Before Chapter 32

In the aftermath, the elemental lay vanquished, its once fierce flames subdued and scattered amidst the debris of the library. Regrettably, their arrival came too late to stem the tide of destruction, as the infernal entity had already ravaged the precious tomes of wisdom, leaving behind naught but ash and sorrow. Skywing, his heart heavy with grief, bowed his head in silent reverence for the fallen comrades, their valorous sacrifice immortalized amidst the charred remnants of the battleground.

Suntail stood amidst the destruction, her breath labored and her once-immaculate attire now a tattered testament to the fierce battle. She had expended every last ounce of her magical prowess to secure even this meager semblance of triumph, though it felt hollow in the wake of Arcturus' audacious escape with his dragon, and the liberation of Lyndis right under their noses. The Inquisitor remained stoic, her silence speaking volumes as her steely gaze bore witness to the violation of this once-secret sanctum, a betrayal that struck at the very core of her being.

The commander retreated to his quarters, burdened by the weight of sorrow, yet not before ensuring that Powerfeather and his husband would receive proper care. They were escorted to one of the numerous clerical temples, swathed in blankets and nestled among the ranks of fallen soldiers, victims of Arcturus' cohort’s merciless onslaught.

He tossed and turned upon his nest-like bed, plagued by fragmented and haunting dreams. Each awakening found him shivering, his thoughts inexorably drawn back to Arcturus. He longed to dismiss it as the Inquisitor had suggested, attributing it to delusion or manipulation by his cohorts. Yet, the familiarity of those eyes, the shared battles, and near-death experiences lent credence to the conviction within them, giving him pause.

What haunted him more deeply: the unsettling prospect of his thoughts manipulated, or the revelation of a truth so kingdom-shattering that it fractured his allegiance to Lumara? If only there were ample moments to engage in discourse with the man, to unravel the complexities of the assault and the bloodshed it wrought. Yet, amidst his internal turmoil, the Inquisitor's suspicions regarding Rothdell's hand in the turmoil rang ever truer. Should the enemy possess more of those formidable elementals, the consequences for the populace loomed dire. They must be thwarted, regardless of the justifications presented, for the safety of all hung precariously in the balance.

As dawn broke, the night's burdens weighed heavily in his bloodshot gaze. With a sharp clack of his beak, he cursed the intrusive rays of the sun and the unruliness of his feathers. Summoning every ounce of willpower, he dragged himself from his bed, collapsing in a disheveled heap upon the floor. It took him a full hour to restore a semblance of order to his appearance, meticulously preening each feather with methodical precision in preparation to confront the challenges of the day ahead.

As he stepped into the morning sunlight, its golden radiance danced upon his armor, casting a gleaming sheen. The bustling activity of the city greeted him, its inhabitants already immersed in the day's tasks. Inhaling deeply of the crisp morning air, he savored the tantalizing aroma of gryphon buns, the scent teasing his senses beneath his beak. It could only emanate from the Feathered Nest, a beloved bakery known for its delectable treats, undoubtedly filled with seared horse meat, a favorite among gryphons. Yet, for now, such indulgences would have to wait. Drawn by an unseen force, he felt compelled to visit his wounded soldiers, their well-being tugging at his heart like an invisible thread.

Had Suntail not reached out to him by now? The question nagged at him as he ascended above the bustling city below, his keen eyes scanning the horizon for any sign of her presence. In the distance, other gryphons darted about, their forms silhouetted against the morning sky as they embarked on their delivery routes, parcels securely held in their talons or fastened snugly about their bodies with leather straps. Surely, the Inquisitor would require his assistance soon, especially considering the looming threat of Arcturus' inevitable return. He knew the man too well to believe otherwise.

He discovered the temple of Fureen, its immaculate stone adorned with gleaming plates of bronze and brass. Elaborate banners of crimson and gold danced in the gentle morning breeze, emblazoned with the radiant symbol of the sun, catching the light in a dazzling display. With a graceful descent, the gryphon alighted upon the grounds, his landing marked by a slightly ungainly trot. Offering nods and waves of greeting to the cleric understudies tending to the verdant gardens that sprawled from the temple like tendrils of ivy.

Passing through the opulent, mahogany-hued door, he swiftly located the healing ward where his companions were housed. The chamber stretched wide, filled with rows of beds and the wounded souls who occupied them. Gryphons and humans, adorned in robes of fiery orange and burnished brass, moved with graceful purpose, their skilled hands weaving intricate spells of healing and restoration. At the rear of the room, Powerfeather's hearty laughter rang out, accompanied by the lively wiggle of his mustache, a beacon of cheer amidst the somber atmosphere.

"Looks like a caterpillar's taken residence just beneath your nose," a gryphoness teased, her laughter tinkling like wind chimes in the breeze, as the burly human repeated his amusing gesture once more.

"Ah, but you see, this caterpillar has been carefully cultivated for maximum majestic effect," Powerfeather quipped with a grin, his eyes sparkling with amusement. “This mustache is a sign of respect, duty and honor. Why, any knight without a mustache or beard isn’t one at all, isn’t that right sweety?” He leaned over, batting his eyes at his husband in the bed over.

"Ah, but my dear, while mustaches may be impressive, it's the heart beneath that truly defines a knight," Frostbeak remarked with a slight smirk, casting a brief glance at the female gryphon before turning back to Powerfeather. "Though I must admit, I've never seen a caterpillar quite as captivating as yours,"

The gryphoness splayed her ears with a nervous laugh, meeting his gaze. “I have much to attend to, I’ll check in with you two later.”

“You’re not very subtle with checking her out you know.” Frostbeak clacked his beak, only getting a hearty laugh from his mate.

“You know I only have the eyes for you my dearest Snowplume.” He rested his bandaged stump against the gryphon’s feathery limb, when their gaze met, he smiled warmly, “Your admiration means more to me than some random feather sister.” When his husband only gave a keen chirp, his eyes widened as he gave a sly grin, “Oh, I know what this is about.”

“And what would that be Gryphkin?” The gryphon ruffled his feathers with a chirp.

"You don't care if we roll around the nest, you just think I believe they have the prettier feathers!" he quipped, punctuating his remark with a playful nudge.

Frostbeak opened and closed his beak several times, shifting on the sheets, “I’d have smacked you in the balls if not for your injuries. Thank Fureen that you’re cute.”

Powerfeather chuckled, “You flatter me dearest. But let me set your fragile heart at ease, know that your feathers are the most magnificent things I’d ever laid eyes upon. You're my everything, and nothing could ever change that.” His brow rose as he flashed the bird an honest smile, “Want to play a game of who has the prettiest feathers? I promise not to be biased.”

“Hmmpf.” Huffed Frostbeak, peering back with a lash of his teal tipped tail. What wall he had up appeared to break under the caring eye of the mustache wielding man. “I don’t think that counts, you don’t have any feathers.”

“Course I do.” He gestured to a nightstand beside the bed, where on a chain, one of Frostbeak’s feathers laid.

The sight of their tender gazes locked in an intimate embrace echoed a bittersweet nostalgia for the commander, reminiscent of the bond he once shared with Arcturus and Selina. It was inspiring to see this light within the darkness. With a solemn cough, the commander approached as the couple exchanged a beak parted kiss.

"Commander Skywing," Powerfeather greeted with a nod, his tone carrying a mix of frustration and resolve. "Apologies for not being able to lend a hand, so to speak, in the recent battle with the elemental," He continued, a wry smile on his lips as he shared a glance with his pun loving gryphon. "But rest assured, I'll be back in action soon enough, ready to do whatever it takes to protect our kingdom." he added, a hint of bitterness seeping into his voice as he glanced down at his bandaged stumps.

"Powerfeather," Skywing acknowledged with a nod, "No need for apologies. No one doubts your conviction. Not many can get their hands lobbed off and want to keep going.”

“He isn’t most people.” Cooed Frostbeak, resting a hand on Powerfeather’s chest, they shared a look, a moment of seriousness passing between them. “Have you seen Talonheart yet?” Sighed the gryphon.

That should have been the first thing he noticed, the lack of hands. “Has she not arrived?” His squawk echoed through the hall as he spun about, searching through the crowd for her pink feathers. “Not like her to be late, especially not from helping you two.”

Powerfeather laughed, “Don’t rush her though, last thing I need is a beak clacking in my face over it because I was too impatient to wait for a regeneration.”

“You’re quite cheery over the entire affair.”

The man sighed, “No sense in staying mad at it. In the grand scheme of things, just a fleshwound! Besides, with Talonheart it’s a waiting game now.” He leaned against Frostbeak as the gryphon shifted closer, the bird’s feathers brushing his cheek. “Though what gets me commander, why didn’t Arcturus finish me off?”

“Don’t speak like that.” Cooed his husband, caressing his head, “Just be glad for the hand we were dealt.”

“I’m serious fluff butt, he had us dead to rites and left us there. Can’t even say he didn’t have the time.” He shifted uncomfortably in his sheets, looking out to a window nearby, “What do you think they have on him?”

“Excuse me?” Skywing rose his brow.

“Arcturus, clearly, he’s not working for them on his own free will. Otherwise, he’d have finished us off right?” The man wiggled his mustache, before steeling his gaze to Skywing’s own, “What I mean to say sir, I apologize for saying Arcturus was a traitor the other day. Clearly, he’s not.”

“Which means we have to rescue him.” Frostbeak nodded.

“After I get my hands back.”

“Of course.” He nuzzled against Powerfeather’s cheek with a salacious rumble, “Then we can get to work breaking those hands in.”

To free him seemed an impossible task, a truth that weighed heavily upon his conscience. He hesitated to confess that his confinement was not by force, but by choice – a choice born of genuine conviction. Yet, in his heart, he knew the price of their salvation might demand Arcturus' very life. He shivered as the thought sent ice coursing through his veins.

I believe when this ordeal reaches its end, retirement might be in order," Skywing mused, a solemn note in his voice. "The weariness of battling former allies weighs heavily on the soul."

“You, retire?” Scoffed Frostbeak, “You wouldn’t know what to do with yourself!”

"Perhaps," Skywing murmured, "If our friend survives and is absolved of wrongdoing, perhaps we could find solace in a serene place. I've often imagined the rolling hills of Dustfall, where the whispers of morning light are said to mingle with the song of the land."

As Skywing reminisced, his thoughts drifted to a particular memory of joy and camaraderie. He vividly recalled a sunny day in the countryside, where Geoffrey's youthful laughter echoed across the fields. With playful trills, Skywing chased after him, the wind ruffling his feathers as he soared. Selina and Arcturus soon joined the fray, adding their own laughter to the mix. It was a day filled with storytelling, friendly sparring, and shared moments of mirth. All of that snatched away, burned to ashes by Dreadflame’s cruelty, even his corpse couldn’t stay the ache.

With a slight shiver running through his feathers, Skywing cleared his throat and excused himself from the company of his companions. The familiar banter and tender exchanges between the pair before him had already begun anew, prompting him to fulfill his promise of seeking out Talonheart and investigating the cause of her delay. With Suntail's directives temporarily absent, Skywing felt a sense of liberation, as if the weight of duty had momentarily lifted from his shoulders. He imagined Talonheart lingering near the shrine of Hades, drawing power from the enigmatic deity with the ram-like visage.

The mere thought of venturing to such a place filled him with a sense of unease; its dark, imposing stone structure seemed to meld seamlessly with the mountainside, evoking images of a passage to the depths of the underworld itself. Even the accents of grey and red did little to alleviate the somber atmosphere that permeated the shrine.

Taking to the skies with powerful beats of his wings, Skywing soared towards the Dragonneck Mountains, his determination guiding him like a beacon through the vast expanse of the sky. His keen eyesight picked out the distant silhouette of the temple to Hades, a blackened speck against the rugged terrain below. Even from this great distance, across fields, hills, and the sprawl of city structures, the ominous presence of the temple loomed large, casting its shadow over the landscape like a foreboding omen.

Skywing pondered Arcturus' whereabouts as he navigated one of the currents, allowing it to carry him towards the temple. The mystery surrounding Arcturus' elusiveness puzzled him deeply; it was as if the man had vanished from all forms of detection, leaving behind an unsettling void. Perhaps their encounter with the Emerald Lady held the key to this enigma. Skywing vividly remembered how the dragon orb, a potent tool of scrying and detection, had faltered in the presence of the red dragon and her domain. The memory stirred a sense of unease within him, recalling the chilling intensity of the Emerald Lady's golden gaze that had struck fear into the depths of his heart.

“Hey, can you hear me? Gryphon, squawk if you hear me.” Came a voice in his ear, feminine and full of energy.

He nearly fell out of the air, dropping a few feet as he missed a flap. “What was that?” He squawked, turning about in the air, searching for the sign of the voice that sounded as though it were right by his ear.

“Oh good, you *can* hear me, saves me lots of trouble. Just speak to communicate with me.”

He’d heard of such methods of communication being possible, but never seen them personally. Typically, one needed a rune, stone or some other magical device to converse with someone over great distances. “Who is this.”

“A friend.” The voice cooed, “Of an acquaintance we both share.”

A cloud of unease hung about his ears as he reset his course for Hades’ temple. “Are you the reason why Talonheart is late?”

“Who?”

“A gryphon under my command.”

“Oh, silly me.” Laughed the voice, “But no, I didn’t do anything to her, but I know who did.”

His heart skipped a beat, “Who is this?”

“I told you.”

“You hardly did.” He growled, trying to fight off the icy chill that gripped him. “I doubt we have many friend-“

“You might know her actually. Big, green scales, scary ass horns and a voice that makes lesser beings tremble in their paws?”

Oh no, not her. The gryphon blinked, “Emerald Lady.”

“You got it on the first try, proud of you sweety.” Her voice dripped with condescension.

“If you think for a moment that saying her name would get you to trust me, you’re sadly mistaken.”

“Aw, then why make a deal with her? You’re going to make her all mad if you lied!”

His deal for the lives of his wingmates, the one’s she’d taken. Part of him had hoped he could delay this moment, but it seemed the Lady was going to collect her due. He beat his wings ever faster, maybe she was lying about Talonheart? “And what has the lady done with her?”

“Not the lady, but your inquisitor friend. See, she’s kind of crazy if you havn’t noticed.”

“She is suspicious, not crazy.”

“Regardless sweet beak, if you go to that temple, you’re going to be caught by Suntail and her goons.”

“And pray tell, why would she do that? Why should I listen to a voice that merely says they work for Emerald Lady.” Skywing scoffed, “You don’t know me at all.”

For a moment there was silence, save the whistling of the air. “You’re going to be difficult aren’t you?”

“Not stupid is more like it. Now tell me oh disembodied voice, shall I go back then?”

“No, she’s having you followed at this very moment.”

He turned back, not spying a single speck in the sky after him. Sure he found various gryphons out flying, or the occasional small flying ship, but nothing to suggest that he was being followed. “Nice try, not a single hint of truth.”

“They’re invisible fluff butt, why wouldn’t they be?”

“I think you’re lying.” He started to descend, he could already see the towering statues of the humanoid ram man, Hades in his black, full plate armor. The curses he heard in his ear were just icing on the cake.

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Skywing descended onto a black stone platform, a landing spot designated for both gryphons and airships alike. Ahead stood the temple, a somber structure reminiscent of a mausoleum, adorned with gryphon-shaped gargoyles perched upon its blackened stone walls. Though modest in size compared to the grand temples he had witnessed, its austere presence commanded reverence. The entrance was guarded by a simple steel gate, beyond which stairs descended into the depths where the heart of the facility lay—a labyrinth of catacombs fashioned to resemble the underworld below.

Twin statues of the ram god loomed overhead, their eyes crafted from mana stones that glimmered with an ethereal light, mirroring the fiery gaze of the deity they represented. Skywing's gaze lingered on the archway leading into the temple's domain, intricately carved with depictions of death and the afterlife. Yet before he could take more than a few steps, a sudden flurry of movement materialized from thin air—a squadron of gryphons and their riders, emerging to confront him..

Surrounded by piercing gazes, Skywing found himself encircled, the weight of their scrutiny palpable. Weapons were drawn, their lethal intent evident in the poised crossbows humming with charged energy. Talons and beaks were poised for action, muscles tensed and ready to strike at a moment's notice. Despite the dire situation, Skywing met their collective gaze with a laugh that echoed through the tense air, a defiant defiance in the face of imminent danger.

"Sorry to disappoint, everyone," Skywing quipped with a playful glint in his eye, "but today's not my hatch day. I appreciate the welcome party, though." He nodded towards the temple, a smirk playing on his beak. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm here to pay a visit to a friend. Perhaps you've heard of her? Talonheart. Need to check in on a friend who's in need of some hand regrowth."

"We're fully apprised of the circumstances," Suntail announced, her voice cutting through the tension like a blade. Rising from the midst of feathers and talons, she exuded an aura of unwavering resolve, her composure akin to sculpted stone.

Inquisitor," Skywing greeted with a respectful nod, his tone earnest yet tinged with a hint of apprehension. "I'd suggest reminding your flock here that we're all in harmony, but I reckon you've already got that covered." A nervous chuckle escaped him as Suntail approached.

"We've come to detain you and your entire team," Suntail declared, her posture unwavering as she gestured towards several gryphons already equipped with restraints and bindings. "I advise against making this more difficult than necessary."

"You must be plucking my feathers," Skywing exclaimed, his claws gripping the stone tightly. Already, he scanned his surroundings for any possible escape route. "I've complied with your every request. I interrogated Lyndis on your behalf, and I've even provided information on Arcturus' next move.

"Your cooperation has indeed been valuable," Suntail acknowledged, her movements purposeful as she circled around him, her tail swaying rhythmically. "However, in this crucial juncture, there remain unanswered questions that demand clarity."

“And you think I know them? I’ll try my best.”

“That won’t be necessary. You’re capture will be suitable enough of an answer.”

"So, you're serious," Skywing remarked, tossing his head with a mix of defiance and resignation. He couldn't help but imagine the voice that had warned him earlier, likely feeling rather pleased with itself. "And how exactly will locking me up provide you with these answers?"

"In time," Suntail replied firmly, her gaze unwavering. "But few are privy to my inner workings, to the whereabouts of my facilities, or even where Lyndis was kept." Her form remained still, rigid. "Yet Arcturus and his cohorts managed to infiltrate and rescue her."

"And you suspect that I divulged such information," Skywing retorted, a hint of frustration creeping into his tone. "When all else failed, you turn to me. Your mistrust may be clouding your judgment. I've remained steadfastly loyal to you and to Lumara."

Her amber eyes bore into him, their intensity unyielding, as if searching for some hidden truth within his gaze. "The truth of that matter will soon come to light," she declared, her beak pressed tight with resolve. A moment of contemplation passed, marked by the subtle ticking of unseen gears within her mind. "You may mock me, but my unwavering trust in you has exacted a heavy toll," she continued, her tone tinged with sorrow "Were you aware of Azzik's demise last night?"

He had? His ears ears splayed as a shiver went down his spine. He’d taken a liking to the little lizard. “How.”

“Lyndis whispered things into his ear, clearly. Feku and him were seen helping her escape, all to save her from the Cthulid’s kiss.”

As his heart sank, he kept his composure, “And what…you think that removing myself and my team from the equation that Arcturus will be easier to capture and defeat?” His paws were shaking, the dread of having the knight wind up dead truly becoming reality. “Anyone else that-“

"Follow the protocol without delay," Suntail instructed with unwavering resolve. "At present, your presence and that of your team pose a significant security threat, particularly in this pivotal moment." She added a fluff of her feathers, "We will conduct a thorough investigation into your activities, associations, and movements. If you are innocent, Skywing, you have nothing to fear. You will be released once the truth is established."

“You can’t do this.” He insisted as the team of gryphon’s approached, bindings in hand. “You need me there to make sure things don’t go tits up. I am no traitor.”

“Then don’t resist, put trust in us to get the job done.”

So, he didn’t, except maybe a pull away initially at the first gryphon. Such was met with the raising of weapons, tension rising ever swiftly. His ears pinned, seeing the futility of it all. Any control of what would come truly had slipped through his talons.

“There *is* a traitor in our ranks.” Suntail said, “Someone who works for The Emerald Lady, plotting and undermining our efforts. I assure you Skywing, they will be found, we *will* defeat the Rothdellian mages and bring Arcturus and his cohorts to justice. After last night’s slaughter, there is no doubt which side he’s on.”

“He isn’t a traitor.” He growled as his limbs were placed into the cool manacles, secured with a dull thunk.

“Play nice, getting killed won’t help sweety. Let the nice gryphon take you away.” Came the voice in his ear, seductive with a hint of malice. “I’ll be seeing you later.”

His resistance died in that moment, his wings jammed together and fashioned with leather straps. It would appear as though his only hope now resided in this disembodied voice. Without it, Arcturus was sure to be ambushed and if the conviction within the Inquisitor’s eyes was true, slain for his crimes against her. His head drooped, for if the voice spoke truth, he was once more a pawn of the Emerald Lady in whatever game of chess she was playing.

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Blindfolded and led through labyrinthine corridors, Skywing found himself deep within the confines of Suntail's domain. The cold stone floor beneath his paws left an uncomfortable sensation tingling through his limbs. Amidst the echoes of clanking machinery, his mind dwelled not on his own plight, but rather on the fate of his comrades. Despite his disagreement with his capture, he harbored hopes that they too would be treated with fairness and respect. Suntail wasn’t as mad as the voice suggested, she would see reason.

Guided with caution, Skywing was ushered into a spacious cell, its dimensions just enough to accommodate his majestic wingspan when fully extended. A collar of adamantine, etched with arcane runes, was fastened around his neck, while chains constrained his forelimbs, restricting any movement beyond cautious steps. Though flight was out of the question, leather straps held his wings firmly in place. The solitary solace offered was a modest mattress laid upon the floor.

In the solitude of his cell, Skywing marked the passage of time by the faint illumination that filtered through a small window, casting fleeting shadows upon the stone walls. The air bore the scent of pipe smoke and the savory aroma of gryphon delight, wafting from the nearby guard quarters. Within, a crackling fire bathed the room in a comforting glow, its warmth a stark contrast to the bleakness of his confinement. Around the sturdy table, weathered by countless gatherings, half a dozen guards had congregated, their camaraderie evident in the shared laughter and animated conversation that filled the chamber.

“Read em and wheep boys.” Laughed a woman wrapped in chainmail, the tabard of the Lumarian guard worn proudly on her chest. Down she slammed a hand of cards, her coworkers groaning and throwing in their own.

“I don’t know how she does it.” Squawked a black and red gryphon with an eye patch, a tankard large as a human’s head in his hand. “How did you get that good Elizabeth?”

“Well, I met this genie awhile back, could have wished for anything, but foolish me.” The dark skinned woman brushed her curled, onyx hair behind her, “Got card playing skills instead.”

“Fine, keep your secrets.” Mused the gryphon, taking a swig of his drink, “Mark my words, I’ll win a hand tonight!”

“Not if I have anything to say about you won’t.”

Skywing watched in envy as they went back and forth laughing, already starting to divide cards out for another hand. Occasionally this group meant to guard the *traitor* would toss him scathing looks, cursing under their breaths, no doubt hoping for his death. There had yet been sign of the voice woman in his ear, he was starting to doubt if she was even real.

Beyond the confines of his cell, the skies painted a mesmerizing tableau of crimson and gold, a celestial masterpiece unfolding across the heavens. It was a sight reminiscent of his father's tales, where Crimson Skies were heralded as harbingers of change, omens of fortune and transformation. Skywing pondered the irony of such symbolism, questioning whether the dragon Crimson Sky had chosen his name out of arrogance or a genuine belief in his destiny.

In a twisted way, he found himself hoping that the dragon would prove to be a guardian for Arcturus, at least temporarily, allowing him the opportunity to confront the knight and unravel the mysteries he hinted at. If there truly lurked a darkness as Arcturus suggested, Skywing wished to confront it head-on, armed with his own resolve and the dragon's formidable power. However, he quickly dismissed such thoughts as folly, shaking his head as the guards' laughter echoed down the corridor, grounding him in the harsh reality of his confinement.

“Oh come now, you taunt me with gryphon’s delight and baked horse!” Groaned the commander as his stomach growled, “I didn’t think such torture was used on mere prisoners.”

“Not this again.” Groaned Elizabeth, “No ale or mead for the traitor! Also no cheese bits, looking at you Garret.”

“What?” A bearded man, evidently Garret, brandished a stick of cheese in his hand, “Thought the birb need a pick me up, look at him. That’s the wing commander Skywing!”

“Bah, he doesn’t deserve a lick of respect. Not when he’s a traitor.” Elizabeth scoffed, “Lucky the inquisitor didn’t let us execute him on the spot. Better than he deserves. Know how many friends I lost thanks to his *paladin* buddy and his fuck heads?” She took a swig of her drink, setting it down with fire in her eyes, “Far too many.”

His ears pinned; having lost those he’d held dear over his many years in the service. “I’m only an alleged traitor.” He replied, meeting her hardened gaze, “You’ll see, when the inquisitor is done, I shall be walking free. How about we go together and we can pay our respects to the lost.”

“See? Class act.” Garret crossed his arms, “Says he deserves a bit of mead and cheese now don’t ya.”

“Pff, that’s what they all say, silver tongues catbirds.” She gestured to the gryphon, “Last thing we need is another one stuffed up on cheese, dying enough as it is.”

The eye patched gryphon splayed his ears, “You didn’t have to tell them!”

“I can’t help it, every one that slips out is a ruddy gas chamber!”

“Now Elizabeth, let’s not get to exaggerating. They can’t be *that* bad.” Squawked a male with black and navy blue feathers.”

“Then why don’t you get your feathered ass over here shadowtail and inhale them!”

“Well, not lets not get too hasty. I value my life.”

“I rest my bloody case!”

Shadow tail grabbed a plate with assorted foods, notably missing the cheese, avoiding Elizabeth’s swat. “How graceful.”

“Seen more grace in squatting dogs.” Garret quipped.

As the man was forced to duck from a thrown tankard, Shadowtail made his way towards Skywing’s cell, laying the offerings before him with a kind chirp.

“Here ya are. Hope this all gets sorted, sorry for the arrangements.”

“I’ve had worse.” Skywing thanked him, sampling the various meats. “I just regret getting to bring Arcturus in.”

“It’s alright, the inquisitor talks big, but I doubt she’d kill him. Not when they can interrogate him. Who knows, maybe its what they’re whispering, that he’s being manipulated by the Emerald Lady.” The gryphon shuttered, “Hate to know what she has on him to comply.”

“She is a master of control rest assured.” His voice grew taught, recalling her sharpened claws and teeth, “Swifter than a gryphon and thrice the temperament of a Minotaur. I’ve crossed talons with her and can say, if we ever met again, it would be too soon.”

As the male went to return to his friends, a cold breeze swept over Skywing’s fur. Ever sense inside of him stood on edge, dread coiling around his beak. The voice in his head came back, with the amused coo of a cat playing with it’s prey.

“Stay away from the door handsome, it’s going to get messy in here real quick.”

What, now? He snapped up at a sudden knock at the door. What comradery and good cheer that could be found itself snuffed out. Hands went to their weapons, the gryphons tensed themselves, talons digging into the floor.

“Who in the gods could that be?” Garret whispered, “This place was supposed to be secret. You heard her, no one returns until Arcturus is captured.”

“Think it’s Suntail?” Shadowtail flicked his tail, steeled eyes upon the door, feathers fluffed.

“She said she wasn’t coming back, you heard her.” The red and black gryphon growled, “I think we found our traitor.”

“I’d get away from the door if I were you!” Skywing warned them, but it was too late.

The door exploded inward with a thunderous crash, sending splinters flying in all directions like shrapnel. In the blink of an eye, a figure cloaked in dark leathers darted into the room, her face obscured by a mask of deep violet. Garret's energy crossbow bolts whizzed past her with razor-sharp precision, narrowly missing their mark as she closed in with lightning speed. Her strikes were swift and precise, finding vulnerable points in his chain mail with deadly accuracy.

With a forceful impact, Garret was sent hurtling backwards, his body colliding with the solid stone wall before crumpling to the ground in a motionless heap. The guards sprang into action with squawks of alarm, their talons slashing through the air in a desperate attempt to fend off the whirlwind of violence that had descended upon them. But their efforts proved futile against the fluidity of her movements, as she effortlessly weaved between their attacks with the grace of a dancer.

In a daring maneuver, she maneuvered a nearby gryphon into the path of the energy crossbow bolts, using the creature as a shield to absorb the incoming fire. With a display of strength that belied her petite frame, she seized the gryphon and hurled it like a projectile, sending it hurtling through the air to collide with Shadowtail and another guard with a resounding thud. The impact rendered both of them unconscious, leaving the room engulfed in stunned silence save for the groans of the fallen.

“This how you greet a girl?” The intruder clicked her tongue, evading Elizabeth’s drawn blade with the grace of an acrobat. She was playing with the guard that much was certain, going back in forth in a dance.

“Stay still!” Grunted Elizabeth.

“Hardly seems like a smart thing to do.” Yawned the woman in black leathers before punching the guard in chest, sending her crashing to the table, splintering it from the effort.

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With a grim sense of inevitability, Skywing witnessed as the intruder tore the constructs apart with alarming ease, her hands rending through their metal forms as if they were made of paper. The sight sent a cold shiver coursing through his body as he realized the full extent of her power. She emerged victorious from the skirmish, whistling a jaunty tune as she twirled a ring of keys around her finger.

“Hey there pretty.” She cooed, turquoise eyes gleaming with delight.

"Ah, a preener, are we?" Skywing's laughter was strained, an attempt to mask the apprehension rising within him. He pressed himself against the farthest wall of his cell, his wings twitching with nervous energy. "If you're here for an audience, I'm afraid I'm not in the position to offer much hospitality. As you can see, I've been confined against my will, and my captors aren't particularly fond of entertaining visitors, conjugal or otherwise."

“Oh now isn’t that rich!” Laughed the woman as she pulled down her hood and mask, revealing a half elven woman with fiery, braided hair and shimmering golden eyes. “Though maybe for a cutie like you, who knows.” A smirk came to her lips as she unlocked his cell, “Maybe she’ll let me keep you around.”

He imagined this was the woman from his head. His talons ached to be used, but he just saw what she was capable of. Clearly, she was more than meets the eye. He kept a level head, fighting possibly out of the question.

“So, fret not little birdie, I’m not here to indulge your dirty dungeon fantasies.” She paused for a moment, resting a finger on her chin, “Although, noted that you like chains and bondage. Fun!”

His ears splayed, “I don’t have dungeon fantasies madame.”

“Says the one tied up and the first thing he mentions is a preener.” She tossed open the door.

"Let's drop the jests, shall we? Are you here to end me?" His tone wavered between forced bravado and genuine concern, his heart pounding in his chest. Helpless before her, he braced himself for the worst. "Before you have me shrugging off this mortal coil, could you at least shed some light? Who are you? Have we crossed paths before?"

“Elowen.” She smiled, “And you can stop your shivering Skywing, I’m here to rescue you, not kill you.”

“Is that right?” He met her with skepticism, “And who might wish for me to be rescued?”

Hands went to her hips, “I think you’d be dead now if I wanted that to be so.” Returning to the keys at her thighs, “Besides, are you telling me you truly don’t know who I am?”

He scoffed, never having seen this woman in his life, “I’m sure I’d remember a woman with the strength of at least twenty men. If you’re not here to kill me, I assume you work for the Emerald Lady?”

She gave him a wink, “On the first try, how smart. Knew there was brains in that handsome head of yours.”

Attention drifted to the guards beyond his cage as she approached, he met her with a steeled gaze, “You didn’t need to dispatch them in such a barbaric fashion…they didn’t deserve to die.”

“Oh, stifle your bleeding-heart catbird, I have given them, but love taps.” The half-elf drew in close, giving the commander’s beak a gentle kiss, “Sleeping off a nasty hangover that’s all.”

With a series of clicks his restraints were undone, leaving the manacles, leathers and chains to clang to the floor. She gestured over her shoulder to follow, as if he had no other choice. Against his better judgement the commander stood his ground, defiant in the face of this all powerful woman.

“Come on, don’t you get the motion?” She gestured again, “Come on catbird, you can’t be this thick. Lets get out of here before these mortals come to.”

“I’m not coming.” He lashed his tail, voice like a blade. “I won’t be a pawn for your mistress’ plans. Nor will I make a traitor of myself in the process.”

Elowen chuckled in her throat, eventually tossing back her head in a belly shaking laugh, “You can’t be serious Sky, like you have a bloody choice. The inquisitor already labeled you close enough to a traitor.”

“From the looks of things I do.” He steadied his shaking hinds, “I might not have your strength, but that doesn’t mean I have to submit and come willingly.” The commander ruffled his feathers with a firm chirp, “I shall stay here.”

Spinning around with a skeptical eye, Elowen searched him from hind to beak with amusement. “You’re telling me, that the great commander Skywing would rather rot away in this cell instead of taking help?” She rolled her finger, “That is before he’s blasted apart come evening.”

“Here I thought you weren’t my assassin?”

“Oh not by me.” She mused, gesturing to the corner of his cell. “Right there, when Arcturus and his cohorts launch their assault, a stray energy cannon will strike this spot. You and the rest of this will be obliterated, your parts will go flying there, over there, little bit of your plumage clings to the bars…”

“I’ve heard enough.” He clacked his beak at her smug grin. “What proof do you-“

Her hand found his beak, holding it firm between powerful fingers as she smirked, “Emerald Lady has quite the knack for clairvoyance.”

He hissed in grim realization. All of this had been an elaborate play, the entire time he was doing the will of that dragoness if he liked it or not. He was going to be meeting her agent, Elowen the entire time. “You couldn’t have come sooner?”

“Things to do, people to talk about.” She rolled her eyes, “Didn’t think you’d wind up in prison and force this, but oh well.” She poked his beak, “Stubborn bird making things interesting for me.”

“My point still stands.” His ears stitched themselves to his neck as he pulled his beak free, “I refuse to be your pawn any longer, nor became a traitor at your whims. Find someone else to do your dirty work.”

Of all the things expected of her, laughing in amusement wasn’t one of them. “Sticking to your feathers, respect it kittybird, but I truly wonder. Can you sit here until your disgracefully blown apart, knowing your allies are all stuck behind bars? Will you perish well, knowing that Arcturus and his gang’s fate could rest in your talons?”

“What about Arcturus?” He perked up against his will, only solidifying her position over him. “You’re part of this?”

“I’m not allowed to say, only to tell what we need to do next.” Sighed Elowen, “Such is the intricate web of the Emerald Lady, plans within plans, moving parts supporting one another. They have one path for the evening, we have another.”

How could he sit on his tail at a time like this? When not only the lives of his companions rest in his hands, but Arcturus’ as well. The half-elf before him was a wall of enigma, but she was the only one offering any sort of choice. He doubted the reveal of his death was a lie, Emerald Lady always had the cards to play.

“This still isn’t what I agreed to.”

“Incorrect.” Elowen gestured for him to follow. “You agreed to do as she requested in exchange for your wing mates being returned to you. Don’t go squawking about the deal now, considering the *great* Emerald lady let you keep your life!”

“Then drag me along.” He clacked his beak in defiance.

“Oh I could, but it’s easier if you come willingly.” Her arms crossed, “You won’t be killing any of your soldiers this evening. You and the others will have a simple task. Once it’s complete you’ll fly south, meet another contact of the Lady. Then, you will be free.”

“Is that all? Having us act like a gryphon delivery service?” It seemed too good to be true. “You’ve got to be joking.”

“No trick, no joke.” Her voice grew taught, “So what will it be? Shall I leave you here to die? Giving up your chance to speak with Arcturus again should he survive?”

Ice slithered down his throat, “I thought she was in control, is he supposed to die?”

“Who knows what the *final* outcome will be.” Elowen made her way to the exit, “Dearest only tells me what I need to know, when I need to know it.”

His beak traveled across all the battered guards, the destroyed constructs, there was no denying this would implicate him. He would be labeled a fugitive, just like the rest of his companions.

“And don’t worry Skywing, you won’t be branded a traitor. Trust me, everyone here will remember my face. I am the one that your Suntail was, is after. You and your lot will be cleared of all charges, we can guarantee it.”

“Truly, in the face of Suntail?” He scoffed at the idea.

Elowen brandished a toothy smile, “The kittybird will come to me and it will be her own undoing.”

“You’re either arrogant or oblivious to her.”

She shrugged, “In our exchange, you and she are the ones wrapped in ignorance. Now are you coming? I have places to be and can’t wait on your choice *all* night.”

What choice did he have? He stood, following upon her hinds as loyalty to his kingdom, his people shouted in his ears. With every step upon the stone he could only think to his wing mates and those of which Arcturus had gotten tangled up in. It was his only hope of seeing any tomorrow but death.

“Very smart.” She cooed, patting him patronizingly on the head, only to pull back as he snapped at her.

“I’m not your pet. Tell me what we’re going to do so we can be through.”

“If you wish.” Sighed Elowen, bringing him to his new path, “Mind the step, it’s a bit bloody out here.”