

Enmity's Lost Prodigy

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A small write up by the author.

This is to be a second serious attempt at a story I wish to write. The first being a writing practise which has developed into something greater than anticipated; greater as to say that it is far too encumbering and thus left on a mental, and for some part, written back burner. The following is both a serious and light hearted novel featuring anthropomorphic characters in a unique world of deep lore. I prefer this work to retain swearing and other profanities to a minimum for a cleaner taste of it's content, as well as keep violence vague to the same effect for younger viewers. This is a story about overcoming discrimination, both internally and externally and talks about serious experiences. It has changed path slightly over the time of it's creation and reflects a much grander scheme than it's original perspective.

The concept of this story came from a small study on the development on an emotional and physical level. I desired to openly express value and shamelessness in it's origin and complexities; overcoming great struggles and the founding of powerful and independent decisions... Definitions of what a platonic friendship can be, innocent love and the effects of loss to which. The study became what is here now, a hope that through trials of adversity and intimacy of broken walls that a character could be brought to life.

To anyone reading this before the official release on my website such as an editor or a close friend who shows interest in my work, thank you for taking the time to look over this story and it's contents.

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Information and reference

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All names, locations, and specifics to this world can be found at the bottom of the book for reference. If you forget or have trouble understanding a concept, please refer to script below.

Opening

Night befell the land long ago, long before the fires erupted, and well before the cries filled the air in desperation. Though this was freedom that they felt, they could hardly be considered happy. In the darkest woods, in the deepest corner it could find, it sat there under a bush. This black creature, in midst what she could only hope was veil enough to conceal her, could not hold back her beating heart. For many hours until the panic stopped and she was too exhausted to care, she could not sleep under the warm night, instead there she sat hoping all brightness would fade to black and she could feel safe. At last her apprehension faded, she was calm. However, not far from her stood a ray cast from Luna's light through the trees, majestic moonlight. All seemed safe but she could not bare her curiosity, for this was the first night in years she felt the earth beneath her. It called to her. Beckoned her. For every night before the moon's shine was so pale, but tonight it was brighter than the sun itself amongst the pitch she burrowed in. As she crawled closer to it, she rustled the bush she had cramped into. This noise caught the attention of another. Though if it were a beast she would have been in peril, instead it was a small cautious creature. At first the sight of black mass crawling from the bottom of a shrub struck this small pixy as danger, but fly away as it might, it only hovered and watched. A voice could be heard, quiet and weak. As the fluttering creature looked closer, The black mass appeared to be a bird, wounded or sore. Cautiously they came closer, the bird unknowing to her company. When the bird heard the faint noise of fluttering wings she fell back. "Hold on." the small voice called "Don't be afraid..." Before the bird could retreat, the small fluttering girl came into the light. She floated there noticing the timid black mass inching away slowly "What's wrong?" No response could be heard. Remembering early that night, she called out again to the timid shadow. "You weren't part of that ruckus earlier were you?" The bird shocked, furiously shook her head. Both of then stayed as statues. Memories flooded back to moments ago and the bird began to cry. The odd small critter came closer, baring long red hair and a stranger tipped tail. She was greeted with something unexpected. The black bird only knelled before her new found friend and held her until the memories faded into a small warmth against her white radiant moonlit chest..

Long ago before these events, before the tides shifted and the lands were lost forever, centuries remembered as peace. All people and residents of the earth known as Shemlaur lived equally. Though war as they may from time to time, they were civilized. All walks of life anthropomorphic, birds, rabbits, lizards and deer lived amongst each other. One day however, Shemlaur broke and divided, the earth crumbled and shattered. What was once prairie now became fractured valleys, mountains came down, streams and valleys were formed and just as easily destroyed. Many died in this event that spanned many days before it managed to settle, and many more homesteads ruined. Those who were bound to the earth suffered great loss but were not without hope. Today they still live having adapted to the new land, and the new kings of the world were those gifted with wings. This world harbours a dark past when prejudice took hold, when reshaping the world after the cataclysm took more than hand or foot. To restore balance, many clowns and pretenders have taken to the crown only to fall in their own arrogance. As is now, those times are forgotten and peace is once again restored within the separated peoples.

Chapter 1: Freedom

Bright sun beamed off of the rocks and exposed cliff sides. Trees danced in the breeze and rustled about. In the air flew one bright light though it's body was mostly black. One magpie danced as it fell from heaven and into a crevice of a high hill. She knew these lands well and as her morning stroll often dared fate more than she should. Like a rogue dashing from ally to ally the crevice turned into a valley, and broke into another. Though these highways were used for a very important particular reason, for the most part, she enjoyed the rush much greater than anything. Along these many bridges were laid atop. Those who could not fly made due with structures, and became rather proficient at making them. Below were the corpses of many bridges claimed by the shifting plates and plateaus. Even now, well after the earth Shemlaur settled, many pieces still were unstable. Some times, though not common, one might find someone else trapped. There was one instance which she had helped a man to safety only to shy away before he could properly thank her for her troubles.

The valley disappeared and became the side of a massive slide and cliff. It spanned maybe a good five hundred feet below and two kilometres long. Along this there were many waterfalls that ran off of it to a pond below. Here in the open, she pulled out her wings in and began to dive. She felt the wind rush against her face and she then rolled in the air, relishing in the freedom. She closed in to the wall which at this height was still a sheer cliff, and let out her wings. She was parallel with the rock, stretched out feet away from touching it. She pulled off and continued to descend making a loop around a waterfall. This was freedom for her. "Hey!" A voice called out from behind her. "I get you like to play miss daredevil all the time, but could you remember you have a passenger on board?" The magpie only grinned pondering to push it harder. "Farrah?... Farrah!?"

At last after the rocky bottom and having followed the stream they passed many valleys they could overlook the distant demi-floor. The 'demi-floor' is an elevation which most of the land is shattered, much like how clay mud would dry cracked. On the top plateaus, most of the land is flat and the valleys are harder to spot than one would imagine. Looks are often deceiving. Given it is the flattest for miles, it would still resemble foothills before the cataclysm. However, this close to the fracture level it was much bumpier and a lot greener. The 'fracture level' is where the mountains or high hills split and shattered, hence the massive slide under a sheer cliff. The only more extreme is the 'shatter splinters' which are the tallest spires around accompanied by a rocky uneven and uninhabitable ground. Farther off would inhabit a great plane, the chasms, and lastly the dark lands of the 'shadow downs'.

Carefully they came out to a lake that caught their eyes and decided to rest. Out in the open, the demi-floor was known for very little trees on the upper plateaus and more so actually in the valleys where the rivers ran. Here was an unusually large pond that was fed by a section of fracture level that spanned the '*once was*' mountain range. Upon landing in the clearing they noticed three locals on the other side of the lake. Farrah was very timid of others unless she had to actually help one. Her friend never understood what was up with it, only accepted it. She also, like Farrah, chose to recluse from most civil folk being ten times her size and probably never seen a cat with wings before, let alone one so small. This obscure feline's name was Talia. "Do you think they'll mind?" she asked. Farrah looked closely with her heightened eye sight. It appeared to be a family, a mother a father and a young child, and given the day she couldn't blame them.

“They should be fine.” Farrah responded after some time.

“You sure? You are the one who pushes this incognito stuff all the time.”

Farah didn't respond, she instead started to carefully walk into the lake. Wet, however not cold, she relaxed as she carried out farther into the shallows. She sat to where her legs were submerged and began to bath. Farrah did so for a while until turning around fully to face her friend, with not a word from Farrah's part Talia responded “You do know I'm a cat right?” Farrah smiled and beckoned, Talia refused. As her friend's reluctance grew on her, Farrah continued to bath regardless. Not even a moment later Talia fluttered along and landed on her friend's knee which at the time was bent and lifted out of the water. “I don't do water.”

“I know...” Farrah replied with a grin. As she laid back and submerged her topper half she spread out both wings, and Talia felt uneasy.

“You're not...” With Farrah's face still surfacing and a wild expression, Talia's intuition kicked in full force “No, no!” she begged as Farrah lifted her wing out from the cat's poison and splashed her friend with water. “No, no, stop, I hate water.” Though she spoke in detest, she giggled when she did, not even Talia was convinced by her own statement. It was not harm, more an inconvenience. Water was wet, not much more needs to be said. Farrah laughed as she sent another little wave off of her wings. The two giggled and played around, this catching the eyes of the family made them smile. However, the father who's attention fell on the two friends studied them. Unable to help himself to witness the cute display he noticed something about the black and white bird.

He called his wife and daughter to move on while still holding a smile “Let's let them have their privacy.” The husband implored, his wife questioned it and in private he told her “She should not be here.” Confused the mother acted as though nothing was wrong and they carried their business as far on the other side of the lake as they could despite already being there, and they even picnicked on the grass under one of the few trees of the plateau.

When Farrah was all done with her bathing, she returned to Talia who too was bathing in the sun along the shore, yet not quite done. She rolled onto her other side. “Are you ready?” Farrah asked.

“Not really, for some reason I'm wet, and don't you dare think about splashing me again.”

“Alright, I won't.” She tittered to herself.

“Thank you...” Farrah waited by her friend's side for a while before Talia made a remark concerning the family “Have you noticed that they somehow managed to move farther away from us?”

Farah looked at Talia, not immediately sure what she meant until looking across the lake to the family that was currently eating under a birch. “I think they are just minding themselves, don't you?”

“I want to say that.” Talia replied sitting up where her arms spread and held her weight behind her. “I've noticed that before. It's like they don't like you or something. Hard to believe from such a good friend who would spray a cat with water...” She mentioned sarcastically “I mean, if there was a problem with you I think I'd be the first to know about it. I've lived with you a whole year now.”

“It's probably for the best.” A slight hint of guilt came off.

Talia caught it, unwanting to really call upon it, she continued “What would you have had to do huh?”

Farah got back to her feet and turned to walk off. With a happy expression that didn't seem to match her aura she replied “Nothing, Nothing at all.”

Talia followed behind, landing on Farrah's shoulders and spoke not fully convinced. “People sure can judge others pretty unjustly can't they.” Trying to wedge Farrah open on the closed subject. Farrah had an unnaturally positive outlook on things, Talia thought that she might get her friend to open up a bit more.

To Talia's disbelief, in the same hard to believe positive manner her friend always had about her, she laughed “That is quite true isn't it.”

“Are you okay, you don't sound yourself?... Well, actually no, you do, you just don't souAuh!” With that Farrah took flight a short distance, cutting Talia off. At the top of the cliff was a patch of berry bushes, it ran down the hillside behind sight and followed a sudden drop. “You know you could warn me before you do that!”

Farah chuckled. “Well, I was going to but you were talking and I'm hungry.”

“You could have waited a moment you know.” Talia scowled

Farah sighed, “But who knows how long you would have spattered on.”

“Why in a matter of fact, I was just about done.” Talia pridefully postured.

Before them was many verities of fleshy berries, none of the large pitted inside kind of ones. These are a berry specific to Shemlaul, purple and plum shaped with a black flesh, rather large and held many smaller crunchable seeds. It was ripely sweet but deep in flavour unlike a smooth blueberry and not as sharp as a strawberry. Though Talia was more prone to other forms of nutrition, these were an exception. She could hardly be bothered over a little take off shenanigans around these.

After feasting farther into the bush, and mostly filling their stomachs they heard a loud rumble. A plateau was shifting somewhere. Though not uncommon, it didn't happen very often where one could actually spectate the event. Farrah gazed out in search of it. Somewhere out in the distance there was a cloud of dust, it appeared to have already been too late to watch. She kept her eye on it as the dust lifted higher from the brittle dry plate that was sucked into the earth, only moments later it resurface as though the earth had spat it out. Two more plates started to shift moving higher, soon one of them shattered and a good chunk fell back down. Talia even caught glimpse of it when she noticed it was actually in sight. “That doesn't happen every day. At least, not that we ever get to see it that closely.” She muttered.

“No, it's not. That may have been the best show of it I've ever seen. I hope no one was hurt.”

“People get hurt all the time from that kind of stuff, after a while you need to let someone else be a hero for once. I'm sure everyone in that town there would be out helping whoever was in need if there was someone out there to begin with.” Talia was pointing down and to their right. A ways off

there was a rather large plateau that was sunk beneath it's surrounding neighbours. It contained one river that flowed off and a waterwheel attached to grind wheat. Many houses surrounded the centre of town which consisted of two streets and a third one being rather a stub. It looked rather enticing.

Farrah was satisfied with her lunch. On a big rock in the clearing of the bushes against a steep hill she sat pondering the day. Maybe once, for a moment she could sneak in and leave unnoticed. When she was young, she never got to see the towns, in her parents home and estate was in the hills, they lived never needing to ever leave, nor visit anyone in town. She was free now, free to live and do as she saw fit. She was strong, and fast. Maybe she would have a little peek. She knew nothing of those without wings, nor workings of small communities. It could be exciting. Just a peek. They were far, far away from any kingdom or city, this was one small tiny outpost. Just a little peek.

Farrah set herself ready to take off again and knelt for Talia to dock behind her neck. The cat was a strong and swift flyer in her own respect, but Farrah was bigger and faster yet. To keep up, Talia would simply tag along, this was accepted by her carrier and as of such Farrah never complained since. Talia took the hint and mounted the same as always, right behind the neck under the long strands of hair. They would protected her from the violent turbulence caused by the tremendously faster speed Farrah was able to fly at. She couldn't see very well while concealed there, so wherever they went, she only went along for the ride. It was this way since they met.

Long ago they spent a night sleeping together under a bush. Talia wrapped deep in Farrah's wings. They didn't know the other but bonded that night. Talia knew nothing of friend's past, nor did she care. The same was said about Farrah. However Farrah's quirks and evaded secrecies were what irritated Talia. Seemingly to the other they two lost souls who stuck together for protection. Though Talia may claim as she might that Farrah's crazy flying would one day kill both of them, never had she felt so safe in such a big open world. This trust would be very well questioned as Farrah landed.

It tempted her, the town and it's people. All the things she missed out in for the last seventeen some years of her life, now however dangerous, seemed like plenty good enough time. With her friend by her side, she felt it safe enough to be seen by people. She smiled forcefully, nervous, having never really talked to anyone except Talia.

At last they touched the ground, her friend confused for such a short venture. Talia popped her head out of the top, fighting the strands of hair to surface. "What?!" She popped back down. Caught in the strands she fought she wrestled her way out from the bottom to climb into Farrah's sholder. She took one look and scurried back inside. "What the heck?" Still not believing it. "You are really not acting like yourself now."

"I thought it would be a nice change for once."

"Yeah, but there are people here! You hate people..." She said lowering her voice to a strong whisper.

"I don't hate people." Farrah admitted softly, nervous. She tried to take it in openly, enjoy the moment, but everyone around her stared. A mother even shielded her child's eyes. Everyone here wore clothes, however as was quite apparent, Farrah did not. Neither did Talia. She didn't see the value in them living alone and almost was never cold in her warm coat of feathers. Farrah didn't realize why they stared, she couldn't tell out of the many reasons they would have. It's not like they could really complain, most all birds, respectively with rare exceptions had no breasts. Though she had nothing to

hide, she felt completely exposed.

“I think they are staring at you because you're not wearing anything, I hear that's a thing.”

“You don't wear clothes either.” Farrah retorted

Still, she walked, pacing very slowly with every step seeming to get harder and harder. At last, at the end of the street where it joined another, there was a store. She beamed her eyes up to it having been staring at the ground for some time now. Her speed picked up and she dashed to it's door and went inside.

When the door behind closed and it became darker and hard to see under the blanket of hair, Talia crawled out to see where they were now. In front was a til with no one minding the store. On each side were shelves stocked with many assorted items devoted a particular use. Organized neatly there was food towards the front, tools along the long walls and other nicknacks along a tall shelf with no backing. There was an item on this shelf that caught Farrah's eyes, enchanted she rushed over to meet it. She wasn't sure what it was, but it shined. Two glass lenses like her mother used to wear only strangely attached to protruding holders and a strap. It was gravely small, merely child sized, one that a junior might wear for some reason. As she held it up to her own eyes it appeared that the magic left these goggles. Whenever she would look through her mother's glasses the sight though it would warp, but these were perfectly flat and did not aid those who's vision was distorting. These had a much different use. “You think they could protect my eyes?” Talia questioned.

Farrah looked back to her sholder, scanning. “Why would you need that?”

“When you're flying around you go so fast that I can't see anything.”

“Oh...” Farrah realized. For all her life, the wind never bothered her eyes all that much. It came as a surprise when Talia complained about it, thinking back, Talia never could deal with looking into the wind. Perhaps it was a feature of cats to not be as built to fly. Also given, Talia was the only cat Farrah ever met. “How should we even know if they fit or not, you look much smaller than a child.”

“Well thanks for rubbing it in.”

“You mention it all the time.”

“Yeah but I'm the one saying it.”

Farrah simply handed the goggles over to stop a fuss over Talia's height. Her friend accepted and tried to fit them on her. They were still a tad big, though the band in the back promised it to be adjustable. Neither of them knew how to actually adjust it and for many moment's they pondered and tried with no success. At this point the storekeeper came out from the back room. He couldn't see them, though he knew they were there. “Are you just in the browse.” He asked, assuring they were customers.

It took a while for Farrah to respond, not knowing what to say. “Um, yes.” she replied nervous.

“Alright, just don't take off without paying.” He noticed the uncertainty in her voice. At last he actually noticed her behind the shelf and without much thought he left her for a moment. An old squeaky chair was pulled out from under the counter and the shopkeeper sat, an eye on the door as he

would greet anyone who he didn't see the face of. Probably some traveller who dropped in on their way, wouldn't think twice about running off and never return. He was a gruff old rabbit, his hair faded and medium length as it flopped straight down all side of his head except the front that was combed back. His voice coarse and loosing patients in his old age. On his left came out his son, a young rabbit man who by the looks of it was almost ready to take over the family business, the old man, looking ready to give that title off to retire. The younger had a half crate in his arms filled with vegetables and asked where the young lady was that he heard. "You just think about woman." The gruff old man accused.

"No, I don't see her anywhere, did she leave."

The old man pointed towards the shelf, and shortly a wiggle was spotted through the jars and ornaments. He nodded and set the crate down on the counter. Busy stocking the front table, he wondered what she looked like, all he saw was black. Perhaps a cat, or another rabbit like him.

Farrah was just about done with trying to figure out how to adjust the goggles. "Give them here" Talia requested tired of wanting a try herself. She got her hands on them and messed around just the same. At last she placed it on her head properly, and scrunched the back the band with her hand to simulate what it would be like if they even could get the adjustment to work. It worked, sort of. She held it comfortably but the eye pieces were too far spread. However to some luck on Talia's flat face, however split eyed the protruding lenses may have seemed they were angled for the sharper more rounded face of a bird who's eyes were sunk back. It fit her only because it wrapped around a greater distance, and the actual lenses faced crossing the other. "Maybe it's a good thing my face is so cute and small."

Farrah smiled. She felt more comfortable here, but she couldn't shake the uneasy feeling of being in an enclosed space and not knowing what she was doing. As mentioned she never seen a town nor a store before. She knew it by the outside because of a picture her father hung on the wall. The old man said to pay up front, she forgot about that. Her parents oddly never carried money or ever needed to. Once or twice she ever even saw a coin in her life. She pondered perhaps if he didn't need it, maybe he could part with it for her friend. It was worth the try, even if she couldn't convince him, they didn't need it. After mustering the courage to face him, she turned and walked to the front counter. The old man took a look and somehow managed to turn an even whiter shade of grey. His eyes opened wide and his heart skipped a beat which for his age was not very healthy. He grit his teeth, and held it in for a moment before assaulting "We don't serve your kind here!"

The loud retort scared Farrah and she folded herself in with it. The younger rabbit turned. He was astonished by her. A black and white, completely exposed bird, shy as the wind. She tried to move closer to the counter but was yelled at once more by the old man "Get out of here! You don't belong here, you should be dead!"

"Father!" The son called.

"I..." Farrah didn't have the strength to speak. Talia, stunned at the response went blank expressioned. "I..." she could only whisper "want to ask you..." Before completely falling silent.

"What did you think coming here?!" The old man shouted in disbelief.

"Father, what's wrong?" His son questioned, just as confused as Talia.

“HEY!” The confused little cat roared. “What's your problem you old windbag? A beautiful young lady comes into your store stark naked, isn't that kind of a thing? I'm pretty sure that's a thing. And you have that to say to her?”

“Get out of here!” He roared once more

Silence fell for a moment. No one would say a thing, only stand there. Farrah placed the goggles on the counter and turned around.

“Get out!” veins popping on the old man's forehead.

Instantly she ran out the door, not looking back for a moment. Talia, holding on by her claws, would not be able to catch up to her friend's frantic sprint if she let go. Farrah ran, until taking to the air. She couldn't even feel the pain of Talia trying to climb back up the birds back in an attempt not to fall off. Farrah flew into the air rather high and stopped there. In this time her friend finally managed to return to a safe nestle at the weeping bird's nape. After a moment or two, she landed off on the edge of the plate. On a hillside reaching the cliff she sat there, too upset to even cry.

Talia jumped down into the tall grass. Above was her best friend unsure of how to even feel. She was mad, but held back many tears, shaking, absent. Talia pushed the grass aside to see her friend better. She was empathetic, saddened by the distress. She thought for a moment, perhaps, no, for certain this is why they never faced anyone. Though the man Farrah had once saved was far from upset, downright grateful in fact, this contrast was unprecedented. Still, Talia couldn't bare the sight. She leap into Farrah's lap, and tried to console her. This finally got Farrah's attention. Tail with both arms wrapped around Farrah's belly for as far as the little things could reach, Farrah pushed her pain aside and returned with a single hand. Farrah placed her palm on Talia's back gently and held it there. She sighed. Still shaken by everything, she couldn't help but feel bitter, but still she held it back for her friend who too was not feeling well. “I'm...” Taking a moment to breath it “...Sorry” Farrah apologized

“You don't need to worry about him at all.” Talia consoled “He's in the past.”

They sat there for a while, on the hill, overlooking the town.

“Is that why you don't talk to people Farrah?” Talia asked

“Not really.”

“Then what did you do to him before?”

“Nothing, I never met him.”

“He just jumped out and yelled at you.”

“Yes... He did...” Taking a moment to think about her next words. “I don't care what people think of me.”

“I thought he would treat you a lot different with you being all earthchild on him and all. I thought guys went mad over that kind of thing. Not... That kind of mad.”

Farah smiled “Indeed.” She looked back at the town, still deeply bitter, and maybe with a little less clear of thought. She was over the pain, now, she pondered. “Talía.”

“Yeah?” Her friend looked up.

“I need to do something for a moment.”

“Wait.” Talía broke off. Being picked up and placed down on the ground. Unwillingly. She waved her arms about trying to break free. “You're not going to do something stupid are you?” Farrah did not respond. “You are not going back there.”

“Just stay right there... I'll be back before you know it.”

“You are going back there, I know it! This isn't some kind of vengeance game!”

“I'm not going for vengeance.” Farrah announced

“If I were going back, I'd be going for vengeance! Don't you lie!” Talía screamed

Farah smiled falsely and flew off. Indeed, it was vengeance.

She flew down to the store and landed softly. Everyone looked at her somewhat more concerned than before. She quietly entered the shop to avoid contact with the shopkeeper. It was not on the counter where she left it, looking back to where originally found it, it was not there either. She tried to quietly sneak around, whilst also being swift about it. Now that they were out of sight it was a race to find them and leave. A man that bitter had no right to such belongings. She lived outcasted already, she abide the law simply out of respect, that man lost her respect. She was determined. As she turned the corner she found them on the back table behind the counter. Before she could swoop out to get them the young rabbit came out of the back room, expecting to see her.

“I figured you would return.” He said kindly. Farrah jumped and gasped instantly turning to him. “Don't worry, my father is out in the back with a wet towel. You managed to aggravate him quite a lot, but don't worry, he's fine.

“You... Don't mind me bei...”

“Not at all.” he assured. Farrah was relieved but thought back to Talía's comments. She felt indecent and objectified. “My father explained to me what the problem was, I don't believe in it one bit. Things should be different now.” He explained reaching for the goggles. “Time's have passed, and I doubt anyone would care about that kind of thing anymore.” He handed them to her. “If you want them, you can have them, no charge.”

Farah gulped. “Th, thank you...”

“You do know they are child size though, right?”

“It's for my friend.”

“Alright, I figured, I was just curious... In a few years, I'd love to see you around again, by then

I should have this place all to myself.” Farrah nodded gratefully and turned to leave “Oh,” he continued, “And as a word of caution, you may not want to stay around for too long, best be on your way. Take care.”

She agreed “Thank you again.”

“No problems.”

Chapter 2: Chase

Farrah happily left the shop and made a straight beeline for where she dropped off Tali. Flying just above the ground, there she was waving Farrah back. As Farrah landed, her friend who was gravely worried leapt onto her again. "Don't leave me like that again, not to go back to a place like that."

"Sorry Talia. I brought you something." She replied holding the goggles in her hand.

"Did you steal them?" Talia asked shocked, and feeling uneasy about it.

"No, the young owner was pleased to give them to me."

"Was it because you weren't wearing anything?" Talia asked slyly.

Farrah thought about it for a moment, she felt objectified at first, but was rather complimented that he felt so kindly about her. For a moment she thought about it and laughed. "Yeah, I think so now that you mention it." Perhaps it was, but at least he was nice about it.

"See! I told you that was a thing."

"Yes, yes it is."

The two were rather pleased. Talia put the goggles around her neck as her head was too small to hold them without figuring out the adjustment. Farrah was also pleased, but this joy was shadowed by three winged strangers. Talia took first notice to them directly behind Farrah "Who are they? They look like they want something to do with us."

Farrah turned around to see them and fell numb. They looked at her, and the middle one, bearing steel plates and a cape called out to her "You couldn't keep yourself out of trouble could you?"

Talia was becoming very well aware of the situation. "These guy's know you, what did you do back there?" Farrah was unable to respond.

"You've been quite the tricky one still having your wings."

"What do you want with her?" Talia shouted.

"Who... Oh, you are cute." The man adored.

"Not taking the compliment, what do you wa..." Talia said being cut off

"She, Farrah Shaeleen if I can remember, and her entire race has been exiled for eight years now."

"Wa... Exiled? What do you mean exiled?" Talia exclaimed.

"They have been exiled, not deemed worthy of living in this country. And as it stands, they are

not worthy of Shemloul soil! Her kind has been sentenced to imprisonment until death.”

“Till...” Talia's pupils became full circles from her cat like slits. “Then, why not send to to another country? Why death?”

“She would die either way. Little one, you will be informed that our country is bordered by the shadow downs, after the cataclysm we rest as an island amongst the shatter splinters of a great void and the ocean long lost in the mists. It is only home now to the creatures of darkness, monsters that arose. No soldier nor magpie alive is brave enough to cross it and it's great divide. Thus, to no transport to assure their leave they are to be imprisoned where they are in our sight.”

“What did they ever do to deserve such a thing?”

“They are corrupt, we of the bird, and those without wings alike suffered under their tyranny. Not one alive bares a pure soul, rotten to the core, as warden I've seen that first hand.”

“Farrah is pure! She would never hurt anyone.”

“Do you believe that?” The warden questioned, tilting his head.

“Yes, I don't know what you know of her, but she is a loving kind person who want's nothing from no one.”

“I've seen her curse my name in hatred, violence and malice, she wants nothing because she can't have anything, or we would show up, as we have today. She fears being found out, nothing more. Even now, she looks at me with resentment.”

Talia turned to Farrah. What the warden saw, to Talia, was fear and pain. Resentment would be a nicer term to use, she had every right to resent this man. “She's been through a lot already, leave her alone.” Talia shouted, prepared to make a break for it.

“I wish I could. Even if I could believe you that she has changed, even if that anger she bares is for me alone, she of all people cannot be allowed to roam for she possess power greater than any other.”

“Farrah.” Talia reached

“Don't try to escape, there are three of us, and one of you.”

“Farrah.” The three men moved, trying to surround Farrah, trying to corner her. Edging closer. The poor magpie sitting there, petrified. “Farrah! Snap out of it, RUN!” Talia screamed. As Talia rushed for her friend, the others caught wind and rushed for her as well. She quickly latched on with her sharp claws and biting deeply, Farrah turned and took flight. The two soldiers leapt forth but were unmatched by their captain's speed. Talia held on once again by her claws. “Don't worry about me, go! Fly like the wind!” She tried, but the warden caught up in a heartbeat and tackled Farrah. Latching on himself, the claws of his feet gripped tightly around Farrah's arm and wing with one, and her leg on the other side with his snare. She was trapped and in pain as the claws dug into her, Farrah gasped. Talia climbed to the heel of the warden's leg which held Farrah's wing. The other soldiers hovered as their boss had seized the subject.

“You make me regret allowing you wings Farrah.” The warden called out. “Don't forget it was I who pitied you, a mere child, I chose for you not to suffer the pain of losing them.”

Farrah finally got the strength after some time to retort. “You are a pervert!”

“I have no interest in children! You are still a child, running around bare as the day you were born.”

“OH SACK IT!” Talia exclaimed. Her tail with an odd wispy tip wrapped tightly around the warden's heel. “Now let her go!” Miraculously the tip started to ignite. As her rage grew, many of the strange markings on her arms and legs began to cinder. Her tail exploded in flame burning the warden's leg forcing it to let go. Quickly after he retracted his grip, Talia dived for Farrah's nape. “Fly!” Farrah shook her whole body and broke free.

The warden groaned in pain from the flame still searing without being present. The two soldiers without order dove straight down to Farrah who was making a suicide dive down the edge of the plateau. Into the valley was a narrow passage. Farrah, regardless of knowing the land or not was still skilled at flying with no fear. Life in fear was not worth living. For too long she was kept in prison for crimes she never committed.

The warden came in closely for this straight decent. He, the fastest flyer around, warden who could catch anyone, a hunter at his peak. He came dangerously close to Farrah, remarking to lower her morale. “You cannot out fly me!”

Talia stuck her head out to keep an eye on Farrah's six. She laughed. “Yeah, well Farrah's a maniac!”

Quickly following was another crack to the left, a sharp ninety degree turn with a small window. Though most valley's were open, this bottom was shattered and narrow. She abused the lowest elevation to limit her captor's ability to catch her in fear of crashing into the side if he grabbed her. She tilted herself and flew into the side of the cliff, trying to run against the wall to slow down, she lifted off of it taking as sharp of turn as she could. Frantic, she dashed through the small window into the tangent valley crevice that she saw prior. The warden missed the turn off and halted, quickly as he could recover he took the turn off again and the soldiers followed.

This new path was a dead end, but opened up very wide in the middle. At the bottom was an opening, an entrance to a cave. The entrance was a very thin crevice. In the distance they heard another plate shift, it frightened them for the time until they could tell that it was far enough away to not worry them. Still the sound echoed through the valleys and cracks enough that it could wake a giant. With no where to go but up or take one's chance down below, Farrah dove for the crack as the warden closed in behind. It was a tight fit, but the sooner she got in, the better. She was terrified of being chased and was getting irrational. She hurt herself and began to lose control, in the the dark, maintaining this became almost impossible. The warden flew in as well, a little farther down the opening where it was wider.

Farrah tried to maintain a proper distance from the walls while still going as fast as she could. Talia warned her to slow down but it was not considered. At last she got snagged by something, like a rope. She lost balance and began to fall. She fell and hit many things on the way down, none of which solid or painful. It slowed her down until she flopped onto a slope harshly but not enough to break

anything. The strange objects broke her fall heavily. Looking up, she saw many ropes crossing from the sides of the cavern. Like a village of hanging houses, without a structure to be found. She wasn't sure what they were but was thankful. She could see the warden flying down, but she landed in the dark and blended in apart from her white chest and tipped wings. She made a break to somewhere that she could hide and watch from afar.

The warden flying down, cautious, checked his surroundings. For all he knew, she could be well acquainted with this area and be well gone by now, but didn't want to take that chance. She was frantic, he didn't hear her crash into anything, but she could still be easily within sight. His followers arrived to meet him, less careful than he. "Hold" He called out. He lowered carefully but touched one of the strange topos. Instantly before could alert his presence, he turned back, "Leave here now." He left in a hurry, and his men did too. Strange Farrah thought. Talia concerned.

On his way out, one soldier asked "There are plenty of us to block them in and get them, why are we pulling out?"

"It's not safe in there, reckless as she is, she's probably injured. Even worse, there is a spider in there."

"A spider? I've never seen one."

"If you are lucky, you never will. They are fearsome, ruthless, and cunning. It'll look for some way to corner her, and she will die a painful death. I can't say prison is any better, but she would not experience being impaled. And trapped."

"Have you experience with them captain?"

"I've seen their work, it is not a sight for the faint of heart. I fear for her. I didn't want it to end like this."

"If she escapes?"

"She has my respect." The warden admitted gravely. The soldiers were quiet for some time exiting the valley "And we apprehend her properly next time."

It was dark, dry, rather musty smelling. The hole was a great underground chasm. There were a few corners that could be found, but mostly it was round and tall. Talia was certain the guards turned back for a good reason, and after noticing the ropes, she was pretty certain she knew why. "Farrah." She quietly whispered. "I think we are in great danger."

"We are?" Farrah responded weak and blunt.

"Shh! Shh..." She listened to hear any noises such as footsteps. "We need to get out of here."

"I'm not sure we can." exhaustively still parched from her struggle. She was as quiet as she could muster. Without just breathing her words.

"I know, they are probably out there watching to see if we leave."

“No,” Farrah informed “My arm is hurt.”

Talia, tired of being frightened, found another ounce of terror in her. “What do you mean it's hurt? Can it move, is it broken?”

“No, it's really sore. I don't think I could fly for too long before giving out. I think I tore a muscle or landed on it in my panic.”

“We have to get out of here soon though. Have you ever heard of a spider?”

“No, what is it?”

“Let' not stick around to find out.”

The two agreed and carefully walked around trying to find a tunnel out. They did not have much success, but in their troubles they crossed a stream. The water was fresh, not muddy, and ran across solid rock. “I wonder where it goes...” Farrah muttered to herself.

“Brilliant!” Talia replied, instantly covering her mouth having given off their location. “It has to go somewhere” She whispered with her hands still holding her mouth. “Either way, I think spiders hate water more than even cats do. If it saves my life I'm jumping in that thing and finding out where it exits.”

Farrah nodded her head, and started to walk down the stream. Talia turned around to check for an audience but couldn't spot anything. She didn't feel safe, but she trekked on to follow her friend. Both of them were pretty sure none of them could deal with this legend of horror. At last, the cavern lead to a small crevice of fractured rock that at one point split, probably with the valley above. In there was a tight entrance and a waterway, something to lead to freedom. Hopefully.

“Dark, isn't it?” Talia's small voice whispered out from the abyss, though no distinct notion could be seen, it was followed by a timid nod and the following a much quicker pace.

Through the passage they found little to settle their nerves, only the sound and cold chill of water run beneath them. They were fortunate, the water kept them on track and it did not once stray. This small passage was mostly formed by the same stream that guided them. Caves and caverns were dangerous places for anyone, and in any size of pit, they are far too unstable. The tunnel reached an opening as would best describe this opening. Along the straight narrow passage was a wall in which another plate had cracked, warped the passage and proceeded downward. Merely a drop as tall as Farrah though, this collide had caused the corners to chip away and left a small room which was the most comfort they had. They sat there, and listened, only water and the splatter at the bottom of the small drop.

Talia was certain, either their ever looping captor was following quietly behind or already at the exit having laid a trap. She thought it best to keep moving, but Farrah was exhausted and getting paranoid almost enough to stop her from walking farther. She crammed into a corner and rested. “You know, spiders, miiight not be as bad as I made them out to be.” Talia comforted to no avail, “You know, I bet they only eat bugs and small insects. Who knows maybe he or she is friendly.”

“I don't care, I just want out of here...” Farrah upset and distressed, she could only mumble but

talia understood. The cave itself was very enclosing, especially to one who also lost her ability to fly for a while. The spider, was far from her concern for now. If anything, her fear of the wardens appearance had her the most shaken. Now she had time to think, it rode on her like a pesky tick, one with claws and fangs. Talia, for the most part, only considered their chances of escaping and nothing else.

“Should we keep going? I mean we should keep going. I don't like it here any more than you.” Farrah wasn't listening, she was tucked against the wall, and entranced by the memory of her narrow escape. “Farrah! Hello.” A dim light flickered in front of her. “Farrah, snap out of it, don't tell me you are going to pass out.”

“No. I'm, I'm fine now.” She said not noticing the ember in front of her “Wait, what is that?”

Talia looked around “What? Did you find the spider, is it watching up.”

“Ah!” Farrah yelped sending shivers down Talia's back, making her tail grow hotter.

“Where is it!?”

“No! Your tail, get it out, get it...” Farrah panicked

“Wait what?” Talia freaked out turning to Farrah

“No, your tail it flew into my face and it's hot.”

“What did you see? You saw something!”

“Your tail... It glows...”

“Oh, yeah, you saw it earlier engulfed in flame.”

“I never got to see it before... It's really beautiful.”

“This thing?” Talia asked grabbing it bashfully. “Yeah, it's, you know, just a tail. You got one too... Except yours doesn't ignite.”

“It has so many patterns on it. It's like the patterns on my quilt when I was young.” Farrah reminisced in awe.

Tallia sighed, “Well, there went the stealthy approach to getting out of here. We should move now, especially now that we had our outbursts.”

“Why didn't you use it as a torch before?” Farrah asked pointing to the tail sadly unseen in the dim light it gave off.

“We would have gotten spotted, though to be fair spiders don't really need any of their million eyes... And... Well, I never managed to light it on fire until now.”

“Never?”

“Well, I knew that I could, I just panicked back there and it managed to set you free, so... I don't really know how I did it.”

“You are doing it now.”

“Barely.” She said as the ember of her tail faded rapidly “It's not something I can just up and do when I want to and not all that well.” Talia explained then faintly mumbled “And, I'm... Only quarter phoenix...” It was unheard, but Talia paid attention to whether or not Farrah heard the fact that Talia was rather ashamed of. Instead she heard another noise, a small quick tapping on the walls, very light, very subtle. Her ears perked even more and it appeared to follow them. A shiver ran down her spine and she latched onto Farrah. “Now, now, go now.” She whispered as loudly as she could.

“What?”

“It's here, and it's definitely behind us.” Talia informed. Farrah quickly rose instinctively fearing Talia's clear frightened voice. Farrah tried to reorient herself in the dark but was interrupted by a loud shaking. Another plate had let go somewhere, maybe as a reaction to the first. Underground it was very loud and they felt it much greater than before. Short lived, it ended causing a few small rocks to fall and the tattering sound of fine dirt plummeting into the stream. No one could hear much of anything though, as their ears rang and adjusted the only auditable sound was the fast bantering of footsteps to signify the chase. These footsteps were Farrahs who took advantage of the rock slide to get a head start without their predictor noticing. Sure enough, with all eight legs and incredible speed the cunning trapper set out for the hunt.

The passage shawn a dim light of hope, one of the walls became noticeable, and soon another. Along a long wall was a bright and blurry blade of light that cut into the side. Farrah ran as quickly as her feeble frightened legs would take her. The long passage got taller and taller and more narrow as it went along. She was now walking on a bed of silt that the stream washed in, a very narrow and squishy bed of silt and occasional a sharp rock. It hurt as she ran and the sides became slopes which made walking uneven as the tunnle lead out of a dip and knee high slowing water. Talia, on Farrah's back looked behind to notice the fast following monster. “Farrah, how far until we are free?”

“Not long, but it doesn't look good.”

“What do you mean it doesn't look good. You know I cant see in front of you very easily. What does it look like?”

“A cliff.”

“Perfect, then just jump off and fly away.”

“I CAN'T FLY!” Farrah panicked.

“Glide.”

“I can't glide either.”

“Anything is better than her.”

“Even spikes?”

“Spikes?”

Farrah came across a new cave system which explained the crack through the mountains being as massive as it was. In this cave, it was well lit as below was a mosaic sun set in the earth. Crystals of all forms and sizes littered the ground. They were everywhere with streams of water flowing through them. Beds of seemingly spikes as far as one could hope to ever live to reach out and touch, and in it, there was no bed of earth safe to land upon. Farrah hesitated, for a moment, scouting out somewhere to land. “Farrah!” Talia yelled, “This is no time to freeze up, she's right there, jump, go anywhere but here.”

“I thought you said she wasn't all that bad.”

“I lied, she is a monster. And yes, it's a she.” Talia yelled, staring deep into their stalkers many eyes. “Now jump.”

Farrah took a leap of faith, she lifted out her wings to test her ability to fly before deciding which angle she could safely attempt without forcing too much weight on her sore muscles. This was stopped by something grabbing her in the air, and dragging her down to the ground. The spider had leapt and grabbed Farrah's legs, falling they were stopped and forced to the cliff wall. The predator was not so unskilled as to simply let it's pray escape. This was not a suicidal act as a line of web had ejected at the top, zip lining back to safety, and crawling with her pray to the cliff top.

Talia sprung into action. If it worked once before, igniting her tail proved very effective, it may once again crown her as best asset to the team. Sadly when she tried to give it another go, it only embered and no matter how much she tried, it would not light. “I'm out of juice.”

Farrah was trying her hardest to not be bitten by the poisonous bite. The spider was trying very hard to restrain Farrah but with no extra line to spare she needed her web line to retreat to the top, then she may do to poor magpie as she wished. Dinner, was served.

Talia still tried to free Farrah from the grasp of a monster much, much greater than her own size, which was out of great desperation rather than heroism. Her legs were shielded by a carapace, and Talia's claws could not reach inside the joints of it's thorny appendages. No juice, and too small, she was at a loss to save her best friend. Maybe somewhere along the back she thought. All that could be found was an undesirable foothold on a seemingly centenarian creature. “Hey, granny. Did you know your back is a mess?” No response from the spider who was still fighting to reach the top and secure it's meal. “It is nowhere near slightly to look at.”

“I'll have you too you little pest.” replied the spider as though it were talking to an annoying fly

“I mean really, no wonder you're single, no man would ever want to touch you with an ugly sack like this riding behind you.”

The spider quite fed up with the comment turned her head to Talia and retorted “I'm single because I ate all of my husbands!”

“Whoa, keep it calm, there might be children listening...” Talia remarked teasingly only to be cut off.

“You shut your dam, Ahhh!” It was at this moment that Farrah managed to released one of her feet and with her bird claws she lunged the spider's neck clenching tightly and breaking the skin under its' carapace. Talia leapt out and knew her work was done. She did not expect to win with words, but this outcome worked well enough. Farrah was frantic as her eyes met with the assailant but continued to try and crush the spider's neck to no success. Now it was her adversaries move. the spider rose to the top of the cliff, and began to work the rest of her legs to pull Farrah under and be cocooned. Swiftly, Farrah released her grasp on the neck and lunged the eyes like a lance. Screams were elicited from the beast as it tilted it's head back to brace the pain. Farrah took advantage of this and twisted her body around loosening the grip and breaking free the last grasp the spider had. With Talia somehow not crushed under this panicked attempt of freedom, Farrah left again. The spider, greatly vexed and furious leapt off once again only short a foot from starting the cycle over again.

Farrah could not fly still, and was soon confirmed after a surge of pain struck her wings. She grit her beak and glided along managing to overcome the pain and push off from the pit below. There was a valley and stream of the water that they followed this leading farther into the great expanse. It was big enough to fit a small village in but neither could imagine living here. The sooner they left the better. Now, the light came straight down in the noon sky from a great opening at the top. There was sadly no exit in the side, and the stream ended in a pool. The only idea to where the water left from there would be an underwater passage deep under the pond. Swimming didn't seem likely but at least the stream got them this far. Farrah lost strength and crashed skipping on the top of the water, and faltering into it's shallow grave.

She gasped air, somehow alive. Sitting straight up she looked around, the water slow running past her waist and making islands out of her knees. Talia, bailed, and was currently freaking out. “Are you alright? Are you injured?... Are you any more injured than you were before?”

“I'm fine. I think... Nothing else seems to be broken. Not yet at least.” Farrah returned at an alarming pace. “I never knew you could run your mouth like that.”

“I never knew you had it in you to run your claws like that.” Talia returned just as shocked. “I mean, you looked ready to kill that thing if you had to.”

“You've always tried to be polite.” Farrah astonished

“You've never showed any aggression to anyone.”

“I guess there is a demon in me after all.” Farrah said beginning to laugh.

Talia followed “Yeah, I guess there is one in me too.” She laughed. “Did you see that, we just fought a spider and survived to tell of it. I wonder if they'll tell stories about us when we grow old.”

“I don't know if we'll make it that long, but it sounds amazing just thinking about it.”

Talia smirked, “Scaredy cat warden just can't handle this.” She boasted

“Nope.” Farrah replied getting back to her feet “Even still, I want out of here.”

“Where to though?” Talia said, looking back to Farrah who was feeling her sore arms. “I mean, up isn't really looking like much of an option.”

They both looked up, and though both knew of them Farrah couldn't fly they still hoped for something. All they saw was a taunting opening in the ceiling and vines dangling out of reach. It was something alright, something only an idiot would attempt. In the distance fled the waterway into a pool and they figured it was a dead end. The cave was undeniably beautiful and if not for the looming threat they wouldn't mind resting until Farrah's strength returned. Adjacent to the pond was a hill that climbed to a cliff side, and probably one of the highest points they could reach on foot. Having outrun but not lost the spider yet the high ground was their best option.

“Would it be too much to ask for, that maybe, she fell on those spikes and broke seven or so of her legs?” Talia asked wishfully.

“About now, that isn't a bad thing to wish for.” Farrah admitted mournful despite her fear.

Still, it went higher, the cliff they saw was not the high most point that her legs could carry them. Dangling out of reach were roots and vines from some of the deep forest that used to run through the land before the cataclysm.

“Say... What do you think she is doing down there?” Talia asked looking down to see movement in the crystals.

Farrah looked down as well “It appears she's finally caught up with us”

“If she is trying to be sneaky, she's doing a poor job of it.”

“Doesn't make her any less threatening.”

Farrah looked around for her options, even with the high ground they weren't any closer to escaping. She could try and climb higher up the slope but it got steeper and steeper until she would have to climb the wall itself. Maybe if she was high enough, she might make it to the vines. Though they looked rather weak, Farrah could possibly climb. With two able legs and at least one good arm left, it seemed better than running about being chased in a cage until too tired to flee. She climbed the side of the steep embankment as high as she could before slipping. Talia was still thinking of a plan.

“So I was thinking...” Talia mentioned.

“I'm open to hearing it, my plan is probably less pleasant.”

“Oh good.” Talia sarcastically appraised their situation. “Because mine involved grabbing those vines.”

“That was my plan.”

“I mean, we could try and leave the way we came.”

Farrah shook her head. Back there was worse, and reaching the plateau they left would be

impossible.

“Backup plan?” Talia begged.

Farrah found a finite ledge only wide enough for her fingers, one made by a different layer of rock that seemed to crumble easily, she was at her apex. The chances were slim, the bottom of the vines were barely fifteen feet below her. Farrah began to lose her grip with the fragile rock giving way. As she caught herself she looked down to see eyes emerging from the hill below. With a deep breath, the targets she propped herself to take a frightening leap. In a leap of faith Farrah sprung from the wall and carefully used her remaining strength to glide and catch a strand of hope.

In her grasp, a small green savior of line was obtained. This soon snapped under her weight. Quickly Farrah gathered more together and held on. These less green strands were greater in number and size. It was possibly that a bog ran through here once, though they may be destroyed years ago, reminisce of it still remained however very brittle. It stopped her fall, she had about five feet of vine left before she would need to descend carefully should she fall and not grab foothold. Talia shook her head. “You do know you are crazy right?” To no response “This is also why we are still friends because you not boring like the rest.” Farrah smiled.

From below, the spider watched this struggle and began to climb the wall, attentively not taking her focus off for an instant. Farrah tugged herself up slowly, carefully gathering more roots and dangling safety as she came to them. They held her weight but they creaked with every movement and Farrah swore that they were sliding down. She wasn't sure if she was making progress or not but it was all the poor magpie had. The twinkling glow of sunlight on her as she climbed boosted her morale and taunted her still out of reach. Farrah became aware of her dwindling faith, her arms became shakier and heart pounded more. In the side, that eight legged monster was still after her, almost catching up. Farrah began to speak, hoping the distraction could aid her ascension. “My father used to teach me long ago about how to defend myself.” She started nervously. Talia perked her ears a little to hear the story. “He taught me if anyone grabbed me to just twist my arm and they can't hold on, you can break out of my any grip that way.”

“Well, good on him. Even a warding stone is just a chunk of rock after all... Say, why didn't you do that when the warden had you?”

Farrah paused. “It's not that simple, I did once you broke my arm free, but the warden is very skilled. The way he held me, I couldn't move at all. I had no strength in my free arm to fight back, and the other leg couldn't even reach him. I couldn't even move my fingers, my muscles were locked. I'm glad you managed to free me like you did...”

“Twice...” Talia replied veering off to the side.

Farrah chuckled “Twice. You're good at making distractions.”

“I'll take that as a compliment... I hope that's a compliment.”

“It is.”

“She's still trying to catch us.” Talia noticed, the spider now ascended near the top. “She's blocking our exit.”

“Should we glide back then?” Farrah asked but was interrupted

“Don’t you dare.” The cold malice of the spider’s voice made them shiver, the spider ready to pounce.

“Don’t fly, just lead her on.” Talia whispered behind Farrah. “Get out of here!” Talia cried. The spider irked, leaping from the wall. Farrah jumped from the rope, gliding away. A grave uncertain silence was held, all Farrah knew was she wasn’t caught. As Farrah turned to grasp the line again they saw the black beast hit and tumble down the hill.

“And good riddance.” Talia uttered, hanging from Farrah’s side for a clear view. Farrah flopped into the mess of line, grasping them but unable to move, pain surging. Many of the lines were cut with the mad leap of their assailant but this high up they seemed to be stable enough to hold. Fear told Farrah for a little while freezing her in her own weakness. She began to climb again, gasping as she felt one of the lines fall apart.

“Don’t you scare me like that.” Talia complained

Farrah only hoped that she could make it to the top. The lines that she gathered started to get thicker, and more stable. The spider took a terrible tumble, nothing anyone could survive. It laid in clear sight, legs tight to its core. Deathly howls screeched throughout the cavern and the spider flung its legs in furious rage. “This thing is unstoppable” Farrah frantically uttered, quickly changing pace.

“That’s what I was talking about.”

Pain seemed to ease as adrenaline hit stronger than ever numbing every nerve, Farrah’s heart raced in a cold sweat. The spider ran to climb the walls as a final attempt but did it in vain. Farrah managed to make it next to the rock as the top was in sight. Once she could get a foothold on the rock, it became much easier and faster. At last, the sight of grass and trees rimming the outside of the hole. As Farrah climbed out of the pit spitting at the spider once more, she jumped with joy. “We did it!” Farrah cried in vibrating joy. Talia agreed “Yeah! We, we are unstoppable.” This followed their first order of business, run.

They were far from the pit and soon Talia explained, spiders like caves and as far as they ran, the spider would never find nor chase. Vengeance was the only string tying them to her, vengeance for getting away and for the two of her eight eyes now missing. Anger or not, Talia was sure that it would not surface, nor track them so far from home. Even with that in mind, they didn’t want to leave it to chance the thoughts still chilling in their minds. They walked the whole time. Sometimes when it got on their nerves, they’d walk briskly until wearing off the paranoia.

Talia was still uninformed of why the warden wanted the magpies so badly. What could they have done that would cause an entire race to become exiled. They might have been mean, but an entire race just shot out from worthiness. “Say, Farrah, Why did he want you so badly? The warden. He said you were special or something, why is that?”

Farrah avoided the question. After a while of the question being poked she finally replied “I rather not talk about it.”

“He said you used to be quite mean, is it just a grudge he has? Because it’s kind of a thing that

people like to stretch the truth when they're upset”

“It's nothing I want to discuss.”

Talia was not pleased with this answer. “Well, we just about got pretty burned because of it.” She noticed the shy bird’s dreary drooping face and decided to drop it. Talia could always pester later. Though Talia had some realization to how heavy of a question this was, the reluctance frustrated her endlessly, especially after today’s events and near death experiences. She was determined to uncover the truth.

Chapter 3: Espionage

Camp on the lower ledge of a cliff side, far from where they were before, in the dark of a crevice and shadow of a lone tree they rested. Talia definitely done with the day, Farrah well past that point long ago. They sat looking off at a valley. At the end of that valley was a lake. The sun set behind them and the moon peeked out across the lake. It reflected the moon's rays and carried the two friends off to sleep. Talia however, woke up and stared a while longer until she would eventually drift off again. In the dark was a light that flickered like a firefly teetering for sleep. Someone had a camp site set up in a rather small glade. Talia dismissed this.

Though time went on, and she nodded a little Talia found herself uncomfortable and unable to really sleep. Her thoughts wondered but her nerves veered back to the horrors of earlier. Talia, brave as she wish to appear was rather shaken by being prey. Even now she looked above to see if the spider had followed so far out for revenge. Their plateau was safe, but the dark rustling trees above made it hard to convince the poor cat. The warden, he could be anywhere. Maybe they were even camped somewhere, somewhere in a small glade with lots of trees by a lake and at the bottom of a valley she thought. It couldn't be, but if it was, it was worth noting as a warning of their presence. Talia shook it off, she was far too tired to bother herself with the idea. She rested her head and laid for a moment before sitting up straight, irritated and restless. She could no longer deny it, she was not going to sleep for a while. Maybe even a long while. "Freaking spiders" She shivered, "Freaking warden, freaking uneven rock bed."

Talia needed to go for a walk, something to reset her mind so she could rest her body. She was going to hold it off as much as she could, but the idea of checking out the camp would actually put her at ease more than not. Even if the idea of getting close to the warden was greatly upsetting. "Heck" she thought, "It's probably not even him."

The flight was a long ways, though finding Farrah would be easy even in the dark, the greatest concern was flying all that way back up; which was hard work, especially for someone who mostly rode around on someone else's back "I guess if nothing else, that exercise should tucker me out enough to sleep through anything."

The light grew brighter, it's flicker more potent and visible. Someone was still awake as the shadow of another log being tossed on and the sound that followed deeply echoed. A male voice asked if it was necessary that they needed more wood and the late hour would turn them in. Though faint. she did not recognize this voice and it relieved her. In the surreal silence of the night, the idea of spying was becoming increasingly enticing. Her small nimble body was proficient for the job of checking on her neighbours and her tan and blush brown colours blended her in with the trees more so than most. Talia fluttered down keen on adventure and struggled through the branches and leaves. Coming in from the top was not the smoothest, she had let a noise or two escape but it was unnoticed. Finally, a branch that laid out perfectly for spying with a little nest of leaves to peek through but not so big as to hinder her sight. Talia hid her wings behind her and made like a squirrel. Noticing her careless tail she whipped it down under her and began to prowl to the edge of the lookout, hunchbacked on all fours.

Soon the sight of the two figures became in view off the side of the bough as she left the thick of leaves and crawled to the split of the branch, lowering her hunch. There were two tents set up and a

bedroll outside for watch duty. For now one of the figures became clearly birdlike. He wore a suit of what appeared to be thick cloth and deep in colour. On his chest he wore an emblem but before Talia could make out what it was her vision was blocked by another figure who refused to move. As she inched closer and closer to the edge, the branch began to bend making Talia sweat and regain her ill bent back. Finally she was beside a bunch of leaves that she could peek through. The figure blocking her sight was also in heavy cloth but had a few belts around him including one with a scabbard attached and the hilt of a single sword. They were talking about some matters that she couldn't understand, something about family at home, and then finally moving towards the map on the table. "Ah, a table" she thought, "Why would campers need swords and a table, adventures maybe, but..." As the figure turned to face the table she finally got an angle on him where the campfire illuminated his face. Surely enough, that was the warden all right. "What is he doing out here so close to us?"

"It was off the ridgework mill that it was spotted correct?" One of the soldiers mentioned.

The warden replied in a detestable raspy tone "Ay, and another at Fhen passing by one of our scouts."

"That was months ago. It could be anywhere by now."

"It's all we really got to work off of now."

Talia was curious, had they been really followed for months now? Surely he couldn't mean Farrah.

"What about the other magpie?"

"Farrah?" The warden responded. "As I told you, she's as good as dead. There is no way someone that young would have the knowledge to escape a dark spiders cave. We watched that hole for a good hour, they would have been eaten by then. Shame really."

"I knew it" Talia cursed under her breath "They knew very well and let us to die in there."

"She and I never had the greatest history," The warden continued mournfully "But I wish it went more peacefully than it did. Nothing much worse than putting down an old pet just to watch them walk it off to haunt you in your sleep. Any death would be better than that fate."

"Just you wait until that black phantom comes knocking buddy." Talia whispered gritting her teeth. She was furious that the warden would make such little out of it. Sure, he sounded sincere and sorry for the misfortune, but having coming out of the reality of the whole event left a bitter flavour for Talia to swallow.

The warden pulled out his flask, took a swig and meditated on his sip "We have a lot of ground to cover, for all we know someone might even be hiding our prime target in their homes."

At this moment the second soldier appeared from the tent. He held a knife and some items he was preparing from inside. "Alright then, what is on the plate for tomorrow?" He asked, adding to the conference.

"We'll be searching this area tomorrow." The warden pointed and circled on the map. "He is a

class two target. Simple, but hard to find.”

“There is not many left.”

“No,” The warden stewed. “It's getting close to the time that we head back to the capital and return to our old posts.”

“It's been a long tiresome year.” One soldier reflected, worn and homesick.

“Indeed, now get some rest, it's a lot of survey first thing in the morning. You'll need your strength. Adjured.” The warden finished, rolling the map parchment along his side.

“Yes sir, and the fire sir? It's well set and blazing. Should we dim it?”

“No... It's an old superstition I hold to on days like today. We let it burn nice and bright and we may sleep without the vicious bite.” The warden finished before muttering. “I hate spiders.”

“Alright, I'll take first watch.” The other soldier opted.

“Goodnight.” The warden waved, turning into his tent, the off duty soldier following suit to his own tent.

In there he laid peacefully, watched, and being plotted against. Talia fed up with their mandate and pleased to give Farrah some good news, she watched the guard posted. With a little magic and cunning trickery she receded ominously back into the depths of shadow. On the table was once a parchment, now it laid bare, inside the tent was now the item of desire. Talia snuck around the site like a smart rat unseen by the guard surveying the woods.

Around the corner of the fabric tent, beside the bedroll was a backpack. Laying on top of it, ever so conveniently placed, was the map. The warden slept soundly, Talia was dumbfounded that the warden in his work could rest so quickly. Had he no fear? Was his superstition so strong to ward even spiders from his dreams? Talia's thoughts rambled, cautious and ever still. The hardest part became much harder as her nerves were the greatest enemy. “Is he sleeping? Does he know I'm here?” Talia pondered untrusting. His snoring was very convincing. Talia inched her feet softly touching the ground. His snore changed. She stood a while longer before inching closer again, no change. Maybe it was coincidence she thought. Every sound inside was amplified, the fire muffled, her heart became distracting and annoying. All she needed to do was grab the parchment. It laid there, unstrapped, unanchored, unheld, only weighed down by only gravity itself. Her pace quickened, eyeing the warden attentively until she was close enough to snatch her prize.

In a moment she snatched it up. The warden still asleep, Talia scurried off. At the edge of the tent, the posted guard sat pondering over something. After one last look back, Talia was set at ease. He slept, the warden was still as sound as the moment she entered. Walking casually around the corner of the tent she turned and gave the guard a grimace that he wasn't paying attention to see. Talia's face lined a smug grin. She knew she did it, she didn't need his disapproval to feel victorious, she knew she was an better than all of them and being unseen was just the icing that widened her grin. Then as the wind carried her in, the ghostly thief roamed off into the night.

Flying back as imagined, especially with a parchment, was difficult and by the time she arrived

back up top, she needed a rest. Rather a fourth and final rest, having taken the liberty of stopping many times along the cliff side to catch her breath. At last, tucked under a rock behind the tree where it would not slip away, the map was secured. In the morning, she would inform Farrah of the nights findings. For now, she slept easy. One smug and very exhausted smirk laid on the feline who just marked the sheriffs leg and walked away without the boot; or so her dreams followed as she clunked out til daybreak, never to live down her own mastery.

Day broke in the valley. Two small yet rather adorable young girls came prancing along to pick flowers upon other herbs and spices. They made merry noises and awoke Farrah who unlike Talia was much better rested. She poked her head up and admired the free spirited. Talia was, and would be for some time, still asleep. By the time she did wake up however, Farrah returned well fed and brought back a small leaf satchel of fruits back with her.

Talia's eyes slowly lifted feeling under-rested and weary. The day came to meet her as expected, another wondrous day filled with adventure and other things she was too lazy to embrace. As you might imagine, Talia was not a morning person, nor ever planned on being one. "Right" Talia thought, rising quickly to her feet. Without a word, she scampered off to the tree to retrieve her prize. "Here!" She called out removing the rock from it's side, and the stones from the parchments belly. "Guess what I snatched." Talia smugly asked prancing back with scroll over head. Farrah looked confused

"Snatched?" Farrah asked confused.

"Snatched, stole, robbed blind. It's all the same." Talia gloated, starting to eye the breakfast beside her.

"You stole that?" Farrah responded shocked. She remembered the happy girls from before and their cottage she passed on her way for food. Surely Talia couldn't have taken it from those peaceful folks

"Yeah, you would not believe who was camped out here last night."

"Shouldn't you give that back?"

"Heck no! The warden's got plenty to go around." Talia said, reaching for a berry.

"...The..." Farrah eyes lit and questioned in a single, stopping, fearing word. "How?!" She turned around to see if they were in sight.

"Whoa, whoa, it's okay, they left long ago." Talia assured, followed by an quiet aside as she ate "I hope."

"You saw them?" Farrah began to panic

"Yeah, they were camped out." Talia braked, parting from her food. "I couldn't sleep last night so I went to go check it out. They had some plans to find and raid someone, I'm pretty sure they said it was another magpie or something. Whom, as a heads up, they believe very well that you and I are dead in a spiders cave. They're clearly looking for someone else. Don't worry about thanking me, I rather had simply spoil their plot for what they did to you yesterday."

Farrah reached out and grabbed the map from Talia's side and quickly rolled it out.

Talia continued "They said they would go searching at first light so they are ahead of..." She was then cut off

"First light? Why didn't you tell me any of this? I was out there flying without knowing, we could have ended up in deep trouble. How far out?"

"They were just down there." Talia pointed at the site, narrow eyed. "The point is... I was tired alright. The point is we have a lead on another one of your kind, or whatever. If it is, you don't have to be alone with just me anymore." Talia finished biting into another fresh morsel.

Farrah looked over at Talia who seemed a bit burned. Her friend risked going out there and getting this map, Farrah was glad and honoured but, "I'm sorry..." She apologized

"Don't fret, I'm still pleased that I st..."

"No," Farrah informed "I can't read maps."

Talia's eyes closed. "Oh darn it all!"

"Sorry..."

"No sense in being sorry." Talia strayed her sight "They are still without their parchment, not like they can check it to know where to go... And you are injured too, can you even fly at all?"

"Kind of," Farrah admitted. "If I don't push it. But... Even still, this map is useless to us too. I'm not even sure I can figure out how to read this if I tried." Farrah sat back scratching the dirt.

"Well, had you never even seen one of these before?"

"I have, but, I..." Farrah was cut off.

"Then you must have some clues." Talia said pressing the map. "It couldn't be that hard."

"Well, there was one map in my father's study that I used to look at all the time but I couldn't understand what most of the lines were." Farrah said, running her finger along the side of what confused her.

"Well, If I had to guess, these look like they show cracks." Talia assumed, pointing at the wobbly jagged lines. "And this blue stuff looks like rivers."

"I guess they do." Farrah said looking at it slightly less lost. It did look like it represented something like that. "But where are we?"

"Um, we're right here right?" Talia pointed to the centre of the map.

"It doesn't work like that, my father showed me on his map that we were in the bottom right."

“Then why make a map where you're not in the centre?” Talia complained, frustrated.

Farrah laughed, explaining “They don't work like that.”

“See Farrah? You are a natural.”

“Hardly.” she admitted “I don't even know which way is north?”

“North?... What is that?”

Farrah looked at Talia oddly. How could she not know what north was, everyone knew what north was. “You really don't know?”

“No... Remember, I've never seen a map before because I lived off in the middle of nowhere. Besides, our maps are a lot different.”

Farrah pondered. “Well, if it was night I could point us by the north star.”

“By then it'll be too late. What is north used for anyway?”

“It tells us which way the map is pointing. Here.” Farrah directed “In the top corner it says 'N' which means north”

“Then you do know where north is.” Talia stated as she picked up the map

“No, it tells me on the map but I don't know where north is around us.” Farrah tried to explain. Talia tried processing the information but failed. “Alright, which way is north?” Farrah asked.

Talia pointed to the “N” on the map but Farrah shook her head and waved her hand around behind the map. Talia lifted her finger and pointed outwards, turning herself with the static map. “Oh...” She lowered her hand. “I mean...” She scratched her head “It shows hills right? We can use those to figure it out I guess. Ours maps work with symbols of landmarks and the sun's position. Their more simple... And better than this junk.”

Something clicked in Farrah's head, something she was told a long time ago. After some thought she discerned that “East” was where the sun rose in, and in the west where it set. “East is wherever the sun rises.”

“East now?” Talia questioned ever more confused.

Farrah took the map and pointed to the 'E' on the map “East.” Looking back up, locating the sun. “There.” Farrah pointed. “So, our morning sun points east.”

“The sun is a symbols then?” Talia was starting to connect the dots. “Alright, now if we had a marker we could figured out where that red circle is.”

There were many other lines on the map and many of them denoted previous searches as crossed out. Along the border of many of those expeditions was what looked to be a lake, the most

sizable around. Farrah looked out to the lake they saw last night, "I think that is here on the map" Farrah pointed to the blue smudge.

Talia poked at the landmarks along the map as she followed them "Then, we are behind it, to get to the sun we have to cross the lake."

They looked closer, sure enough, on the map there was a valley and a split which would perch the two of them where they currently stood. It was very small and hard to notice instantly. The whole map covered a lot of area, and the new circle that was drawn covered area larger than they could relatively see as is. The chances of finding the other magpie was increasingly more difficult than anticipated.

"What makes you think we'll even find it?" Farrah asked bleakly. "Besides, won't we be running into the warden?"

Talia slumped, nodding solemnly before perking her ears "That's why we fly ahead of them and search."

Farrah interjected. "They have a head start, and what if we can't find the other magpie?"

"They lost their map, their blind." Talia exclaimed.

"We're not that much better off."

"But you know how to think like someone on the run."

"And the warden is trained to think like that too." Farrah informed, she didn't like it but it was true. Their advantage seemed like a grim sentence

"Well... If we don't that poor bird's gonna get locked in a cage. Is it at least worth the chance? They said last night that he's probably living with someone. Their not going to hand over their friend, but maybe they'll let another magpie meet him."

Farrah thought about it. She didn't like the idea of searching, she was apprehensive that it seemed dangerous and pointless. Nevertheless if it were her in that situation she would need all the help she could get. She, among all other magpies, was the only one who still had her wings. Whoever was in trouble would be tied to the ground, helpless. Farrah nodded softly. She knew that many of the magpies were hunted and for good reason, but another of her kind was out there, and not doing too well to be in such danger.

Talia noticed something in the birds glassy saddened eyes "Say, Farrah, you really want to meet this other magpie, don't you?" She wasn't sure what it was about it but those words sparked some ambition back into her friend.

Farrah wasn't really sure what caught her interest so much but even she was moved. "Alright." She pointed "Here. This is where I would hide." Farrah announced.

"What makes you think there?" Talia wondered, looking up to see a glimmer of kindled determination.

Farrah made certain before calling it but everywhere else seemed too vulnerable and nonsustaining. "It's the deepest point around there and it's beside a stream. I know how to read that at least. It's the darkest shaded, and, it's got the heaviest Forest because it's so low. That means cover, shelter and food."

"Does this mean we are going?"

Farrah couldn't tell herself but something about it brought her closure. "Yeah." Somehow, not being the only one comforted her, if only for a moment. Memories slowly returned then drifted away in an attempt to focus. Farrah studied the map, all the valleys were dark and the lakes were abundant in that area that Farrah pointed to. The lowest most point would be a landmark sure enough. There were three other places that Talia could find dark like that, one already was circled with an "x", and two north above where searches were planned. If anything, if Farrah was right, it wasn't hopeless.

"Then we should get moving girl." Talia rolled up the map. "We are losing time. That place you marked is just touching their circle. It's bound to be hit."

Farrah agreed. She took the map and rolled it up into her claws. She had already flown earlier that morning, she was sore but she could push through. She knew if she was caught, she couldn't out fly them a second time. Ahead was a lake, a hill, and a valley that flew into the deep. She studied as much as she would need, routed out her search and was ready to take flight. Just before she did, as Talia mounted the nape, Farrah turned around. "Talia..."

"Yeah?" Talia replied, hanging off the side

"Thank you, I appreciate what you did."

"No problem, they peevd me off so I just wanted to kick them in the shin." Talia remarked. Farrah laughed at her hot headed little friend. "Besides, win, win. No one mistreats my friend, and this exile thing has really got me worked up." Talia finished mounting and they took off rockley.

The whole 'exile thing' weighed heavy on Farrah who knew the dark past but she yearned to know what was ahead. If she was lucky, whoever they were risking themselves to meet would be one worth meeting. Secretly, she held a grudge against many of her own people for what they did and what became of her because of it. The danger was now in her hands, she wasn't running away this time. She could only hope her time wasn't wasted for someone she assume walk away from.

Chapter 4: Lineage

Pleasant skies treated fair on Farrah's sore wings well, with a tail wind pushing them only slightly off course. Farrah became increasingly tired, so she mostly glided. A break was made at the top of the hill before continuing to the descent below. She sat there at the top, looking for trouble off the lookout, she noticed a barrage of gloomy clouds ahead being followed by a dark lining. The sight was displeasing as the day would not only turn sour, but harbour the a storm for sure. Heavy clouds at that. She watched it move rather hastily and fall to the ground in the distance. The smell of moist woodland blew by on the passing breeze, glancing a timid chill. As moist fog and rainfall rimmed the valley edge she realized that time was not dire quite yet but instead it elicited the sure consequence of tallying. Flying through that would certainly ruin her day. Surely she could muster enough strength to take the easy road down the hill. Farrah lifted herself up, she shook her senses awake. There was no sign of the warden anywhere and they should be flying along the side border of his search. This was the time to go as their path narrowed with every moment.

Glide she did, rather quickly as she stayed as low to the trees as she could, scanning ahead. She at one point seen tail of the road but it was not paved nor reinforced. The forest here, as predicted, was very abundant. Many small lakes and ponds were formed in this deep valley, with one river flowing. A river was perfect. In her old abode there was a river that ran near, it was re-routed into the estate and indoor use of it was greatly appreciated in the winter months. Behind her would have been easy to spot any structures.

Talia peeked out the back of Farrah's hair, scanning behind them. A drop of rain managed to plop onto her nose. Talia became annoyed at cold moist intolerance running down her lips. "Isn't this the place you were saying it should be?" the feline pestered, wiping the drop away.

"Yes, we might be seeing something soon. If there is any houses here, it should be along the creek."

"Creeks are too noisy, I like ponds." Talia expressed.

"We are not trying to find you a house here."

Talia poked her head back in for cover as the sky lightly spat. "Yeah, but you think they might rather build by a lake instead because I saw three of them behind us."

"Houses!?" Farrah jumped

"Lakes! I saw lakes, three of them, don't panic."

"I'm not panicking." Farrah assured. "I'm dreading the thought of backtracking because I'm blind or something."

"No, no, just keep going, you're good. I'll keep an eye on the back."

"Just don't fall off." Requested Farrah. Talia was about to assure her friend of her strong

foothold but was cut off. “And don't mark up my back, you left enough claw marks in it as it is.”

“Fine, I'll try not to make any new ones.” She replied sarcastically, poking her head out again.

Farrah continued down the creek. It was joined by another which the thought of checking this new side path filled Farrah with dread. Her time here was limited with the looming fear of being caught. Around here it seemed to have already rained earlier, the forest rose pale a thin mist, a sign of heavier weather on its way and not nearly enough to mask her.

“Say.” Talia mentioned. “What does smoke mean?” Catching Farrah's attention.

“Smoke?”

“I'm pretty sure that means someone's home right?” Talia explained.

Farrah slowed to a stop midflight and hovered for a bit. She had gotten a little close to the ground now and needed to rise. “Where?”

“To the right” Talia directed. Farrah turned right, “The other right.” Farrah continued to turn right. “My right.”

“I'm turning right.” Farrah retorted.

“Left, your le...”

Farrah quickly shot out “I found it!” It was hard to see where the smoke came from exactly but its slender plumage was a certain highlight among the mists.

“Good job” Talia sighed before being jolted back.

Farrah took to the sight of smoke billowing out from a nearby cottage. Farrah felt her nerves spike with safety in sight. She pushed herself, closing in on the house as to finally escape the sky only to re-injure the old wound on her arm. Farrah very rapidly floating down and landed hard on her legs, falling to her knees. She clenched her arm firmly.

“That's what happens when you get too excited.” Talia lectured.

“I know, I should have known better.” Farrah admitted, knowing she would have to take the rest of the distance on foot. She got up easily, still rubbing her wing. Passing through the woodland, Farrah grew closer, wiping by the dew on each leaf, pushing the shrubs aside.

“You should probably wait before taking off again. I don't want to be responsible for you working too hard.” Talia empathized.

“I would love to rest but I'm not sure how they would feel about having two magpies hiding in their attics.”

“Doing who knows what?” Talia remarked. “...Assuming they are here.”

“Why do you bring that up?”

“I don't know, you still never really told me what you guys did to get exiled.”

“Well, if we find someone in there, maybe they might be a little less sore about it than I am.”

“You're really moody all of the sudden.” Talia pointed out.

“It's stressful alright!” Farrah squawked “It's not a nice past we have.”

Talia turned away “Very well, I can wait for the answer, but I still don't get what the deal is, and it's starting to irk me.” Talia understated “You're not the only one in this.” She pouted.

Farrah frowned. Talia was in this because of her. Though she wasn't in much danger, she was still strung along; besides Talia already took a lot of weight just for the sake of her friend which was more than any of them asked for.

Before them was a house, a small one story cottage made from wooden logs with a hay roof and cobblestone foundation. Despite its poor appearance it somehow made a lasting impression of a homely refuge. Coming out of the woods they also noticed a sizable plot that ran downhill. It was tilled and bore many assorted vegetables that managed to grow in the woodland. This land was seemingly unnoticeable from their low altitude prior, if they flew higher they may have spotted it earlier but Farrah's wings were a greater concern than straining. Even to a bird, the land was so uneven that without a billow of smoke it would offer a great challenge to find this land otherwise.

“That was a good call Talia.” Farrah gratified as she walked to the front door steps.

“Let's see if it turns out before congratulating me. Not to say I don't enjoy it already.” She blushed, smug as ever.

Farrah knew very well the price of this gamble, and it was worth its weight but she couldn't shake the uncomfortable awkwardness of visiting a complete stranger. She knocked twice, just enough to be heard. Talia sighed, “A little louder than that.” she whispered loudly. Farrah instantly complied knocking louder, shy at her friends commanding order. “That's more like it.” Talia commended. A voice inside spoke to another, though they couldn't hear it too well, they heard the floors creek towards them and the door unlatch. For a moment, Farrah feared the owner's response, what if she was yelled at again and the warden sicked onto her. The thought passed her mind to run. As the door pulled open, an older fellow with a big welcoming face shone only to be drowned in a dark void; a dark void with white tipped face and blue sheen kind of void, Farrah.

Farrah was avoiding eye contact, looking just below his face. She asked mumbling a most inaudible bush beating question about their occupancy until Talia shot out and asked in her place “What my shy friend wants to say is...” Turning around Farrah's shoulder she quickly noted the man's wallowing expression. “What's with you, you look like you had a bad day?”

“Honey.” The middle aged squirrel called to his wife. “We have some company that would like something of us.”

Talia tilted her head. She smiled fake and toned herself more welcomingly. “Don't tell me you are

shy because her people were exiled.” prodding at the point once again.

“Shush!” Farrah commanded. Finally looking into the man's eyes.

“No...” The man replied.

“Another?” His wife asked taking a look out the door from behind him.

The man now assured that the jig was up. “Yes hon, another.”

“You mean this is the place?” Talia jumped out practically falling forward with a loose grip.

“What do you know?” He asked with a concerned droop cast over his face as his eyes widened.

“If this is the right place, you have some trouble coming your way. It's a good thing we got here first to warn you.”

“Warn us? What about.” The husband asked perturbed

His wife stumbled out the door, “Come in, come in.” She requested firmly.

Farrah was slow and uncertain, staring at the man, she wanted his permission as well. “Come.” He requested. The wife almost dragged the two young girls inside as her husband swiftly closed the door trying not to slam it. Inside was lit by window mostly, and one fireplace running with a cooking pot. The clouds had already started to pull over, and to their knowledge, they weren't followed. Regardless, a storm was going to roll over, whether in the form of cloud or by sheer force. They were taken to the first chair in sight, one by the dining table and close to the fireplace. The wife asked her what was up, though her friend Talia would be more up to saying; especially since Talia also was the one who witnessed the plot.

“You not gonna tell her Farrah?” Talia asked.

“You are the one who saw it.” Farrah replied.

“Very well.” Talia sat on the table with very little manners to placing her tush on a dinner place, then proceeded to prepare her spiel. “Last night a warden fellow camped just out of here saying that he had word on a magpie, class 2 whatever that means, and that they are on scout right now to find... Uh... Wherever he is. We just narrowly escaping the warden yesterday, I thought best to do a little spying on him while his back was turned. So... Here we are.”

“How did you find us then?” The husband asked, concerned.

“Farrah had a good sense of where another magpie would hide, or at least one who would stay around long enough. She cut them off at the chase, and if I may say, she has some decent map reading skills am I right?”

Farrah ignored it. Her mind was on the fact that soon she would be face to face with a stranger. It may be her kind, but that means nothing. To be rabbit or dog means nothing of character, and over the years, sadly, Farrah started to believe her race was doomed with impurity. A discrimination does

more to a person than they realize, and in time, they start to hate themselves. Farrah needed this help.

“I'm glad you came when you did.” The wife declared.

“So, if you don't mind me asking.” Talia nudged “Where can we meet this friend of Farrah's?”

“She knows him? He never really spoke to me of who he was.”

Talia shrugged, “I don't know anything about them, but...”

“It doesn't mean he's my friend Talia.” Farrah butted in. “It means I'm not the only one left.”

The husband became empathetic. “Come now.” He said. “We'll take you to him, and if he is in trouble, you are too. You are nice people, so is he. We trust him greatly.”

“Oh Unice.” His wife consoled “You look concerned.”

Unice nodded. He took the two of them to the other room. Under the table by the couch was a rug, a rather ratty rug, but a well made one and even better trap warmer. He lifted it to reveal the floor. The squirrel had some emotions to patch through. He felt touched by Farrah's young determinacy, and her pain of feeling alone in the world his friend blow them had to leave behind as well. Many of Unice's nights were spent with this magpie, learning the struggles of their people. A believer that there is was good in their kind. He knocked. “Cedric.” Waiting a moment for the bird to hear him. “Could you undo the latch?”

Soon a tussle was heard and the flicking of a metal piece. The floor opened upward.

“My husband,” said the wife “Made that silly hiding place in case of war or being raided in the night. I laughed and let him work as it kept him busy... I'm glad he did.” She told.

“Alycia. You just didn't want me getting into trouble. I know you.” Unice replied. She laughed. “Cedric, You will be surprised who I found.”

“Now is not the time for visitors,” He yawned “And anyone looking for me is trouble.” Grumbling a earnest tire.

Farrah slowly crept up to the hole. The name was very familiar, in fact, being this close made her nervous. She was curious, but weary. His eyes shot wide as his focus came to him. Another magpie. “What is this?” Cedric asked. “How?”

“They came looking for you, apparently we have some undesirable attention on it's way as well. They came ahead of the storm to meet you.” Unice informed

“Did they attract it here? I hope not.” Cedric flustered

“It was already on it's way. As you feared, you were sighted by the wrong people. Best I can figure at least.”

“Apparently a scout no less.” Talia added.

“What is that?” Cedric asked.

“You ask as lot of questions.” Talia added, uncomfortable by the dark figure in the pit. He wasn't very well lit, quite mysterious. Her cat instincts told her to keep an eye on him.

“Sorry, come, come, it's best to hide before they get her, lest they be peeping in any windows. If they know I'm here I doubt they'll be polite about it.”

Farrah was nervous about the pit, in many ways it reminded her of her cell. Eight long years tied by a steel chain really tempered her. She was inside a house, with other people only to meet a figure, inside a pit. The definition of anti-social could be applied, but a better description would be a conglomeration of phobias that were well knit into a scarf and tied too tightly around the neck. She was frozen, but Alycia helped Farrah down and assured her that it was alright. Why the hole, why so many people around here, why was no one panicking? She was shaky at first, and turned rather ghostly by the time she made it in.

Talia thought one more thing to be important. “Unice.” She mentioned, clinging to the edge of the trap door “They are not going to be nice when they get to the door, if they say that they 'know' we are here, they are full of it. Last they saw us, they left us for dead in a spider's cave.”

Unice nodded but quickly was distracted by Cedric's comment “She's barely clothed!” Cedric flabbergasted.

Unice smirked to the comment. “Cedric.” Unice replied “...You... Are barely clothed.” He remarked.

“Ah, yes, my apologizes for being indecent.” Cedric apologized, patting himself down to be somewhat more presentable.

“Don't sweat it.” Talia mentioned. “I've never so much as wore a grass necklace. And Farrah here... I'm not sure I've ever seen her in anything.”

“I see... Farrah? Wait, Farrah. Is that your name?” Cedric astounded.

“Talia.” Talia corrected.

“No, her.” Cedric pointed.

“Oh. That's what I said.”

“Farrah as in Shaeleen?” He continued

Farrah jumped back. He could be, he very well possibly was. He knew her name as she remembered such a name herself. Her cousin.

“You know her?” Talia asked happy for Farrah.

“Of course I know her, he father is second to the royal throne. And... My second cousin.”

Second cousin

“Shes... WHAT!?” Talia exclaimed so loudly she made Unice drop the hatch by accident as he closed up the hideaway. A moment later. “SHE'S ROYALTY!?”

Cedric laughed. Farrah only dug deeper into the wall. She knew him, she knew him indeed. Not well, he came once travelling with his father to visit. A bookworm with glasses so big she could eat off of them. He was kept to himself and his books, a miracle he could see without them now. “It's been eight years now hasn't it?” He reminisced. “No wonder I couldn't recognize you. You've grown into a beautiful young woman.”

“Wait, wait, wait... She's royalty? As in fancy bloodline, fine teas and golden jewelries royalty?” Talia marveled. She heard of them, mostly jokes and ridicules but she knew their stature.

“Yes, and no. I would say that is stereotyping the royalty, but of recent years before the fall, that would be a fitting description. Her family however was not.”

All the while Unice and Alycia stood above and scratched their heads. They weren't sure what to say after Talia's outburst and their conversation about supposed royalty. They covered the rug over the boards and stood silent. Eventually moving into the other room to discuss.

“I got a big question.” Talia asked. “Farrah is a little bit sore over all this, so could you tell me what you guys did to get yourselves exiled?”

Cedric sat back against his side of the cellar and began to recall “It was as I said, ‘the fall’ took us all by surprise. Well, all but Farrah's family. They knew what would happen and they would have been the first to flee if not for having been the first to be targeted.”

“So, what did they do?”

“Nothing... Long ago after the cataclysm, the royal throne was taken by the magpie race. It was once a race as any other, but soon brought to greed through power. In time they started to become a tyranny, one of pure blood and lineage. They lived lavishly beyond their means, I... Myself included as a more direct bloodline. Though, only through my mother's marriage. The coupe happened overnight after a threat that was declined and rebels stormed the castle already in position for the word. We, in the castle had nowhere to run. The treat however was the head of king's younger brother as ransom.” He said pointing to Farrah. “Daven Shalene, her Father.”

“Why would the king abandon his brother like that? I know my family can get a little tough, but that's hard to swallow.”

“The king hated his brother. As of such, he approved the mansion in the middle of nowhere in a heartbeat just to get rid of him. You see they had opposing ideas. Farrah's father, foil to his brother the king, believed that all the people were being treated unfairly; and being unable to sway the crown any, he decided to abandon his royalty in fear of the retaliation that occurred a decade later. Farrah's mansion, hidden in the mountains however was not guarded or protected by the crown and was taken by storm as a tactical advantage. The mother taken away, the father captured, and everyone else including the servants were taken prisoner. They never saw it coming. I assume Daven Shaleen waited to hear of the crown being attacked before they knew to hide, being the first to go... I can only imagine

the shock that caused you..."

Farrah was in tears beside herself. The memories flooded in and the sudden separation was too hard to bare.

"He was a good man." Cedric continued. "I looked up to him. In the end, hatred won. Every last magpie was branded a villain. Most of which living in the upper class, unaware of the suffering below. During my time, many believed the over throwers to be evil and unjust, selfish and greedy. In turn, they looked no different complaining. I chose to stay out of it. What happened, happened. I moved on, and I'm living fine out here."

Talia looked over to Farrah, her tears making light in the darkness. "You poor thing..." Talia consoled. Flying over, she gave Farrah a hug. "I never knew you had that much behind you... I can't imagine. It's okay now."

"Here." Cedric cheered up. "Let me bring some light into here." He took two small rocks and a candle he had for special occasions. In a few tries he managed to light it. "Ha, I'm usually never that quick to get it lit. Very lucky."

Farrah looked up. A small dim candle burned and made the room lighter. He placed it in the centre of the room. The room was very small, big enough for two, but barely room for another. It could sleep someone, if small, two someone's who were comfortable with one another. In the corner he had some books that he kept there to read as always. In the other, a pillow made out of a wrap of heavy cloth.

"This doesn't seem like much of a home Cedric." Talia mentioned.

"No, but it's merely a bed for the day time. I work during the night so that Unice doesn't mind my stay. Sometimes he helps me. I've become somewhat of a night owl I guess you could say. No offence to one."

"What did you hear..." Farrah asked taking a moment to finish between sobs. "About my family? No one I knew, knew anything about it."

"I've only word on your father. It's sad really."

Farrah broke hearing those words.

"Y-you mean h..."

Cedric took a moment to let Farrah finish but ultimately took the reins. "No one knows what became of him. Only that he was locked away in a separate prison. The dark prison Oblavaeya." This name was not familiar to anyone, so he explained. "Oblavaeya is a prison for the worst criminals. It is given heavy security, and it's far enough away should someone escape that they could never return to the capital before being caught. Even still, it's track record is spotless with not a single successful escape. If there is any chance of seeing him again, that is where he would be."

"You had to say that huh?" Talia rolled her eyes

“Wh... What?” Cedric asked “It's suicide, Farrah should know that.”

“Doesn't matter. She's crazy enough to. You just put her father on the line.”

Cedric looked at Farrah, her eyes burning a single tear that rolled down her cheek as the dams had finally closed off their valves. The reflection of the candle flickered in her eyes, but it wasn't the only flame.

“The only hope is that if you still had your wings, and even then...” He fretted, explaining how stupid it was. Farrah lifted her arms revealing the wings attached, still very well intact. Cedric choked. “You still have them?... How?”

“You ask a lot of questions” Talia reinforced.

“I was the only one allowed to keep my wings,” Farrah informed in a mellow voice sounding like poison. “The warden thought I was too cute to hurt. He couldn't bare the thought.”

Outside a noise echoed, a knocking. A visitor, most likely the warden who finally caught up. Soon they heard a man's voice, deep, assertive.

“There is the slitherous pervert now...” Farrah announced.

Over top some of the soldiers paced around looking for places a magpie might hide. Cedric blew out the candle, and moved towards Farrah. She wasn't sure why he came up to her. Reaching out, he flicked the ceiling above her. She went to open her mouth but Cedric shushed and slowly retracted. Curious she looked up to see what he did, still uncomfortable and not fully trusting others quite yet. The latch that Unice talked about, it was smaller than expected. Just a nail hook that went into a ring, simple, yet sturdy. It was a nail after all, no weaker than anything the other floor boards were held down by. Still, it was nerveing that, that was the only wall between them and the captors. Just a small latch. Farrah sunk down and balled up. The memories of her cell came back, and the world became much more frightening than it should have been. Just a nail holding a trap door shut, and a man above smart enough to figure it out.

They could still hear the warden talking with Unice, still hard to make out the words. Talia gritted her teeth, once again she had to prepare for the event of having to save her friend once more. It was about this time that the warden came into the room having finished speaking with Unice and not satisfied. He looked left and right while walking in a straight line above. They could see his figure from below the floorboards as the gaps between became more and more unsettling. He peered into the third room, that being of the couples stay, under the bed, and other places that he thought fitting. Below, all they could hear was the silence and their own hearts beat sometimes mistaking them for footsteps.

The warden came out and kicked the rug. It covered the door but not the entire crawlspace. Everyone jumped when he did this and tried their best to hold their mouths shut. He stared at it then began to step on it and put some weight on it. The door seemed just as hollow as the rest of the floors of the slightly suspended house. Below all the boards, one could see it if they veered over the tops of the crawlspace walls a small half a foot gap and the odd support. Each time he tapped on the door, it echoed all throughout the house. The warden reached down and found a small gap in which he peered into. The dark pit was too hard to see. Lastly he fit his fingers into a small opening just big enough where a knot once laid ruin to the otherwise perfect bored. With a tug he tried to lift it. He gave some

force into it but still it would not budge. Though the board was part of the door, it was still firmly latched by the nail. Unice planned for war, no latch was too tight to keep him and his family safe. The warden ceased.

For a while longer, the warden continued to pace, not uttering a word, thinking of his next ploy. Farrah was certain that the warden knew and was almost ready to break in there at any moment. He confined privately with his men which was inaudible from everyone else, merely a whisper. Each moment of mystery drew the captive rogues farther and farther into stress. As a final attempt at his best hunch, the warden calmly walked over to the trap door so quietly that only Talia could hear it. Cunning as she was, she knew something was up. She climbed Farrah in a heartbeat and whispered in her ear. "Hold your mouth closed." The second Farrah did so a loud slam bashed on the ceiling above them. Farrah's eyes shot wide, she held back and had almost screamed at the top of her lounges.

"Calm yourself!" Unice enforced. "I know you're stressed, don't take it out on my house. You swore you would search peacefully. You're frightening my wife."

The warden firmly retorted. "I also informed you if I found so much as a hint of deceit in you story I would tear this place board to board."

"Have I? I let you in full willingly to see for yourself, tell me have I deceived you? Now let's continue without slamming the floor shall we?"

"You do not give the orders peasant." The warden roared with great assertion.

"Have it your way, but I have very little to hide."

The warden carried out his business for a while before he gave it a rest. "Come on men, there are other households." His followers followed the warden out of the house. In thinking, this must not have been the first place homestead he had gone to, but trapped, it felt all the more real. Farrah, in tears, replayed the moment in her mind over and over again. If Talia hadn't caught on to the wardens tricks, she was certain to shriek loud enough to be heard all throughout the valley. Terror, the thought of falling prey to his head games.

They spoke little after, and the married stayed away from the hatch for eyes spying on their response. These people were very smart in how to deal with the intrusion. Cedric finally rose to console Farrah but Talia already on the ball. In all this time knowing the magpie, never once did Talia think that Farrah's troubles would be so serious. Sighing to relieve the stress inside, and trying to open the conversation, Talia confessed. "It's a lot to take in. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to delve deeper into this mess." Talia admitted solemnly "Maybe we should have just taken our leave and..." Farrah pushed Talia aside and shook her head.

She had a hard time swallowing but Farrah informed her friend quite certainly. "It's not over. I need to do something."

"No you don't, we just need to accept our hits and walk away."

"I need to find my father!" Farrah exclaimed.

The pit became silent. Both Talia and Cedric knew they should say something, but they also

knew Farrah's pain. "You know we can't... It's hopeless." Talia replied sadly.

"I don't care." Farrah returned

"I care!" Talia shot back "And, it's suicide. That's what Cedric said anyway, right?" Cedric didn't respond, he sat there and pondered on it. "You can't really be seriously reconsidering?" She asked him

"No." Cedric finally answered. "It is... I want to help you Farrah, I really wish I could say that it's fine, but. And... I wish I could help you, it's... Just... It's over our heads. Talia is right. You, like I have already done, should take your injuries and accept them. We are still alive, and we are free, that is more than most of our kind will ever know from now on. For all we know, we may very well become the last of our kind. Extirpated in the least."

"Please tell me you are not going to be stubborn about this Farrah." Talia pleaded. "I know you would do it, and that scares me."

Farrah dropped her head. Now fully sitting up, still holding her pain inside, and starting to shake. She questioned herself how free she really was in this cell. "Okay..." She replied "I'll think about it, but I don't think I can let this go. If I tried my whole life I might still never forgive this. But in the least, I'll think about it."

Talia's ears dropped somehow lower than they were before. She knew her friend was bound determined.

Chapter 5: Voyage

As the day became late, Farrah was more comfortable in her cage, practically hiding in it. Unice came by and told them the coast was clear but they refused to leave until night.

Farrah became hungry, and after denying her rumbling gut, Talia requested some food in return for their work. While Farrah thought about what she wanted to do, she figured that they would be there a while anyway. They could find something to do. Unice thought on it but declined, Cedric was a hard worker who tended to everything more than enough. Even if Farrah wanted any work, there was nothing to do. Unice came by a little later, offering some preserved tomatoes and eltoe juice. The company was payment enough he supposed but their stay would have to be short.

That night, Farrah went out and gazed at the stars having been cramped up in a hole all day, she was glad to get out. There was only so much of a war shelter one could take. Cedric fell back asleep an hour or so after the event earlier and Farrah and Talia kept to themselves for the most part. Talia, still trying to console her friend at the time, was extra glad to be out. The fresh moist air filled their longues like newborn spring, their senses returning, the world renewed.

Here, all was tranquil again. Here it was almost as though nothing happened, even though thoughts still lingered of the day, it was a distant memory that loomed over. Like a spirit who could never rest in peace, the spirit was free to roam but couldn't deny it's doom. Absentminded in the moment of all of this disaster was Farrah's only escape from the past. Farrah walked for her amusement, gazing off into the abyss of a dark nick of the woods. She sat there, though she had rested all day, this time she felt at ease. She was over rested and anxious. Farrah rubbed her wings, feeling for their weakness. She wasn't going anywhere too far for a while, maybe tomorrow night at the earliest. She doubted it. Looking back up to the sky a single star fell between a nest of clouds. The moon was bright, not full yet, but cast the world in limelight where the clouds permitted. In this patch of grass, the clouds had let a small beam onto the earth, still in the shadows Farrah witnessed the night unfold.

Two Fireflies danced unaware, small little things that made Talia look big, carefree and in love. They wisped left and right, teasing the other until they came close. Dying in laughter they split apart and reenacted their journey. Mysterious cultures they had, Talia once talked about forest tribes and speaking in dance, storytelling, and even rituals. Soon into the epic that played out Talia started to question. "Should we be watching this? Cause this is kind of a thing." Farrah was still enchanted by their lights and the way they glowed. "Say, when are you going to get a boyfriend?"

Farrah veered her sight to Talia. "I don't think I could get one if I tried." Though saying so she remembered the store clerk. He could accept her, though she would still never be able to be seen by anyone else, and maybe he was a little distracted at the time. "Well..."

"What about that Cedric feller?" Talia suggested. Farrah made a peculiar noise which sounded like she had swallowed something nasty and choked while laughing. "What's that about? He won't judge."

"I barely know him, and he's my cousin." Farrah explained

“You got plenty of time to get to know him, and he said he was only married in right?”

“What do you know about my family tree?”

“I know there is a lot of technical details and when you deal with my family, no one really respects the whole family thing, like cousins are fair game. Buuut, that is just my family.”

“What is it like?”

“My Family?” Talia asked. Farrah nodded “It's complicated, you know, sixteen brothers and sisters, two extended families, every day is a reunion. Nothing I want to get too deep into explaining.”

“You don't talk about your family much...”

“Neither do you, until now, I never know how much worse you had it. For all I knew you might have never even had parents. Just popped on this world like blam, then here you are.”

Farrah blanked out again, worrying about her Father, leaving Talia to talk unheard. She couldn't help but think of the risks ahead. She still didn't let that desire to see him again die. Very adamantly she planned to go in, head first if need be. The ideas swirled around her mind, dancing, enchanted by the sight of the two lights.

Farrah shook herself awake and returned to what Talia was saying which by the sounds of it, she didn't miss much. “What about you?” Farrah asked.

Talia tilted her head, in context completely puzzling her. “Yes, me... What about me?”

Acting as though she didn't just stumble, Farrah continued “When do you plan on getting someone?”

Talia shrugged, having been cut off of her story, no less seemingly unrelated to the moment. “I got you right?” This caused Farrah to look rather squeamish for a moment. “I don't need anyone special.” Talia continued setting Farrah at ease. “All the guys I know are all buttheads, all my other sisters are mean spirited. You are the only other I know, and the only friend I really need. I mean... Who needs relationships right?”

“Then why ask me?” Farrah questioned.

“Well... Sometimes you kinda look like you need somebody else. Someone you can actually talk to for once... You know? Maybe I just wanted small talk, I don't know.” She took a moment to relax a while longer enjoying the night. “You think those fireflies are new to this love thing? They've just been dancing about forever. HURRY UP AND JUST KISS ALREADY!” She exclaimed. The two fireflies stopped. Unable to see the culprit in the dark, they took their party elsewhere.

Farrah felt bad for their interruption but tittered guiltily to their reaction. “Well,” Farrah announced between chuckles. “I'm glad you are happy with things as they are.”

“What do you mean? As is, I'm pretty unsatisfied. Everything is upside down...”

“I mean having me around.”

“Yeah, come on. You are great to be with... But maybe I actually do need a little romance myself. With someone who... Isn't a complete weirdo... You think I'm just being cynical at all?”

“I think we are all cynical of another.” Farrah assured.

Talia relished for a while in relief. She smirked “Maybe even a little cynical of your non-blood cousin? Ah? Fair game.” Talia teased, nudging her friend.

“I'll find others.” Farrah shot down, still not attracted to a bookworm who spoke in dignified words and manor.

The stars showed themselves more clearly as they drifted into the sea from their cover, some shot across the sky, some disappeared forever behind the blanket of cloud. Soon traces of colour appeared between the pinholes only ever slightly as it started to show the true night sky. Purple haze and pink hues, the stars behind the glowing clouds and the moon that shot rays upon the earth. The wind had crawled to its crib and slept peacefully. The two friend almost followed.

Hours later, a figure walked close through the woods. Dark, solemn, earnest, making a round. He was as dark as the night itself. Peering into the glade, the moon had a cast new light over the trees and the once hidden Farrah laid exposed to the hidden world. The noise caught Farrah's attention and caused her to jump. Out from the dark came Cedric, covered by overalls and farm shorts. They were torn but intact. He smiled as he came nearer. Talia mistakenly fled to the back of Farrah's neck.

“What brought you all the way here?” Cedric questioned curiously walking towards the girls.

Talia Slowly moved to peer above Farrah to see it was in fact Cedric. Farrah wasn't fully surprised, but wasn't expecting his visit “Just wandering.”

“Luck then I suppose.” He replied soon noticing Farrah's hair rise and the figure of a wide eyed cat emerging like a submarine. His eyes widening himself to the ominous hair demon. “Your hair... It's enchanted.” He stated pointing to the top of Farrah's head.

“Nope, just me.” Talia announced.

“Talia?” Cedric confirmed

“That's what I said” she replied popping farther out.

“Your friend has some odd habits.” He motioned as to ask if he may sit with Farrah

“If you flew with her, you'd want a place to hide too.” Talia remarked

Farrah exclaimed “Hey!” as Cedric began to laugh.

“Fair enough.” Cedric said relieved, taking his seat “The night plays tricks on me. I never liked it, I suppose I read too many fiction, but my eyes still aren't what they should be either.”

Farrah noticed after a while, the bookworm she once knew with his oversized glasses was different. It took until now to notice, she thought maybe before he may have left his glass dinner plates aside but now it was clear that they were gone. "What happened to your glasses?" Farrah asked.

"My glasses, those were lost long ago. It's taken many years but I am starting to get my vision back, or at least cope with it. To be fair, my problem was always reading or seeing things close up without them."

"I have an uncle like that" Talia butted in. "He's always bumping into things because everything that's too far away to run into isn't blurry."

Cedric chuckled "That would be my life in a nutshell. It's a miracle I managed to escape the prison itself." He said cheerily

Talia was curious, the grim subject left Farrah much more clammed up. "What was that like?" She wondered aloud "The prison."

"Well, how do I put it... An incident occurred that normally would have been considered as someone with a deathwish. Soon after it became a full rebellion. I didn't hear to much of what was going on, just for about twenty minutes I reckon there was a lot of screaming and hollering over someone escaping. As they would have it, that person stayed around, it's a shame they got him. Before they did though, he had stolen the keys and managed to release many inmates. It spread wide and soon the entire complex was in anarchy. We were released one after another and lead an assault. Many had a grudge against our captors, others fled as soon as they saw the door out. As I heard it, one of which bearing wings made the greatest distraction for dozens to escape as the most skilled of the guards went to seek after her. I assume that was Farrah. Soon following, I managed to escape because of it. We went in all directions, from there I can't say what happened to everyone else. It was like living through the seven trials of the Alben codex from ancient times. Fearful, the souls of evil tortured to run through a maze in hopes to leave... Only to find out that they were never free when they found their way out, merely in another form purgatory. Though I assume those ancient times would be much worse than our trials. This however was a wondrous time, and a harsh time. It was the first time that I was alone and independent. Winter hit, but I read much on survival. I eventually made it here, caught taking crops. Unice asked why I did it, and I told him my story. He pitied me, and offered my earnest work. I've yet to meet my parents or even know if they are still around. But, enough of that, those times are behind us, and some of us wish to leave those times behind." He said noting Farrah still upset over the events and wishing to let her be; however not restraining him from his next lesson. "You know what it will be like Farrah. You've escaped once before. You won't escape a second time. Have you thought about your father?"

Farrah nodded. "I have." Still not willing to admit her crazy ambitions, she refrained from giving her call.

"Then are you still pondering it?"

Without saying her intent she avoided the question saying. "I will never feel at ease about it."

Cedric knew this but her response told him all too well. Veering down to his feet, he was still strongly against her decision but knew himself to be powerless. "You are still weak, you still have time to rest. I will never accept you throwing yourself away, and I'll be darned if I will aid you in knowing

where to even start looking.” He firmly stated, looking deep into Farrah’s eyes.

Farrah only looked at him and asked “Have you looked for your parents?”

His mouth seized and his sight dropped back to his feet. The quell night fell farther into silence.

Two days had passed, and over many hills she flew. Stiff, but no longer weakened from her encounter. The warden had not returned, all was safe, and Cedric had said his goodbyes. “If I never see you again, I will mourn you. In going, I will still mourn you. From here, you are to me no longer living. For all of our sakes, may you succeed.” She was sad to see him cry as he did.

Two cliff sides mingled before her. A gate with a river running through. This was a pass through the southern ‘break shores’; the land coming up to the coastline where most the way from here was down through large layered plateaus and large plates. As she followed into the break shores many chasms laid with steep spires and lakes over abundant. All rivers and streams would one day reach the ends of Shemlauls mysterious world, where to from there no one could say.

As they left the narrow pass, they were cast into a wide void of expanse, high above a great valley where the watery bottom was almost endless. Here it seemed the chasms became so extreme that it created black water. Though the pool was secluded from wind and as still as stone so that one could see through it like glass, the bottom was impossible to find. Along the sides of these valleys, great plates stuck out almost impossibly with near no support underneath, merely clinging to the sides like blades.

Down below, along a shore of the lake was a small settlement of houses and villagers whom ran boats across the the crystal surface. They would collect algae and hang it, from here however, they seemed like specks of dirt as they pulled the cloud of mass onto the shoreline. The distance below her was unimaginable, and the canyon still lowering deeper on ahead long the river.

Along the sides of the canyon the edges came closer and closer until they turned into a tunnel, with the exit in sight well off ahead of them. All streams lead the way, Farrah pressed forward and continued. Somehow this waterway would have to one day reach the seas or dry trying.

Her dark burning wings chilled quickly undergoing the shadows of the tunnel. This moment was refreshing, Farrah wished it would last but knew that with the luminant outer world in front of her, she would bare its’ weight again. Once exiting, the land opened up. Around here were sheets of land, all shedding away from her country to the great abyss. The flats laid shying away as the ledges aimed to pierce the sky like battlements against the evils below. Little to her belief, Farrah saw houses here too, this uneven rocky land was many people's homes. The river became waterfalls and split multiple times cascading against the rock, however all ending in a pit of mist along a wide exposure. As they ventured down this decline, lush trees popped up, the greenest Farrah had ever seen. Their fresh hot air became intoxicating and potent with oxygen, and moisture. The clouds pulled over, thankfully giving some rest by partial overcast, it came in spurts. Soon following the only stream that was left, it vanished into the underground and left them only to follow the decent.

The rock here was darker. They followed a few splinters in the ground that emitted a mist, warding a small path through the forest below. It seemed as though there was some latent volcanic activity deep down and hopefully some sign of waterflow. Talia was fascinated with all that surrounded them “Farrah, I’ve never seen anywhere like here before. I’ve seen some interesting things, but these

sights, their kinda haunting.”

“What do you mean haunting?”

“Their, well... New, and for the most part smell weird.”

Farrah chuckled “Smell weird?”

“You don't use that nose of yours, you wouldn't know. When I smell something brewing, I watch out. It's what keeps me safe.” Talia said defensively.

“If you want to stay behind...”

“NEVER!” Talia exclaimed “I don't like this one bit, but I'll be darned if I'm gonna leave you alone.”

“Then try not to complain too much.” Farrah sighed, exhausted and unadapted to the new climate.

“See, strange places, don't like it.” Talia reinstated

The rest of the way was very tiring and sapped Farrah's strength. The slide crumbled and took a death drop into a deep abyss filled with fog bordering a raised flat plane of grass and bush; one of the last pieces to stay intact around here. The cliff acted as a wall but it most likely had slid into the depths to retain its' composure. Other land masses were not so fortunate creating quite the landslide or boulders and sun bleached splintered logs.

At the edge of the platform, Farrah veered to the side. She clung to the side of the cliff, squinting at a void. “Is... That the abyss?” Farrah asked redundantly. She was indeed catching glimpse to the ceiling of the shadow downs. This was not the only cliff facing it, other small ledges along the rocky shore existed in poor shape, following a fault line towards it. The mists below her were actually a river that flowed out into the basin of the world's edge. In the distance, there was another shore adjacent to it, looking out as they did.

The shadow downs, below the mist was said to contain all horrors, walks of life unsettling and unnatural. Demons that had fled the lands in search of this dark haven for them to crawl into. From there the damned had crept out in search of children. Having been told this story from her ‘Uncle Artheour’, it was merely a spooky thriller by the family servant. Before her now standing atop the cliff, Farrah was rather concerned. For a moment, she wondered just what Artheour would he think of her now. Never did anyone imagine she would be here now, outside the might-as-well-be forbidden lands.

“That is by far the weirdest thing I've ever seen.” Talia astonished

Farrah came nearer, walking endlessly along the cliff's edge, making her way to the tides. Both sat there staring off at the rolling mist. An endless sea of it in fact, so far stretching that one could no longer differentiate between the sky and the ghostly ocean of mist. The wind moved the mist along like waves of cloud, twisting, warping, turning. This tranquil moment, suspended well above its surface hardly seemed like the horror tales that were made of it. A few rogue waves made plumes in the air, and

one or two caught Farrah off guard. Being inside these massive thick clouds was unlike anything in the air, these were very thick and smelled of strange gas. There was also a hint of sulphur and ash. Talia, with her acute ears also heard many noises from below, cracking, whistles and to some extent echoes.

The Shadow downs of the olden time were just as normal as the rest of the world. The cataclysm caused much of the plates of Shemlaul's earthly crust to shift, some rising while others lowered, tilted, and sunk forever. The ocean flooded into the new lands and valleys as volcanic rock and openings caused most of the water to expel. For well over a century, its fury has not ended, the mists that surrounded their country was merely a small wave in the history of this world as it fought for equilibrium. Is it inhabited by monsters? Maybe, but no one is brave enough to explore such a feat as the dark underbelly of the shadow downs for long. Those who had, only claimed the sights they managed to escape from. Home of spiders, reptiles, and the transformed. Surrounding the country on all sides, the unbreakable tide, the people trapped on an island for many lifetimes to come.

Farrah rested well, the time was still early, a little past midday. She couldn't take her eyes off the mists and their mesmerizing tides. She feared what horrors awaited her from below. The soft cotton sheets hiding strangling claws and sharp mangled gory teeth. After a while, they looked much fluffier than her nerves would deceive her.

South more, that is where she needed to go. Farrah looked along the coastline as far as she could but still no tower or prison. It would be a long while before she could manage to so much as spot it. Sure enough though, it was that way.

Cedric as reluctant as he was, and still hated the fact that she was leaving to find her father, he finally confided in her the prisons location before their expedition. Even coming all the way here was partly to do with him. Though he gave in, it did not make him feel any better. If she was serious, he would only get her killed or worse by withholding anything any longer. The night prior, he explained a lot about what they might see, and where to look. If they were lucky, Daven would be in the highest tower, if not then the lowest dungeon. It all depended on how they saw him. Though the exact route was unknown, at least he remembered the atlas and his geography pretty well.

Her wings were ready, it was time to follow the shore and continue to her father's captivity. A long flight awaited them, clinging just below the cliff to be safe. Always weary of others, she kept an eye above her, hoping to approach unseen.

Along the coast Talia became rather chatty. Farrah, began to open up a little. The thoughts of seeing her father gave her hope and felt happy to passed onto Talia what she was told long ago. "Once my father told me of a place along here that was special to him though he never admitted to where. He oddly enjoyed these tides and would have wanted to live by them if not for raising a family. It sure is beautiful though."

Talia nodded softly "No kidding, but it still gives me the chills. What kind of monsters live here anyway?"

"He never really said, he called them people of another way, but he was very optimistic of others in general. It could mean anything."

"Is that where you got it from?"

“Hardly, I never had that kind of love for everyone as my father did, nor do I think I could really meet anyone without watching them very carefully. He is a much better man than I... Anyway, these lands weren't really discussed much, just that they are quite dangerous but only below the mists, as long as we are safe up here, nothing can get us hopefully.”

“Has he ever seen what is below?”

Farrah took a moment and not enjoying herself to say so, she replied, “Yes, he told me he was young, never had he been so fascinated by something and so frightened for himself.”

“He saw something?”

“I think it was just the legends getting to him, he spent an hour there before it got to him and he left as quickly as his wings could drag him out.”

Attention poured off of the endless ocean and moved to the cliffs ahead which were in shambles. They were not easy to traverse, most of the cliff was rugged, and when she was not hugging a little too close to the rock she was exposed greatly around the bend. Her altitude would drop to compensate relatively often and with the consequence of below in mind, she made great effort to ascend quickly. Surely enough, at the ends of the rocky cliffs she managed to cast eye on a large structure. It was deep and looked as though it sank in it's ages. Tall, slender, and morbidly constructed, it suited the very idea of what a terrifying prison should appear to be. Almost touching the mists itself, the building's lifeline held a fine thread to the eroding hills.

“That's it there, I'm sure of it.” Farrah announced.

Talia popped out and perched on Farrah's shoulder. Taking some time to adjust her eyes to the world outside Farrah's nape, she struggled to find the spot. Finally, coming to somewhat of a decent distance she too saw it. It was a far ways off, and Talia made it known “That's going to take forever to get to. It's a miracle I can even see it at all.”

“It might take a while, but we'd be there well before nightfall...”

Closer, they found a small platform to patiently wait for the setting sun, a time of Farrah's greatest advantages. Like a spectre, all that would be seen would be the white body of a small dove and two ribbons along her wings to carry the phantasm. She would be far too quick to be noticed, and if she did, they would think they were haunted. Farrah was ready to strike back and too eager for her own good. She pictured herself and her daring rescue passionately focused in her fantasy. The occasional worry still lingering.

Talia, influenced by the grim stories of Oblavaeya took this time to bid her friend farewell. Talia herself being of unexiled race had no problems there like Farrah did. “Do you think it's really all that bad?” the small cat asked, clasping herself tightly into her knees. Her ears slightly twisted as to listen though she didn't expect to hear much of an answer.

“It might be.”

“Figured... We know almost nothing about here, just going off of a whim.”

Farrah rose up agitated. "You know I can't wait... I..." A rude shiver of sadness passed her by almost breaking Farrah into tears. "I miss him... And, I have to because if he is still in there, I can't imagine leaving him there any longer than he needs to." She said in stern duty.

"And what about you? Are you going to just walk in blind?"

"And he misses me too!" Farrah continued deaf "All this time, not knowing what happened to me, it hurts. It hurts me all this time not knowing too."

Talia laid on her back trying to relieve the stress inside but ultimately finding herself restless. "Do you think he'd want to see you toss yourself away for him?" Talia shot out, turning her head to Farrah.

Farrah, still stuck up, grit herself and held it in. Finally, she came to terms. "No, he wouldn't. He wouldn't want to see a single person sacrifice themselves... But a thousand men and woman would if they knew him like I do, and that is why he is worth going in blind. He's a good man... He would sacrifice himself for my sake."

"Can't you see that you are not the only one stressed right now?" Talia spoke pressing her situation into an assertive tone.

Farrah snapped. "What do you care!? You're not wanted, you can just walk off and leave here."

"Of course I care, why else would I be this stressed out with you. And besides, I have no where else to go back to!"

Farrah held herself. "You still have your family."

Talia gave a course sigh. "I wish I had nowhere be return to, I left there without a moment's thought, I've never felt so happy as when I've been with you. You are my family, a... A sister I wish I had... I'm, I'm scared, of losing you." Talia choked, fiercely "You are walking towards a prison that wants you in it, I can't help but care. I just wish I could feel the same way about my old man!"

Farrah took the time to digest what Talia told her, she sat down in front, staring at her friend's hidden cowering expressions crack through the exterior. "What if you thought about him like he was me?"

Talia forced a smile, still weary inside. It faded away and she looked aside until she could retain some composure. In an agreeing tone replied "I'd fight tooth and nail to get you out. And if you get caught, I will fight too. It's not just your head on the line."

"You don't have to..." Farrah carelessly disregarded herself.

"But I would..." Talia bit down on her jaw "...And so would you."

"So I guess you know..." Farrah nodded gently, "I'm still doing this."

"I know. I know I can't stop you, and this is something that you need to do. I'm scared is all. Just needed to let you know is all."

Farrah knelt forward and scooped up her friend and smiled, "I'm scared too, I wouldn't do this if it weren't for him." Talia held her sister, and wished her fears away but they would not dissipate so easily. Talia nodded silently

In time Talia settled enough to inquire about the stragedy, as Farrah could only best describe as headstrong, and undeveloped. Go in, check, get out; and if all possible, with her old man. Talia, figuring as much and was far from moved to say the least. "Is there a problem?" Farrah asked seeing the plan much more straight forward.

"No, no, it's as I imagined. At least you are not going to one woman army this operation, that is all I can ask for."

"I'm not dumb you know."

Talia narrowed her eyes, "Yeah, but we could use an escape route, or a backup plan..." Farrah was about to raise a finger, but Talia continued "Other than high tail and fly like Kaltaous."

They discussed it thoroughly, and with every passing concern, they were turned more and more off of even attempting at all. Soon dusk would fall, and after scoring some local foliage it was about time to strike. They rested for what little they could, and made sure to be prepared with a proper escape.

"Turn left, double back, follow the cliff back." Farrah confirmed. "And if anyone asks we are assassins."

"I still don't like this." Talia mentioned one last time, tucking herself into Farrah's hair.

Farrah shook off the remark, following her taking flight. The dark shadow was cast, unseen, and low flying. She flew to barely to skim the rock of the cliff closing to the prison. Rising was the fog and mists as the tide rolled in and the wind rushed them against the shore. Twice Farrah was hit by a gale wind, setting her unbalanced and almost crashing. With the cliff rounding off, the stronghold was in sight. She folded with the cliff forward to meet it, taking the shortest and quickest path. One good appearance of the spectre before hugging the stone brick walls and into the complex to scale the tall tower.

She made sure to stay from guards sight, and climb the fortress like a monkey. Always facing her back to her enemy, invisible, and watchful. Talia took roost to look for trouble, though for an inescapable prison, security wasn't very tight. Perhaps guard shift changed, or the prestige was held within it's walls rather than out. Still, three towers overlooked the facility which were easy enough to avoid, been given one of the four original had crumbled and fell with the rock down to a grim burial. Each tower stationed at least one guard by the looks of it, Talia reported in, and Farrah took to it more frantic than before.

Upon climbing she encountered the odd window which she dodged as to not alert the residents and kept as quiet as the claws of her feet would allow. Sometimes there were no finger holds and she had to ascend with her wings giving off noise. If given the opportunity, the architecture gifted her the ability to climb even quieter, and near the top, it was a matter of scaling by hand alone. The bricks got loose in some places, and she prayed they would not come out as to alert the guards; however by the

structure's frail chipped appearance, it was likely they were well acquainted with bumps in the night.

Finally, the top of the tower, the greatest achievement of criminal status to not be executed publicly. Of all places within Farrah's grasp, she had obtained the altitude to brag about, not by altitude but the gravity surrounding the entire ascension here. She was shaky and near hyperventilating from the exertion under the strict and serious eye of the guardsmen. A single window in sight, the chance of a lifetime, the prize of a dangerous feat. Barred, too tightly to enter. Farrah peered in, to see little of her father, but only to find an empty room with a single chain in the centre.

Talia peered in, and walked through easily without effort. She took a better look, eerily peering below her. Nothing in sight but walls, many walls, all inscribed by its previous inhabitant. "Well?" Farrah whispered loudly.

"Uh... You, really, aren't going to like this."

"Is he missing?"

"That's a lot better than I thought you would ask... He's completely missing. Nothing in here except writing, lots of it." Talia then whispered to herself "No bones, no blood."

"I can see, what does it say?"

"You think I can read?"

"Wait, you can't read?"

"I can't say I've ever so much as seen the cover of a book. We have a different alphabet than you do, they're like pictures, none of this literature crum. You ever seen trees sprouting books like apples in the wild? I mean we haven't so much as..."

"I get it, I get it..."

"Well, I'm afraid we'll probably have to search elsewhere. I could probably slip by everyone and get to the bottom of this place, but I doubt it'll be easy."

"Let me in there." Farrah demanded, fed up.

"How? It's a prison, it's made to keep people in, you have a better chance out there."

Farrah looked for an opening somewhere. Frantic, she started to pull on one of the bars, already weary and working on adrenaline. The stone had decayed and began to crumble. She managed to actually break one of the bars off.

"Whoa." Talia astonished. "Farrah, I didn't think you were that strong."

"The stone, it's old, it's practically falling apart."

"Careful not to..." Talia gasped as Farrah pulled another bar out "Did... That sound like what I thought it sounded like?"

Farrah managed to pull enough out that she could squish in and made great haste in doing so. She bashfully smiled as the noise of a brick crashing to the ground. "They are used to that kind of thing, right?"

"You better hurry if they are not." Talia warned.

Farrah quickly jumped to the dim lit walls and started to try and decipher the inscriptions. They were crude and poorly inscribed as the person doing so was very weak and had very little to work with. By the looks of it, they were over a year old, overgrowing in some places with the moisture and the colour of the stone fading. They told a very sad tale, nothing noting the person other than how they felt. It was a mess of descriptions. Farrah choked. She read a name inscribed, as "Nadalia." Her mothers name, referred to as his darling, soon following came another name. "Karine." and finally "Farrah." His dearest daughter. Tears came rushing out at alarming speeds. She began to clog, and had forced to breath from her lounges.

"Farrah, are you okay?" Talia rushed over to find her friend curling deeper and deeper into ball.

She could barely draw air as her throat ran with mucous, and her muscles seized. She began to fall to the ground and hit her head.

"Farrah, calm down!" Her friend was incapable of sensing and was forced into grave depression, she could not hear her small friend. Farrah was certain her father was gone from this world and in each saddening word she read, echoed to that point. She had solid recognition, the empty cell and the overgrown inscriptions; he had suffered greatly with the separation of his family. Talia continued to reach out. "Farrah, get a hold of yourself!" Nothing was working, Farrah swung herself in anguish trying to release her crushed dreams. Talia knew that Farrah hurting herself would do nothing to ease the pain but only give her more to deal with. "Why am I always picking you back up? You are the stronger one, and the older one here. -- Stop squirming!... I don't want to do this." Talia said tracing her claw down the nerve where Farrah always complained about. With one swoop, Talia bit into Farrah's neck

The sudden pain stopped Farrah, but she instantly retaliated "You didn't have to bite me!"

"You don't have to take the pain out on yourself either!... So I thought I'd do it for you instead." She said licking her paw.

"I don't care!"

"You wouldn't tell me what's going on so I panicked." Talia barked back.

"He's dead!" Farrah scowled

Talia looked blankly for a moment and snapped out quickly. "You don't know that." Talia didn't know either, but she knew it couldn't happen, she didn't think so at least.

"How do you know that?" Farrah retorted

"You can't really write down that you have died, after you have die can you? Keep reading,

maybe they moved him somewhere.”

Farah nodded, shaking herself back to reality, determined and quickly poured over the scripts once more. Farrah agreed with Talia, somewhere here had to say something about what happened. Though she also realized she also couldn't read that he died either. All Farrah could hope for was some kind of solid clue.

Talia only gazed, unable to read it, but stood amazed. “He really was here... And she really made a holler back there.” Talia instantly took to watch duty, and kept one eye open for her friend. Maybe if she read something proving his death, she wouldn't freak out all that much this time.

Farah read and read and read. There was so much he had put down, each in a new tone of speaking. Ten minutes went by, some text was hard to read, and some were too scratched to be legible. He spoke of many times of his life, recalling childhood, recalling the present, and much of how he missed his family. One piece however spoke out very clearly to Farrah, and it said “In this I remember how much I missed those times, I missed my after super tea before my study, Farrah would come to play with her toys there so she may be near me. Nadalia, how I loved her. She thought it was cute, as did I. I never had the chance to tell you, and I fear I never will, but I would trade my life just to be there one last time to smile, to see you. One last time to tell you, I love you. Farrah...” The rest continued on as though speaking to his wife, another for his servant whom he was glad to house and feed well. He never believed in having her work for them, and treated her like an aunt as she tended to the garden. More scripts talked about pain, suffering, and most wrenching an illness. He claimed his cell to be colder than all Kale of olden legend, the lands one revered before the cataclysm as frigid. The rations were old, the rain leaked in, and the shackle was uncomfortable.

Finally, a passage referring to a bleak moment where most of the words were hard to understand. She didn't know what it meant until a moment of clairvoyance in his written testimony that he would not die of a broken heart, nor a poor treatment before tyrants, but simply because no doctor could cure him. To which, they honestly tried to save him. He died with love.

The walls echoed, falling inward, and crashed beneath her. In a choke, stricken by the last unsettling words and a very clear gap of wall until the next chapter of his unwritten legacy, she cried unlike anything anyone had ever heard. She cawed, from the depths of her heart, and that cry echoed through the hillsides and well into the abyss below the tower. It was the only noise that could escape her. This howl into the night sky caused Talia to nearly faint. In catching herself, she fell off of the windowsill and tumbled to the ground.

Quickly retaining her breath, Talia shouted. “WHAT THE HECK WAS THAT!?” Farrah was limp now, knelt down and bent backwards. Crying to the heavens. “We need to get out of here now!” Talia quickly latched to Farrah's shoulders. “Don't make me bite you again.”

Farah fell instinctively to her side and picked up, making a break to the window, then dove out scraping the side of the gap. Her shoulder burned, worsening the moment in cringing failure. Everything seemed to fall apart, her fondest memories of life before the revolt crushed, caged and enslaved. She free fell. This moment was almost tranquil, all care left. If this moment could only last a while longer to push out the pain into numb oblivion, then paying the toll of her anguish may be worth it for another moment of silence; to feel the calming rest of falling to the ground beneath her was like a weightless moonlit blanket, but the ground came up to meet her.

A tear pulled off, not knowing what to do Farrah looked attentive to the ground below. Maybe it was too late, maybe it wasn't. To try and lose her last hope in another fumble of her irresponsible body or to accept her fate and rest peacefully. Farrah felt rest run away from her, she was too scared to rest, panic overcome her. Farrah swore she felt the devil grin, the calm rest that she curled toward was a venomous snake that laughed like the watching reaper. Farrah opened her wings hesitantly, begging some penance for her selfishness. She still had Talia, how could she face Talia. In a silent part of her mind, a memory began to play though she couldn't place it, almost a voice but she knew instantly what it said. Farrah remembered. Quickly She flung open her wing at full strength kindling a new fire that burned within her. His final words rang through her as though they were her own. "Don't you ever cast your hate onto others for my sake, keep living, *it only hurts for a little while. I promise.*" Sobbing, she could barely see straight, but she pulled up to escape the dark hand in the full moon.

All was lit and beautiful, but all was blind as tears tore sight like water met rock. She glided over the back wall as planned, and kept descending. Talia kept an eye behind her, and noticed two guards checking out the ruckus, and attempting to follow them into the mists. It was planned that they would loose them here, and that they would keep from descending into the accursed planes. Farrah, did not stop.

"Farrah, shouldn't we be going up right about now? I can't see them anywhere, I think we've lost them." Farrah didn't respond, she was wiping the tears from her eyes, and almost falling again. She knew she would have to see to escape, especially in the dense fog.

The moonlight illuminated the lands and the mist underneath, instead of being pitch black, they were bright. Farrah finally ridding her eyes of tears for now, noticed a spire and shattered rock moving closer at alarming speeds. She retracted her hands from her face and forced them out, pushing the ground away. She touched the ground for merely a moment and took off again.

"You are impossible!" Talia exclaimed. Farrah kept going forward into the abyss, Talia was starting to panic "Uh, plan is to deke left remember? Head back to the cliff sides? Hello?"

"Change of plans Talia." Farrah exclaimed "We're heading straight."

"What!" She shouted, shocked. "No, no! This is NOT a thing, abandon course, or I'm abandoning ship. What are you thinking?"

"I'm not letting you die in vein father!" Farrah said to herself

"No that's exactly what you are doing, you just went from imprisonment to worse."

"There is a place far away from here, across the tides, my father spoke of it in his prison cell. A special land where no one has ever been except him, somewhere where we can be free. Somewhere outside the exiled lands."

Talia shut up. "There is?..." She thought in her head. "You mean..." Finally Talia asked rhetorically "But why the heck out here?" She cried. Talia held on tightly, and shuttered before muttering in clairvoyance, sombrely awake "My goodness, she really is a lunatic after all... And I'm on board this crazy ship." She wasn't sure what to think, this was the breaking point where there was a chance to escape to the shoreline. She looked behind in the moonlit garden of fog, watching it slip farther away. "I'm gonna kill you after this!" She exclaimed.

Farrah laughed, "Fair enough"

"NO! Not fair! Not okay! I am not okay!" These complaints would follow her for most of their trip. At least until they had bigger problems.

-- I was but a young boy, foolish, brave, but mainly foolish. The shadow downs tempted me and like any fool I tested their waters. A land so shrouded in its confinement that a new world opened up. Lucid, pure yet tainted. It was perilous, ruthless, but home to many gentle of sorts. I found a land, far away, off the coasts of the eastern shores; a haven in the mists as wide and far as my young wings could fly. It is here that I spent a period of time missing, considered gone from this world by everyone I knew. Only two others know of this existence, my only brother, and my darling wife whom to this day would wish we could have raised our little family there in safe peacefulness. These memories, that I could never forget, are treasured for eternity.

Chapter 6: Shadows

Dark, moist, lost in a deep dense fog of smouldering ash that had mixed with water; Farrah continued onward not knowing where she was going any more. The path before her had long since derailed, and no matter how high she flew, the fog could not be escaped. The more they travelled the deeper the floor beneath them got. They took this time to rest on the peak of a shattered rock. Around here there are plenty of them, the split landslide went for miles off of the coast. Deathly deep and dangerously sharp, all the surfaces appeared to be held by thread along a steep embankment. Surely this canyon that fell into the depths couldn't be endless. From what they could see, there wasn't much to go off of, but it sure seemed to be unending.

They took into the air once more, trying to reach the surface, for the longest time it felt hopeless until finally they came on a stroke of luck. However the fog had a crippling effect on flight as Farrah's wings became damp and soaked causing her flaps to be more saturated and heavy. In the distance, there was a very small wave rolling over, a ripple to poke out of. After climbing some ways and gliding against the winds, they saw small pinholes of light in the sky and a few more along the shore belonging to the prison they had escaped from. They made a ruckus back there, and though Farrah laughed over it. Talia was still firmly horrified over the careless squawk and alarm. Never would she run covert with Farrah again, so long as her eight remaining lives could stop it. With somewhat of a better idea of where they were in mind, and the wind to guide them, Farrah took back to the depths.

In the fog, there was wind still, but not nearly as much. A rogue gale wind pushed her back. If she had a tailwind, her ability would have increased tenfold. All breeze seemed to rush to the shores, perhaps another reason why the land far away was so hard to find. Between the head on turbulence and her damp wings Farrah was facing a testament to her stamina.

An hour later, the lateness took fold and sapped away their strength. To be fair, the mist did most of it, and the continuous movement without stop gave no time to rest. Under the dark pale mist, avoiding anything she could see in front of her, she started to look for rather a place to hide for the night. Talia, had only woken up. "Farrah," She said yawning, "Are we still flying?"

"Yes." Farrah responded in an even more tired manner.

"I don't like the sound of that," She gave another yawn. "It's getting late, and I rather not sleep down here. I'm getting bad rest as it is."

Farrah understood but couldn't help their situation. "I've been looking, but nowhere really seems available."

"I'm thinking we should have decided to take on a big flight earlier in the day, don't you?"

"Not much I can do about that now. I'm too tired to surface again."

Talia squinted her eyes and bleakly mentioned having almost given up on her eight lives "There is a lot of things I don't like about this, I'm not sure I care anymore. If I find one more thing I don't like

about all of this you can colour me surprised... But right now, colour me pale” Yawning weakly, she nestled back down and tried to relax. “I’m sleepy.”

“I’ll try and find somewhere.”

“Somewhere without monsters is nice.” Talia said wearily

“Not sure I can.” Farrah admitted, ashamed of her lack of sight and planning.

“Do you see any monsters?”

“No, but I don’t want to chance it.”

“Then anywhere is fine.” Talia muttered, passing out.

The ground had finally evened off, and worse yet, it started to rise making the travel harder. Some taller spires had formed, and small plates of fractured shale under the misty ocean. Here it oddly resembled the land above, only without trees or grass. The fog would be plenty to water it, but the sun however did not shine bright enough to pierce the soil. Most the things around here could not support life, no food nor nourishment, no one could live here; perhaps this was an area where they would not find trouble. The nervous apprehension turned apathetic and even this wasteland which seemed like a horrid storm to travel felt more peaceful to Farrah. On the top of one of the highest rocks, she perched just high enough to not be spotted. Here she felt at ease, and here she intended to sleep. Not well mind you, the bare rock was hard, but it was land.

Her eyes shut themselves and she quickly blanked out. Not utterly into sleep, but resting. She wasn’t sure if her bed simply wouldn’t allow it, or if there were other things on her mind. She heard noises, but nothing alarming, it sounded like rocks unsettling. Oddly, the thing she noticed most in this half awake state was how eerily quiet it was. She tried to force herself asleep but was still in a daze from flying and her tired sore muscles could not rest nor heal. All was peaceful, too peaceful, the loud shaking of shifting plates would be could be warmly welcomed in this pitch deafness.

She was certain that she had fallen asleep, but she didn’t wake up when a small clawing sound came from beside her, she dreamt while still listening. Instead the noise manifested an illusion in her sleep though she wasn’t sure where it came from. She was flying, two men chasing her, but she was far too fast for them. Talia had warned her that there were more on the way. This little dream state was shaken off little by little until Farrah was too agitated to retain her slumber. To her right was a figure, though her eyes were shut, she knew very well that he was there.

“Little girl.” He called out.

Casually Farrah turned her head and nonchalantly replied “I was just starting to rest.”

“You shouldn’t be out like this. It’s not safe out here at night for a feather folk like yourself.”

Farrah opened her eyes wearily and frowned, “No? Then you should run along yourself.” She hoped to turn the stranger away.

“Girly, I’m no feather folk...”

“Then you shouldn't have a problem here, let me go back to sleep.” She cut the stranger off, not fully in a proper state of mind. She closed her eyes, hoping it to all go away

The stranger walked up the rock more fully, and requested Farrah come with him to a place she could keep hidden. She ignored it and nodded back off purging the outer world. He insisted again, sounding more concerned, falling on deaf ears. The only thing more irritating than his desperate pleas was a wave of high pitch noise that was calling out, kind of like a kettle, probably some gas escaping somewhere.

“Look I can give you a bed, better than any old rock out in the open.” He begged. “ I don't want to see a little girl like yourself get hurt out here. There are some pretty shady figures around. They might want more than just a snack to eat. Folk down here don't wed.”

She opened her eyes again, knowing she was not going to get any rest, actually a lot of her sense came back as she woke. Partially swayed by the man's pleas and figured he might be able to help, partly still concerned about a hidden motive. For the first time really talking to someone after meeting Cedric, she felt at ease to converse; but in this place, she would be wrong to do so very lightly. Farrah took a moment to look into the man's eyes, crookedly from her horizontal fix, she had to focus to really see him. He was dark, but so was everything else. His head shined, either bald or hairless. 'feather folk' he was no bird, he didn't look like an animal, he had no ears. This person was something she never seen before, perhaps a resident here. The thought came to her that he may be a monster but she pushed it away, a monster would have eaten her before she even woke. Actually, her father spoke of many of 'gentle folk', maybe this was a folk with good intents. This was not be the first time she was approached in the night, however this stranger was strange. Her head tilted back slightly.

“So, why should I trust you?” Farrah asked.

“Have I done you wrong yet?” The hairless man riddled in return

Farrah noted, no he had not. “I still don't know you.”

“How course of me, Alundreer.” He said in a strange tongue, his name was pronounced with a drone noise, native to his kind perhaps.

“Farrah...”

“A lovely name I do say.” He replied, making a smile that could scarcely be seen in the dim light.

“I don't need to worry.” Talia spoke, seemingly talking in her sleep “They'll get full off of you before they get to me.” She laughed jokingly.

The stranger tilted his head. “We really do need to get you in...” He instilled hastily.

Farrah was still wary of him, wary of everyone. Sure he had no hand with the kingdom and no hatred for her kind, but down here had it's own threats. Why would he bring up a lot of the dangers, why bring up that he hasn't done her wrong, of course he hadn't, it's not like he needed to say it. She wasn't really ready to trust anyone from here yet, let alone in the dark. Something came to mind “How

did you find me here anyway?" She asked, surely she was out of sights, maybe he was looking for prey. He didn't jump her though. She wished that she could think more clearly if not for that blasted kettle noise ringing in her ear.

"I could smell you, you have a unique smell that's not from around here." He explained

"Then does it matter where I go?" Farrah continued explained "If you can smell me, can't everyone else?"

"What's the ruckus?" Talia asked, poking out from Farrah's side.

"I thought I smelled a cat." The stranger muttered aloud

"I'M NOT A CAT!" She exclaimed. "I'm... Well, not fully one..."

"And one so small."

"Okay, I'm out, this guy is getting on my nerves."

"Yes," Farrah agreed. "I'm sorry I can't take you up on that offer, but thank you for warning me." She said, getting to her feet.

"No, NO!" The stranger pleaded, "Don't go, you don't know how dangerous it is out there!"

Farrah became rather nervous of his frantic reaction, he was desperate, she moved more cautiously. She swept Talia back to the nest and moved away not taking her eyes off the strange bald creature. She apologized again feeling sorry. She made an attempt to take flight but the man lunged and grabbed a hold of her feet. She was dragged down only slightly, he was very light, and his grip was pitiful. He must have been starving if he was a predator. If he was lonely, he was sure not lonely enough. She figured he would be easy to break free of, and she could escape his whining for good. Just a little kick, that's all it would take. Farrah was getting really irritated, and her head began to ache from the noise. She was about to break loose but something hit her. Out of nowhere a swift soaring and screeching creature rammed into the connection between the two. This hit knocked Farrah off balance, and Talia flung out from her back.

Farrah flew as fast as she could, not knowing what hit her. Quick to meet her was a dark winged fuzzy creature with large pointed ears and a female voice that called out "Are you okay? I just save you a doozy back there huh?"

"No, I think I had it under control." Farrah assured a little offended, trying to slowly back away from the new stranger.

"Sure you did..." The figure replied in disbelief.

"Thank you... What are you anyways?" Farrah asked, trying to reassess her danger.

The fluffy savior smirked, and Farrah could tell from the proud posture the little hero made in saying so. "You are very welcome, I am Hollie the bat, 'Freer of the Helpless', 'Purge of the darkness'" She didn't look all that large, a little short and sounded like she was slightly younger than Farrah.

Farrah narrowed her eyes. "Is that so."

"If you are all in one piece, then I suggest we loose this guy, these desperate types are pretty persistent." She took a moment, out of curiosity and no longer bragging, Hollie asked "Wait... What exactly are you then? I don't see any birds down here, most of which are too smart."

Farrah sighed, she was definitely awake now and just glad to be out of trouble, again. "I am a magpie, and my friend is a... Um... Tinder..." Farrah waited for her friend to break out and correct her. To her surprise, there was no response. "Talía, you there?" Nothing. "Talía?"

"A friend?" The bat intruded. "You don't suppose she's down there do you?"

"Oh, heavens no!" Farrah exclaimed "Please, don't tell me she fell off."

"I'll go check."

"No, you've done enough now." Farrah enforced heading down help, but was outmatched by Hollie's eagerness which took a head start.

Talía wasn't too pleased at being dropped. She recovered in the air and once stable she shouted "HAY!" Flew to chase them but was quickly caught by the odd scaly lizard man. "I had to run into someone like you, huh?" Talía scowled

"I see your friends left you behind."

"It'll only be a little while before they find out I'm missing... For Farrah that is, I don't know about the other one." Talía explained, expressing a lack in Farrah's perception.

"And what if I eat you now?" The starved man mentioned, pulling Talía nearer "Will they save you then?"

"Any last words?" Talía requested wishfully.

"Go and say them if you wish." He answered, Talía went to raise her finger but the man continued. "You're not much, but you are the first thing I've had in a very long while."

"I meant for you," Talía informed. The lizard lifted his bare eyebrow. "I'm heading off soon, and I'm not coming back to visit." Talía remarked having wrapped her tail firmly around her captor's hand and began to ignite it.

He would have retorted at her remark, he would have let her go once the searing fire got to him, but instead he was knocked out cold. Hollie had come to the rescue, diving at great speeds and colliding into his stomach, his grip was instantly released sending Talía once again hurdling into the air. "Congratulations!" Talía hollered cynically. "I found two more things I hate about this trip!" Before performing the astonishing acrobatic feat of accidentally landing one back of her hero, and digging in with her claws at full force.

"Agh!" Hollie cried "GET IT OFF ME, GET IT OFF ME!" She screamed repeatedly, picking

up speed and flying faster, trying to break the grip, causing Talia to dig deeper while hissing and spitting.

Farrah laughed fullheartedly at the spectacle without remorse. The gung ho hero met her match before the very princess she just saved from 'bozo's' grasp. Perhaps she would be less cocky and arrogant once she managed to removed the claws stuck in her back. To be fair, Hollie just wanted to help. A few circles did both of them good as Hollie slowly spiralled to the ground, landed, and collapsed plastering them both to the ground. Talia lifted her face from the bat, and gasped for air. Farrah at standby to pick up her friend, and any claws left in Hollie's back.

“So, you are the one I have to thank huh?” Talia remarked.

“I regret nothing.” Hollie replied.

“Yeah, well I had it under control.”

“No you didn't!” Hollie jumped up to her knees. “He totally had you!”

“Na-uh. I was letting him have his last words.”

Hollie stood proud, “Because you totally knew I was going to save you.” She boasted triumphantly

Talia pulled her ears back, “No, if I couldn't break free, Farrah would have his face for breakfast.” She bragged

“Enough!” Farrah interrupted. “Thank you.”

“You're welcome” Hollie basked with an adorable look of praise. “So you are Farrah, that is a lovely name.”

“Thank you... Again...”

“Glad to be of service!” Hollie replied brushing herself off, and checking her back.

Talia climbed back to safety, and fully under the hair in case of any more acrobatic stunts taking place. “I'm tired still, if you want to really be of service, find us a bed trickster.” The cat demanded,

“Talia!” Farrah disciplined.

A great star shone in Hollie's eyes, she chuckled “Sure thing!”

Farrah looked shocked “Are... you sure?” She asked.

“Yup! And we don't eat people, just bugs.”

“Bugs are people too...” Talia remarked. “Say!” She said aloud. “Is it true that bats can't see very well?”

Hollie stunted, and felt a dark shadow loom over her. She was irked by the stereotype, and preferred not answer, but with her composure she only remarked. “No, no, I can see just fine, tell me, how much can you see down here?”

“Didally. I just hear it's a thing is all.”

“No, it's not a thing, my screeching just helps me hear where I am, not sure why everyone's gotta... Think I'm blind or something.”

“Huh, really? You really can't tell a thing when you hear one anymore, I would have swore that was a thing. Thanks for clearing that up for us.”

“No problem.” Hollie muttered “Now, to my home.”

Hollie lead them straight to her abode. Along the way, they noticed the land becoming much more splintered, and many uphill. They passed many of chasms, cracks and fountains of hot steam. Here was one of many deep portals to the underground cloud factory, still pumping out plumes of textured smog. Soon, things became normal, only with a touch of unnervingly thick fog. It was cooler here, like the summers night, pleasantly brisk and moist. The peace was broken.

“What?!” Hollie asked. “You decided to sleep there of all places?”

“Where tourists, eh?” Talia replied.

“Don't you two start it again.” Farrah interrupted, still tired.

“Anyway.” Hollie continued, “You know better now, and besides, you can rest at ease. Our house has everything from snacks to beds, to our own little entertainment. On occasion you can see my brothers fight over a single doll, and watch them bicker for hours.”

“Amazing.” Talia sarcastically remarked. “I just hope they don't keep us up with all that.”

The road became a wall, though there was no road to begin with, there also appeared to be no home either. Hollie sure seemed to know what she was doing and where she was going. “In here.” She beckoned. Farrah followed, finding a small cave that appeared almost invisible from below. It had a small landing pad before the entrance and a ragged cloth door with patches put in, and holes that needed more patches. “Here is our luxury estate.” Hollie continued.

Farrah entered. Before her was a carved home, a cave that was modified to house many people. On the sides were melted wax stains and one dim candle up ahead. Hollie walked up to the kitchen's table to where her mom was fixing some sort of grub for children. Farrah hoped it was for children, no adult could stomach looking at it very much. Mix of greens and purples with white in between. “Hi mom. I brought friends over.”

“So you have, very odd friends in fact.” Hollie's mother replied.

An older voice, male and raspy called out in warning. “It better not be another boy, I had to chase the last one out.”

“It's a girl honey.”

“Carry on.” He replied in a more mannerly tone as though returning to his nap in the other room.

Farrah took instant liberty of their chair. She held her head up and watched the mother prepare the mash. A thought of her stomach came to mind but fell, she wasn't that desperate.

“So where did you find this one at?” The older woman asked.

“She was being attacked by rogues.” Hollie replied.

The mother looked up and asked Farrah “What really happened?”

“MOM!” Hollie intruded.

“Just a predator.” Farrah replied void of character.

“So, a rogue.” Hollie reinforced.

“Well, I'm glad you are safe.” The mother consoled. “Things have gotten a little ruthless out there lately, more so than it has been in my time.”

“That's why I'm there. Saving damsels and kicking baddies before breakfast.”

“Hollie! Their not bad people.”

“Yeah, well they do bad things!”

“They are starving out there and you know it.” The mother put down her mortar and pedestal. “Not everyone has the luxuries that we have. I agree, they shouldn't be doing what they do, but they have no choose...”

“But...”

“I understand.” Farrah interrupted. “They really are desperate...” She said, tethering some shred of empathy in her weary appearance.

Her mother smiled. “Your friend understands.”

Hollie pouted. “Mom, they shouldn't be aloud to go around hurting others like that, who knows what they would have done to poor Farrah.”

“No, you did right to get her out, but you can't be blaming them all the time. I would do the same if we were in their state right now just to keep you and your brothers alive.”

Hollie turned away. “I'm grown up and can feed myself.”

“What is the problem anyway?” Talia popped out, giving Hollie's mother a heart attack. “I

mean, why is everyone in such dire straights?” popping her head out from the top of Farrah's hair ominously.

“Oh my... What...” The mother replied, staring.

Talia continued regardless. “Is it just because there is no food that grows down here?”

“No.” The woman continued to stare. “Partly yes. There is no where else for them to go. It's here or fight their own kind over food. Even in other places, there is little to go around. The shendaloulians are very nice people but, anywhere else, they are shunned back here.”

“Shendawhats?”

“Where we are, where the fog reaches.”

Talia tilted her head. “We call those the shadow downs.” She said trying to pull out of Farrah's mane.

“You will come to know that this world is still in shambles, since the tables tilted, everything will take many generations to fix and settle to what it once was. I fear we may never truly escape it though.”

“I'm sorry.” Farrah asked “Where might I sleep?”

Hollie's mother looked at Farrah, studied her. Even placing her hand on her forehead to see if Farrah was well. “You are a night sleeper aren't you?” Farrah nodded. “I can prepare you the couch, or Hollie's room if you please. We don't really have much here.”

Farrah nodded more, just so long as it got her rest. Talia agreed and tucked away into her catnap. Moments later, Farrah found herself falling into the bed, and though it wasn't much, it was still the best bed she had since she was home. For over a year, she was free to roam, but hardly pleased about being homeless. Tonight would be a blessing before the long trip to the haven across the tides.

In the night, they woke once to find a little bat at her bedside, holding a small doll and dancing it around. One of Hollie's brothers no doubt, she shut her eye's and went back to sleep. Talia, soon after, hid completely. She did not like kids, too unpredictable. Besides, Talia looked like an oversized doll to boot, she did not want to be played with. Eerily she peeked over Farrah's unconscious body like sandbags in a war setting every time she heard a noise, then lowering her head slowly to avoid notice.

Chapter 7 - Trials

Breaking day, all in the house had finally become quiet, and all but two went to sleep. Hollie, being of stolen bed, and her mother, wishing to send them off as a proper host. Farrah slept in greatly, greater than normal, embarrassingly so. When she awoke there was nothing to be heard, except perhaps a groan or two of Hollie keeping herself awake and refusing to sleep on the couch. Farrah slowly crept out of the room and hugged the door casing which was barely a door casing at all. Everything was still very dark as the night before, except instead of a slow burning candle, it was the light of outside bleakly peering in through the doorway.

Hollie instantly took notice to Farrah and came to meet her. Trying to act fully awake, Hollie somehow found a way to make a mockery of herself then pulled the magpie to the table.

“Did you sleep well?” The mother asked.

Farrah attempted to reply but was still too tired in the morning to really say anything. Finally remembering she could nod, she did so rather late, and tried to freshen up her head.

“And your friend?” The mother continued. “How are you doing in there.”

Farrah didn't pay attention to this, nor the rest of the conversation that was had with her hair.

“What about you huh?” Hollie asked. “You don't look like you are holding up too much.”

“I'm not a morning person.” Farrah pushed out toneless, feeling the dryness in her throat being irritating. “I need a moment to wake up.”

“You and Hollie are the same, she hates it when I say it too.” Hollie's mother poked.

No comment from Hollie. Though you could see her eyes roll, and try to stay focused. Though at last she did say “I'm sorry I might not get to spend much time with you, you seem pretty awesome.”

“You must be travelling somewhere right?” The mother asked

Farrah replied, ignoring the yucky feeling in her throat. “A long ways.”

“Then it would be best that you pack a lunch at least.”

Farrah thought on the meal that was made that night and was turned off of the idea. “I might pass.”

“You won't find anything for miles, I'll assure you of that. If you came from the land to our west, it will be many days until you actually find anything let alone food.” She would have let Farrah talk, but she had ran off to the pantry where there was already made a packed meal prime and ready.

“I'm in the building, hold the bugs.” Talia mentioned pacing out without her chariot. She sat before the table, Hollie she already seen Talia but not her mother, she was rather surprised again.

“What... Exactly are you?”

“You sound surprised, you saw me last night.”

Saw could be a loose term, for all the lady could see, Talia might have very well been a spectre or a demon made to possess people's hairs and chat about worldly ongoing casually around a table. The strange winged cat-like creature with what looked to be a pair of kids goggles hanging off of her neck appeared to be rather grumpy in the morning and in need of a stern coffee. The mother stared for a while before returning to the meal she had made.

“Face it Talia, you're a rarity.” Farrah commented.

“Still, it's rude to treat me any different...”

The mother nodded, she was only curious though. Placing a plate in front of Farrah, the bird took one look at the grub and passed. “Sorry, I can't accept it.”

“Farrah's not a bug person, I used to eat them, but, I changed diet.” Talia spoke on her friends behalf.

The mother looked concerned for the lack of anything else she could give the young flyer. Farrah surely would find herself very hungry along her trip, but she would be more hungry if she lost her stomach.

“It's just another way of living.” Talia continued, looking to Farrah “Your kind no doubt ate smaller creatures too, is the way of the world.”

Being of royal blood, Farrah had eaten very well. Finest grains, finest berries, and ample supply of some form of meat. She never thought about it as a kid, but after a while, she became resentful to the idea. Before her was energy, nutrition, but she could never force herself to it, and so she would rather starve.

“Everyone's got to keep living somehow.” Talia continued. “And in certain times, we need to do some things we wish we didn't have to.”

“It would still be wasted if you gave it to me.” Farrah replied.

Talia smirked. “I wasn't telling you to, I'm just trying to psych myself up to eat bugs. I'd rather not go hungry in this desolate land. My diet comes second when starving.”

Farrah looked sheepishly at her friend who was about to scoop up a portion of ground up nutrients. Talia didn't seem to mind it all that much.

Talia looked over to Farrah, poking at her one last time to see if she would bite. “As my mom once said to get us kids to eat. If you don't eat up, you might end up on someone else's dinner table. I thought it was mean to say, but it sure got stopped us from throwing it at each other.”

Hollie's mother chuckled.

Farrah looked at it, just stared at it. She held herself tight and reached out. It's not like she hadn't eaten meat before, but bugs were very unsatisfying. She laced her finger and brought it near her. Talia was a little surprised that her mother's words echoed still to this day. One taste, maybe it wouldn't be all that bad. She accepted it, placing it in her mouth and swallowing.

Unsavoury.

Their goodbyes met with a farewell, and Hollie leaving the second they were out of sight for sleep in her own bed again. They wished that they could visit again, but the cave in the middle of nowhere where they rather not return would be a little hard to find again. Farrah felt guilty of their hospitality. Also, of Talia being an opportunist and requesting service as she did. Perhaps if they could stay longer Hollie would have made a great new best friend, but the price of living off of bugs turned Farrah's stomach. She, if not obvious, left with an empty stomach.

By late mid day Farrah came upon vast planes while heading as east as she could determine. She managed to peek up above the mists and find the rising sun, then she dove down again to follow it, trying take on a little less wind. The wind was calmer, but still hindering. She would check frequently to note for a change in the direction of the breeze. For most the travel, it was head on and unfortunate.

Soon in the distance, they found themselves in an odd land, for the first time they saw a tree in the mists, it was dead, but stood tall. The land was very bright here. Surprising that the tree could not survive. Perhaps some others might still bare leaves. Soon followed more trees, and a few more yet. This land was starting to become more favourable. Still, no sign of food. Trees, but no bushes or grass, and certainly no fruit.

Farrah moved to surface to keep them on track. Talia praying each time they they would end up actually finding something out here. Each time, the ocean became more and more shallow, though it was still hard to fly down below. Being damp, the wind up top seemed frigid. Cold and hungry was not a favourable mix. Farrah regretted a lot of her travel, until now nothing seemed to go right or kick off on the right foot. As carrier and flight crew, Farrah could think only about this and the hopes she would find something.

Soon something caught their eyes, a new odd sight, a house. No place they want to stop, it gave them the creeps. Just looking at it as they passed, it's rotten wood and tattered roof; if it wasn't abandoned it should be.

More trees, more houses, and more of everything. It was hard to tell what happened here other than a land sunk down into the sea. A cliff appeared dragging them farther down, and the land rose again. Everything was mostly stable, the huge sheets of land tilted only slightly but rose closer to the surface. Finally at the peek of the new plate they found a small village. This sad place had been long since deserted. The sights they saw around here were unlike anything they could express from their homeland. Once again, everything was tattered. Even the soil and stone looked torn up decayed and morbid.

At the peek was a tower, once close enough to it, it could be distinguished as a church. The steeple was tall and flat with the following architectural designs of many other religious constructions. Out here, It would appear their deity had forsaken them. The only thing they couldn't find all the way out here were skeletons. Looking down however, a grim sight, a vast graveyard filled with empty holes.

It was possible that they might not have migrated elsewhere before the crops died, or they narrowly escaped their graves elsewhere.

“This place is so sad.” Talia spoke out.

Farrah who had just landed on the top of the tower, caught her breath. “What happened here anyway?”

“This would definitely count as shambles right?”

“I would have to say so.” Farrah replied looking down the tower. This thing was even more rickety than the prison. Everywhere she stood the stone either creaked or moved. She thought best to move away from the edge for now. One thing that was notable was the height that they were at. They could see a long distance, but yet nothing in the future. They rested, rather to say Farrah rested, Talia actually used this time to stretch her legs. Sitting on the edge, Talia couldn't help but feel uneasy. The sight as wondrous as it may be was far from a vacation resort, it looked downright decrepit, eery and disturbing. “What do you think, perfect place for a honeymoon or what?”

Farrah tittered at the remark, part of her was creeped out by it as well. Perhaps they would find more places like this ahead. It was hard to imagine any haven existing out in these damned-lands, as though the whole world had fallen to the divine will to score all outside her maiden country. Homeland was a welcome place to be, exiled or not.

Time went on, and noticeably the tide had lowered more. Now at times only peeking around the rooftops. Farrah could see well out now, but still hardly any sign of anything. Talia joined her, hoping that somewhere they would find something. Everything was still oddly whitish looking, the fog continued up to the sky and the clouds over top. Just above them was blue, the edges of the horizon were indistinguishable and vague.

“I can't see anything. Can you?” Talia asked

Farrah didn't answer, too busy trying to find something, which was taken pretty solidly as an answer. In the distance she noticed something but couldn't tell what it was. It was seemingly poking out but too small to be any kind of mass. A tall spire perhaps. “There might be something, but it's nothing like our promised haven.”

“We are going the right way, right?” Talia inquired.

“Yes, it's supposed to be on the east by the southern edge.”

“What if it, you know...”

“My father wouldn't lie about it.”

“No, I'm saying what if we passed it already?”

“It isn't that small, I know the directions might be a big vague but...” She took another good stare into the abyss. “We can't simply miss it... Can we?”

“I kind of want to go home, this place is depressing.”

“I know it is, I hate it too.” Farrah confessed.

“You know, despite the near horror experiences so far, I don't think coming out here was really all that bad. It's been an adventure for sure.” Talia mentioned blankly. “We're still alive.”

“Yeah, but... I want to keep going.”

Talia became worried again. “You know I'd die out there alone.” knowing that she couldn't do anything.

Farrah looked to her friend. She noted the grim expression, and felt shame inside for taking her out this way. “Tell you what...” Farrah bargained raising her spirits, “If we find this place, we are set, and if we can't then you can rub it in my face til the day I die.”

Talia smiled. “You know it doesn't really work like that right? We don't find it, there is guarantee we'll have another room and board. This place isn't bad per say, but, it frightens me.” Farrah went to scoop up her friend and comfort her but Talia patted her friend's hand away. “You're not going to simply hug this away...”

“Then what can I do?” Farrah asked sympathetic.

“Just... Find this place, alright. That's how you can shoo these doubts away.”

Farrah knew there was no happy alternative. Farrah picked up Talia and raised the cat to her shoulder. “Alright, I'll find it. Besides, we should probably go anyway. I hate to see who lives here still. If these shadow lands are all filled up, something ugly has got to be stalking.”

Talia quickly tucked away. She held on tightly, not for the takeoff, but out of eeriness. One crazy stunt after another, if it wasn't Farrah's flying that would be the end of this cat, it would be everything else and in between. Talia counting how many lives she still had remaining before takeoff, four she questioned. Silly kitty superstitions.

There was only one sight remaining, that was the small spires in the distance. As she climbed higher and tried to find a good view she noticed there were more of them. If she was lucky, there might be bigger one's ahead, maybe land. Down she shot picking up speed. All the flying of the last while was hard on her, but her wings were much better. Tired, but far from broken. Talia was losing faith, and it was time that Farrah made a push, she could rest once she found the island haven. Farrah was amazed at the bravery or stupidity of her father to come this far out not knowing.

As she closed into the spire, more of them appeared. They were course and dark, cracked and rough. This was unlike most any rock she ever saw. These spires were old springs of lava that once rose out, pushing, breaking, and striving to be the tallest. To Farrah, she was clueless to their actual origin. With more in sight she kept up her ambition. More passed her, Talia restoring some hope in a good outcome. Farrah starting working though her adrenaline supply, feeling the hunger work its way through her. Quickly following was a well in the world, a strange billowing of darker mist that poured out. Below, something was stirring, no one wanted to find out what it was.

All around them was the unknown, that day alone they found many new sights. If lucky, it wouldn't end with just that. Farrah made haste over the outpouring of steam, she felt horribly warm when passing over, but soon cooled having left it. Still beamed with sunlight. Finally, the last spire she could see was before her. It ended, once again to an endless abyss. Her father had a death wish, without doubt, he must have had one.

Farrah returned her thoughts to her father, it crunched her deeply under the weight of it's heel but she had to force it out. The danger those tears put her in when her sight was already faded in the mists Farrah couldn't bare the thought for even a moment if she hoped to make it out alive. Every time her mind wandered, she pulled it back in line. Farrah was determined that it would not get the better of her, there was no changing the past and she painfully forced it behind her walls.

Perhaps two hour later of flying blind over the seas she saw a sign, what once appeared to be a lump and rise in the clouds became taller and more noticeable. Soon the wind blew over, it was a south wind, sending the once was cloud into the ocean once more. Beneath it was a large landmass. Little to Farrah's attention, an even larger magnitude covered in cloud had began to thinly unveil itself. Instead She only noticed the one before her. She exclaimed happily.

“I think I found it!” Farrah cried flying into a puff of cloud. The tides out here were very uneven and at times blocked vision greatly. Finally coming out of it, Talia peered over, having finally applied her goggles to see. Talia was surprised at how well they worked. Cedric was a genius to fix them up right.

“Ha! I think I see it... But, uh, it's rather small? I mean for an island. You could hold like what, three farms and pool?”

“There is more to it.” Farrah informed. Talia Stared and focused. The wind no longer bothered her eyes but the turbulence shook her clear sight a little bit. Once she could steady herself and wipe the lenses clean again, she peered out once more. “Huh... Add four more farms and a village-fool, that does look promising. Still think it's kinda small to be the thing we are looking for.”

They got closer, the land widening up, and oddly being enveloped in thin mist for the most part. The land was far from fertile as no grass would grow on it's solid topped flats, and the veins ran far too deep. Talia retracted her settlement statement. Along this travel they found themselves in a deep valley that rose up with the land. Either side was a great distance from the other, and it's depth ran into the mists that appeared to climb up the land with them. Farrah was definitely feeling the burn of this excursion and much of the toll that it was taking on her. In the distance, she heard a noise. Metal. It was as clear as day, she knew this sound well as it usually echoed very loudly. A blacksmith hard at work doing an honest days work. Perhaps they should check it out, see if anyone knew much about a so called “haven”; which appeared less and less likely to be this ugly dead waste of ground below them.

Talia took a gander herself and noted a billow of small dark smoke coming from edge of the valley's top. Farrah locked onto it and expected some warm welcomes. When she got to the edge of the cliff she spotted an encampment, or what looked to be one anyway. Inside was a group of lizard people, sure enough the blacksmith was working and making a fine piece of iron. Two more had come out of a mineshaft, and three sat around a dead campfire drinking. Farrah was about the climb up to meet them but Talia halted her. “I don't like the looks of these guys.” She said trying to poke Farrah back down.

“I'm sure not everyone of them are bad.”

“That's not what I mean.” Talia whispered retracting herself from their vision. She got right beside Farrah and pointed out to the banners. “Those things look tribal.”

“So their native?” Farrah asked confused.

Talia was pointing at some dyed cloth that hung down. It was ratty and woven out of some plant fibre. In the centre it bore a strange marking “They look like their some pretty tough fellas too...”

“So, are they thugs then?” Still not getting the point

Talia finally spelled it out. “They look like warriors. Probably about to head to war, or prepare for it. They don't like outsiders poking around, even if they aren't up to something. Mining is serious business.”

“So, we let them be?” Farrah asked disappointed.

“Well, that, and we keep an eye out for the rest of the locals. Hollie's mother said the people down here are in desperate needs of food. You see a group together, you know they are doing well whatever they are doing.” Farrah was about to back away and head off. She gestured for Talia to hop on be was then told otherwise. “I have a horrible idea.”

“Oh no, Talia...” Farrah replied in a worried tone and expression

“Whoa, hearing that from you? Welcome to my world.” She said starting to grin. “You sit tight. I got this.”

Talia flew around, looking for an in. Farrah didn't like having no idea what Talia was up to, starting to wonder even more what she put her little friend though. Nimble, sly, sneaky. The master once again sprang into action. Past the tents, into the tents, Farrah lost track of Talia and where she went. Not long after a brave and foolish small winged packrat came back with something big and round in her hands. She plopped down the edge of the cliff out of sight, just over the lip and made her way along it back to her friend unseen.

“You stole that?” Farrah asked ashamed.

“Don't fret it, they had plenty in that storage box. Funny thing about these people, they don't have locks on their things.”

“But why?”

“Well duh, you see me eating it? It's for you.”

Farrah looked at it guiltily, then back up to Talia's smug and overjoyed expression. “Why are you so proud of taking it?”

“Don't you get it?” Talia ecstatically explained. “It's an apple. It's fruit. That means somewhere around here there are actual trees. This could prove that we are at the doorstep of our haven afterall!”

“Shh!” Farrah hushed, looking up to notice someone taking attention. She took the apple, and Talia too right before dropping off the cliff and flying away, knowing she was probably spotted. “I still don't feel right taking this.”

“If we get to this haven place and we find more of them then we can drop them a whole basket of these things, but you need your strength.”

Farrah smiled, she understood what the apple meant, just a bit farther and they might arrive at the promised land.

Normally birds have a hard time eating apples. Farrah had less trouble but was very slowly. The juice that ran out of it poured down her beak and guiltily into the feathers along her neck. Small little pecks of flesh could be taken but no big bites. She had no teeth but was far from hindered as her hunger took over, hardly taking time to breath. It wasn't finely chewed out, but she could finish the job later. If anything, the liquid was more refreshing as she tiresomely dried herself, breathing heavily in her frenzy of eating. One apple was hardly enough to fill her, but it was all the small cat could carry.

“You think I'm getting good at this sneaking thing?” Talia asked

“I don't think you should be this good.”

“I'll take that as a compliment.” Talia said sticking out her tongue.

“Thank you... I appreciate it. Just as much as I regret it.”

“In tough times, you got to do what you need to survive right? The fact you are guilty means you still have a heart.” Talia smiled earnestly

“And you?”

“I don't show it, but I am... But if you grew up around my brothers, possession means jack. Big families you know.”

Farrah laughed. She never had any siblings, she wished she had, but the way Talia talked about hers made her glad she didn't.

They once again made headway. The land dipped, still visible but fell under a blanket of smog. Before them was a big open clearing that sourced this rolling mist. There was a stream that ran down indicating a large land for it to run from. It was dirty, cloudy, and smelled funny. Then again, lots of things around here smelled funny, and was actually uncomfortably warmer than anywhere else. There were springs that steamed and one that bubbled but did not boil. Farrah didn't think that she would be getting any clean drink before she would have to take off again at this rate. Just a bit longer and she would never have to worry about that again. Talia tested the waters. “Well, it's warm.”

Farrah did find a natural hot spring once before. She enjoyed it, but here, here it was far too hot. Scolding hot in some ponds. In others just barely unbearable. Farrah reminded. “You figure we'll ever find another hot spring like that one?”

“The one with all the mosquitoes? I hope not.” Talia quivered.

“You think there is one in the haven?”

“Ha!” Talia shouted. “One? Nah... Probably ten or twenty. I'm starting to like this idea all of the sudden. This place is ugly, creepy, and downright depressing... But I'm okay with that for now. We found an apple, and where there are apples... It's got to be at least nicer there than it is here.”

Farah smiled. She was about to take off but she heard something behind her. She turned around but nothing was there. Talia turned around too. “You...” Talia began, “You heard that too didn't you.”

Farah nodded and said “It sounded like something moving in the water.”

“Probably best we get out of here before we find out what it is.”

Farah nodded. She got ready to take flight but was stopped by the rising of something or someone from the spring. They heard a sweet voice, like candied juice or cider. A person had emerged. They couldn't figure out what it was, just two arm and a wavy head. The voice came from all around them rather than from the source. Talia heard something else, something unsettling. Farrah went closer to see what it was.

“Is that smart?” Talia asked.

“If it's in the water, it can't fly out to catch me, at least not outrun me. I'm curious.” Farrah said enchanted.

“I'm over here.” The sweet voice called “Come in to the spring, the water is nice and warm for you.”

“No thank you.” Farrah replied. “I can't endure the heat.” Shaking herself awake

“Party pooper, party pooper, come and play, I'm lonely here all the time.”

“She's a tad eccentric” Talia muttered, trying to make out what it was.

Farah got closer and closer, but as she did Talia's ears heard the deep noise of movement again, it hit a certain frequency that pounded in the poor cat ears that heard it. The figure waved and waved, but Talia was done looking at it, she was cautious about something else. She peeked out from Farrah's hair to have her own fur turn snow white and stand so far on edge you could mistake her for a porcupine with a mohawk. “FARRAH! BEHIND YOU!”

Farah quickly turned to face the same horror. It was a long woman who had stopped, and her ghastly face turned into one of sad pity. Her body was shelled and each foot of her body was a set of legs. Not knowing what she was, they were frightened, and not just because of it's massive unbelievable size. This centipede pulled her tail in from the other pool, and stopped her charade then her face turned to a distasteful one. “Well,” it said “My fun is over I suppose.”

Farah could barely respond to it. “Clever trick” Talia thought to herself “Very convincing... Frightening.” The centipede woman appeared to be somewhat classy about loosing her disguise. In holding one hand before her like she were holding up her slanted head, she congratulated them,

clapping many of her feet together.

“I didn't suppose you had a friend attached to your hair, touche.”

“You... Tried to sneak up and eat me didn't you?” Farrah finally stood up.

“Well, no shame in hiding it, yes. Though I do say, I think I would have kept you around for a while... You are rather cute.”

Talia rolled her eyes. “Why are you people always creepy?”

This struck a nerve and the woman lost her elegant composure. “I'm not sure this is a good time to be sassy Talia.” Farrah remarked, turning tail and flying away as quickly as she could. The centipede woman taking hot pursuit without hesitation.

“You however little one, are not cute at all.” The woman scowled.

“Definitely a bad time to insult her!” Farrah reinstated behind her.

She took quick haste to fly up the hill, but escaping this way proved to be far too slow having to move uphill. The centipede was swift and caught up instantly. Farrah quickly turning zipped past her going back down and out from the way she came. The woman turned over exposing her legs and tried to whip her massive body to grab hold of Farrah, but the bird rolled to the side and picked up tremendous speed. They took one of the valleys which appeared to exit somewhere that they could easily gain the altitude to escape the tall but ultimately earth bound beast. Soon they realized that the edge of it actually lead to a flat plate and the only escape was instead to keep moving.

Talia kept an eye on the six, but the woman was nowhere to be seen. “Scratch that, I see her.” Talia tattled. Over the hills the centipede climbed and poured down like quicksilver, twisting off of each imperfection in the rock like she were liquid. “Farrah, she's coming from the right!” The centipede had incredible speed, and worse yet she knew the land well. Quickly the monster took advantage of this fact and started to force Farrah to turn into a crevice. Though it got tight, it opened up into a much larger one. The centipede turning each corner by leaping from one side of the opening to the other and running it with the wind.

In front was a wall, a dead end. No doubt intended as she was well acquainted with her home. A predator skilled well beyond her own means. Farrah tried to pick up speed for all she could muster. She was well tapping into all her adrenaline reserves now, and forced herself to the top of the wall but not in time. She scampered against it in a fine crack that the woman could not fit though, but only mere meters away. Farrah tried to move up by limb, having no room to flap her wings.

“It's only a matter of time, you are trapped” Tall dark and dangerous slithered up the crack. “But if I really wanted to I could easily reach you from inside there.”

“Saaay,” Talia chummed, “What is your name?”

“What a wonderful time to ask.” She said maliciously, “It would be Matilda Tou Dawn.”

“That's a nice name, mine is Talia, and this is...” Talia was interrupted

“I don't care about your name, I rather not refer to you in the future other than as the rude one that didn't last much more than a few moments.”

“Oh come on, I'm barely a grub. Farrah's got plenty more meat on her than I do.”

“TALIA!” Farrah exclaimed. “This isn't the time to be selling me out!”

“I don't care if you are an elephant or a bump on a log,” Matilda informed “I don't take kindly be being called creepy by strangers.”

“You would have eaten us either way and you know it.” Talia grimaced

“Talia, I'm running out of room here!” Farrah frantically stated, knowing even reaching the top, she would no longer be in protection. Farrah had to come up with something, Talia could only stall for so long.

“Maybe I should end your struggle and just give you a hug, huh?” Matilda beckoned in velvet tongue, reaching out with her many arms.

Farrah was close enough to the top to make it if she only had just a little push. The feet came closer and closer, menacing death pincers, all uncountable of them. In a leap of faith, Farrah did something unthinkable. She leaped from the rock wall and straight for Matilda's arms.

“Oh,” Matilda said happily “You've come to your senses have you? It's been forever since I had a bird, you are quite the specimen. I might just keep you a while after all. I am a fine collector of sorts.”

Farrah latched on and started feeling Matilda all over. Even reaching up and around the carapace, trying to tickle.

“Honey.” The woman said. “I didn't think you were that kind of person. When I said you were cute, I meant you were very helpless, like a babAGH!”

Farrah managed to find the area under the centipede's shell where the flesh existed, and rammed her claws into there causing Matilda to cringe. Farrah wrapped around to Matilda's back and rode her like Talia would, making sure the pinch the back by the top of the neck. The centipede took to the top of the cliff to roll over to crush Farrah on a flat surface. Farrah taking the whole ride for free leaped off before Matilda could attempt to finish her. She didn't even realize Farrah taking off, the bird was swift and agile, quickly taking to the sky straight up. Matilda could catch up easily, but if Farrah were too high, she might lose the woman in the clouds. Like a child's dream, the clouds were so high up. They seemed out of reach but whatever it would take to escape, that is what would have to happen.

It would happen, but Matilda once again returned to the hunt, and started to tower up. She had reached fifty feet easily, and Farrah only merely thirty five. Diving down again, all options were out. The road became rocky, narrowly dodging her fast competitor. “Left.” Talia called. “Right.” “Down!”

“Down?” Farrah questioned. The woman shot from above. Farrah deeking left to Talia's will. Ahead was another valley, one that went down instead. Narrow, but the more narrow the better. Any small crevice would be suffice. On the land Farrah was useless, in the air was impossible to get to.

“You are really testing my patients.” Matilda scowled

“That mean's you are loosing” Talia remarked. Farrah only pushed forward, not able to reprimand Talia for enticing Matilda's wrath. Besides, her main focus now was trying not to flying into the rock while she was tired, and exhausted. Vision became more blurry as she was reaching her limit. The cave opened up more, as Matilda came to visit. Near the end, there was a small gap. Water started to run in and out. Whatever way they were going, it seemed to have a cliff. Outside was bright, dangerously bright. Farrah had to pay all of her attention to this one moment squeezing through. “She's on our tail.” Talia reminded.

A moment went by, each bearing a new change in faith. The first happening just before the exit, what would happen if she missed. Farrah thought but and couldn't bare it, knowing it would jinx her if she did. The second was realizing she was perfectly on track with her target. She was flying sideways to cut through the crack, Keeping left and right was like trying to cut wood with a crooked saw, always bending with pressure. Somehow, she kept it perfect. These moments were slowly passing, each thought ran so fast, and the world so slow that she could calculate it twice in the single moment of passing doubt. The third change however was realizing that by flying sideways, she was falling and dangerously close to the ground. She could not look beneath her for sight on Matilda, but felt that Talia sure had a tight grip on Farrah's neck all of the sudden. The moment came, Farrah lost room for her wings as her hand touched the ground. She pulled it in and hoped she would make the gap as a missile.

Crash! The cliffside shattered. Farrah brazing the bottom with her shoulder, free fell out and into an open space. Below her was blinding, green, lush forest. Over a hundred feet below. Matilda, flying behind. Farrah unclenched herself and broke off of the trouble veering right, and gliding the rock side. She looked back to see her enemy tumble and fall quivering into the forest below. Talia screamed. “YES! YES! YES! IN YOUR FACE YOU UGLY COW!” No offence to any cows who would be present at the time. This also followed some profanity Farrah had never heard before, which by the sounds of it, 'Ill-spirited' would have come off as a child's description of her friend's filthy, fowl mouth.

Below was all the fresh greenery and as abundant of water as they could ever ask for. In the midst all the dark lands, the barren lands, and all the trials up til now bestowed a wonderland; at long last what could only be described as a haven. A valley that went beyond their ability to see. In the distance, a large mountain, and before that, nothing short of awe.

Chapter 8: Haven

Below them, all around them, the gateway had opened up to all their desires. Matilda was well out of the picture, as long as they closed the game out of sight, and stayed in the trees. They took to a higher platform, well above the crash site, and followed a upstream into a large pool that fed it. Here they stopped and rested. Farrah was very weak, shaking from head to toe. All her adrenaline had started to wear off and she was left cold. Talia couldn't help but jitter herself. She was high on the thrill of almost touching Matilda's breath in their nit and tuck escape. Petrified at first, but now exuberantly awakened. She couldn't stop laughing to herself.

“You crazy, crazy girl.” Talia astounded, completely ecstatic. “You took us out all this way past fire and brimstone and if I could guess I would swear that was exactly what we were walking on. All in hopes of a some illusive haven you only briefly read in a dying man's cell? What a crazy, crazy girl you are.”

Farrah brazed Talia's head with the feathers of her wings still unable to really speak herself. She didn't even mind the taste of the water, which was tracing sulphur and other impurities. Talia danced about, happy as a lark. Though, not all larks are happy people, Talia was exceptionally blessed. Farrah gasped for air, having just downed half a litre of water and cleansing her throat. She fell down and collapsed, still panting and recovering. “Never again...” She forced out, having issues talking.

“Never again? Why would we even need to? We're here, we actually made it, you did it Farrah!”

“Never...” Taking time to breath, rolling her head back to face the sky, and swallowing.
“Again...”

Farrah laid there for a while. A long while. Time went on, and Talia calmed down, however it did not stop her curious nature from unfolding all over the pond and every nook and cranny that it held secret. The small cat plopped down beside her best friend and stared off into the pond. “What else do you suppose is out there?” Talia asked, waging her feet against the sand.

“I couldn't say.” Farrah rolled over.

“Everything here is really green. The trees are tall and the leafs are massive. You think they have cool places? Because it's kinda hot here.”

“I don't care if it's hot, I don't have to do anything.” Farrah replied sitting up. “You think they have cleaner water, because I rather not bath in that pond.”

“Yeah, the water does smell like someone heated it themselves.” Talia admitted. All seemed fine, except for the odd scuffle in the distance. She noticed it before but disregarded it as it went away, too small to be any trouble. Probably a forager out for berries and other fruit. She looked out for it, but couldn't seem to find where it came from. Out of the corner of her eye she saw a figure walk out from the bush to her right. He was tall, bird, and carried with him a bow and quiver. This despite the first theory was not a forager. Talia nudged Farrah, and “pst” her to her right.

Farrah looked over to notice the man walking up to them while keeping along the waters edge. Farrah was oddly stunned. She had never seen a winged folk of his type before with feathers so brown they could make pale a deep forest tree root, his eyes glistened. He had freckles of light and dark that splotched his side and wings with a dark tan inside that tipped the outer edge his fans. He was bold, tight bellied and strong chest and arms. The muscles developed by year of archery and bushwhacking. His beak had one scar along the side where it had been scraped, probably in a flying accident. By the time Farrah was done checking out the stranger, she realized he had drawn his bow and began to point it at her. "Whao, whao, we're not here to cause any harm!" Farrah flustered, holding her arms in front of her.

The man remained quiet, moving closer, and kneeling down to draw back farther on his bow. "Hey!" Talia shouted, "Let's not get irrational here!" but nothing stopped the man from veering down his sights onto her vitals.

Finally he spoke. His voice like smooth amber, however course and serious. "Girl, You need to come with me."

"That's fine just don't shoot!" Farrah requested. In an instant he pulled his aim up and directed it to behind her letting the arrow take flight.

"RUN!" He exclaimed taking her hand, and dragging her.

Talia flying up to meet them, She looked into the woods to where the arrow had landed only to panic "Oh crud!" She exclaimed. "This is bad, this is really bad!" Farrah looked behind to see what Talia was complaining about saw a strange creature in the trees. "Matilda is back! And this time she looks more angry than before, now she's a unicorn!"

The remark made little sense, and wouldn't for some time. "A single arrow to the head won't kill that beast." The man replied. He dragged them into the woods on foot. It was the safest, and miraculously it really great to hinder the raging monster behind them. They did not stop however. Matilda could weave through the trees, however slowly, but certainly threateningly. Over logs and dodging trees. Farrah kept speed with the strange man as, Talia was flying just fast enough to keep up. By the time she finally caught up and docked on Farrah's harbour, they fell into a crevice.

"Oh, darn it all!" Talia exclaimed.

"In here." The man requested, motioning Farrah into a cavern. Farrah fumbled her landing and looked up to see Matilda fly over top, missing the crack in the ground. Her massive body made small tremors and shook down dirt from above. The sound was enough to frighten anyone. Farrah returned to her feet, following the man's beckon. Matilda then returning to the crevice to find the bowman ducking into a hole that was too small for her to fit. She was enraged even further.

Matilda had entered someone else's backyard but still craved revenge. Her new competition was the strange man who had outsmarted her. Perhaps she should have made the lunge at first sight of Farrah. Now it was too late, but no matter, the great Matilda could look for another exit. Her head games turned rash and thoughtless, searing a migraine against a shattered pride.

"Are you okay?" He asked.

“I think so, I didn't expect to fall like that.” Farrah replied.

“And no one could wait for me!?” Talia barked.

“Gregory the hunter, at your service!” The man announced gentlemanly.

“I'm sorry, I didn't have time to stop while we were being chased.” Farrah answered Talia, ignoring Gregory's announcement.

“You could have slowed down, I was right behind you!” Talia plopped down next to a rock. “I think I'm down to 3 lives now. I think that's probably also how many I've lost just today.”

“I have to know.” Farrah asked turning to her hero who was now sitting bow in lap “Why did you aim at me?”

Gregory replied confidently. “To make your predator think I was going to take you instead. Most of them are opportunists, if they see a fight, they'll wait until the end and take the hunter along with the prize. I'm sorry I had to scare you like that... If I couldn't get close enough to you, I don't think I could have saved you.”

“Okay pal,” Talia interrupted “Very glad you saved our tail back there, but how did you know to show up at the right time?”

He laughed and stated. “I heard the loud noise of that beast crashing though the cliff from across the valley and I went to check it out. I just so happened to have caught her on you.”

“Pretty lucky timing, too lucky... No, this is how I figure it happened.” Talia explained. “That was you I heard earlier poking around and when you saw us you just sat there peeping until you noticed big ugly in behind.” Talia said. A strange echo from above rattled the ground as the beast scowered for another entrance. Talia pointed up.

“Peep? No!” Gregory defended, “Besides, it would be rude of me to do so to such a fair lady as yourselves while you were undressed.”

Talia narrowed her eyes, and smiled. “A confession?” Looking at the man, she stared at the loincloth he wore and continued. “You ain't wearing much either.”

He sat back and assumed a relaxed composure. “Alright, you got me.” Gregory admitted, bracing his arms against his neck. “I didn't want to interrupt you two, least not until I saw what caused all that ruckus behind you two. That thing I could not let get you.”

“Thank you by the way.” Talia finally thanked.

“Now, while she is scurrying around up top, I should wait for her to calm down and take the other exit. Just so she gives up looking for it and guards this one.”

“Who say's she didn't find the other?”

“Well, for one it's buried in bushes. And two it's almost impossible to find once you exit. If we

are lucky, we should be able to just walk out and leave completely unnoticed.”

“You know this place very well, don't you?” Farrah asked. Having been staring at Gregory for the last little while.

“Yes.” Gregory replied. “These are my stomping ground, though to be honest, I don't know them all as well as I should. This cavern and the way back however I knew quite well. It was fortunate I found you there and not at the cliff basin along the outer edge.” He seemed more earnest now, showing his flaws; his voice now smooth and natural. “Perhaps when I get you back to my place I can show you around.”

“Sure, that would be great.” Farrah exclaimed, finally quite uplifted to be around folk again who honestly saw her as anyone else. “Where do you live anyway?”

Talia rolled her eyes, “Don't tell me that you are actually falling for this guy, are you?”

Gregory laughed. He sat there returning his bow to his backside and rose to his feet still chuckling to himself. “Well, if you are, I stopped trying a while ago. Come on. Our unicorn friend is bound to return to this entrance when she's tired of looking for the other one.”

Farrah was quick to her feet to leave this place, and return to peaceful resting where danger was no longer lurking eerily behind her. Talia sat on her shoulder, The small cat did little to impair her friend even in her tired state. She figured Farrah's strength came from the cute satchel of feathers walking in front of her. Talia figured it was a matter of time, maybe Farrah should learn herself the joys of young men as Talia did; though in thinking, maybe this guy would be tolerable. It would be an easy guess that Talia's experiences had left her cold on the subject.

The cave twisted and turned, and in some places it got gravely narrow. Farrah could just fit through some of the places. It was a crazy mess, but even though there was nowhere to really get lost it didn't mean they weren't blind. Almost all light was missing, they went by feel and the memory of their brave hero. “Be careful” Gregory informed. Past the bend he continued “This part of the journey got to me once. I got stuck here for a long while until I figured it out.”

Talia took flight, and making sure not to accidentally get anyone, she proceeded to offer assistance. A dim, light came forth, slowly turning brighter. Gregory turned himself to face the odd light and was surprised. “Don't panic.” Talia informed, “It's just me, just my tail.” She said grabbing it and pulling it out into the open. “See?”

“How is that... Possible?” Gregory asked enchanted.

“It don't last forever bub, I suggest you find that exit so we're not stuck here for hours.”

“It's right here, I know it by heart now, you can put the light away.”

“I'm sorry.” Talia said apologetically, turning the tone of voice to how she actually felt “Was it pride, or were you just scared of it? Cause, I thought it was a pretty good idea.”

“Talia, hackles down.” Farrah intervened. “Sorry, she gets a little protective.”

Talia went to licking herself innocently

“Then you have a good friend.” Gregory answered.

“Best... Friend.” Talia finished.

“Where is the exit?” Farrah asked putting them back on track.

Gregory, still in the dim light of Talia's tail managed to point to the wall. In it was a fold where it took a one hundred and sixty five degree bend backwards up a two foot ledge. Down the corridor and over the large steps they managed to see light, the exit was in sight now. Standing below they saw many bushes and a lip that shot inward. It appeared to be a tight squeeze, but definitely well hidden. Gregory turned and motioned to shh them as he ascended to the top. Squeezing out, he looked around and beckoned Farrah and Talia to follow.

Outside was an enclosed clearing from the trees that was overrun with bushes of many varieties stagnant in the waves of light breaching the canopy. Gregory held Farrah's hand and pulled her along to communicate silently. He took any opportunity to do so. Really though, Talia saw through it, she had to give him one thing, he knew his stuff. Farrah falling into it but at least she was having a good time, even though she was too exhausted to think for herself.

Down the path between two plates was a natural dirt road made by sliding mud, now mostly bare rock, it was the first steps to finding their new home. Once sufficiently far away they took flight until the path took them to a rapid flowing creek with thick tree guardrails. The creek ran steep down the hill, cascading a cool brisk aura of fresh water. Gregory smiled and tested Farrah. He took the initiative and flew over her, rolling in the air and took the creek down. Falling down the rapids on his back, he motioned to Farrah, and flipped around to resume flight. Gregory narrowly almost skinned himself upon recovering, but Farrah didn't hesitate, she dove in to take him up on the offer. This once smooth escape turned into a white water race through the woods.

Farrah easily caught up to Gregory who was holding back, but he took it a step farther and accelerated. Farrah quick to match. She then tried to pick the speed up even more but could only barely surpass her limit. Gregory was impressed. A skilled flyer she appeared to be, gaining much respect as the rapids became violent and the rocks that the river ran became obstacles. Each dodge was fluent, each tree becoming more of a tunnel, each breath becoming more and more exhilarating. A cliff turned the stream into a bend with an island tree in it's pool, quick to follow Farrah turned on a dime. Farrah quickly embraced the ride, the race became a celebration of her free spirit. Talia, panicking as always with the unbelievable spinning.

“Always with the spinning with this one, always with the spinning!” Talia retorted, unheard.

Farrah spun about, slowly, gliding on her back and returning upright. Gregory was at an ends, he was being trumped by a crazier flyer than himself, and he thought he was pretty gutsy. Farrah on the other hand was fearless, and precise. Each rotation was a perfect movement, smooth as could be. She embraced the feeling of the wind, cutting through it, and defying the gravity that held her down. Seeming perfection, grace, and just a little more crazy than he was comfortable with. A fish that was a little too out of his league to catch, but that wouldn't stop him from trying. What a strange creature she was, rare too. If she were to come home, she would be the talk of the grove. Perhaps it was best that no one would be able to keep up with her. Without even knowing it, Farrah was well beyond his speed. A

sparrow in the body of a majestic black white and blue masterpiece. She resembled a falling leaf in the breeze, floating and swirling without hinder.

At the bottom of the stream, it broke into a lake, a wide lake in fact. In the distance was a tall hill and a bridge connecting it to another cliff. The wide beach curled along the vast space. Sight of settlement and a small dock lined the cloud speckled getaway bay and the rest was surrounded by dense forest. Farrah skidded along the water, often checking to see if Talia was still attached. Talia pulled out to see the lake, looking back to guard their trail of anyone or anything following them. The clouds pulled off lighting the glitter ocean for a while before dimming down again. For once, the air was welcoming to the cat's prude nose.

Past the lake, a narrow pass through the hills ahead lead them to a ravine that they crossed on foot. The road climbed higher until they came upon probably the greatest sight of all. The path opened on the side of a cliff to a giant bowl. The trees up until now were tall and massive but now they met the true elders of the land. Towers could not compare to the ancient woods that held the land together. Dozens of trees could be seen, their roots lacing a marsh of healthy vegetation. The wide valley was massive and made them feel nervously small in comparison. Farrah wondered if this was what it was like to be a bug. Turning along the cliff side they noticed more of this haven, and closest to them, a cliff side running two streams off of it along the side of a massive tree. This titan was dug into the cliff and could be accessed by simply walking up to it. A door into the giant was carved on the cliff's height at the end of the path. Inside between two sets of curtains a settlement built.

Talia poked her head out to see what the commotion was about. The walking had bored her into a nap, but awaking she too shot up at the sight as she announced. "My great hallowed Messiah! These things are frik'n nuts!"

Farrah chuckled at the response. "I know, I know. Aren't they beautiful?"

"Yes they are," Gregory answered "This is our home. All that you see before you is our wonderland. We have ample supply of food year 'round, always something new to see, and the kids will always keep you busy because they are always bored."

Talia narrowed her eyes. "Kids, why must it be kids, bored kids no less." she muttered. "Always with the unpredictability, the goobers, and the funny faces."

The path along the cliff side flattened and widened into the plateau that dug into the tree. Flowers adorn the edges in all varieties along the dirt road. The cliffs too were laced as vines scaled the walls and the lilies bloomed henceforth. Life had sprang off the edge to the ground below, all over voices could be heard. As Farrah and Talia looked up, they could notice houses built into the treetops. The canopy above was filled with walkways and houses hung, built on, dug in, and anyway they could fit them. Except for this one in front of them. It's only construction was midway, lone to one occupancy.

"I could get used to this." Farrah uttered.

"It's very homely, I assure you, everyone is all so friendly." Gregory informed. "Besides, there is someone I want you to meet. Rather, everyone meets. She's our elder. Though old Leanna might not be much of the spry young gal she used to be, she is a master of making people feel at ease. Everyone looks up to her for support."

“Sounds like a nice gal.” Talia remarked

“Come inside...” Lifting the curtain out of the way, Farrah walked in carrying her friend, and soon following Gregory. “Lady Leanna... Lady Leanna.” He called

“There is no need to be formal.” Replied an old voice “I told you many times, just Leanna is fine.”

“I brought visitors. Quite special ones at that.”

“We're not really all that special.” Farrah said on her behalf.

“No, I'm pretty sure I'm special.” Talia added.

Out from the corner of the room behind a few objects was a seating area in which the old lady came form. Many little chairs sat there along side bookshelves as though to seat a kindergarten of young listeners. The Lady Leanna was a dark figure, rather, quite black all over, with white tipped wings, tail, lit face, and bossom. Along her sides were blue sheens that shined, and a long beak that found a way to droop with age. Farrah's eyes lit up. Talia couldn't hold herself in when she saw her. “Farrah... It's... It's one of your kind. It's another magpie.”

The elder looked on them and smiled. Her eyes lit the same as though to know the other, yet somehow they had never met. Farrah was almost speechless. Leanna came up to Farrah, inspecting her, lifting a wing and then wiping the hair from the young girl's one covered eye. Leanna smiled and taking a her hand to Farrah's collarbone she asked “You are certainly not from here, how far had you come young one?”

Farrah was still hard of speech. She was flustering inside, a hurricane of excitement building, just waiting to open her release valve. This was certainly the place, untouched and without prejudice. A home. A new life.

“Hello, anyone in there?” Lady Leanna asked.

“Yes!...” Farrah responded promptly.

“Good, now what is your name? Where are you from? Don't leave me waiting, I don't have all that much longer left in me.”

“I'm sorry,” Farrah replied. “I'm Farrah.” She stood there for a moment remembering the other part of the question.

“And where you are form?”

“Home, I mean, the homeland.”

“You don't mean all the way from the west do you?” Leanna inquired fearfully. Farrah took a moment to remember her directions on a map, then quickly nodded. “You have been a long way from home. I hear that bridging from here, the lands have been warring with another, and so young to travel them... How did you know what to find?”

“My father told me, well... He wrote about it.” Farrah announced, starting to feel the burden of mentioning him

Leanna became quiet, her age had taken more out of her to think than it did in her youth. “Not many outsiders have come this far, nor decided to leave given their journey across the shadow downs. Who is this father of yours?”

“Daven... Daven Shaleen.”

Lady Leanna paused, she shut her eyes and smiled. “I should have known.” opening them again. “I should have known you would be his daughter.”

Farrah's world opened up with these words. She became hyper, nervous, stuttering at her words. “T-then, you kn-n-now him?”

Gregory was just as shocked to hear what he heard. “Yeah...” He answered. “Everyone here knew your father. No one can forget him.”

Farrah turned to Gregory in aw. “You, knew him?” She asked.

“Not personally,” He replied “I saw him many times, but my father was the one who really knew him.”

“Yes.” Leanna continued. “He was a spry one he was, gave me a run for my money to keep up with him. I miss the days of my youth, but I will never forget our friendship. He left to return home. He came again said he had a family. The last time I saw him was nine years ago. How is he doing? Where is he?”

Farrah paused, but couldn't stop the shaking. Now, bad vibes were billowing in her stomach. “Oooh.” Talia uttered. “That's not going to go over too well.”

Everyone turned to the little cat on Farrah's shoulder. Gregory was the first to break the silence. “What the heck do you mean?!”

Leanna held Farrah's hand up, looking into her then calmly retracted asking sombrely. “Yes... What do you mean?” Catching a whim of the reality.

Farrah couldn't give the news, she didn't want to accept the fact even now. She had all the time to come to terms with it but never the heart to face it. She was far too emotional to feel capable of surviving such a flood of tears a second time.

Talia figured Farrah couldn't handle saying anything, and the cat's little comment would end up forcing her to answer the rest in her stead. Talia sighed. “Well, as you can imagine... It's not such a happy ending.”

“What happened?” Leanna asked, “Last he said was homeland was in unrest.”

Talia felt saddened by having to give the news. Everyone was taken by the loss of Daven, most

of all was Farrah, and she saw the pain it gave her. “A long time ago some things happened, people got upset, stormed the castle, took the throne, and now all magpies are considered exiled from existence.”

Gregory's eyes shot. He could barely hold the pit in his stomach. “Exi...”

“So it happened then...” Leanna bleakly hollowed. “And you... Farrah, what happened to you?”

Farrah couldn't answer, holding back gates of the last eight years and of the last few days. She wandered over to the nearest wall and collapsed, shutting everything out. Talia, comforting her.

“I think we've asked too much...” Leanna stated. “She will need time.” She went to Gregory and held his hand and followed him out to talk privately. “I will watch over her and make her well. I suggest you make the most of your time. Come back in a while, she will want to see you again, I'm sure.”

“I wish there was more I could do... I felt sad for myself, but I didn't think about how she...”

“Shh, it's alright. I imagined she too would have come to terms with this, but we all need time.”

“Are you alright Leanna?”

“Of course. I've seen many die before me, many friends of old age, and other not as lucky. I'm sad, but it is life. We must make loving memory his loss, he would rather be known for the joy he has given us than in grief”

“Indeed...” Gregory understood.

“Carry on... I'll see you in a while. I myself am one too many people to be around her.”

“I'll give her some space.”

Gregory left, he headed somewhere unknown, a place he went in times to think. Though he never knew Daven well, he had many fond memories of him and his father did too. By the signs of things, fate was far from favourable.

Leanna took to the poor weeping youth and comforted her with a blanket, then left.

“You know, you are a bit of a loose cannon at times right?” Talia said. “Too much load to take, and you are so unstable at times... Oh, go on, let it out.” She consoled “You've held it in ever since we left homeland.”

Farrah slowly let open the dams, but couldn't hold it and the rest came flowing out. After a while Leanna came back with a cup in hand, and steam rising from it. “I brought you some tea. Please drink it, It'll help you feel better.”

After a while Talia let Farrah sort things out herself and turned to Leanna who was outside. She held a bracelet made of vines, pondering on it, sitting in her favourite chair. “You could have...” Leanna muttered, Talia hearing it clearly beside her.

“So, any bit curious to what I am?” Talia asked, trying to lift at least one person's spirits. “Everyone does...” She flew around to try and more face the elder.

Leanna turned slowly to the little creature landing on the chairs arm. “But I suppose it was inevitable, wasn't it...”

“Oh... Not you too...” Talia lamented.

“No, I'm fine. Just going over old memories. It's all we have.”

“I can see that. What's this thing anyway?” Talia asked pointing to the bracelet.

“It's something Daven made. He said he was never good at making crafts because he didn't have the patients for it, but I have to say this looks pretty good. He'd never believe me though.” She took a moment longer with the item before setting it aside. “You are wise to know when to distract someone. So, what are you?”

“I don't really know, we have a weird name for it but that wasn't really the point. I don't know, I was just waiting for my grand welcoming too... Before everything turned sour. Sorry for opening my mouth.”

“No one is happy to hear of the loss of another, but it is unavoidable. She will need to deal with this in time.”

“If you want, I can get you up to speed.”

“No, I couldn't.” Leanna said looking off to Farrah. “It's her story, she should be the one to tell it when she is ready.”

“Yeeeah, I get that but, I can at least get you caught up with the politics. At least what I understand of it.”

Talia tried her most to explain the events of the kingdom's fall. The exile, and even spoiled a few parts about the imprisonment. Leanna understood, she was empathetic more than anything, she figured something bad would happen in homeland eventually, but it never really was *'her'* homeland.

“Long ago...” Leanna explained “I was born here, my mother was a brave and adventurous woman. Back then the shadow downs were much nicer places to travel. She settled here, liking it a lot. There was one other magpie, though he was a grump and bitter old coot they eventually got together. I don't know how my mother put up with him. He had been there before the cataclysm... How he could be upset living here was beyond me. Ever since we were made an island, no one has had the desire to leave; though some did they soon found their way back or couldn't. I've thought about leaving once or twice, but I am far to frail now, and my wings can barely lift me. I don't dream of your homeland any longer.”

“Don't blame you, ain't much to see except pine trees and the same stuff you got here... Just a lot less of it.”

Leanna smiled and remarked “Maybe when I become a ghost and haunt everyone, I might have

the opportunity to check it out. Not much an *exile* can do about a wondering spirit.”

Leanna came back inside to find Farrah who had finally quieted down. Her head was slack and leaning forward. The blanket wrapped her waist and thighs was discordantly tussled and showed great unrest. Her tears stopped, but her face pale and wet.

“How are you doing deary” Leanna asked, kneeling down to lift Farrah's head. As expected, she didn't want to speak. Leanna sat down beside Farrah, and Talia moved in too. “It's sad news for me too. Not much can be done about it now, all we can do is let him rest at ease and remember the great things he's done.”

“But it hurts...” Farrah mumbled.

“It hurts for a little while, but it can hurt for a whole lifetime left in misery. Let him bring you joy, even in passing.” Farrah didn't know how. This was a strange concept, one she never heard of. Finding joy in one's death seemed evil and disrespectful. Leanna tried to convince her more and explained how simple it was. “When you think back on him, you won't remember the pain of his loss, only the love you have. Most can't see that until they are my age, so don't worry if you can't get your mind around it... The important thing is to never give into it. Life is too short to live in loss.”

Leanna picked up the blanket around Farrah's waist and held it up and placed it on her shoulder. Reaching around the youth, she held on and shared her body heat. Farrah still didn't understand. “Every time I think back to remember him, I'm just so sad I can't be with him any more.”

“Do you feel this warmth deary?” Farrah nodded, Leanna continued “This feeling, does it remind you of him?”

“A little.” Farrah confessed

“When you feel hurt, this is how we heal. Did he snuggle you into bed?”

“Some times.”

“Did he tell you things that made you laugh?”

“Of course...”

“Did he always find a way to make you smile when you were sad?”

Farrah felt a warm spot in her, but she wanted to push it away. It had no place in her when she was sad and wanted to feel cold. Leanna brought her hand to Farrah's cheek which was about to cry more, brought it to see eye to eye and said at last. “These are memories we keep that make us strong. When you are sad, look on that warm feeling inside you, and bring it out. You become the feelings that you feed yourself, getting over someone is not a matter of crying until you can cry no longer, wouldn't you rather smile instead?”

“But I'm always going to be sad at some point right?” Farrah asked, grovelly sick in her throat.

“It's natural, but feed who you want to be. Don't you feel better?”

Farrah tried to feed that warmth in her, the small pit of joy she felt was getting in the way. It was an odd feeling, kind of a desire, a need to escape the pain. It didn't ignite very much, but she felt it, and she concentrated on that inner warmth before it faded.

"If you ever need to talk to anyone." Leanna continued. "Everyone here is always happy to help, me myself included." Farrah smiled at this. "What did you love the most about your dad?"

"I don't really know, I was too young to really think about it." This was a bluffing answer. Farrah couldn't really think of anything right off hand, though she could have easily answered it eight years ago.

"Was it his eagerness? That was always a lovely trait I saw in him."

"Eager... How? When he was at home he mainly sat in his study and wrote papers and documents."

"I suppose he had a different side when he was on vacation... What about humbleness? Clearly you must have seen that."

"Humble?... He was, I just can't remember how though."

"Well, your father once told me that his servants were more family than anything. They were hired by the king, but he couldn't stand watch them pour over him all the time."

Farrah did remember this, and it brought on some new emotions. "Yeah, Aunt Karine would always work in the garden. She loved tending to it. Dad would always tell her that she didn't need to work so hard, but she would always cheerfully tell him it was her favourite thing to do."

"Was there anyone else he liked to treat so kindly too?"

"Yes, there was another 'servant', Uncle Artheour. He would work in the woods gathering food, flowers, herbs, and other things. He loved going for walks and my father would always accompany him in the evening. They would tag me along every so often and we'd go down to the stream to pick lilies and belladonna."

"That sounds like a wonderful time." Leanna said, retracting. "You and your father had a great time together."

"For the time we had, yes. I loved him lots." Farrah agreed, nodding.

"Then remember that feeling whenever you feel down about him alright?" Then jokingly Leanna said. "If you get too sad, he might just walk out of his grave to console you."

Farrah was rather excited at the thought. She hadn't realized just how excited she got talking about her father again. Like before she had fallen into sadness, but the topic was an amazing spirit lifter. Farrah was like a child merely just waiting for her father to return home, as though he never left.

"Lady Leanna," Talia finally joined in asking. "How many people did you lose?"

She glared graciously like the old lady she was. “Oh, I've seen my share. Being the elder, Everyone of my generation pretty much... And you know how I feel about being over formal.”

“Sorry, 'Leanna', It must have taken a while to become that wise. I mean, you just fully turned Farrah around.” Talia admitted guiltily. Talia could never reach Farrah the same way in all her attempts.

“It's not just age, it's experience... It's also our way out here, it's different from everywhere else. Our philosophy is special in spirituality is important for a healthy body.”

“Do you believe in ancestors who watch over you like my family does?”

Leanna pondered a moment “Can't say I've heard much about that belief.”

“Good, that one got on my nerves.”

Farrah laughed. Talia was feeling back up to snuff again now that Farrah was fine. She sat on her bird once again. Farrah discarded the blanket aside her, having started to overheat under them and her spirits were back to give her the energy she needed. Still sore, but she could worry about that for the next couple of peaceful days ahead.

“Deary,” Leanna said looking down. “You didn't finish your tea.” Farrah shook her head, embarrassed, but mainly glad that her fit didn't knock it over. “I'll have to make you a warm cup again so you can enjoy the nice flavour this one has.” Farrah agreed. She wasn't a fan of tea, but couldn't be rude.

“Set one on for me too, won't you Lady...” Gregory announced, having returned and noticed things were back to normal.

“AGHK! None of your lady business, you got Talia going at it too.” Leanna crowed

“Miss...”

“AGHK! No miss business either.”

“Miss Farrah...” Gregory grudgingly continued.

“Just Farrah will do.” Talia informed.

“Farrah, how are you feeling?” Gregory asked in concern.

“Much better.” The much cheerier magpie replied.

“Lad... Leanna sure can work wonders can't she. You can see why the whole village looks up to her.”

Farrah nodded. She sat there with Gregory, both being rather quiet. Gregory didn't know whether it was safe or not to mention his thoughts on the situation, or his father's old friend. Farrah, not sure whether to mention it or not either. Leanna came by soon with three cups of tea and a tiny one for

Talia.

Placing them down, she remarked “Sorry Talia, this is as small as I have.” The small cup was meant for children, given Talia's fairy nymph size, it was a schooner mug. “Gregory, did you know how wonderful of a father Daven was? Busy with official paperwork and can still find time to take his daughter to the creek to pick flowers.”

“That's what I've heard when he used to visit.” Greg replied. Farrah smiled again, ready to continue chatting more, but would have to save that for another time. “You'll be staying at my place if you don't mind.” Gregory informed. “We have extra beds, and my Father would love to meet you. Er, if that's okay, he doesn't need to know about Daven quite yet if it's still a sore topic.”

Farrah opted out, not sure how she would take confessing her lineage. The tea was surprisingly sweet and powerful. Mint and other herbs that packed a punch, far from the Owl Gray Tea they were shipped in from the capital as 'special privilege compliments'. Surprisingly decent.

Farrah made a hard ascension to the grotto canopy, having wished the elder Leanna a good night. The trees were massive, and having flown up all the way, she realized just how much more massive they actually were. Just a few trees away they landed on the deck of a tree house. Four other houses laid along this side of the tree, all attached well and bridged along in a circle. Gregory lead the way and brought her inside to meet with his father. Farrah wandered inside.

“Who the heck is this?” The big middle aged man asked in a heartbeat.

Farrah jumped. “Father.” Gregory introduced. “This is Farrah.”

“Is she just another weekend relationship of yours son?”

“Another?” Farrah exclaimed

“Whoa! No, no, they left long ago.” Gregory defended.

“ANOTHER?!” Talia jumped out contributing. Her tail straight and her body ready to pounce from Farrah's shoulder.

“HA!” Gregory's father laughed. “I'm pulling your legs. I'm surprised son, you brought two girls home this time.”

Talia had pertained to a crouching pose and licking her paw with a more sinister glare than before “One girl,” She corrected, “I for one didn't fall for him.”

“Two, one, doesn't matter, come in come in. I'm Kalin. My wife is out with the girls, you'll see her later. She's Saren.” He got up to greet the girls “Good to meet ya. What is your name stranger?”

Farrah refused to reveal her name, knowing the instant association, especially with magpies being rare and all. “Talia!” Her feline friend reached out.

“Talia, and your friend?” Kalin insisted.

“Don't mind her, she's been through a lot just to get here. We were almost eaten...” Talia stopped to count. “Three times coming out here. She's really sore, and tired, and aching, and having to carry me all around. I don't suppose you have a place she can rest do you?”

Kalin chuckled, “I like you, alright, fair enough. Though I got to give it to my son; he sure when to strike when the iron is hot.”

“Yeeeah, quite the hero ain't he.” Talia remarked trying to sound nice.

“Right this way.” The father lead.

They were taken to a nice bed, one that looked much more decent than the cave bat bed they used the night before. It was reaching dark out, some of the stars could be seen in the distance when getting here, and the travel had weakened Farrah. She plopped onto the bed. “Thank you.” Farrah replied before just about clunking out. “I'll tell them tomorrow when I feel up to it.” Within a moment, she passed out. Talia was sorry that she sat around while her friend did all the flying. If there was one thing she was however, was proud. Proud and darned lucky.

“You did it Farrah...” Talia said taking roost in her spot. “You found the haven after all... Oh who am I kidding, you are fast asleep. I could say whatever I wanted right now an...”

Farrah swept Talia up in her sleep, just like she would normally do when Talia would get cynical and talk too much.

Talia peeked out from Farrah's arms. Gregory took to his own bed across the hall, glancing over for only a moment.

“Good night Farrah.” Talia whispered. “Greg, I hope I make you jealous.”

Chapter 9: Storytime

Morning struck early, but by the time Farrah awoke it was breaching noon. Her arm felt numb, tired and complaining to the world. Her other arm was less sore but bruised. Farrah tried to lift herself but her back gave no strength and she laid back down. Farrah smiled, she sure got herself into quite the pitiful state. Rolling over, she found Talia nestled in her plumage, passed out asleep. In the distance, Farrah heard the noise of someone walking around. The floorboards creaked with each passing of whoever was out there, it gave a strange homely feel. Sun shot down the hall from the window in a warm glow, accompanying the smell of used air. Farrah pulled up the blankets that she had laid on all night and wrapped herself gently. The homely feeling started to seep in as she covered her face and vividly remembered her past.

It was morning. Aunt Karine was changing the towels. Father must have just had a shower but she couldn't smell it while tucked away. Maybe if she stayed there long enough, Aunt Karine would come by to wake her. She always had funny things to say. "Deary" the voice called. Are you going to sleep in bed all day?" Farrah was silent. Maybe if she didn't say anything Aunt Karine would come in. It was dim lit under her covers, perhaps the sun went behind a cloud. Farrah frowned, she hated when the sun went behind the clouds, she wished it could always be sunny. Moments passed, Karine didn't come after all. Farrah peeked out from the blankets.

She slowly crept out of bed. The floor was cold again, Farrah fret quietly dancing foot to foot, adapting to the icy floor's touch. She stopped as the sun returned. Dust flew sparsely in the blinding light, a surreal moment of their ballet that Farrah enjoyed greatly. She started to move with them, swaying left and right, the floor became irrelevant and she too felt like she was flying. In her blunder she almost ran into the dresser. It reminded her, she was hardly dressed. There was nothing inside though, Farrah turned away and headed for the closet. Inside there were many garments, most of them fancy and lame. Inside was her favourite dress. The silky feeling it had when she took it off the hook reminded her of precious moments that seemed so long ago. They were merely only yesterday but to her they were history. They were more than history. Those memories were a history she lived every day, blissful. She was filled with nostalgia and joy. What a lucid moment, it was as though nothing was wrong.

Farrah left her room, it was quiet. Aunt Karine must have left to tend to her garden. She remembered, "Right, I was going to sneak up and surprise Aunt Karine." She continued to sneak but childishly she failed to remain quiet. Farrah looked into the study. Illuminated, quaint and full of wonders yet empty, her father was elsewhere. Maybe her mother would be near by. She heard voices, maybe they were in the dining room. Farrah tip toed along but no matter where she went the voices never got louder, still quiet. She stopped to listen carefully and she could hear faint words.

"So, how is our guest?"

It sounded like her Uncle Artheour, not her actual uncle but he always felt like one. "Guest?" Farrah thought. Maybe it was Cedric, his family was known for staying over. Maybe they came in the night, it wouldn't be the first time they came past bed time. It was a long travel from the kingdom, at least to a child. She never went there herself but she wanted to one day. Cedric told many tales about how big their house was and all the things they did there. Father didn't want to take his family there, it

was not a place for loved ones. “Then why does Cedric and Tammy, and Josphica live there?” Farrah remembered asking her father, he couldn't tell the answer.

“She is still in bed.” replied a woman's voice.

“Maybe it's Jaeny...” Farrah thought. “I really hope it's not. I don't like her, she's always snooty and hates fun.” The voices were odd, faint, but she knew who they were alright. They had to be Uncle Artheour and Aunt Karine, they had to be. Farrah peered in the kitchen, she didn't know how she got there though. Sure enough, it was her uncle and aunty. They were sitting around the table. Farrah tried to sneak up but was caught.

“Good morning Farrah.”

“How did you know I was there?” Farrah asked

“There are some things I just know.”

Aunt Karines voice was different now, quieter but Farrah could still make out the words even easier.

“Where is daddy?”

“He's outside, he had to go look at something. You shouldn't bother him, hes busy.”

“I won't” Farrah replied heading to the door. Maybe he was in the court yard. She didn't want to bother him but still wanted to see him. Maybe she would bother him if he wasn't too busy. Outside the air was still, the feeling of sun no longer beating down on her. It must have been spring but she wasn't cold. She danced around, everything was as it should be. She couldn't deny that something was different but it wasn't time to worry about it. The sun began to feel warm again, in fact she began to sweat. Careless she felt herself slipping away as though she was leaving her own body. The feeling returning to her, small pins laying on her side, the blanket still over her eyes as she played in the garden. The dream was over.

Farrah awoke calmly, returning to the dim light linen, unable to pull herself back under it's spell. As she pulled the sheet off of her face, a small, cold, stagnant tear fell off her cheek. Talia resting beside her, paws opening and retracting. What a strange dream, it felt so real at the time. The voices, almost real. Leaning up sideways, rested but still sore, Farrah set herself to leave but couldn't bare let the still present memory fade. She still felt the slight emotion she felt as a child flow within her, not wanting to let it fade too. Farrah looked up to see the foreign surroundings and like that it was gone. Farrah asked herself if she would know that feeling ever again. Voices still talking in the other room, Farrah turned to it, returning to her maturity.

She crawled out of bed and made her way down the hall. “Ah, there you are.” A young woman spoke to her. Farrah still not fully herself yet, only nodded, curious who this woman was.

“We were just talking about whether you were going to get up at all.” Kalin added, At last it started to make sense.

“Nice to meet you.” The lady introduced. “My name is Saren. And I'm sure you met my

husband Kalin last night. What is your name?"

"Fare..." Farrah stopped, recalling her somewhat secrecy.

"Fare, that is a lovely name... You are a Magpie aren't you?"

"And you would be?" Talia butted in, returning to her biological heater.

Saren astonished, mouth slack. "Oh my, aren't you... Unique."

"Ain't I though?" Talia replied finally accepting the fact as she missed the landing and climbed the rest of Farrah half awake.

"This is Talia. My best friend." Farrah explained as her friend folded over the bird's shoulder bonelessly. Cats often find the oddest times and places to sleep relentlessly.

"Well..." Saren segued "How did you meet our son? He seems quite occupied this morning, and he didn't come back last night until well after supper."

Food sounded pretty good right about now. Farrah almost rudely asked before catching herself. "Mmm... Supper." Talia mentioned. "When did we eat last anyway? I know Leanna gave us a biscuit or two but I'm starving."

Quickly Saren leaped to the pantry and withdrew some food for the small creature. "Here, have some. As for you miss, you look like you've been famished for weeks." Talia didn't care what it was and couldn't really see anyway.

"We've been travelling for much longer." Farrah informed. Talia rolling off towards the table. "Normally we have something but the shadow downs are scarce."

Saren procured her head and softly astonished "My, you must have been through a lot."

"That's putting it lightly." Talia butted in between bites.

"Greg helped us make the last hurdle here." Farrah continued, sitting down to join Talia.

"Help? We wouldn't be here right now if it weren't for him."

"My son did?" Saren admired.

"I thought you didn't like Greg?" Farrah questioned Talia, taking the morsel from her mouth to speak.

"A hero is still a hero." Talia pointed out. "But a stud is still a stud."

Farrah managed to fit a few bite in before being questioned farther.

Saren was ecstatic, curious. She'd not had such intriguing guests before. "Where did you come from? What is it like there? What brought you out here?"

Farrah rather forgo the questioning until after she could satisfy her hunger but answered anyway. "I'm from homeland and..."

"Saren, don't you think you should let her answer before bombarding her with more questions?" Kalin remarked.

"Yes, sorry." Saren apologized.

"What? It's like you've never seen outsiders before." Talia stated.

"Not in some time, say, dear do you know a man named Daven?"

Farrah did, she nearly choked when Saren said it. It was expected, she would have to say it eventually. Guiltily Farrah frowned.

"I'm home!" Greg barged in.

"Where have you been all this time?" Kalin asked.

"Foraging a gift for my lady." He announced, making a brisk entrance.

"When did you become a gentleman?" His father dumbfounded

Greg chuckled guiltily. "If you don't mind, I would love to take my girlfriend for a tour of our homeland, she only got here last night."

"Sit down son." Saren beckoned. "I haven't seen you all morning."

"Sorry, I need to head out."

"But?..." Saren stuttered, trying to retrieve a hug from her son. Farrah promptly retracted herself from the table, and bowed gratefully just as quick as she left.

"Youngsters eh?... Remember when we were like that?" Kalin reminisced.

Greg pulled Farrah off the balcony into the air below, and they took flight. Farrah was weak at first but got her strength back in their decent. She was far from resting her wounds. "You know, she's not your girlfriend." Talia mentioned.

"No, but it sounds that I came just in time, again." Greg answered, tightening his grasp on his gift.

"Who are those for?" Farrah asked.

"These, a gift for my hopefully girlfriend to be." He said, charming a smile. Talia pouted.

Farrah blushed. "They are lovely, but can we wait until we land first?"

“Of course... Where would you like to go?”

Farrah gazed down below her. Life was sprawling. It seemed as though everyone was out doing something. At the bottom was huge roots with ponds in between, a giant swamp almost. It was bright, and the light of the nearing-high-noon sun made it hard to see much more. They descended, gliding between and around the trees. At last, Farrah no longer fought the glare of the shimmering water. Farrah landed on the top of a large root that arched over a small cliff. It overlooked a few ground structures, even more astonishing was the life below the canopy. Many walks of life gathered for lessons, games, bathing and recreation. Kids were playing in the pond, splashing each other, playing tag. Even some reptilian creatures existed, newts and salamanders, all living together with the furred and feathered folk alike. Of all things in homeland, reptiles were considered low life, shady, conniving and worthy of prejudice. Here they seemed welcomed, accepted, indifferent. Talia peeked out. “This place seems nice... Apart from all the water everywhere.”

“It is nice...” Farrah replied

“It's home.” Greg answered, having just landed. “It's always been this lively since I was young. Lady Leanna has brought many people together and her mother more so. She united many peoples to live here, each finding their own place to exist. When Leanna was younger she would take me and the other children to the outskirts and teach us about life. She's far too frail for such travels now but she often comes down to the basin below her home to tell stories to the children. Maybe soon we can visit and hear one of them. Oh... And these are for you.” Greg handed the fresh picked flowers over as promised.

“Thank you.” the magpie accepted

“There is much more where that came from.”

Farrah flustered “Oh, I don't need them, really.”

“Please, have them.” Greg insisted.

Both of them looked into one another for a moment, Farrah awkward as a child. Gregory, noticed the details of her face. Farrah's white mask and freckles, her blue eyes, the curl on her left, the hair draped over her right eye. Long, beautiful, straight hair, a very quiet cat sitting on her shoulder looking away. “You've been quiet, haven't you.” Gregory commented.

“It's none of my concern...” Talia replied, still occupied.

“Come now, lets see if Lady Leanna has a story for us.” Farrah nodded her head.

Gregory took flight, passing over a vast lake, Farrah soon following. “Don't push it now.” Talia begged. “You don't need to prove anything. We can relax here without racing for a while.” Farrah knew this but had a pride no one could break. Besides, she wanted to see Leanna again. Their last visit left a rather depressing note. Farrah felt at home mostly by her own kind, she had seen plenty of everyone else but felt readily extinct for some time now.

Slowly Farrah felt her strength come back to her, however weak she became, overcoming the stinging pain. Farrah saw the tree ahead, it was Leanna's tree, the one erected into the plateau. From

here it also adorn two even more astonishing streams than before that became silk waterfalls and shaped the cliff side. Along it was a path carved into the side that came to a lower platform at the basin of the tree, still elevated from the rest of the valley floor. On the path was a small dark figure pattering their way to the bottom. A long elegant dress reached for the ground beneath her, and what appeared to be something in her arms. It seemed they were just in time. Sure enough, below them ran a herd of children about to make the climb to the higher platform.

“Come.” Greg beckoned, landing by some seats. “Lady Leanna usually tells the children from here. We should wait for her.”

Farrah sat down on the bench, a small thick block of wood that was carved with a small back rest. For her, it was only enough for one and left her tush sore at it's shallow edges. There were many other seats like this one and they looked quite heavy. By a fenced lookout were some adult sized seating but it was far from the story place. Talia popped out to enjoy the scenery before the rugrats showed up. Farrah had still been holding the bouquet in her tired hands. She wanted a place to put them so she wouldn't loose them but Farrah did admit to herself that they came with their own burdens. She couldn't impose, they were for her, but she rather not carry them. “Hey” Talia poked. “Greg, aren't you a little old to enjoy children stories?”

Greg laughed. “Some time's it's not the audience but the morals that make the story. Many parents come to listen too but they've heard most of these stories already. Often when there were kids, Lady Kawli, used to tell those same tales.”

“I get that but, their just silly dumbed down stories that kids aren't going to cry to, right?”

“Some times even adults disregard lessons even children know. We teach the young so they don't make the same mistakes we have. Some of us still make those same mistakes even now.”

“Huh... Never thought of it like that...” Talia admitted, “Say, what mistakes do you still make if you don't mind my asking?”

“I often forget people have their own burdens... I... Often find that a lot of people are surprisingly more like me than I think. Things like that...” Greg tried to answer, not really well analyzing himself.

In the distance, Leanna was finally making her way to the flat but not before the screams and laughter of young listeners. Up they came, Talia hiding to not stir trouble. “Where is she?” Asked one of the youth,

“Over there. Come on!” Another said, leading the brigade. They rushed up ahead to meet Leanna, dancing around her, impatient and ecstatic.

“She's quite loved, isn't she?” Farrah asked rhetorically. A smile adorn and brightened her face. What a lovely complexion Greg thought to himself. The normally reserved, quiet young lady became much more lively in front of him as she began to open up without realizing.

“Alright everyone.” Leanna asserted. “You know what time it is. Sit yourselves down, gather around...” Leanna noticed Farrah and Greg, then gave a confirming gesture and sat herself on the big log.

“Ooh, look.” A child said pointing rudely at Farrah. “And old person.”

Talia poked out and grimaced with her tongue stuck out. “Yes child.” Leanna confirmed. “They came to listen too.”

“What are you going to read us today?” A young girl came forward, walking on her knees.

“Let's see here.” Opening her book, Leanna passed through the pages. “How about the Little Pig Parade.”

“No, we've heard that one.” A boy cried.

“Alright... Let's see...” Leanna peered, she remembered a story she was told as a young girl but it wasn't anywhere in this book. She couldn't put her finger on it, merely hoping that she would stumble on it. A smirk came about her. She looked up, Leanna saw the small, hiding little friend she met yesterday. “Dear.” she called out. “Did you tell me yesterday that you were partly phoenix?” This instantly got Talia's attention. Peeking out, she nodded. “I think I may have one that no one has heard before.”

“Really? A new story?” Some children astonished, others too busy playing.

“Yes, a new one. It's the Lost Nest.” Leanna began to recall, remembering it from her childhood. She loved that story because she always wanted to help the poor bird. “A long time ago, Shamlul cracked. It was said that when it did, a magnificent creature had pour out of it's fiery core.” Often Leanna would have to pause to remember what happened next. “A great, fiery bird emerged. It soon calmed down as the flamed dimmed down and on it's vibrant orange back was a flame painted on it in beautiful feathers. It was regal, majestic, and alone. He decided that he would make a nest, an amazing nest. In his nest was... Let me think. Ah, gold cups, gems, and... mantles.” Leanna enchanted the audience, some weren't actually sure what a mantle was so they made up something else in it's place.

Leanna continued. “He loved these things, he had collected them over many years. He was indeed the king of his domain. However these things did not fill his sadness for he still was the only of his kind. He wished that one day one of him would come by but he realized that they may be just like him, waiting for him to come to them instead. He decided, he wanted to leave his nest. One day he would find his friends. He knew his land well, he could never forget it, he could never get lost. But this world was vast, he searched and searched but never found another. He passed man and woman, business man and traveller as himself alike but no one had ever even heard of him before.

One day he returned to his home but it was gone. Everything had changed, the hills had fallen and the streams they had turned a different path. He noticed things that he remembered but never could he return. It was as though his nest had been swallowed up. The peak of the highest hill was no longer there. The world changed without him. Again he left, maybe another search would help him find his friends but alas he still did not find them. He was sad, his home was missing and no matter how hard he looked he could not find what he was looking for.

One day he came across a travelling man who told him that he had met another phoenix, he was looking for his kind just like him. The phoenix was rejoiced, but it wasn't meant to be. Eventually he settled down, his dreams may have left him but he found a new life. A young lady he met along his

ways took him in. They fell in love. Each night he wished he could find them but it mattered less and less. The friend and home that he longed for was not anywhere in particular but the peace that he found himself. No treasure could bring him joy and no fantasy could replace his love. The things he thought would bring him joy, he did not need. The things that would bring him joy were things all around him and his friends were the people he met long the way. No one knows what became of him, some say he is immortal and will never die. Maybe he still searches for his immortal friends or he may have flew back into the fiery core to sleep. His legend lives on.”

The crowd was a little underwhelmed. It wasn't often they heard stories that didn't have solid endings. The uncertainty got to them. “Granny,” One of the kids asked. “Isn't there more? What happened to the phoenix?”

“No one knows, it's a story older than I am young one.”

“Did he find his friends? I want him to find them.” The child insistingly asked, sure that there was something more, wanting there to be more, yearning to know.

“Maybe one day you might meet him, and then you can ask him. Wouldn't that be exciting?”

“But...” Another child asked, a young girl barely able to speak fluidly. “Whyd nyu tell a sad story gamma?”

Leanna slipped the book to her side, having never needed it to retell her childhood favourite. She thought on it, in the way that a child could understand. “It's not really a sad story, he didn't find what he set out for but he found something else. He found friends along the way. Some times you don't need what you think you do, sometimes you just find it.

“I wish he could find his friends.” Many of the children cried

“Some times the stories that end without closure are the best of all. They make you think and wonder. It's fun to make your own ending to a tale. When I was your age, I played pretend all the time where I would go on journeys with the phoenix and help him find his kind. It was so much fun, maybe you can help him like I did. He could always use some more friends like you. Now carry on, lets see if we can't find those phoenixes.”

Some of the kids dispersed, ready for a hunt. Some went in groups, while others simply sat and wondered what Leanna had said. “I found one!” One kid said, gathering a bunch to his side to see what he found.

“Gramma, will you help us?” Said a little girl, reaching out for Leanna's hand.

Leanna smiled, placing her book down, she lent her hand to the child. They looked all over, as far as they could along the plateau. Their journey seemed endless, the fiery determination, the wonders of youth.

“Quite adorable aren't they?” Greg asked, looking over, reaching out.

Farrah nodded, and left leaving Greg surprised. “I think I'll join them.” She announced

Greg chuckled, "Aren't you a little old to play pretend?"

Talia peeked out, "Not a chance." She said, returning to safety.

Greg had to admire Farrah's spirit. She was mature, fit, talented and of course free spirited. He had not realized also how childish she was. Unfortunately for him, he left the days of fantasy beside. He was a grown man, proud, mature and sad. He watched all their youth overflow, unable to move, having killed his own ambitions long ago. Farrah returning to him, ignorant, offering her hand.

"Do you want to play too?" Farrah asked.

Greg not sure what to do, only got up and followed quietly, shy, scratching his head awkwardly. Beside them, a small group gathered as someone dancing before them, acting out how he figured the story should have gone, finding clues to where all the other phoenix had went. Greg always admired their ambitions. Maybe he didn't completely loose them after all.

Hours later, most everyone cleared out. A few kids remained, hoping their parents wouldn't arrive to pick them up and take them home. Leanna could finally rest. She took her place at the bench overlooking the valley, looking quiet exhausted. Greg joined, Farrah leaning on the fence.

"I haven't seen you have that much fun since you were young." Leanna admired.

Greg feeling more liberated, had a cleaner voice than when he started. "Yeah, Farrah is quite the adventurer."

"She is quite the spirit isn't she."

Gergory admired it. "Yeah... She is."

Talia fluttered out, staring off at the haven beside Farrah. "Is this really home now?" Talia asked

"I guess so." Farrah replied, "It has to be."

"I'm kind of glad... I enjoyed seeing the world and maybe I'm just traumatized but I'm glad we can finally settle somewhere. This crazy kids fantasy is a little more than I bargained for."

"It's nice to be around people again." Farrah said gleefully.

Talia added. "It's nice have a bed to sleep in." She turned to Leanna. "You are like a grandmother to them, huh?"

Leanna smiled back, "I'm related to everyone apparently. Getting old has it's benefits I guess."

"It's nice..." Farrah said, turning around, catching Leanna's attention. "...To have someone who cares..."

Leanna smiled, Greg noticed a glow from Farrah's face, the brightest he'd seen. A fluster overtook him, in a moment he felt her happiness. Swallowing a pit, he realized how much that happiness meant to him. His face cracked, hard to hold in the expression. Talia raised an eyebrow and

adored, smirking. “Hm, you're a goofy boober aren't you. You look like you're in love.”

Greg somehow, through his feather coat, shot a tone more red in the face than it had ever been before. “Talia, stop. You don't have to say it.” He replied, guiltily cracking at the seams.

Leanna laughed. “To be young again... Farrah... You had something to speak with me of, yes?”

Farrah's complexion melted a pale frown and looked away. Everyone was quiet, the breeze blowing by in this quiet valley could be heard just louder than one's breath. “I guess...” Farrah started. “You are probably wondering how I found this place from homeland...” For the first time, Farrah felt as though she could talk to someone again. After all that happened, she knew that her troubles were behind her. It was pointless to really say anything, life would go on. Still she yearned to finally rid her burdens. They could not hurt her now. She pulled her cheeks together to grin but the facade was too blatantly obvious. It was hard to smile but she pulled through. She needed to get it off of her chest, the pain needed to disappear. “It should be obvious, my father is gone now...”

Chapter 10: Release

Farrah in any fantasy would have been stricken dumb before such things were mentioned. No prodding or begging could loosen her beak, but now she spoke freely. Everything was told. Her time in the mansion, her father's relationship with her, Farrah's relatives and servants who were closer to family than not. Gregory wanted to comment, even Talia but Leanna told them it was simply their time to listen. Farrah briefly spoke of the exile, getting to it later. Her father wrote many messages on his cell walls and the tone saddened more so.

Soon, Farrah recalled many details about the revolt. The night struck, men storming the mansion through the kitchen. Karine was taken first, dishes dropped, strangers rushing in from all corners and outnumbering everyone two to one with more rushing in the main door. Panic, struggling, Farrah utterly confused, not sure whether she was dreaming or about to die. Watching it all happen as though through a murky looking glass and her body numb and stiff. To her, how could she understand what was happening. She mentioned being tied up, her father begging the men at arms to listen only to be taken away. A carriage, dark, looking out of small holes to see the moonlit forests from a cliff up above. Looking out again and again, falling asleep in a pile of hay and waking up with the bumps. The night passing like frozen silk until she passed out and awoke in a cell, alone. Never a moment to know what to expect next. Crying out, crying until men came to shut her up, confused. Years went by, confusion turned to hatred; pain turned into the everlasting wish for vengeance with her claws buried deep into adversaries chest. Plotting. Coming close to blinding the warden multiple times. Being the only magpie to still have her wings in the constantly filling prison, and the cries of those without. Farrah never understood what the warden saw in her when he ordered his men to let her keep them; If it was the cute innocent girl that she was before, or the untouchable she-demon she became that kept them at bay. Talia could tell that this was not the Farrah she knew now.

The night of the breakout, a fellow came by with keys but none of them worked. He left Farrah scared if she would ever see daylight again from outside her confinement. Finally, another man came at the last moment, a strong man, beaten and scarred. He had fought three levels of guards with a battalion of inmates to get there at the call with many others still trapped. Cunning he forced the lock open with a tool he got from above, bashing it in the slot. Both free, they ran out together. Farrah wondered where his men were, she was the last out, they already left to make a diversion or to save their own hides. The man stayed behind, leading more prisoners who were on the defence to leave with him. Countless trees and bushes cut her, her breath became short, legs cramping. She dared not stop, or look back. She dared not fly or be caught. Her one gift laid dormant, curse to break her freedom, a bird with wings still chained by the looming oppression of sharp rock and cold wet grass. At last she collapsed in a clearing, moonlight cast down in the centre. She hid, crawling under a bush. She was afraid it would not cover her well, they might look there, she could never be safe. Heart racing, body sore, Farrah could recall every lasting moment in great detail. Every minute felt like an hour, every emotion amplified, every fear running in her head. She was weak and this frightened her most.

Everything that came to her was harsh and undeserved. She did nothing to them, and eight long years to be put away from her loved ones was unbearable. She hated them, even then she plotted her vengeance. She planned each moment of hell that she would give them, all the pain that lead to her hatred sank in deeper and deeper until she became so frustrated that a single tear fell from her eyes. All the time she lost, all the people she would never see again, the monster that her heart became. She

hated everything, even herself. She had enough hatred, she was sick of feeling that way. She could never be happy like this and so she had to make the choice. If she was free, would she chose to be a harbinger of her own prejudice or live on in spite of that suffering. The mind of a child, the body of a woman, to make a choice over matters no man should ever have to face. For an hour, she laid there, begging for freedom. She wished with all her heart that morning would come, she just wanted to feel the warmth on her curdled heart. A noise came, a strange one of light wings flapping. This was when Talia first met Farrah. Talia couldn't sleep, the ruckus woke her and she couldn't fall back asleep for once in her life, the cat was restless. Farrah couldn't hold everything up herself, she was defeated in her own right, at last she crumbled. Talia's warmth glowed like a small ember but it was enough to change Farrah's heart. Farrah could not change the past, the future was in front.

Farrah mentioned many things, adventures she had with Talia, times with family, times she lashed out, times her heart turned to malice. The time she left a half inch deep gash in the wardens right bicep after threatening to take her wings after all. Though Farrah relished some moments of her hatred, she preferred not to return to such dark voids.

Cedric had lit a fair light on the story during their visit, without his piece, Farrah would never really understood why any of it happened. She understood somewhat, but she never knew about the suffering of the capital or the tyranny of her own people. Her Father never burdened her with such details, she was after all still a child, unshaped by malice or sorrow. For many years she was left unanswered and senseless evil was all she saw.

“Child...” Leanna condoled. “That is not easy to simply turn your prejudice aside.”

Farrah turned her mind to it. Nothing was really easy at all. No choice she made was without fear or malice that night, or the nights before. “I suppose I just got tired of feeling angry all the time.”

“Anger takes effort, hate breeds more hate. Many adults cannot see past their own eyes, but a child...”

“I told you, I just got tired of feeling upset.” Farrah insisted “Alright?”

Leanna paused. “You are right, even still so many people can't see it that way. They fear they will be weak without hate. It will drain you of everything you have, you are better off without your prejudice. Great deeds have been made possible because of these emotions, very few have made people happy.”

“Maybe you should tell a story about that.” Talia suggested.

Leanna chuckled. “I was thinking of just that, actually. I think I would need to write a new one, I don't think I've heard anyone realize such a thing from that angle before... The fall of... Hmm, what should I change it to for the children...”

“So, what makes me so special?” Farrah asked, feeling spotlighted. “Why is it so hard for everyone else?”

“You're still a child. Children see the world differently, they haven't seen or had to deal with being hurt like we have, so it's harder for them to hold onto shards of broken glass. Eventually everyone is going to have to drop it but the harder you hold on the deeper the cuts and the bigger the

scars until you forget yourself why they are there. Farrah, how do you feel now that you've told your story?"

"I feel a lot better, I knew that I would but I feel more okay with what happened. It shouldn't have happened, it should have been right."

"That is because you've already let it go, even memories can cut you if you still hold them tightly. It's not right, but you overcame it, you can finally let it go. Your life is in your hands now, if you want to make things right, you must start with you."

Farrah was happier now, about everything. Even the trip out across the shadow downs seemed like distant memories. Still, it would not stop her from dreading ever crossing such a path ever again. She breathed a sigh of relief. For the first time in a long time Farrah felt that she had family again. She had a new family, though it could never replace the one she was born with, this was okay. The past could not be changed, but the future looked alright, starting with her.

Farrah leaned over and rested herself against Leanna. The warmth of her filled Farrah's heart with joy "I haven't been able to feel this free around others since before the incident." She confided.

Leanna wrapped her arm around her young magpie, "What stopped you?"

Farrah did not reply, she knew exactly what. The world might be cruel, but it did not define her for she could still choose. How could a child have known back then.

Greg snuck in to join, Talia finally giving the guy a brake and petted her best friend.

Leanna finally broke apart. "It's about time that I headed back up."

"Please my lady, let me walk with you." Greg pleaded.

Not a complaint came from Leanna for once, either she didn't realize the formality or didn't care. Instead a big grin formed in its place. "You are always welcome." She accepted.

Farrah felt right at home, walking up the path beside her friends. That's right, she had friends. Farrah relished in the moment, she met many friends along the way, some she would like to see again. Maybe one day she would make the gap back to homeland and sneak past the guards to see Cedric and his friends. The bookworm actually started to grow on her before she left. There was also the nice til boy who treated her like a person, regardless of her protective friend's suggestive opinions. In the past there was even a small family that stumbled across her and Talia that were oblivious to the exile. Before she knew it, they reached the cliff summit. Leanna returned to her home, waving them off. "What a sweet old lady..." Talia commented.

Greg smirked. "Farrah, if you have some time to burn, there is somewhere I would love to take you." He said, taking Farrah's hand.

She nodded. "I guess... I mean... I..." Farrah awkwardly muttered. She then lighted up and chirped, "Actually, I have all the time in the world. Sure!"

"Wow..." Greg admired. "I don't think I've ever seen a grin like that on you."

“There is a lot of things you haven't seen about me.” Farrah replied, rearing to go.

“Alright then.” Greg said before taking off. He launched himself off the cliff and began to make his way, Farrah following in behind. “It's a place only I know about, so don't tell anyone.” He informed.

“You might want to save that detail until we're there.” Talia remarked. “Lest someone have ears.”

“Ha!...” Gregory agreed half laughing.

Along the far reaches of the grotto was a tall pass along a stream that ran out. They took to it's top ledge and left into a crumbly foothill. Greg made many adjustments, knowing the land since he was young. He took the scenic tour, showing Farrah many of the surroundings. There was even a house or two even out here. Farmers, gravity bound dwellers with sprawling fields. Small creeks littered the lands, curving and crawling all over this mostly settled land. Farrah wondered if this was what it looked like before the Cataclysm took place. Everything was normal. Too normal.

Greg then took along the ridge of a distant hill until they came to a half oval pond linking up with narrow waterway where the water was dormant. A long winding lake between green overgrown ledges took them into a tunnel of trees and bushes. The path opened up to a wide fat horseshoe lake area, still mostly covered canopy and ridges. The area was enchanting, wet but not yet marsh. Talia who was peering from behind Farrah's neck poked her head out to see more and admired. “This reminds me a lot of home.”

“Does it now?” Farrah replied

“Yeah, all the trees, and water here, all secluded like a sanctuary. Moss grown rocks and smells... I remember it well, too well.”

“Just up ahead...” Greg informed “You might want to take this part slowly.”

Past the pond they arose and quickly found plenty of rock. Thick, cracked rock that made narrow passes left and right before reaching a thin slit at the end. Greg clung to the wall, carefully moving into the crevice without a floor to walk on, only a narrow crease one could get their foot caught in. “You can actually fly though here if you are lucky enough.”

“Looks like a hole that a crazy person would fly though.” Talia mentioned, having barely fit through cracks twice in size with Farrah. Greg only lifted his hand and rubbed his beak, right near the scar he had.

“Was this where that thing came from?” Farrah asked.

Greg chuckled. “I wish, I was ten years old and pretended I was a woodpecker and cracked things open with my beak. Spoiler, I hit the ground instead. I've made it though this gap flying before when I was younger and a lot smaller, just about took every feather off my back trying though.”

“What's inside?” Farrah asked.

“Come on in and find out.” He said jumping down on the other side.

Farrah squeezed though. She fit much easier, apart from her chest. Talia jumped out, having gotten a little squished as Farrah leaned back. Below them was a small drop to a ledge, and below that was the bottom of a pit inside a grove. All the walls were built up by rock with grass sprawling everywhere, thick greens and vines. Flowers grew along the sides and smelled semi-sweet. They could hear running water but found none in sight. The walls were covered in many child's drawings. Some were adult drawings. Along one side was a large cutaway in the rock and blocked by trees and dead bushes that were placed there to hide the opening.

Landing down to the bottom Talia asked. “What's there?”

“Another way in.” Greg replied.

“It looks a lot easier to get into.” She said narrowing her gaze.

“But that way is boring, where is the adventure?”

“I didn't sign up for adventure.” Talia replied, taking an eye to Farrah who always welcomed adventure rather nicely. “But this isn't really about me...”

“Talia, lighten up.” Farrah pleaded.

“I am lightened up.”

For a long while Greg and Farrah talked more and got to know one another a bit better. Greg retold many of his memories and Talia even jumped in with her own. After a while, the three actually became quite acquainted. Time passed by and the girls became restless. Greg consolidated their time together and realized that he shouldn't keep them captive. “You know,” He mentioned. “If you head out and go straight you'll find the stream that runs out of the valley, just go left and you'll return no problem.” Greg informed. “But I will worry about you two.”

“Aww, then why not come along?” Farrah asked.

Greg fiddled with a stick he was carrying, shrugged and dropped the wood. “Alright, there are some things I should probably get back to anyway. I'll escort you ladies back home.”

Sure enough Greg did. They reached the grove entrance but Talia was getting anxious about something and wanted to rest for a while. Farrah understood. “Greg.” She called.

“Yeah?” He replied

“Talia wants to rest for a bit.”

“Alri... Wait, Talia isn't even flying.”

“We want girl talk!” Talia exclaimed, carrying her little voice.

“Alright, I'll see you back at the house.” Greg confirmed. Flying himself back, out of sight and

far away.

“Well Talia, what is it?” Farrah asked, landing on a near by ledge. One shaded by the trees with a tall grassy seat.

“You see, it's just a little overwhelming. It's awesome that we can finally settle down and relax but that's the problem. Since we got here, we've yet to really do that. We haven't had a moment to ourselves all day. Soon we are going to have to go back to his place, talk or avoid talking about your Dad and family exchanges, getting to know one another. It's just going to be busy so...”

“What do you want to do?”

“I don't know, anything... Just anything that doesn't involve a third person.”

“Do you still dislike Greg?” Farrah inquired, getting comfortable.

“No, he's... He's cool.” Talia admitted. “...Do, you like him?”

“Yes, he's very nice, regardless of what you have to say about him.”

“Yeah I can be a little rough on him, but... Do you love him?”

“Do I?...” Farrah thought to herself. “I guess so.”

“I guess so' is probably not going to cut it. You'll be staying at his place as a guest but we're kinda intruding. We might be giving the wrong impressions you know.”

“Well, I'm sure that they'd be fine if we stayed for a little while even if I wasn't dating their son.”

“But that's the thing, we stay there long enough he's going to keep putting the moves on you and you might actually end up together... Regardless...”

“I'm not sure it concerns you who I'm with Talia.” Farrah returned. “Do you just not want us together?”

Talia quieted down. “Farrah... Do you really want to be together?”

“I don't know.”

“That's just it. It's a lot of pressure, and if you don't want it then I don't want to see you put into something that you're not sure of.”

“Talia, we've slept outside every night for over a year now, we don't need to stay over at his place. And if we end up together, then it happens.”

“I guess... Farrah, if he makes you happy, I don't want to stop you. I just don't want to see you pushed around is all. But trust me, if he ever hurts you, he has worse things to worry about than an angry magpie. He has to deal with the burning fury of a full fledged, half... Phoenix, cat, quarter...”

Thing to deal with.” Talia sang, trying to sound somewhat cool.

“What is that called again?”

“My people call it Tinderclaw but I mean you toss that word around and who's going to know what you're even talking about, right?”

Farrah nodded. “So, you're cool about it, right?”

Talia sighed. “I guess. He does one thing to hurt you and all bets are off, got it?”

Farrah understood. They sat idle for a moment or two but Farrah realized something. “We should make our own house.”

“COOL!” Talia jumped. “Yeah, we're totally settling down here! We can make the coolest place ever!”

Farrah chuckled. “We can make it out of all kinds of things.”

“Two stories.” Talia added.

“Make it round.”

“No boys allowed!”

Gracing the stream, Farrah flew barely above the water as she came into the forest valley. She was excited, this being her new home, she would make such a wondrous mark on the land. All she needed was to find a place worthy of her keep and then let Gregory's parents know, though she didn't know what to tell them. She was stumped with a lack of answers, maybe it would come to her later. Another thing on the plate was that Farrah did really know if she actually loved Greg, he was the first boyfriend she ever really had. She didn't know how she felt, or how to feel. She loved being around him, certainly. In her mind, maybe she wasn't ready for love yet, only recently did she come into loving herself. What a long year it had been, maybe it would take many more years to finally settle in. Her childhood and lost years pressed on her, impatiently waiting in a long line up to come out. Love could wait a while, he wasn't going anywhere; she hoped.

Alas, Farrah needed to return anyway. Farrah ascended to the canopy, taking a guess. “Farrah, do you even remember which place it is?” Talia inquired.

If only she could remember which house it was. “Not really.” Farrah replied uncertainly, error in her voice.

“Lets see... If I were Greg... I see him.”

“Where?”

“There.” Talia pointed “At least, from what I can see. He sure wants to make sure we return to him. Maybe a bad experience with past lady friends?”

“That is him.” Farrah confirmed, her powerful eyes did her well.

The figure waved to them, it was Greg alright “I thought you'd never show up!” He called.

Farrah landed next to him “Oh, we were.”

“Girl talk, right?”

“You bet your fanny.” Talia answered. “And what happens in girl talk, stays in girl talk.”

Greg scratched his head bashfully. “Yeah, I figured.”

“Greg, we were talking.” Farrah announced excitedly. “And it's really great that you can offer us this place to stay but... Me and Talia want to build our own house!” She exclaimed.

Greg began to frown. “Your own place, huh?”

“YEAH!” Talia shouted. “Two stories, the coolest around with card games and all girls...” Excited she was, talking quickly and rambling her words together “I got the top level to myself” she muttered.

“Like a club house?”

“The best around.”

“Yes, we are quite happy about it.” Farrah added. “I get to make my very own place.”

“That sounds exciting.” A voice came from inside. “You are still welcome here any time you like though, even after it's finished.” Kalin came out. He had an earnest grin about him and a more mellow tone than the night before. “Come on in, we have much to talk about. Greg my boy was just telling me how you were Daven's daughter.”

Farrah shed a depressed eye to the mentioning, veering towards Greg. “About that...” She said.

“It is a shame, I know.” Kalin condoled. “He was a good man. Me and him would go for many walks together, quite the scholar he was. New to the land and he knew more about the land than I did. If it's not too much, I'd love to talk about it. I've been wondering what he's been up to all this time... Before Homeland went into all that bad stuff.”

Farrah nodded. She left the balcony and walked into the house. Inside they sat down before some more food, the second meal she eaten that day. Something got to Farrah though, a strange compelling aura that Kalin had in speaking. He was uplifting, and as much as Farrah shot away from her father, she would somehow love bringing him back up. It was as though Daven were still alive, though they talked past tense about the things they remembered, it felt like a fitting memorial. Probably one of the few that would be said upon him.

Kalin became rather energetic and quite taken in their conversation “You know he would take all kinda of plants back with him when he left. You probably seen him studying them at home Farrah.”

“I think I remember that.”

“Those plants were from here, just down the trail from Elder Leanna's place.”

“Wow...”

“Small world, huh? I remember he'd bring some from homeland by the likes which I've never seen. Of course, I was never as into the herbs as he was but the things he could tell you about a plant... He was next near a medicine man, if he only got a degree he could have saved many lives.”

“I never knew... I was so young back then.” Farrah admired.

“You might not be one right now but there is a chance you might be able to learn like he did. While she's around, Leanna could surely teach you about them. I think you'd make an excellent prodigy.”

“You think?” Farrah bashfully accepted. “Really though, I have probably less interest in plants than even you do...”

“If you ever change your mind, we aren't getting any younger here.”

Farrah nodded. “Dear, you look quite tired” Saren commented, “Please make yourself at home for as long as you wish.”

“Yeah, I've probably talked your ear off long enough.” Kalin admitted. “Your friend seems to have clunked out.” He said pointing to Talia who was always asleep.

Farrah went to bed, taking her cat with her. Still sore, she entered bed more relaxed than the night before. Greg spent some time with his folks before heading himself to his bed. Just across the hall he stopped in to see Farrah. She appeared to be half asleep. “Farrah...” He whispered but no answer. “...I love you.” He said, before laying down in his own bed. Farrah heard him, not sure what to do but smiled. She had not heard those words in a long time. They filled her with bliss. Talia rolled over, pawing at Farrah's side again.

“But, I love you more.” Talia mentioned.

Chapter 11: Retribution

“Don't get me wrong.” Talia assured. “We like it here, but Farrah plans on making this valley her home so we want a place we can call our own.”

Morning had risen like a restless mummy, Talia had stiffly crept out of bed and headed mindlessly to the kitchen for a meal. Before she knew it, she was now discreetly discussing her plans to move out.

“You are always welcome here.” Saren reminded. “You and Farrah both.”

“I know but we kinda got these plans, and we're two young woman that need our space so...” Talia tried to let down easy, “It's nothing personal.”

“Of course, I just don't want to seem as though you are any burden is all.” The mother assured.

“Honey,” Kalin intervened “She's just being earnest is all.”

Talia smiled at the remark “I'm glad this went well.”

“Young lady,” He continued, “You liven up this place, I like that, but I can't hold you here.”

“Thank you for understanding.” Talia nodded.

“Say, have you put any thought into where you want to sit yourselves? If you need help...”

“No, no, it would take from the experience.” Talia insisted.

“I know men who can build very well...” Kalin offered

“It couldn't be that hard.”

Kalin stared, “Do you have any tools?”

“Honey” Saren intervened “She's just being earnest is all, let her build her own house.” Tittering at the role that was switched.

“She's being a fool is what she is! House building is hard.” He asserted.

“I lived my life in the nook of a tree,” Talia informed “A pile of boughs is like a mansion to me.”

“And when it gets cold?” Kalin suggested.

Talia pondered “Then... If it gets too bad, we'll just stop by your place. Ifn's your invitation is still open.”

“Of course, why wouldn't it be?” Saren answered

“Excellent.”

At this point, Farrah had awoken, no doubt by Talia's conversation with the hosts. Staggering less sore, she sat at the table and was handed a morsel from her best friend. “Thank you.” Farrah said reaching out.

“They are a lot better than war rations.” Talia remarked. Farrah chuckled.

“War rations?” Kalin asked.

“Oh, that story, we'll save that for another time. Amazing what one does for food out in the abyss.”

Time passed, conversations did too. Farrah was waiting for Gregory who still hadn't returned yet. Sun shown on her through the tops of the massive trees onto the balcony. They dazed her in trance, dancing rays of light, laughing, singing to themselves like ethereal children cast down to meet her. Did she miss Gregory? Maybe she thought. Light still trickling though. It had been a while now, she could gauge some sense of attachment or affection but she wasn't sure what to expect. Maybe she already felt love and it bounced off of her dunce forehead like a drunken butterfly and crash landed into a daisy. Maybe she looked too deeply into it. The longer he took to get back, the more she wondered; this confusion to her, was it a fools guess at which way the stars pointed or a fools errand to meet them. Her ship was lost at sea and no direction to point her to shore. Maybe it was nothing. The light regardless felt so rejuvenating, she could wait there forever if need be and sort herself out.

Farrah heard a sound, wings, flapping, it was near by. She shot up to find them but was disappointed. The neighbours passed by, unaware of her at first but glancing over slightly, they smiled then returned to their abode. Farrah returned to her seat. “Huh, that bad eh?” Talia commented.

Farrah turned to Talia and then back out past the balcony.

“These heights make even me paranoid” Talia said as she peered down below. “You think it's because of how big everything is here? Makes you feel pretty small, especially for me... Hey, you really do like him don't you? Greg...” Talia specified, “You seem pretty out of it waiting for him.”

“And who say's I'm waiting for him? It's nice out.”

“I know what I saw, he must mean a lot more than you realize, or you just ain't saying.”

“You really think so?... I've been wondering myse...” Farrah stopped. A tall handsome figure had just made sight, Farrah left to greet him, Greg had returned.

Talia exhaled, “What did I tell ya?” She answered alone.

“Farrah.” Gregory welcomed

Farrah flew around, still at a distance. Following him back to the deck where she just was moments ago. “Where had you been?” She asked.

“Around, about, just planning something for later.” He replied, looking away, hiding a grin.

Farah was excited, it had to be something for her, why else would he hide himself so obviously like he did.

Talia sat, staring off half unexpectedly, half expecting some acknowledgement of herself. Maybe a 'Sorry I ditched like that.' or 'As we were saying...!', Talia knew she wasn't going to get it. Talia saw it, young love, blind, literally, Talia was 'right freaking there'. Talia opened her mouth to speak but closed it, she would just wait a while longer. 'What was this' Talia wondered, now they were planning on going somewhere.

“Alright,” Talia got up, “That's it.” She flew up to Farrah's shoulders and dug her claws in innocently. No response. Talia needed height. She climbed but among the cat's tilted cynicism she slipped, falling back with wings now tangled in hair. Talia spazzed out trying to grasp the slipping strands of hair, like a fly caught in a web, wild noises began to erupt from the back of the magpie's nape. Hair tussled in the breeze of frantic flailing claws. At last, the hurricane had ended. In the top of Farrah's lovely head grew a goose egg, a large rapidly growing one with two ears and ominous eyes like glowing obsidian.

“You have, a...” Greg mentioned, staring into the eyes of the beast.

Farah fixed her hair, scratching the side of her head. “Yeah...I kinda got that impression a while ago...” Farrah confessed.

“I think we should get going then.” Greg suggested, turning himself to depart.

Farah noticed the light reflect off of his feathers, along his shoulders, his cheeks. She blushed furiously, almost enough to be seen without her goofy squished expression. Greg released both arms and tipped himself hurdling down below. Farrah returned to her senses and was about to follow but not before privately discussing. “Hi.”

“Just getting comfortable.” Talia innocently carried herself

“Mmmhm.” Farrah returned, just as obviously illegitimate.

Farah's wings opened much nicer today, the soreness only barely tense along her muscles, recovery had happened much faster than expected for an expedition into the abyss. At last, her strength could persist to test Greg even farther. Their morning flight took them across the bottom of the village, through daredevil gaps and skimming water. Each roll felt like a bed of grassy hillside along a divine barrage of penetrating light. Farrah felt entirely blessed. Along their path came a plateau of rock only as wide as two people laid out, stuck out of the bark of an old tree. They made their stay there.

The bark waved like shattered oceans, large tendrils came down with groove like seats in between. Lovely seats. They sat there a while, occasionally glancing over. Greg gave out his hand. Farrah, uncertainly receiving it by giving her own. “Farah.” He spoke.

“Yes.” Farrah replied after some time.

“You make a socially awkward man such as myself very happy.”

“You, socially awkward?” Farrah asked, looking up to face him.

“Ha...” He tittered. “You can't tell?”

“Not really.” Farrah replied

“Well, I'll tell you.” Greg said, turning himself to meet her. “Without a mask to wear myself... You make me very nervous.”

“How nervous?”

“Well... How nervous are you?” He asked hoping to hear the same. Farrah shook her head slowly not sure how to gauge it, but worry still took her eyes slightly. He caught the glimpse of it in her. “Multiply that by about ten.”

“How are you even holding yourself together?” Farrah asked, concerned

“I don't even know... I just know that, you, and...”

“HOLD IT!” Talia shot out. “Should I give you two some space?” She asked very calmly, looking to each individually. Both too quiet to reply. “I think I should give you two some space. I'll just be, um...” Looking around. “Over that a ways... Somewhere.”

Farrah nodded.

Talia turned to leave but hauled, returning slowly. “Oh... And um... Farrah, did you father ever give you a certain talk?” Talia inquired

“Uhh...” Farrah replied, clueless.

“Just... Um... Don't do anything to crazy... No, seriously.”

Greg would have died laughing but he curled into his seat, melting in embarrassment.

“He know's.” Talia commented to make sure nothing would happen.

“You know what?” Farrah asked.

“Nothing that you need to know for quite some time.” Greg replied, reassuringly.

With that, Talia nodded and left. “No, really, what is she talking about?” Farrah asked.

Their intimacy was cut short but they didn't change. Greg tried to resume some composure uttering “Well, it's...” Before falling silent and the two sat together, alone. Before long, Farrah slouched back, as did Greg and the two laid into one another. Farrah looked up, the still air down where they were was so peaceful. Maybe if she were to just hold more than his hand. She moved her arm slowly across his side, under his arm which shakily moved to her shoulder her head soon fell forward. This

warmth was like long ago but under fell under a new light. Her head, nestled into his chest, the smell of another. She fell back to her early memories, snuggled into her uncles arms. Autheor would sit by the fire, his feathers were stiff and itchy, but she got used to it. This was different though. Somehow she was even warmer, he was softer, more comfortable, more desirable, more than she ever felt. As though a mothers arms were replaced by a silver steed, protecting and accepting with the firm assurance of trust. It was intoxicating. Soon, Farrah drifted off and began to dream.

Red dancing splotches waltzed along her eyelids, slowly opening them she found herself in euphoria. She just laid there, looking up as the sun beamed blinded her, closing the eyes once more. Time itself moved still, calm and tranquil. Each leaf moving swayed like dandelions on the hill. Three figures flew above, going about their business. Farrah sat up. "How long was I out for?"

"A little while." Greg replied.

"Talia... Where is she?"

"She went to give us some privacy, remember?"

"Yeah... I do. Where did she go to?" Farrah began to feel uncomfortable without her friend.

"She should be fine Farrah. She's probably off in the distance ominously watching us like a... I don't know. Like she usually does."

Farrah pulled herself up, shaking the daze away. "I just don't want her to get lost, it's such a huge place."

Greg knew his peace had come to an end. "Alright." Getting up, he looked disappointed. "Let's go find her so we can go somewhere else for a while."

Farrah staggered to her feet. Taking off they headed in the last place they remembered her going. Talia had to be close by, especially knowing her. They passed through the immediate area, and could not spot their small friend. "Is it possible that we missed her?" Farrah asked, holding onto the confidence that they were just blind.

"I don't know, she's your friend, you should be able to spot her much easier than I can. After all, she's not that big."

They exhausted their search after many passes, soon Farrah became somewhat worried. What would happen if she became a snack for some foreign predator she never knew about, Farrah didn't want to think about it. "Are there... Any predators out he..."

"Don't be ridiculous." Gregory cut off. "We're... just blind is all. It's not like she could get that lost here. It's impossible to leave here without knowing it. Eventually you are bound to find yourself again."

"Talia!" Farrah called. "Do you think that she might have gone to Leanna's? I can see it from here."

"Can she fly that far?" Greg questioned.

“Maybe, I'm not certain.” Farrah worried.

“If anything, Leanna should be able to help.”

Over the lakes, past many homes, Farrah flew hoping that Talia was somewhere safe. Hoping maybe she might find Talia along the way. Climbing the basin of the hillside, they spotted some children by the story area. They had already gathered for their daily visit with Leanna early today. Landing there Farrah noticed a familiar face. Dressed in cloth, with braided hair and of all the impossible things, red lipstick. Farrah couldn't help but exclaim. “Talia!”

“I've been overrun by children.” The cat informed mellow dramatically.

“What brought you all the way out here?” Gregory asked, relieved. He would not admit his own worry.

“Well, while you two love birds were doing whatever, I saw Kaila crying to herself alone so I went to see what was up. We walked all the way here, I cheered her up and now we are friends.”

“Friends, huh?” Farrah teased.

“She's cool. Mathanial and Leean here are pretty chill too, and Va'ness can make all kinds of makeup out of things you never expected.”

Farrah adored, “You look marvelous.”

“Quite royal.” Gregory added, smirking.

“Some times a girl just needs to dress up and remind herself that she is a dog gone queen.” Talia remarked.

Farrah, happy to be reunited sat back and smiled. The sun flashed, Farrah rose her head to the sky. Three figured flew overtop, probably the same from before. They seemed to want to see Leanna. A lot of people did. She wondered if story time would be prolonged.

“Farrah.” Talia called. “You didn't... Worry about me, did you?”

“No... I knew you were safe...” Farrah pretended

Gregory laughed. “All the way here, 'are there predators here' 'what if she fell in the lake' 'could she have gotten lost'”

Talia smirked. “Sounds like someone isn't getting any tonight.”

Farrah hid herself. Gregory laughed harder. “Oops. Guess I walked right into that one.” Talia followed this humour, covering her mouth as she chuckled.

Most the kids headed off to do their own thing, while assumed Va'ness was trying to fix the poor braids in Talia's hair. Some loud noises could be heard from above. It caught Farrah's attention, no one

else seemed to notice. "So" Greg inquired. "Talia, what do you think of kids now?"

"They are all still crazy, but at least I'm not being dog piled, or chased, or leached upon. Oh and there was this one time when me and my cousins all went to the creek and everyone thought it would be funny to go upstream and take..." Talia's story was interrupted abruptly by a cup that had fallen. "That was odd... Either way it's probably best I don't say what they did ups..." Once again interrupted, this time by the crash and shattering of a wooden chair. Screaming and hollering could heard above, now more fierce and malevolent than before. Gregory had leaped to his feet, and Farrah dazed wasn't sure what to do. The voices called again and she backed up onto a standing and horrified position.

"Kids." Gregory ordered. "You should head down to the village, now." The kids stood there in shock, half unsure of what just happened. "GO!" He ordered. The kids followed the command. Gregory quickly headed straight for the entrance to Leanna's house, Farrah following wearily behind.

Inside the house was a mess. Furniture knocked over, some things broken. The hollering came from outside on the balcony. "Stop, she can't fly. What are you doing?" The voiced called. Gregory rushed out to see the matter. Three men flew out carrying Leanna in their claws. Gregory leaped out to the rescue, unarmed and in panic. Farrah soon made her way to find a man beaten on the deck, still pleading the men to stop. Farrah gripping the deck, she wasn't sure whether to leave the beaten man or to go with Gregory. The men couldn't be carrying Leanna, Farrah didn't want to believe it but part of her knew that it was. Hesitantly she scrambled out, making her way.

"Your kind is not welcomed." One of the men said, loosening his grip on Leanna.

"What could we have done to make you hate an old woman like me?" Leanna cried out.

The mans expression was stricken at the remark, a blind powerful anger flashed through him and he tightened his grip once more. "This is no longer your world. When I am done, no more of your kind will ever exist to tarnish this land." He finished, shirking his grip. With the weight on one leg, the other man released her, jerking Leanna out of either's grip and plummeted her old feeble body to the ground below.

"Leanna!" Gregory called, diving to catch her. One of the men turned, and fell with her, blocking Gregory from assisting. He was tackled in the air, pushed away from saving the woman he had known his whole life. Screaming, his attempt was in vein. Farrah too offered her effort but could not get close enough. She dove as rapidly as she could, knowing it was slim, catching up to save her. In a bleak moment, time stopped. Leanna's fall had been stopped by the home that she knew as it came to meet her. On the ground, in a cloud of dust, laid the heart of the innocent, forever at rest. Leanna perished in an instant.

Shock covered everyone but the assailants. Gregory begged his own life that his vision was clouded. Hallowing deathly cries Farrah snapped. All colour faded in her eyes, all chains dismantled. The gates that held back her fury had been decimated "You monsters." Her blood curdled with her voice "I'll kill you!" She broke off at blazing speed.

One of the men, the main aggressor beckoned her. Soon noticing her black body, the blue sheen on her back, the white tips of her wings "So, it seems there are more of these devils here." The man engaged, following the pursuit in the air.

Farrah swung herself mid flight to catch his neck with her claws. He parried and the two fell separate of one another. Both recovering and returning to exchange blows once more. Farrah's anger was without saviour. "I'll never forgive you, I'll make you pay."

"I don't need your forgiveness, nor owe you more than your death itself."

Gregory too joined the fight, aiding Farrah. "Gradius, I'll take on this one." The lucky said, blocking Gregory from the fight and starting his own.

Talia in the back of Farrah's nape, frantically trying to stop the conflict. "Farrah, what are you doing?" The two collided, Farrah's attack grasped Gradius's arm, throwing him off balance, forcing him to the cliffside. They began to spin and Talia was forced out. The last few strands of hair left the her paws and Talia frantically recovered her tumble. "Farrah! FARRAH!" Talia screamed "THIS ISN'T LIKE YOU, SNAP OUT OF IT!" but the words fell on deadened ears.

The two spun out, breaking from one another, Farrah skipping along the cliff and slipped. She rolled along the rock and leaped off, reengaging. Every fibre of her being screamed with hatred. Her blood boiled over, every nerve of her body burned like fire. "How could you!?" She cried out.

Planting firmly against the other, Gradius spat in her face out of spite. "You don't deserve life, nor that old woman, nor the dead man who lead us here." Once again, they disengaged, as they plummeted closer to the ground and attempted to regain their altitude.

"How could you hate an entire people, so much?!" Farrah roared.

"You don't know my suffering, how could any of your kind know what I endured!" Gradius retorted, gaining dominant height

"That's not an excuse!" They clashed, Farrah spinning them around and taking the top, only to get a foot planted in her face and the grip viced against her skull.

"While your people thrived, my parents starved to death to feed me. We had nothing, we were dirt, we were beaten, ostracized, damned, disgraced! I'll rather die than let your rich privileged tail flaunt any longer in matters you could never have experienced. You cannot vanquish my resolve."

Farrah in her respite managed to grasp tightly onto his nethers, and sent enough pain into Gradius to release his grasp. Both attempted to recover but rolled upon the ground. Gradius, quick to his feet took a lunge towards Farrah who's injuries weakened her ability to rise. Gregory swooped in before Gradius could reach, managing to break from his own fight to save Farrah. With this opportunity, Farrah used what energy she had to grasp Gradius's neck with her claws, digging them into his neck. "I didn't grow up all that nicely either." Farrah returned. Talia screaming in the background. "Why do you still hold onto your prejudice when my kind is no more, you've already won, what more is there left?!"

In the voice that he could muster, Gradius with a deathly stare returned "If you lived as I have, you would understand why I still hold this grudge. That is why you do not understand my hatred, and though I wish that you could suffer the same, you never will... Understand... My..."

Farrah tightened her grasp, watching the pain flow in him. "Farrah, this isn't you!" Talia

screamed in her ear, now firmly digging into her. "Do you really want to do this? Do you really want his blood on your hands?" Farrah ignored Talia, the anger overcoming all reason. "This doesn't make you any better than him. Don't do it Farrah, please! If you kill him out of hatred, you will be just like he is!"

Farrah awoken, fire still coursing through her. She didn't want to accept it. She knew he had to die. She would regret letting him live, he would only give her, and many others, trouble and threaten their lives. She saw the hatred still linger in her leer. He was a monster, as was she. She could accept damning herself, justly, righteously. Inside her own glare, she too saw the same look. It scared her. Just like him, his sense of justice was clouded, hers was blinded. The grip loosened. Farrah's will faltered. The monster leaving.

Gradius's lacky swooped in, knocking Farrah back. Gradius took to his feet, ready to assault but noticed fifteen men arriving to meet him. If he died now then all would have been wasted, his pride got the better of him and he shrugged. "Magpie, you live today." Gradius threatened, still facing her as he ran off. "If I were you I would fly away from here, very far from here." Gradius and his lackeys left quickly, turning themselves and running. In the air he leaped, escaping at high speed. In the distance, he uttered, "Because when I return, it will be with a royal army." Farrah frantic, jumped, clinging to follow him but fell back down. Her energy was low, and her immediate injuries would not allow her to chase at much more than a snails pace. She grit her beak, cussing under her breath before crying.

The angry mob aided her, soon discovering the situation. Gradius was scarcely in sight but ten of the original mob split to chase him, the others to help Farrah, and Gregory. Just past the battleground, Leanna was found and quickly poured over. The three that found Leanna returned solemn. Farrah, turned away. She couldn't face them, it was too much to bare and the guilt of being followed to Haven almost killing her inside. Silence. Not one person could speak, except for one who was tending to the injured as he asked what hurt.

More villagers arrived. Someone called out to keep the children away but Farrah couldn't hear it over her own heartbeat. She was lost in her mind, reliving the moment, taring herself apart internally. She wallowed for what seemed eternity, though her medic tried to reach her, she simply shut out the world. Getting up, Gregory rushed to her and gave her a hug. Farrah took the moment to try and love back but failed, her heart couldn't accept it. She broke him off and walked away. "Farrah, where are you going?" Gregory asked. The medic followed, but could not reach her even still. Gregory gave up and told the medic to let her be, she needed to mend herself. It hurt Greg to see, to think, to put his pride away and let her go. He was helpless, but she still had Talia. Talia could reach her.

Chapter 12: Misery

It was a dark place, as dark as she could find. Farrah locked herself away. Not one person could ever describe the maelstrom of emotions she had churning. The perfect storm erupted inside her and she laid down as though to die, if grace could gift her such luxury. Her torment was to face it alive, all of it, unending with no resistance. Life as she knew it ended before her devilled eyes, her justice faltered and in the sly hands of the game master, she had no winning play. She was to damn herself, or everyone else. Her mercy damned her, her vengeance damned her, her heart damned her and penance left across the hills with ten men who would damn themselves with success or failure either way. Her homeland damned her and soon haven would damn her too. Hatred breed parasites in them all. Trauma, fear, anger, doubt, these were the emotions on the surface. She was void, cold, and laid motionless. Much worse emotions churned beneath the skin.

Talia worried. Her friend always had a way of being over dramatic. All she could do was comfort Farrah. Talia left for a moment, and Farrah fell into a nightmare, alone. When Talia returned, Farrah had shed her shell, she turned to face her only solace with frightened cold sweat tears. Quaking. "I brought you this." Talia announced, revealing a sum of cloth much larger than she could ever carry alone. Farrah heard someone else, but they soon went away. Talia pulled the hemmed fabric over and placed it next to Farrah who did the rest. Talia returned to Farrah who took her into her wings. They stayed there for hours, Farrah finally opening up to Talia about how she felt in the moment for the first time. Talia soon understood, and immature herself, she hardly had the right answers to say. Though they were aged, they were just two kids out to take on the world with a tilted handicap against them.

Eventually Farrah left the tree roots which she hid in, groveling in the blackened soil. She was filthy, looking ridden with disease and deaths row. Inside she was still torn but managed to pick herself back up from the gallows. She wasn't ready to take on the world quite yet, but surely enough Farrah was recovering from her fit.

By dusk Greg returned to find her sitting in silence. She had been stewing on what to do. He approached cautiously with a heavy heart. Farrah finally noticed him and turned suddenly. Her face lit up, saddened. He knelt down, caressing her cheek. "You don't look much better bud." Talia intervened, seeming concerned.

"It's not as relevant as my love is."

"She's fine. We've been trying to figure out wh..." Talia was cut off

Farrah continued "I can speak..." She was sheepish at first but continued her thought. "The damage is done."

"I'd hate to break your perseverance but I'm not really ready to put this behind me." Greg admitted

Farrah started to understand more, he too was holding in some sorrow. "I want to apologize"

"There isn't anything to apologize for... What is done is done, right?" He answered solemnly

“Then what is wrong?”

Greg looked away. “I'm not really the best for this.”

“What do you need to say? Just say it. I'm okay now.” Farrah fret.

He couldn't find the words. “Alright.” His vision veered, stumped, he sat down. “Those men sure don't like you do they?...”

“No...”

“That's a real shame you know. You are a good girl.”

Farrah bit herself grumpily “I don't feel it...”

“I can imagine...”

“They wouldn't be here if not for me. Or my dad.”

“I kind of figured that much, ain't much we can do now though.” The two sat together, stirring their thoughts.

“Are, are you sure that you still want to be around me?” Farrah asked.

Greg bit himself, choking inside. “I'm not really sure actually.” He said plucking the grass from the ground, and then dissecting it. “It ain't that I don't love it but I'm a little on edge, and you are going to have to leave.”

“Why?” Farrah returned, broken. A tear now skimming her cheek.

“Those guys who said they were going to bring the royal army got away. Three men were brave enough to voyage out into the shadows but returned a little while ago. Those men were serious.”

“So it's too late...”

Greg nodded. “I don't want to see you hurt... But...”

“You know, if I never came by, Leanna would probably still be alive.”

“Probably... I don't know how they found you but yeah.”

Greg furiously began tearing grass out of it's roots.

“I'm pretty sure it had to do with my outburst in the tower. They said a dead man lead them here.”

“Dead men don't tell tales when their dead.”

“No... They don't. Can you forgive me?” Farrah asked, preparing herself to dig into her wrists even more.

“I don't know!” He shouted. “It's not something that is so simple.” He threw the grass down and got up. He was far too agitated to keep his calm. The heavy heart sank through his chest and pounded the cold ground below.

“So, you are one of those that take a while to let things sink in, huh?” Talia mentioned.

“Why would you ask that?” Greg shot out.

“Just that... You're a lot like me then...” Talia replied, sympathetically.

Greg swallowed a pit, turning away. “We need to take a break for a while so we can recollect ourselves.” Talia nodded, as Farrah however did not. She saw him walk frustrated, her own problems drifted away. She could only think about his. He turned around after slowing down and said. “You have a few days before they should arrive, where are you going to go? Have you thought about it at all? You can't take on an army that is looking for you.”

Farrah returned her composure, “Yeah... I was afraid that those men would get away so I was planning on leaving here.”

“To where?” Greg asked, begging to know

“Homeland...”

“What could that accomplish?” Greg cried. “You are just as wanted there too.”

Farrah returned to herself, looking over the pond. “I was planning on racing them back and stopping them.”

Greg shook his head. “How do you plan on doing that? You are just throwing yourself away.”

“If I don't, then they will come here and change your way of life. Any other magpies will be no more. It's all my fault, it's the only thing I can do to make good on this.”

“Maybe they won't come...” Gregory deluded himself.

“Really?” Talia butted in.

Greg turned back to leave. “I wish I could help you but I really don't know what to even do anymore.”

“Greg.” Talia consoled, “Your girlfriend needs your help, you can help stop this.”

“I... I still don't know how I feel, alright. I'm... Scared. I'm not even sure if I trust anyone. All of this is hard on me too.”

“If you change your mind, you don't have a lot of time.” Talia informed

“We'll be flying through the night.” Farrah added. Still not sure she was even worth the effort for Greg to devote himself to. “If you don't come with me... I'll understand. I won't hold it against you.”

He wanted to speak but he would only repeat himself. Torn at both ends, he left without another word. No “I love you.” No “I think we should leave each other.” No closure.

They saw him leave into the distance and returned to their plan. Farrah, absent minded. She cleaned herself off in the chill evening waters and headed for the edge of Haven's shoreline.

She stood upon the cliff where she entered, remembering the path here and took one final look behind her. The trees stood as silent as the stone, not a creature moved, no one there to send her off. She felt unwelcome, the sad reality aiding her self doubt. “This is it Farrah,” Talia spoke. “If you are really sure about this, I am behind you all the way.” Farrah nodded. It was time to return home. She had plenty of time flying in order to sort things out. She took her grace, and tipped off the edge taking her wings to the tides.

Farrah made a distance ahead before being caught in the eyes of someone very familiar. She flew away, still visible, skimming the surface of the shadow down's ocean of mist. She got away and though still able and ready, he couldn't bare himself to follow. Greg arrived to send her off. He wasn't sure whether he could will himself to leave, he hoped that when he got there that he might have made up his mind and kiss her off but he was too late. When he arrived only his body knew, and it knew well that he was not strong enough to endure. He cried out softly, but echoed a loud roar that pierced the fog. Farrah did not respond. To her, she feared the mighty distorted howl that reached her was Matilda. She flew faster. If anything, if she was around, Matilda would have been distracted away from Farrah. The majestic black bird disappeared. His love gone in the distance, his chance dissipating in the abyss. This was his closure, it hurt as he knew he could never give himself to her as she did for him. He felt unworthy, whether true or not, he cried there. His love lost in the same mists that brought her to him.

Chapter 13: Ascension

Just as before, the shadow downs were treacherous, the winds blew into the shoreline and hindered their travel. The smell of sulphur was something they had not missed. Dread pulled back to Farrah as she knew that they were now wet in their most dangerous journey all anew. As she stood on the cliff earlier, Farrah's mind was apathetic, the reality of this journey seemed pale as compared to her faded sight now. She knew she could not return, only press into the eye of the storm she had embarked to endeavour.

Beside the fracture and uneven ground, Farrah began to mellow out in cruise control. She fought it once before and she survived, with an idea of what to expect her body set to autopilot and she was haunted by her thoughts.

Once out into the mists fully, she began to set astray her mind. The silence and the wind, her old friends came to meet her. For the long voyage she continued to where she left off, before Gregory arrived. She had built a new resolve, the past could not be altered, so she would face the reality that she was wrong to hunt him down; but he was wrong too. Gradious sparked a fury within her, her fury over heinous atrocity in and of itself. He was less her enemy than he was a carrier of the true enemy she sought to quench and silence. The only way to save her Haven was to stop the man who endangered it by an equally brutal conquest that Farrah was committed to. She would have to finish the job.

Farrah flew bitter, she didn't want to, but it was her only option to stay alive apart from running away once more. She wanted to run away but nowhere was safe and no new safe haven rose up from the ground, least not for her sake. Farrah was tired of living in fear, tired of having the world against her, tired of losing the people that were close to her. She had to fight, there wasn't anything else. If she were to be damned, she would make sure it that meant something.

After a while, Farrah began to wonder about the world. How closed away from it she was, she never knew much more than what she could see outside of a glass bubble. Farrah wondered how the people lived in dire straights in the shadow downs, then again to eight years ago, and she wondered how the kingdom lived now. Did the upheaval make life better, did their justice enrich the lives of the unfortunate? Could an action that wronged many good people still blossom a good ending in order to dispel evil? Was the world for those people brighter because of harsh actions against the magpies or were they disillusioned by hateful people? As the blade turned inside the wound, were the new leaders, still sore, fulfilled by its sadistic pleasure? Did her own suffering go to waste just on someone's game of revenge eight years later? The whole world she thought she knew from the outside of the snow globe was skewed even now. She had no idea. It was too much for her to bare.

What Farrah wished and what has handed was so distant. Nothing was right. No one was right. She stripped the thought from her mind and kept flying. The daunting voyage pulled her aside to rest. With sun fading, and a trickle of rain, it may be time to head in but nowhere safe was in sight. Her journey just began, there was no time to wait until morning, every moment weighed another drop in the glass. Farrah would have to continue while there was still strength left to use. The rain stopped, just a small passing of spatter and on again into the mists she continued, hoping to find shelter so she may change her mind.

Farrah started to laugh. Some lining irony fell onto her. It wasn't anything she thought to expect, just in passing she realized how similar she was to all the locals. Like her, they were cast away from the lands above; and though the shadow downs harboured their own dangers, it began to feel more and more like home. She could never live here though, it humoured her for a moment. For now, she sure felt like a local, but Farrah knew very well what the real blood thirsty monsters looked like.

Her mind returned with the thought. When Farrah saw the monster within her, when she saw the sorrow in Gradius that is when she realized the compassion she had with her enemy. However, unlike him, she relinquished that hate; he however, still stewed upon the feast of his own prejudice. Maybe it brought him joy to hate, maybe he wasn't ready to move on. Maybe even now, Farrah was childish and prideful herself to think she was better or more matured than he was.

There she went again. Farrah tried to ignore the thought that weighed her down but it returned. She knew something was wrong, she knew that she was wrong, Farrah accepted already this but it would not leave her. His words still echoed in her. Voices saying that she could never understand because she didn't live as he did, else she would feel the same. She could not deny this, she simply didn't know his life. Her life may very well have been much better than his. Maybe Gradius was hurt to the point where he physically could not overcome or find the will to forgive. Maybe he learned to hate so it may relieve the sorrow. Maybe the atrocities he saw, as Farrah did, he too blamed on those around him. Each moment of her empathy drove her less and less wanting to fight him.

Farrah had every reason to feel hurt, the people who rebelled had every reason to feel hurt. It would be wrong to let people suffer tyranny, but it wronged Farrah and many good people when they struck the magpies back; and though they were on opposing sides Gradius and her both felt righteous to strike the other in consequence of those long past events, even now.

Maybe neither side were to blame, Farrah hoped. Maybe there was no one to blame. Farrah flustered, frustrated that there must be some point to all of it. To her rampant mind, to the everyone's careless judgment, to why it burned her up so badly. The whole ordeal was senseless. After long enough of two sides fighting a war, does the spark that started the war to begin with no longer remain relevant. What else is there left but vengeance, could the line ever be drawn?

With a reality in front of her outside either's control, Farrah began to wonder if she would be taking the hurt she felt too far, or if her justice would retain the peace between peoples. Would her justice not then turn the tides against her for her wrongs, was it not just to want freedom or was it not just to ascertain it. Though three men ventured out where no one dared go, it would be a shame if no one ever heard from them again.

Night fell, Farrah was tired and rested a while again, Talia was well on watch, oblivious to the force of the storm brewing inside her best friend. In the distance, something caught their attentions. Farrah was relieved, though she made herself seem tough, she desperately needed rest. As they approached, Farrah was still uncertain about how she felt. To be honest, Farrah was trying to talk herself out of this whole thing if she could. Some ideas came to her, crazy alternative ideas. In the moment of her uncertainty Farrah devised something much, much bigger than her. Talia was with her all the way, but Farrah worried that even this thought was too much. One extreme after another. Farrah put her pride away, she was not the only one in this. Maybe, just maybe Talia could give her what she needed to head. Action had to happen, but action must be governed to protect from the wrath of our own judgments.

“That's the craziest thing I've heard yet!” Talia exclaimed. She could not believe what Farrah just told her. “Are you trying to get yourself killed?”

“You are 'with me all the way' right?” Farrah played out. “Then just tell me what you think.”

“I just did!” Talia replied hysterical “...What happens if you get caught? What happens if you can't persuade him, what if we are too late?”

“We are prepared for that one...”

“...Yeah, but... You want to talk to the king?”

“I told you, I'm tired to running away, and I'm tired of living in fear.

“The King, the guy that wants you the most dead?”

“I'm tired of hating people, alright!” Farrah defended.

“Look, it's like you said, no one will suspect a thing out here. It's that simple.”

“And maybe I don't want his blood on my hands after all!”

Talia understood. She hushed up. “I guess if I told you to, then it would be on my hands too right?” Talia sighed

Farrah dug her head into her arm wrapped knees. “I'm sick of hate, I'm sick of fear, and I'm sick of running away.”

Talia sat and stumped. “So, we wait for this to all blow over?”

“I'd Rather die... I can't stand living a life in fear anymore, always running. I can't keep living when I can't hold onto anything. I can't just do nothing and hope everything to go away, so I rather fight until I succeed or... Well...”

“Brave words. I always figured you were shut in and frail. There is some strength in you yet. Farrah... I wish I had that spirit.” Talia paused. “You know... I really I kinda had to talk myself into this, I didn't really feel like launching an assault anyway.” Farrah still curled up beside the wood, looking deeply into her options. “Do you... Think you have a chance?”

Farrah didn't know, she lowered her head deeper.

“I'm with you either way.” Talia assured.

“We should sleep here.” Farrah peered into the cubby inside the tree. “I can't keep going at this pace, I'm falling behind and my mind is a mess.”

Silently they crept inside. Between the cavity of the dead tree, Farrah slowly fell asleep, nodding off in the chill moist air. Talia laid against Farrah's shoulder, well awake. She wasn't worried

like she used to be, she wasn't thrilled either. Talia poured over the idea, whether they had a chance, what Farrah could even say to prove her life's value. She was a fool, so was Talia to follow. Farrah couldn't possibly succeed alone, not without Talia's help. It was time to accept that Farrah had her own will, She couldn't help it and Talia couldn't change it. Everything sucked. Farrah finally opened up to her and now headed into the dragon's lair. Wouldn't be the first time, or the second time, or the sixth time and came out alive. It still sucked. Talia hated taking chances, with only a few lives left maybe it was time to make good use out of them before retiring.

Morning came, dim lit. Talia woke up, taking in the mist. She let Farrah sleep a while longer before waking her friend up. Farrah, weary moved her head, she had nowhere near the rest she needed. "Farrah." Talia announced. "I think you can do it..."

Farrah wasn't sure what Talia meant but it was encouraging. Talia still didn't know whether she believed it or not but the cat didn't have much choice in the matter.

As before, the sights were dull. The day dragged on, no sign of danger. The first time through here was definitely an eye opener however Talia slept her missing hours as they reached the end.

Before sundown they began to climb again. It was tiring to ascend the great height, but the shattered ground and something they could smell told them that they were closing in. They could not tell which way would they would need to go once they arrived at the shores. Running into *Oblavaeya* was definitely the last place they wanted to pass by.

At last, their stealth under the tides vanished and they were greeted with the pours of light following a large wall. This massive wall was the shores of homeland, they made not only one journey across but two successful voyages past lands no one braved to cross. Now the danger was above, unable to see anything much more than the cliff side and the rolling fog below.

Peering off the edge of a hanging plate, they could see nothing dangerous. Actually, it seems that they veered off course dramatically. The area they were in now was different than the prisons', this filled them with some hope that lasted them atop and well into the valley. They saw formations and ways the ground fractured that were familiar to their decent but this was not their original trail. It reminded Farrah just how stable Safe Haven was, what it lacked was the extremities of homeland's brittle decrepit plates as such. It was shocking that here too didn't fall into the shadow downs with the rest.

Their flight had to be kept as swift and out of sight as possible. The gloaming Valley walls were the best they could ask for, the sun had faded and so had they. Her experience flying the thick mists aided Farrah's flight in the dark passage. She never had the nerve to traverse these canyons past dark but time held her steady in pace. After her whole ordeal, she hid the fact very bravely that it wore on her. The muscles were well used, and she rode on the borderline of her ability, her bones ached which helped even less. She was riding out of determination, unfortunately determination has need of clairvoyance. In the haze of flight Farrah accidentally came too close to the sides and rubbed the wall. Quickly she recovered, stopping the momentum and waking Talia quite well to the fact. "You need to rest." Her passenger announced.

Farrah didn't respond, she was embarrassed and prideful. Talia continued to lecture her about her rest but Farrah kept going until almost colliding with the rock and took an evasive roll. It was now that she realized that her trip here would mean very little without her life. Farrah gave in. They came

out of the canyon and found a place for the night. Talia worried greatly. Farrah was too tired to sleep.

The stars that came out to play between the clouds made dancing figures in weary sight. Half moon rays shot dim beams across the sky. Farrah smiled. She had made plenty of distance. Maybe Gradius had rested more frequently. Farrah wished that she could have eaten more. The last meal before leaving was the hardest. She could barely find the appetite and had overindulged for the long road. Now she had very little and a hunger still yearned in her. The moon did little to light the underbelly of the bushes behind them as they looked off, finding food now would be a struggle. For a moment she feared that she too had slowed down tremendously due to her wavering stamina. The worry of this many times kept her awake.

“Farrah,” Talia mentioned, knowing very well her friend couldn't sleep. “What are we going to do after this?”

“I'm not sure we can think about that.” Farrah admitted, hopelessly. “I don't know.”

“Well, we keep wondering what will happen if the worst happens and that's gotten quite tiresome. I want to think about something happier like, what happens after win and show that punk up.”

Farrah thought about it. “I'd love to return to Safe Haven.”

“But you'd be free, right?” Talia suggested, as though hinting that there was more.

Farrah couldn't believe it. “No...” She knew that acceptance was more than just a one day reality. “Even when I'm old like Leanna, I will still be hated.”

“I guess that makes sense.” Talia sighed discontentedly. Farrah nodded slowly. “I was thinking there was something here I kind of wanted to do.” Farrah tilted her head. “I could only bring myself to do it if I had you by my side.” The little cat explained. “I want to introduce you to my family. I...” She paused. “Guess I've been...” Talia pouted. “It's nothing.” Looking away. “I've been a little homesick lately.”

“I know how you feel. You still have a family.”

Talia agreed calmly. “They're kinda nutty, and overly playful, and embarrassing and stuff but I guess they mean well. It's just, I wish I could give you a family.”

Farrah broke out laughing. “Give me a family?”

“I don't mean it like that!”

Farrah continued to laugh. “If you could give me a family I would already have one with Greg... It's not something you just give someone. You just have it. Like you and me.”

“So, what am I to you anyway?” Talia lightened up

“You're like my sister.”

Talia smiled. “I really couldn't ask for more.” Talia nestled in.

“I guess I wouldn't mind though.”

Talia's ears perked up. “hm?”

“Meeting your family before I return.”

“Yeah... I miss them... More than I like to admit.”

The night danced, Farrah's sight slightly bettering but hazy, she would be soon asleep. The brighter thought brought her some peace and the world began to drift away with her hardships. Moonlit linings and stars pierced her mine and seemed to lead in through her eyelids. She could see them clearly, and she wondered if she was actually awake in this moment of piece, the first she had all day.

“Wait...” Talia questioned. “Like, big sister, or little sister?”

Farrah placed her hand on the cat and hushed it to sleep.

Farrah woke up early, not by the new light but by a hunger that pained her and made her nauseous. Without much thought, she rose rolling Talia to the ground. Farrah ran off in search of food. At last, some berries on the bush. She cared little at that point whether they were good or not. A few bites in and she recalled the taste well. “Grouber berries!” Talia exclaimed, diving into the bush from behind. After a long awaited nourishment, the two sat along the valley. Strength returning, Farrah rested again. When she woke, she was determined. “Any closer to knowing what you are going to tell that guy?” Talia asked, climbed mount and gave a strangling hug. Farrah shook her head.

They had read a map on a few occasions now, it was no question of wonder how it worked. Farrah could picture the placement of the capital in her father's study, it hung on the wall, and the top pointed north. She knew where the prison was that she lived in, as well as the rough area. Merely a short ways off from there was the capital, if anything if she got close enough she could ask someone. They came from the lower mid right, or east, of the island. To reach their destination, they would go north west, and a little luck would guide them.

Farrah knowing her little time left had to dart for it, seen or not. If Gradious spotted her, he was too close to the king to begin with. It was a gamble she had to take, else gamble the time either way and pray she was not too late.

Familiar hills formed, memories passed her, some of them good memories. After passing by all of them she knew she was closing in. If anyone she could trust, Farrah knew there was a slight detour to be made within an hours flight from their current position. In a small town on a pedestal, she fell. People all around stared as always but it made little difference to her, their concern meant near nothing. The shop bell rang. Turning the corner, the shopkeeper noticed her and leared. “You again! Out of here!”

“I don't have time for you old man, give me your son.” Farrah retorted, taking control.

The old man tilted back. He placed both hands on the counter and leaned forward in a powering pose. Lifting his hand to the door and demanded she left. “If you do not go, I shall inform the authorities!”

“Yeah, and what are they going to do?” Farrah returned assertion, she had a bone to pick with the intolerant coot and she tried her hardest to contain her frustration with him.

“What is the fuss?” The young man asked, exiting the back. Farrah looked at him and turned around, beckoning the rabbit to follow. He did so without hesitation.

“Where are you going?!” The old man barked.

After asking the son, Farrah left. He told her exactly how to reach the capital. It was less than half a days flight even yet. She held strong and bolted in her race to the king.

“You were so... COOL!” Talia remarked. “You were all like, Get out of my way old man! And whatnot.”

Farrah chuckled a little. She had started the timer. As long as she got to where she was going, it wouldn't matter what trouble she caused and the old man was really asking for it, even though she didn't have the best thought argument to dish him.

In time Farrah began to notice the outskirts and city walls of the capital. Past here, she would be in the midst of the hornets nest with enough guards to tackle an invading army. Talia took a peek above, and astonished. “It's huge!” Which accurately described it. The area Farrah would have to traverse would be eminence. Talia was her eyes, the small creature that no one would expect. A relay for their path.

They closed into the walls. Farrah did her best to look out for guards from the trees. Hoping to find a weak spot she waited for the prime moment and left to hug the wall. Talia made the large flight to the top and peeked along the parameter. Giving Farrah the signal, her friend climbed up and peeked around. When it was safe, they jumped the wall. On the other side they found a low class part of town, people were everywhere and there were scarcely any alleyways to duck into. Farrah noticed something before falling down. She glid down and made the best attempt of sneaking around that she could. Talia had a taste of what was to come in directing through the bustling area. Farrah soon found one of the options she had in front of her. A dark purple cloth awning waged, the thing that caught her attention, it was slightly torn. She dismantled it which was effortless and the cloth was so old and fragile that it could be easily ripped from it's holding. She wrapped herself in it, which was enough to cover her features.

They kept moving along, crossing a good portion of the town's lower class. People here didn't seem distraught. They didn't seem sickly either. There were a few that they passed by but it seemed as though even most of the poor managed to do well for themselves compared to the homeless drifters that sneaked towards the centre. After entering the higher class, the buildings gained in size and the ally ways became more abundant. There were some dark and damaged ally ways which made every street that much more sightly as they crossed making as little attention as possible. The great amount of people was dazing. Talia never expected how difficult her job would be. The off guard roamed but otherwise it was hard to spot Farrah and Talia in the crowds. They must have zig zaged half across the town by the time they could finally approach the castle.

In the centre of the capital stood the tallest, stone towering monolith of them all. Though they could see it from far away, the sight from below was incredible that such a structure could exist. Master

masonry and a few magic incantation could have been the only thing to erect it. To think, Her father, Daven, the king's own brother lived here for most of his own life. Cedric would often visit or reside, but the Grey Quarter estate was elsewhere. Of all her royal blood, she never came close to entering it's doors.

Farrah couldn't see any way of breaching it's walls, the fortress was well designed and would take a master thief to enter. They circled it for a while looking for a way in until Talia had a plan. They found their ladder and the little miscreant went to work. On the wood awnings of the castle, Talia flew to and with a little phoenix magic she started fires on each tinder dry roof. Once there were enough distractions between the guards and the townsfolk, Farrah took a chance and climbed up to one of the windows along the shaded side of the stone tower. Men were heading down the stairwell in a hurry, she had no choice but to hang off the edge for them to pass. The idea was to hide inside somewhere and wait for the signal out of sight from the city below, but there was no place to go inside. She got another brilliant idea. Farrah made her ascent to a flag mantle facing outside and clung to it. She became the new flag in it's place. Talia who after causing the distractions went in search of a window leading to the king. Eventually, he would have to return to his throne room so naturally that was the first place in mind.

Farrah was out of ideas, and had to wait until Talia could find her. At least she managed to gain half the height of the building. Farrah looked below, no one noticed her so far and it was rather amusing to be unseen. Either her disguise worked well, or the time old myth that no one ever looks up was gratefully true. Not much longer Farrah heard a whistle. She looked around. Talia was somewhere. After some time Farrah spotted her. She returned with a whistle herself but Talia was blind. Talia began to look around the tower but Farrah broke their code “No!” She whispered harshly. “Here!” Talia looked about but was oblivious. “The dark thing.”

Talia tilted her head. “The flag?”

“Yes.”

“You're behind it?” She asked, getting closer.

“I am the flag.” Farrah chuckled.

Talia's eyes lit up. “You are the flag! I couldn't even see you. I never knew that could be a thing.”

“Yeah, well, it's a thing alright.”

“Follow me.” Talia found the room. Farrah agreed and left with Talia. Hopefully they could navigate without being spotted. The fires were on the other side of the castle so they should at least avoid the attention of the guards. They scaled the walls trying to make the gap between windows. Soon they came upon the last windowsill, the one Talia found.

“So, is he there?” Farrah asked.

“Take a look for yourself.” Talia provided.

Inside the window, though she was cautious to peer through. The king was busy talking to

someone, he must be the king, he wore a crown though his garments were more military; a steel plate under his open purple robe and chain mail wrist gauntlets. For a king, he was not very flashy nor flaunted exquisite jewellery. Merely a small pointed coronet with one gem in the centre. It was neither gold nor silver. Farrah wondered. The old king wore a much more extravagant crown as her father mentioned and visitors joked upon. Still, he was the only noble man in the court.

Chapter 14: Naked

While Farrah thought about what she was seeing, Talia was busy trying to break in. The windows were closed glass panes with clay cocking around the edges. She tried digging away and sure enough the old patch job began to chip but it would take too long to removed. Farrah noticed Talia's efforts and tried to help. They managed to get a finger hold and Farrah used her beak to pry the window open. The crusted fill cracked free, and Farrah grabbed the window as it almost fell out. The glass then slipped out of her hands as the clay edge gave way in her fingertips. It seemed like minutes as the glass fell to the ground and shattered. It was too late to worry now. Farrah peered in again. They could hear the conversation clearly.

“Likely, it will be held off until the third day after the celebration but we'll be sure to patch it up. No sense in leaving it bare while the workers are elsewhere. It's still usable.”

“Then I'll send preparations out to the stockpile to have the materials reserved and readied for next week.”

“I don't suppose you'll be making a few others?”

“Hardly, what for?”

“It's strange that fire should just start up.”

“They are strange indeed. Guards have been posted outside the room but there are no signs on what started them.”

“One fire is odd, two fires is deliberate. Do you suppose it was a message?”

“What of?”

“Perhaps someone was ill pleased with the effectiveness of the complaints box.”

“Impossible. I've handled every one of them personally. The only one to complain about my work are the well to do and the radical. No matter how much you give some people they are never satisfied.”

“I would take it as a warning, sire. The people are still unstable to call anyone king, no matter how much you try to earn their trust. We left one tyrant to receive a radical just as you described.”

“Give them time, this is petty in comparison to their other attempts to gain my attention.

“Very well. I shall see to our arrangement.”

While watching their movements and focus, Farrah managed to slip in through the windowsill. She did not have much time. Some people had noticed the broken glass below and she needed to get in. Farrah hid behind one of the banners. She made sure to be as quiet and still as possible. Her breath was

as still as it could be, though her heart raced uncontrollably and she could hear it almost as loudly as the two gentlemen. She heard every sound, the one man had left and his footsteps followed him down the hall. The king, assumedly, turned about to return to his throne but stopped. His steps were in place. Silence, the drafting sound of a slight breeze outside, the turn of a foot on the surface. Once again, silence.

“You should know that I see you.” He said, quietly enough for Farrah to hear. She was alone with him, she was sure of it. He made no attempt to retrieve his guard, she had his attention.

“Can we speak for a moment?” Farrah softly asked. The throbbing beat of her heart trembling her voice to crack.

“There is life behind that banner after all. Reveal yourself.”

Farrah tried to land quietly but couldn't. She left a noise equal to the dropping of a small stone and the guards turned the door to face her. Farrah lifted both hands, walking calmly towards the king, she knelt down after her legs gave out of fear. She was close enough. “I just want to talk.” Talia still hiding behind the banner not to confuse the situation with her presence. She understood that her kind was unknown and would rise suspensions. Farrah was alone with the king.

“I said reveal yourself. Discard those rags.” He demanded. Farrah slowly undid the piece that she torn off to cover her face. The king's eyes widened. Farrah then followed by removing the cloth around her body. As it fell, the king was in awe. Like the last rose of a dying land, a magpie knelt before him with nothing left to hide. “Why are you here? You're kind was removed long ago by my father.”

“I have come to be reconciled. I can no longer live like this.” Farrah began to stutter

“I can understand your trespassing. Had you been seen, you would have been executed under much prejudice. What makes you think however, that you may find reconciliation within my court?”

“I am tired...” Farrah choked. “...Of living in fear.” The trembling voice cut off.

“Yes. Any one would fear the life deemed unworthy out of mistrust and blind aggression. What would so set you apart from another of your kin?” He asked, looking down curious but in partial disgust. He seemed wavering, shocked most certainly, but he was skeptical about something much different than who she was.

“I'm tired of all the hatred. I'm tired... Of hating people.”

The king sighed. “Dear... You cannot simply stop hating people, or being hated. I have seen enough of it to know that you cannot prove your worthiness to be reconciled by the throne.”

Farrah was stunned. His voice was sympathetic, but his words lingered of ingrained doubt and closed mindedness. “Please!” Farrah cried. “There is still good left in our kind.” Talia knew it, she saw Farrah and never saw anything else but good in her. Inside she believed that Farrah had the gift to show someone that but she started to realize the impermeable wall of prejudice that people had and the situation became bleak.

"I'm sure there is." The king agreed, "However, you cannot prove to me with words. This is the reality of where we are and how we have come to be as we are."

"Then what do I need to do to for you to forgive us?" Farrah begged on her hands.

"Us? The magpies?..." The king poured farther over the girl "You mean to say that you do this for the whole of an entire people?" Farrah nodded. The king debunking his disbelief. "An entire people that, however great you may be yourself, still masses those who hate us in return just the same." Farrah was completely still. "If not for yourself," The king continued, "Then what would you sacrifice your own life for those whom would selfishly not sacrifice the same for you in return?"

"Anything... Everything!" Farrah cried.

The king was astounded. Every word he heard, he wished that he could believe. Every ideal latent in his mind peeked his interest and shock to his eyes. He grit himself. He walked to the guard, and requested for the mantle. Talia witnessed everything. Her heart bursting out of her chest. At this pinnacle, she was helpless. The king whispered to the guard, and he took his place. Farrah looked up to see the guard standing directly above her, partly grieving himself but blank with the expression of duty and joy of servitude. He, among the two, was chosen to do the solemn rite of his liege. "If you intend to prove your words, magpie, then for your people I ask that you give yourself."

Talia was frozen, her heart stopped. The executioners axe in hand being raised. Farrah took a look towards it. She had no choice, there was nothing left. In these moments as she laid down on her side, memories and thoughts poured like veins of mana. She wanted to end the hatred because it lead to more, each man of the village who sought after Gradius irked vengeance, the single act spread cancer like disease and famine. Each order to capture another magpie passed on to the victim of blinded malice. Each starving child with a mind yet to be decided, left tainted without the love of those who cared. It wasn't enough to ask for herself but to save the turmoil and fate of an entire race to continue to breed more unnecessary friction in the innocent and the impressionable youth. Good people still made bad choices. She laid her life down to conquer her fear. If she was unable to live free then she could not bare living it. This was not by any means surrendering, this was her fight and she was still very much fighting even as her shoulder braced cold stone, and her eyes closed to see Talia, screaming, crying, rushing over to stop them.

"STOP, DON'T DO IT!" Talia begged, he voice shattering her own throat. Farrah never heard such a beautiful sound, it was as though her ears were plugged all her life and for the first time she heard the real voice of her cynical, sarcastic little friend. "PLEASE, SHE'S MY BEST FRIEND! YOU CAN'T TAKE HER AWAY FROM ME!"

Farrah was saddened but it was time. In her last words, she spoke to Talia that she could barely hear over her own cries. "Love."

The great heft of the solid steel blade came crashing down, the sound of it smashing into the ground echoed and deafened Farrah, and her vision became black. Talia screamed but Farrah could not hear her. All there was was silence. In the darkness, Farrah felt cold. Her body numb, the wonder of death. It seemed so peaceful. She smiled. Moments passed and she began to see a light. A blurry vision of the throne room returned to haunt her. Was she a ghost now? She looked up and saw her executioner laughing, was he really that happy to see her life end? She still couldn't hear much other than screaming. A fire reputed. She could see the pain inside the guard's face but he kept laughing heartily.

She looked to the king who was concerned more with Farrah, the other guard held Talia who was completely engulfed in flame. The king smirked. Farrah's expression still standing. She laid her head back down and relaxed. Hearing returned, nothing happened. She just laid there ready to die this time, she realized that she was not dead.

The darkness she saw was the blade in front of her face. The king called out to her “Magpie! Do you still wish to give yourself?” He said in pleasure. “Have you a taste of fear? Do you not flinch?” She shook her head. “Then you a streak of anger? I had fully the intention to frighten you, to break the trust that I would end you peacefully so that I may watch you suffer. Do you not hate me for this?” Farrah only smiled. She was happy. Not that she lived but that she was no longer afraid. “Do you have the slightest thought that I may spare your life?” Farrah shook her head and laid it to rest. “Then you still place your life in my Deceitful hands?”

Farrah laid still. The guard in behind began to panic as his hands were burning. The king walked up to Farrah and placed his hand on her shoulder. “Can you live through so much that death does not scare your subconscious, and yet trust your enemy without hate.” Farrah opened her eyes to find the king, gritting himself in tears. Farrah nodded. “How?” He asked, trembling.

“This life is not worth living in fear, or hatred.”

“Do you really think you can change anything?” The king begged. Breaking under his steel armour and knee bound fractured stature

“I may not be given respect by respecting others, but how could I ever expect to be given love if I were to show them hatred? If I were to hate you, how would I have the right to be forgiven?”

The king's heart sank. Something latent came to him, some childish desire he had tucked away after all the hardships. He wanted to believe but never could he prove it to anyone, not even himself. He clenched his face and turned away. After swallowing his pride, he returned to Farrah. “Rise.” He requested.

Farrah was slow to her feet. The two guards were struggling to keep Talia under control, passing the fireball between the other like an explosive potato. Finally she broke free, with a deep rage in her eyes, Talia lashed out. “TALIA!” Farrah ordered. “Enough.”

“But they tried to kill you!” The miniature inferno howled, “And then they had the nerve to laugh in your face. These people aren't worth proving yourself to, their despicable GARBAGE!”

Farrah grasped Talia and held her close. “I'm sorry for what I have done... Talia” The king admitted. “What I did was cruel and you have every right to hate me for it. As I said, Farrah, is it? You cannot simply stop people from hating. They have to stop hating first.”

“Then why you do some crazy thing like that!” Talia roared

“Your friend cannot prove anything with words, even actions can be false. Even when pushed, and ample reason to hate me, you, Farrah, were selfless. I wish I didn't have to be so cruel, but others can be deceivingly more so. Talia, can you forgive me?”

“Why should I bub?!”

“Because Farrah already has.” The king gestured towards the magpie.

Talia turned her head to see her friend. Farrah smiled and nodded.

The king continued. “I’m sorry that I cannot reconcile you before the court, but you have reconciled yourself in me. My guard follow me but they may not believe the same and that is fair. For your life and beyond that, you will never be fully reconciled by everyone, nor your race. Trust takes time, and though my father meant well, he did little to appease others and he too acted out of his prejudice until the day he was civilly uncrowned. Your errand is too great for even your own lifespan, but you can still aid your mission. If you still wish to reconcile the magpies, then I will offer you what you need. You have my respect. I will give you a room here, food, and a guard. Most of the new royalty was formed from the rebellion so I cannot guarantee your safety. Do you still wish to help your people? I will understand your declination. You are at worse odds than even I am.”

Farrah wasn't sure what to think. Talia still held some grudge but she became lost in the king's offer. His respect was mesmerizing, mere moment's ago, they were enemies. Farrah couldn't decide. She came from knowing certain death to once again the fear of death unknowing. “Can we think about it?” Talia asked.

“Certainly. Either way, I will offer my space to you until you have come to a decision and I will consider you working until that time arrives.”

Talia and Farrah were quite pleased. The king quite closely sided to them, and with no prejudice took the hand of an exiled race. It was sad that their alleged freedom was just as fruitless as the shadow downs. Though they gained the respect of a single man, little had happened. “Say, Farrah, there was something else we wanted to come here for?”

“Ah?” The king inquired.

“Well, it's kind of difficult to ask.” Farrah explained. “We originally came to prevent catastrophe, but I felt that if I couldn't prove myself worthy of you then there was no point in trying... And I couldn't bring myself to stop Gradius...”

“Gradius, his name is familiar.”

“Well, wouldn't you like to know what your hard earned tax dollars are doing?” Talia mentioned. “The guy went off exploring for hidden treasure instead of working his post.”

“Talia!” Farrah butted. “Gradius, the Jail warden of Obla...van.”

“Oblavaeya.” The king cited

“Yes, he found a map to an island far past the shadow downs and caused a lot of trouble.”

“He nearly raided the place!” Talia added. “What a horrible foreign affair!”

“Is that so?” The king asked.

“Oh yeah, that's a thing alright!”

“He swore he was going to return with the royal army to conquer the land and everyone in it.” Farrah informed. “I was so scared that I had nowhere left to go that I came all the way here.”

The king laughed unpleasantly. “Not without my order. Is that all that bothers you? Here I thought it would be a matter of country wide crisis. You have my assurance that even without you here, I would have denied such a selfish request. We are not ready to conquer anyone while we are still recovering and that would be no better an example to set than what we have already lived through.”

“Really!?” Farrah and Talia cheered together.

“You have my word. But all of this brings up some interesting questions. I may need to speak with you formally right away. I will not judge you so that you may speak freely, I have entrusted you this freedom.”

“Wow, you're really awesome!” Talia exclaimed. “I mean, you are giving us all of this, and just a little while ago, I mean...”

“If I cannot forgive others, how could I forgive myself?” The king returned, smirking. “I may use my version of what you said to me Farrah, if you do not mind.”

“No, please. You may.” Farrah insisted.

“McWhilliams, clear the meeting room for me, I have some urgent business that absolutely need tending to. I, these two young ladies and yourself alone please. Tarin, please watch my throne room for me... Oh, and... Do arrange for a replacement window, it will be quite distracting with that thing open like that.” The guard jumped to notice the open windowsill. “And before we go, there is one more thing I can do to help you two...”

They gathered together in the royal meeting room. They discussed the new land that Daven, Farrah, and ultimately Gradius found. The king was very intrigued about it, wanting to send scouts to peacefully explore and map out the area for closed informational records. Soon curiosity to how Farrah came into this knowledge. Very quickly he had found her bloodline, the separation of the crown's ideology, and the work that Daven did to try and keep the peace. The pieces sank together, and the empathy he felt could not be expressed.

“You know, I can't believe what happened today.” Talia stated, pulling on new cotton weaved sheets. “And what he said, that he could call off the search for the missing magpies.”

“Captain Graham mentioned the end of the hunt coming up before when we were tracking him. You think that it was just inevitable?” Farrah said, tossing aside her garment and making her way into bed.

“Maybe, but I could tell that the warden was just tired of his job.”

“You think?” Farrah wondered

“Probably... Just kinda sad that he can't release anyone from prison yet. He said there were too

many complications.”

Farrah tucked herself in. It was the first time in years she slept under decent sheets, but new as they were they were missing a homely feel that she was accustomed to at home. Talia laid down beside her and nudged “Hey.”

“Yes.” Farrah replied. “What is it?”

“What do you suppose we do anyway?”

“I’m not sure.”

“I mean, we get all of this stuff, we’re like super high priority, we’re kinda living with people that aren’t as sympathetic to you, plus you have to wear that silly outfit to go anywhere so that no one knows, and it’s all kinda muddled about you know.”

Farrah looked towards Talia with a sarcastic stare. “Jee, I didn’t think about that.”

Talia stopped. “Like, I’m lost.”

“So am I, but we don’t really have forever to figure that out.”

“Even though we kinda do.” Talia reminded.

“Besides, I don’t want to hold you up any in this place...”

“No, girl. I’m with you. Always.”

Farrah wasn’t sure, she paused and decided to bring it up. “Do you really think I can do anything that time itself can’t?”

“Maybe, I don’t know. You got the king to believe you, I mean... You got that.”

“I’m not really sure that I can though.” Farrah admitted. “I’ve been thinking and it’s really much bigger than any of us.”

“Hey, if not then we know that Safe Haven is clear, we can always return and you and Greg can pick up where you left off at.”

Farrah nodded “So what do we do?”

“Well, for starters you got life by the balls pretty good right about now so I guess whatever you want to do is up to you. And if they stop the hunt of magpies, what could they really do to you then, huh? Homeland is safe too. That’s kind of like freedom, right?”

Farrah relaxed. In her mind the question was no longer about what she was limited to, or having to thinking around it, but instead filled by the possibility of what she could do. She laid back, looking at the ceiling and was captivated by the thought. “I guess it really is.”

Information and Reference

Names

Farrah Shaleen of Quin. - You are very sad if you don't know who this person is.

Daven Shaleen of Quin – Farrah's father, second kin to the late magpie throne. A good man dutiable by his own nature to keeping the peace of his Brother's tyrannic reign.

Nadalia Eleth Shaleen of Quin – Farrah's Mother, a magpie wed into royal blood to Daven Shaleen. Her maiden name is never mentioned.

Talia – Farrah's best friend, a “Tinderclaw” or fire cat. A native tribe of small pixie sized creatures that descended from a legendary phoenix whom left Shemlaul's molten core during the Cataclysm or so legend is told.

Karine – An avian house maid for the Quin estate, referred to by Farrah as Aunt Karine (no family relation to Shaleen, or Arthur)

Arthur (Artheour) – Male avian servant of the Quin estate, referred to by Farrah as uncle Artheour (no family relation to Shaleen, or Karine)

Cedric Errendour of Grey Quarter. – Farrah's cousin by marriage, identified as a child by having oversized aviator glasses, now merely a humble farm worker.

Unice – An older squirrel, wed to Alycia. He owns a farm and has enlisted Cedric to work there earnestly after an encounter roughly one year ago.

Alycia – An older squirrel, wed to Unice.

Warden, Captain Graham – Jail warden who's scars still remain having kept Farrah imprisoned for over eight years, after the breakout he left to recapture the escapees.

Hollie – A friendly young bat resident of the Shadow downs, who dreams of being hero with a cocky attitude and pride to boot.

Gregory – An young avian man who is fondly in love with Farrah, and second to her in reckless flying.

Saren – Gregory's mother

Kalin – Gregory's Father and good friend to Daven Shaleen.

Leanna – Elder Magpie of Haven and good friend of Daven Shaleen

Gradius – *A hateful jail warden of Oblavaeya who seeks adoration through his warmongering and retribution against the tyrant magpie of past.*

Thallis, *The king* – *Second king of the new rule, son of the publicly uncrowned (rebel and first king) Garrent*

Shop boy – *A hare who works the back of a local store and believes that times have changed and the magpies should be reconciled, especially Farrah.*

Bioms

Demi-Floor – *A flat biom described to resemble cracked, dried mud. It is the heartland of Shemlaul filled with fields and is mostly still stable.*

Fracture Level – *The highlands, a biom of many cliffs, evergreens and mountain passes. Not many take to these areas unless winged, or having already settled before the Cataclysm.*

Shatter Splinters – *The most uninhabitable terrain, usually found in the highest points of the fracture level. There is no fertile ground, mostly rock slides and crumbly towers of whatever can still stand.*

Shadow Downs / Shendalouls – *The dark lands, home to many of homeland's shunned and feared creatures who refer to their land much differently. After the Cataclysm, much of the land was swallowed causing a century of unrest and endless fog. Homeland rose up, and though the shadow downs may seem like an ocean of mist, it is still well above the new sea level.*

Break Shores – *A lush land of thick green leafed trees and rich dark soil. Despite the Shadow downs and the in the highland shatter splinters, the break shores are the most unstable biom as the plates that jut out to the sky are still eroding into the abyss of the bordering shadow downs.*

Locations

Shemlaul – *A wondrous broken earth inhabited by anthropomorphic beings. Long ago a great disaster shattered the world sending it into chaos, an event known as the Cataclysm. Though still intact, the world has much left in way of recovering.*

Homeland – *Surrounded by the Shadow Downs on all sides, Homeland is the only known land to exist by it's resident.*

Oblavaeya (Ob-la-vae-ya) – *The greatest, dirtiest prison overlooking the abyss of the shadow downs. Prestige with it's flawless record, only the most hardened and dangerous are sent here and is reputed to be an unexceptionable purgatory.*

Haven – *One of the many islands outside homeland that have been mostly undiscovered since*

the Cataclysm. Without knowing its location, only despair could be found in the futile attempts to find such a place as Haven, or any other islands that may still somehow exist out there.