

THE PRINCESS'S FEATHERS

91. Let's Talk

“Quickly, get inside! You’re as frozen as an ice pop.”

Stepping in from the cold, a frigid gust of wind buffets my tailfeathers, sending me deep into the shelter of the den. I cast about to see Nakino loping through the entrance, his boiler black feathers turned a pale shade of gray by the snow-driven gales. He shivers and shakes his wings of ice, recently reformed from the short flight to the top of the aerie.

“I’ll start a fire,” I offer, grabbing a stick of emberoot left against the back wall. Instead of replying coherently, Nakino issues a coarse grunt of acknowledgment.

He sounds as enthusiastic to have this conversation as I am. Resigning myself to fate, I hold the emberoot between my fangs and say, “We never got to talk about Couple’s Night.”

Nakino grumbles, “That’s because you didn’t want to talk about it.”

“Well, I’d like to talk about it now.”

“Do you?” Nakino asks, raising his voice. “Are you sure?”

...What?! Why is he upset?! “...Yes? Nakino, will you listen to me?”

A soft growl escapes the larger drakon’s chest, but his expression moderates. Slowly, he dips his head and murmurs, “Alright.”

Oooo-kay. Why is Nakino in such a foul mood? I know he had to fly all the way to Flat Rock in a blizzard, but that isn’t my fault. He choose to do that. Shouldn’t he be relieved to see the drakaina he’s in love with? Or did he forget there’s a psychopathic Dragon on the loose that wants me dead?

Unable to understand his emotions, I turn away from Nakino and find a spot to drop the emberoot. My first attempt to ignite it only causes the encrusted ice to simmer a little, but on the second try, a stout flame erupts. The den is bathed in light, revealing its true shape and warming the surrounding area.

“There,” I say. “Now, come on, mantle your wings.”

Nakino studies me a moment, then steps before the fire. He shivers as he draws his ice-encumbered wings open and rests gently against his haunches. The stone inside our den is icy cold, and it’ll remain that way for some time. As the fire begins to warm him, A strained breath flows past his fangs, and his feathers begin to relax.

Viewing Nakino in this state, I can't help but feel pity. Regardless of his intentions, flying the gales to Flat Rock was tremendously dangerous. Stifling the worry that I might regret what I'm about to do, I step forward and nuzzle my face against Nakino's, taking in his musty scent. As his face begins to warm, he exhales another breath, this time more relaxed. But before he can get too comfortable, I pull my head away and distance ourselves, turning in a circle to lay against the ground. I'm not sure what Nakino's expecting from this conversation, but the way he spoke to me earlier has only reinforced my feelings for him.

I avert my gaze to stare into the fire, then begin slowly, "I didn't want to talk about it because I didn't know Kuro had feelings for me."

"I know," Nakino says bluntly. "I overheard Frope talking to you."

He heard us in the den...?!

On that day, Nakino interrupted the end of my conversation with Tomcat to ask for my assistance with the first two patients who came down with the illness. He must have approached the den but remained quiet to listen to our conversation.

I exhale and tell him, "Then I shouldn't have to tell you how much it caught me by surprise."

Nakino keeps his eyes averted from me and stares across the den. "I was convinced you had already talked to Kuro about your feelings. When Sefri announced we were paired together, and she *didn't* shred me to pieces..." he trails off, then chuckles lightly to himself, "Well, until I heard Frope, it was the only explanation that made sense."

To this day, I still don't know why Kuro concealed her feelings for me. Even as Couple's Night approached — and the prospect of me falling for some drakon loomed — she kept her muzzle shut. It astonishes me how much restraint she had, watching me fly off on a date with the drakon she disliked so much.

“We've since talked about it,” I reveal with a coy smile.

A slab of ice slips away from Nakino's wing and shatters against the ground. He slides his gaze to me, and a glimmer of hope as fervent as the flame beside us shimmers in his eyes.

“But,” I continue. “I told her I... wasn't ready yet to think about romance. I can't let go of my family in Ellyntide just yet.”

Nakino's expression sinks, and he turns his head away. He gazes into the fire and asks, “What about us?”

I blink in confusion, his candidness catching me off-guard. “What do you mean?”

Nakino turns back and asks, “Don't your feelings for me mean anything, Asha?”

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My feelings for him?

I curl my talons against the ground. "Nakino..."

"You told me you enjoyed our kiss," he says, lowering his head closer to mine.

"I know, but..." My voice dissipates as a certain discomfort writhes beneath my feathers. "It was just a kiss. A single act of kindness isn't commitment."

Nakino snorts, "Didn't you feel anything that night?"

I lay in silence, unable to think of a satisfactory response. Or maybe I'm just scared to say aloud what I really think.

Nakino takes another step forward and stretches his neck until his head nearly hovers above mine. He whispers, scarcely louder than the fire beside us, "When you looked into my eyes, I saw a drakaina who admired me. By your own admission, you never met anyone in the Farlands who liked plants as much as I do. Correct?"

Nakino pauses, perhaps expecting me to interject... or to admit I've been a fool all along, and he's right. He's not, of course, so I remain silent. How much longer is he going to

pressure me about this? Kuro had no trouble respecting my decision to put off romance, so why can't he?

The black drakon's frown deepens. With anger creeping into his voice, he continues, "Why can't you see that we're right for each other?! How can you be blind to the connection we had? And when are you going to admit that you love me more than—"

My patience runs out. "Nakino, stop!"

I slap the top of my wing against his face to push him away from me. His head recoils mid-sentence, giving me a precious moment to jump to my talons and put some distance between us. As Nakino recovers, he flares his wings wide in anger, drawing them open to a length that extends nearly the entire span of the den. He flares his nostrils and drops his head low, issuing a savage warning growl that trembles the stones beneath my talons.

I flare my wings to match Nakino's stance and issue a sharp riposte of my own, hoping to match his effortless intimidation. One of the largest and smallest Dragons in the flock — the difference in size between us has never been so apparent. But despite Nakino's advantage, I have to stand my ground. Mom never allowed herself to be pushed around by King Finn, and Nakino has to learn the same lesson!

"Listen to me," I hiss through bared fangs. "I attended Couple's Night because I had no other choice. I'm not ready to commit myself to the flock, not until I exhaust every option to contact my family in Ellyntide. If that time comes, *then* we'll talk. But not a day sooner! Do you understand?"

By the Goddess, what a nightmare this has become! This isn't at all what I wanted to tell Nakino today. I wanted to tell him, 'no.' I wanted to close the book between us before we even started writing it.

Once, I enjoyed his company and found his grumpy attitude endearing. It felt like a dream to find a dragon as passionate about plants as I was. But no more. I no longer have feelings for Nakino. Not after he cowered behind Sefri at the Grandfather Tree, and certainly not after threatening me today. There may come a time when I have to be forthright about my true feelings for him... will he take it with civility? Or will one of the largest Dragons in the flock corner me again in a fit of rage? The uncertainty makes me uncomfortable, but I'll just have to lie now and deal with the consequences later.

Nakino studies me, his expression unwavering. He gathers his thoughts and rumbles, "It's more than that. There's something else that's bothering you. What is it?"

I frown and avert my eyes. *Damnit!* How can he tell? But there's no way I can be honest when he's cornered me inside a den. What should I do?!

"Tell me!" Nakino growls impatiently.

Argh, I have to stand up to him, but how?

What if... I told him the partial truth?

“Alright, fine,” I spit. “The way you covered behind Sefri was despicable.”

“Despicable?!” Nakino scoffs, throwing his wings up.

“Yes!” I say. “If you had agreed with Kuro about Sefri’s behavior, then I might still be allowed in the aerie! Instead, you couldn’t even tell her I wasn’t the source of the illness!”

Nakino growls, “That’s because I can’t.”

I gasp and take a terrified step backward. He... doesn’t think it’s absurd? How could he..?

The admission catches me utterly by surprise. It’s like I no longer know who Nakino is. Trembling, I ask, “Y-you don’t think he was right, do you? Relmoon?”

As I speak, the anger across Nakino’s face subsides. It seems he realized he made a mistake. “Asha,” he answers in a calmer voice. “Listen to me. I don’t agree with Relmoon or the things he said about you. But you taught me to have a scientific mind about plants, one that’s unburdened by prejudice and bias. Until I can confirm the source of the illness—
“

“Use your *mind* to understand it’s jimbaldung!” I screech, unconsciously using a Kin swear. “If I was the source of the illness, then why didn’t I infect Kin the moment I landed in Felra!?”

“I won’t know for sure unless I find it!!”

The howl of a bone-chilling gale caps the end of Naknio’s sentence, thrusting a flurry of snow and ice deep into the den. The blanket of white collides against our feathers and quickly extinguishes the emberroot fire. By the cover of darkness, I fold my wings close to my body and slip past Nakino on the outer wall of the den, following the disparate rays of daylight shining in from outside. By the time Nakino realizes what’s happened, I find myself standing in the snowy entrance of the den, free to leave as I please.

“I’ve had enough of this,” I growl, lashing my tail. “Believe whatever you want, Son-Of-Yzori. Just... stay away from me.”

As I turn to leave, Nakino cries out, “Asha, wait!”

Against my better judgment, I plant my legs into the snowdrifts and swivel around to face Nakino. Daylight shining past me illuminates his face, allowing me to see intense regret painted across his feathers.

“I-If we were mated,” he trembles. “Then I could get you back into the Grandfather Tree. I could argue that Sefri has no right to kick you out. I would never be mated to the Dragon causing the illness, right? Asha, don’t you see? We could save lives!”

My muzzle drifts agape, unable to believe a word Nakino just said. I would have never expected him to be so pathetic, so vile as to hold the lives of his patients hostage so that

he could be mated. But that's precisely what he did. How can he call himself a healer? It's not even worth explaining how despicable he is.

"Goodbye, Nakino."

Before he can object further, I leap into the air and feel myself lofted by the frozen winds. I gain some altitude away from the rock before gliding down to the entrance of Fra's den. Inside, Tomcat and Kuro are preening by the fire, while Parth has since returned with Fra's prey.

"Oh!" the dainty drakaina chirps, raising her bloodied head from a leg of spikehorn. "Asha, you're back. Is everything alright?"

As the Dragons turn their attention toward me, I briefly consider telling them the truth.

"Yeah," I lie through a feigned smile. "Everything's fine."

92. Warmth

Snow crunches beneath my talons as I land on the opposite side of a redwood, causing a dusting of snow to drift from the branches above. I raise my head to taste the scents — a gryhawk is perched in the sequoia a hundred yards to my left, but the trail left by my prey is as cold as the ice on my feathers. I stifle the momentary frustration, fold my wings tight, and leap through a snow-covered thicket. It's early morning, and Kuro is counting on me to return prey.

As I emerge on the opposite side of the thicket, it's clear that something has changed. I raise my head once more, this time visually assessing my surroundings. The forest is unchanged, yet I know it's different – something indescribable has occurred, something I can't quite put a feather on.

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If only strange intuitions caught prey.

I lower my head and continue forward, following a depression in the ground towards the home of the gryhawk – a prominent sequoia that dominates this section of forest. I approach the tree, trod over its roots, and hold close to the trunk as I circle to the opposite side.

Then, the forest changes.

As I round the trunk, I suddenly find myself in an utterly different place than I was just moments before. Gone is the deciduous forest, and in its place is a dense evergreen canopy, a snow-packed clearing, and a towering tree... but not just any tree. This is the Grandfather Tree! My feathers stand on end, unable to believe what I see. But more importantly, I'm not supposed to be here! I'm exiled from the Grandfather Tree! Instinctively, I whirl about and try to return from where I came, only to find the grove of trees surrounding the Grandfather Tree. What the fwegh is going on?!

I slink behind the trunk of the sequoia, shielding myself from the view of any Kin who might be lounging around the aerie. But as my heart thunders against my chest, I notice something peculiar: a complete lack of scents.

Usually, I can smell Kin the moment I land in the field outside the tree. But here, there's nothing, not even the stale smell of prey from the communal pile. More confused than ever, I peek around the trunk and discover the aerie utterly devoid of life. No Kin lounging on the branches, no prey by the large old stump... I'm alone.

Where did everyone go? And how did I get here?

With seemingly nothing to lose, I step out from behind the tree and square my wings, anxious to investigate the scene. With my senses high and my head held low, I step into the clearing, searching for any trace of the flock.

Then, I notice something – a shimmer of iridescent light at the edge of my vision. I turn to face the source and discover a small red bird perched upon the lower roots of the Grandfather Tree, its feathers dappled in a brilliant, glowing light.

“Gust?!” I react in stark surprise. “Wait, fwegh!”

Ack!! I'm not supposed to acknowledge his existence, much less say his name aloud!

The liaison of the deities raises his head to face me, and our eyes meet. For a breathless moment, we study each other, and a peculiar feeling overcomes me – the sincere belief that if he so desired, this measly prey-bird could end my life with a mere flick of his wing. Having witnessed his power firsthand, I have no reason to doubt my unsettling intuition.

When we last spoke, I learned that one of the deities had orchestrated my arrival in Felra so I would have the best chance possible to join the flock. It keeps me up at night, thinking about everything that's happened to me and how it's all connected. As I've learned more about Felra and the forgotten history of the Animals that once lived here, I've become increasingly convinced that the deities have something important planned for me... something to justify my incredible transformation.

That something could be revealed to me now.

With renewed purpose, I cross the clearing and stand at the base of the roots. "Why are you here?" I ask, gazing up at the glowing bird. "And where did everyone go?"

Instead of deigning a reply, Gust ruffles his feathers and goes on twittering like any normal bird would.

Oooo-kay, he doesn't want to talk. I already know Gust is divine, so why continue the feral bird charade? Growing impatient, I hop onto a nearby root and climb the tree toward Gust's perch.

<This way, Princess.>

A disembodied voice, separate from the moon around me, echoes inside my head. Instinctively, I freeze and nearly tumble sideways off the root in shock. What was *THAT?! Just now, I heard Gust's voice. Somehow, he spoke to me inside my head!!*

Before I can react further, Gust takes flight from his perch, suffusing a wisp of snow into the air. A glowing trail of light follows his tailfeathers as he rises over the roots and disappears, flying inwards towards the ancient tree's trunk. Acting on a hunch, I leap into the air and pound my wings to follow him.

Following the trail of dappled light, I find myself near the top of the gnarled root structure at a particularly large root that dives into a yawning, snow-filled chasm. I land at the base of the crevasse and step inside, following a well-worn path in the snow toward a pool of clear water. Here, I find Gust perched above a crook in the roots where water flows from the depths of the moon.

"This is the rootspring," I say. "Kin fly here to drink when the puddles are low. Why are you showing this to me?"

At that utterance, the world around me wavers like a puff of smoke caught in a breeze.

SKREEAK?!

I cry out, shocked and frightened by the sudden betrayal of reality itself. Slowly, the rootspring and all its scents fade from existence, replaced by the unyielding darkness of a sullen, black void.

“Gust?!” I ask aloud, bordering on panic. I flail my head about, desperately trying to locate him. “What just happened?! Where are you!?”

<I’m over here,> he responds, somewhere to my left.

I turn about, expecting to find Gust perched upon the empty ground. Instead, some fifty yards away, I see a snow-covered grove framed in a square against the black void. A cold breeze reaches my nostrils, bringing the scents of an alpine forest.

“What is this?” I ask, astounded that such things can be possible.

<Come and see for yourself.>

My talons click as I trot across the void, searching for any sign of Gust in the apparition before me. As I come upon the grove, the void that wavers and dissolves, and the moon as I know it reforms anew. I find myself among the conifers, standing at the rim of a large, snow-lined depression where the undergrowth is strangely absent. What’s more, the shape of the depression is unusually consistent – too consistent to be formed by nature.

Hearing the sound of feathers above me, I gaze up to see Gust perched in the lower branches of a fir. “What is this place?” I ask him. “Did Animals construct this, too?”

Gust swivels to face me, then preens his chest lightly. <The answers you seek are buried beneath the snow.>

Buried in the snow, huh? Normally, I wouldn’t dare to use my fire in the middle of a forest. But this can’t be a *real* forest. No, I must be asleep at Flat Rock. I’m dreaming right now, and Gust is sharing a vision of something important with me.

With the mandate of the liaison, I leap forward and unleash my fire, quickly melting the snow around the depression. As bare ground emerges, a series of fallen trees are revealed. I extinguish my flame and approach them, trodding over muddy ground. So far, I’ve encountered nothing out of the ordinary. Could these trees be some kind of clue?

I approach the trunk closest to me and rest my talon atop it. It’s slightly damp with a strong scent of rotting wood – again, nothing unusual. But as I idly roll the trunk under my talon, another scent emerges. I push it forward to reveal the moist underside, and what I see there takes my breath away: a shrubby, black fungi is growing in patches against the decaying wood.

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“*Pilophorus acicularis?!*” I gasp. “The Devil’s Matchstick lichen?!”

Feathers rustle behind me, louder than ever before. Sensing Gust is close, I cast about to face him, only to find something far more incredible. As I turn, the world shifts to become a mottled mess of color, like someone smeared their fingers against a wet painting. When I stop twisting, I find I'm no longer in the snow. I'm no longer on Felra. I'm in a room, a building – the Lordanou Palace.

Sofl's lab.

I gasp loud enough for the Goddess herself to hear me. Everything is exactly as I remember it on the day I left. The books stacked against the wall, the samples on the desk, and the dusty tome opened in the center of the room.

I'm... home.

So, that must mean...

I raise my forelegs but instead find a pair of fuzzy black hands. I stare at them unblinking, unable to believe my eyes. These are *my* hands. I curl my fingers, mesmerized by their simple, intricate movements. I gaze down at my legs and see two of them, clad in the most expensive slacks money can buy. I try to unfurl my wings but only lift my shoulders slightly.

It's... It's really true! I'm a Lemur again! I turned back to normal!!

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“Oh my Goddess,” I whisper. “Sofl...?! *Mother?!!*”

I sprint to the door leading into the hallway and attempt to fling it open, only to find the knob frozen. I try again with more force but encounter the same result.

“Hello?!” I yell, banging my hands against the door. “It’s me, Asha!! I’m not dead!! Please, can anyone hear me?!”

I scream and pound my fists until they’re numb with pain. Doubts infiltrate my thoughts, and an unbidden feeling overcomes me – the fervent belief that no matter what, I will never, ever, walk through this door. Yes, that’s right... I can never walk through this door because it’s not real. *I’m* not real, and neither is the moon I find myself in. Gust created this strange, dream-like reality to show me something important.

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Stubbornly, I run to a window on the opposite side of the room and whip open the curtains. Warm sunlight floods the room, revealing the palace’s grand front lawn. Horse-drawn carts are trundling up the tree-lined path, its cobblestones covered in a scarlet array of fallen oak leaves. It’s a sunny autumn day – the day that I left Varecia to travel to the Eastern Weald.

“What...?” I ask aloud. “I don’t understand. Gust?”

Feathers ruffle behind me. I turn around to see a single red feather resting at the bottom of the dusty tome, the one Sofl was translating on the day I left. I approach it, and something compels me to read the translation.

“Gather one part yarrow, two parts fireweed, one part axsage, and a pinch of Devils Matchstick lichen. Agitate the lichen, then wrap the compound in fireweed leaves. Scorch with an open flame. Combine with yarrow and axsage in 8fl water. Agitate vigorously.”

As the words roll off my tongues, the lab and my restored Lemur body dissolve soundlessly into nothing. Once more, the unyielding black void surrounds me. I call out to Gust, but no sound is produced. In the absence of reality, I’ve become formless, drifting through the veil as a pale wisp of flickering blue light.

Somehow, I understand these things.

In the distance, two other lights appear – red and orange. I try to focus on them, but my thoughts are numb, stunted by the specter I’ve become. A force unseen acts against me, causing me to drift closer to the lights. As I approach, their energy begins to twist with my own, forming complex interactions of light. They feel... oddly comforting to me.

I open my eyes.

Greeted by the light of an emberoot fire, I raise my head slowly. I've returned to Fra's den, surrounded by the Kin I've come to know in the Snowfell Flock. Fra, Kuro, and Frope... they're sleeping peacefully around me, completely unaware of the journey I just returned from. It's the middle of the night, and I'm back in my Lithan form. As the warmth that returned with me begins to fade, my consciousness comes back into focus.

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...What the FWEUGH just happened?!

"It was somewhere up north," I continue. "The distribution of conifers was consistent with an alpine biome, except I was at the bottom of a valley. It didn't correlate with anything in the Great Valley, so it must be somewhere farther north. I thought it could be in the flock's territory beyond White Mountain."

Looking down at me, Kuro tilts her head and blinks. She doesn't understand a word I'm saying, but that's okay. She doesn't need to know what a conifer or a biome is. She just needs to trust me.

"But it wasn't natural. That much, I'm certain. Animals must have created it. If we could find this place and the lichen, we could develop a treatment for the illness. Kuro, have you ever seen a place like that before?"

The morning sun shines from a clear blue sky, warming our feathers through a patchwork canopy of snow-brimmed trees. I brought Kuro to this remote location on Flat Rock's island to tell her about my visions from Gust, far away from the prying ears of gossiping Kin. I've been restless all morning, unable to concentrate on anything but the visions Gust showed me overnight. The more I think about them, the more I become convinced that the deities want me to stop the illness spreading through the Grandfather Tree. In fact, it might be the reason why I was brought to Felra.

Think about it: What if the elixir in that old book is the only cure for the illness? There's no way someone like Nakino or Frecci could develop it, so what if the only solution was to transform a Farlander, lead them to join the flock, and have them invent the cure?

I'll admit it's a bit of a stretch. So many things have to go right for that plan to work. Why did they choose to transform the future Monarch of Ellyntide instead of someone far less important? Professor Willow knows more about botany than I do, so why didn't he become a Lithan? But if this is really the path the deities want me to follow, then... I accept it. I'll trust their judgment and walk that path.

Kuro studies me for a moment. It seems she's having trouble believing my story. Finally, she tells me in a dry voice, "No. I'm not sure where that place could be."

I exhale a muted sigh and allow my wings to droop. "Then we have to go looking for it."

"What?!" Kuro growls.

"Kuro, it could save lives!"

Kuro flashes agitation before her expression moderates. She lowers her wings and says, “That’s a lot of faith to put on a dream.”

“I know, but—“

“Even if Relmoon wasn’t looking for you, the territory beyond White Mountain is dangerous. Storms can arrive in a talon’s mark and make flying impossible. There are no dens or prey beyond White Mountain.”

At this point, Relmoon’s *flock* may present as much of a threat as the far-flung territory. As yesterday’s storm passed, word reached Flat Rock that Relmoon’s thugs had been attacking Kin and stealing prey. Evidently, trying to kill me wasn’t enough.

“There’s one other thing,” Kuro says, lowering her voice. “Frope wants to return to her family’s den for the rest of the season.”

“She does?!” I reel in stunned surprise.

Kuro nods. “She told me while you were at Frecci’s den. She wants to help her father hunt until greenwing arrives. So, if we fly beyond White Mountain, it’ll just be us.”

I turn away from Kuro and gaze silently across the forest. This is terrible news! Tomcat has been an integral part of our hunting trips. On those unlucky days when it seems like every prey-animal in the valley knows I'm tracking them, she's the one who flies home with prey in her jaws. It's her right to return to her family's den, of course. But, gosh... this one hurts. I owe Tomcat so much.

This isn't good. Kuro has some persuasive arguments against searching for the lichen. And who could blame her? Risking your life over something seen in a dream is a huge leap of faith. How can I explain to her just how compelling my vision was without revealing Gust's existence?

Wait a second...

I already told her about Gust. It was on my second day in Felra during our very first flight to White Mountain. I asked her if she had ever seen a strange, glowing bird, and she told me 'no.' So, it's not a big deal if I mention him again, right? I'll just act like his identity is still unknown to me.

And if it *isn't* okay, then, well... I'll find out pretty quickly.

"Kuro," I say, gazing up at her. "I know it's dangerous, but... I think Keuvra wants me to find the lichen."

Kuro raises her wings in curiosity. "...Really?"

“Do you remember when I asked you about the glowing red bird? The one that led me to the False-Kin?”

Kuro’s eyes go wide. Where a few moments ago she seemed irritated, now she appears brimming with concern. “Did you see it again?”

I nod slowly. “I-It was in my dream. It brought me to the place where I found the lichen. Kuro... I think this could be the reason why I became a Lithan. I think Keuvra brought me to Felra so I could treat the illness using my knowledge of botany. And I think that bird was showing me how to accomplish that.”

Kuro growls lightly in contemplation, her tail swaying rapidly over the snow drifts. “Asha...” she speaks slowly, turning her head away from me. “That bird nearly led you to the skies of Maki. How can you be sure it isn’t trying to trick you again?”

“Kuro, if that bird hadn’t led me to the False-Kin, then we would have never met each other. I would have died of starvation or been killed by a different False-Kin. Don’t you see? It was trying to help me join the flock!”

Again, Kuro rumbles in contemplation. It seems she’s never considered that angle before. She turns to me and quips, “You sound awfully sure of yourself.”

“W-Well!” I stumble. “It’s, um. I’ve thought about it a lot, okay? I think about these things all the time.”

Kuro chitters to herself and says, “Okay. I think I understand.”

Wait, what?! “...You do?”

“Yeah,” she says. She approaches and looks down on me with those shimmering, merlot eyes. “That bird must be important if you saw it twice. We’ll fly to White Mountain and wait for a break in the snow. Then, we’ll mark every guiding tree and fly back at the first sign of snow. How does that sound?”

How does it sound?! “That sounds wonderful!” I exclaim, overcome with relief. I’m unsure what convinced her to trust me, and I don’t care! I’m just so happy that she believes me! Without thinking, I lurch forward before quickly stopping myself. I was about to nuzzle my head against Kuro’s.

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...Okay, maybe just a little nuzzle. I hop a step and stretch my neck as far it will go, brushing the tips of my facial feathers against Kuro’s. My partiality pushed aside, I allow myself to enjoy Kuro’s spiced scent for a fleeting, joyful moment.

“We’ll leave tomorrow morning,” she chitters, and a smile brighter than the sun shines across her face. “Now, how about we share some prey?”

“Sure!” I smile back, basking in her glow.

I'm not a fool — I know Kuro has ulterior motives. But just this once, I want to appreciate the Dragon who's always been so considerate of me. It's the least I could do — A small act of reciprocal kindness for the soul I've always wanted in my life but never had. I just wish there was some way I could tell her that without it being taken the wrong way.

...

Our business complete, I follow my dear friend back into the clearing and into the sky, following her tailfeathers as we ride the thermals back to Flat Rock.

93. Unlikely Help

RARR!!

A stout cry erupts from below, echoing through the whirling tempest of snow and ice. Heaving wingbeats strain to gain altitude against the gales, and a moment later, Kuro glides into view below my foretalons. On fairer days, her soot-colored plumage would stand out against the outline of pearl-white snow. But here, she's practically invisible, veiled from sight by the heavy snow squall and ice-encumbered wings.

She certainly can't see me if I can barely see her. I glide beside her and shout, "Did you find something?"

Kuro's head swivels towards me, and relief floods her face. She flicks her ears towards the ground and yells, "Down there! We can sleep against the side of that hill!"

A gust of wind pelts my face with ice. "You mean outside?"

"All the dens are snowed in. We have no other choice!"

I scan the ground and locate what Kuro was describing: nestled in a grove of redwoods is a rocky outcrop against the side of a small, snow-covered hill. There are no dens, no caves, or really anywhere suitable that can act as shelter.

...Is she being serious? Even as a Lemur, I was never one to complain about my sleeping accommodations. But *this*? Quite frankly, *this* sucks. At best, there may be a rocky overhang to stop a couple of snowflakes from landing on top of us. And how are we supposed to start a fire when all the emberoot is buried under snow drifts?

But what else can we do? Bonello asked us to hunt this morning, and it wasn't until early afternoon that we departed Flat Rock to fly north to White Mountain. Resigning myself to a night in the cold, I exhale stiffly and tell Kuro, "...Alright. Let's land."

We lower ourselves from the sky and land in a clearing a short distance from the hill. Following primarily by scent, Kuro leads us through the snow-covered forest and toward the rocks we saw from the air. It's not until we're at the base of the hill that it becomes visible through the blinding snow. The bottom half is an ice-crusting rock wall with wind-sculpted snow drifts burying everything in sight. That is, everything but the space cast beneath a jutting overhang of slate gray stone near the site of a felled sequoia. The wind

seems to be blowing past this location, creating a snow-free respite from the gales. It's not much, but for tonight, it's shelter.

As night falls, we gather the remains of fallen trees to create an adequate, if short-lived, denfire. Kuro says it won't last the night, but the warmth should help us fall asleep more easily. With little reason to stay up past sundown, we retire for the night, our bellies empty.

Beneath the stone overhang, I settle against the snow-dusted rockface and tighten my wings. As the icy winds blow around us, doubts begin to cross my mind — I've never slept outside before. What happens if I can't fall asleep? If my feathers begin to freeze, will I wake up?

As Kuro steps past the fire, she notices the anxiety scrawled across my face. "I'll try to block the wind as much as I can," she assures with a gentle smile.

"O-Okay," I nod. "Thank you, Kuro."

True to her word, Kuro has continued to respect my wishes for us to sleep apart. Even now, as we sleep on a pile of frozen rocks in a fierce snowstorm, she isn't so much as offering to lay a feather against me. That was how we slept with each other — her wings draped over me, our mutual warmth keeping us snug on even the coldest nights. With perhaps the coldest night of them all still ahead of us... I'm beginning to have some second thoughts about my request.

But before I can act on any of them, Kuro settles beside me, her body bearing the brunt of the storm. "Fair dreams, Asha."

Momentary guilt causes me to pause before saying, “Goodnight, Kuro.”

With snowflakes swirling around us, I curl into a ball, laying my head past my tailfeathers and using my wing as a shield. An icy wind blows past Kuro, throwing loose snow onto my feathers. I shiver momentarily, allowing my fangs to chatter in my muzzle. I hear Kuro’s feathers shift through closed eyes, and a small sound of anguish escapes her.

Should I... ask Kuro to sleep with me?

As I contemplate the idea, my thoughts begin to numb, drifting as they often do back to my home in Ellyntide. With memories of simpler times playing through my head, It’s not long before I settle into a peaceful slumber.

Consciousness returns to me at the sound of a foreboding growl and a stiff kick to my leg.

Quick as a lightning bolt, I raise my head and focus sleep-dulled eyes. Through the pale light of dawn, I see Kuro standing before me at the front of the shelter, her wings drawn open and her head lowered close to the ground. My hind leg is in mild pain – Kuro has been kicking it to rouse me from sleep. Confused, I gaze past her, and everything becomes clear: a pack of Litsha, no more than eight strong, have surrounded us in the forest!

“Asha,” Kuro growls over my startled gasp. “Stand up. Slowly.”

Following her orders, I slowly rise from the ground, focusing on the pack. Until now, they've remained silent, standing at a distance and not so much as raising a paw from the snow. But upon seeing me awake, they yelp and bare their fangs in excitement. They were hoping I'd stay asleep and make an easy prey-kill.

I'll give them one thing: they're clever.

This is a dangerous situation. Three or four Litsha are no problem for a group of experienced huntresses like us. But a pack of eight? We'd have our work cut out in an open space. I'd expect us to survive, but not without some injuries. But here in the forest, surrounded and cornered on all sides... I'm less certain about our odds.

Kuro flicks her ears forward, signaling a path past the left edge of the pack and into the forest. "When I give the sign, we'll run for the clearing."

A growl of acknowledgement rumbles my chest feathers. With the battle lines laid down, the Litsha become rowdy, cavorting and yelping for us to make the first move. I bunch my muscles, ready for the fight and Kuro's command.

"...Now!"

Like diving hawks, we tuck our wings and propel forward, racing to the far edge of the pack's line. Our enemies react in turn, leaping to cut us off at the base of the felled redwood. Hunched for a fight, they watch helplessly as Kuro leaps into the air to clear the

fallen trunk. Snowy branches rain down from above as Kuro's body barrels through the canopy, causing a few of the Litsha to scatter in fear. As she lands on the opposite side, I approach the disoriented pack and prepare to mirror Kuro's leap. But the pack senses my plan and reaches skyward to intervene. I leap into the air and hook a talon low, clipping the edge of a Litsha's face and sending their head spiraling backward. Blood flows forth, but not from prey. While aiming my claws, another Litsha from the opposite direction snagged their fangs against the back of my hindtalon. I sail over the tree and land where Kuro impacted into a snowdrift. Purple blood trails behind me as sprint for the clearing.

SKREAK!! SKREAAAK!!

I shriek into the crisp morning air, hoping my desperate pleas reach the ears of a Kin on their morning hunt. As my call echoes around the valley, Kuro adds her own cry.

RORARRGH!!

We bound through the forest, leaping and dodging trees as fast as our talons will allow us. I can hear the pack behind me, laughing and yelping as they close the gap between us. In a larger forest, they would quickly catch up to me. But today, it's only a short distance to the clearing we landed in the night prior. Following Kuro's lead, I leap through a snow-covered thicket and find myself back in the clearing. In any other season, we would take-off now to escape the moonbound Litsha. But here in the depths of winter, the chance to prey on an entire pack is simply too enticing. Without speaking, me and Kuro cast about and lower into an attack position, ready to ambush our prey the moment they appear.

And appear they do, leaping through the thickets at once, a writhing mass of tan and white lunging towards us with fangs bared and claws outstretched. Kuro is the first to attack, leaping onto a Litsha's back and immediately lunging for its neck. But before she can execute a killing maneuver, the Litsha flops to the ground and reaches up to swipe at Kuro's face. Unwilling to be injured so early in the fight, she detaches herself from the Litsha and leaps away, only to land into another pile of cavorting prey. I lope forward to

help my dear friend, only to see a Litsha barrel through a snow drift and cut me off halfway. I pivot at the last moment and attempt to hook a wing claw against my enemy, only for it to sail cleanly out of the way as the Litsha drops into the same snowdrift it burst out of.

If you discover this narrative on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen. Please report the violation.

We trade blows, occasionally scoring claws on each other, but neither Kuro nor I can execute a killing maneuver. There are simply too many Litsha moving too fast for us to reach their necks safely. As the stalemate drags on, doubts begin to enter my mind. Was it a mistake to challenge the pack? Should we take flight before one of us gets hurt?

RARGH!

A baleful cry splits the hollow, momentarily drawing the pack's attention. But for one unlucky Litsha, it's already too late. A shadowy presence falls from the sky like a meteor, its hackles shimmering gold against the day's first rays of sunlight. With its foretalons extended, the Lithan hooks onto the back of the helpless Litsha before carrying it a short distance and hammering it into the ground. Quicker than lightning, his head lunges for the neck.

Instantly, the cadence of the battle shifts. Harried yelps rise from the pack as they realize the advantage they once enjoyed has vanished in a pool of red snow. They scatter like rose petals to the wind, making a mad dash for the forest's edge with their tails tucked neatly behind them. As they vanish into the underbrush, the drakon rears his head and issues a savage roar of defiance.

ROOOARR!

The clearing falls silent, and the copper drakon turns about to greet us. Our eyes meet, and his eyes widen in surprise. Me and him, we've met each other before. How could I possibly forget the second Dragon I ever saw?

"Enyll!!"

"Asha..." he trails off, surprised to see me. Then, his gaze slides to my left. "...Kuro."

His former den mate stands motionless with a face of steel, refusing to acknowledge him in any way.

"Enyll, thank you so much!" I exclaim, bounding forward. I reach up and nuzzle against his head, turning him as stiff as a dead spikehorn. "You arrived just in time! There were so many of them!"

A moment passes, and Enyll quickly returns the nuzzle before separating himself from me. He retreats a step, his wings still raised, and darts a befuddled gaze between Kuro and I. Like everyone else in the flock, he must have heard the rumors about our supposed relationship.

"Um, Yeah. You're welcome," he manages to blurt out.

Kuro approaches my flank and asks dryly, “What are you doing here?”

“I was hunting prey for Tall Spires,” Enyll snorts. “I moved there after departing your den.”

Oh, so that’s where Enyll went! I saw him on Couple’s Night, but we haven’t spoken to each other since the day I was admitted into the flock. Since that gathering, I’ve occasionally wondered about the other Dragon who saved my life on my first day in Felra.

The copper drakon continues in a faintly smug voice, “How did you two manage to get ambushed?”

Standing beside me, I feel warm irritation emanating from Kuro’s feathers. I step past her and say, “Last night, we were flying to White Mountain when it began to snow. We decided to land and spend the night on a nearby hill. I awoke to discover they had surrounded us.”

Enyll’s gaze slides to the Litsha he preyed upon, and he shakes his head in dismay. “Miserable creatures. It seems like you’re unharmed.”

“We’re *fine*,” Kuro speaks in a voice blunt enough to maul somebody.

The former den mates stare at each other with their wings perked, the tension so thick you could divide it with a claw. But before one of them can go feral, Enyll peels his gaze from Kuro and settles it onto me. His face softens, and a particular resolve forms across it.

“Here,” he says, returning to his prey-kill. He grabs the Litsha in his jaws, then drops it into the snow before me and Kuro. “You’ve had a rough morning.”

Wha..?! He’s offering his prey to us?!

“O-oh, Enyll,” I stumble, running my fangs through my chest feathers. “We can’t accept this. That’s your prey-kill, not—”

“Take it,” he growls. “I haven’t forgotten the kindness you offered my sister.”

Oh, that’s right... on my first night in Felra, I offered to share some of my prey with Enyll’s sister, Fra. It seems the time has come to repay that act of generosity. And it couldn’t have come at a better time! My last meal was the frozen scraps of a Spikehorn’s neck, granted to me nearly a day prior in Flat Rock.

I cast a glance at Kuro, who’s surely just as hungry as I am. Her brow remains furrowed in irritation; I think she would sooner starve than accept Enyll’s generosity. But to my surprise, her face begins to soften. She takes a cautious step forward, then stops with one talon held in the air.

Perhaps she'll follow my lead. I step past the dawdling drakaina and tip my wings to Enyll. "Thank you," I say before burying my head in warm viscera. Moments later, I sense Kuro's head beside my own.

As we enjoy our first full meal in days, Enyll issues a stiff grunt. "I should return to my hunt."

Muffled talonsteps begin to trod away from us. With a tendon hanging from my jaws, I lift my head and shout, "Enyll, wait!"

The copper drakon, a few yards removed, stops and swivels his neck around.

"Why don't you join us?" I offer.

"*What?!*" The other two Dragons shriek in unison.

"O-Okay, listen!" I stumble. "I know you and Kuro dislike each other."

"That's an understatement," Kuro rumbles.

“But! Me and Kuro are journeying to the territory beyond White Mountain. I believe there’s a special plant there that could treat the illness at the Grandfather Tree. We planned to fly there alone, but it would be safer if another Kin joined us.”

Enyll tilts his head, and his tail sways slowly behind him. “A special plant? Since when did you know anything about plants?”

“Since she was a Lemur,” Kuro answers, attempting to stifle a growl.

I incline my head. “Me and Nakino were working together to discover a treatment before, um, some stuff happened. I’m pretty certain I know the treatment now, but I’m just missing one ingredient.”

Enyll’s eyes remain slits. But instead of dismissing us, he closes his wings and reapproaches. “Tell me more about this special plant.”

Beside me, Kuro’s eyes widen.

I slurp up the tendon hanging from my jaw. “In the Farlands, we call it *Pilophorus acicularis*, or more commonly, Devil’s Matchstick lichen.”

Enyll’s face bends in surprise, and he shares a glance with Kuro. “I see... such strange Farlander words. I’ve never heard of a ‘lichen’ before.”

“Well, this one usually grows on decaying wood, but it can also be found on rocky outcrops. In frostwing, I suspect it could only be found on the underside of logs. Specifically, I’m looking for depressions in the ground where fallen trees are buried under snowdrifts.”

Enyll mumbles something to himself, then gazes across the forest in contemplation. “I know a place like that.”

My muzzle falls open. “You do?!”

“Yeah,” Enyll says calmly. “My mother trained me to hunt in the lands beyond White Mountain. One morning, we were tracking prey by scent and landed in the forest. We came across a strange place with lots of stones and fallen trees... I’ll never forget it. It was like the stones were arranged with intention.”

Arranged with *intention*?

“Oh my Goddess,” I whisper. “Kuro, that sounds like the building in Loner territory!”

While Kuro remains silent, Enyll squawks, “The *what*?”

“Kuro, he has to join us! He knows about the place I saw—“ My mouth seizes before I can utter another word. No, we don’t need any other Dragon to know about Gust and the vision I received from him. “I mean, the place where the lichen can be found!”

Kuro watches me for a moment and releases a heavy, frustrated sigh. Her apprehension is understandable. My admittance to the flock allowed Kuro to finally rid herself of the drakon she despised so much. But now, not even a full season later, he’s back. And this time, there’s every reason to let him join us.

“Kuro, please,” I say, leaning my head close to hers, hoping my scent is just as alluring as hers. “I know how much you dislike Enyll. But I also know you dislike Relmoon even more.”

A stiff growl rises from the copper drakon’s chest. “That wingless traitor? He’s looking for you, isn’t he?”

“That’s right,” I nod. “Kuro, if Relmoon finds us again in Loner territory, we’ll have a much better chance of defeating him with Enyll on our wing. He has to come with us!”

For a breathless moment, Kuro keeps her eyes attached to Enyll. Finally, she stamps her talon against the ground and turns away. “Alright,” she says simply before skulking away with her head held low.

Again, my muzzle falls open. She agreed to let Enyll join us! I can hardly believe it! I thought getting her to see my point of view would be a battle, but it wasn’t! Eager to discuss this shocking turn of events, I approach Enyll so we can speak a bit more candidly.

“I didn’t think she would agree!” I exclaim.

“Neither did I,” Enyll sniffs, lifting his wing to preen an errant feather.

“You’re alright with joining us, right? I, um, kinda set you up for this without even asking.”

Enyll refolds his wing before nodding slowly. “It’s better than fetching prey for Tall Spires. Besides, it seems you’ve helped Kuro mature a little.”

“W-well!” I chirp, a little shocked by his observation. “You’ve matured a bit yourself.”

Enyll snorts, “I was *always* the more mature Dragon.”

I swivel my neck around to check on Kuro. She’s pacing at the edge of the clearing, walking the line of trees with her head held low and her tail dragging through the snow. She really has matured though, hasn’t she? When I first met Kuro, she was always a feather’s edge away from getting into fights with Enyll. Obviously, she isn’t thrilled about this arrangement. But the fact that she agreed to it is *such* a big deal. Watching her improve like this... it makes me feel warm and content in a way that I can’t describe.

“There’s one other thing,” Enyll adds. He lowers his voice and looks me straight in the eye. “You and Kuro... you’re not...”

“No,” I quickly interject. “At least, um. Not yet.”

Pfft, *‘not yet’*. What am I even saying?

I’m acting like it’s only a matter of time until we’re mated.

Enyll studies me for a moment, his face curious. “Alright,” he says calmly. “So, I won’t be stepping on your tailfeathers.”

“Not at all,” I smile.

He nods silently before folding his wings flat against himself. “You should finish your prey.”

“Oh!” I chirp. “Right, of course.”

As I step away to finish my share of the Litsha, a curious thought enters my head: Did Gust lead Enyll to the clearing? Moreover, did he lead the pack of Litsha to our makeshift

den? It can't be a coincidence that the one Kin who's seen the place in my vision happened to be flying overhead just as we needed help. How much of my life is being orchestrated by the deities? If they're dead set on helping me succeed in Felra, then... why? What is the purpose of leading a Princess from Ellyntide to treat an illness in the Snowfell Flock?

As usual, there are far too many questions and not enough answers. I suppose all I can do is hope they reveal themselves.

Warm sunlight bathes my feathers as I approach the Litsha and return to my meal. A few moments later, I sense Kuro's head beside my own.

94. The Mad Dragon of The North

I've become awfully tired of snow.

I didn't always harbor this opinion. Back when I lived in Varecia, snow was uncommon; a magical event that stirred wonder in even the staunchest of nobles. I would stand by the windows, giddy with excitement as I watched the first snowflakes of the season fall on the palace grounds. Some of my most endearing memories as a kit were made on those snow-filled days when the garden was buried under an unbroken blanket of powdery white.

Then some stuff happened, and I became a Dragon.

These days, snow is the enemy. Snow is my *scourge*. What the hell was kit Asha thinking? It's cold, it causes prey to go into hibernation, and there's far, *far* too much of it. In contrast to my upbringing in Ellyntide, snow is dreadfully common in Felra. I think it's

snowed every single day this entire season. Snow on my feathers, snow in my den... it makes me want to screech!

The latest fluffy white headache is the snowstorm we're trying to navigate. After a late departure from White Mountain we encountered a sudden snow squall over a vast mountain range. Kuro and Enyll are with me on this flight, but currently, all I can see is an endless sea of white against the churning sky.

ROOARH?

Kuro's worried cry thunders over the gales. I peer down to where I last saw my friend, only to find she's no longer there.

"Asha...? Asha!!"

Kuro emerges from a cloud of snow and wings her way up beside me.

"Kuro, what's wrong?" I ask.

"I lost sight of you! Your wings are covered in frost!"

I swivel my gaze and watch my wings rise and fall. Sure enough, the blue feathers on top of my wings have turned a pale shade of blue. No wonder Kuro lost track of me, I've become nearly as white as Tomcat.

Kuro yells past another powerful gust, "We have to find shelter and wait for the storm to pass!"

"Right!" I yell back.

SKREAAAK!

I call out to alert Enyll, and a few moments later, the copper drakon wings his way into formation. With the three of us reunited, we descend in altitude until we're flying just above the peaks of a broad, snow-capped mountain range.

"There!" Enyll cries, flicking his ears towards a jagged peak to my right. "I see a cave against the mountain!"

Kuro gruffs in acknowledgment. "Quickly, let's land!"

We circle down from the sky, fighting the unpredictable winds that often accompany the peaks of mountains. Kuro leads us, providing Enyll and I a calm wake to follow. We land on the side of the snow-packed cliff with barely enough room to fit and locate the

entrance of the den beside a pair of wind-sculpted fir trees. Snow has blanketed the area, but the entrance of it is conspicuously free of snow drifts.

I approach the den with my head held low, and my wings tensed. “I can’t smell anything.”

“Neither can I,” Enyll adds, standing behind me.

“Let’s be careful,” Kuro growls. “We’re in Loner territory. This den could still be occupied.”

I nod and allow Kuro to take the lead. Kin are not foolish enough to live past White Mountain, but a foolhardy Loner surely might. As I’ve previously discovered, entering another Dragon’s den can be deadly. But should we find ourselves in a fight, I have faith that three well-trained Kin can handle a single Loner. Who knows, maybe we could appeal to reason and avoid a fight altogether?

Kuro slinks her head past the entrance to gaze inside. She flicks her tail, signaling for Enyll and me to follow. The inside of the den is free of bedding, but an emberroot pit is present and recently used. The scent of a Lithan — male, middle-aged — is fresh in the air. Speaking without words, Kuro signals with her feathers to be prepared for a fight — the Loner may be deeper in the den. Me and Enyll nod and draw our wings open. This just became a lot more dangerous, but we have little choice but to press forward. It’ll be dark in a few hours, and this might be the only den we locate.

By the dim light shining through the entrance, we inspect the den in closer detail. As Kuro and Enyll smell around the entrance, I explore the back wall. The ash in the emberroot pit is fresh — a fire was burning here recently as yesterday. It’s hard to imagine that the

owner of this den is still out hunting. Could he have moved onto a different one somewhere else? Come to think of it, I don't know how—

Crk!

Beneath my talons, a twig snaps. I gaze down to spot a pile of oddly shapen sticks, stacked into a neatly organized pile with the utmost care. What is this...?

GRRRR....

Stolen from its rightful author, this tale is not meant to be on Amazon; report any sightings.

A low growl rises from an unseen corner of the den. My feathers stand on end, and a heartbeat later, the tawny head of a drakon emerges from behind a stone wall.

SKREAAK

RARRAGH!!

Like a clap of thunder, the den erupts with rapid motion. I shriek in surprise, and the tawny drakon roars back in defiance. Kuro leaps forward to stand beside me and issue a savage roar of her own. Unfazed, the tawny drakon bounds into the den from another room and splays his wings wide, ready to attack!

“Who are you, and what are you doing in my den!?!” he shrieks.

“Wait!”

I cry out, hoping to prevent the fight that’s a feather’s edge away. To my relief, everyone present freezes with their wings splayed and fangs bared.

“Please don’t attack!” I plead. “We didn’t know this was your den! The snow masked your scent!”

“You couldn’t smell it?” The long-eared Dragon scoffs. “A jimbai could smell my den from Maki if it had wings. You must be here to steal my prey! Or my rocks!”

Kuro growls, “Your what?”

“My rocks! Those are what everyone is after. You must be too, to fly all this way in the middle of a snowstorm!”

The loner speaks in a stochastic voice, changing their intonation seemingly at random. Is something wrong with him? Disheveled and skinny, he has dirty feathers and long, tapered ears that trail off to a point. He's undoubtedly a Litan, but unlike any I've seen in the flock.

Confusion grows across Enyll's face. "What are you babbling about, Loner?"

"Loner...?" he asks inquisitively. "Oh... oh, yes. I understand now! You three are from the flock, the flock of Kevura. Keuvra's flock. Isn't that right? The flock of snow?"

I give Kuro a sidelong glance. She and Enyll thought they had discovered a mad Loner after I confided I was from Ellyntide. It seems we've encountered a genuine specimen today.

I guess we better tell him who we are. "Yes, that's right. We're from—"

"Well, the answer is no!!" The mad loner jumps from his attack posture and throws his wings into the air. "Kevura desperately wants my rocks, but he can't have them! Not now, not ever! NO. KEVURA!"

"You can keep the rocks," Kuro growls gently. "We just need somewhere to rest until the storm passes."

I nod to confirm and continue in a more gentle voice. “We’re... on a very important journey. One that doesn’t involve your rocks. Please, will you allow us to shelter here? We won’t ask you to share your prey.”

“Spend... time here?” the Loner’s long ears twitch in curiosity. He looks past us to the entrance and mumbles, “Yes, yes... heh. The snow sure is strong, is it not?”

Silence stretches through the hollow as neither of us can conjure a response to something so spectacularly obvious.

“Hmm. Well, I can be a civil Dragon. Yes, that much I can offer. It would be rude to do so otherwise, would it not? Helping a fellow Dragon in need is quite admirable. Yes, quite so. Very well, then. You may rest here, in this den, and this den only, until the time the snow stops.”

At once, the three of us collectively exhale.

“Thank you,” I say, dipping my head. “My name is Asha, Daughter-of-Kelani. What’s yours?”

The mad Loner ruffles slightly like the question caught him by surprise. “My name? Well, I’m afraid I forgot that many seasons ago. Names are not important when you live alone. Heh-ha!! The rocks are what’s important, you see.”

Kuro gazes around the den, trying to glean the significance of the rocks. “My name is Kuro, Daughter-Of-Mecali. We—“

The Loner cuts her off. “Yes, important business with the flock, I’m sure,” he stops to turn about and saunters towards the back of the den. “The flock is your business, and business... is good!”

The Loner lowers his head and begins to diligently tend to a pile of gnarled twigs. The three of us sane ones look between ourselves and come to an uncomfortable conclusion: This one has truly gone mad.

“I am Enyll, Son-of-Zuki,” he says, and an opportunistic grin grows across his muzzle. “And Asha is a Farlander.”

The Loner stops moving.

Slowly, he cranes his neck around and whispers in a voice free of madness, “What did you just say?”

“Um,” I say, suddenly anxious about his response. He sounded normal! “Before I joined the flock, I was a Lemur living in the Farlands. I was called Princess Asha Lordanou.”

There can't be any harm in sharing that information, right? It's not like he'll understand it what it means. Likewise, the Loner's face bulges in shock. His eyes lower to the floor, and he mumbles, "Daughter... Of..."

He turns around, shields his face from view, and ruffles into a big ball of fluff. "A Farlander, in my den... in Felra!! Hmm, well, yes! Yes, indeed! What an exciting STORY! That must be!!"

Is... he alright? I take a cautious step forward and ask, "Are you...?"

I squeak and recoil backward as the Loner spins around. "Fine?!" "Of course I'm okay! It's not like..."

The words roll off his tongue, and an uncomfortable silence lingers in the den.

"Yes, well! We'll just have to see about that, won't we?" He laughs maniacally and spins around, kicking a twig across the den with his back leg. "WON'T WE, INDEED!"

As the Loner flutters around the den, Enyll rears his head close to Kuro's and whispers, "Can we really trust this fool?"

Kuro shakes her head and frowns. "We don't have a choice..."

“Make yourself at home, Kuro, Daughter-Of-Mecali!” The Loner suddenly blurts out. He approaches Kuro, and a look of concern builds across his face. “I... did offer you to spend some time here, yes? Feel free. Make yourself comfortable. Put those Ellyntide Lemur feet UP, Princess Asha Lordanou!!”

Kuro and Enyll exchange intent glances, their faces suddenly deathly serious. But Kuro shakes her head, and Enyll’s frown deepens. Slowly, he lowers his feathers.

This guy was already acting strange before, but something changed when Enyll told him I used to be a Farlander. He seems more... concerned. It’s like he was trying to impress us, but knew he was doing a terrible job. Could there be something more to this Loner? What else could a Loner be besides... a Loner? Then again, most Kin were anxious about me when I first landed in Felra, and many Kin still are. Some Kin are even *more* suspicious of me these days. Perhaps it’s not worth analyzing someone who is this stricken with madness.

The Loner trundles to the back of the den and slips behind an opening in the wall, passing into another room. With him out of our feathers, we can finally relax and talk openly about the unusual situation we find ourselves in.

Kuro whispers, “I don’t trust him. If we have to spend the night, then we’ll take turns watching him.”

“Right,” Enyll nods.

“Um, okay,” I say. The prospect of spending the night here fills me with a bit of dread.

This isn't the best arrangement to wait out a snowstorm, but at least we'll be safe... assuming the mental state of the Loner doesn't degrade any further. If it comes down to a fight, I won't have any issue taking care of him. And I know Kuro and Enyll won't, either.

So, with that uncomfortable thought aside... what should we do now?

...

...I have the perfect idea.

95. Stories Told By a Fire

“Is this the story about your other mentor? The one you always talk about?”

The light of a crackling emberroot flame reflects off Kuro's curious eyes. I've promised her a stirring emberfire tale, one that'll teach her plenty of new facts about the Farlands. With nothing else to do but listen to our empty stomachs, I thought now would be a good time to share the story of a particularly infamous event in my life.

“Oh, no,” I reply, shaking my wings dismissively. “This happened long before the incident with my mentor. I had only known her for a few months when this took place.”

Kuro inclines her head. "So, this is something that happened when you were young."

"That's right. I was, um... 28 seasons old."

"You were still a fledge," Enyll observes, lying to my left.

"*Kit*,

" Kuro chides. "Lemurs call their young *kits*."

Enyll rolls his eyes so hard they could fall out of their sockets. "Yeah, Kit, whatever..."

Ignoring their squabble, I continue, "I was young, sheltered, and knew nothing about the Kingdoms of the Farlands. If I were even a year older, I would have thought twice about what I did."

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Ironically, I managed to do something far more dangerous as a teenager — that *particular* event. Mom will never stop complaining about her and what happened to us, but it was the right thing to do.

Kuro's brow rises. She seems intrigued. "You did something wrong. Asha, I can't imagine you being disobedient."

SKREE!

Oh, man! I can't help but laugh aloud at that. "As a kit, I was a terror." I shake my head in dismay, recalling every terrible detail from my youth. "And this was one of my most infamous stunts."

The sound of moving feathers caps the end of my sentence. I twist my neck around and gaze to the back of the den, the room the Loner retreated to. It seems he was listening in on our conversation.

"Um, mister Loner...?" I call out. "Would you like to listen to my story as well?"

Ruefully, the longeared Loner snakes his head around the corner. His facial feathers are sullen, and he has a look of guilt scrawled across him. "I... I would, umm..."

An uneasy silence hangs in the air like a feather caught in a cobweb.

“Yes, very well, then. I will listen to your tale from the Farlands. It would be interesting to learn how Farlanders live, would it not?”

I flash a gaze to Kuro. She isn't the slightest bit amused, but she's not objecting.

“Take a seat,” I say, splaying my talons before me. “You're going to learn a lot about the Farlands.”

Slowly and uncomfortably, the Loner emerges from his den. He holds his head low as he trods before the fire, settling against the ground between me and Enyll. He raises his head to feign a smile and nods for me to continue.

“Now, then!” I announce, finally ready to begin. “This all occurred many seasons ago. To you Dragons, I was 28 seasons old. But to a Farlander, they would say I was...”

96. The Prettiest Princess EVER!

My name is Princess Asha Eloise Lordanou, and I'm seven years old!

Tee-hee, you heard that right: *Princess* Asha Lordanou! Pretty neat, huh? When I become an adult, I'll be crowned the Queen of our Kingdom: Ellyntide! And when I'm Queen, I'll order all the nobles at my palace to do everything just for me! I'll say, ‘*Misses Almandoz! I*

order you to give me *ALL* your candy at once!’ And she’ll say, ‘Yes, Your Majesty. Here is all the candy in Ellyntide. Please eat it before supper!’

HA HA HA!

But right now, I’m just kit, so I’m not allowed to order anyone around. It’s not fair! I don’t get to do *anything* I want! I *REALLY* wanted to stay home today and play in my garden, because my Rabbit friend Annie was gonna come to my palace and show me her new doll. But last night my Mother said we had to leave, and when I told her I didn’t want to go, she wouldn’t listen!! And when I got mad and cried a little, she still wouldn’t listen!!

But then Mother told me something that made me... um... surprised!

I’m going to meet another Princess today! I’m so excited! I’m friends with a lot of kits who come to my palace, but I’ve never met anyone else who’s a Princess. Mother told me I was the only one, but I’m not! I wonder if the new Princess is like me? I want to be friends with every Princess!

Last night before bedtime, we left Varecia on Mother’s new airship, the Blue Demon. And this morning, we landed on an island in the middle of nowhere called ‘*Truce*.’ I’ve never been here before, but Mother says it’s a really important place. And the reason we’re here today is also really, *really* important!

Mother is trying to become friends with another Kingdom! I think they’re called ‘*Sarlain*,’ and we haven’t been friends with them before. Mother says they did a lot of bad things, but they want to be our friends now, too! That’s so exciting! I think if we become friends with Sarlain, then I’ll become friends with *so many* other kits!

And then when I become Queen, I'll have *even MORE* candy!

HA HA HA!!!

Anyway, after we landed, Mother helped me change into my favorite promenade dress and led us off the Blue Demon. When I was walking down the landing stairs, a group of Avian knights came to greet us! I was so excited! I love the Avian Knights. They have such beautiful feathers! And their red and gold armor is ever so pretty! Mother says they're very important knights, but they don't come to visit our palace a lot. It's so wonderful that we get to visit their home instead!

After the Avian knights greeted us, they took us across a grassy field into a big brown building called the '*Woburn House*.' I know the Avian knights live here, but I'm not sure why this place is so important. Oh well! I just hope I get to see more Avian Knights! I wonder if their fledges live here, too?

Eventually, the Avian knights led us into a room that seemed a lot like the dining room at my palace. It's a tall room with lots of carpet, statues of Avians... um... and lots of gold stuff hung on the walls. It looks very important and pretty! But I like my dining room more. That's the place where Miss Almandoz gives me candy for my good manners when Mother isn't around! *Heh-heh!*

(So, don't tell anyone Miss Almandoz gives me candy! Do you double-tail swear not to tell my Mother? ...Okay, good!)

Anyway, that dining room is where all of us are waiting for the King and Princess of Sarlain. Mother, Father, and I are all standing in the center of the room with a big group of Avian Knights around us and an even *bigger* group standing on the side of the room. There's so many animals! Father is speaking to a Jay about boring knight stuff, but Mother and I are quiet. She's staring around the room and looks worried about something.

And me? Well, I'm a little bored.

I wish I could read some of my books while we wait. This morning I was reading about the native plants that grow on the central continent of Ellyntide. I checked it out from the library the other day, and I've been reading it SO. MUCH. It has so many plant species I never knew about! It's really neat, but something's been bothering me.

"Um, mother?" I ask, tugging on her hand.

Mother stops being worried and looks down at me. She smiles and asks, "Yes, sweetie?"

"I read in my plant book that, umm... the Varecian Rosebush grows seven feet tall! Is that taller than me?"

"Oh, yes," Mother nods. "That's quite tall. In fact, it's even taller than your Father!"

I twist around and look up at Father as he talks to the Jay. I try to imagine it in my brain: A really pretty rose bush, growing with lots of pointy stems and pretty pink flowers...

...But it's *taller than Father?*!

"Whoa..."

That must be halfway to Maki!! That's HUGE!! When I get home, I'm going to tell the groundskeeper to grow me a Varecian Rosebush! Unlike Mother, she *always* listens to me! I wish I could play with her every day!

Filled with excitement, I whip my tail around and tug on Mother's hand again. "I also read that the Varecian Rosebush always has five flower petals!! That's so pretty!!"

"Yes," Mother says. "And it's almost as pretty as you, dear."

Mother bends down and smooches me on the top of my head!! Awwwh!

I can't help but laugh! "Hee hee hee!!" When I get older, I'm going to become the prettiest Princess EVER! And when I go out in public, everyone will talk about how pretty I am, just like Mother!

Finally, after waiting for a really long time, everyone gets quiet. A Crow and a Hawk on the far side of the room step towards a set of very pretty doors and open them wide. And

there, walking down the decorated hall from another part of the building, is the King and Princess of Sarlain!

That Princess....

Looks SO. COOL!

Oh, my Goddess!!! The dress she's wearing is so simple but so elegant! Mother always says, '*Laces and bows on your clothes make you pretty as a rose,*' but this Princess's dress isn't frilly at all... and she's still pretty! Somehow, her dress doesn't have any lace or embroidery. She's not even wearing a petticoat! It's just lilac-colored silk and some chiffon around her neck and arms, styled to be simple and elegant! I love it!

This Princess... she's an older Kit, for sure. She's taller than me and has *beautiful* makeup. She must know so much about the Ringtail fashion trends in Sarlain. I hope she'll still play with me even though I'm a younger Princess from Ellyntide!

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And that King... he looks soooo much older than Mother. I wonder... how long has he been a King? Compared to the Princess, his clothes look a lot older. It reminds me of Grandfather's clothes when we go out in public. I wonder if he's nice like Grandfather? If I asked to sit on his lap, would he tell me stories about Sarlain?

The King and Princess step through the doors and down a short set of stairs that span the length of the room. The King looks pleased to be there, while the Princess just looks cool. Then, The Crow and the Hawk step beside them on opposite sides and follow them until they all stand before us. The room falls silent – everyone looks really nervous, the way adults usually look when something important happens.

The Crow steps forward, wraps his black wing in front of him, and bows. “Your Majesty. As you know, the prime mission of the Knights Eternal is to foster a lasting peace between Ellyntide and Sarlain, one that ultimately blossoms into the act of unification. To this end, it is our distinction to present His Majesty King Finn the Second and his daughter, Princess Lucy Richelieu.

“Queen Kelani,” the King talks in an old-sounding voice. “At long last.”

Mother takes a quiet breath and speaks slowly. “King Finn. It has been far too long since our Kingdoms sat at the negotiating table in Truce. It is my fervent desire to see us resolve our differences and foster a lasting peace that will resound for generations to come. Our Kingdoms, and the Goddess, are counting on us.”

When Mother stops speaking, everyone looks to the King. “Yes, well! Thank you, Your Majesty. I do hope the Goddess is satisfied by what we accomplish in the coming days. The schism that divided our families centuries ago has persisted like a stubborn welt for far too long. We should endeavor to set aside the differences that caused us to walk the path of war, and satisfy the Goddess’s desire for a lasting peace.”

Wow, that was *so many* words I didn’t understand! But I think the King sounds really friendly. No wonder Mother wants to be his friend!

...Well, I *think* she still wants to be his friend. Even though she's standing apart from me, it feels like her fur is standing on end. Aww, I think Mother is scared she can't be friends with him! I don't really understand why, though. Adult stuff is too confusing!

Mother begins to speak slowly again. "The wounds of the Fourth War, cut deeper than any war prior, will be felt for generations to come. Through the spirit of cooperation, and the Goddess's—"

Ugh, BORING.

Whenever Mother starts doing Monarch stuff, I always get soooo bored. I'm glad I don't have to worry about it until I'm older!

I wonder... does the other Princess have to do adult stuff? She's definitely an older kit, though I'm not sure how old. Standing across from me, she's watching Mother quite intently. Does she understand the adult stuff she's talking about? She should be paying attention to me instead!

I wave my tail behind me like a pendulum, trying to draw her attention. But she just keeps watching Mother like she doesn't even see me! Ugh, rude! Doesn't she know I'm the *Princess* of Ellyntide? Mother says I'm really important, and everyone else in the palace pays really close attention to me. So why won't she? I wanna be her friend!!

"Asha."

Father's voice whispers into my ear. He sounds really upset. "I don't know what's gotten into you, but need to stop fidgeting *right now*."

What?! Why is father trying to stop me and the other Princess from becoming friends? Why is he always so mean to me?!

"NO!!" I shout, stamping my feet and baring fangs.

At that moment, the King stops talking, and everyone in the room stares at me. But before I can react to them, Father grabs me by the shoulder and whispers super angrily, "Asha Lordanou!!" he squeezes my arm again. "Now, you listen to me. DO NOT start this. You are upsetting the King of Sarlain, you are upsetting your Mother, and you are upsetting ME. DO NOT bare your fangs in public! Do you understand?"

Eep! He called me by my full name! That means Father is *really* angry. If he punishes me in front of the other Princess, she'll think I'm just a dumb kit! Argh, I don't want Father to push me around, but I can't let the Princess see me get in trouble. I hold my frown for Father, then nod my head really fast. Father scowls but seems satisfied. He stands back up, sighs quietly, and smiles at the King.

"My apologies, Your Majesty," Father runs his hands through his ruff and bows his head. "Princess Asha can be a feisty one."

Unlike Father, the King is strangely amused. "We face unique challenges, raising kits to lead a Kingdom. Your Majesty, perhaps we should relocate to the coronation room. I'd love to hear your thoughts on the subject, along with our more pressing matters."

The King smiles kindly, the same way Grandfather does. He didn't get mad at me for baring my fangs like Father did! I like this King!

"I think that would be best," Mother says quietly. She gazes down at me, looking a little upset, then turns back to the King.

The Crow from earlier steps between Mother and the King. "Very well, then. Would the delegations from each Kingdom assemble, please? Once we are prepared to do so, I will lead the assemblage into the coronation room."

As the crow stops speaking, everyone in the room starts to move like Mother issued a really important order. The Avian Knights are running around, trying to prepare for Mother and the King to change rooms. Another Ringtail, a man in really pretty clothes, steps out from behind the King and whispers something into his ear. And the other Princess... she's watching me with the same expression she's had the entire time. Calm and cool-looking. I wonder what she's thinking about? Does she think I'm funny like the King does?

"Murdoch," Mother says. She places her tail on Father's shoulder and continues, "You should join us. We need—"

"And what about Asha?" he interrupts, then quickly looks at me. I think he's still upset that I bore fangs.

Mother looks at me momentarily. “The plan was to let her play with Princess Lucy. They need... well, let’s talk about it later, alright?”

Play?! They’re going to let me play with the other Princess?!

Father opens his muzzle to say something but then shuts it. He nods, smiles, and then crouches down to my level. He places his hand firmly on my shoulder and says, “Your Mother and I have to talk to King Finn. I want you to be on your *very best* behavior with Princess Lucy while we’re gone. Do you understand?”

I smile really big and nod my head up and down. Yes, this is what I’ve wanted all along! Of course, I’ll be on my best behavior!

“Good,” he says really quickly. He stands up and goes to talk to a Parrot knight.

Oh, I’m so excited! I finally get to meet the other Princess! I’m so excited, that I can’t stand to wait any longer! I look to where the Princess used to be standing, but she’s no longer there. Where did she go? I look around the really busy room and spot her standing with the King and a bunch of other Ringtails. I step away from Mother and Father and cross the room to where the group of Ringtails in pretty clothes are. As I get closer, a few of them notice me and tell the others. Then, finally, the Princess turns around and sees me. She looks surprised!

With everyone watching, I step up to her and talk in the nicest voice I can. “Hi!!! My name is Princess Asha Eloise Lordanou!”

“Umm, yeah. Hi. I’m Princess Lucy.”

“My Mother said I was the only Princess, but you’re a Princess too! That’s so neat!”

Before Lucy can respond, Father’s voice calls from behind me.

“Ah! Asha!!”

I turn around to see Father and the Parrot knight jogging towards me, nearly tripping as they step over the tail of a Ruffy. They seem really worried for some reason. “Oh, hi Father! Look, it’s the other Princess!” I smile and point to Lucy.

Father stops in front of me. “Asha, I told you to be on your very best behavior!”

“I am! I was really nice to Princess Lucy!”

“No, Asha, that’s not what I meant. You shouldn’t—“

“Hello, Princess Asha. My name is King Finn.”

Unexpectedly, I hear the King’s voice behind me. I spin around to see him standing beside Lucy, his old face happy and friendly. Whoa! The King is talking to *me*! “H-Hello King Finn!” I sputter.

Um, there’s something else I’m supposed to do when I meet really important Animals, right?

...Oh, right! Miss Almandoz’s manners training! One foot in front of the other, bend my knees, pull out my dress, and bow my head before the Goddess. There! I perform a perfect curtsy for the King!

He relaxes his tail and smiles. “I see you’ve introduced yourself to my daughter, Princess Lucy. Lucy is a kind young lady like yourself, and I’d like you two to get to know each other.”

“What?!” Lucy squawks like an Avian. “But, Father—“

“Yes, Your Mother and I will be quite busy negotiating the peace accords over the coming days. It’s the perfect opportunity for the future Monarchs to mingle, don’t you think?”

Finn rubs Lucy’s shoulder and smiles. For a second, the Princess looks unhappy, but then she forces herself to straighten up. “Yeah, I guess so,” she mumbles.

Why does Lucy look so upset? Doesn't she want to play with me? I know she's an older Kit, but we're both Princesses! Doesn't she want to learn more about her new friends in Ellyntide? Well, whatever the case, I'll have to impress her if I want to become her friend!

King Finn looks past me and asks, "I trust that's agreeable, Prince Murdoch?"

A second later, Father responds, "Of course it is, Your Majesty."

Even Father sounded a little upset speaking to the King. Why is everyone acting so weird? We're supposed to be friends!

"Well, then," Finn nods and motions with his tail to me and Lucy. "Knight Galloway, if you would, please."

"Yes, sir!" the Parrot knight wraps his wing in front of him and bows to the King. "Princesses, if you would follow me, please."

I smile to Father as I walk past him. He seems a little worried, and I'm not sure why. He shouldn't be! I'm going to try my hardest to make sure Lucy and I become friends! As we're led away from the crowd of Animals, the King's voice begins to fade over the sound of everyone talking.

“Prince Murdoch, I’d like to introduce you to Senator LaSalle...”

97. Hide and Seek

The Parrot leads us down a really pretty hall with lots of paintings and doors to rooms elsewhere in the Woburn House. As we walk, I notice the faces of the passing Avian Knights. They keep staring at me and Lucy!! Is it because we’re both going to be Monarchs as adults? Everyone wants Mother and King Finn to be friends, so they must be worried that me and Lucy won’t be friends.

“Don’t worry! As the Princess of Ellyntide, I’ll do anything to become friends with Princess Lucy!” ...That’s what I wish I could tell them. But as excited as I am, I’m a little worried we won’t become friends. Lucy’s so cool looking and older than me... and she didn’t look happy when she found out we were going to play together. I know I have to become friends with her somehow, but... can I really do it?

We stroll down the hall, passing even more doors leading to other rooms. Finally, after passing like a *million* doors, we turn into a smaller hallway. A Hawk in fancy clothes is removing some kind of musical instrument with lots of horns and tubes from a closet, which is now almost completely empty. He spots us, and his face becomes really surprised. He snatches the metal instrument, slams the door shut, and leaves behind a trail of down feathers on the carpet as he races past us back to the main hallway.

What a weird Avian!

Finally, the Parrot stops to open a door and leads us into a room. As I step inside, I get really excited!

“Woooooow!” I say. “Look at all these dolls!”

Scattered around the room are Kit-sized tables, little pink couches, and tons of TOYS! At the center of the room are four toy chests that are practically overflowing with toys for girls! I giggle and run over to them, pulling the cover off the closest one to see what’s inside. At the top of the pile is a Fronted Lemur doll in a pretty pink dress!! I pick it up and give it a big hug, just like it was my own Kit!

“She’s so cute!! Her name is ‘*Lavender*’ because she’s as pretty as a flower!” I spin around and run back to the doorway where Lucy is standing. “Look!”

Instead of being excited, Lucy looks a little annoyed. “Yeah, um. I’m thirteen, Asha. I don’t play with—”

“That’s okay!” I interrupt. “I’ll find something for big kits!”

Before Lucy can say anything more, I whirl around and run back to the toy chests to search for something else. Big Kits still like toys, right? There’s gotta be something in here I can find for Lucy! She’ll become friends with me if I can find a toy she loves. I give toys to all the kits I meet, and everyone always likes it!

But as time goes on, Lucy doesn’t like any of the toys I show her. She’s not interested in dolls, doll houses, or doll clothing! As I sift through the last toy chest, I’m beginning to get scared. What If I can’t find a toy she doesn’t like? Everyone likes me when I share my

toys, so why doesn't she? Ugh, how come this dumb house doesn't have as many toys as I do at my Palace? The Avian Knights must be *poor!*

Wait...

...Of course!!

Lucy is a Princess, too! And if she's anything like me, then she already has—

"Asha," Lucy calls out from across the room.

Huh? I look up to see a Secretary and a Crow standing around Lucy. It looks like she was talking to them about something important. As she sees me, she raises her arm and waves for me to join them.

"Oh!" I say, scampering across the room.

"Prince Murdoch has summoned us for some reason," the Secretary says as I look up at him.

The Crow folds her wings and growls, "Something about the Queen's preferences for tea."

“They are *very* specific,” The Secretary’s head plumes droop. “In the meantime, Princess Lucy will be watching you until we return.”

Wait, Mother needs help with something? Isn’t she working with King Finn about peace stuff? Maybe if I came with the Avian Knights, I could ask the King how to become friends with Princess Lucy!

“Um, can I come with you?” I ask.

Lucy shakes her head. “You have to stay here, Asha.”

“Huh? But—“

“She’s right,” The Crow says. “We won’t be gone for long, alright? Just... stay put!”

With that, the Crow and the Secretary adjust their pretty red uniforms to look presentable and exit the room, leaving me and Lucy to ourselves. How come they get to see my Mother, but I can’t? Don’t they know I’m the Princess of Ellyntide? They’re acting just like Mother when she tells me I can’t do something!

“*Ugh!*” I pout, stamping my feet against the ground. “This isn’t fair! I *never* get to do anything fun!”

Lucy looks at me but says nothing. She doesn’t seem to care that I don’t get to do anything I want! Why? Does King Finn allow her to do whatever she wants? Maybe she doesn’t like my toys because she’s seen them all! She probably has everything she’s ever wanted in Sarlain and gets to go anywhere and see anyone! That’s so unfair! Why do adults always do this to me?!

Last week, the Groundskeeper told me I should act more... um... assertive! She said that’s when you act confidently and take matters into your own hands! She’s right! If I want to have fun, then I’m going to have to make my own fun!

...

I have an idea.

I walk past Lucy and peer into the hallway, checking to see if any Avians are nearby.

“Um, what are you doing?” Lucy asks.

I turn to face her and smile. “I’m playing hide and seek!”

Lucy looks annoyed. “You’re what?”

“The adults never let me have fun! So, I’m going to have my own fun! You should play with me, too!”

“Asha, I—“

“I’m going to hide in one of the closets! The adults will *never* guess to look there!”

Lucy takes a step towards me. “Asha, you can’t do that! You’ll get in trouble!”

I fold my arms and frown. “I don’t care!”

“If you get in trouble, then *I’ll* get in trouble! I’m supposed to be watching you!”

“So?”

“Don’t be such a dumb kit,” Lucy’s tail twitches in irritation. “Do you want everyone to get mad at you?”

“Everyone is always mad at me! My Mother never lets me do anything fun! You’re just a *lameadult* like she is!”

Lucy scoffs and rolls her eyes. “And you’re just a dumb kit.”

“I am the Princess of Ellyntide, and I’m going to play hide and seek!”

With that, I turn on my feet and march into the hallway. I’m going to hide in the closet, the one I saw the Hawk removing a musical instrument from! Everyone will get really worried and start looking for me, but I’ll be right under their muzzles the whole time! This is going to be so much fun!

From behind me, I hear Lucy run to the door. “Asha?! Asha, *wait!! UGH!*” she snarls in frustration.

Ignoring the boring adult, I find the closet and open the door wide. Inside is a few small boxes and some other stuff that’s used for playing music, I think. But before I can step inside, Lucy’s grasps my shoulder.

“Asha!” she growls.

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“No!” I say. Using all my strength, I grab onto her arm and pull her backward into the closet.

“Hey—!”

“Eep!”

Something catches my leg — a box, maybe? Either way, we fall backward and land against the wall with a loud thud. As we do, the door closes behind us, and everything darkens.

“Asha!!” Lucy growls. By the light shining under the door, I see her bare fangs. “You stupid kit! What are you—“

Noises outside the door interrupt Lucy. Instead of continuing to be mad at me, she stops talking. There are talonsteps approaching the door — the Secretary and Crow knights have returned from talking with Mother! I cover my muzzle with my hands so they can’t hear me squeak in surprise.

“Huh? Where did they go?!” asks the Secretary.

Lucy opens her muzzle to answer back. Oh no, you don't! I reach up and cover her face, muffling her voice and making it quiet. Surprised I would do such a thing, her eyes bulge.

The crow calls out, "Princess Asha? Lucy?! Where did you go?!"

The Knights quickly search the room before leaving again. As they pass our closet, I keep my hand over Lucy's face and only release it once the sound of their talons fades down the hall.

"You stupid kit!" Lucy snarls. "Why did you—"

"I don't care!" I say. "My Mother can punish me all she wants! I am the Princess of Ellyntide, but she never lets me have fun! So, I shall have my own!"

I cross my arms, remembering Mother's advice about standing up for myself. How funny! I bet she never expected me to stand up to the Princess of Sarlain! But instead of being angry at me for being strong and independent, Lucy seems... happy? She smiles and almost looks delighted that I'm standing up for myself.

"Fun, eh?" she asks. "Okay, Princess. We'll do it your way. I'll play hide and seek with you."

“You will?!”

“Yeah, you and me. Let’s play together. That’s what friends do, right?”

I don’t believe it! Lucy actually wants to play with me now that I stood up for myself! Mother was right; Animals really respect you if you act strong! But before I can tell Lucy how happy I am, I hear talonsteps walking really fast down the hall.

Lucy braces me against the wall with her arm. “Shh! Here they come!”

The Animals outside approach our hallway. The Crow explains, “—They were here just a second ago! They couldn’t have gone far!”

A set of four talons pass by us, again avoiding the closet. Yes!! I know my plan would work! As the Avians return to the toy room and talk about forming a plan, Lucy reaches forward and turns the knob on the door lock. Oh, good idea! I’m glad I have a smart, old Kit with me!

“Start looking around. We have to find them before the first recess!” a new voice commands, older and more angry than the others.

“Yes, ma’am!”

The Avians begin scouring the room, knocking over toys and moving tables. Eventually, a pair of talons enters the hall and begins searching each closet. One by one, he opens the doors and comes closer to ours. With my heart pounding against my chest, the Avian approaches our door and turns the knob. I mean to gasp, but Lucy covers my muzzle just in time. To my relief, the lock remains engaged, and the door stays shut. Upset, the avian tries turning the knob again, but the door stays locked.

“Ugh, where’s that key? Goddess damn it…”

Giving up, she steps away from the door and moves to the next one down the hall. After the last two doors have been checked, the knights reassemble in front of our closet.

“They’re not here,” the older voice says. “Let’s move further down the hall.”

The other three respond in unison, “Yes, Ma’am!”

Muffled talons walk across the carpet, slowly growing quieter until they disappear again.

Ha ha, that was so close!! Lucy pulls her hand off my muzzle, and I can’t help but laugh!
“Tee-hee hee! We were so quiet!! They have no idea we’re here!!”

“Yes,” Lucy says calmly. I’m sure they’ll never think to recheck the closet.”

Ha ha, this is AWESOME! I can’t believe it, I’m friends with the other Princess! And not only that, but I’m playing a fun game with her where we disobey the adults!!

“I wonder if they’ll think we were abducted?” Lucy asks.

“Huh?” Abducted? “What does that mean?”

Lucy takes a step backward and asks, “Haven’t your parents taught you about being safe in public?”

“Well, yeah, but—“

“Some crazy Animal could take us away and never give us back to our parents.” The light creeping in from the hallway shimmers off Lucy’s blue eyes. “Would your Mother blame Sarlain if that happened here?”

“W-why would she blame Sarlain?” I ask hesitantly. “Mother wants to be friends with King Finn. And he’s really nice!”

“Asha,” Lucy says ominously, looming directly over me. “Our Kingdoms fought a war.”

“Um...” Why does Lucy sound really serious all of a sudden? I pull my tail around from the back and run my fingers through it. This is making me scared.

She continues, “Our airships raided your cities, dropped bombs, and killed thousands of Animals. Then, your ships were sent to do the same to my Kingdom. Didn’t your parents teach you that?”

I try to think of something to tell Lucy but come up blank. Why is she telling me this? I thought we were friends...? These aren’t the things friends talk about! Wh... What’s going on?! I don’t want to think about these things!!

But Lucy keeps talking. “Don’t you get it, Asha? Let me spell it out for you: We can’t be friends because our families hate each other. We’re *enemies*.”

“SHUT UP!”

I stamp my feet and throw down my tail, trying to do something, anything, to get Lucy to stop!! Surprisingly, she does, and instead of being angry, she smiles.

“My Mother taught me about the war!” I say. “I know that Animals got hurt! And some of them DIED!”

Once, Mother sat down with me and told me our Kingdom fought a war. But she never told me who it was against. This is the first time I've heard it was Sarlain, and now everything makes sense! The reason why we're here, and the reason Mother and King Finn are trying to be friends... they want to stop fighting!! They want the war to be over!! But most of all, this is why Lucy says we can't be friends. Because of some stupid war that happened a long time ago!! Thinking about all of this overwhelms me with emotion — it makes me wish I could open the door and run away from here.

“But I don't care! I don't care why the war happened or why our families don't like each other! That doesn't mean **we**

can't be friends!!”

I turn away from Lucy, bury my head into my tail, and start crying softly. I told myself I wasn't going to act like a kit in front of her, but I can't help it. I feel awful. Why did she have to tell me that? Why couldn't we just be nice friends with each other? One day, we're going to be Monarchs. Doesn't she want peace? Doesn't she want our Kingdoms to be friends with each other? If me and Lucy become friends now, then we'll still be friends as Monarchs!

Outside the closet, another group of Avians rush past the door, squawking orders at one another. They're really starting to panic about us missing. I pull my face from my tail and look up at Lucy. Her face has softened, and she no longer looks mean or upset.

“Are you scared to become Queen?” I ask softly.

Lucy says nothing and looks away. Then, surprisingly, she nods.

“Yeah,” I say. “I am, too. I don’t understand the war, and I don’t understand being a Monarch... but if I make a lot of friends as a Kit, then maybe they’ll help me out when I become Queen.”

The other day, the groundkeeper asked me if I was scared to become Queen. When I told her I was, she said I should make as many friends as possible as a Kit. Whenever I visit the garden, she’s always very friendly and asks me a lot of interesting questions... I trust her a lot.

“So, I thought becoming friends with another Princess would be the best thing ever. Because you’re the only other Animal who knows what it’s like to be a Princess...”

Lucy stares at me, and her tail lowers a little. “Hm. You’re more mature than you look.”

Outside our darkened closet, another group of Knights rushes past us. Then, I hear Mother’s voice talking to King Finn. They both sound really worried about us.

“I think we should stop hiding,” I whisper.

“Yeah,” Lucy says normally. “I’m bored. Let’s get out of here.”

Lucy reaches over my head, undoes the lock, and flings the door open. After my eyes adjust to the sudden light, I follow Lucy into the hallway. Mother and King Finn are with the Avian knights, standing by the doorway to the toy room. They're talking to each other and trying to decide where to search next.

Looking annoyed, Lucy steps past me and yells, "We're right here!"

Everyone whips around in shock. Finn and Mother's eyes go wide.

"Lucy!!"

"Asha!!"

With the Monarchs leading, the group rushes over to us. Finn looks relieved, but Mother is staring at me with a furious look. I thought I wouldn't care if she got mad at me for playing hide and seek, but Mother *never* gets this angry. This is bad!! What if she gets angry at Lucy, too?!

"Lucy, were you hiding in the closet?!" Finn asks frantically.

"Yeah," she says, still annoyed. "I was teaching Asha a lesson."

“You were *what?!*” Mother shrieks.

“I wanted to play hide and seek!!” I say quickly. “Please, don’t be mad at Lucy! It was my fault!”

Lucy continues, “I wanted to teach her she can’t be an annoying kit and just run away whenever she gets bored. But Asha’s actually smarter than that, so it didn’t work.”

Lucy looks at Finn, tilts her eyebrows, and shrugs. For some reason, Finn looks kind of amused by her response. Why isn’t he angry at her?

In contrast, Mother looks furious. She lashes her tail and says, “I don’t believe this!! Your Majesty, this is an—“

Finn cuts her off, “Tell me, Princess Asha. Did you have a fun time?”

Finn stares down at me, looking very old and kind. He seems like such a nice King, but Lucy told me our Kingdoms are enemies! Could it be... he’s acting kind to me on purpose? He isn’t trying to trick me, is he!? Ugh, all this adult stuff is so confusing! I wish I knew what to do!

“Um...” I trail off, wishing I knew what to say. Mother still looks *super* upset... there’s got to be a reason why she’s upset, right? I think... I trust her more than King Finn. I’m going to be in *big* trouble later, but I trust Mother and my Kingdom more than him.

“I felt a little scared, b-but I’m okay now!!”

I lied. I wish I could be braver, but Finn is making me uncomfortable, and I don’t know why.

Finn smiles and pats the top of my head. “Well, then. It seems the Princesses’ little adventure caused no harm.”

“Caused no harm?!” Mother echoes. “And what about the Eternals? They nearly assembled the fleet to search the island!!”

“Well, Your Majesty, the fleet *wasn’t* assembled. And it seems our Princesses had some bonding time together. Isn’t that right?”

“Yeah,” Lucy smiles. “Me and Asha are friends now.”

Ohmygosh!! She said it! She said we’re friends! I beam with joy, so pleased that Princess Lucy and I are friends! Mother still looks upset, but I don’t care! I can’t wait to tell the groundskeeper what happened! She’s going to be so happy to learn I became friends with Lucy!

...Oh! I've been saving something just for this moment! I reach into my pocket and pull out a piece of foil-wrapped candy Miss Almandoz gave me. I step in front of Lucy and hold it out in front of her.

"What's this?" she asks, snatching it from my hand.

"It's candy!!" I announce. "I give candy to all my friends!"

Lucy examines the candy, and her eyes fall onto me. The tiniest smile flashes across her face.

98. Madness Departs

"Ultimately, the peace accords were unsuccessful. Mother was unwilling to concede the territory we gained during the war, and Finn was unwilling to admit he staged the assassination of my Grandmother. The Goddess was livid, but we carried on. The cease-fire remained, and to this day, our Kingdoms are technically still at war."

Sitting across from me at the denfire, Kuro's wings droop a little. "What about Lucy? Did you really become friends with her?"

"Sort of," I say, ruffling my feathers. "After our little stunt, the knights insisted on keeping us apart. But on the last day of the conference, we were allowed to spend some time together. I asked her a ton of questions about the war and being a Princess, and she answered them truthfully. She had no reason to do that, but she did."

I used to wonder how my relationship with Lucy would unfold once I became Queen. Did we really build a rapport that day? Could we one day achieve what Mom and Finn failed to do? Or did I totally misjudge how much Lucy liked me?

“I don’t trust her,” Enyll growls. “She must have known they killed your Grandmother. She was acting friendly on purpose.”

I exhale a long sigh. “I’ve thought a lot about her behavior in the seasons since we met. She was trying to manipulate me, and Finn was helping. That much, I’m certain. But I think some part of her believed I was right, and it was in our best interests to be friendly to each other. I’ve often wondered what she would say to me when we finally met as adults,” I chuckle to myself and add, “Can you imagine if she saw me as Kin?”

“She would be *terrified*,” Kuro growls in delight.

Enyll adds, “You’d be the one manipulating her!”

“Maybe I should visit her in greenwing,” I smile.

Sitting beside me, a pair of tawny wings rustle. “Well, that was an awfully interesting story,” the mad Loner remarks, jerking his head like he had an itch he couldn’t reach. “To think that Farlanders are capable of such interesting lives. I really would have never guessed!”

As he finishes talking, the Loner folds his wings and rises to his talons. He dips his head at me in particular before turning about and walking away.

Huh? Is he leaving already? “Um, are you going to sleep, mister Loner?”

The Loner stops with one talon in the air and smiles awkwardly. “Yes, I believe I will be. Fair dreams, Princess Asha Lordanou.” He dips his head, then disappears from sight into the back of the den.

He spoke awfully genuine just now. Quite frankly, it was the first genuine thing he’s said all day. For whatever reason, this Loner seems to have gained a particular interest in me.

...

Before we fly from here, I want to ask him a few questions.

Another gust of wind howls into our den, adding to the snowdrift at the entrance. It took so long to tell my story that before we knew it, day transitioned to night. Enyll had planned to tell his own story, though he seemed rather crestfallen in the wake of the enlightening story from my past. Still, I was able to convince him to share his story of the *crazy* mate he got paired with on Couple’s Night.

Needless to say, Enyll is still single.

After that, we decided to settle down for the night. As Enyll lies against the ground near the fire, I ask Kuro, “When do you want to leave tomorrow morning?”

“As soon as the snow stops.” She leans close to my head and whispers, “I don’t want to stay here any longer than we have to.”

“Okay.” I smile and nod in understanding.

I trace my way to the back wall of the den, past the pile of sticks the Loner meticulously organized. I settle onto the ground and curl into a ball, laying my head just past the tips of my tailfeathers. “Goodnight, Kuro.”

Laying beside the fire, Kuro smiles back. “Fair dreams, Asha.”

As I close my eyes and wait for sleep, a particular memory resurfaces in my consciousness – one I had completely forgotten about until this moment. Mom worked late on the final night of the peace accords, desperately trying to reach a deal with King Finn. But, eventually, the talks fell through, and she gave up. I remember being roused from sleep by an Owl who told me I was returning home. I was grumpy... not because I was awake, but because I wouldn’t have a chance to say goodbye to my new friend from Sarlain. I protested, of course. But no matter what I said, Mom wouldn’t listen to me. By the time I marched back to the Blue Daemon, I was exhausted. All I wanted to do was fall asleep in my quarters, but Mom asked me to lay with her instead. That night, I fell asleep on her lap, allowing the drone of the propellers to dull me to sleep.

...

I raise my head from the ground, flat and cold. Across the den, Kuro is gazing into the fire with her wings slightly mantled, trying to stay warm. A small noise passes through Enyll's nostrils, audibly announcing he's drifted to sleep.

...

I rise from the ground and stroll across the den. As I approach the fire, Kuro's head turns.

"Asha?"

I say nothing and continue walking. I'm too tired to respond, too exhausted to ask permission for what I'm about to do. Kuro watches closely as I lie beside her and nudge my head under her wing. I push it above my head and scoot closer to her warmth, allowing her wing to fall against me like a heavy duvet. I lie against her flank and bury my head into the cleft of her wing.

If you discover this narrative on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen. Please report the violation.

Um, hello? *Asha*? What are you doing?!

Am I being partial right now? Absolutely not. And I couldn't care less.

I'm untold miles from home, a home I might never see again. In this land of ice and snow, hunger and longing, the only thing that's real is compassion for your fellow Dragon. Even those stricken by madness understand this fundamental fact. But me? I've been too caught in the past to feel the warmth that's right before me. It's time I start living in the present.

'You can't rest a talon on two islands.'

I close my eyes. A heartbeat later, Kuro makes a soft noise as she rubs her head against my own, adding to the warmth flowing around me. It's not long before the crackling sounds of the fire dull me to sleep.

I awoke the next morning. Warm.

When was the last time I didn't wake up freezing cold? Probably the last time I slept beside Kuro. As dawnlight glows through shuttered eyes, I feel Kuro's flank beside me, rising and falling gently on shallow breaths. She's asleep, which means Enyll must be up and about on his watch. I should let him know I'm awake. That way, he can get some extra sleep until Kuro awakens. I open my eyes to discover Kuro's wing draped across me, left in the same position as when I fell asleep. Using small and delicate movements, I inch forward until I have enough room to stand upright.

But as I rise to my talons, I immediately notice something wrong.

“Enyll?” I whisper. Across the fire, He’s lying with his head in front of his talons, eyes closed. “Enyll, are you awake?”

The copper drakon’s crest rises and falls, but he doesn’t respond. He’s fast asleep.

Um, this isn’t good! He and Kuro were supposed to take turns staying awake! But before my dismay can spiral into a full-on anxiety attack, I realize something important:

None of us are currently dead.

That’s right, those two took turns staying awake to keep an eye on the mad Loner and make sure he didn’t try anything fishy. But we’re all still here. Nothing fishy about it. After allowing a moment to let my heart rate stabilize, I slink past Kuro and trot to the back of the den where the passage to the Loner’s room is located. Hoping not to disturb him, I peer my head around the wall and wait for my eyes to adjust to the lack of light. I stare into his room, looking for any sign of the rise and fall of his tawny feathers. I look... and keep on looking. I think a pile of rocks is near the back wall, but I don’t see the Loner. I reposition myself so as not to block the dawn light and still don’t see him.

He’s gone!

“Wha..?!” I ask aloud, panic now flaring. “Kuro?! Kuro, wake up!”

“Mmmh...” Kuro mumbles dreamily as she regains consciousness. “Asha?”

I bound to her side and announce, “It’s the Loner! He’s gone!”

Kuro’s eyes open like a pair of venetian blinds. “*Gone?*” she raises her head in dismay and gazes across the den to see Enyll sleeping soundly. “**HEY!**”

The copper drakon stirs but remains firmly asleep. Kuro growls and jumps to her talons, shaking off sleep. She steps past the denfire and kicks Enyll in the flank with her foretalon.

“WAKE UP!!”

“AAGGH!” Enyll recoils backward in pain. He raises his head, and a puff of smoke drifts from his nostrils. “Kuro!? What are you doing?!”

“You fell asleep!! You were supposed to stay awake, featherbrain!”

Enyll gazes around the room in confusion. His eyes glide past me towards the back of the den where the Loner’s room is located. He bares fangs and snarls, “*I* fell asleep, Kuro? I went to sleep because it was *YOUR TURN* to watch the Loner!”

“Hey!”

The arguing Kin swivel their heads to face me.

“You guys don’t have to fight about it, okay? The Loner is gone, and nobody got hurt. The snow stopped. He probably went on a morning hunt.”

I angle my wing towards the entrance of the den. Beneath a cloud-free sky, dawn light tickles the jagged peaks of an ashen mountain ridge, bathing the snow-packed valley in a kaleidoscope of brilliant gold and scarlet red. Fresh scorch marks are present on the ground near the entrance – the snowdrift that grew in the evening to nearly seal the den has been cleared by fire. Obviously, the Loner went on a morning hunt and didn’t want to wake us.

Lowering their feathers, the tension deflates between Kuro and Enyll.

“It was still your turn to watch him,” Enyll growls, quickly preening his chest feathers.

Kuro shakes her head. “No, it wasn’t. I stayed up for at least a full wing before waking you up. You said you would take over, but obviously, you fell back asleep.”

“That’s jimbaldung. If that were true, why don’t I remember falling asleep?”

“Nobody ever remembers falling asleep. Bitch.”

Confusion smacks Enyll across the face. He shoots a glance at me, and my dumb grin gives it away.

“You’ve learned too much from her,” Enyll snorts. He stands up and stretches his foretalons in front of him. “Fine, whatever! Nobody got hurt, and everything is fine. You can stay here with Asha while she wakes up. I’m going to wait outside.”

While I wake up? But I’m already awake! I open my muzzle to object, but Enyll ignores me and continues walking until he’s sitting beside himself on the cliff outside the den.

My wings droop to the ground. I guess there’s no helping it when it comes to these two. “I wanted to ask the Loner some questions, but I don’t think we should wait for his return.”

Kuro looks confused for a moment before nodding. “We need to catch prey before the sun gets too high.”

With our plans determined, Kuro rises to her talons and helps me douse the denfire with snow and dirt. After giving ourselves a quick preen, I turn to step out of the den with Kuro following my tail.

“Asha, wait.”

I stop and turn about. To my surprise, Kuro hasn't been following me — she's sitting by the remains of the fire with her tail wrapped tightly around her talons.

“Asha, I... “ she trails off and averts her eyes. What is she so apprehensive about?

“Kuro?” I ask.

Gathering courage, the feathers of her brow furrow in determination. She asks quickly, “Can we talk about what happened last night? I mean, not right now. But later. Tonight.”

Oh, my Goddess!

Kuro wants to talk! About *us*! I can't believe it! Despite everything that's happened in the past few months, she's never wanted to talk about her feelings until right this moment! She finally gathered the courage to do it!

So... what should I tell her? Has anything changed between us since we slept together last night?

After a brief moment of contemplation, I open my muzzle to speak, but something catches my eye. Something beyond Kuro's wings. I look past her to the back of the den where the Loner's pile of sticks is located. And it's there, lying motionless, that I spot Calypso's body. My guilt has returned to remind me of my dear friend, the one I never had the courage to acknowledge as he lived. But unlike the prior times my guilt has tried to haunt me, Calypso seems more... distant this time. It's as if he's moved farther away from me.

...

I promised him, as his Princess, *'That your sacrifice will not be in vain.'*

Is this what Calypso would have wanted? To witness me mated to a Dragon in Felra? To see me... *happy?*

...

"Of course," I smile at Kuro. "Let's find an island somewhere and tell Enyll to buzz off."

Kuro's face beams brighter than the morning sun. "Okay!"

With renewed vigor, she jumps to her talons and trots beside me as we exit the mad Loner's den and rejoin Enyll. With the whole day in front of us, we leap into a pure blue sky and catch a sun-fueled thermal rising from the valley floor.

99. Grave Realization

Knock knock.

"Prince, it's Commander Almandoz. Please open the door."

Gentle footsteps approach from the opposite side of the door before it's drawn open slowly. The mussed brown head of Prince Sofl emerges through a crack in the door frame — he has a look of worry about him that doesn't change upon seeing me. Regardless, he draws open the door to his lab and motions with a flick of his long black tail to join him.

"Thank you," I say, stepping through the frame.

"Dunc'," Sofl asks expectantly as he closes the door behind me. "Did you...?"

With our privacy secured, I reach into my coat pocket and produce a small felt bag. I pull back on the string that secures it shut and empty into my hand the national treasure of Ellyntide.

Sofl gasps, “The Serpentine Diamond!”

“I believe this belongs to you,” I smile.

Sofl smiles back, takes one step forward, then stops abruptly. He quickly recoils his hand from the diamond.

“Ah, yes,” I say. “There’s a protocol to follow when the Diamond changes hands to a new owner.”

Sofl lowers his eyes. Normally, a private ceremony is held at the Coronation Palace where the reigning Monarch presents the Serpentine Diamond to the new heir. But to follow tradition today, we would have to disclose our clandestine operation to retrieve the diamond in the first place. Needless to say, that can’t happen.

“It would be best if we didn’t tell my Mother,” Sofl says quietly. “Not yet. When the time comes, we can hold the ceremony. But for now...”

“You wished to personally inspect the Diamond, yes?”

Sofl nods. I smile and straighten myself as if I were before the Queen herself. This meeting can be our rather big secret for the time being. Sofl stares down the diamond in my palm and draws an unsteady breath. Diamond or not, the young Prince is already the heir to the throne. But taking possession of the diamond is a hugely symbolic event, one

that is to be celebrated and recorded in the history books. To say nothing of the fact that the diamond was thought to be lost forever! it will surely serve as a tremendous boost to morale across the Kingdom when the public comes to learn that the diamond was safely recovered and is in the hands of the Crown Prince. A ray of hope in these troubled times is sorely needed.

Sofl takes a deep breath and moves two steps forward.

And then, without warning, something unexpected happens.

Shimmering light, iridescent and brilliant, emanates from the diamond like sunlight refracting from a prism. As the diamond glistens in my hand, It produces a shrill noise like none I've ever heard.

“What—?!” Sofl gasps.

“Aahh!”

The diamond falls from my hand like a hot potato and rolls across the floor until it collides with the baseboard. As it does, the light and sound emanating from it cease, and the diamond becomes inert once more. The Prince and I stand breathless for a time, incapable of reacting.

“By Jaya,” I whisper. “What the hell just happened!? Prince, are you alright?”

Sofl nods, his muzzle stuck open in shock. “I-It reacted as I approached. W-wh—” he stutters, speaking in fits and starts until he manages to form words again. “Duncan, it’s not supposed to do that! Something’s changed!”

With my heart thundering against my chest, I shield the Prince with my arm. “Did you feel anything as you approached it?”

“I felt nothing. Did you?”

I shake my head. The only interaction was the shimmering light and that strange sound. I felt nothing against my fur — it felt as cold against my hand as any stone should.

For a time, silence stretches across the lab as we stand too scared to react. With an unsteady voice, I finally ask, “How should we proceed?”

Sofl thinks carefully for a moment. He steps away from me and retreats to the far corner of the lab, as far away from the diamond as the small lab will allow. “Try picking up the diamond.”

“Prince,” I speak gently. “I would feel more at ease if you waited in the—“

“No,” he ripostes. “I want to see the diamond with my own eyes. That light is connected to what happened in the hollow! I’m sure of it!”

I open my mouth to object before closing it shut. “Very well.”

As much as I dislike it, far be it from me to disobey an order from the young Prince. Slowly, I move towards the diamond with measured steps. It only reacted as Sofl approached, so it must be safe for me to touch it again. Right? Right. Everything’s going to be fine. I bend down, reach my hand forward, and clasp the diamond in my palm. I rise to my feet and hold it before me, studying its cloudy appearance. Nothing strange occurs.

“Good,” Sofl says. “Now, place it on the table in the center of the room.”

I do as the Prince says, carrying it to the center table and quickly clearing away a stack of crumpled papers and open books. As I place the diamond against a spot of bare wood, Sofl begins a slow walk towards me.

“Prince,” I caution. “Are you sure about this? Your sister—“

“Commander, I appreciate your concern. But I have to know the truth of what happened.”

My mouth curls into a frown, but I pull the sides of my coat together and nod for the Prince to proceed. I always knew Calypso might one day fall in battle, and it was that preparation that allowed me to make peace with his passing. But Sofl has no closure, no

greater purpose to explain Asha's death. In his heart lies only misery and confusion... I could never hope to understand the anguish he's endured.

Sofl approaches the diamond, one arduous step at a time. As he reaches a pile of books at the foot of the table, the diamond lights anew. I gasp, but Sofl's resolve is unflinching. With each step he takes, the light grows in intensity until it's nearly as bright as an oil lamp. As the Prince hovers above the diamond, his face tightens in pain – the pain of losing Asha resurfaces in his heart. With a flick of his wrist, he grasps the diamond in his hand, and the light begins pulsing in intensity.

"Prince..." I trail off. "Are you—"

"I'm fine," he says, staring into the diamond. He holds it up before him and inspects it closely.

With the threat of a reaction seemingly passed, I step forward and join Sofl at the table. "How does it emanate light? This can't be possible, yet it is."

"I've been translating old Nortanian books from the library," Sofl begins. "Specifically, the ones written in an Owl beak from the city of Hoarfrost. In a book recording ancient lore, a chapter is dedicated to cataloging strange and priceless artifacts. It's primarily about objects important to Avians, but strangely, the Serpentine Diamond is mentioned. In its description, it claims that the diamond has '*unnatural powers.*'"

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

“Unnaturalpowers?” My ears twist in intrigue. “Prince, are you—“

“I’m not suggesting anything, Duncan. But think about it: Nothing in the hollow adds up. The Lithan took my sister, yet there was no trace of her blood. The Lithan flew from the Northern Continent, but nobody saw it enter the Kingdom. If the natural doesn’t add up, you’re left with the supernatural. It’s simple logic.”

Could the tragedy of the weald really have a supernatural explanation? “At times, I thought the appearance of the Lithan was supernatural. If we are truly dealing with such things, then... what could have happened that day? Could the ring have done something outrageous like summon a Lithan from the Northern Continent?”

Sofl’s brow furrows in contemplation. “No...” he drifts off, deep in thought. He places the diamond on the table and says, “I don’t think it’s that. For one thing, it doesn’t account for Asha’s—“

Like a steam hose rupturing, Sofl stops speaking. His eyes drift from me, and he gazes across the room with a desolate stare.

“...Prince?” I ask.

As I finish speaking, Sofl’s eyes widen, and he covers his muzzle in shock.

“What is it?!” I ask more urgently, taking a concerned step forward.

“Duncan,” the Prince speaks. The thin layer of skin surrounding his eyes has turned ghostly pale. “What if we couldn’t find Asha... because she *became* the Lithan?!”

Asha... transformed into the Lithan?

At that second, all of the evidence, all of the mysteries, all of the pain and the suffering coalesce into a simple realization: He’s right.

“*Oh my God,*” I mutter breathlessly.

As my brain stews in shock, Sofl re-approaches the diamond and watches the light pulse in intensity. “It reacts to me, a Lordanou. And it reacted to Asha because her life was in danger!!”

The epiphany broadsides me like a punch to the gut. Calypso, Laurent, and Bodie all fell while trying to defend Asha. But when Crow Wing attempted to take the Princess’s life, the diamond transformed her. That’s why her clothes were shredded. That’s why there was no trace of her blood. That’s why the agents of Crow Wing were brutally dismembered, but our soldiers had only puncture wounds. It’s because Asha transformed and defended herself from her captors!

I can still recall the cry of the Lithan just as clearly as the moment I heard it:

'EER-KRSAK!'

As our eyes locked, the look on its face wasn't of anger or malice; it was *fear*. The fear of us discovering the bloodbath in the hollow and the dread that *she'd* be seen as the culprit.

"Oh, my Goddess..." Sofl laments as tears roll down his face. I've never seen him this distressed before. "Asha, she..."

"Prince, wait."

Sofl pauses to clear his nose. Dolefully, he raises his head and looks at me intently.

"Let's assume... the Lithan is your sister. Princess Asha. That accounts for some things. Her shredded clothing, the lack of her blood..." I trail off and rest my hands on the table. "But not Rhl. Why did she fly there and try to attack the city? Why did she light Owens Island on fire? And why did she attack the Beatrix at the Northern Continent?"

“What if she’s no longer herself?” Sofl follows up quickly. “What if she lost the Gift of Communication and became a witless monster? What if...” Sofl trails off, and his face fills with sorrow. “What if Asha is still alive but gone forever?”

Regrettably, the Prince has a point. If Asha has indeed turned feral, then it would account for her aggression toward the Kingdom. Even contemplating such an outcome brings a certain misery to my heart that I can’t adequately convey. The jubilant little girl I first met in the palace so many years ago, reduced to a braying, feral monster. What a truly lamentable fate.

“Prince, this is...”

I attempt to finish my sentence, but my voice dissipates. I can make peace with Calypso’s sacrifice, but not this. The Princess falling victim to some freak, supernatural occurrence is simply too much!

“I know,” Sofl speaks softly, overcome with emotion. “But I’m not giving up. If that’s what really happened to my sister, then there must be a way to reverse her transformation. There has to be an answer somewhere in these books!!”

As Sofl speaks, an uncomfortable realization forms in my head. “Prince, the books you’re translating are from *Nortane*. There is a finite amount we possess, and certainly not every Avian book on the matter of ancient artifacts.”

Sofl looks confused for a moment, but then his tail stiffens. “Duncan, are you suggesting—
“

“Yes,” I nod ominously. “That is precisely what I’m suggesting.”

Sofl frowns and rests his quaking hands against a pile of wilted dandelions on the table. He looks sick to his stomach. “You believe Crow Wing did something to enable the diamond’s power.”

“It makes sense, doesn’t it? In all of history, nothing supernatural has ever befallen an heir to the throne, even those who were in mortal danger. But Crow Wing surely has access to every book we possess and far more. They could be years ahead of us in understanding the mysteries of this diamond. And what better way to destabilize our Kingdom than to transform her heir into a monster?”

Nortane’s intelligence agency is second to none, and its reach is truly global. Throughout history, Ellyntidian and Sarlanian monarchs alike have been tormented by Crow Wing, and it’s broadly assumed they still possess operatives in our Kingdom. But if Crow Wing has learned to harness the power of the supernatural, then this represents a chilling new chapter in their existence, one that threatens every inch of the moon. If only Nortane hadn’t destroyed our history during their occupation of Ellyntide, then we might still be able to unravel the mysteries of the diamond ourselves!

Sofl’s tail slumps to the ground. He takes the diamond in his hand and presents it across the table. “Commander. Take this and store it somewhere safe.”

“Prince...” I trail off in muted surprise. By rights, the Serpentine Diamond is something only the royal family should possess. “Are you sure about this?”

“Yes,” he nods firmly. “Get it out the palace and away from my family. If Nortane has mastery of this diamond, then there’s no telling what damage they could unleash.”

Again, the Prince has a solid point. If the rest of the Lordanous shapeshifted into a pack of feral Lithans, it would spell the end of the Kingdom. It’s as simple as that.

Sofl’s frown deepens, and he averts his eyes. “Asha was suspicious of everyone in the palace who wasn’t family. I think... she was right. Her concerns were justified.”

I can understand the Prince’s aversion. With everything that’s happened in the past few months, trust is a difficult commodity to come by. Regardless of Asha’s true fate, the fact remains that Crow Wing was clandestinely operating on such a deep level in our Kingdom that they were able to ambush a member of the Royal Family. How deep do their talons sink into the heart of our Kingdom?

“Very well,” I say. “I know a place the diamond will be safe.”

Sofl slips the diamond to me, and the diffuse light dims as I re-secure it into its pouch. When Mother and Father built their home on Oak Island, they made a point to include a safe room in the basement. Mother is the only soul I could possibly trust with such an important item. I must head there at once and reiterate the need for discretion among those who joined me to the weald.

“I... will continue my research,” Sofl says, drawing an unsteady breath. “If the answers are in the palace library, I will locate them.”

I incline my head. “Please keep me abreast of your work.”

“Of course, Duncan,” Sofl smiles for the first time today. “Truly, thank you for everything you’ve done to get us this far. If there’s any chance Asha’s still alive, then you’ll be the first—“

VRRRRRRRRRRRRR....

A muffled wail splits the air, interrupting our conversation.

Sofl’s eyes bulge in fear. “Huh?! Is that—?!”

“The air raid siren,” I gasp. “I never thought...”

Memories from my childhood return to me — memories of the Fourth War. Sarlain came close but could never quite reach Varecia by airship. The eastern side of the continent and the many islands bordering their territory slowed their advance and saved Varecia from an all-out bombardment. But the Confederacy of Nortane has no such natural barriers to contend with. The only thing separating Varecia from our western border is a wide expanse of open sky, one that Nortane is wholly capable of traversing. It would be

laughable to say the war has been going in our favor. If airships have truly been spotted, then this is the worst-case scenario!

“Prince, we have to go!” I yell, breaking free of my trance.

“R-right!” he stumbles.

I run to the door and fling it open while Sofl grabs his coat. Bedlam has erupted further down the hallway as Animals flee to the bomb shelter, screaming for their loved ones to follow. Two members of the palace guard run against the chaos, making their way toward the end of the hall where the lab is located.

“Commander!” A Marten guard shouts. “Airships have been spotted off the edge of the continent! We have to get you and the Prince to the war room!”

Sofl joins me in the door frame, frantically trying to button his coat. “I-is this real?! Not a drill?!”

“It’s not a drill!” The Marten yells over the wail of a terrified Lopear. “Now, please! We have to go!”

As the sirens wail unabated, I wrap my arm around the Prince and run with him down the hallway into an uncertain future. We’ve uncovered something truly shocking today, an unprecedented discovery that could rewrite the history books and lead us to a still-living

Princess Asha. But what does it matter now? With the war at our doorstep, what good would finding Princess Asha do if Ellyntide is reduced to ashes?

100. The Lordanou Clan

I have a confession to make:

I really enjoyed my time with Kuro last night.

Flying a few yards behind her, I watch the graceful movements of her wings as they cup the air, rising and falling against the updrafts with an effortless grace. When I still lived in Varecia, I often thought, *'Where in the Kingdom is the Animal destined to be my partner?'* Could the creature I see before me, this misunderstood huntress of the Snowfell Flock, really be them?

I admit it – when Kuro asked me if I wanted to discuss our night together, I had no trouble saying *'yes.'* But I'm still not comfortable being in a relationship with her. There are so many things we have to discuss first. Like, will the flock *really* accept two girls being mated together? What happens if I discover a way to turn back to normal? Or If I return to Ellyntide and make contact with my family?

But as much as it pains me to admit it, I simply can't deny my feelings for her any longer. When I imagine my life without Kuro on my wing – always looking after me, always pleased to be around me – it breaks my heart into two. She feels as close to me as my family in Ellyntide, if not more. I haven't forgotten about my responsibilities to the throne, but how can I set aside someone who means so much to me?

I might not be ready for a romantic relationship with a Dragon. But for the first time ever, I think I could live with it.

The snowstorm that encumbered our wings and forced us to spend the night with some rock-hounding Loner cleared, giving way to a delightfully sunny morning. After we departed the mad Loner's den, I was able to catch some meager prey and share it between the three of us. It's provided enough strength to ride the thermals while Enyll scans the ground, trying to recall from memory the sunken landscape he saw as a fledge — the location of my vision from Gust.

As the morning drags on, Enyll makes little progress. With the sun in the sky and a setting Maki on the horizon, the thermals have been strong, allowing us to lazily glide through the air for hours, surveying countless snow-blanketed valleys. But as soon my stomach begins to remind me of our meager breakfast...

"Asha..." Enyll trails off, a tinge of hope on his fangs. "Asha, I think that's it!"

Flying to my left, Enyll flicks his ears downward, pointing toward the bottom of a V-shaped valley. There, the conifers are spread thin, growly sparsely between themselves near the point where a frozen mountain stream connects to an icy valley river. To the left of the junction is a copse where the late morning shadows reveal a distinct, bowl-shaped depression in the ground. My excitement reaches a crescendo as I notice fallen trees poking conspicuously through the snow.

"Finally," Kuro grumbles, noticing my excitement.

"This must be the place!" I announce. "Let's land and take a look!"

SKREEAK!

I call our landing and circle down from the sky with Enyll and Kuro on my tail. As the finer details become visible, I become convinced we're in the right spot. The trees are exactly as I remember them from my vision! We land a short distance from the copse in nearly the same spot where Gust first showed me this scene.

"This looks familiar," Enyll says, shaking his wings of snow.

I open my muzzle to agree before quickly clamping it shut. Enyll can't know about my vision from Gust. Instead, I play dumb and ask, "How confident are you?"

Cerulean eyes narrow to slits as he scans the trees. "Pretty confident. Let's move forward."

We approach the copse, dragging our tails across the surface of the snow drifts. It's just as I remember it, down to the position of the trees and the shadows cast from their branches. In the center of this scene is the circular depression in the snow, far too symmetrical to be anything natural. What would we discover if we melted the snow away? Another building foundation? Perhaps a courtyard where ancient Animals prayed to the deities? The fir trees groan as a gentle breeze blows through the valley. Should I be listening for the sound of shifting feathers, as well? Surely, Gust is here with us, watching this scene unfold with great anticipation. Could the Dragon deity himself be watching?

I stand at the rim of the snow-lined depression and gaze across it. “Kuro, would you do the honors? You have more flame than I do.”

She nods, then moves to stand beside me. She rears her head back and unleashes a blowtorch of flame against the ground, suffusing clouds of cold steam into the air. As the snow begins to drop, a shape takes form in the center of the depression. A rectangular object a few yards in width, its composition indeterminate.

“Kuro, wait.”

I brush my wing against her flank, and a moment later, Kuro extinguishes her fire. Instead of explaining what I see, I lope into the depression and sink against the wet snow until it’s up to my underside.

“Asha?” Enyll calls out.

I ignore him, continuing on my way until I’m standing directly in front of the rectangular object. With the very top now poking through the snow, I can make out it’s some sort of stone pillar or monolith. Though weathered by time, it’s clear this stone is as unnatural as the depression it sits in. Unwilling to scorch it, I begin digging out the area directly in front of it with my talons. It’s a warm-colored stone, grainy in appearance, and different from the stone that composed the ancient building in the southern part of Felra. As I sense Kuro and Enyll approaching from behind, a series of inscriptions become visible.

“Oh my Goddess,” I whisper. “This... I can read this! This is the Goddess language I’m familiar with!”

What?! How can this be?! Written in the stone before me is the modern-day Goddess language, the one I've known my entire life! How did it get so far north in Felra?! I steady myself against the snow and read the first few words inscribed on the stone.

'We, the members—'

The rest is cut off, obscured behind a layer of wet snow sticking to the stone monolith. With renewed excitement, I begin digging furiously, using my hind legs to kick out snow from behind me. A few moments later, Kuro and Enyll join me at my side. With the three of us at work, it's not long until a space is cleared, revealing the whole inscription, beautifully preserved by the frigid climate of the north.

I retreat a step and observe the stone monolith as a whole. The entire stone is covered in the Goddess language, a paragraph's worth of text. In contrast to the tool-carved inscriptions we found in the forest, these letters are long and jagged, carved in a much more primitive way. Truly, ancient Animals did not carve these letters — a Dragon did!

"What *is* this?" Enyll muses with a touch of wonder. He angles his head close to the stone and sniffs it inquisitively. "They're like guiding tree symbols, but... there's so many of them!"

"That's because they're Farlander symbols," Kuro explains. "Asha, what do they say?"

Kuro and Enyll are speaking to each other, but I have no idea what they're talking about. I'm off in my own little world, trying to comprehend the gravity of what's written on the monolith. I already read it from start to finish, repeating the words over and over again inside my head. It's the most profound thing I've ever read, and it changes *everything*.

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We, the members of the Lordanou Clan, commemorate our accomplishments in this place of honor. It was from this grove that we harnessed the power of the Chimera, the sacred ritual to change form and ascend to Dragonkind. We used this power to tame the land, ending the scourge of Dragon infestation and claiming the crown of the first Kingdom of Ellyntide. The Chimeric Stone, the vector for our noble deeds, forged from the inhospitable moon in this tempered land, sleeps in the first Kingdom.

I lower my head and rest it against the surface of the snow, using my right wing to brace myself upright. Using my left, I reach forward to run the barbs of my feathers across the monolith, cold as ice. My body winces as I touch it; for the first time since I flew from Ellyntide, I feel the influence of my family. *The Lordanou Clan*. Unbidden, my eyes clench together, and tears fall from my face. *Everything makes sense!*

"Asha?!" I sense Kuro's head near my own.

"It's for me!!" I burst into tears. "My ancestors left this for *me!*"

I whip my head around and bury it into Kuro's chest. My ancestors created the Serpentine Diamond and used it to become Dragons. When they were finished with it, they returned the diamond to Ellyntide so it could protect the newly crowned royal family in the event of a crisis. They knew that one day, an heir might transform, so they left this message for them to discover the truth. Why else would an inscription in the Goddess language be left in the middle of Felra?

It doesn't explain everything about my transformation. What's the power of the 'Chimera'? Why did they call the Serpentine Diamond the 'Chimeric Stone?' And what became of those first Lordanou Dragons? But the most important truth, that which I've yearned to discover since the moment I transformed into a Lithan, has finally been revealed to me. I know why I'm a Dragon.

As I weep, Kuro's head nuzzles against my own. She intones a soft and reassuring growl, hoping to lull my joyful sorrow. Even Enyll is allowed to join in, nuzzling his head against my flank while keeping a measured distance from Kuro. With warmth surrounding me, I sob into Kuro's feathers until no more tears are produced.

When I finally regained control of myself, I translated the monolith for Kuro and Enyll, dutifully explaining everything it revealed. As Enyll was keen to point out, it doesn't match the flock's account of history as told to them by Keuvra. Ancient Farlanders becoming Dragons and taming Felra? Even I have to admit it sounds far-fetched. But then again, a Lemur Princess transforming into a Lithan when her life was in danger sounds equally implausible, yet here I am. Despite finding the closure I so desperately longed for, I have no fewer questions for the Dragon deity when he finally reappears.

"So, this is what you were looking for," Enyll says, his head hovering above the frozen bark of a fallen tree. Disparate patches of ice have thawed to reveal a glaze of green and black, fuzzy-looking lichen.

Yes, you heard me right: I FINALLY found *pilophorus acicularis!*

I really can't believe it! The devil's matchstick lichen itself, only a few months late and on an entirely different continent! While explaining the inscription on the monolith, I noticed some twigs poking through the snow. We turned around and began digging until we uncovered a tree lying on the ground. When I pushed it over with my talon, I could hardly believe my eyes — thousands of wooly strands of the rare black lichen perfectly preserved under a blanket of snow! A layer of ice has grown to cover most of the log, but I can see more of the lichen preserved inside. As long as it stays below freezing, we can easily transport it back to the Grandfather Tree!

"It feels like I've been searching for his lichen for months," I joke, standing beside Enyll. "I can't believe I finally found it here, of all places."

I can, of course, believe I found it here. It's plainly obvious that Gust left it for us to discover. But we don't need to go on about that little detail with Enyll.

He pulls his head back and ruffles slightly. "How are you going to bring it to the Grandfather Tree if you're..."

A breeze drifts through the trees, capturing Enyll's voice with it. He frowns, and his eyes fall away from me. I never told him about my expulsion from the Grandfather Tree, so it seems he heard about it somewhere down the wing. It makes me uncomfortable knowing how fast my infamy spread through the flock.

"First," I say, squaring my wings. "I think we should fly to Flat Rock and talk to Frecci. As a healer, she'll understand the value of a rare ingredient. I'd like her to join us at the Grandfather Tree."

“And what about Nakino?” Sitting to my left, Kuro deadpans a growl.

“That’s the other reason I want her to join us. Unlike Nakino, I think she’ll actually stand up for me in front of Sefri.”

Kuro inclines her head; she seems satisfied. With the promise of a treatment and two Dragons backing me up, maybe we’ll be able to convince Sefri how featherbrained it was to expel me.

“We should be on the wing,” Enyll says, showering snowflakes into the air as he draws his wings open. “And fly quickly. The longer we wait, the more Kin grow sick.”

“Right,” Kuro nods in a rare show of agreement with Enyll. “Asha, is there anything else you want to do here?”

I gaze past Kuro and stare at the monolith. There could be more stones like these just beneath our talons, ones that explain the power of the Chimera or the fate of the Lordanou Dragons.

“Perhaps another day,” I smile. “We’re leaving the place standing this time.”

Kuro smirks and Enyll looks confused. We could continue to melt the snow and learn about the past. But for now, I've sated my curiosity. All I've ever wanted to do was return to normal and see my family again. To that end, I'm satisfied. Perhaps I'll return here in the spring when the weather's warmer (And we don't have to melt any snow!)

The three of us step away from the ancient site, and Kuro calls our take-off.

ROAARRR!

We leap into the air, causing a flurry of snow to fly in all directions. Once we rise above the tree line, I circle around and gingerly snatch the fallen tree from the ground like I was swooping down for prey. My foretalons grip the wood and squeeze tight, but the rotten trunk remains intact with only a few loose splinters. I climb into the sky, following Kuro and Enyll as they locate a thermal blowing up the sides of the valley. As sun-fueled air ruffles my tail feathers, I gaze across the valley and wonder just how much things will change by next spring, both here in the valley and in my life as a member of the flock.

The snow-capped peak of White Mountain stands silent as we glide into the Great Valley, lowering ourselves into the warmer, southerly currents blowing from the plains to the south. Besides the clouds that invaded the sky and blocked out the sun, nothing of consequence happened on our return trip from the lands to the north. The leisurely flight gave me plenty of time to reflect on the ancient monolith and what we learned from it.

Dragons must have been a real scourge to ancient Animals when the floating continents were still moonbound. Perhaps they built ocean-faring vessels and sailed to Felra? That would explain how Animals arrived in Felra. But what really set my mind ablaze during the flight was the mention of the '*Chimera*'. What's the deal with that, anyway? Was it a lost technology? Some kind of ancient magic? The power of deities?! I've thought of all sorts of possibilities, and I'm unsure which of my theories could be correct.

Regardless of what it is, my ancestors were awfully clever if they were able to become Dragons and ‘*tame*’ the Lithans (whatever that means.) As usual, the more I learn about my transformation, the more questions I uncover. But for the first time, it feels like I’m stalking closer to the truth.

SKREECH!!!

A Dragon’s cry echoes through the valley, intruding on my errant thoughts. This would be a mundane event if it weren’t for the fact it was directed at us.

“Who was that?” Enyll calls out from behind me.

Kuro scans the sky and flicks her ears to our left. “There. Someone’s flying from below.”

Another Dragon, clad in a dirty blond plumage, is winging towards us fast. “Kuro!!” he cries out.

Wait, I recognize that voice! “Ykuvi?! Is that you?”

“Kuro, something’s happened!”

The soot-plumaged drakaina rears her wings back to come to a halt. “What!?”

Ykuvi banks right to insert himself into a thermal and rises to our altitude. As he draws near, Enyll calls out with a touch of concern, “Blue Skies, Ykuvi?”

He shakes his head quickly. “Kuro, it’s Frida. She’s been attacked!”

Kuro’s eyes bulge. “*What?!*”

Ykuvi wings forward and flies alongside Kuro. “I—I don’t know all the details, just that she was ambushed. I think she’s at Flat Rock.”

At that moment, something visceral comes across Kuro. Her flight becomes erratic, and she snarls in a sinister voice, “*Relmoon.*” She rears her body back and lunges forward, changing direction to fly as fast as possible towards Flat Rock.

“K-Kuro!” I shout, still shocked by the drastic change of events. The three of us set off after her, pounding our wings to keep pace with my distraught friend. What is going on? How could Frida be ambushed?! And what are we going to discover when we arrive at Flat Rock?