with Nakino."

"Really?!" Frope asks with genuine surprise. "You mean, you were never mated to anyone in the Farlands?"

"Frope, I was the Princess. Do you realize how important I was? I didn't have time to chase boys."

"Really?" she asks coyishly.

I hesitate, realizing just how obvious my lies must sound. "Alright, maybe I could have. But that's not what I was interested in! Chasing boys, I mean. All I wanted to do was work in my garden, shower before supper, and read a book with Bro and Pro until I fell asleep."

Frope stares at me, perplexed. "Shower...? Read a book?"

"I'll explain it later. Look, the point I'm trying to make is that I didn't care about that stuff. At all. So I never had the opportunity to learn about... um, being someone's mate."

“Well,” Frope says, stretching her talons out before her. “You have time to learn about it now. So, what do you think?” She scoots herself closer to me and lowers her voice. “How do you feel about Kuro?”

“Well,” I say, feeling the pressure of Frope’s eyes. For some reason, It’s much harder than I expected to articulate my feelings for Kuro. “I-I’ve always liked it when she’s nice to me,”

“No, not that. I mean...” Frope trails off as concern swells on her face. She pauses to gaze out the den’s entrance, and a moment later, Nakino’s voice echoes faintly off the root walls. Satisfied, Frope lowers her voice and continues, “When Kuro is being nice to you, have you ever felt anything... more?”

After a silent moment of contemplation, I think of something to say. “I like how she smells. I think about it a lot.”

“Yes, that’s something!” Frope exclaims, fluttering her wings. “Anything else?”

I stare across the den, trying to locate my feelings for Kuro. After a long pause, I release a frustrated huff. “Frope, can I ask you something?”

“Of course!”

“What do Lithans find attractive?”

“Huh?” She blinks. “You mean you don’t know?!”

“No, of course not! I only know what Farlanders find attractive, and I’m certain It’s different from Dragons.”

“Um, well,” Frope says, lowering her head to contain a smirk behind her wing. “For us Sisters, we like drakons who are confident and strong. When I’m whelping kits in frostwing, I want to know he’ll find us prey, even if he has to dig through every snowbank in the valley.”

“So, you like drakons who are muscular,” I say.

“Oh, yes. A strong pair of hindlegs are just....” Frope’s feathers ruffle, and she becomes a vibrating ball of fluff. “*Ohhh!!* Almighty Keuvra!”

“Oh...” I trail off, feeling downtrodden. “I don’t think I feel the same.”

“What about Nakino?” Frope asks. “Did you feel anything last night?”

It only takes a moment to locate the answer. “I don’t think I’ve ever had feelings for any Dragon.”

“Hmm...” Frope mumbles, narrowing her eyes. “Well, that’s no good!”

That’s a little weird, right? I’ve been a Dragon for almost a full season, but I’ve never been physically attracted to one. How can that be? Is something wrong with me?

It’s not like I’m unfamiliar with the feeling. When I was a Lemur, I felt all sorts of things about the women who passed through the Palace. I’ll never confide this in anyone but myself, but I had a bit of a crush on Corya, the other Ruffy who worked in the garden. She always arrived in the morning with a smile, happy and eager to work. And when there was a difficult task to perform, she never complained. She just put her head down and kept working until the job was finished. I admired that.

And the way she tied her hair back into a ponytail, leaving a few loose strands dangling at the front... mmh. It was really, really cute.

So, why don’t I feel anything like that now? I admire Kuro a lot, of course. But I’ve never looked at her feathers the same way I looked at Corya’s hair or thought of her as anything more than a good friend.

Do I truly lack romantic feelings for her?

Or...

...Have I simply repressed them out of guilt?

I'll admit it. I've been so caught up in the stress of returning home that I haven't allowed myself to enjoy Felra. Even in winter, the scenery here is drop-dead *gorgeous*. It could take a lifetime to categorize and understand the biodiversity of the plants that grow here! And most of all... this is what I've always wanted, right? A respite from the responsibilities of being the heir to the throne? No more confining palace walls, no more arrogant nobles, no more sleepless nights wondering if I'll be a worthy Monarch.

Freedom.

I got what I wanted.

And yet, when I think about Mom and Sofl and everyone back home... I can't let go of their faces. I can't forget the night I flew over Rhl and terrorized my own citizens. And I can't stop seeing Calypso's body lying motionless in the grass.

I promised him his sacrifice wouldn't be in vain. Is this what he would have wanted? To witness me abdicate my responsibilities and live a placid life while my Kingdom withers?

"Asha, is everything alright?"

Frope's concerned voice cuts through my thoughts, dragging me back to the present.

"Mmh," I mumble, clearing my nose and sitting up straight to regain my composure. "Frope, you've been in a relationship before, right? What do you think I should do? I wasn't sure how I felt about Nakino, but now Kuro has feelings for me, too. I... I can't reciprocate feelings for either of them. I'm the Princess, and I have to live up to my responsibilities. I wish I could stay in Felra, but—"

"Asha."

I quickly shut up as Frope interrupts my babbling to lay a wing gently against me.

"I know how important your family is to you, but... *you can't rest a talon on two islands.*"

I tilt my head and stare into Frope's golden eyes. "W-what do you mean?"

"What I'm saying is, you're in Felra now. You have to let go of your family in the Farlands until greenwing. There's nothing you can do to fly home quicker! So, you might as well focus on what's in front of you. And right now, that's Kuro and Nakino."

I exhale sharply and look away. She's absolutely right, of course. Kuro and Nakino are going to tear each other apart, trying to court me. But even the thought of setting aside my family to worry about Dragons in Felra fills me with insatiable guilt.

“I’m not saying that you need to choose one or the other. If your heart has decided that you can’t be with another Dragon, then fine. But if you feel anything at all for Kuro or Nakino, no matter how small, then you need to take your feelings for them seriously. If you become a Lemur again, you’ll never be able to return to the flock. You could regret that decision for the rest of your life, Asha.”

The rest of my life...?

Could I really feel that way about someone? Someone like Kuro or Nakino?

I’ve been so caught up in wanting to return home that I’ve never really considered how my time in Felra would change me, for better or for worse. I’ve been living as a feral Dragon for months. How difficult will it be to reintegrate into modern society? Will I still treat animals the same way as I did before? Will I look back fondly at my time in the flock?

Could I... come to regret leaving?

...

When I flew from Ellyntide, it felt like my family was torn away from me forever.

Will I feel the same when I leave Felra?

...

“Just think about it, okay?”

I pull myself away from my thoughts and gaze down at Frope, wise beyond her seasons. “...Already am,” I smile. “Thank you, Frope.”

A smile brimming with relief grows across her face, and we nuzzle our heads together.

“Asha?”

Nakino’s voice echoes faintly from another room. “Asha, are you still here?”

“Y-yeah!” I stumble, quickly lifting my head away from Frope’s. Moments later, Nakino steps into the opening of the den. His face is sullen, and his wings are raised slightly.

“Sorry to interrupt. I know I asked you to rest for a while, but...” he swivels his head around and briefly gazes into the central room of the den. “The Kin who showed up earlier are very ill. I need your help.”

I exhale a surprised breath and gaze at Frope. She's similarly concerned — she flicks her ears forward, signaling me to go. I smile, once more thankful for her wisdom, and leave to join Nakino in the other den.

85. Visions of The Past

Two Lithans have a crush on me — the Princess of Ellyntide.

Faced with the moral dilemma of choosing between one, the other, or neither at all, I chose the most sensible option:

Shelving the question for now so I can answer it some other time!

The way I see it, I shouldn't make a quick decision about Kuro and Nakino. Tomcat was right — I'm stuck here until spring no matter what, so I may as well take my time and think about this very carefully. So, that's what I'm going to do. In the meantime, I'll continue my search to try and learn more about why I became a Lithan. You see, my original plan post-Couple's Night — before everything went completely insane — was to travel with Kuro to the ruins of a strange Farlander den in Loner territory. I had almost forgotten about it!

Initially, I was hesitant to make the trip. But when I told Kuro I wanted to leave the safety of the flock's territory, she thought I had gone mad. It's not hard to see why! With Relmoon confined strictly to Loner territory, attempting to fly there is insane. He, in no uncertain terms, wants me dead.

But the prospect of finding a building from ancient times is too enticing to pass up. I'm convinced there has to be a connection between the serpentine diamond, my transformation, and ancient Animals in Felra. And if I can learn about that connection, then maybe I can find a way to change back to normal. Flying to Loner territory is risky, but it's a risk I'm willing to take.

And if I discover that reason but decide to take a mate and remain a Dragon? Well... at least I'll have some closure on the biggest event of my life.

It took some convincing, but eventually, Kuro agreed to lead me to the Farlander den. A low and satisfying growl grew from her chest as I reminded her that, as a Loner, Relmoon was no longer under the flock's protection. If we encountered the crimson drakon somewhere on our journey, Kuro was free to deal with him as she pleased.

Us two versus Relmoon? For everything he's done to hurt me and Kuro, that's a fight I'm ready to jump into. This may be the Lathan side of me speaking, but I'd quite like to taste his flesh again.

Of course, flying somewhere with Kuro means we'll be denning with each other again.

Again, you ask? Well, ever since I found out she has romantic feelings for me, I've become a bit... averse to her presence. Neither Dragon was thrilled to hear it, but I asked Kuro and Nakino to let me sleep alone at night. It's lonely in my den at the Grandfather tree... I miss sleeping beside Kuro. But I want to understand my feelings for Nakino without any pressure.

But now that we're on our way to loner territory, I can't escape Kuro's courtship maneuvers and casual hint-dropping. I asked Nakino to fly with us, but it's too risky for the Grandfather Tree's healer to leave in the middle of frostwing... especially when he's still caring for the two ill Kin who appeared in his den the other day. I wish I could be more fair to him, I really do. But if I want to discover why I became a Litan, then it's unavoidable — Kuro and I have to spend time together.

Under the cover of heavy snowfall, we left the Grandfather Tree early this morning and flew south. We traveled the icy skies until reaching the ledge of the continent, then banked left to catch the strong gales blowing off the strait. After stopping to mark the last guiding tree, we crossed the invisible scent line and arrived in Loner territory.

It's not a great deal different here — the smells are the same, and the trees appear identical. But compared to the flock's land, it's downright silent. I haven't heard a single long-range Dragon call since we crossed! According to Kuro, it's because Loners are slowly driven mad without the guidance of the flock. She seemed chipper as she explained how they live in isolation, only venturing from their dens to hunt.

It sounds like a certain Dragon will have a rough time here. What a shame!

Kuro's neck feathers perk as we pass through a dry cloud bank. "There," she announces, flicking her ears toward the bottom of a snow-free valley. "That's the Farlander den."

I gasp when I see it — tangled between an unending canopy of mottled green is the unmistakable outline of a rectangular, flat-topped roof. Half-collapsed and covered in a blanket of dried moss, it appears to be constructed from the same stones we saw in the Great Valley, albeit on a much grander scale. Based on the size of the redwoods

surrounding it, the building must be at least three stories tall! As we descend to land, my excitement peaks. Dragons have groomed a makeshift clearing near the front of the building, and there appears to be an entrance large enough for a Dragon to slip through.

Wait a second. Large enough for a Dragon? This building was designed for Dragons to use?!

But how can that be!? Setting aside the question of how ancient Animals arrived in Felra, there's never been a time in history when Dragons weren't at serious odds with ascendant Animals. And yet, the design of the building suggests that not only did they live on the same continent, but there was also cooperation among them! My mind buzzes like a beehive at the implications of this astounding discovery. Were Lemurs and Martens friends with Dragons once upon a time? What ended their friendship? We haven't even landed yet, but we're already making discoveries!

We glide down and navigate a cramped landing, nearly clipping the tips of our wings against the bare branches of a stunted redwood. Dragons have groomed the clearing, though not as cleanly as those in the flock's territory. As dirt is lofted skyward, my hind talons touch the ground, but the front talons unexpectedly contact an invisible boulder camouflaged against the underbrush. I stumble forward slightly but allow my talon to slip off the boulder and keep myself upright.

The ancient building looms over us like the elders atop the gathering stone, seemingly taller from the ground than it appears in the air. Large chunks of stone have been weathered from the once ornate facade, leaving behind a disparate patchwork of yawning chasms and heaps of rubble. Hanging moss covers everything the light touches, and a tangle of vines sag from the trees to cover the building like a bed sheet draped over a chair.

“Honestly,” I say, taking in the cathedral of nature and stone. “You thought all of this was natural?”

Kuro gives me an irritated look, and I can’t help but laugh. A moment later, her irritation dissolves, and she smiles back.

We step through the underbrush, carefully making our way around the invisible boulders and through the tall thickets. As we trace around a large oshbush, the entrance of the building comes into focus. Two large redwoods have fallen at its base, blocking all but the very highest reaches.

“Skunkscent,” Kuro grumbles. “Those trees weren’t here last time. We’ll have to climb over them to get inside.”

Oh, that’s...

Hmm. No, this just won’t do!

Before she can take one step further, I ask, “Kuro, can we talk for a moment?”

“Hm?” Kuro’s feathers perk, and she swivels around to face me. “What is it, Asha?”

“Well, It’s about your curse words.”

“My what?”

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“You know, whenever you say ‘skunkscent,’ or ‘featherbrain.’ Kuro, they’re not very good.”

Slowly, her head tilts sideways. “I don’t understand.”

“Look,” I say, stepping in front of the oshbush. “What I’m trying to say is you should expand your repertoire. If you’re gonna visit a Farlander den with me — a Farlander — then you should play the part and learn how to use some Farlander curse words!”

Kuro’s feathers relax, and she raises a coy smirk.

“I-I’m being serious!” I stumble. “Okay, look. Instead of saying ‘skunkscent,’ try saying, ‘fwegh.’”

Kuro stares at me a moment longer before shrugging her wings. She swivels her gaze forward, straightens her neck, and speaks slowly.

“...Fwegh.”

“Perfect!” I exclaim, bouncing on my talons and fluttering my wings. “Fwegh is one of my favorites, I use it all the time!”

Kuro glances away, but not before I catch a smile loosening across her muzzle. Oh, don't be bashful! I know how much you like me, Kuro. You're allowed to show it! And quite frankly, I would prefer it that you did. You've never been forthright about your feelings for me, and I wish I knew why.

“There's more!” I say, refusing her the opportunity to avoid me. “The next time you see someone acting featherbrained, you should call them a 'bitch' instead.”

Kuro's eyes narrow to slits — this time, she's determined to please me. She gazes forward, sticks her neck out, and rasps in the most eloquent voice I've ever heard,

Pbbffttt...!

SKEE SKEE SKREE!!!

I squawk like a Parrot and nearly fall over sideways with laughter. The way she said it was... she sounded like a noble! Like a super arrogant one, trying to imitate the way the filthy commoners... oh, Goddess!!

“Kuro!” I gasp, my head reeling from laughter. “Oh, I’m so sorry, Kuro. But you have no idea how funny that was!”

I raise my head from the side of my body and find Kuro staring at me with a soft expression. Instead of being angry or upset, she just seems... happy. “I like how bitch sounds,” she smiles. “I’ll try out that one. For you.”

“Thank you!” I say, ruffling my feathers in satisfaction. If nothing else, I taught Kuro something new today!

We continue across the chilled forest towards the obstructed entrance of the building, stepping over thickets of raven's thistle and boulders as we go. As we reach the first of the downed trees, Kuro leaps forward and clambers onto the top of the trunk, flaring her wings as she scales it with effortless grace. As she does, I catch myself... watching. Staring at her hind legs.

They look awfully powerful.

Is... this what Tomcat was talking about? I mean, I guess I just never noticed Kuro's legs before. Until now. And, um, I already know how good they are at breaking the necks of prey. They're really good at that. So, why do they—

“Asha?” Kuro asks.

My heart barrels against my chest. “Eep!”

She caught me!! I was so fixated on her legs that I didn't even notice her climb to the second trunk! Quickly, I scale the fell trees and join her at the top.

“Sorry,” I murmur, giving my chest a quick preen.

“What were you... you know what, it's fine,” Kuro says without a hint of malice. “Come on, let's enter the den!”

As she turns to crouch into the opening of the building, I bury my muzzle further into my chest feathers. She knows. She totally knows what I was doing! So why is she brushing it off like it didn't happen? Kuro has a crush on me. Wouldn't she like it if I stared at her body? I decide to shelve the thought for now and follow after Kuro.

A gentle breeze blows outwards from the interior of the building, bringing with it the stale scents of Dragons. As Kuro wedges between the fallen redwood and the top of the entrance, I strain to look past her and get a taste of what awaits us. Shafts of dim light

shine through holes in the roof, revealing a stone room overgrown with knee-high shrubs and large, stunted trees. Nature has taken its course inside the building as much as it has on the outside. If any furnishings were left behind, they've long since withered to dust.

Kuro disappears inside with myself close behind. As we land against the eroded cobblestone floor, something strange catches my eye — light from the outside, reflecting off the branches of a cypress tree. As my eyes adjust to the darkened room, I take a half-step forward and realize that the source of the reflection is a stone structure in the center of the room.

“Whoa...” My breath is stolen as I approach the mystery object. “Is this...?”

Behind the withered branches of the cypress is a pane of glass, enclosed in a thick frame of stone and erected to roughly the height of Lathan's head. Dirt and debris surround the strange window, giving the objects on the opposite side a hazy, sand-stained appearance. This glass must be centuries old, yet it's completely intact!

“I don't believe it!” I exclaim, pushing past a branch to examine the ancient window up close. “How has this not shattered?!”

Kuro approaches me from behind and asks, “Asha, what is this?”

“It's something Farlanders make called 'glass',” I explain. “It's like a rock that you can see through!”

I brush my wing against the ancient window, then turn and nod for Kuro to do the same. Cautiously, she draws the tips of her flight feathers against the glass, imparting a line in the dust as she does.

Kuro's face twists in confusion. "What the..."

"I know, right?!" I can't help but chuckle at her response. "Farlanders make this stuff all the time. It's very common."

Kuro glances at me disbelievingly. She steps around to the opposite side and squints to stare through the glass.

"I can see the entrance of the den!" she says, aghast.

What an innocent response. Kuro's like a small child, leaving her house to discover the world for the very first time. What's it like to be astonished by such mundane objects? Though I suppose a pane of glass that's survived for centuries is anything but mundane.

"Why don't you check this out while I explore the room?" I say.

Kuro allows her feathers to relax and nods slowly. I have a feeling she's going to be enamored for a while.

I step away from Kuro and glance around the room. This building, whatever it was designed for, was clearly intended for Dragons and Animals to use together. The room we're in now appears to be roughly the size of the royal garden – multiple Dragons could fit in here quite comfortably. What did they use this space for? Could this have been some kind of reception hall for Dragons and Animals to work together? What's the significance of the window in the middle of the room?

I approach the wall closest to me and tear away a patch of clawvine growing up the side of it. Could the ancient Animals that lived here have left behind inscriptions? It's known that the Goddess Language has existed for centuries, though for precisely how long, I'm not sure. Sofl was much more into languages than I was. But if there's Goddess script carved into the walls, then that could give us—

RAARR!!

A terrified roar splits the room like a crack of thunder. My neck whips about to face the source of the cry, and my blood freezes. Kuro is standing on the opposite side of the ancient window, gazing through it with her muzzle agape. The terror painted on her face makes it seem like she saw a ghost.

“Kuro?!” I shriek in vehement concern. For some reason, she's gazing at my talons.

“A-A-Asha...?!” her voice trembles and her feathers shiver.

“Kuro, what’s wrong?”

86. Decryption

Kuro stares at my talons through the glass of the ancient window, shocked into silence. Through harried confusion, I flick my gaze to the ground but see nothing out of the ordinary at my talons or in the surrounding area. I sniff the air, lift my legs, twist around, and gaze at the wall, but can’t locate the source of her terror. What is going on?

“Kuro, what’s wrong?!” I say, loping forward to join her in the center of the room. As I do so, the expression on her face softens somewhat, but her gaze remains pointed, following me until I’m standing beside her.

No longer seeing me through the window, stark relief fills her face. “Asha!!” she cries, throwing herself on top of me. She curls her neck around my own and buries her face into my feathers. “Asha, Asha!!” she repeats as her spiced scent fills my nostrils. “I thought you were...!”

RARRR!

Kuro unleashes an anguished cry, a shrill noise that I’ve never heard from her before. By the Goddess, what happened? What the hell did she see through that glass?

Agh, damnit! I can’t just let her wail in agony! I told myself I wouldn’t do anything like this, but...!

“It’s okay,” I murmur into her ear. I recall the times I was scared as a child, and the soothing voice Mom used to calm me. Holding it in my thoughts, I reassure my friend, “Everything will be alright. I’m right here. Nothing’s happened to me.”

Kuro whines, heaving quick and erratic breaths. As she buries her head deeper into my neck, I feel her heart racing against my feathers. Gradually it begins to subside, and her breathing slows. Feeling like the crisis has passed, I begin to lower myself and Kuro follows, keeping her head pressed against my neck. Once we’re both lying down, I crane my head around and nuzzle it against hers.

“What did you see?” I ask, barely louder than a whisper.

Slowly, Kuro removes her head from my feathers. Her eyes are swollen and red – tears have flowed recently. But instead of answering me, she averts her eyes and stays silent.

“Kuro?” I ask again.

“Asha,” she croaks. “It was you. I saw *you*... as a *Lemur*.”

My eyes become as wide as sunflowers. “A *Lemur*?!”

Kuro shuffles her talons and nods sheepishly. “At first, I couldn’t see you through the glass. You were there, but you looked... strange. I could see you again as you stopped in front of the wall, but... you looked like a Farlander. I thought you had become a Lemur again.”

I blink, then shift my gaze between Kuro and the ancient window. How did she see me as a Lemur through it?! What kind of sorcery is imbued in that glass?!

Kuro lays her head against my neck once more. “I-I don’t know why, but... when I saw you as a Lemur, it felt like I was losing my parents all over again. I thought I lost you, Asha.”

Oh, gosh.

Kuro...

I curl my head around and nuzzle it back against her own. She thinks so much of me that even the sight of my former self... it was like I had taken my last breath and fallen over dead.

The misery of grief – what a heart-wrenching thing to experience.

As we lay with our heads entwined, her breathing becomes quick and irregular. It’s been a long time since I lost someone close to me, but I know what’s occurring – In her thoughts, she’s reliving the trauma all over again.

...

I promised myself I wouldn't get close to her, but how could I lay idle while she endures so much pain? My eyes trace down her neck, and... mmh, on second thought, that area wouldn't be appropriate. I pass her neck and locate a spot of unkempt feathers beside a wing joint. Gently, I lower my head away from Kuro's and begin to straighten the soot-plumaged feathers bunched around her shoulder blades. Moments later I feel a gingerly pair of fangs against my back, engaged in the same act of comfort.

For a time, we groom.

How long did we lay with each other, I wonder?

It must have been an hour, at least. Can you really blame us? Tomcat was right; having your whole body groomed by someone else is... well, it's indescribable. As we lay in silence dutifully cleaning our feathers, never had I felt so contented and at peace. The world and all its anxieties seemed to dissolve around me, replaced by a simple act of shared compassion. Nothing existed but Kuro, our feathers, and our warmth.

But, inevitably, we ran out of feathers to preen, and the strange reality of our situation weaved itself back into my thoughts. Somehow, Kuro saw me as a Lemur through that ancient window. Could it be some kind of magical mirror? It seems impossible, but it wouldn't be the first time I've witnessed phenomena that defies science. The lights of the Grandfather Tree have no visible power source, and the blue flames used to summon Keuvra act nothing like true fire. Could they all be related to each other? Could I somehow use that window to turn myself back to normal?!

...On second thought, perhaps now isn't the best time to contemplate such things.

Eventually, Kuro felt comfortable enough to re-examine the strange window. First, I tried directing her to the spot where she saw me as a Lemur. As I watched her approach the wall through the translucent veil, there was no sign of the '*strangeness*' Kuro saw with me. She appeared utterly normal.

I've been against it, but Kuro insists she wants to see me through the window again. "Are you sure about this?" I ask as she approaches the center of the room. "You'll probably see me as a Lemur again."

Kuro inclines her head. "I'm prepared. I know that if I see your Lemur body, it's just an illusion. On the other side of the glass, you're still a Dragon."

An improbable scenario plays out in my head, one where I change back *right now*. The timing would make it the joke of the century if it weren't so tragic.

As Kuro moves into the observer position behind the window, I reposition to stand a few feet before it on the opposite side. She mentally prepares herself to take another look, and I draw a careful breath. Even if Kuro knows I haven't transformed, seeing the prey form of the Dragon you love must be staggering. How many Lemurs has she preyed on during her trips to the Farlands? How does the savage predator inside her see *me* as a Lemur?

Slowly, Kuro saunters to the other side of the window. Her gaze lowers to my talons, and her muzzle draws open in muted shock. Somehow, she maintains her composure.

“Oh, Asha...” her voice dissipates. She sounds crestfallen, like she was speaking with the dead. “I-I can’t believe this is what you look like as a Farlander.”

Kuro’s doing much better this time, but I won’t allow her mind to dawdle. I ask, “What happens if I open my wing?”

I draw a wing wide to the side, but Kuro’s eyes remain fixated on my talons. “It happened again. For a moment you looked strange, but then returned to normal. Your body hasn’t moved.

“And my legs?” I raise a foreleg into the air.

“Whoa,” Kuro quickly chirps. “Your... arm. Your arm just went up.”

The tale has been illicitly lifted; should you spot it on Amazon, report the violation.

It seems my arms became my forelegs when I transformed into a Litan. I guess that makes sense. But what’s Kuro talking about when she says I look ‘*strange?*’ Determined to find out, I trot forward and join her on the opposite side of the glass. As I pass the window, relief washes across Kuro’s face.

“May I?” I ask.

Kuro steps aside, giving me full access to the dusty window. Using my wing, I snake some flight feathers around the opposite side, and everything becomes clear. Or rather, the opposite of clear. As I move my wing up and down, my feathers move as a blur, like the image of my feathers can't keep up with how quickly they move. Then as I hold them steady, they disappear entirely!

“Whoa,” I mumble. “Kuro, are you seeing this?”

“Yes,” she speaks from behind me. “Asha, this happened to your entire body as you walked. And when you stopped moving, you were a Lemur.”

Of all the strange things I've witnessed in Felra, a window that shows the viewer what I looked like as a Lemur takes the cake. There can be no denying it: Somehow, my transformation into a Lithan is tied to this building from the ancient past.

“Let's keep exploring,” I say, folding my wings. “Maybe we can learn more about this den and what it was used for.”

We search the rest of the room for anything unusual but come up empty-taloned; the underbrush in here is simply too thick. However, Kuro is able to locate a passage that connects to another room through a dense thicket of small trees and raven's thistle.

Nature has worked to reclaim the second room just as much as the first. Daylight shines through a collapsed section of the roof where a mature oak tree has grown unrestricted from a pond of dirty rainwater, fallen leaves, and stone rubble. The ground is soft and muddy, muffling our talonsteps as Kuro and I branch off to explore in closer detail.

As my neck twists around, I spot an exposed section of wall where the stone appears largely intact. At its base is a pile of rubble which has prevented the vines from growing up the wall. As I approach it, the finer details become visible. Finer details, like...

...

“By the Goddess,” I murmur.

“Asha?” Kuro calls from across the room.

“Kuro...” my voice trails off as I scale the rubble, eager to confirm a suspicion. What I see leaves me breathless. Someone has carved crude inscriptions against the wall; words I can read! “This is the Goddess Language!” I announce. “Oh, wait a second.”

Kuro’s scent approaches from behind. “Are these Farlander symbols?”

“They are,” I say, moving my head about the wall, trying to view the words at different angles. Although the clawvines haven’t reached this section of the wall, the letters have

been heavily eroded by other forces. “Some of these symbols are part of the goddess language, but some aren’t. See this?”

I draw my wing forward and point it toward the top left of the paragraph.

“This word spells ‘Dragons.’ And over here, this word spells ‘beyond.’ Or at least, it almost spells ‘beyond.’ There’s a digraph I don’t recognize.”

Kuro looks at me confused, then steps forward to brush her wing across the stone. She moves her feathers slowly, feeling the outlines of every word as she goes. “I can’t believe Farlanders can read this many symbols. Asha, can you read what it says?”

I shake my head and exhale a stiff sigh. “Not quite. The stone is so eroded that I can only translate bits and pieces of what it’s trying to say. I really wish I could, but—“

As my eyes fruitlessly scan the words, I notice something near the end of the carvings -- the faint outline of a symbol I’ve known my entire life. I rub the area with my wing, allowing the oil in my feathers to soak up the dirt. I pull it back, rub harder, and blow off the excess.

“By the Goddess,” I murmur. It’s exactly what I thought it was.

“*Lordanou*,” I whisper.“

This is the symbol of the Lordanou clan – *my family*. Kuro, do you know what this means?!”

Kuro’s ears droop, and she remains silent.

“My family was in Felra! We have a connection to the flock! And my ring was the proof!”

I can’t believe this! Everything is beginning to fall into place. The Serpentine Diamond, my family, and this strange building buried deep in the forest. They’re all connected somehow, and the ramifications are staggering.

It’s well known that the royal family of Ellyntide – the Lordanou Clan – has ruled the Kingdom since its founding in ancient times. Although the details are fuzzy, the Goddess has said this happened *before* the continents rose. It seems crazy, but could ascendant Animals have played a part in the wars between the Dragon Clans and the eventual rise of the Snowfell Flock? Is that why this building exists? Because it was some kind of embassy? And then there’s the window in the other room. It was built at the perfect height for a Dragon to gaze through, showing me my true form. When you put it all together, there’s really only one conclusion you can draw:

I’m not the first Animal to be transformed into a Dragon. There were others like me.

I retreat a step from the wall, feeling the dizzying weight of possibility. If I’m not the first, then what happened to the others? Did they return to normal? They couldn’t have integrated into the flock... could they? And why was all this information forgotten? Or, perhaps it was...

...I should stop thinking in conjecture. The answers to my questions could be right under my muzzle; there are still more rooms in this building to explore! Though I wish I could translate this ancient version of the Goddess Language. The answer to why I became a Lithan could be *right here!*

“Hmm...” Kuro mumbles, inspecting my family’s symbol up close. “Even a fledgling couldn’t make symbols this small. Are you saying a Farlander left these? Maybe even someone from your family?”

I nod. “That’s exactly right.”

Kuro exhales a long and drawn-out breath — she must be coming to the same moon-shattering realizations I just came to. Like the stones we found in the Great Valley, this challenges the beliefs she’s held for her entire life. “I don’t know about this, Asha.”

“Why don’t we keep exploring?” I offer. “We still haven’t found where the stale scents are coming from. Maybe we’ll find some Goddess Language in another room that I can translate.”

Kuro relaxes her wings and nods slowly. We continue exploring the room until we come across another passage, this time leading us into a massive, wide-open room with a completely collapsed roof. A battleship grey sky greets us as we stroll into a groomed clearing flanked by large, mature redwood trees that rise to join the forest canopy surrounding us. Stone columns litter the clearing, half-collapsed and covered in thick vines and stale moss. The stale scents of Dragons fill the air, permeating with the earthen smells of dried moss and decomposing bark. When Loners come to roost in this ancient building, they make this clearing their home.

“Keep your wits about you,” Kuro grunts, her head held low to the ground. “The scents are stale, but there could be Loners in hiding.”

I survey the scene around us, searching for any obvious signs of Dragon activity. There are no emberoot pits, gnawed branches, or claw marks against the redwood trunks. It been a while since someone was here. The only sound is our talons crunching through the bone-dry underbrush, and our hearts beating against our chests.

“Well, well, well!”

The smug voice of a male Drakon echoes through the clearing, its source indeterminate.

Kuro tears her wings open. “What the...?!”

“Blue skies, Daughter-Of-Mecali,” the voice taunts. “And who’s this you’ve brought with you?”

Frantically, my eyes dart about the clearing but locate no signs of another Dragon. I taste the air, but the scents are unchanged. Finally, from a section of non-collapsed roof to our left, the steely-plumaged body of a drakon struts into view. His complexion is familiar, though I can’t pin a claw on where I’ve seen him before.

“The Farlander herself,” taunts the confident Drakon. “I’d thank you for bringing her here if I wasn’t so disgusted to see *you*, Kuro.”

“Moth!” Kuro seethes, issuing a ferocious warning snarl. “What are you doing in Loner territory?”

From the recesses of my mind, a faint memory resurfaces; Moth was the drakon who foolishly challenged Kuro to a spar on my initial visit to the White Mountain aerie. Kuro defeated him and made it look easy.

“I could ask the same of you,” Moth says, flexing his talons. “It seems we both have business in this fetid swamp.”

“As do the rest of us!”

At that utterance, Moth and four other drakons descend from the shadows like hawks, landing in the clearing to surround us on all sides. Instinctively I fall into a defensive posture and snarl a baleful warning cry before realizing how pointless it is. In the blink of an eye, we’ve been cornered by five hostile Dragons! As fierce growls rise from Dragons I don’t recognize, I lower a wing and take an uneasy step toward Kuro. How are we going to escape this?!

“Tell me, Kuro,” a familiar voice rasps from behind. Instantly recognizing who it is, my stomach sinks, and my blood freezes to ice. “Is your heart so full of hatred that exile wasn’t enough?”

Slowly, I swivel my neck around to discover the Dragon I least wanted to see.

Relmoon.

87. Encounter Among The Ruins

An uneasy silence stretches across the clearing as Relmoon curls his talons, awaiting Kuro's response. But she remains silent, standing with her muscles bunched, a feather's edge away from leaping into battle. Doubtlessly, the only thing preventing her from tearing out Relmoon's throat is the other Dragons that appear to be on his side. Though their faces are unrecognizable, their feathers are worn and tattered, groomed to be just barely presentable. If I had to guess, they're Loners as well.

"What's the matter?" A drakon with a gruff voice growls from behind us. "Too scared to speak?"

Sensing that Kuro is unwilling to respond, I speak for her in the driest voice I can muster. "We were *exploring*. Farlanders built this den, and it holds clues—"

"What nonsense," Relmoon dismisses me off with a flick of his wing. "There's no need for the deception, Princess Asha Eloise Lordanou. As soon as the opportunity presented itself, you and Kuro flew from the flock's territory in search of *me*. You believed I was weak, an easy prey-kill to satisfy your restless hatred."

Kuro raises her voice, “*You’re* the one who tried to kill *her!*”

“*So?*” Relmoon smirks.

“GET TO THE POINT!” Kuro slams her tail against the ground. “Why is Moth here?! What are you doing with these Exiles?”

“And how did you find us?” I quickly add.

“It was simple,” Moth says, puffing his chest. “The flock still believes I’m loyal, so I followed you from the Grandfather Tree. All I had to do was stay downwind and track your scents.”

“And when he heard someone laughing like a featherbrain from overhead,” Relmoon pauses to narrow his gaze towards me. “He knew precisely where you were. It didn’t take long for Moth to alert me and the rest of us disgraced by the elders.”

Are you serious?! They found us because I was laughing so hard outside the building? What kind of a reason is that?!

“*Awhhh,*” Relmoon’s mouth curls into an exaggerated frown. “Don’t look so glum, Asha. As you take your dying breaths, you’ll witness the birth of a new flock.”

“A *new* flock?” Kuro’s ears perk. “Relmoon, what are you blathering about?”

“The flame of the Snowfell Flock will soon be extinguished,” Relmoon portends, lowering his head. “For too long, the flock has been marred by the ignorant judgment of aging, dawdling elders. They are weak, incapable of making the decisions that please Keuvra.”

Is Relmoon... being serious? He believes he can oppose the entire Snowfell Flock? Him and these four Dragons? But more importantly, “Keuvra is the flock’s leader,” I remind. “You speak of sedition; to oppose the flock is to oppose the deity himself.”

“Keuvra has abandoned the flock,” Relmoon hisses. He begins to circle me and Kuro just outside the range of our claws. “You of all creatures should understand that, Farlander. You were the catalyst – the spark that caused Keuvra to turn his tail to the flock. Now he lies in White Mountain, awaiting the Dragon brave enough to take your life.”

Here he goes again with this nonsense! Back when we subdued Relmoon on Couple’s Night, he claimed Keuvra was *‘testing’* the flock, and the only way to pass his test was to kill me, the outsider who cursed Felra with scarce prey. If the Snowfell Flock doesn’t act to take my life, then Relmoon will simply form a new one.

Wait a second. That means...

“You believe Keuvra wants to replace the Snowfell Flock,” the realization takes my breath away. “And whoever takes my life will be the progeny of that flock. No more elders, no more chevils... just one Dragon making all the decisions. You.”

“You sound so offended,” Relmoon chuckles as he circles through the underbrush. “But isn’t that what you seek as well, *Princess?* To return to your pitiful Kingdom and ‘*make all the decisions*’

as Monarch?”

“That’s different,” Kuro growls defiantly. “Asha has the support of Ellyntide, and the Goddess. You have three rotten Exiles and a traitor.”

Well! Um. Everyone in the palace hated me, and the Goddess was so upset at Mom that she caused her to collapse during communion. To say that I had their support would be stretching the truth... but I’m still going to smile and act like Kuro’s right!

Relmoon rolls his eyes. “When I’m finished with you, it won’t matter what the elders or anyone else in the flock think. Keuvra will reappear in White Mountain, supporting me, and the rest will fall in line. Prey will return, and our fledges will survive frostwing.”

This is insane. Not only is Relmoon delusional, but he’s also dangerous! “You honestly believe yourself,” I murmur, shaking my head in dismay. “You think you’re some noble Dragon doing what’s right.”

“I’ll do anything to protect my family,” Relmoon hisses, stamping his talon against the ground. “Just as much as you’d do anything to protect yours.”

Slowly, Relmoon's gaze slides onto... Kuro. Er, Relmoon said *my* family, right? I quickly glance at Kuro, and she seems equally as confused.

"Oh?" Relmoon chirps with amusement. A sinister smile creeps across his face. "Don't tell me you actually fell for that pathetic boy."

Wait, who is he talking about? He doesn't mean Nakino, does he? Why...

...

My body stiffens as a grave realization draws over me. Tomcat said, '*everyone's noticed.*' Surely, everyone includes Relmoon. He must think Kuro and I are secretly mates!

"Asha...?"

I raise my head to see Kuro, all the fury in her face dissolved. She's staring at me with that peculiar mix of anxiety, fear, and longing. My eyes fall to the ground, and I avert my head. Getting called out by Relmoon was *not* the way I envisioned confronting Kuro's romantic feelings for me.

The crimson drakon relaxes his stance and cackles to himself, “Oh, dear. It seems I was wrong, after all.”

“Wait a wingbeat,” Moth stares at Relmoon in confusion. “You mean these two *still* aren’t mated?”

“I don’t even think they’ve shared their feelings for each other,” Relmoon sighs wistfully.

I take an unsteady step backward, wishing my body could disappear into the moon and never return. Why did Relmoon have to drag this up!? I just learned about Kuro’s feelings for me the other day! I’ve barely had time to process my feelings for her, much less talk to her about them! *Damnit, damnit, damint!* My breathing becomes erratic, and my heart thunders against my chest. Out of the corner of my eye, I spot Kuro staring at me with an equally as concerned expression. How could I do this to her?

“Asha,” Relmoon speaks in a surprisingly earnest voice. “Do you understand, now?”

Slowly, I force myself to meet Relmoon’s gaze. “U-Understand what?”

“Why you must die?”

I exhale sharply and look away. How could I possibly understand such a thing?

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

With a certain melody, Relmoon intones, “*The skies of Maki are just over the horizon.*”

A cold breeze blows through the clearing, numbing my feathers. Just like Lemurs, Kin believe the planet Maki is where they go in the afterlife. Relmoon must be reciting a proverb about the fragility of life.

He continues, “You and Kuro are going to die without ever having expressed your feelings for each other. The Kuro I know would have never let an opportunity slip through her feathers, so I can only assume the reason you haven’t talked... is *you*, Princess.”

That’s not true at all! It’s not my fault I didn’t understand Litan courtship the moment I landed in Felra! I didn’t even know the flock existed until Kuro saved my life! How was I supposed to know she wanted to be my mate?

But, despite that... A certain part of me knows he’s right.

I keep my head low, trying to hide the tears in my eyes. I *should* have known better. I *should* have talked to Kuro the moment Frope had to spell it out for me. *Kuro thinks so much of me*. And now, I’ll no longer have the chance...

“Life is fragile,” Relmoon speaks with a certain pain. “It can be torn from you faster than the talons of a diving gryhawk. I would have thought the Princess who sent her dear friend to Maki—“

“SHUT up.”

I raise my head to see Kuro staring down Relmoon, the fire in her eyes restored.

“Oh?” Relmoon quips. “What’s—”

“QUIET!!” Kuro snarls.

Relmoon freezes and does as he’s told, but not before a sadistic smile curls across his muzzle. He tips his wings for Kuro to speak.

“What happens between me and Asha is *none* of your business!” she howls, strained emotion clouding her voice. “And if Asha isn’t ready to talk about her feelings, then fine! I respect that! It’s not up to me, you, or anyone else to decide how she feels. But she’ll have enough time to decide because she’s not dying today. I won’t allow her to die at the claws of such a despicable drakon. So, just shut up!!”

Relmoon growls in delight — I've never seen him look so pleased. But as he opens his muzzle to speak, he's suddenly cut off.

“...Bitch.”

Battling tears, Kuro looks at me and smiles. I can't believe it! She kept her word! *GREAT burn, Kuro!* Instantly, I feel my spirits rejuvenated. It won't be easy, but with Kuro at my side, we might stand a chance! I'm not dying without a fight!

“Whatever,” Relmoon rolls his eyes. He flicks his tail, and the other Dragons come to attention, falling into an attack posture. “Enough nattering. We'll be sending you both to Maki. Perhaps you can discuss your feelings there?”

As fierce growls rise from both sides, Relmoon begins pacing around us with his head held low. Moth feigns a lunge and snaps his jaws, while another exile bunches his muscles, ready to pounce when the sign is given. The fight is imminent, but who will strike first? Should Kuro and I go after Relmoon or pick off the other Dragons individually? Who are they, anyway? Could they be just as dangerous as Relmoon?

What if... I could attack them all at once?

...

There's no other choice. This is my best shot if I want to live to see another day!

Relmoon raises his wings to signal to the others. When they drop, the fight will be on!
“Goodbye, Kur—“

“HEY!”

With everyone’s attention diverted, I rear my head back and tickle the muscles deep in the bowels of my throat. Heat builds quickly, and my mouth flings open, expelling an intense blowtorch of flame! With terror in his eyes, Moth dives out of the way just in time to see the column of flame sail past him and collide with one of the half-collapsed stone pillars that pepper the clearing.

FOOM!!

Just as it did at Owens Island, the flames are reflected outwards in all directions, raining down hellfire across the clearing. The desiccated underbrush ignites, and a heartbeat later, a savage wildfire roars to life. Bedlam erupts, and shrieks of terror rise from the Dragons. With my heart pounding, I spin around to see two of the Exiles flailing madly with their wings on fire, scattering like prey-birds into the recesses of the building to escape the intense heat. But where’s Kuro? She was standing right next to me as I shot my fire, but now all I can see is flames. As the heat of the fire rises, there’s no time to search for her!

“KURO!!” I screech into a wall of fire, hoping she hears my plea. “FLY!!”

With flames swirling around me, I lope into the air, using the rising heat to quickly gain altitude and sail out of the ancient building and into the sky above. Once I clear the tree line, I gaze back to find Kuro pounding her wings to catch up to me.

“I couldn’t find him!” she shouts.

Kuro must be talking about Relmoon. When the fire erupted, she must have dived into the flames to chase after him. “Forget about Relmoon!” I screech. “We have to return to the flock’s territory!”

Kuro’s face twists in pain before nodding. The revenge she seeks will have to wait until another day. As we bank to our left and gain altitude, I gaze around to see a towering pillar of gray and black smoke rising into the cold, frostwing sky. I wince at the realization nothing will remain of the ancient building – my only chance to uncover why I became a Litan may be lost forever. But if that’s the price to live to see another day, then so be it. I’ll live without knowing.

Warm thermals propel us higher as Kuro rejoins me to my left. She keeps her eyes averted, focusing on the skies before us. We ride the currents hard, knowing Relmoon and his thugs won’t be far behind.

We flew and flew until our wings could no longer carry us. Then, we forced ourselves to fly some more.

Despite the distance traveled, it was a silent flight – Kuro and I only spoke when we needed to navigate. I tried to hold my gaze away from Kuro, and it felt like she was doing the same to me. Today was traumatic for several reasons, but the unease hanging between

us stung the most. When we finally arrived at Flat Rock, exhausted and worn out, the pale outline of Maki was framed bright against the darkened slopes of the stone mountain.

We land near the top of the aerie and quickly locate an empty den. As we step inside, my heart quickens — the silence between us can't last forever. We'll have to discuss what happened today and what Relmoon forced us to confront.

Kuro stops a few yards into the den. "I guess we'll spend the night here," she says, breaking the conversational truce.

"Yeah..." I drift off. It's the best I can muster for a response.

"Asha," Kuro speaks slowly, then turns to face me. Her face is brimming with anxiousness. "About the—"

"It's not your fault." I cut her off with a firm voice.

Kuro exhales slightly, and her gaze falls to the ground. She's trying to hide her face.

"I didn't know until Frope told me the other day," I say, drawing a careful breath. "I... I had no idea."

As I enter the den, Kuro raises her head but says nothing. A certain glimmer in her eyes tells me she's surprised.

"I never took a mate when I was in Ellyntide. I'm not used to others being interested in me... that way. Kuro, I..." my voice dissipates, overcome with emotion. These are the hardest words I've ever spoken. "I don't know if I can feel that way about you. Or Nakino."

As the words leave my muzzle, Kuro's expression craters. She looks ravaged, moments away from a full breakdown.

"I'm not saying 'no,'" I quickly add. Unbidden, I step forward but stop myself before I can lean in to comfort her. "I'm... not saying anything. Not yet. I'm just not ready to abandon my family in Ellyntide."

Kuro's expression moderates somewhat, as do her feathers. Still, this is devastating for her. I have to maintain my distance, but I don't want her to be miserable.

"Kuro, you're so special to me. I hope we can stay friends forever, even if I return to normal. But... I need some space to decide what's best for me. I hope you understand."

The most uncomfortable silence stretches between us.

With her head held low, Kuro opens her muzzle to say something but quickly shuts it. Her face twists in pain, and she draws a long, staggered breath. She must have prepared herself for the possibility of rejection, but... this too is heartbreaking to watch. And it's all because of me! How do normal animals put up with these gut-wrenching feelings of guilt?

Finally, Kuro gathers her courage and murmurs meekly, "I understand."

"Thank you," I breathe. I feel myself unconsciously taking another step forward before once again stopping myself. I smile in hesitation, and Kuro forces a smile back.

"Let's see Bonello as soon as the sun rises," she says, raising her head and ruffling slightly to gather composure. "We have to warn the flock about Relmoon."

"R-Right," I say. It seems she's eager to move on from the subject of our feelings. Who could blame her?

We settle against the disparate bedding of the den, separated from each other as far as the room will allow. I've become more comfortable sleeping away from Kuro, but to do so in the same den... this arrangement will be difficult. When the nightmares return, how will I resist her warmth?

As I perform my nightly preen, Kuro calls across the den. "Asha? Is it really true? Can females be mated with other females in the Farlands?"

Well, that's an awfully strange way to phrase *that* question. And now that I think about it, I can't recall telling Kuro about same-sex couples in the Farlands. I guess Tomcat must have said something to her.

"Yeah," I say, allowing a yawn to escape me. "It's totally normal. In fact, one of my ancestors ascended the throne while mated to a Marten woman."

"Oh," Kuro says, curling her neck around her body to lay her head against the ground. "Ellyntide sounds really nice."

The admission makes me smile. If Kuro was a Lemur, she would be happy in Farlands. I'm sure we'd be friends there, too. "Goodnight, Kuro."

"Fair dreams, Asha."

I relax my head under my wings, pleased with how amicably Kuro responded. She *shouldn't* be upset! I could still decide to be her mate! But Kuro's always been incredibly kind to me... perhaps I should have harbored the faith that she would extend that generosity even in rejection.

My thoughts begin to wander — sleep is close at hand. But as my consciousness numbs, I'm stirred awake by a strange, muffled noise. Confused, I raise my wing to look around, and the source of the disturbance becomes clear: from the bedding on the opposite side of the den, Kuro is weeping gently into her feathers.

88. Ejection

“Nakino...” the elder drakon rasps with considerable strain. “I think it’s time.”

Nakino raises his head from the assemblage of plants gathered at his talons. His eyes narrow, and his resolve deepens. “No, it isn’t. You’ll live to see tomorrow.”

“No...” the tawny drakon’s voice is cut by a sudden, choking cough. He gasps, straining to regain what little strength remains. “No, I don’t think so, Son-Of-Yzori.”

As guilt rakes my heart, I avert my eyes. Somehow, Rosht’s condition has become grave. How can this be?! Why aren’t our treatments working?

After returning from Loner territory, Kuro and I knew we had to alert the flock of Relmoon’s treachery. We decided to personally alert all the Chevils, providing a firsthand account of what we witnessed in the ruins. After informing an understandably concerned Bonello, we returned to the Grandfather Tree to alert Sefri. We planned to spend the night before flying to White Mountain to tell the elders, but that all changed as I returned to Nakino’s den to let him know I was safe.

Before we left for the ruins, two Kin had come down with a minor illness at the Grandfather Tree. I had forgotten entirely about the mundane event until I returned to find their condition had deteriorated significantly. Frail, they lay motionless in Nakino’s den, unable to hold down prey or water. Without thinking, I sprang into action, working to help Nakino develop a treatment. The next day, another Kin arrived in his den with similar symptoms. Then, three more this morning.

An illness is spreading through the aerie, and we have no idea what it is or what's causing it!

All of Nakino's usual treatments have failed to improve their symptoms. And to make matters worse, there's no common thread between the Dragons who've become ill. Two can no longer leave the Grandfather Tree, while one is a huntress who regularly gathers her own prey and only visits the aerie to return communal prey. We can't begin to develop an effective treatment until we understand what's causing the illness, but all the cases so far seem entirely unrelated.

"Skunkscent," Nakino curses, pounding his talon against the ground. "Asha, fetch him some more water."

"Should we use water from the rootspring instead?" I ask. "It should be cleaner."

The rootspring is precisely what it sounds like — a natural freshwater spring that flows from a crook in the roots of the Grandfather Tree. Most of the Dragons here prefer the taste to the water that pools around the tree. In Nakino's den, we have a steady supply of water dripping from the skylights on his roof.

"Cleaner?" Nakino tilts his head. "All water's the same, Asha."

Well! That's completely false. But sensing the futility of trying to explain '*germ theory*' to a feral, I hold my tongue. I locate the closest puddle of ponding water, slurp up a

mouthful, and release it into a depression in the ground at Rosht's talons. "Please," I say. "Try drinking it again."

Rosht's emerald green eyes study the water for a moment. "I can't..." he sighs. "It will not matter."

"Rosht, please!" Nakino pleads, standing over the emaciated elder. "You have to try!"

"I know when my time has come," he murmurs with a tone of finality. Rosht lays his head beyond his talons, and his eyes become heavy. "It's been untold seasons since I saw my mate. But soon... we'll fly together again."

He gingerly raises his head, and a gentle smile forms across his muzzle. Is... this it? Is this really how this kindly old drakon passes onto Maki? I glance at Nakino, and his doleful look says it all. My heart shatters, recognizing that he's using his remaining strength to reassure us he's at peace.

Suddenly, his breathing picks up — short and erratic chuffs as the pain becomes unbearable. I place my wing against his flank, wishing with all my conviction there was something I could do to help. A heart-wrenching moment later, his body flinches and then stops moving altogether.

Nakino draws a sharp breath and dips his head. "He flies the skies of Maki."

My feathers shiver as I slowly retract my wing. I've watched the life force drain from prey countless times, but never my own species. This was more traumatic than I anticipated. "D-Did he have a family?" I ask.

"Not here," Nakino replies, shuffling to his talons. "He had a son at Tall Spires. I must speak with Sefri and request his Kin be informed. We'll move his body afterward."

I nod gently, and Nakino turns to leave the den, his tail dragging against the ground behind him. Despite everything we tried, this Kin has perished. Just what kind of illness are we dealing with? And what about the other four Kin with similar symptoms? Are their lives in danger as well? The pain of watching one Dragon die was too much... no matter what, we have to figure out a treatment!

"Mmm, no..."

Resting against my haunches, I trace my foretalon down the wall, closely inspecting each of the crevices. Since Nakino left to inform Sefri of Rosht's passing, I've been scouring his stock room for any usual plants that may aid us in developing a treatment. Needless to say, I'm restless — the image of Rosht's smile is seared into my thoughts. But try as I might, I'm having little success locating any plants that might be useful. Just this once, I wish I had modern medicine to treat these Dragons!

As I return to four legs to reposition myself, the muffled sounds of a commotion echo through the root walls.

"—can't do this!!"

That sounded like Kuro's voice. What is she talking about?

"I don't care," an older drakaina rasps, her voice drawing closer. "That fress brings death."

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My body freezes. That was Sefri! And she's talking about *me*! What does she mean, '*I bring death?*'

I have an awful feeling about this.

"But where is she supposed to go?" another voice, this time Nakino's. A tinge of fear clouds his voice.

"That's not my concern," Sefri growls, her voice clear as she steps into the entrance of the den. "Daughter-Of-Kelani!"

The Chevil's call echoes, a call I can't possibly ignore. I step into the entrance of the the stock room to find Sefri at the foot of the connecting room, her tail swaying rapidly behind her. Our eyes meet, and a look of reproach draws across her face.

"Y-Yes?" my heart thunders against my chest. "What's going on?"

"There you are," Sefri chides. "With the sick, no less. Come closer."

As I take a cautious step forward, Kuro and Nakino enter the room, standing on opposite sides of the brown Chevil. Kuro looks furious, like she was a feather's edge from lashing out against Sefri. Her fierce loyalty doesn't surprise me, but what's Nakino doing? He's holding his head low, and his face is filled with dread. They both know something terrible is about to happen, so why does he look so frightened of Sefri?

"Son-Of-Yzori," Sefri growls. "How many Kin have come down with the illness?"

"S-six Dragons," he stumbles, turning his wings inward. "One came to my den yesterday, a-and three more this morning."

I gaze across the den to see the three Dragons, their faces filled with concern. Before Rosht's condition began to deteriorate, I was helping to treat them while Nakino worked elsewhere.

Sefri looks at the same Dragons and shakes her head in dismay. “The affliction is spreading. This all began as soon as your *blood* was revealed to us.”

My blood?!

Is she... blaming the illness on me?! I thought she didn't believe all that crap Relmoon said!

Kuro's face twists in equal shock. A low growl rises from her chest, “Her blood doesn't matter!”

Sefri snaps her jaws at Kuro's face. “Hold your tongue, Daughter-Of-Mecali!”

Kuro stares down Sefri, silent and unflinching, refusing to cede an inch to the elder drakaina. By the Goddess, I would have exploded on Sefri if I were her. Kuro's displaying so much restraint right now. Conversely, Nakino's cowering behind Sefri's wing with that same trepid expression, his muzzle clamped shut. Why isn't he trying to defend me? Doesn't he understand how wrong this is?!

Guess I'm going to have to speak for myself. I summon Mom's diplomacy voice, trying to remain civil. “Sefri, with all due respect... what does my blood have to do with the illness?”

“Your blood is different,” she growls, straightening her neck to look down at me.
“*You’re* different. Incompatible with us natural-born Kin. You could be the source of illness.”

A scoff passes through my fangs. “That’s preposterous!”

“Nakino,” Sefri gazes past her wing. “Have you determined how the illness is spreading?”

Nakino stares up at the elder Dragon. “N-no, I haven’t,” he stammers. “I’ve spoken—“

“Then it’s possible her blood could be spreading it,” Sefri concludes, inclining her head.

Nakino looks upset but again stays silent. Why isn’t he trying to defend me?! Where’s the bitter Dragon who became infuriated by the slightest annoyance? If all three of us were upset, we might be able to convince Sefri how absurd this is!

“Sefri,” I say, allowing a tinge of annoyance to seep into my voice. “This is going to sound strange, but we’ve figured out how illnesses spread in the Farlands. And there’s no way—“

She flicks her wing dismissively. “Don’t belittle me with your Farlander nonsense, Asha.”

“You’re being ignorant,” Kuro hisses a challenge. “Farlanders are clever, and know—“

“SILENCE!”

This time, Kuro’s head rears slightly as Sefri’s roar thunders through the den. The cracks in Kuro’s resolve dissolve with her surprise, and she lowers herself, twitching her wings like she were itching to fall into an attack posture. Conversely, Sefri seems to have realized she’s losing her composure. She ruffles slightly but keeps her steely gaze steady. Mom always told me leaders can’t lose their composure, and it seems Sefri is also aware of this. Her gaze slides between Kuro and me, and she lets out a frustrated sigh.

“I’m done arguing about this,” she growls. “Trouble follows your tailfeathers, Daughter-Of-Kelani. Until the illness can be controlled, you are *exiled* from the Grandfather Tree.”

Exiled...?

She’s ... kicking me out of the aerie?

My breathing chokes up, and it feels like someone’s punched me in the stomach. This is the thanks I get for trying to save lives? The same treatment that Relmoon received?

“You bitch!!” Kuro explodes, splaying her wings. “You believed Relmoon, didn’t you?!”

RARRR!!

Sefri bellows, falling backward into a defensive posture and nearly knocking over Nakino. The two drakainas bare their fangs and issue savage warning growls. This is insane! I know Kuro is fiercely protective of me, but would she really attack an elder? Agh, damn it! I can't allow her to destroy her reputation in the flock just for me!

"Wait!" I screech over the yowling.

The two dragons seize up and swivel their gaze toward me, fangs bared. They hold their aggressive posture, refusing to cede an inch to each other.

"Please," I plead, taking a step forward. "Please don't tear each other apart. I'll go willingly."

Kuro gasps, "But, Asha!!"

"Kuro," I take two steps forward before abruptly stopping. The longing look on her face reminds me that I shouldn't try to comfort her. "It was never my intention to cause strife in the flock. If I'm no longer welcome here, then... I'll leave."

Kuro stands with her wings open, panting for breath. She swivels her gaze to Sefri and then locks eyes with me. She has to understand that attacking an elder would get her exiled from the flock... I hope she can see the concern in my eyes. I would never, ever forgive myself if I caused Kuro to be exiled.

Finally, she allows her soot-plumaged wings to droop to the ground. "Alright," she speaks slowly, lowering her head in acceptance. "But as your mentor, I'm coming with you."

"But, what about me?!" Nakino pleads, pushing his way forward past Sefri's wing. "I-I mean... Asha has been helping me treat the sick!"

'Me..?'

...Seriously? That's what Nakino's concerned about? Not my imminent exile from the Grandfather Tree, the risk to my reputation, or the extreme danger I've been thrust into... but *himself*? I understand we've been working to develop a treatment, but... is that seriously the first thing that comes to mind?

'Me?'

Something builds inside me. Those familiar, turbulent thoughts that haven't shown themselves since I was first admitted to the flock... oh, this isn't good. Kuro's seen this side of me before, and she's giving me a look that says, 'Just give me the word.' If Nakino keeps this up, then I may do just that.

“You’ve cared for our Kin since before Asha arrived,” Sefri says, folding her wings. “I have faith in you, Nakino.”

“But...!” Nakino pleads. “This is different! Asha’s taught me so much! If we work together—“

“Forget it,” Sefri dismisses with a flick of her tail. “It’s under your wings, Son-Of-Yzori.”

Nakino stares at me, distraught. A certain part of him is legitimately concerned... I *have* taught him a lot, and he relies on my judgment. But more than that, I’m certain he wants to keep me separated from Kuro. Kuro is a *threat* to our supposed relationship. We still haven’t spoken about what happened on Couple’s Night, and now he won’t get the chance.

...I stifle the small voice of guilt inside my conscious. Maybe if Nakino wasn’t so self-centered, I could have stayed in their aerie! It’s his fault!

I grunt and redirect my attention to my mentor. “Come on, Kuro.”

Gazing down like a judge, Sefri moves to clear a path and allow us to leave. Kuro jumps to my side and leans her head over my wings, issuing a faint growl to the elder Dragon as we pass into the foyer of Nakino’s den.

A crowd of ten or so Dragons has gathered on the roots outside, no doubt concerned by the commotion in the den. “Is everything alright?” a drakaina asks us as we pass her by.

I consider a response but keep my muzzle clamped.

They’ll soon learn what happened from Sefri and probably believe whatever twisted story she concocts about Kuro and me. *Whatever*. We have more important things to worry about. I’ve been scared to even leave the Grandfather Tree since we returned from Loner territory. Where are we supposed to go now? Will the other chevils welcome us? Could the elders at White Mountain turn on us, too?

Relmoon’s flock, the sloppy situation with Kuro’s feelings, and now this. My flight home to Ellyntide has never seemed so far away.

89. Pretext

Outside my window, the landing stairs of the airship crash into the ground with a portentous thud. It is the sound I’ve been straining to hear for weeks yet dreading profusely. As the age-marred propellers wind down, I silently plead for my nerves to do the same. Here we are again — the scene of the tragedy and my nightmares: The hollow in the eastern weald.

“Commander, are you alright?”

I raise my head to see the professor sitting in the shoddy bench seat directly before me. Dressed in a warm, tan overcoat, he has a look of concern scrawled across his face.

“You don’t have to join the search,” Finch adds from behind me. Gently, they rest their tail against my shoulder. “You can stay aboard the ship.”

It seems my apprehension was more noticeable than I expected. I suppose it’s unavoidable. “I appreciate your concern,” I say, raising Finch’s tail and depositing it on their side of the seat. “But I am prepared. This outing was my idea, after all.”

Slowly, Willow inclines his head. “Very well. But, should change your mind...” He draws his paw across the flight deck, beckoning to an empty seat.

I match his gentle smile and rise to my feet. I appreciate the offer, but this time will be different.

Just as he promised, the Prince secured us an airship for our mission to locate the Serpentine Diamond. Though it brought us here in one piece, it’s a far cry from the family’s usual accommodations, the Blue Daemon. Cramped, old, and with a paper-thin flight deck scarcely wide enough to contain us and our possessions, the craft is usually reserved for training pilots and very little else. It’s not hard to see why — I’ve been inside outhouses with more compelling amenities.

Still, the vessel fulfilled its routine purpose, allowing Max’s son Odell some valuable time behind the rudders. We may not have much in the way of tools, but the five of us should be enough to search the area before nightfall. I’ll take anything we can get today. Given the mood at the palace, it’s a minor miracle we could disembark at all.

...

Let's set aside that particular thought for now.

We landed in the field next to the hollow, the one where I witnessed the Lithan taking flight. As the propellers go silent, Max and Odell are the first to disembark and anchor the ship to the ground. This may not be an official mission of the Air Squadron, but as the ranking officer, it's my duty to follow after them. I stand at the top of the flight deck, gazing down the metal landing stairs that descend into a frozen field of trampled brown grass. I draw a deep breath and slowly place one foot in front of the other...

As I step into the field, a bitter wind whips against my pea coat, allowing me my first look at the hollow where everything went so terribly wrong. That is, what remains of the hollow. Gone are the suffocating walls of bramble and thickets surrounding the hollow on all sides. In its place is a sterile, flattened parcel of dirt with almost no trace of the vegetation that once crowded it. If it weren't for the familiar grove of trees on the high ground above the hollow, I'd be unaware that a national tragedy occurred in such an unsuspecting location.

I knew the hollow had been scoured — the official report said as much. But to flatten it to the bare moon with such prejudice... I would have never anticipated this. Regrettably, I find myself second-guessing my judgment. Was I wrong all along? Can we truly find the diamond after so much has changed?

Finch and Willow depart the ship with their tools in tow. We couldn't bring much — two shovels and a couple of hand trowels will have to suffice. As they approach the three of us who already departed, Odell leans over to Max and whispers something into his ear. My old friend nods.

“Odell wants to stay aboard the ship,” Max says, turning to face me. “I hope that’s alright with you.”

The young pilot forces a smile. He must be anxious about being in the hollow. Truthfully, Odell has already played his part — the cover of allowing him some valuable flight time worked well in securing our ship. Still, I was looking forward to having an extra pair of...

...On second thought, perhaps it would be best if Odell monitored the radio. “Very well,” I nod. “Keep your radio tuned to the pilot exchange. Let us know if there are any announcements.”

“The pilot exchange?” The young ringtail tilts his head. “But sir, we’ve already landed.”

“Just do what the Commander says,” Max gives Odell a pat on the head and a shove against his back. “Now go on, git!”

Odell stumbles forward before settling into a leisurely jog, passing Finch and Willow on his way back to the ship. As they step forward to join us, our other two participants have a certain look of awe scrawled across their faces. I can’t say I blame them. This is hollowed ground, and they are among the first to visit. Or at least what remains of it.

“Well, then,” I say, fighting the frigid winds to button my coat. “It seems the investigators performed their due diligence.”

“Cleaner than a chicken’s rump,” Max observes.

“Let’s not allow that to deter us,” I say. “Her Majesty insisted on a rapid investigation. In their haste, the investigators could have made mistakes.”

I pause to gauge the mood of our group. Willow looks weary, holding his tail close behind him. But Finch has a look of fervid determination across their face. And Max? Well, Max looks like he’d rather be flying right now.

I continue, “For everyone who passed that day... let’s give it our best shot.”

Willow lowers a solemn nod. “For absent friends.”

From an overcast sky, flurries begin to fall.

Ice crunches beneath our boots as we traverse the field, treading over long dead stalks of grass. As we approach the scene of the tragedy, the ground beneath us changes to bare soil and then changes again. Disparate patches of stubby, regrown plants pepper the hollow, disproving the notion that the area was scoured entirely. Willow immediately notices the change and bends down to inspect a small pocket of plants growing beside a small, woody stump. The rest of us continue forward, making our way into the heart of the hollow.

Max and Finch search errantly, prodding the ground with their shovels, turning over rocks and sticks, and occasionally disturbing the moon to check for anything unusual. I wander between them, holding my eyes low in a vain attempt to distract myself from the memories of that day. Although the hollow has changed, the grove surrounding it has not. I turn my head up, woefully allowing my gaze to wander to the spot in the thickets where I burst forward and witnessed the Lathan taking flight.

And, of course, I recall *that* spot. The spot where I spent so much time on that horrible night that I can practically recall it just by the trees surrounding us.

I spent hours there, above Calypso...

...

As the afternoon drags on, we seem to be making little progress. Finch and Max have paused to take breaks and warm themselves up while I find myself distracted by intrusive thoughts. Perhaps I should go easy on myself. Being here is troublesome enough, and it's no minor miracle I haven't broken down weeping.

"Commander."

The Professor calls over the wind, strolling from the side of the hollow with his paws buried deep in his coat pockets. The look on his face matches the weather — dreary.

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“What have you found?” I ask.

“The question you should be asking is, ‘*What haven’t you found?*’”

My head tilts, unable to solve Willow’s riddle. “...Go on.”

“All of the regrowth is of native species,” he says, drawing his paw outward in a sweeping motion. “For example, observe the dried sprouts of Hollyhead carex, or the diminutive patch of manzanita.”

I follow his lead, gazing toward the areas where plants have grown back. But the answer to his conundrum remains elusive. “I don’t understand. The weald is a nature preserve. Shouldn’t we expect native plants to grow here?”

“Quite the opposite. Without the diligent care of Animals, invasive species flourish across Ellyntide. Do you recall the brambles?”

“...Ah.” Now I get it. “They’re invasive.”

“One of nature’s most stubborn plants, yet it’s been completely eradicated from the hollow. Commander, after concluding the investigation, they did not simply fly home. They got to work re-engineering the flora of this hollow.”

Everything's been changed...? “But why? Why go through all that trouble?”

“A member of the Royal family died here,” Finch speaks over the wind, approaching with their shovel resting on their shoulder. “And, this is a nature preserve – open to the public. Anyone can waltz in and have a look around.”

“And they will,” I conclude, drawing my hand against my chin in contemplation. “They wanted it to look presentable.”

“Or they wanted something to return to,” Willow says ominously.

I'll never forget the impenetrable walls of bramble that used to grow here. To learn that they're an invasive species that grew out of control makes perfect sense. Still, I'm not sure I believe the angle that the hollow was groomed to be presentable. The location where Queen Beatrix was assassinated is on public grounds, and the Crown has done little to signify it as a place of importance.

But why would they foresee themselves returning to the hollow? At length, I espoused to Finch why the report on the tragedy was ultimately irrelevant – little more than a pretext for war, should it become necessary. Perhaps more than ever, I still harbor that belief, so what is the significance of returning here?

Why must the answers always be elusive? I allow my shoulders to sag and release a muted sigh. “Let’s keep looking. We’ve still got an hour or two of daylight left.”

“Locate the areas less disturbed,” Willow suggests. “The ones that weren’t planted last fall. Our best hope lies there.”

As the sun sets against a mottled gray horizon, we continue to come up empty-handed. Finch and Willow have decided to take another break, resting against the side of a rock and discussing how much daylight we have left. Or if it's worth calling off the search altogether. I’m not sure where Max walked off to. I think he got bored and returned to the ship.

I stab Finch's shovel into the ground to lean against it. I've continued the search, poking the ground here and there, inspecting the places the investigators could have missed, just as Willow suggested. But I'm not immune to the fatigue and the cold. The sun is setting, and it won't be long before the temperatures plunge. Have I truly led everyone on a wild goose chase? What if the vision in my dream was really just that – a dream?

As my thoughts wander, I glance around the hollow and notice something peculiar. The trees, they're...

...

I recognize them from this angle. How could I possibly forget? This was the spot where Calypso fell. The spot where I spent so much time on that endless night, clutching his chest and weeping into his arms...

As negative thoughts overwhelm me, I lower onto one knee, desperately trying to fend off a full-on anxiety attack. I have to maintain my composure! As the memories swirl in my head anew, something unusual stands out: the logs scattered around the hollow.

They're still here, aren't they...?

I raise my head, and my gaze leads to the right side of the hollow. There, at the base of the incline that leads up into the grove of trees, is a scattering of logs situated on a bare patch of dirt. I've been avoiding them because there's no regrowth nearby, only bare soil.

Slowly, I clamber to my feet and rip the shovel from the ground. I approach the logs and use my boot to kick over the closest one, exposing the uncomfortably slimy underside. Strange looking vegetation grows there in a flurry of colors, though most prominent is a strange, black looking... fungus? I'm not sure what to call it. It resembles short strands of hair and grows all over the backside of the wood.

But it's the ground underneath the log that's important. And it's here that I find a boilerplate-sized patch of the original grass preserved beneath the log. Somehow, the investigators missed this! With no regard for cleanliness, I drop to my knees and search the grass with my hands, feeling around for anything unusual.

And then, when it seems like I've scoured it...

“EVERYONE!!” I shriek. “Everyone, come quickly!”

Finch and Willow crane their necks in my direction, their faces filled with hopeful resolve. They jump to their feet and hurry to my position by the logs. On the far side of the hollow, Max leaps from the flight deck of the ship, sailing over the landing stairs and nearly tumbling to the ground as he lands. Moments later, he’s standing above me, flanked on both sides by Finch and Willow.

“Did you...?” Max asks, panting for breath.

Instead of replying, I search my hands through the grass again, pulling aside the frozen fronds. And it’s there at the bottom, just as it was in my dreams, that I find it: The Serpentine Diamond.

“By Jaya,” I whisper.

Slowly, I draw my hand forward and lift the diamond from its resting place, holding it at arm’s length from my body. I twist it around, inspecting it for damage from the attack that took the late Princesses’ life. Remarkably it seems unscathed, with its distinctive shape still intact. This is it! The ring of legend!

“The Serpentine Diamond!” Willow gasps.

Max covers his mouth in shock. “O-Oh my stars!”

“Dunc, wait.”

Finch crouches beside me and reaches forward to draw back another layer of grass. To my astonishment, there’s something else here: the golden shank that held the diamond – the ring worn on the Princess’s right hand. But as they lift it into the air for closer inspection, something becomes dreadfully apparent.

“It’s been damaged?!” Willow gasps.

“What is this?!” I ask, angling my head for a closer look. Indeed, it is the ring the Princess wore, tarnished and dirtied by sitting in a field for the past four months. But where it used to be a loop of metal with prongs to hold the ancient diamond, it now more closely resembles a coffee tin shot by a steam gun. On one side of the band, the metal is warped and splintered, like a great force came and tore the ring in two.

Willow crouches down beside Finch and asks, “May I?”

Finch nods and presents to ring to Willow. He holds it above him, using what little daylight remains to inspect the finer details of the metal. “It’s as if the ring was destroyed inside-out.”

Max raises an eyebrow. “Inside-out? What do you mean?”

“It’s like this,” Willow says, rising to his feet. He holds the ring before Max, then uses his other paw to make a fist. “Either the Princess removed the ring before she passed, or someone took it from her. As to which is more likely, I’m not qualified to answer. But regardless of what happened...” Willow’s palm opens wide, initiating an explosion. “A force from within the ring expelled outwards, causing the damage we see now and dislodging the diamond.”

A force from *within* the ring? After it was removed from her hand? “That doesn’t make any sense,” I say. “Even if the Princess willingly gave the diamond to Crow Wing, why would they destroy it?”

“And, how was it destroyed?” Max ponders. “From inside? That don’t make a lick of sense.”

“All I know is...” I gaze down, marveling at the national treasure in the palm of my head. “We have to get this to Prince So—“

“HEY!!!”

Odell’s voice splits the air, immediately drawing our attention to the ship. He’s standing at the top of the landing stairs, making sweeping gestures with his arms. He’s...beckoning us to return....

“What is that boy doin’?” Max asks, scratching his head.

A sickening feeling overwhelms my heart, the same manner of dread I felt in this very hollow on the day of the tragedy. The worry on Odell’s face leaves little doubt about what he’s bothered by.

My heart slams against my chest, pushing me to hop to my feet. “Come on. We have to listen to the radio.”

“The radio?” Finch asks. “Why?”

Should I tell them now...?

Perhaps it would be best if they heard the Queen’s own words. I secure the diamond in my coat pocket, buckle the clasp and say, “Her Majesty is making an address to the Kingdom.”

Finch’s eyes turn wide as discs. Monarchs only address the Kingdom by radio when they have something truly significant to announce – not even the death of Princess Asha met this high standard. But after all the turmoil of the past four months, there can be only one thing Kelani is announcing today.

“Bring the diamond,” Willow speaks quickly, pocketing the ring.

“Right!” I say, taking off in a sprint.

Ice crackles as we race across the hollow, our hearts filled with fear. If the specter of what we dread is truly at hand, then there’s no time to waste. We must return to Varecia at once! As we approach the ship, Odell leaps inside the pilot’s deck and enables the outside speakers, projecting the Queen’s resolute voice across the hollow.

“—as President Weatherlight believes she can terrorize our skies. We will not sit idle as she works to undermine us, piece-by-piece, island-by-island, and soul-by-soul. That is why, at the advice of the Air Squadron, the Home Guard, and by the authority granted to me by the Goddess Mother, I declare a state of war against the Confederacy of Nortane.”

We stop in front of the landing stairs, shocked and out of breath. What was once considered unthinkable has now come to pass — war in our time, against a nation vastly more powerful than our own Kingdom.

“No...” Finch laments with terror in their eyes. “Damn it, no!”

90. Frostwing's Chill

“Agh!!”

My head shoots up from the bedding, a cold sweat dripping from the feathers of my brow.

“Asha!” Kuro whispers in surprise. She’s standing above me, intensely worried. “Are you okay?”

Panting, I stare at her for a heartbeat, the haze of sleep clouding my awareness. “Yeah... was I being noisy again?”

“Another prey dream,” Kuro chitters softly, and her smile reforms. The light of an emberroot flame reflects cleanly from her merlot eyes.

A prey dream? That’s a funny way to describe a *‘nightmare.’* I’m surprised at how long I’ve been able to stretch that particular lie with Kuro; this is the fourth time she’s had to rouse me from sleep since we left the Grandfather Tree. At this point, she has to know my nightmares have returned.

“Sorry,” I mumble, forcing my feathers to lie flat. “I hope I didn’t wake you up.”

Kuro smiles, “Don’t worry, I was already awake.”

That’s only partially true — I’m certain Kuro doesn’t want me to worry about her.

After Sefri exiled me, we met with Tomcat and decided to return to Kuro's Elderus den in the Great Valley. For a few days, everything felt normal. We hunted prey during the day and got to keep it between ourselves. As it turns out, Tomcat has a bit of an unfair advantage when she hunts in winter, thanks to her snow-white plumage. She becomes practically invisible against the snow drifts! But those same drifts doomed our stay as they grew in size until they completely entombed the entrance to Kuro's den. Using our fire to melt them risked damaging the tree, so we were forced to flee to Flat Rock and hope their chevil, Bonello, would be more accommodating.

As it turns out, he was! Prey has been just as scarce at Flat Rock as it was in the Grandfather Tree, and landing in their aerie with three butchered Spikehorn was a great way to convince Bonello of our value as huntresses. I'm not entirely convinced he's on our side, though. As I presented him the Spikehorn I preyed upon, there was a pronounced look of suspicion across his face. But the illness spreading through the Grandfather Tree has yet to reach Flat Rock, so there's little reason to prohibit me from staying there... so long as our group keeps finding prey.

As Kuro turns away, I cast a glance past the emberroot fire to check on our den's regular occupants: Fra, and her mate, Parth. Unlike the Grandfather Tree, spare dens at Flat Rock are much harder to come by. We were fortunate that one of the first Dragons who welcomed me into the flock was willing to again extend her kindness by allowing us to stay in her den. ...For the small price of sharing our prey with her. It was an easy compromise to reach. And mercifully, my morning shenanigans did nothing to stir them from sleep.

"Mmh," I murmur, exhaling a yawn. "It's almost morning. Should we wake up Tomcat?"

Kuro frowns and angles her wing towards the entrance of the den. "It's been snowing ever since sundown. If you're still drowsy, then you should get some more rest. Maybe the snow will stop by the time you awaken,"

A frigid wind howls outside the den, causing chunks of ice to spiral into the snowdrifts. Lithans can fly in snow storms, though it isn't particularly safe. Ice accumulates rapidly on your wings, weighing them down and making the gales harder to fight. And heavy snow can quickly conceal the moon behind a curtain of white, making it impossible to navigate by your senses. I'm anxious to hunt, but it's not worth the risk of getting lost. We'll just have to wait.

"You're right," I tell Kuro. "Let's wait until it clears up."

She smiles and scoots closer to the fire, splaying her wings to keep herself warm.

I turn in a circle and curl against the ground, ignoring the churning sounds of an empty stomach. Living as a Princess on the guided lap of luxury, I never experienced hunger until I flew to Felra. It fills me with overwhelming guilt to know that Ellyntide is in no small part responsible for the pain the flock feels every winter. When I become...

...

...*If* I become Queen, I'll ensure nobody in the flock ever goes hungry again!

But for now, I wish to continue proving my value to the flock. Bonello may have allowed me to stay, but that doesn't mean I have the support of everyone in Flat Rock. I've heard the whispers as I fly around the aerie... more and more Kin feel anxious about me. They wonder if I'm responsible for the illness spreading through the Grandfather Tree. Or the unsettling lack of prey this frostwing.

They wonder if Relmoon was right.

Death has not followed my tailfeathers to Flat Rock... yet. Just how precarious is my relationship with Bonello? If he kicks me out, then where will I go? How will I prove myself, then?

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Lifting heavy eyes, I watch twirling bands of snow cascade through the entrance of the den, forming neat little piles against the stone floor. Falling snow is so peaceful and uncomplicated. I wish my life were like that.

Entranced, my thoughts numb before giving way to a gentle slumber.

“Wait a wingbeat. You’re telling me Farlanders build their dens inside trees, too?”

Tomcat gazes at me disbelievingly on the opposite side of the emberoot fire. Flanked to her sides are Fra and Kuro, equally surprised by my shocking revelation.

“That’s right,” I nod. “At least, the Farlanders in my Kingdom do. Nobody else has a tree as big as the Elder Tree.”

Kuro and Tomcat exchange skeptical glances.

Laying against her side with a visibly bulging stomach, Fra raises her dainty voice to speak. “And, this ‘*laboratory*’ you have. That’s where you learned so much about plants?”

“Kinda,” I say, curling my tail inwards. “I used it to start seedlings in frostwing before transporting them to the garden in greenwing.”

Fra blinks. I don’t think she understood a single word I said.

But that’s fine. It’s not like we can do anything else but tell stories this morning! The relentless snowstorm has kept us huddled by the emberoot fire inside Fra’s den. I’ve already told Kuro many stories about the Farlands, but this is the first time I’ve mentioned the buildings constructed on the branches of the Elder Tree. It’s not *that* interesting, but thinking about botany is a good way to distract myself from how hungry I am this morning.

Whump!

A muffled sound from outside Fra’s den interrupts the unyielding winds. It is the sound of a pair of talons landing amongst the shifting snow drifts. Parth left some time ago to

search the communal prey pile. He must have returned with Fra's prey. My gaze swivels to the entrance of the den, and I expect to see a burly, stone-colored drakon strut into view. Instead, a small drakaina appears, her copper feathers coated in wisps of wind-driven snow.

"Oh!" Fra chirps. "Frecci? Is that you?"

The healer of Flat Rock — who I met for the first time just a few days ago — steps in from the cold and shakes her wings of snow. "Blue skies, Fra. It's good to see you and your lillet healthy."

"Oh, well thank you," Fra says, loosening a smile. Mentioning her brood always makes Fra a little bit flustered. "Asha's telling us stories from the Farlands. Would you like to join us?"

Frecci shakes her head. "Actually, I've flown here to fetch her."

Instantly, my feathers rise in apprehension. "M-Me?"

"That's right," Frecci nods. "A Kin from the Grandfather Tree arrived at my den a claw's mark ago. Son-Of-Yzori wishes to speak with you."

"Nakino?" I squawk. "He flew all the way from the Grandfather Tree just to see *me?!?*"

“N-not quite,” Frecci replies quickly. “Sefri permitted him to visit Flat Rock. He wanted to speak with me about the illness spreading through the Grandfather Tree. It’s become quite severe.”

My heart rate spikes— this is the first news I’ve heard from the Grandfather Tree since I was exiled. I didn’t exactly leave on good terms with Nakino, but I’ve been nonetheless worried about his management of the illness. If he had to fly all the way to Flat Rock during a snowstorm, then that means it’s gotten bad. Really bad.

Frecci continues, “But when I mentioned you were in the aerie, he became quite intent on speaking to you.”

Erk...!

Ohhh, *this isn’t good*. This isn’t good at all. I feel myself slinking away from Frecci, silently pleading it hadn’t come to this. Me and Nakino never tied up our loose ends about Couple’s Night. We never talked about his feelings for me or the kiss we shared under the glow of those mysterious, iridescent plants. And now that I’ve been exiled from the Grandfather Tree, this may be the last chance we have to talk about it.

I gaze through the flames of the emberoot to see Kuro, her face deathly serious and her wings raised slightly from her sides. Even the mere mention of Nakino’s name has her hackles raised. Since Nakino and I first met, Kuro has been particularly hostile to his existence. She never missed the opportunity to intimidate and belittle when forced to interact with him. After I learned Kuro had feelings for me, I thought she was jealous of the time Nakino and I spent working together in his den. But after he stood in silence as I was exiled, well...

I loosen my wings and jump to my talons, accepting what needs to be done. “I understand. Let’s go see Nakino.”

Blowing snow ravages my feathers as I step into the morning blizzard outside Fra’s den. Following Frecci by sight alone, I lope from the cliff and pound my wings, struggling to gain control against the howling gales blasting up the side of the mountain. Frecci’s den is at the bottom of the aerie, down in the grassy clearing where Kin often gather during the warm seasons. But today, the winds are so fierce that it’s difficult to even lower myself out of the sky.

We land in the clearing and approach a stone wall with snow piled against it. The healer rears her head back and unleashes a blowtorch of flame, melting the snow and clearing the way to a hidden den behind the snow drifts. As we step inside, the unmistakable scent of burning emberroot fills my nostrils. And it’s there against a back wall that I find Nakino resting on his haunches before a roaring emberroot fire. His frost-crusting wings are mantled before the flame, working to melt the ice that encumbered them on his long flight from the Grandfather Tree.

“Nakino!” I gasp. He more closely resembles a bowl of melted ice cream than a mighty Lithan. “By the Goddess, are you—“

“Asha.” Nakino turns to face me with a deathly serious stare. His facial feathers are frozen, and his eyes are drooped in exhaustion. The journey from the Grandfather Tree has drained him of strength, and he’s in no mood for pleasantries. “We need to talk. In private.”

Frecci gives me a sidelong glance. She knows nothing about the history between us, but it doesn't take a genius to understand the tension in the air. I draw a deep breath and release it slowly through gritted fangs. Did Nakino really have to embarrass me in front of Frecci? For a fleeting moment, I felt regret about the conversation we're about to have. But now?

He can suffer a little bit more.

"Okay," I say, throwing up my wings in defeat. "Alright, fine. Let's talk."