

Blown Away

Chapter 1 - 4103

Fir's first hint that he wasn't home was the caterpillar in front of him – at least, that's what he thought it was. He never actually saw one before, only hearing about them from the wandering storyteller who flew to his village every year to tell her tales in exchange for cod and spruce bark.

According to her, caterpillars were green, fuzzy, and smaller than a talon. This one was jet-black, with glossy orange stripes and a million little legs on each side.

Currently it sat right next to Fir's face, making it look (*uncomfortably*) larger than he'd envisioned.

Wriggling jauntily, it scuttled atop his face until it was right between his eyes. Breathless, he could only watch as it paused briefly, antennae rustling, before a gleaming stinger buried itself in his snout.

"AAAHH!" Fir jolted up, grabbing the bug and hastily flinging it away as far as he could. It sailed through the air, beady eyes twitching in a panic before disappearing into the wilderness.

The storyteller should've mentioned stinging; it felt like thousands of tiny icicles stabbing underneath his scales.

WHY in the three moons does it hurt so much?! He complained, cradling his snout between his talons.

On the bright side, it woke me up. Now I can go back... home?

Looking around, Fir found himself sitting atop some sort of green snow. Except instead of being cool and powdery soft, it was dense and prickly and made his legs itch.

And were those trees above him? They weren't the needle-like pines or coned evergreens he was used to; they were all so *droopy* – with long, wavy leaves that shimmered in the wind which...

... which also was shimmering? Now his entire vision was flashing – and why was there pain coming from his side?

Huh, that's weird. Fir thought. The trees loomed larger, probably because he was falling down. *I bet it had something to do with that cater-*

Juniper's first sign of trouble was the citrus-striped centipede. Or rather, the lack of one in the jar supposed to contain it. She'd spent weeks finding that centipede – *weeks* spent in the frustratingly dense underbrush instead of soaring high over the trees and silk-homes – and all she had to show for it was a thin trail leading out into the forest from which she'd found it.

Perhaps she should've closed the jar *before* going to bed; hours into her search and that was all Juniper could think about.

A rustle to the right caught her eye – was it the one?

No, *just a grasshopper*, glumly she went back to foraging through the brush. She'd started her search in the morning, when the light barely peeked through the horizon to illuminate glistening dew drops; they'd long since melted away in the afternoon sun, and the towering willow trees did little to stop the heat.

Moving to check another log, her pouch jostled on her back. In it was the jar, purchased from a flamesilk glassblower during last month's moon festival, and a pair of tweezers to grab the centipede when it appears.

More like if it appears, Juniper mused, checking under the log – nothing.

Sighing, she leaned back. *Who am I kidding? I'm never finding it again. Stupid, stupid, stupid Juniper! How could you be so careless?*

She contemplated cutting her losses and flying home – all this effort wasn't worth the trouble. Above her the wind picked up again, willow trees now dancing in the breeze. At least they were pretty; the whole forest always was.

The cool breeze is nice too: finally something I can't complain about.

After one last look around the forest floor, Juniper turned to leave – *wait, what was that?* Flying from between the leaves was something small and black... an insect?

A flying insect! Thank goodness, I can catch that instead!

As it came closer though, something was off. Where were its wings? And were those orange stripes on its sides? *Wait, that's not a new species... That's my ce-*

It landed on her snout.

Juniper shrieked.

Scrabbling for her pouch she whipped out the tweezers, eyes not daring to leave the insect. Quick as a flash she grabbed the writhing bug, threw it into the jar, and slammed the lid shut. Only after (firmly) screwing the jar closed did Juniper allow herself to relax.

Citrus-striped centipedes had a nasty sting, able to knock out even a fully-grown dragon. It was a small miracle she'd caught one in the first place – *and a bigger miracle I did it again*. Now safely trapped within the jar, the centipede hissed angrily at its reconfinement.

That still left one lingering question: *where – no, how – did the centipede fly like that?*

Following where it flew in from, Juniper cautiously ventured through the willows. Densely soft leaves brushed past her as she squinted through the thick foliage, finally emerging onto the other side.

It was a meadow, full of reedy grass next to a burbling stream dotted with vibrant lilacs. But that wasn't what caught her attention – not even the mess of leaves and broken branches on the other end of the clearing (as if a boulder crashed through it; what happened?)

Instead Juniper stood shocked, staring at the center of the meadow where the most blindingly white dragon she'd ever seen lay unconscious.

****One day ago****

At this height, the wind battered like the tide against Fir's wings. Perhaps it was to make up for this hostile air, then, that the sky was also full of shimmering snowflakes. Like mirrors they reflected the dull sunlight that seeped through the clouds until pinpricks of light glittered all around him.

Fir tucked his wings in, gaining velocity as he hurtled down towards the water.

The flakes below him danced through the air – waltzing gaily around each other as if at a festival – until spinning into the sea; flecks of light falling into the vast deep, never to be seen again.

For such a big ocean, you'd think there'd be plenty of fish. Now gliding just above the frigid waves, Fir cast his net into the sea. He glared at the waters – *demanding* they give him a good catch – before twisting back up towards the sky, a (hopefully) full net in tow.

Once higher up he looked down at his catch – but it was only a tangle of kelp troughed up from the seafloor.

By the teeth of the Great Ice Dragon what IS this? Fir growled. *That's my twentieth try today, and not a SINGLE fish?!*

Turning back down, he set his net again and dived. He would not come back empty-handed to the village.

His home, Among-The-Evergreens, was known across the Ice Kingdom for its sturdy lumber and ornate wood carvings. *But what they forget*, Father would tell him, *is that we're also the tribe's most skilled coastal fishers – and don't let those bird-brains from Where-the-Terns-Fly tell you otherwise!*

Sure, Where-No-Dragon-Goes-Hungry had free magic seals, but that was several day's travel away; and besides, eating seals *every day?*

Blegh.

Sliced salmon, cold cod, even halibut tasted better in his opinion. At this point though, even a slimy haddock would be enough. *Any fisher could at least catch that; he definitely could.*

Then why can't I?

Swish, Splash... Empty again.

Turning back up, Fir couldn't help but notice how worse the weather was becoming. The once cheery festival of snowflakes had morphed into an oppressive mob, smothering the little light that came through.

And instead of flurrying around him in the wind, they conspired with it to further buffet his eyes and wings.

No matter, a little snow is no bother for an Icewing, Fir resolved. I'll catch something before the day is over, I have to!

Swish – nothing. Splash – nothing. A few more tries came and went, yet the only thing he found was more kelp. By now his net was fully choked with it; holes plugged full of seaweed, it began to flutter like a sail in the ever-worsening wind which whipped the sea into a frothy white.

Even the clouds seemed to be sinking, until a thick gray fog hung over Fir.

Now I'll have to fish in this moon-cursed weather, Fir shook his head in annoyance. But I won't give up, I have a duty to fulfill. Better than going back home with an empty net... GAH!

In a rage he threw his net over himself, intending to sling it over his back and clean out the kelp.

That was what would've happened too, had the rampant wind not interfered. Billowing out from the currents, kelp transforming it into a makeshift sail, the net instead walloped Fir in the face with a wet *smack!*

Three Moons! Now my own net mocks me!? Fir raged, writhing in the air. *Once I get this off me I'll... oh no.*

To his horror, Fir realized that the net had wrapped around his wings during the struggle. The wind picked up again, and the net surged... *away* from land. *Oh no no no...*

He couldn't even see the coast anymore. The sea whirled underneath him, waves looking ready to swallow him whole.

The hooks on his net dug into him, and a stinging pain brought tears to Fir's eyes.

He was being carried away faster now, as the wind turned into a tempest that blew him away.

Great Ice Dragon, save me!

And then he was gone. The snowflakes kept on falling, though. Specks of glittering white, each unique from every other. They danced and twirled across the breeze until it spun them into the sea, never to be seen again.

****Present day****

After a solid few minutes spent crouched underneath the willow branches, Juniper finally worked up the courage to approach the dragon. Stealthily creeping forward, she stopped just a few talonsteps away.

By all the trees in the forest...

Juniper thought she knew every color there could be on a dragon. Greens and browns on Leafwings. Black and yellow on Hivewings. All those colors (and more) on Silkings.

But not white, never white. Yet here this dragon was, its scales that color from head to tail. And were those spikes on its tail? They looked cold and sinister – and *really* annoying to have; what if they jostled around and poked your back while flying?

Peering closer, though, Juniper noticed that the dragon wasn't *entirely* just white. The underside of its wings and belly were more of a silvery-gray, like a smoothed stone picked up from a stream, while its spines were more of a pale shade of blue if anything.

And on its snout was a small but distinct bite mark, one she was nearly given herself.

Well, that solves that mystery. Still... another just opened up. What sort of dragon IS it? What do I do? What should I do?

Taking a deep breath, Juniper considered her options. On one talon, she could just leave; take her centipede, go home hopefully in time for lunch, and forget about the mystery dragon.

But what if it's dangerous? Juniper thought back to the rumors in her village, to the worried looks on the older dragons' faces. To the whispers of Leafwing towns in the west reporting trees being cut down, of whole forests vanishing under orders from the new Hivewing queen.

She looked down to the dragon's talons; they were so *sharp*. With claws like that it could easily cut down a tree! A centipede bite like that *should* keep it knocked out for at least an hour, but that was only for Leafwings and Silkings.

Juniper knew *nothing* about this dragon's species. It might wake up when she's gone; worse, *it might cut down the willows!* NO. NEVER!

Snarling, she briefly considered killing the dragon. Better safe than sorry, right? But with a stab of shame the thought left just as quickly. Killing an unconscious, defenseless dragon just because it looked strange? *Don't let your fear be the queen of you.*

On the second talon, she could tie down the dragon, leave, and then come back with her village; they'd surely know what to do.

But Juniper didn't have any rope, nor were there any nearby vines. She *could* use willow branches, but they were more flexible than strong; not good material for tying someone up. What if it woke up, broke free, and went on a rampage? *Then it'd surely be violent!*

Deep down, though, Juniper knew this was a lie. She didn't need to tie it up; the odds of the dragon waking up while she was gone were slim, and telling the village would be the most reasonable choice.

But the truth was, she wanted to keep this secret only to herself – at least for the time being. This dragon was something different, something stranger than anything she had ever seen. And for now, it was something whose knowledge was in her claws alone.

Juniper quite liked that feeling.

Just then, the dragon coughed. Shuddering, it rasped and wheezed, tossing and turning on the grass. She jumped back, expecting the dragon to wake up, until it rolled on to its side. Juniper gasped.

Oh no...

That was when she learned that its blood was blue; what else could be pouring out its side? Angry gashes – too deep to be from thorns or branches – criss-crossed each other underneath its wing.

She put a claw over her mouth. *Poor thing... What happened to you?*

On the third talon, it was clear that this dragon was seriously injured. At the very least, it was in no shape to be a threat to anyone.

Safe in this new knowledge, Juniper made her decision: heal this dragon (and worry about waking it up later).

Well then, time to get to work.

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Hold on, time to get to work? You're not even a healer!

Now yes, that was... *technically* true. But her mom was one, and Juniper had watched her work before. How hard could it be, really? She'd just follow the steps and it'll all work out (*should work out*).

That's what you thought before, didn't you – and you remember how that turned out.

Step zero of treating any wound: ignore your inner fears, no matter how right they are or how scared they can make you even after all this time. No one would die this time.

Moving on to step one: clean the wound. Scooping a talonful of water from the stream, Juniper splashed it onto the injury.

Look at all the blood pouring down. How could you possibly stop it?

Blood and water mixed into rivulets that ran down its sides until darkening the soil below. No reaction from the dragon – that was good, it meant it was feeling no pain (*or does that mean it's close to death?... I'll stick with the first one*).

Step two was to stop the bleeding. The village healers had a ready supply of bandages, but out here Juniper would have to get creative.

Bandages couldn't have fixed him. Why do you bother?

In her pouch were a talonful of berries (meant for a midmorning snack), the tweezers and the jar – centipede still scuttling within.

Emptying its contents to the side, Juniper contemplated using the pouch itself as a bandage before deciding against it. Due to the location of the injury, she'd need to wrap any makeshift bandage around the dragon's whole side, and the pouch simply wasn't big enough to do that.

The wind picked up again, willows and reeds swaying in the breeze. They always bent so low, always looking like they'll break in a few more seconds of pressure. But they never do. They endure until the wind stops, and spring back up as if nothing had ever happened.

“Bending willows and reeds...” she mused. “I have an idea”.

It took a few minutes of searching, but Juniper finally had herself two willow branches, sized just right for what she needed. Another few minutes were spent gathering reeds, dumping them in a pile next to the dragon.

Sitting down next to it, Juniper went to work. Taking a willow branch she wrapped it around the dragon's back between the wing and neck, being careful not to snap the stem by accident.

Snap – then the breathing stops, just like him, remember? You should, you didn't do anything to hel–

Juniper froze, talons shuddering. Closing her eyes she took deep, shaky breaths and tried not to cry.

“It's all in the past, all in the past” she whispered. “I'm not there anymore, I'm fine. I'm fine.”

After a few minutes, her talons stopped shaking. She finished wrapping and repeated the process with the second branch, this time placing it behind the wings.

With the wound now between the two willow branch wraps, Juniper turned to the reeds. Grabbing a strand, she tied each of its ends to the branches so that it covered the lacerations.

It took a while (tying the reeds could get so finicky) and Juniper went slowly so as to not graze the wound by accident, but eventually the whole wound was covered by the grass.

She stepped back and examined her work. Between two splints of willow, dozens of tied reeds covered the dragon's side. Apart from a few faint blue stains, it seemed to be working.

She'd done it.

"YES!" Juniper whooped to the sky, pumping her fist in the air. "I did it!" she preened, admiring her makeshift bandage with unabashed joy.

Glowing with pride, Juniper turned to step 3: let the dragon rest and recover. She paused. *Huh... now what?*

As a dragonet, this was the part when Juniper left the healer's pavilion to do something else; watching dragons sleep was pretty boring after all.

But what should she do now? Waiting around for it to wake up would be pretty dull – and this was a *whole new dragon species* that dropped out of the sky!

Things should be *exciting*; sitting around sure wasn't.

Juniper reconsidered; maybe she should go back and tell the village. They could handle this a lot better than her – *now you're talking sense, Juniper* – and it wasn't right to leave the dragon alone like in the woods.

"So that's that, then. I guess I should fly ba–"

The dragon coughed again and groaned. Juniper turned.

"–pillar. I *knew* I should've thrown it soo–"

Two pairs of eyes met each other. Two voices died out in a heartbeat. Two faces turned to look at one another, each now shocked beyond belief.

Within the jar the centipede stopped scurrying. It sat down and looked outside, to the scene unfolding before it.

When Fir was barely a moon old, his father took him to the evergreen forests for the first time. They were the village's pride and joy, known far and wide throughout the tribe – and a rite of passage for any Among-The-Evergreens dragonet.

Fir remembered struggling to fly the whole distance from home to forest, pushing forward thanks only to Father's encouragements, and wondering the entire time whether anything under the sky could be worth all this effort.

Without a doubt, the forests were.

Cultivated through the tireless work of generations, the Great Forests of Among-The-Evergreens were the largest and most diverse in the kingdom. It was the center of the village's identity, the source of the tribe's best quality

wood carvings, and the most beautiful place in the whole Ice Kingdom (in his opinion).

It was said the Moon Globe Tree in the courtyard of the queen's palace was prettier – but Fir would believe that when he saw it.

What he did see that day took his breath away. Packs of sombre green pine trees towered towards the sky alongside silver-blue spruces, their needles proudly puffed against the cold. Nestled beneath this coat of foliage lived the thickets of tamarack, adorned with cozy brown cones, and colonies of snow-capped alder trees.

Below even that was the underwood, inhabited by vines of shimmering hoarfrost and lonely arboretums. Among these was the fir tree grove, *and that was where I met your mother*, Father recalled. They were sitting on a snowdrift near the grove, Fir snuggling under his vast wings.

It just so happened that both our families were visiting the forests that day. But while they went browsing for lumber, I decided to wander below the fir trees. He waved a claw in the direction of the grove.

Luckily for me your mother thought the same thing too! The rest is history.

Father looked down and smiled. *And that's why we named you Fir.* He hugged him tighter. *After a place close to our hearts, just like you.*

Personal memories aside, the appeal of the forests was clear. Its colors of green and brown couldn't be found anywhere else in the kingdom, at least not in such large numbers.

Fir had heard of other tribes with those colors, of course, but he was sure they looked ridiculous. Blue, white, purple, and gray– those were the only *respectable* colors; anything else would look ridiculous!

After seeing what stood in front of him, Fir felt vindicated.

This... dragon (he was sure it was one, despite its unfamiliar appearance) looked as though a tree had one day gained sentience and sprouted wings. Its sides and underbelly were green speckled with copper brown – as if someone decided to mash leaves in a bowl before carelessly dumping a tree bark on top.

Tsk. *How messy.*

Instead of spikes proudly running down its back, it had needle-like pins joined by webbing – *I think they're called "frills"... they say that's what Seawings have* – colored dark green, like the evergreen canopies at night.

This color continued through the undersides of its wings and – *wait* – WHAT WAS THAT TAIL? Why was it a *leaf*?

"Three moons, it really is a tree!"

"Excuse me?"

Fir paused.

Did it just speak Dragon? This is awkward... I should say something before I look dumb!

"...Huh?"

"Did you just call me a tree?"

By the teeth of the Great Ice Dragon, did I really say that out loud? If only I said nothing; now it must think I'm an idiot!

He looked at the strange dragon again. It looked angrier.

My stupid responses are making it mad! I'll have to be more confident – my charisma and wits will calm it down. You got this, Fir!

He tipped his wings back, lifted his chin, put on a winning smile and gave the dragon his most confident look.

“Why yes, yes I did.”

Now the dragon looked *furious*.

“Well I’m not a tree! I’m a dragoness!” it roared.

“Well, you don’t look like any dragon I’ve ever seen,” he retorted. *That’s right – When the fish resists, you tighten your grip!*

“I could say the same about you too”, she commented, “but at least I’m not so *rude* about it!”

“It’s not rude if it’s true!” Fir cut in. “You look just like a tree – oh, I know, you’re a *Treewing!*”

“Wha – No!” the dragon sputtered. Angrily, it replied. “I am a *Leafwing!*”

Fir racked his brain. *Leafwing... Leafwing... Leafwing?* Neither the storytellers nor sagas ever mentioned Leafwings.

Come to think of it, she does look kind of like a leaf – his eyes widened in inspiration. *Aha.*

“Leaves are on trees, are they not?” Fir asked wryly.

The dragon opened her mouth, before closing it again.

“Well, yes” she managed, “bu–”

Gotcha.

“SO THERE! *Treewing* is right after all – you said it yourself!” Fir triumphantly finished.

The Leafwing did not share his enthusiasm.

Though the argument was won, Fir still had many, *many* questions. Where was he? Who was she? And why does his side not hurt as much?

Fir opened his mouth to speak – but movement to the left caught his eye. Next to a pouch within a jar, a caterpillar sat silently.

A caterpillar black as midnight, marked with orange stripes, and carried by a thousand tiny legs.

Fir gasped. He’d seen it before – inches away from his face – right before it bit him.

That’s the caterpillar that bit me. Eyes narrowing, he faced the Leafwing.

And it belongs to her.

Verses from the storyteller-teachers rang in his mind. *Skywings are red, Seawings are blue, Don't trust anyone who looks different from you.*

Fir you fool. Chastising himself, he stood and flared his wings, tail bristling.

The battle wasn’t with the argument; it was with her.

“Who are you, *Leafwing*?” Fir snarled, crouching in a battle position. Adding in a low growl, he added.

“And why did you sic that caterpillar on me? Don’t lie – or it’ll be the last thing you ever do.”

Chapter 2 – 3194

One Year Ago

Growing up, Juniper’s life could be summed up with two locations, the first of which was the willow forest.

Located on the ridge jutting from Pantala’s “knee”, cocooning her village from the shores of Dragonfly Bay, it was an expansive woodland full of dense brambles, labyrinthine paths, and the largest willow trees in all of the continent.

Each was towering, elegant, and beautiful; together, they formed the namesake of her home: Willowwood.

Her village took great pride in caring for their forest, who in turn provided them with food, shelter, and bountiful quantities of sweet willow sap alongside exotic forest critters; the latter two kept them quite prosperous through trade with Silkwing chefs and the occasional Hivewing collector.

Gathering them, however, was much harder than it looked. Collecting sap required carefully breaking parts of the bark – moons forbid if the tree was permanently damaged!

And once broken, the sap spilled quickly and suddenly, slipping through outstretched talons or past jars not brought up in time. The fauna weren’t much easier either; they weren’t rare because they were easy to find!

But those were just the luxury goods. The village still needed food, vines, reeds, herbs, and a plethora of other common materials.

That was why gatherers chose apprentices to accompany them – experience and training for one, an extra pair of claws and eyes for the other. It was why Juniper's early years were mostly spent with her father, gleefully tramping through the forest while he carefully foraged behind.

At the start of each day they'd depart with empty baskets and jars, Mother waving them goodbye before leaving for the healer's hut. Mornings were spent fulfilling the village's tasks, and the morning of her sixth hatching day, in particular, stood out.

"Alright Junie," Father began, beaming at his daughter. "We'll need a full jar of willow sap, two baskets of tubers, and" he continued, leaning down, "a fresh bouquet of hyacinths for your hatching day!" he sang as he nuzzled her snout, Juniper giggling as the village grew farther behind them.

Lessons would begin in the afternoon, once the jars were capped and baskets filled: How to identify if a plant is poisonous or safe, to find the hidden homes of grasshoppers and mayflies, and to feel the pulse under bark that indicated sap release.

Today Juniper learned the various uses of a willow tree as she sat under one's shade: branches were tied as rope, leaves boiled for tea, roots weaved into baskets, and bark chewed to fight fevers.

"A good gatherer finds value in everything she sees," Father explained, "from the deepest stone in the stream to the tallest leaf in the sky."

He braided the hyacinths with vines, forming a laurel. Placing it on her head he continued.

"Everything has a value, even when you think it doesn't. Remember that, my sweet daughter, and you'll grow tall and strong."

Today the lessons ended early – “Because it’s your hatching day” he answered with a wink – making way for hours spent freely exploring and playing with other apprentices until it was time to return home, where Mother listened patiently to Juniper’s adventures of the day over a happy dinner.

Father was silent during meals; he preferred not to speak while eating, a trait not shared with his wife and daughter. But this dinner, he wasn’t. The whole meal he just could not stop sneezing. At first it was funny, then concerning, then worrying.

Finally he excused himself, leaving amid anxious looks. Her mother thought it was the pollen; hyacinths had plenty of it, after all, so both her and Juniper assumed his swollen eyes and runny snout would soon pass.

It didn’t. The sneezing continued through the next day. And the day after that he started coughing instead, deep rattling gasps that shook him to the bone. But no matter how much of Mother’s honey tea he drank, he didn’t get better.

Which was why, three days after her sixth hatching day, for the first time in her life Juniper went foraging alone as Father stayed home to rest.

She had a lot of trouble finding what she needed; the forest was empty that day – at least, it *felt* empty. By the time she returned it was almost dark, and found Mother waiting at the door with worry in her eyes; Father had developed a fever.

And it was getting worse.

At the crack of dawn the next day Juniper nearly sprinted to the forest. Like a whirlwind she scooped and pried off as much willow bark as she could until two whole baskets were full of it. Alongside that she had as many medicinal herbs and honey that she could carry as she hurried back home.

Returning to the village, though, Juniper couldn’t help but notice how other gatherers were carrying willow bark just like her. Instead of going to their homes or the village square to drop off their goods, they were all walking in

the direction of the healer's huts, past sick dragons dragging themselves to the same place.

It was only when she arrived home, finding a limp Father being carried by Mother and a few others, that her worst fears were confirmed. It wasn't just father; the whole village had been struck by sickness, one that showed no signs of slowing down.

Gone were the orders for sap or insects; food, medicine, and more medicine were all Juniper – and the rest of the foragers – were assigned to gather. Once she collected her amount she went not home, but to the healer's pavilion.

Located near the village center, the multi-story treehouse was as tall as the massive willow it was built on. Lower down were the storage rooms, carved into the wood itself, while higher up were wood platforms tied with vine that formed the patients' quarters.

A leaf roof let plenty of sunlight filter into the structure. Entering from it, Juniper clearly saw the chaos inside.

The healers had insisted their pavilion remain as uncrowded as possible, yet despite their orders and the risk of infection it was packed.

Between rows of hammocks full of the sick and feverish, almost a third of the village milled about. Most chatted eagerly with the sick or to each other, while others sat silently watching with worry in their eyes.

Nearer to the entrance gatherers like herself bustled in and out, dropping off medicinal plants and herbs before leaving or staying. Juniper was in the latter camp; where else should she be? Father was in one of those hammocks, and Mother now worked sunup to sundown here.

Without them their house was silent. *Empty.*

Juniper preferred to stay here.

The dropped off plants were taken by a healer who flew to a station on the second floor. There the plants were grinded into paste with a mortar and pestle until the smell of chamomile, ginger, and feverfew permeated the air. The mixtures would then be distributed to the remaining healers as they patrolled among the growing number of patients.

After giving her findings to the nearest healer Juniper beelined to the hammocks, eyes raking through the crowd. At last she found her four rows down:

Mother.

Wrapping willow bark around her tail and brandishing a jar of paste, she commanded her section of the floor. With a flick of a talon, orderlies snapped to attention and hurried off to work. With a wave of a claw, healing pastes and herbs appeared in her hands. And with a confident smile she cleanly treated her patients with care, as them and their families watched with relief.

Power and authority, respect and admiration. Mother had all of it there in the pavilion. Juniper had never adored her the way she did now as she calmly and confidently served in Willowwood's time of need.

A familiar rattling cough snapped Juniper to attention. Hurrying her pace she arrived at the hammock where Father lay. His glazed eyes regained focus upon seeing his daughter.

"Junie!" he wheezed. "It's good to see you again. How was foraging today? Tell me all about it – I haven't got anything else to do" he remarked with a smirk before a hacking cough gripped his lungs.

"Father! Are you alright?" Juniper worriedly asked.

“Oh, don’t worry about that” he waved his talon away. “I’ll drink some more tea. I want to know what you’ve been up to.”

“Well, nothing interesting so far. Just collecting more of the sa–”

“ATTENTION EVERYONE!”

Heads turned, patient and visitor alike. Juniper winced as Father craned his neck from his hammock to see the commotion.

“YOUR ATTENTION PLEASE!”

It was Mother. She was hovering in the air, claws cupped around her mouth as she continued to bellow to the whole pavilion.

“By order of Elder Rowan and the healers, in response to the fact that the sickness is CONTAGIOUS, ” the entire pavilion was now looking at her.

“All non-healers must LEAVE the pavilion at once! Any visitor can wait outside until further notice.” she finished.

The crowd went silent, then loud.

“Leave?”

“But my son is sick, he needs me!”

“I’d rather get bitten by a centipede than wait outside!”

“Who does she think she is?”

“You don’t tell me what to do!”

“Yeah, go swim in poison ivy!”

The crowd was not having her announcement, and a rising tide of displeased voices soon filled the hall, all of it aimed at Mother.

But despite the hostility she remained unperturbed, a slight frown the only indication of a reaction. The response came shortly after.

“WHO HERE WANTS TO SEE THEM DIE?”

The tide of voices died out as the eyes of every dragon in the building widened.

“Sneezing. Coughing. Wheezing. Death.” She looked around the stunned audience.

“That’s how the disease kills them.”

Her eyes passed by Juniper, and for a moment mother and daughter shared a worried look. Then she looked away and raised her voice.

“And that’s what we’re trying to stop! But we need your help! You can visit your loved ones later, but for now?”

Mother held her talons out beseechingly. “Please. Let us save them.”

The silence was deafening. For a moment, Juniper thought it didn’t work. But then a dragon turned and left. And another. One dragon leapt into the air and flew out from the roof before being followed by twelve more. Mother’s speech had worked.

She flew back down, landing next to Juniper with a soft *thud*.

“Juniper my sweet. How are you?” she asked as they embraced.

“Doing well. I liked your speech by the way.”

“Thank you,” she smiled. “I was worried I was making a fool of myself.”

“You weren’t.”

Mother was quiet for a moment as she held her husband’s talons. “I’m sorry I couldn’t come to you sooner.” She finally apologized to both of them.

Turning to Juniper she continued. “But you heard what I said. You have to come back later – It’s the Elder’s orders, and us healers *know* it has to be done.” she hurriedly added as Juniper’s face fell.

“I’m sorry, Juniper.” she quietly finished, eyes downcast. “Only healers can stay.”

“Then why don’t you be one?”

The two dragonesses turned to the hammock, where Father was looking at them with a bemused expression.

“Me? A healer?”

“Precisely. Just volunteer as a healer so you can stay. I’m sure your mother can find work for you.” he grinned.

“Well, I don’t see a problem with that,” Mother wondered aloud. She nudged Juniper with a wink. “So it’s settled, then. Want to help out your mother for today?”

“Yes!”

“Then come on!” Mother grabbed Juniper’s talons and together the two went deeper into the pavilion. “I want you to gather some supplies and meet me on the second floor. Don’t delay – you’re a healer now, not an idle tree. Work hard for the village and for yourself.”

“Yes Mother!” Juniper replied. “I won’t let you down!”

****Present day****

“Three moons, it really is a tree!”

Juniper froze. Her body went stock-still, eyes widened and mouth gaping open. Her mind, meanwhile, went racing faster than it had when she first saw the dragon.

It's awake! It's looking at me! What's it going to do!? What will it say!?

She’d been expecting something more congratulatory. Something like “Bless the forests, you saved me!” or even just a simple thank you. What Juniper was not prepared for, though, was for the mystery white dragon to call her a tree.

As a tribe so closely connected to flora, trees were used both as compliments and insults by Leafwings. Someone could be called as strong as an oak and as majestic as a sequoia, or as idle as a log and as pernicious as a belladonna.

So what did the dragon mean? Compliment or insult? Juniper wasn’t sure, but considering its tone, she was leaning towards the latter.

Don’t jump to conclusions yet, Juniper. Ask a question first.

“Excuse me?” was all she could muster.

The dragon looked surprised, as if it couldn't believe she could speak.

Maybe it thinks I'm as mute and dumb as wood, she bitterly thought, an offended expression fixing itself on her face. After all she did – how DARE it!

“...Huh?” was all it could say.

Juniper seethed. *And now it tries to act dumb! Why I should – I should –*

She stopped herself.

Hold on, Juniper. Don't let rage be your queen. The dragon could just be surprised. It could be scared. Ask again, give it another chance.

“Did you just call me a tree?” Juniper finally responded.

The dragon could've apologized. It could've acknowledged its mistake. It could've just said “*My mistake, I didn't mean to be rude. You're not dumb as wood – you're amazing!*”

But nooooo. Instead it *smirked* at her with a lazy smile. If emotions had a smell, Juniper would've gagged from its arrogance. Meeting her eyes it tipped its head back – as if she was *beneath* him – before speaking.

“Why yes, yes I did.”

That does it!

Juniper reared back, digging her claws into the dirt.

“Well I'm not a tree!” She roared. “I'm a dragoness!”

“Well, you don't look like any dragon I've ever seen,” he snapped.

“I could say the same about you too,” Juniper shot back – *Two can play at that game* – “but at least I’m not so rude about it!”

The dragon waved a claw away, as if dismissing her (perfectly valid) points.

“It’s not rude if it’s true!” it butted in. “You look just like a tree – oh, ” the dragon grinned. Juniper wanted to bite that expression off its face.

“I know, you’re a Treewing!”

Now it was just name-calling her. *This* was the dragon she saved? *This* was how talking to it would become? A part of Juniper was disappointed. But a larger part was just angry.

“Wha – No!” she quickly corrected. “I am a Leafwing!”

It paused. After a moment its eyes widened, and gave a reply quite unlike the snarky quips before.

“Leaves are on trees, are they not?” the dragon asked.

Following in the talonsteps of her body, Juniper’s mind froze.

What is it trying to do?

“Well, yes,” Juniper answered, “bu–”

“SO THERE!” it shouted

Juniper winced – perhaps she should’ve tied its snout with reeds.

“Treewing is right after all, you said it yourself!” it finished, beaming as if it’d won some big contest. Juniper was not as pleased.

The dragon turned her right – *probably to preen in front of an imaginary audience* – when it gasped. Juniper turned to see what surprised it when a harsh snarl escaped its jaws.

Jolting back she found the dragon with teeth bared, wings flared, and in a battle position.

“Who are you, *Leafwing*?” it threatened. “And why did you sic that caterpillar on me? Don’t lie – or it’ll be the last thing you ever do.”

Fir maintained his stance. He was an *Icewing* – proud and terrifying! The *Leafwing* may have been angry before, but now?

She’s probably too scared to think. Good. She’ll pay for her tricks!

Juniper’s eye twitched.

I’ve HAD it with this dragon.

“Well?” it goaded. “Answer me alrea–”.

“SHUT UP!”

The dragon stopped, shocked into silence.

“FIRST, I spent the *whole morning* searching in the forest, spending *hours* stressed out before I could find my centipede again.”

“A centipede?”

“THEN,” she shouted, “I find you, unconscious and *bleeding out*, and I HEAL YOU!” she pointed to the bandage on its side.

“But when you wake up, what do you do? You act ungrateful! Stubborn and rude, you call me names! You don’t even give me a single shred of gratitude.”

Juniper blinked back tears. Now was not the time.

“And now, after everything I did for you, you *threaten* me?”

Juniper bared her teeth. “You have no right to interrogate me, nor to be this hostile. So stop acting like a threat, because I know you aren’t.” She finished.

The dragon remained quiet for a few long moments, the silence stretching for an eternity. Juniper felt her anger subsiding after that outburst.

“Not a threat?” it quietly whispered.

Finally. “Yes.” she softly replied. “That’s right. I’m not a – ”

“Did you say I’m not a threat? Are you calling me WEAK?!” it roared. “I. AM. NOT. WEAK! I am Fir, son of the Icewings, the strongest tribe there is!”

He reared his head back, opening his jaws.

But he’s too far to bite me – whatever he’s up to, it won’t work.

“And I’ll prove that today!” Fir raged. “When I show you who’s truly weeeaaack!”

He clutched his bandaged side in pain, and toppled onto the grass.

Had Fir not tried to attack her, perhaps Juniper would've felt the same sympathy she had when she first found him.

Right now, though, she was ready to scorn him. To mockingly ask about his "strength". To taunt him in every way she could for everything he did and was about to do, then bring the whole village down on him.

Talons shaking, Fir pushed himself up. And fell. He slammed a claw down and roared, then tried again. And fell again. He wheezed on the ground, tail slamming the dirt, before devolving into a coughing fit.

Finally he lay defeated, breathing heavily. The sound wormed its way into Juniper's ears.

She stopped. That gasping cough. That wheezing breath which rattled on the exhale.

Juniper could feel the hyacinth laurel placed lovingly on her head. He sounded just like him.

The words on her tongue died in an instant.

She turned around and walked away, to the stone on which her pouch lay. Reaching inside she took a talonful of berries and walked back to Fir.

He'd finally stopped trying to get up, so the worst of the cough had subsided. But he was still breathing deeply as he warily watched Juniper approach.

She stopped next to him and crouched down.

“I’m not saying you’re weak.” she gently began. I’m saying you’re wounded. And despite what you think I mean you no harm.”

She held out the food.

“So let’s start over. Hello, Fir. I’m Juniper, daughter of the Leafwings. Would you like to eat some berries?”

He nodded.

“Yes. Yes please.”

Chapter 3 – 2095

Maybe Fir was wrong after all.

But to be fair, the centipede wasn’t his fault. Considering how he’d never even seen one in his life, Fir thought it was quite okay labeling it a caterpillar.

Calling the Leafwing – Juniper – a tree may not have been. Nor was arguing that she was one. Or threatening her (though it did seem *very* suspicious from his point of view).

Or almost blasting frostbreath at her. Whoops.

Why Juniper was now offering him food instead of mocking him to death, Fir didn’t know. But he wasn’t going to complain about berries! They were his favorite back home. Visions of tangy raspberries and sweet blackberries danced in Fir’s head as his mouth began to water.

“Good,” Juniper smiled. She turned her claw over, dumping half the berries into Fir’s talons.

“Here you go then. Enjoy!”

Fir looked down. His mouth turned dry. *What in the three moons am I looking at?*

Raspberries, blackberries and every berry he ever ate were all symmetrical, and each of only one color. There was a clear hierarchy of food – recognizable differences bound by a common shape

The berries in front of him could not have cared less about such rules.

Each was colored by haphazard splotches of green and brown, as if they couldn’t make up their minds about what they wanted to be. They must’ve been confused about shapes too – that would explain the lack of uniformity.

Come to think of it, they looked a lot like the dragon who gave them.

Fir’s stomach growled, reminding him that now was no time to be picky. *Here goes nothing.*

Taking a berry with his other talon, he popped it in his mouth and chewed, expecting the worst.

That was why the explosion of sweetness caught him by surprise, hitting his tongue with waves of flavor. But just as he was getting used to it, the fruit shifted to a smooth savory taste, the flavor reminding him of fresh winter dew.

Finally he swallowed, the aftertaste warmly buzzing in his throat.

Licking his lips, Fir hungrily looked at the rest of the berries, his dry mouth a distant memory.

Juniper noticed the look, grinning with pride. "You like it, don't you?" she preened. They're dragonberries that I picked yesterday, they're as good as fresh. They pack a lot of energy and nutrients and- Whoa!"

She jumped back as Fir shoveled the rest of the berries into his mouth.

"Slow down there, you'll get sick!" she laughed.

"Hrmrm Wrrb Ghblrrbl." Fir answered.

For half a minute he just chewed and swallowed, enjoying the tastes and relishing his hunger retreating. Licking his teeth clean he finally responded.

"Better sick than hungry."

"You could be neither if you ate slower." she quipped.

"What can I say? I'm impatient." He sat up.

"Which brings me to my next point. Who are you and where am I?" he bluntly asked.

"Not so fast." she replied. "Remember who fixed you up *and* fed you? I think I deserve to have *my* questions answered first."

Fir looked down at the bandage, stained with the faintest hint of blue. As much as he hated to admit it, Juniper was right. Another confrontation wouldn't do him any good.

"Very well. " he sighed. "Ask away."

Juniper jumped forward, eyes gleaming.

“Who are you?”

He could feel the enthusiasm radiating from her scales. “I’m Fir, an Icewing.” He paused. *She already knows that.*

“But you already know that. What you don’t know is that I’m a fisher, from Among-The-Evergreens.”

“Among-The-What now?” she tilted her head.

“Among-The-Evergreens.” Fir repeated. “My home village, on the western shores of the Ice Kingdom.”

“The Ice Kingdom?”

“My tribe’s home. It’s the safest, most beautiful place in the world I tell you!” He animatedly answered.

Juniper sat down and curled her tail, resting her head on her talons.

“Tell me.”

Thinking back to home, Fir obliged. First he talked about his village, and the great evergreen forests that looked so much like the one he was in. He told her about the many arctic trees, detailing them the best he could to an enraptured Juniper.

Still hungry, he talked about their many village feasts, where rarer polar bear and deer would be served at feasts held over glimmering swathes of arctic snow. *That* led to a question about what a polar bear was, so Fir spent the next few minutes depicting it as much as he could.

Finally he described the sea that overlooked his village: the thousand shades of blue and gray that it reflected onto the sky, the delicate ice formed over it during the winter season, and the gentle waves that lapped on the frigid shore.

All the while, Juniper listened with rapt attention. "It sounds amazing," she quietly said when he finished.

"It is amazing."

"Then what brings you here?" she questioned.

"A storm." Fir thought back to that day. How foolish he'd been to remain in such weather. "I was fishing when a storm erupted. The wind wrapped my net around me, blowing me out into the sea," he looked down again. "and giving me this nasty gash."

"Nasty indeed." Juniper agreed. "Quite an inconvenient location for a bandage, too."

Fir perked up. "Ah! That reminds me! Speaking of location, where in Pyrrhia am I?"

"...Pyrrhia?" Juniper uncurled, confusion in her voice.

Fir ignored it. "Yeah! I know I went south, but this doesn't look like the Sand Kingdom to me."

"Fir?"

"Is this the rainforest? I don't know how I'd go so far inland, though."

"Fir."

“And didn’t you say you’re a Leafwing?” He babbled. “You’re surely not a lazy Rainwing, so I really doubt that – ”

“FIR!” Juniper yelled.

He stopped. “Hm?”

“..What’s Pyrrhia? Is that the Distant Kingdoms?” SShe slowly asked.

Fir’s stomach dropped.

“Pyrrhia, ” he said shakily, “you know, Pyrrhia! *The Dragon Continent!* ”

“No,” she answered. “I don’t know.”

“Yes.” He interrupted. “You *do* know, because we’re on it, *right?*” Fir’s voice became desperate.

“This isn’t Pyrrhia.” Juniper flatly stated.

The world seemed to slide again, just like when the centipede bit him. Fir felt himself shaking his head in disbelief.

“Fir?”

Juniper spread her wings out, arms stretched out to the sky as she looked around to the scenery around her.

“I want to introduce you to my home. To my continent.”

She looked back down, meeting his eyes.

“Welcome to Pantala.”

That was so epic! Juniper gleefully thought.

She was afraid she looked silly with her wings and arms outstretched. By the time she made dramatic eye contact at the end she half expected Fir to burst out laughing.

His shocked expression washed away her doubts. Not a word escaped him as he stood stock still, as if the weight of what happened today was finally sinking in.

Juniper waited for a long moment before talking again. She could drag this out – a part of her relished this reaction she got from him

“Soooo,” she asked playfully. “How do you like it?”

“A new continent.” Fir whispered, slowly shaking his head. “By the Great Ice Dragon, I’m on a new *continent*.”

“Yes. We’ve established that.”

“And you – you’re from a whole new tribe!” he pointed at Juniper.

She fidgeted. “You are too, you know.”

They stared at each other. In this second silence, it was Juniper’s turn for those words to sink in.

I’m talking to a dragon that I never knew existed. A dragon from the mythical Distant Kingdoms.

She sat back down.

By the trees, Juniper. What has this day become?

“You know, Juniper.” Fir broke the silence. “To answer your question: yes. So far, Pantala seems pretty nice, despite the centipedes.”

“Thank you.” She managed. Juniper felt as if she was two years old again, when she got lost in the woods for a whole day and had no idea where to go or what to do. *This must be how Fir feels too.*

“And I’d like it more,” he continued, “if I could know more about it. It’s *my* turn to ask the questions now.”

She nodded. “Go ahead.”

“What are the Distant Kingdoms? You mentioned it before when talking about Pyrrhia.”

“It’s our name for your continent. Long ago a dragon arrived from there, saving Pantala and guiding it to a bright future.” She narrated. “At least, that’s what the legends say. Many don’t even believe it exists.”

“Wait until they see me!” Fir laughed. “By ‘many’, you mean your tribe, right?”

“All of them. Pantala has three.”

Juniper held up a talon. “First there are the Leafwings – my tribe. We live across the whole continent, within its many forests. Our queen, Sequoia, keeps us safe and happy no matter where we live, so that wherever there are trees, so too are we.” she proudly finished.

“Second are the Silkings. They come in all sorts of colors – and have four wings too!”

“Four wings?”

“Four wings.” She repeated. “Their closest settlement is farther inland, so they don’t come to my home often. But they’re nice dragons, and I think you’ll like them. Their good queen, Monarch, is said to be the kindest dragon on Pantala.”

“But is she strong?” Fir questioned.

“What do you mean?”

“Is she strong?” Fir unfurled his wings.

“A good queen is a strong queen. There’s no use in being kind if you can’t defend it with strength. A queen that isn’t strong will only invite danger to her and her tribe.” He lectured.

Strength? A queen should love and care for her subjects. What does strength have to do with anything?

“Take my queen for example. She loves us too. But she’s also a hardened warrior and brilliant commander. She leads us into battle, winning skirmishes against other tribes for prey and treasure so that we remain strong!”

“Hold on – skirmishes!?” Juniper burst out. “You mean your tribes *fight* each other?”

“Of course.” Fir stared at her as if she’d grown a second head. “It’s the way things are. Tribes fight, dragons fight, and you need to be strong to survive and thrive.”

Juniper recoiled. Fighting? Skirmishes? *Battles*? She shuddered.

“Well, our tribes don’t fight each other.” She declared. “Every few moons the three queens meet to sort out any problems, and it works great! At least, it’s supposed to.” she mumbled.

“What happened?”

“The third queen. Wasp, of the Hivewings. I’ve never seen one before. But I hear that they’re terrifying, and that she’s the scariest of them all.”

She looked down at her claws.

“And I’ve also heard that she’s ordering trees across Pantala – *our homes* – to be cut down. Queen Sequoia’s been confronting her about it, but so far nothing’s come out of it. And now we’re hearing reports of trees being cut down farther inland, and rumors are that Elder Rowan is uneasy, and... *rrrrrgh*.”

Juniper realized that her talons were clenched. It took a conscious effort to unclamp them. Looking back up she saw Fir looking at her with a concerned expression.

“Oh, and, uh, they have four wings too!” she awkwardly added.

Fir stood up, lifting himself until his scales shimmered under the sun.

“Juniper.” He put a claw on her shoulder and she froze – literally. It was so *cold*, as if he’d dunked his arm in the most frigid river on Pantala (perhaps “Icewing” was a more fitting name than she thought).

“Is your queen strong?” he slowly asked.

“Yes.”

“I agree. If she stands up to this ‘Wasp’ like you say she does, then she is strong. And if she is strong, then there is no need to worry.”

“I guess so.” Juniper nodded. “I must be overreacting.”

“Good.” Fir sat back down.

“I’ll be honest,” Juniper admitted, “I thought you had something to do with the Hivewings. Your claws looked sharp enough to cut down trees, and that worried me when I first found you.”

“I think I’ll take that as a compliment,” Fir inspected his talons, “for how sharp I keep them.”

He looked back at Juniper. “Have any more berries? They were delicious.”

“No,” she admitted, “but I’d prefer if we talked some more. You mentioned other tribes – what are they like? What’s your tribe like? Tell me more.”

“Only if you tell me as well.” Fir grinned. “How about it? You answer me and I answer you.”

“Deal.” Juniper sat back down. “Ask away.”

As they talked, the centipede in the jar grew bored. With nothing else to do it lay down to rest, coiling around itself over and over until it drowned out the conversation outside.

Chapter 4 – 3724

One Year Ago

With foraging in the willow forest put on hold, the healer's pavilion became the second location to sum up Juniper's life. And what a change it was.

In the forest, goals were simple and straightforward: Collect two baskets of reeds, find 30 arm-lengths of vines, and fill a jar with sap, just to name a few.

Once the task was given, the forager was free to complete it in any way they saw fit – as long as they returned with the supplies by sundown.

Some, like her and Father, finished them in the morning so that the afternoon could be spent however they wished. Usually this meant chatting with other foragers, napping, or going back to the village.

Others had a slightly different schedule. Sleeping, socializing, or relaxing until after noon, they'd scramble to complete their jobs in the evening before barely making it back to Willowwood by night.

Everyone had their own way of doing their job too. Foraging in the forests was one option (her favorite), as was searching above the trees, or in the underbrush, or near the streams and ponds.

But regardless of time or method, the supplies were always gathered and brought back. A single task completed in a hundred different ways.

The healers were the opposite. Instead of one job being done countless ways, they had countless jobs each done only a single way.

And there were sooo many rules!

Stock the herbs alphabetically, mix paste in a specific ratio, and administer it to patients every hour. Wrap bandages for cuts, splints for bones, and be sure to set them the correct way!

“No, Juniper.” Mother softly repeated for the twentieth time. “You have to wrap *around* the fracture, not move it to your liking.”

They were in a storage room, a mannikin splayed on the floor. Next to it was Juniper, trying (and failing) to apply a splint on its “broken” arm.

“Moving the limb will only aggravate it further.” Mother pointed out, standing over them both.

“I know, I know, ” Juniper grumbled. *This is so stupid! All I have to do is move it a little bit to the right, and it’ll work!*

“But listen!” she looked up. “I could finish the splint right now if I just –”

“Don’t.” she cut in again. “We don’t want to risk hurting the patient, right?”

“...Right.” she conceded.

Mother put a wing around Juniper. “You’ll get the hang of it eventually, I promise.”

Juniper returned the hug, and the two went outside for a break. With everyone working from sunup to sundown to stem the tide of rising patients, it was a welcome respite.

Across its multiple stories, the healer’s pavilion had a number of balconies and outdoor spaces for patients and staff. The pair entered one such space, and looking down they could see the waves of dragons moving in and out the building.

Leaning on the railing, Juniper closed her eyes.

Working as an apprentice healer while training under Mother was harder than anything she'd done before. There were always more procedures to learn, more techniques to study, more supplies to sort and (many) more patients to take care of.

"Juniper. " She opened her eyes, hearing Mother's voice.

"We need to talk."

"What about?" she tilted her head.

"Being a healer. It's very different from foraging, and I want you to be prepared for that."

"But I am preparing! I'm not good at it right now, but soon I'll—"

"It's not about your skill." Mother's voice cut through. "It's about your attitude."

"Attitude?" Juniper stepped back, confused.

"Yes." Mother gazed beyond the railing, to the treeline on the horizon.

"I know you, you're just like your Father. You have a free spirit and a creativity that loves to show itself."

"It's an attitude that served you well in the forest, as a forager, " she looked at the bustling crowd at the entrance, "but here as a healer? It needs to change."

"But —"

“Juniper, we have rules and procedures for a reason. There are things that need to be done a certain way, or else *dragons get hurt*.”

Juniper looked down at her talons.

“Don’t get me wrong, daughter. I love you the way you are, now and forever.”

“So I’m telling you this as your mentor, not as your Mother: follow the rules. Trust them as much as you trust me, and you will do well. Can you do that for me?”

The question hung in the air, refusing to go away. Finally Juniper looked up and met Mother’s eyes.

“Yes, I can.”

“Good.” They twined their tails, and together looked back at the sky.

“I know these past few weeks have been hard for you, with Father and the village getting sick,” Mother whispered, “but things will work out. It’ll all work out in the end, I promise.”

“I love you, Mother.” Juniper murmured, leaning underneath her wings.

“I love you too, Junie.”

Heads rested together, no more words were spoken.

Despite its challenges, Juniper was getting used to being a healer. Though hard, the work was rewarding. And seeing the looks of relief on patients and their families when Mother told them things would be alright, knowing she helped bring that joy? That was something worth the world to see.

Which reminded her; how *should* she have put that splint on? Juniper opened her mouth to ask Mother.

“Healer Cypress! Healer Cypress!”

They turned around. A dragon, clearly panicked, burst through the entrance behind them.

“What’s wrong?” Mother started.

“Healer Cypress, your husband – Maple.” He panted. “His lungs – he’s in critical condition.”

No. Juniper’s face went pale.

“What?” Mother gasped.

“You need to come no–”

“On my way!” she shouted, the pair nearly bowling him over as they rushed downstairs.

No no no. Juniper’s heart thudded in her chest.

Down they raced, past the other training rooms, past confused looks, until they finally arrived at the patients’ quarters.

Down the rows they sprinted, almost colliding with several hammocks, past dozens of eyes, until finally they were at Father’s hammock.

Another healer was already there, applying smelling herbs to no avail. Upon seeing Mother, she backed away.

“Maple!” Mother skidded to a stop.

Father looked up at his wife, pain in his eyes. The inside of his mouth was an ashy gray, colored only by the blood coughed up with every other breath.

“Cypress? Junie?” he hoarsely called. “I –” another hacking cough stopped his reply.

“Save your breath, my love” Mother hurriedly pulled out herb jars as Juniper frantically brought out willow bark.

Father shook his head. “Won’t... work.” The wheezing was getting worse.

“Don’t say that!” Mother snapped. “Chew on this, it’ll help.”

“Can’t. Hurts... to breathe” Father rasped.

He sat up, gripping Mother’s claws. “Take care... of our daughter. Stay safe.”

Turning to Juniper, he softly held the side of her face. “Listen... listen to your Mother, Junie. Make us proud.”

Blood began to pour from his nose. It ran down his snout, dripping onto his chest.

“I love you both. So, so much.” he whispered.

“I’m sorry.”

With that final murmur his chest convulsed. It shook up, fell back down, and stayed there.

A long moment passed.

“Maple!” Mother cried, shaking a limp Father. “MAPLE!”

Juniper stared at him, eyes glassy and unmoving. Someone closed them, but she didn't know who. Her vision was too cloudy for that.

Tears streamed down, the water on her face matching the blood on his.

Other healers soon rushed in. Some to console her and Mother. Others to take the body away.

Juniper felt Mother embracing her. She could feel her chest shaking.

"Mother?" Juniper sobbed.

"I'm here, Junie." She hugged her more tightly. "I'm here."

"Is Father... is he—"

"Yes. I'm sorry."

He was supposed to get better. I was supposed to help him.

Why didn't I?

****Present day****

"So, what's your family like?" Fir asked.

Juniper was silent for a moment.

"I live with my Mother. She works as a healer, while I go out to forage." She replied. "My Father passed away from a sickness almost a year ago."

“Ah, sorry. My condolences.” Fir nodded.

“No, no. It’s ok.” Juniper waved it aside. There was no use in reliving such memories.

Her hand cast a long shadow over the meadow, and she noticed that the sun was setting quickly.

How long were we speaking for?

“Hey, Fir?”

“Yes?”

“Are you going to stay here?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Juniper stood up, “that I have to return to my village before nightfall. But where will you go?”

Fir stroked his chin with a claw. “Hmm... you’re right. I can’t fly back home, not in this state.” He looked at his bandage. “Perhaps I could come with you? You could introduce me to your village.”

Juniper thought back to wanting to keep Fir’s presence as her own secret. Could she really expect him to stay in the meadow forever? But there was still a problem.

She shook her head. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. News of tree-cutting has made us all a bit... on edge.”

Juniper pointed at Fir, then at his claws. "We're already tense about foreign dragons coming and destroying our trees. So if I bring you – with your claws – back home? I don't know how they'll react."

"Couldn't you talk to them?"

"It'll take more than my word to persuade them all."

Fir was silent for a moment. "I understand. If I was them, I'd be wary of strange dragons too. But you mentioned an Elder. Would they be able to?"

"Oh – yes, he would!" Juniper exclaimed.

"I can talk to him about this, bring him here to meet you, and then he can introduce you to the village!" She explained. "If we can convince him you're not a threat, everyone else will accept you too!"

"That sounds wonderful." Fir grinned. "Could you bring him here by tonight? I'd rather not sleep out here."

Juniper paused. Elder Rowan was usually pretty busy. How would she even get an audience with him, much less bring him all the way out here?

Fir's expectant face stared back, Juniper fidgeting under its weight.

"Er – Yeah, yeah." she stammered. "I can definitely do that, no worries!"

Fir relaxed, as did Juniper.

"That's good to hear." He stood up and turned around.

"This meadow is near the coast, right?"

"Right."

“I’ll walk to the sea and catch myself a snack, then I’ll come back here to wait.” He called. “See you until then, Juniper!”

“See you!” she turned to leave.

Alright Juniper, she thought, you’ll just have to meet with the Elder, get him to come here, and convince him that Fir’s friendly without arousing suspicion – just like you promised.

She stopped.

How in the trees will I do that?

Getting to the sea was harder than Fir thought.

Try as he might, the forest was determined to not let him walk straight. All of a sudden a tree would appear in the middle of his path, demanding he go left or right, and no matter what he chose he’d just end up even more lost!

Fir barely managed to backtrack to the meadow, where he sat and stewed.

The forests back home were orderly and neat – every grove of trees was separated from the rest, so that the beauty of each could shine through unhindered.

Perhaps Juniper and her village could learn a thing or two from me!

Looking up at the sun, Fir remembered how it always set on the western sea – *wait, west! That's it!* The sun was setting in the west, which meant all he had to do was move away from its light and he'd get to the shore in no time!

This time he moved carefully, memorizing the path as best he could while looking to the sky often. Finally he did it; emerging from a clearing of trees, he saw a sandy beach dotted with rocky outcroppings. Past that, at last, was the ocean, waves gently lapping the shore.

Such waters *had* to have fish, Fir was sure. But how to get them?

His net was long gone – not that it mattered since he could barely fly. And he didn't know anything about the local trees, much less how to craft them or whether they can even be used as a net.

Besides, the sun was setting, and Fir didn't want to spend too long out here. There simply wasn't time to build one from scratch.

That left a single approach: claw fishing. Wait in the water with outstretched claws, and catch any fish that comes too close. The only problem?

It's going to be so, so, sloooow, Fir groaned.

Five Years Ago

The first time Fir went claw fishing was when he was two. Father had insisted he learn it (despite Fir's protests), which was why they were hunched up on the village beach, claws outstretched in water that went up to their legs.

The summer season brought with it warmer winds that whooshed past Fir's ears. It was completely at odds with the cool waves below, leaving his body stuck between the two temperatures in a way that infuriated him.

A curious catfish approached Fir, whiskers running over his arm. It swam in a circle, straying closer to Fir's arm, then –

Swish! Swoosh! He squeezed his claws, but the catfish wriggled away.

"I missed AGAIN!?" Fir roared. "AAAARGH!" In a rage he threw up his claws, sending a shower of water over him and Father.

"Why won't it WORK? Why can't I DO IT? Why Why WHYYYYY!?"

"Fir." Father's harsh voice cut through his tantrum. "Enough."

Fir clamped his jaws shut, fuming. "It's just not fair." He quietly murmured.

"You're right."

Fir's eyes brightened. Father said he was right?

"It isn't fair," he admitted, "not fair at all." He turned to his son with a gentler expression.

"Fir, do you know why I brought you here?"

"To...To learn claw fishing?" He tentatively asked. "The other fishers say it's important I learn how, if I ever find myself without a net." *But why not just get one if I don't have it?*

"Yes," Father answered, "But that's not the only reason for being here."

"Huh?" Fir tilted his head. "Then why else am I doing this?"

"I brought you here," Father began, "to learn patience."

He gestured to his claws, still unmoving beneath the waves. “Life is unfair. Sometimes the catfish will go to you, other times it swims for someone else to enjoy.”

Fir noticed a dark shape approaching them. It was another catfish, seemingly unbothered by the chaos he created.

“But the ocean is always shifting, always moving. Eventually the waters will bring you something else, where before it gave you nothing.”

The new catfish took a fascination to Father’s submerged tail. It twirled around it, occasionally nibbling the edges.

“But in order to last until that next opportunity, in order to prevent hasty actions that would take your prize away...”

The fish floated underneath Father’s arms before flipping around above his claws. But he didn’t pounce. He waited, and waited, and waited until it brushed his talons, then –

Shink!

Lifting his claws above the water came an impaled catfish, still wriggling in a panic.

“...you must persevere, my son.” Father held his catch out for Fir to eat. He gladly accepted the food, gulping it down in two quick bites.

“So, what is patience and perseverance?” Father asked.

“Delicious!”

“Ha!” Laughing, Father scooped up Fir in a tight hug.

“Yes, Fir. Yes it is.”

****Present Day****

Delicious.

Fir’s stomach rumbled. Being patient would be harder than he thought. But he can handle it. He *would* handle it.

Fir waded into the bay, standing up on two legs until the water was just below the bandage. He submerged his upturned claws, held still, and waited.

Minutes passed, the only sounds coming from the wind and waves. Fir waited.

The sun began to sink below the horizon, coloring the sky pink. Fir waited.

But that’s the funny thing about waiting; you get bored. And when you’re bored, your mind starts to wander. For Fir, there was much to wander through.

Will the Elder trust me like Juniper does?

I wonder what fish I’ll catch. They can’t be weirder than those berries.

The sky looks pretty – just like home.

He sucked in a breath.

Father... My whole family must be worried sick! How will I even fly back?

He looked beyond the beach. Even with his sharp eyesight, he couldn't see a trace of land out there. Where was his home?

His talons began to shake.

What if he couldn't find home, and fell into the ocean and drowned? Was this all for nothing? Is he stuck on Pantala forever?

Will I ever see them again?

ENOUGH!

Father's voice rang in his head, and Fir forced himself to calm down. He envisioned his worries sinking beneath the surface of a frozen lake, vanishing under layers of ice until they were out of view and out of mind. Then he re-stilled his talons and waited some more.

Right now, he had more pressing problems to deal with. He was injured, hungry, alone, and one wrong turn away from being lost in a new land. He had an Elder to meet with, a village to gain the trust of, and possible incursions from those "Hivewings" Juniper worried about – not to mention a fish to catch.

Going home was a problem that could wait beneath the ice.

Beneath the water, movement stirred. Fir's eyes widened. A new fish!

Maybe it'll be green like Juniper, or bright pink like the sunset!

He held his breath as the fish came closer. Bracing himself, he peered down to look at the new specimen.

I bet it'll be exotic, strange and tasty. It's... It's... It's...

It surfaced.

... A catfish.

A familiar pair of whiskers ticked his body. Fir sighed. *Better than nothing.* He waited, and waited, and waited, and pounced.

One meal later Fir was on the beach, picking his teeth with its bones. All in all, it tasted quite good.

You take what you are given, and let go of what you are not. Fir looked up at the darkening sky. The moons rising from the east lit up the bay, while glimmering stars looked on.

I might not be given all I want, he thought, but I'll enjoy what I have. It's like Father said: all I need is to hold strong, no matter how hard it is. He threw the last fishbone away. *But if this is what endurance brings, I think I can manage.*

He laid back on the beach, staring at the darkening sky as the waves lapped at his feet. If there was one thing that could remind him of home (besides catfish), it was the stars. Fir's sharp eyesight picked out all the familiar constellations.

To his left were the twin bear stars, migrating across the sky in search of food. Below them was the reindeer constellation, ever watchful of predators. Nearby the rabbit star pranced and played, a harbinger of the summer seasons. And highest in the sky he saw the faintest glimmer of the North Star, placed there by the Great Ice Dragon to guide all her children home.

They greeted him like familiar friends. *Hello, Fir. You're a bit too far west today!* They seemed to say. *Have faith, you'll return soon.*

"Yes," Fir answered back, "yes I will. You'll see."

We will. The stars shined back.

“I’ll endure. I’ll be patient. I’ll get through this!”

He closed his eyes. It was such a beautiful night to sleep under. Who knows, perhaps Juniper will be standing over him like last time?

Juniper.

Fir’s eyes shot open. “The meadow! I have to go back!”

Kicking up sand, Fir scrambled back into the forest, this time with the stars watching over him. They gave enough light for him to reach the edge of the meadow where he hid.

Wouldn’t want to scare the Elder – besides, I think Juniper likes dramatic introductions.

And so, again, he waited. Alone, with the shadows of the willows blotting out the shine of his scales, and the sounds of the forest masking his soft breathing.

Fir squinted through the dark. Where were the shapes emerging from the treeline? Where was that Elder? Where was Juniper?

The moons continued their climb alongside his irritation.

Soon the forest sounds masked the impatient tapping of his tail and the annoyed ruffling of the spines around his neck.

The moons reached their zenith, yet still no one came.

Finally the mask broke. “Where are you? I’m here!” Fir shouted. The sound echoed through the meadow until dissipating in the trees.

She lied, didn't she. Shaking his head, Fir lashed out on a tree. He dug his claws through the bark, ripping it again and again until the trunk was marred with his frustration. Still angry, he finally stalked back to the beach to sleep.

So this is what I get for being patient, he bitterly thought. *Empty promises and no progress on going home.*

He looked back up at the stars. Every day was one of fear and worry for his family – and for himself. The only way to fight back against those fears and rejoin his tribe was to work towards returning.

Talking to the Elder would've done that. Perhaps her tribe had maps or knowledge that would've been of use. At the very least, he could recover faster in a village. But thanks to Juniper's false promise, none of that would happen today.

Fir rested his head on the sand, curling underneath the coldest stone outcropping he could find. *Perhaps Juniper didn't lie,* a small part of him said. *Maybe she simply tried and failed.* But the result was no different, and it was he who would pay for it.

Father, I have to disagree with you. Fir apologized. *Waiting has led me nowhere.*

Getting home won't swim up to me like catfish, He admitted, closing his eyes. *I must hunt it down, no matter where it runs. Next time I must be forceful, aggressive, and assertive. To Juniper. To the Elder. To everyone.*

Sleep came quickly, numbing his senses.

Then, and only then, will I go home.

Chapter 5 – 2698

Juniper never felt stressed going back to Willowwood. *That* was reserved for the healer's pavilion. She remembered the first time she went there after Father's death, and his funeral that had happened beforehand.

According to Leafwing tradition, the deceased were to be buried in the forest, nourishing the trees so that new life could arise from death. But what life could arise from the weather that day, Juniper didn't know. The sun was high and hot, burning the air so that everyone sweltered under the heat, until sweat and tears mingled freely.

Her and Mother were standing side-by-side next to Father. Behind them was a small crowd who came to pay respects. Maybe it was because the blood was cleaned off him, but Father looked as if he was simply asleep. Juniper thought he looked unreal; the whole day had felt that way.

"The forest gives and the forest takes." The Elder's voice slipped her out of her thoughts.

"Throughout his life Maple was many things. First he was a dragonet: adventurous, spirited, and sharp-witted at all times."

He looked beyond to the trees behind him. "Then he was a forager, eager to prove himself and soon a friend to many." At that the crowd nodded, murmuring their assent.

"Most of all," he glanced at Mother and her, "he was a devoted husband and father, who he loved as much as he will be missed."

“And so we remember Maple today, as he becomes one with the forest again. May he forever nurture our home, as he did in life.” He finished.

Mother silently nodded, eyes stoically dry. Juniper did her best to do the same but to no avail, every teardrop and sniffle another reminder that Father was gone.

Every time Juniper looked at him, all she could think about was his bloodied face and chest, grotesquely stained with the life he used to have. She couldn't bear to see him again – not like this. So instead she kept her eyes down, at the darkening ground in front of her.

Finally they buried him, fittingly beneath a maple tree. A hole deep enough to expose its roots had been dug beforehand, and all that remained was for it to be filled. Once carefully placed, heaps of dirt and earth buried Father's body until he at last disappeared.

With the funeral over most dragons turned to leave. A few came to them offering condolences, receiving stiffly rehearsed nods and cracked smiles.

“Cypress.” The Elder quietly approached them.

“Elder Rowan.” Mother curtly greeted.

“I am sorry for everything that has happened.” He softly consoled. “We all know how much Maple meant to you.”

She hollowly nodded.

“Which is why the healers and I have agreed; you do not need to come to the pavilion today. We don't want to force you back to work so soo–”

“No.”

Mother's reply caught him off guard. "...Cypress, what do you mean?"

"I mean what I said: No." She repeated.

Elder Rowan joined Juniper in silence as Mother turned to the Maple tree.

"Under there, Maple – *my husband* – lies dead." She furiously shook her head, and Juniper could've sworn she saw tears.

"And the thing that killed him? It's. Still. Here." She hissed, turning back to them.

"It pollutes our village. It kills us one by one. And I'll be *cursed* if I don't do what I can to stop it!"

Composing herself, Mother took a shaky breath. "I will go to the pavilion today. I will be a healer. And I will work against this plague until it is gone."

She extended an arm to Juniper. "Junie, my daughter. Will you come with me?"

Despite the strength of her words, Juniper could see the longing in Mother's eyes. She *needed* her daughter by her side, if only to dull the pain of Father's loss as she worked.

The answer was obvious. "Of course."

"Come then, we shouldn't delay." She put a wing around Juniper, gratitude in her eyes. The Elder watched with concerned eyes as they left

The walk to the pavilion was quick and quiet, Mother's mask of professionalism slipping on as they approached the building. They entered through the front, and were greeted with the familiar bustle of healers, foragers, and visitors among the rows of hammocks.

One of those belonged to Father.

After a quick greeting with the other healers, the two went deeper among the patients, herbs and willow bark in tow. Along the way she could feel the stares on her back – news of Mother’s return to work must’ve spread.

Juniper told herself she wouldn’t look at his hammock. That would bring the memories back, and all its pain. She forced herself to look forward, standing close to Mother to block her view as much as possible.

Work hard for the village, and for yourself. She repeated to herself.

Yet the feeling was irresistible. Slowly, Juniper found herself skimming down the hammocks, down rows all too familiar.

There.

Father’s hammock, unchanged the day he left it. She took shaky steps toward it, unable to turn away. A small part of her hoped he’d be hidden there, curled up in peaceful sleep as he had the weeks before. That hope vanished the moment she peered from the top.

It was empty.

Empty.

And she did nothing to stop it.

Juniper’s head started pounding, the noise of the pavilion turning deafening. She squeezed her eyes shut as her knees shook, breath turning fast and jagged.

“Juniper?” Mother worriedly turned to her. “What’s wrong?”

She opened her mouth to speak – but nothing came out.

I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I can't –

Her vision flashed, and she saw Father in the hammock. He was struggling for air just like before, coughing blood with every exhale. Suddenly he shifted – and it was *her* covered in blood.

I have to get out of here.

Her legs wouldn't obey. They buckled, and she was falling.

“Junie!” Mother lunged for her, catching her before she could hit the floor. “Breath, Junie, focus on my eyes.” She told her, suppressed panic in her look. Juniper's breathing slowed, and she felt her legs obey again.

“Easy there,” Mother gently stood her up again, “just breathe and relax and –”

Juniper ran. Past Mother's calls and through the door. Out into the village and past the tree homes. Beyond the confused looks and whispers of the dragons around her, growing blurrier with each step. She ran and ran and burst into home, slamming the door shut before nearly tripping over the dinner table, its third chair sticking out like a sore talon.

Finally Juniper stumbled into her room, crashing down on her bed. For the second time that week Juniper sobbed, not from loss, but from shame. Her village needed her. Mother needed her.

But she couldn't go back there.

She just couldn't.

Standing in front of the door to her house, Juniper reflected on that day. Unable to work in the pavilion, she'd gone back to foraging like she used to. Where it once felt empty the forest now felt peaceful, like a reminder of happier days.

"Could you bring him here by tonight?" Fir's request rang in her head. She slumped. *I still have no idea how to do that.* But first things first, she had some items to drop off.

Entering home she found it quiet as usual. Even after the sickness had ended, Mother still worked long hours as a healer. And Father...Her gaze settled on the dinner table at the center, now with only two chairs. It still didn't feel right.

She put her pouch on the table. Rummaging through it she took the jar and headed back out, insect still inside. Citrus-striped centipedes were quite valuable, and it was time to collect.

Juniper departed to the trader's booths under the evening light. At this time of day most foragers were returning as well, rivers of green and brown filling the walkways. Her home, like all homes in Willowwood, were treehouses. Nestled among the huge willows they were connected to the ground and to each other through a system of vine bridges and wood ladders, like a spiderweb extending throughout the treetops.

She went on one such walkway that sloped down to the forest floor. Most of the shops were on the ground – laid out in a bustling circle convenient for visitors and returning foragers.

As Juniper traveled the sunlight dimmed, both from its descent and the increased foliage blocking it. Dragons began bringing out flamesilk lanterns and torches until the forest floor was dotted with pinpricks of light that illuminated the numerous shops below.

At last she arrived at the insect trader's stall. Nestled between the trunks of three willow trees growing close to each other, it bought and sold exotic insects and tools to help find them. The entrance tarp had been rolled up, allowing Juniper to see shelves full of goods filling the inside as she moved to the front counter. A dragon stood behind it and upon seeing her he grinned.

"Juniper, how've you been!" The owner, an older dragon named Aspen, greeted her. "Did you finally catch the citrus-striped variety?"

She proudly placed the jar down in front of him. "See for yourself!"

"Wonderful..." He gasped in delight. "It's been ages since I've last seen one like that."

"You could've seen it sooner too," a voice cut in, "had Juniper not forgotten to close the jar." Another dragon entered through the tarp. She was younger, with a smattering of pink streaks running down her neck complemented by golden scales on her wings.

"And I would have," Juniper rolled her eyes, "if *someone* didn't bang on my door at night begging for me to get some tulips for you to crush into paint, *Azalea*."

"Art cannot be stopped!" she playfully declared. "Isn't that right Dad?"

Aspen turned to the many paintings his daughter made and nodded with a bemused expression.

"But it can wait." Juniper teased back.

"I think you're just jealous of my talent!" Azalea wiggled a talon at her accusingly.

“Oh, hush you two.” Aspen cut in. “I know you both are good friends but more customers will be coming in soon. Here, have this...” He pulled out a pouch. “Take some silver for your troubles.”

Juniper hefted the bag, which gave a satisfying jingle. Despite its difficulty, foraging can pay well. “You’re too kind.” She thanked Aspen .

“Take this, too.” Azalea held out a canvas. It was a painting of the night sky, with wisps of bright pink clouds scattered throughout. “You earned it – the tulips you picked made such a nice color.”

Juniper carefully wrapped her arms around the piece. “It’s so beautiful” she excitedly squealed to Azalea, a huge grin on both their faces.

“Don’t mention it. Come back soon!” Azalea waved as Juniper turned to leave. After a quick trip back home to put the painting in her room and deposit the pouch on the table, Juniper steeled herself. She’d put it off long enough; it was time to get Elder Rowan.

His treehouse was not on the ground as Aspen’s shop was. Instead it was the highest structure in the village, above even the healer’s pavilion. Its roof even stuck out from above the canopy, serving as Willowood’s sole landmark.

At such a height there were a lot less walkways, allowing Juniper to fly to it instead of walking. She wove through leaves, branches, and trunks, looping around the few bridges that did exist until she came at last to the entrance. The Elder was usually open to visitors, even at such late hours. Landing on the bridge she started forward, only to stop in shock.

By the trees, why are there so many guards?

Willowood was a peaceful place. In all her life she could count on one claw the number of troublemakers or incidents that’d happened. That was why the Elder’s treehouse had few guards, if any.

The keyword being “had”. Tonight 20 Leafwings in full armor stood vigilantly around the building. One of them glared at Juniper as she approached.

“Er...Hello.” she cautiously began. “I was just wondering if I could have an audience with Elder Row–”

“That cannot be done.” The guard’s reply was curt and immediate. “Currently, Elder Rowan is in a meeting with her majesty Queen Sequoia. No visitors are to be admitted tonight.”

Juniper reeled. Sequoia. *The Queen Sequoia. Here in Willowwood!?*

Reading her face the guard answered Juniper’s confusion. “She is here to discuss matters of safety and security with your Elder, before leaving west to meet once again with the Queens Monarch and Wasp.”

The guard’s tail curled impatiently. “Now if you have no more business here, I must ask you to leave.”

Juniper silently nodded and flew away, doubt welling inside. *Willowwood was already safe and secure. Why is the Queen here to talk about it? Are we in danger?*

Fir’s words rang in her head. Her Queen was strong. Her Queen stood up to Wasp, and will do so again.

Then why was she still worried?

Juniper flew faster, plummeting back home as if to leave her fears behind her. She already had enough to worry about, thank you very much. She had to go back to Fir and tell him the bad news. Maybe she could bring her pouch and pick some berries along the way? That should cheer him up.

Opening the door she beelined to the table where she put her pouch. Emptying its contents she turned to go outsi–

“Juniper?”

She stopped and turned around. It was Mother, leaning on the door to her bedroom.

“Hi, Mother.” She squeaked.

“I couldn’t help but notice the painting in your room.” Mother gestured to the door. “Did Azalea make it for you?”

“Yeah, she did.” Juniper nodded. “Azalea got the pink from those tulips I gave her, remember?”

“Of course.” Mother walked to the table. “How could I forget your panic when that centipede escaped the next day?” She impishly grinned before looking at the coins. “Though something tells me you’ve found it.”

More than just that. “I finally did.” She allowed herself a smile. “Took long enough too.”

Mother walked up to her, moving past the cold dust in the kitchen. She embraced Juniper, allowing her to see the bags under her eyes. “Those coins will go a long way for us. You did good, Junie.”

“It was the least I could do.” She quietly replied. Even if she couldn’t go with Mother, she could at least earn her keep. *But it’ll never be enough. I couldn’t do it when it mattered.*

“You don’t want to know how many bug bites I got before I found it again. But it’s like you told me: Work hard for the village, right?” She asked

An awkward silence spread between the two. Mother looked worried, glancing down at the coins with an almost guilty expression. Juniper wasn’t sure. With Mother working long at the healer’s pavilion and Juniper away

foraging, the two had become... distant. Even the dinners were cold, silent and quick. Juniper knew it was because of her cowardice after Father's funeral. How could she ever grow close to Mother after such a betrayal?

"Say, Junie?" Mother's voice cut through her thoughts. "Are you going somewhere? This late at night?"

"Um...Er..." Juniper stammered.

"You don't like night foraging, so it's strange seeing you leave. Is anything wrong?"

"No, No!" Juniper exclaimed hurriedly. "Nothing, nothing's wrong."

She squirmed under Mother's doubtful side-eye. "You look... stressed. Is it because of Queen Sequoia's meeting with our Elder?"

She nodded. That wasn't *technically* false.

Mother sighed. "Well don't listen to the rumors. All they do is rile dragons up. Come, get some sleep."

Juniper paused. On one talon she had to go back to Fir, at least to tell him the bad news. On the other talon, it would be *highly* suspicious if she did.

So she retired to her bedroom, staring at Azalea's painting of the night sky. The stars looked beautiful, yet cold and distant at the same time.

He must be sleeping under it. She closed her eyes. *I'm sorry, Fir. I'll come tomorrow. Things will work out in the end, I promise.*

Chapter 6 – 2772

One good thing about the morning is the cold. The night's chill has yet to leave, and the emerging sun has yet to dispel it. Add to that the serene chill of dew on the grass and leaves and one has a delightfully frosty temperature given Pantala's climate.

To Fir it was a welcome respite. The heat here was so *unnatural*. He'd heard of the scorching heat of the Sand Kingdom's deserts, but the forests here were something different. Everything felt too warm and humid and muggy, so that even when wrapped in cool leaves and brisk grass (apparently that's what the "green snow" is called) Fir's skin still prickled irritably.

But he had to remain hidden. Juniper would come back, he was sure of it, and he would only be seen – and heard – by her. His spikes bristled. Despite a peaceful sleep, Fir was still bitter.

Morning dew from a nearby willow dribbled down next to him. *Drip. Drip. Drip.*

For someone who hated waiting, Fir sure was doing a lot of it. Waiting, waiting, waiting – it was making him complacent! Passive! Like a dumb rock watching its future go by! He suppressed another snarl. Juniper would be sure to get an earful.

As he stewed, Fir spotted movement from the other end of the meadow. Sure enough it was Juniper, carrying her familiar pouch.

"Hello, Fir?" she called out. "Are you there?"

Fir could be dramatic too. He waited until she reached the center, next to the stream, until he showed himself.

“Of course I’m here,” he growled, “where else would I be? So much for meeting the Elder, huh?”

Juniper hung her head. “I – I’m sorry. I really am.”

The silence hung in the air, stretching the size of the ocean between their continents.

“So that’s it then.” Fir hissed. “Just a simple ‘sorry’ and suddenly it’s back to normal?”

“There was nothing I could do!” Juniper burst out. “He had a meeting with *our Queen*. I was going to tell you last night, but my Mother stopped me and I didn’t want to make her suspicious!”

“Ah yes, your *Mother*.” Fir drawled. “I have one too; a whole family in fact! And you know what? They’re worried sick about me!”

Tail lashing dangerously he continued. “Every day here is a day of FEAR for them. For me. But *no*,” he spat, “by all means, keep your Mother unaware. While you slept on a bed, I slept on the sand with only the stars for company!”

“It was just one day!” Juniper countered. “Cut me a break!”

He swiped a claw through the stream, shattering his reflection into a thousand ripples. “But even the stars leave and pass. And soon I was left alone.” He looked at Juniper. “Tell me, do you know what that feels like? To be alone like I am? To be stranded on a whole other continent, not knowing how to get back? To have that eat away at you? To feel *empty*?”

“I do.” Her clear response caught Fir by surprise.

Juniper walked next to him beside the stream. She scooped up a talonful of water and stared at its reflection. “I know exactly how that feels.”

“Then why didn’t you–”

“Because I messed up.” The pain in her eyes caught Fir by surprise. He hadn’t been *that* harsh, had he?

“I made a promise I couldn’t keep. I abandoned you when you needed me. And,” she choked out, “I made you hurt because of that. *I’m sorry.*”

Hold on, is she crying?

Fir stood dumbfounded as Juniper crumpled to the ground, tears streaming freely.

“You needed me but I just couldn’t – I just couldn’t!” she babbled. “And it’s my fault again and I can’t do any–*mmffh!*”

The last time Juniper was stressed, putting a claw on a shoulder calmed her down. That was why Fir hugged her now, nestling his head above hers. At the very least it quieted her down. Juniper went silent, looking up at him in shock. He didn’t blame her.

After an awkward few moments he stepped back, wings tucked in and talons pressed together. “I’m still upset about you not bringing your Elder,” He began, “as well as you not telling me until this morning. But something tells me this is about more than that.”

He looked at her questioningly. “Want to get it off your chest?”

Juniper nodded shakily and spoke. “Remember how I said my father passed away?”

“Go on.”

“After his funeral my mother asked me to work with her as a healer, to help fight the same illness that killed him.”

She took another talonful of water and drank it before continuing.

“I promised I would – she *needed* me by her side, I could see it! But when we went inside, when I saw the hammock Father used to be in, I couldn’t.”

What’s a hammock? Is it some sort of bed? Fir bit back his questions. *Now’s not the time.*

“I saw Father there – him *dying*, and I couldn’t handle staying there. So I ran back home, leaving Mother alone and hurting.” She buried her head in her claws. “And today I did it all over again, with you.”

Fir wanted to keep yelling, Juniper’s backstory changed nothing! But Father’s voice drifted in his head. *Hold on, Fir. Life is unfair.* He took a deep breath, feeling his bubbling frustration cool away.

“Listen, Juniper.” He helped her stand up. “You’re right.”

She looked up at him, confused.

“You were right to not have come to me. It was the best way to avoid suspicion, and I’m glad you understood that where I didn’t.”

“And you had no idea,” Fir continued, “I had no idea, that the Elder would’ve been so occupied.”

A faint spark took root in Juniper’s eyes. Fir pressed onwards.

“In fact,” he raised his voice, “I’m surprised at how stupid your Mother was!”

“What did you just say?” Juniper growled, grief now blinded by anger. Oops. “Fir I swear to the trees I’ll bite you right now for what you just said!”

“Wait wait wait.” He soothed. “Hear me out.”

Juniper narrowed her eyes and huffed. Fir took it as a sign to continue.

“What I mean,” he clarified, “is that it wasn’t right for your Mother to ask you to work with her like that.”

“What do you mean?” Juniper was back to being confused. *I’m getting good at this*, Fir thought.

“You said it yourself. You were struggling with the death of your Father – with your grief.” He explained. “Yet your Mother wanted you to return to the same place where he died, and act as if nothing happened?”

Juniper slowly nodded as Fir continued.

“Your only mistake was making a promise you couldn’t keep, but it shouldn’t eat you up like this.”

“But wait!” She shot up. “What about Mother? She needed me!”

“And you needed *yourself*!” Fir shot her back down. “She made her choice, and you had every right to make yours. Duty is important, I agree.” He thought back to his stubbornness the day the storm hit. “But it should never become unreasonable, or it might turn into something worse.”

Juniper remained silent for a long moment. “I guess so.” She finally said. “Thank you, Fir.”

“No problemmfh!”

Now it was Fir's turn to feel shocked as Juniper hugged him back. "I mean it, Fir," She whispered, "I really do."

After a moment she unwrapped her arms and turned to her pouch, opening it. Inside were the same green-brown berries from yesterday. Fir's stomach rumbled.

"I also brought more berries as an apology," she dropped the pouch onto his outstretched claw, "but your help deserves more than this. Is there anything more I can do?"

Fir grinned from ear to ear. *The catfish has swam in. Time to bring in the catch.*

"Well," he tipped his head thoughtfully, "*you could* try again to bring the Elder here..."

"I had a feeling you'd say that." Juniper laughed. She straightened up. "Alright then. I'll do it!"

"I'll hold you to that promise" Fir wagged a talon. "So get him this time, and don't dance around it." He encouraged.

"Yeah!" Juniper began to jog away. "Goodbye until then!" She called back.

"Goodbye!" Fir waved.

After Juniper disappeared into the trees, Fir popped a few berries in his mouth and smiled.

Three moons, Father. He thought. I think you were right after all. Endurance may be more helpful than I realize. He chewed through more berries, enjoying a well-earned snack. *Though it certainly is still delicious.*

Of all the things Juniper expected out of her second meeting with Fir, a pep talk was not one of them – nor was him hugging her, or her returning it. She could think about that later though. Right now she was on a mission!

Taking flight, Juniper rose through the forest. At first the foliage was too thick for true flying so she climbed instead, grabbing branches and vines to pull herself up. Once she got past the shorter willows Juniper spread her wings and flew the rest of the height. Finally she emerged above the canopy, startling a few birds resting on it.

There was a reason why most Leafwings preferred to fly within the forest rather than above one. The open blue sky stretched onwards forever, devoid of life. The entire forest was reduced to a second ground, its vibrancy swallowed up from view. Where were the vines to grab onto? Where were the branches pointing the way home? As someone who'd hatched and lived among trees, Juniper felt quite unsettled. How any dragon could fly like this, through an empty ocean of air, she didn't know

But the dizzying lack of flora did mean faster flying times, and today Juniper couldn't dawdle! Flying this high might feel wrong, but so be it.

Looking around Juniper finally saw it at the edge of the horizon: the roof of the Elder's treehouse peeking through the willows. At once she was off.

Soon Juniper was almost there, the roof growing larger and larger as the distance closed. The wind picked up, and the whole canopy rustled in waves as if each towering willow was just a blade of grass. After a few seconds the wind stopped, yet the leaves around the roof kept stirring.

Suddenly a dragon burst through the trees. She was dark green, like the forest at twilight, and a long neck that swiveled to the west. On her head was – *a crown?*

By the forest, it's Queen Sequoia! Juniper realized. Should she salute? Bow in midair? Where should she stand? *It's the Queen!*

Queen Sequoia was saying something, but Juniper couldn't hear it from this distance. But she did look angry. Very, very angry.

The rest of her entourage followed in her furious wake, the 20 guards surrounding their queen in a circular formation. After a brief pause they flew west at breathtaking speed until they disappeared beyond the horizon, leaving Juniper alone with her thoughts.

The Queen's personality was well-known among Pantalla, but what could've Elder Rowan said to make her so mad? The Elder was cool-tempered and wise; surely he'd have no problem calmly defusing her temper.

It must be about Wasp and those tree-cuttings. She worriedly thought. *But maybe Wasp will get a taste of Sequoia's fury,* she grinned.

For now, Elder Rowan awaited. With the meeting just over now was her best shot in grabbing his attention.

With haste she dove back into the forest. The roof, once a small beacon in an ocean of forest, grew wider and wider until it exploded into a sprawling complex in the heart of Willowwood. At the top were the guest suits, lit bright green by the few leaves that hung between the sun.

Below that were a smattering of nooks and ledges carved into the willow trees tall enough to reach such a height. Their entrances were adorned with hanging vines and flowerpots, leading into administration rooms and meeting halls for visitors and villagers alike.

At the bottom were wooden platforms connected by a handful of vine bridges. These housed the waiting area, food storage, and Elder Rowan's

living quarters. He preferred to stay at this level for easy access to petitioners and visitors. Mother said it was because he was humble.

At the moment a large crowd was in the middle of dispersing, no doubt seeing off the Queen. Juniper paid no attention to them, descending the treehouse until landing at the entrance. With Queen Sequoia gone there was only a single attendant at the front who quickly let her through.

Inside Juniper found herself in a hallway that was the waiting area, a deep green rug guiding her forward. Candles lined the sides of the walls, providing a soft light while filling the air with the aromatic scent of thyme.

“Hello? Who’s there?” A voice called out from the end of the hallway. An old dragon turned the corner, and Elder Rowan came into view.

“It’s me, Elder. Juniper.”

“Ah, Juniper, Cypress’s daughter!” Rowan’s aged eyes sparked with recognition. “Come to see our Queen leave, have you?”

“Not really,” she admitted, “I came to talk to you about something else.”

“Oh?” He asked with a curious tilt. “Then come on in! I’ll make us some tea and join you shortly.”

“Actually, Elder,” Juniper interrupted, “let’s skip past that. It’s *urgent*.”

Rowan arched an eyebrow questioningly. “Urgent, you say?”

“Absolutely.”

“Hmmm.” He muttered. “I never thought you to be an impatient dragon. This is quite the shock to me.”

“And to me as well.” Juniper shrugged. *Fir must be rubbing off on me.* “But it’s important you hear this as soon as possible.”

“Very well then,” he turned around, beckoning Juniper. “Come with me.”

The meeting room Elder Rowan chose was a small outdoor nook. On the floor lay a beautiful carving of Pantala, its forests accentuated with glittering inset vines. Flowers spilled out from the siding, the last of the morning dew dripping off their petals. Entering through a door the pair settled next to the railing, alone save for each other.

“So then, Juniper.” Rowan questioned. “What’s on your mind?”

Juniper took a deep breath. How would she say this? Fir told her not to dance around the issue, so maybe she shouldn’t.

“Alright.” She began. “Elder Rowan, there’s a new dragon in our forest.”

He stared blankly. “You mean... a visitor? Is it a lost Silkwing, or... it can’t be a Hivewing. Sequoia can’t be right – Quick, what was the Hivewing doing when you –”

“No, no!” Juniper interjected. “He’s not a Leafwing, Silkwing, or Hivewing.”

Juniper sped up under Rowan’s shocked expression. “He’s from the Distant Kingdoms, from a tribe called the Icewings. He was blown out here yesterday when I found him in a meadow unconscious. I fixed his injury, we talked, and –” she took a breath. “ – and he wants to meet with you. Today.” She finished with a gasp. “So, can you come?”

Elder Rowan seemed lost in thought, face slightly paling. “Yesterday you say?” He muttered. “Why wait until now to tell me?”

“I – er, ” Juniper stammered, “I didn’t know what to do. I heard the rumors about Wasp, and I didn’t want the Icewing – he’s called Fir, by the way – to be thought of as a danger.”

She fiddled with her claws. “We planned to bring you last night, but you were busy meeting with Queen Sequoia so...” she trailed off.

“Ah, Sequoia.” Rowan rested a claw and looked to the forest outside. “Did you know why she met with me yesterday?” He suddenly asked Juniper.

Seeing a shaking head he proceeded. “She told me not to worry about Wasp and the Hivewings, and that she’d handle the reports of tree cutting. Pah. If Wasp is anything like I’ve heard, words won’t do anything to change her!” He exclaimed.

“For hundreds of years our Willowwood village has stood in peace and prosperity alongside the rest of the Leafwing tribe.” He paced around the room. “At times this was achieved through words. But I fear now they are not strong enough against the new hivewing queen.”

Rowan brought his voice down to a conspiratorial whisper. “I think this was why our Queen was so angry when she left. She is stubborn, and the strength of her determination does not match with the weakness of her words on Wasp. Perhaps our Queen will understand this as she grows older, as I have.”

He chuckled to himself. “But that’s enough rambling from me.” His expression turned serious. “A new dragon on the shores of our village, you say?”

“Yes, Elder. I trust him.”

“Young dragons trust everyone.” He waved a claw dismissively. “Even if they’re strange...and dangerous.”

Juniper saw a glint in his eyes she didn’t like.

“Very well.” Elder Rowan decided. “Take me to this Icewing.”

Chapter 7 – 3021

After two days spent in the meadow, Fir came to the conclusion that he did not like grass. It was coarse, prickly, irritating, and full of little bugs that loved to climb onto his leg. He'd lost count of how many times he had to scratch them off, the fear of centipedes still fresh in his mind.

If it was up to him, Fir would've stayed on that beach forever. The sand was smooth and the water was cool, not to mention how it reminded him of home. But perhaps that's why he couldn't stay there. Along with the familiar comfort came constant fear and worry, as if his heart was being pulled apart. Better to keep it in one state by staying in the meadow.

Besides, the Elder, Rowan, would be coming here with Juniper. He couldn't be stuck on the beach when that happened.

Speaking of them, where are they? Fir wondered. He didn't want to hide away and wait; it would only drive him crazy like last time. He looked up. The willow branches looked big enough to hold a dragon, and the view...

He smiled in anticipation.

After a careful few minutes of climbing Fir reached the topmost branch. *I guess climbing the evergreens back home was useful after all* he mused, relaxing on a cluster of branches.

The injury on his side buzzed in muted protest. It had healed slightly over the past day, and Fir could now fly short distances comfortably.

Looking around at this height, Fir couldn't see anyone else. He was alone – which confused him. Fir couldn't fathom how Leafwings wouldn't want to fly up here instead of in the forest. The serene sky reached to the ends of the horizons, full of space and freedom. Flying in the forest was more akin to a prison, with tangling branches and hidden vines that'd ensnare his wings.

It was almost as if he was fishing again, with the sky above and a green ocean below.

All of a sudden his chest seized. That day, when the snowflakes danced around him until they were swallowed up by the sea. That storm, which blew him away into a new ocean of green. *Will I ever get out?*

With a hiss he ducked back into the trees. What was wrong with him? Now wasn't the time!

As if on cue he heard flapping in the distance. Fir looked back up, squinting his eyes into the distance. Two dragons were clearly visible. One was young, with an all too familiar appearance. The other looked much older, hanging back as if following the other.

They were coming.

Fir quickly scrambled back to the ground, curling back among the trees. *Breathe, Fir*, he assured himself. *You got this.*

He played out his plan in his head. Fir would begin with a dramatic entrance, emerging from the foliage where he was hidden with a respectful greeting. Introductions would begin afterwards, where he'd recount the story of how he got here and how he first encountered Juniper. Finally he'd ask the Elder for permission to stay in Willowwood, until he healed and could fly back home.

All in all Fir thought it was quite sound, one that would soon begin as the pair of Leafwings landed in the center of the meadow. Hidden in a bush, Fir listened.

“We’re here.” Juniper declared. “This is where I found him, Elder.”

“So you say. ” *That must be Elder Rowan.* His voice carried with it a quiet authority undimmed, or perhaps bolstered, by age. Fir wondered what kind of leader he was.

They walked forward, where Fir was waiting. As the Elder looked around, eyes raking over his hiding spot, Juniper spoke up. “He’s hidden right now, we didn’t want to startle you. I can ask him to come out though. Fir! Come ou–”

“There will be no need for that.” Rowan sharply replied. His head snapped back to where Fir hid.

“Juniper, for countless decades I’ve lived in Willowwood. I know this forest like the back of my claw – and all the ways to hide within it.” He pointed a talon at Fir’s hiding spot. “Did you really think I wouldn’t notice you there, Icewing? Your scales betray you. Come. Out.”

So much for that idea Fir thought as he begrudgingly emerged.

The Elder was big, larger than either Juniper or Fir. He had faded green scales that melted into a dark brown underbelly, and was currently glaring at Fir with open suspicion.

“Greetings, Elder Rowan.” Fir bowed respectfully. “I am Fir of the Icewings. I come to you today to –”

“Silence, boy.” The Elder cut him off. “Hear this, strange-colored dragon. I may have flown out here to see you, but it is *you* who will answer *me*.”

“Elder, wait!” Juniper broke in.

“Not now, Juniper.” Rowan silenced her. “You are barely fully grown, and have no experience in matters such as these.” He returned his focus on Fir, flaring his wings for effect.

“I have some questions for you. Your answers may fool Juniper. But they will not on me. So don’t lie if you know what’s good for you.”

Three moons, Fir realized, he sounds like me.

“Now, my first question. When did Wasp send you and why?” The Elder bluntly growled.

Fir was at a loss for words. As was Juniper, who opened and closed her mouth like a fish. It would have been hilarious, had it not been terrifying. The plan was falling apart, and Fir didn’t want to know what would happen if the Elder decided he was a threat. Imprisonment? Torture? Death? He shuddered.

“Listen, you have it all wrong.” Fir responded. “I’m not a Hivewing and I’m not a spy!”

“Of course you’re not a Hivewing!” Rowan thundered. “Do you think I don’t see your scales and wings? But what I do know is that you’re related to them.”

Fir again found himself speechless. It was Juniper who spoke up behind them. “What in the trees do you mean by that?”

Rowan cleared his throat as if ready to give a lecture. “Let me tell you what a Hivewing looks like. They have compact faces, slender bodies, and whip-like tails.”

I think I know where this is going. Fir thought with a pang of anger.

The Elder held up an accusing claw, showcasing Fir as if he were some exotic new species. “Now let’s look at *this* one. Its head is narrow. Its body is lean, as sharp as a diamond. And its tail... it’s not a whip. It’s a whole mace!”

“But why would Wasp send an injured dragon?” Juniper implored. “Look at its side – when I first found him he was bleeding out unconscious. Would Wasp really send an injured dragon?”

“Yes, she would.” Rowan crisply answered. “I spoke to Sequoia yesterday, and her account of Wasp adds up. A dragon like her would surely do this – sending an injured agent, knowing we’d take it out of kindness, only to suffer the consequences.”

“Elder, I have no such intentions.” Fir insisted. “Believe me, I mean no harm.”

“And still it lies!” Rowan spat. “Turn around, dragon, and see the truth!”

Confused, Fir obliged. Behind him was the forest leading to the beach. He’d been here last night, when he... *oh... oh no.*

He was waiting for the Elder and Juniper who never came. He grew angry, and lashed out on a tree. The same tree that appeared in his view now, bark shredded and splintered.

Juniper mentioned how important trees were to Leafwings, and their recent fears over tree-cutting.

Uh oh.

“Wait, I can explain!” He put his claws up in a panic.

“Explain what? The tree you disfigured? Our forest you defiled? I see those talons of yours – raking through our home!” Rowan snarled.

Shaking his head the Elder turned to a horrified Juniper. “Juniper, child. You must learn to be more wary in the future.”

“No, Elder Rowan.” She choked back. “You have it all wrong.”

“Elder, please.” Fir tried one last time. “I know how you feel: paranoid, wary, and afraid. I was that way too when Juniper first found me.”

He turned to her. “But despite my hostility, she showed only kindness in return. She showed me the goodness in your tribe, in your village, and I wouldn’t dare betray it.”

Approaching the Elder, Fir continued. “I was blown here in a storm, and since then all I want to do is go back home. I ask for refuge in my village so that my wound heals faster. Once it does I’ll fly back east, and we can leave each other in peace.”

“There is no known path east.” Rowan shot him down. “All who have tried it were never seen again. Your cover story is faulty – Wasp should have crafted something more convincing. Regardless,” he snapped his talons, “you’re coming with me.”

The Elder turned to the trees around him. “Me, and the guards I brought along. Seize him.”

The foliage exploded. Leafwings armed with spears and wriggling bags burst out around Fir.

“No!” Juniper shrieked. “Don’t hurt him!”

“Very well.” Rowan said, rolling his eyes. “Use the centipedes.”

Before Fir could react, something was thrown onto him. It was a centipede. This one had crimson stripes which glimmered mockingly, before it clamped down on his snout.

“Take it to the cells under my treehouse.” The Elder ordered. “I will question the intruder later.”

By the teeth of the Great Ice Dragon, Fir cursed as the world began spinning, why does it always have to be a centipe–

To say the village of Willowwood was in an uproar would be an understatement.

It was in a frenzy.

Barely into the morning Elder Rowan left suddenly into the forest, bringing a small squadron of guards secretly following behind him. That alone sent rumors spinning.

But now he returned with a dragon bound and muzzled. A dragon of scuffed white scales and pointed spikes with razor sharp claws and tail, said to have been defiling the trees and threatening Willowwood. A dragon the likes of which no one has ever seen before. And amid this return, a mute forager was spotted alongside Rowan and his guards.

Before departing the meadow the Elder had approached her.

“Juniper?”

“How could you do this?” She breathed. “How?”

“I did what was necessary for our safety.” Eyes steeled with authority, not a shred of doubt was in his voice.

But seeing Juniper aghast, Elder Rowan's face softened. "He must be kept under a close guard." He put an arm on Juniper's shoulder but she slapped it away. "I understand you're scared and angry at me." He continued unperturbed. "But better safe than sorry. Fearful times may be approaching, and we must act accordingly. What I do may seem harsh and cruel," Rowan locked eyes with Juniper, "but it is absolutely necessary."

Necessary. Juniper wanted to gag.

Despite the speed of their return, word must've traveled faster. By the time they arrived at the Elder's treehouse a crowd even larger than the one the night before had already gathered. They milled about, looking at the sky. Looking for one specific dragon.

That dragon was currently unconscious, hanging limply in the sky. Fir's arms and legs were bound with thick vines, as were his snout and wings. Four Leafwing guards carried him roughly, each holding a limb and spreading their wings so that most of Fir's body was hidden.

As they descended from the sky all eyes snapped to them. The crowd froze.

"It's them!"

"They're back!"

"Look – the guards are carrying someone!"

"It's the mystery dragon!"

"Whatsit look like?"

"Eeee look at its tail!" The guards blocked most of Fir, but not all. His tail hung out the back for all to see.

“Ew.”

“Let’s get a closer look!”

All at once the crowd surged forward, held back only by the desperate attempts of the treehouse stewards, attendants, and guards.

Elder Rowan gestured to the guards. “Take him to a cell.” He ordered. “As for you,” he turned to Juniper, “you may leave now. Thank you for your service.”

Then he flew towards the crowd, leaving Juniper alone. *Elder Rowan thanked me. She nearly crash landed on a walkway, not trusting her wings to keep her airborne. He tricked me. Fir’s locked up because of him. And he thanked me. She tried not to retch. This is all my fault.*

“Dragons of Willowwood!” Rowan’s booming voice startled her to attention. He hovered in midair, facing the crowd. “Hear me, your Elder speaks!”

The crowd stopped, and all ears turned to him.

“You may have heard the news before – but yes, a new dragon of an unknown tribe has been found in our forest. And we have reason to believe that it aims to cut down our trees.”

The crowd gasped, and whispered to each other. Juniper couldn’t find her voice. *He has it all wrong.*

“Luckily, the forests have seen fit to bless us this day. The intruder has been apprehended, and now languishes in a cell. Tonight, we will hold a trial here, at this very entrance!”

He raised his voice. “And I assure you my villagers, when that time comes justice will be served!”

Juniper felt faint. *Fir's in so much danger.* She sat down in horror. *And it's all my fault.*

"Juniper!" She looked up, confused. A dragon was flying towards her. "There you are!" Her pink and gold scales made her easy to identify.

"Azalea?" Juniper squinted her eyes. "What are you doing here?"

Azalea barreled into her and the two went rolling down a walkway. The tangle of talons and tails finally separated when they hit a tree, leaving Juniper dizzy.

"What in the trees," Juniper wobbly asked, "was that all about?"

"EEEEEE JUNIPER!" Azalea squealed, grasping her talons and shaking them.

"DID YOU SEE IT? Did you see the dragon?" she was jumping up and down in place, like a dragonet who'd eaten too much chocolate before bed.

"Um, yeah." Juniper responded. "I saw 'the dragon'."

"What do you think about its tail? It was all pale and spiky and oorrghh." Azalea shuddered excitedly.

"Like, did the leaf on its tail fall off or something? It looks so weird. And kinda cool. I want to paint it" She sheepishly admitted. "Oh you've got to come with me to the trial tonight. I'm going to bring my canvas, and make a painting of the whole scene!"

Grabbing Juniper's shoulder, Azalea spread her other arm to the sky. "I can see the painting's name now: Willowwood Delivers Justice on the Dangerous Threat."

“Fir is not a threat!” Juniper exclaimed. “He’s a good dragon, and now he’s hurt and scared because this is all one big misunderstanding from our paranoid Elder!”

Azalea stared at her, mouth dropping to the floor. “Fir? That’s its name?” She whispered. “How do you know its name?”

Juniper clamped her talons around her snout. *Three moons, how could I let that slip?*

“Juniper?” Azalea took a step forward. “You MET THE STRA–*mmf!*”

In a flash Juniper wrapped her claws around Azalea’s snout. She dragged her to a platform connecting two walkways, behind the tree serving as its base. Looking around she made sure no one was listening before unsilencing her friend.

“Juniper, you have so much to explain to me.”

“Shhh!” She put a claw to her mouth. “Azalea, I can explain. Just *be quiet.*” She desperately hissed.

Azalea’s eyes grew as big as the moons, but she remained quiet.

“Ok.” Juniper began. “Yesterday, I met the dragon you just saw.”

“HO–” Azalea cut in before an exasperated Juniper hushed her again.

“Remember how I was searching for my centipede?” She asked. “That’s how I met him. He was unconscious and bleeding out, until I healed him.”

“You healed him?” Azalea questioned. “I thought you didn’t like healing work. Not since...that day.”

“Well I did it anyway.” Juniper told her, shifting the conversation back. “Introductions were... rocky to begin with,” she admitted, “but we talked, and I can say with full confidence that all he wants,” she pointed east, “is to go back home. But now he’s imprisoned because the Elder thinks he’s working for Wasp, when that can’t be further from the truth! And he’s going to be brought out tonight, and... and...”

“Three moons, Juniper.” Azalea breathed. “That’s a lot to take in.”

“It is.”

“Do you know what this means?” Azalea suddenly asked.

“No?”

Azalea leapt up with a dramatic flourish of her tail. “This means we need to rescue him!”

Juniper blinked. “Rescue him?”

“Exactly!” Azalea beamed back. “Think about it,” she explained, “this is just like the adventure books I’ve read!”

“You’re basing this plan off a book? You can’t be serious.” Juniper deadpanned.

“Oh but I am, Juniper. It’s not like you have a better idea.” She retorted.

“Actually I do!” Juniper insisted. “When Fir’s brought before the village this evening, I’ll step forward and argue on his behalf.”

Azalea looked at her. And laughed. “Seriously?” she snorted. “*That’s* your big idea?”

“Shut up!” Juniper whacked her with her tail. “I think it’s a good plan.”

“Except for the fact that it isn't.” Azalea shrugged off the blow. “It’ll be your word against the Elder’s, and we all know who everyone will listen to.”

Juniper held up a talon. “Well miss-know-it-all, I’ll just...just...huh.” Her talon wavered. “Ok. You have a point.”

“Can you repeat that?” Azalea preened. “I couldn’t hear you say that I’m right.”

“By the trees, Azalea, I’ll whack you again!” They giggled.

“Alright then.” Juniper affirmed. “Let’s talk more about that plan you have.”

“It would be my pleasure.” Azalea purred. “And while we do that,” she leapt at Juniper until their faces were inches apart, “tell me *everything* about that dragon – Fir.” She demanded, excitement rolling off her in waves.

Alright, Juniper. She thought. You can still fix this. You can still do this.

Juniper looked back at Azalea, determination set on her face.

“Deal.”

Chapter 8 – 3730

Fir had always liked his village teacher, Mistral. While others would insist on Icewing dragonets learning inside cooped-up classrooms with desks tailor made for napping, she believed in teaching outside among the open snow, with the sounds of the waves and wind carrying her voice.

Today her students were arrayed in a semicircle across from her, the Great Evergreen Forests to her back. Fir was among them, waiting expectantly for the day's lesson.

"Alright class," Mistral began, "does anyone want to guess what we're learning today?" A dozen arms shot up.

"Trees!"

"Fishing!"

"Napping!"

"Not quite." She chuckled. "Today we're going to learn about the other tribes of Pyrrhia!"

The class immediately broke into excited murmuring.

"Quiet down, quiet down." Mistral waved her claws slowly, "Your parents might have already told you about them. But what they said might sound confusing and complicated, isn't that right?"

She was met with twelve nodding heads.

"That's why I'm going to teach you some rhymes!" She announced. "Who's ready to sing?"

"Me! Me!" The dragonets shouted.

"Ok then, repeat after me." Mistral cleared her throat.

"Skywings are red. Seawings are blue. Don't trust anyone who looks different from you."

“Fir?” He looked up, and the world around him shifted. Instead of the Ice Kingdom he was in the meadow again. Juniper was standing above him with an outstretched arm.

“I’m Juniper, daughter of the Leafwings. Would you like to eat some berries?”

Fir was about to say “Yes please” when she evaporated along with the meadow.

“Onto the second verse!” Mistral’s voice rang out again, and Fir was back in class.

“Rainwings change color. Mudwings are brown. If a dragon’s not an Icewing, They’re a danger to our crown.”

“Behold the threat to our village!” Elder Rowan burst out from the snow, an army of Leafwings behind him. Thick chains bound rose from the ground around a squirming Fir as they surrounded him, unveiling wicked sharp spears and flashing claws.

“No!” Fir yelled. “Let me go! LET ME GO!”

At once they melted away. For the second time Fir found himself on snow. With trembling talons he sat himself up in time for Mistral to continue.

“And now the third verse!” She gleefully yelled, the whole class cheering with enthusiasm.

“Nightwings are black. Sandwings are beige. If you see someone unfamiliar, You should immediately ice them in the face just to be safe!”

Fir stood up. Wait...why was he standing up? He wanted to sit back down! But his body acted on its own, as if he was a spectator to himself. He opened his mouth and unleashed a blast of frostbreath.

“Slow down there, you’ll get sick!” Juniper appeared again... *in front of Fir*. “Juniper look out!” He yelled, but no sound came out. The frostbreath surged forward, Juniper looking on terrified until it finally hit her. Her scales blackened on impact from frostbite, breaking off in pieces one by one as she staggered back. And her screams... the sound raked his ears over and over and over –

Fir woke up.

He found himself breathing heavily, nightmare fading away like melting ice.

Head still fuzzy, Fir tried to stand but found his arms and legs bound with vine. He tried to speak, and found that his snout was also bound. Panic seized Fir with its claws. Where was he? Why was he tied up? Why–

Fir froze as his memory rushed back. *The Elder*. He bit back a hiss. He accused him of crimes the moment he landed, before unleashing his guard. Then a centipede was thrown on him, and he blacked out. The Elder said something then. What was it?

“*Take it to the cells under my treehouse. I will question the intruder later.*” Fir was obviously the intruder Elder Rowan referred to, which meant –

He was a prisoner. *Great Ice Dragon preserve me.*

Would Fir rot here forever? Or maybe he’ll be executed. Hanging? Drowning? Crushed by stones? He felt tears in his eyes.

No no no *I have to go home! I have to go home!* Fir thrashed in his restraints, but they didn’t budge. Eventually he gave up.

With nothing else to do Fir looked at his surroundings. He was (predictably) in a cell, dark and dismal save for a window barred with rope above him and a

lamp outside the cell. Something glowed inside it, and it didn't look like fire to him. *Perhaps it's one of those firefly or flamesilk lanterns Juniper mentioned.*

Wiggling his talons and toes Fir looked down at his restraints. They were vines, stronger and thicker than anything he'd ever seen. They were also carefully wrapped around him so that his claws could not bend, preventing any way to cut them off.

Perhaps Fir could've used his sharp tail to cut himself free. Unfortunately the Elder thought the same thing too. A heavy wooden weight was tied to the end of his tail, pinning it down.

The rest of the cell was bare, save for a few reeds scattered haphazardly as a feeble excuse for a bed. Looking beyond the cell was where things became interesting. There was the lamp from before sitting on a table, but next to it was a Leafwing guard patrolling the hallway. At least, that's what Fir thought she should be doing. Instead she kept taking poorly hidden glances at Fir, no doubt entranced by this strange new dragon.

That gave Fir an idea, something to take his mind off from his fear. Grinning, he stood still as the guard looked back to the hallway. The next time she glanced at Fir, he rolled around as noisily as he could.

"Ah!" The guard jumped back before looking away, face reddening and claws almost dropping her spear. Fir would have laughed if he was able to.

"Sir!" The guard quickly called out to her right. Soon talonsteps could be heard marching to Fir's cell.

"What is it?" Another guard came into view, growling to his subordinate.

"The intruder has awoken, captain Hornbeam." She tersely replied.

"So it's finally awake!" He laughed.

“Is that a problem, sir?”

“Not at all, Laurel. It’s all tied up and helpless – those strange-looking claws and tail won’t save it.”

I’m not an “it” you walrus! Fir wordlessly snarled.

“We’ll watch over it until evening.” He continued. “Not that it’ll escape. After that,” the guard turned to Fir with vengeful eyes, “we’ll bring it out to face justice.”

“What will the Elder decide?”

“Killing or beating.” Fir’s blood turned even colder. “Something to make an example out of it, so that the Hivewings get the message. Wanna bet on what it’ll be?”

“Sure. How much do you want to wager?”

Fir tuned out the rest of their conversation. Here he was, in mortal danger, and there was nothing he could do. Nothing but wait. Wait for salvation. Wait for a miracle. He gazed at the small barred window above him.

Juniper, please. You’re my only hope.

Let’s hope this works. With the late afternoon sliding into evening, Juniper and Azalea parted ways. The plan was made, it was time for each to do their part.

Azalea, for her part, will go to her dad's shop and spirit away a knife to cut the vines Fir will undoubtedly be tied up with. But his cell must be unlocked with a key, held among who knows how many guards assigned to him.

That was where Juniper stepped in. Her job would be to take sleeping berries from home and give them to the guards as an "Elder's gift". With them safely knocked out, she'd free Fir and let him escape under the cover of night.

As she walked back home Juniper ran the plan through her head again. What would happen once it succeeded? Their involvement would, of course, be found out. The Elder would be furious. Mother would be furious. The guards they incapacitated would (definitely) be furious.

"I'm fine with being grounded." Azalea shrugged. "A month of confinement for a daring rescue mission? So worth it."

Juniper knew that Fir didn't deserve whatever was coming to him. Besides, she didn't heal him in the meadow only for him to be set upon by the village! She turned the corner and her house appeared. Juniper readied herself and went inside.

After a few steps she stopped, and sniffed the air. It smelled of sweet taro and earthy potatoes, her favorite. Further inside she could hear chopping, her confusion growing as she went deeper into the house.

Finally she came to the source. It was Mother, wearing an apron and humming a happy tune as she waltzed around the kitchen.

"Oh, Juniper." She sang, twirling a plate of potatoes beside a steaming pot of taro. "You're just in time to taste my cooking!"

"Cooking?" Juniper stared dumbfounded. Mother never cooked, not since Father got sick. The two usually ate before returning home from the pavilion and forest. "Don't you usually work at this time?"

“I know, I know” Mother’s tail swished excitedly. “But with all those coins you brought in I just *had* to do something special. Also,” she walked up to Juniper and bopped her on the snout, “it’s your hatching day, silly!”

The world froze around Juniper. Her seventh hatching day... with all that's happened the past few days *she completely forgot!*

“I spent the whole morning buying ingredients with the money – the crowd was a lot smaller thanks to that commotion at the Elder’s treehouse.” She muttered before turning to Juniper with a smile. “I’m making your favorite, potatoes and taro with chocolate!”

She put down the platter and rummaged through the pantry, pulling out a smaller apron. “What do you say, Junie? Will you cook with me?”

Juniper felt her heart sink. Happy memories of warm family dinners clashed with the plan, and she felt herself being torn in two. *How could I possibly say no? But Fir...*

Slowly, Juniper took shaky steps to the pantry. Scanning through the rows she found what she was looking for: two baskets, one red and the other blue, containing identical colored berries. The berries in the red basket were delicious and savory, perfect to cook with. The one in the blue made you fall asleep in seconds, quite useful for medical work.

Juniper took a large clawful from the blue basket and dropped it in her pouch. Then she turned to a confused Mother, still holding the extra apron. That same longing was in her eyes, and Juniper hated herself for what would come next.

“I – I,” she choked, “I can’t.”

It was like a candle had been snuffed out of Mother. “You can’t? But why not?”

“Because...” What would she say? Juniper would’ve loved to cook with Mother and have a good dinner for the first time in a year. “...Because I’m going out to forage again.” She lied. There was no knowing what Mother would do if she knew the truth. She might stop Juniper, or worse, tell Elder Rowan!

“But you don’t forage in the night.” Mother’s voice was half question, half accusation.

“Yeah,” Juniper rubbed her neck, “but after doing it for Azalea I actually found I liked it, so I want to do it again.”

“I specifically remember you complaining to me about how much you hated it.” Mother looked accusingly at her.

“Well it’s always good to contribute to the village!” She switched tactics. “And to work hard for it and yourself – you said that.”

“I shouldn’t have.” Her reply was met with silence.

“Juniper?” Mother looked down at her talons. “I want to apologize.”

Juniper stared. “Apologize? What did you do?”

“It’s not about what I did.” Mother put the platter down. “It’s about what I *didn’t* do. For you.”

“After your Father died I was lost.” She reminisced. “I was just so full of grief and pain, and I thought the only way to honor his memory was to pour everything into my work.”

Mother sat down, clenching her talons. “But in doing so I completely forgot Maple’s last wish, to take care of our daughter. You.”

She gestured to the food. “While I was at the market today I saw a mother and her child shopping together and that just... revealed something to me. When was the last time I actually spent time with you? I couldn’t recall. I remembered it was your hatching day, and I realized that I didn’t plan to do *anything* with you today, and... and I decided I had to change.”

Mother took the apron and offered it to Juniper. “So please, let me make this up to you, on the day you deserve it most.”

Juniper stood rooted on the floor, at an utter loss for words. Mother was taking the blame for the actions that’d tormented her for the past year. She wanted to mend their relationship, clearly wanting it as much as Juniper had. And all she had to do was stay, stay and relive those cherished memories of the past.

“I don’t want to.”

Juniper ran. Past Mother’s pleading calls and through the door. Out onto the walkways before flying up through the branches, hating herself with every forced wingbeat.

“Woah. Are you okay?” Azalea was waiting on a walkway when Juniper arrived.

“I’m fine.”

“Are you sure about that? You look –”

“I said *I’m fine*.” Juniper hissed.

“Ok, ok.” Azalea muttered. “I was just asking.”

“You have the knife?”

“Yes.” Azalea opened her satchel and Juniper could see the metal gleam inside. “Let’s go.”

They made their way to the Elder’s treehouse. And stopped. The entrance was bustling with dragons. A wooden platform was being set up, with builders moving planks before tying them with rope. Around that were decoration poles tied with colored banners and streamers alongside torches and flamesilk lanterns. Past all that wasn’t just a single sleepy attendant; instead a whole cadre of guards stood watching over the scene. It seemed that preparations were happening earlier than expected.

Juniper went over the plan: get tools, subdue guards, free Fir. They’d forgotten about getting in!

“I take it the plan is falling apart.” Azalea whispered next to her.

“Like wet paper.”

“So... do we, just, give up then?”

“Absolutely not!” Juniper growled. She thought back to Mother’s cries as she left. That can’t have been for nothing.

“We enter a different way.” Juniper improvised. “I can fly up to the upper rooms and enter through there. Then I can make my way to the cells.”

“And the guards won’t notice you flying?”

“I’m... working on that.”

“It’s too late for that.” Azalea pointed. “The trial might start any minute now!”

“Then what do we do?” Juniper snapped. “All you do is poke holes in my plans!”

“Someone’s gotta do it.” She countered. “And someone needs to make a distraction for you.”

“To that end,” she took off her satchel and wrapped it over Juniper, “you’ll need this. Azalea began walking towards the entrance as Juniper looked in disbelief.

“Oh. And Juniper?” She called. “After this, you owe me. Big time.”

With that Azalea sprinted to the treehouse. Juniper was confident she wore a manic grin the whole time. Once she reached the entrance she “tripped”, stumbling head over tails through the decoration poles. They collapsed, the banners conveniently falling on the heads of the crowd.

But Azalea wasn’t done yet. Bedecked in streamers like a red-and-green gremlin she turned her attention to the platform itself. As everyone else scrambled to uncover their eyes she barreled into the structure. With a satisfying *crack* it tumbled, loose planks and rope flying everywhere. Finally she turned to the sky with a triumphant cry.

“Witness Meeeee!”

Thank you Azalea. With one last look of gratitude Juniper took flight in the chaos. Everyone at the entrance, guard and villager alike, were now focused solely on Azalea’s mess. No one looked up to notice Juniper fly into one of the ledges before disappearing from view.

Once inside Juniper kept to the shadows, peering carefully over each corner before moving to another. Luckily there were far less dragons inside than

out; save for the occasional attendant the halls were empty. Getting to the cells should be easy from here on.

Juniper froze. *Where were the cells?* Her plan forgot about that too! Talonsteps to her left snapped her out of her panic.

I have an idea...

As the talonsteps grew closer Juniper emerged from the corner. Judging from the crates she was carrying, it was a steward working in storage.

“Hi!” Juniper greeted cheerily.

“...Hey?”

“Listen.” Juniper began, her rehearsed speech at the ready. “I’m trying to get to the cells right now. Do you know the directions?”

“You want to see the intruder, don’t you?”

Juniper squirmed. “Uh, yeah!” She held out her pouch. “I also brought some berries for the guards there as a favor... could you help me out?”

After seeing the berries the steward relaxed. “Ah, feeding the guards? Go on ahead, they deserve a treat.” She pointed to the hallway behind them. “Take the last right on this hall, then the door on the second left. That’ll lead to the cells.”

“Thank you!” Juniper hurriedly left, repeating the directions in her head.

The door on the second left lead to a staircase winding down. Juniper went through it, down and down until she entered another hallway far darker than the one above.

To her left and right lay iron bars glistening from the feeble lamplight there was. Without a doubt, Juniper was in the cells.

“Hey! You!” Someone shouted ahead of her. Two dragons rose from a table they’d been gathered around. The clinking sound of keys came from the bigger one as he bellowed at Juniper. “What’re you doing down here?”

One more lie, Juniper. She steeled herself. You can get through this.

“Believe me, I don’t like being here.” She coolly replied. “But the Elder needed someone to deliver these, and I was the one chosen.”

“Deliver what?” The smaller guard asked.

Juniper opened the pouch. “These. Berries, freshly picked. Elder Rowan said you two deserved a snack.”

“Oooh, don’t mind if I do!” The same guard stepped forward, excitement in her eyes.

“Wait a minute.” They both turned to the older guard. “I recognize you from the meadow.”

Oh no. Juniper breathlessly panicked.

“You were the one telling the Elder the intruder was innocent, pleading that he be *merciful*.” He spat out the last word as if it was rotten. “So why would he send you, of all dragons?”

For the third time that night, Juniper’s plan was falling apart. Had she really gotten so far, only to fail at the very end?

No, it can’t end this way. Juniper furiously refused. I won’t let it. My plan might’ve failed a long time ago, but I haven’t.

“Because he realized I only had good intentions.” Juniper answered. “And that once I saw the truth, I’d change.”

“Up until that day I had no idea the intruder defiled our trees with its hideous claws.” Juniper explained, hoping Fir wouldn’t take offense. “It’s true – I gave it a bandage and berries. And I thank the trees that our village remained safe despite it.” She looked down demurely. “The very least I could do now is help the *right* dragons and redeem my errors. Elder Rowan understood this, and that’s why he sent me.”

Juniper kept her gaze down, praying her act would be believed.

The younger guard approached her. Looking up she saw only pity and understanding. “Everyone makes mistakes sweetheart.” She took the pouch and walked back to the table. “What’s important is that you learn from it, and try your hardest to fix it. I certainly see you doing that!”

The two guards chuckled. Each grabbing a fistfull, they popped the berries into their mouths, reclining on their chairs.

“I must say, these berries are delicious!” The older guard spoke in between swallowing. “What kind of berries are... these...”

He trailed off, muttering incoherently before collapsing on the table. His partner fell off her chair and landed awkwardly on the floor, their snores filling the hall.

“Sleeping berries.” Juniper answered, walking to the guards. Opposite to them, tied up behind bars, a familiar white dragon lay staring at the whole scene. Grabbing the keys she turned to Fir. “Turns out, having a healer as a Mother gives you quite a lot of access to sedatives.”

“Now,” she unlocked the cell door and pulled out the satchel “let’s get you out of here.”

“Fir, you can let go of me now.” The dragon in question was currently wrapped around Juniper, hugging the life out of her. They were standing in the cell room, between Fir’s unlocked bars and the sleeping guards.

“I know, I know. I just... thank you.” He stepped back. “Thank you for freeing me, thank you for saving my, just tha–”

“I get it.” She cocked her head up with a smirk. “I’m awesome, I know.”

“That too.” He laughed before turning serious. “But now what?”

“We get out of this treehouse, and you escape into the night.” The snores of the guards punctuated her last word. “You’ll get a headstart before any morning search party.”

“I still don’t know how to get home.” Fir breathed. “But I can fly north and go from there. Lead us out.”

“My pleasure.” Juniper turned to the door, Fir behind her.

“Juniper? Juniper?” They both froze. A muffled voice coming from behind the cell walls was calling her name. Heading to the window the pair craned their necks to the source of the noise.

“Juniper, where are – there you are!” A dragon popped into view, looking into the window. It was Azalea.

“I came to warn you about – eeeee it's the mystery dragon!” She squealed.

“Hi. I’m Fir.” He waved.

“Hi! I’m Azalea!” She piped back. “I helped Juniper get you out. You look so weird – but still cool. Weird and cool – and what’s with your tail? Can I paint your scales later?”

“Azalea, focus.” Juniper scolded. “Before you freaked out you said something about a warning. What do you mean?”

Azalea gasped. “How could I forget?” Her face turned fearful.

“Juniper, there’s a fire. Willowwood’s on fire!”

Chapter 9 – 2252

With that news, Fir saw Juniper’s face turn to horror. He could imagine why.

In the Ice Kingdom, fires weren’t just a non-issue; they simply didn’t exist. Save for the small ones started by scavengers there simply wasn’t any reason for an Icewing to create it. The Moon Globe Tree in the palace provided all the light they needed, and Fir didn’t know anyone who preferred cooked food. Besides, if a fire were to spread despite all that, subzero cold and frostbreath would make short work of it.

But here? Fir looked around. Trees, wooden walkways, rope, and vines – all potential tinder. All very, very flammable.

“A fire?” Juniper pushed her head as far through the window as she could. “Where?”

“It started on the ground,” the dragon, Azalea, replied. “It’s burning through the shops and spreading up the trees and now it’s threatening the homes! The Elder has ordered everyone to stop what they’re doing and help fight it – you have to come right now, Juniper!” Her voice rose to a fever pitch.

“Meet me at the entrance, I’m on my way.” Juniper reassured her. Then she turned to him. “Fir, follow me.” She stepped back from the window and into the hallway. “And hurry!”

Fir remained right behind Juniper as the two sprinted through the treehouse. In fairness, it looked quite pretty. The rugs were homely, the candles provided a relaxing atmosphere, and the wood carvings were almost as good as the ones from home. But something felt... off.

The pair’s talonsteps reverberated through the halls they rushed through, and Fir understood what was bothering him: the treehouse was deserted. Such an important building should be packed with dragons, yet he and Juniper seemed to be the only ones in it. Azalea might be right, perhaps *everyone* was out fighting the fire. The thought made Fir uneasy – he could only imagine what Juniper was thinking.

At last they burst through the entrance. Outside was a mess. Poles and banners lay strewn about, adorned with a crumbled platform at the center with streamers thrown about. Some of those streamers lay on a dragon, pacing back and forth through the debris. She looked at them.

“Juniper!” It was Azalea, presumably her friend. While Juniper was only green and brown, Azalea had pink and gold scales streaking across her body. She reminded Fir of Rainwings, and the many colors they were said to shift into.

But unlike that lazy tribe Azalea seemed brimming with energy – panicked energy, as of now.

“There you are! We have to go help.” Azalea tugged Juniper towards her. “Last time I saw the fire it was *bad* – most of the trader’s circle is already burning. And,” she whimpered, “it’s burning closer to Dad’s shop. We’re fighting it as hard as we could but–”

“Say no more.” Juniper reasserted some veneer of confidence before turning to him. “Fir, I’m sorry our village has treated you the way it has, but I’m glad we met.” She looked to the sky. “Fly high above the trees and travel north. Perhaps another village will be able to help.”

With a nod of finality Juniper turned to leave. “Goodbye, Fir. I hope you get home.”

Home.

“We need to go, Juniper,” Azalea reminded, “or *we* won’t have a home.”

The stars beckoned Fir, inviting him to fly away. He could escape, and find the route to Pyrrhia from another town.

But what about here?

Fir’s sharp eyesight picked out a faint light coming from below the forest. The fire was spreading, and fast. Juniper’s home was in danger – *she’d* be in danger after everything she did for him.

“Wait!” The Leafwings turned around, confused.

“I’m coming with you.” Fir decided. “I’ll help you fight that fire.”

“But the village thinks you’re an enemy!” Juniper interjected. “Yeah,” Azalea echoed, “you need to leave now!”

“Juniper.” He looked her dead in the eye. “I know what it’s like to lose one’s home. I can help. Trust me, please.”

They looked at each other for a long moment. Then she relented. “Alright. Follow us.” Her and Azalea took off, diving down into the forest. Fir trailed right behind them.

As they descended the number of walkways, ropes, and vines increased, filling the air with obstacles. Juniper and Azalea deftly swooped through while Fir struggled to keep up. But he couldn’t stop now – he had a fire to fight and a favor to repay!

The aforementioned fire grew larger in the distance. Even with so many trees to block it the faint glow Fir saw before grew in intensity as they drew near. He flew into a willow tree, branches scraping at his sides. He struggled through it and emerged from the other side where he saw Juniper and Azalea hovering in place, looking down. Following their gaze Fir saw the fire.

Great Ice Dragon help us.

Below him the forest floor was completely ablaze. Dragons could be spotted flying above it, dumping buckets of water and sand in a futile effort. Others were desperately cutting away what walkways that weren’t on fire. Their efforts were too late though; the inferno had already spread on the ones that weren’t cut, tongues of flame latching onto unlucky homes, platforms, and trees.

And the smoke. Even from up here Fir could feel a cough rising in his throat.

“Leafwings!” It was the Elder, shouting in between the chaos at the top of his lungs.

“Abandon the forest floor! Evacuate the dragonets! Stop the fire from spreading higher to the homes!” He pointed to the lines of flame racing skywards. At once a dozen Leafwings abandoned their efforts on the ground to aid in the struggle above.

“But what about our shops?” A dragon flew up to Elder Rowan. “Those are our livelihoods down there!”

Azalea nearly fell out of the sky. “Dad?” She gawked.

“Forget about it!” The Elder yelled. “Focus on the things that *can* be saved!”

Azalea gasped. “The store...” she whimpered. “It can’t, it *can’t* be—”

“Azalea, keep it together.” Juniper held her friend’s head between her claws. “There’s still hope. We’ll help bring water and sand to the firefighters. Can you do that for me?”

Azalea took a deep breath and nodded. “Yes... Yes. Let’s do thi—”

A high-pitched shriek cut her off. They all looked to its source. Below them, on a smoldering platform, a Leafwing dragonet lay choking on the smoke. Its lime green scales shined even brighter in the firelight.

“Daddy! HELP M—” It broke into a coughing fit, barely able to breathe much less fly. But that didn’t stop the child from stumbling to the edge, wings vainly flapping.

“Where are you? I’M SCARE—” It tripped under the weight of another cough and rolled onto the edge, glowing in the light of the inferno below.

The dragonet fell.

Fir didn't scream like Juniper or Azalea. He didn't even think. One moment he was watching from the branches, and the next he was flying down into the sea of smoke before it claimed a victim.

He tucked his wings in, gaining velocity as he hurtled down towards the dragonet. Instincts honed from years of fishing kept his body steady against the fire's updraft as he opened his claws for the catch. Fir flew under the Leafwing then banked sharply up, grabbing the child in one swift motion. He returned to a relieved Juniper, handing the dragonet over to Azalea.

"Um, excuse me?" It piped up, nestled between Azalea's arms. "Hi. I'm Sumac and you look funny. What are you?"

Fir grinned. "I'm an Icewing. Fir the Icewing." He turned to Juniper. "Remember how I said I can help?" He smirked. "Watch and learn."

He dove back to the burning platform, calling up the cold within him. Fir opened his jaws, and let loose a blast of frostbreath.

"What in the trees is THAT!?" Juniper gawked dumbfounded. Azalea and the dragonet shared her reaction.

One moment Fir was diving to the burning platform, then the next he opened his mouth and a bunch of sparkly smoke came flying out. After that the platform *froze*! Ice exploded onto the wood, extinguishing the fire with a defeated sizzle.

Fir spiraled down around the tree it was on, his ice-breath not ceasing until the whole tree was extinguished with his ice.

"Juniper!" He called her, flying back up.

“Fir!” She exclaimed. “What did I just see?”

“It’s called frostbreath.” He smugly answered. “They don’t call us Icewings for nothing.”

Something crackled nearby. They turned to their right and found another tree ablaze.

“Juniper?” Fir rushed towards it. “Follow me and keep the villagers away!”

“You got it!” She followed behind. Glancing back at the ice-covered tree.

If Fir can do that to the whole fire, we just might be okay.

The smoke tickled Fir’s lungs, but now was no time for weakness! As he neared the next smoldering willow Fir let loose another blast of frostbreath. Circling the tree he formed a wall of ice protecting the homes above from the fire below. He did the same with another tree, and another, stemming the flames before they could reach the homes and upper walkways.

The Leafwings around him stopped and stared, their shock of him outweighing the chaos of the fire. Most watched surprised but a few made to stop him. Luckily Juniper was there, flying in front of any hostile dragons and demanding they halt.

Fir’s eyes flicked back to the front. He had more to do. With the higher levels taken care of he dived down into the smoke.

“Fir! Wait!” Juniper’s voice called from above. “The smoke – it’s not safe!”

He coughed a little then shook it off, Juniper's words ignored. His work was not done yet.

Smoke buffeted Fir's eyes like fog, but even then the fire's glow could clearly be seen. He felt his scales prick from the heat, drawing out an uncomfortable hiss. The fire was most concentrated in a circle that stretched across the ground. *It must be the "trader's circle" Azalea was talking about.* It would've been foolish to fight in the center, so Fir instead flew to the edge, dodging burning vines and branches.

Arriving at the circle's border he unleashed his frostbreath again. Waves of ice erupted from his mouth as he flew, walling off the fire from the rest of the forest floor. From the corner of his vision he noticed more Leafwings diving to his same level. With the taller fires extinguished they must have been sent further down.

They also carried damp cloth around their snouts, protecting them from the smoke. *Oh well,* Fir shook off his worries, *a little smoke is no bother for an Icewing!*

Fir could've sworn he said something similar before. But his mind felt too foggy for such recollection. Right now his focus was on fighting the fire – nothing else!

After a few minutes of flying around its perimeter, Fir reached his frostbreath – he must've looped around the whole fire! He tilted his head back up to shout with glee, but almost fell out of the sky coughing.

The smoke must be getting to me, Fir steadied himself on a tree, breathing in short gasps. He looked back to the fire. Azalea, one of the dragons who'd saved him, said her Dad owned a shop there. Their livelihood was crumbling to ash, and he was just going to quit?

Never! I won't let the fire win! I will endure!

Launching from the tree Fir plunged once more above the flames. The smoke was thick – thicker than anything he'd seen so far – but the light from the fire cut through, making itself an easy target. Fir hissed more frostbreath onto the ground, ignoring the pain from his lungs and a tearing sensation coming from his side.

He felt streams of water and sand shower from above as well. It seemed as if the whole village was working to extinguish the inferno on the ground.

Fir reached another line of frostbreath; he had to have flown through the whole circle. He turned right – or was that his left? There were spots dancing through his vision that would not leave, and they were making it very hard for Fir to orient himself. At least the fire seemed to dim, as mountains of damp sand smothered the shrinking flames.

One last push, Fir. Hold strong.

His lungs disagreed, as did his wings. Perhaps Fir wasn't as ready for flying as he thought. But the fire was almost out. He could do this!

Back in he went, landing on the forest floor. He spun around, spraying frostbreath on the booths all around him before moving forward to do it again. One stall burned between three smoldering tree trunks, with flaming tarps that waved in the air. Fir let loose his breath and covered the shop with ice. He turned around, ready to fight more fires, and stopped.

The forest was quiet.

The once roaring crackle of the fire had been reduced to a mere whimper, the sound barely carrying over the wind now filled with wingbeats as more Leafwings began descending onto the forest floor.

“There he is! FIR!” He looked up and saw Juniper barreling towards him, Azalea and the dragonet in tow.

He wanted to say something to her, but all that came out was a rattling gasp. Fir tried again, and went down into a coughing fit. Blue blood – *his blood* – speckled the ground in front of him as his eyes went wide.

Juniper? Father? Fir's head pounded him to the ground as his knees buckled. The spots in his vision grew larger and larger, sinking him into dark unconsciousness.

I'm sorry.

Chapter 10 – 2595

“FIR!” Juniper's heart seized as she saw him collapse. She'd feared the worst when he dove deeper into the smoke, and now it had come to pass.

She landed quickly, scrambling to the Icewing. Azalea, holding Sumac in her arms, skidded behind a moment later.

“Is he ok?” Azalea asked, Sumac nodding in agreement. He wriggled out of her grasp and sat closer to Fir, staring worriedly at his eyes.

Juniper looked with him. Fir's eyelids had an unnatural reddish tint, a clear sign of smoke inhalation. Down his underbelly and tail were angry pink splotches – burn marks – standing out from his scales like a sore talon. The bandage she put on him had also torn, revealing a familiar blue laceration.

Moving closer she could hear pained, wheezing breaths rattling from Fir's ribs. He opened his mouth to cough and Juniper looked inside. Fir's throat

was covered in soot, ashy gray flecks that billowed out like dust. She felt chilled to the core. She'd seen that before.

"There it is!" Yells from above made Juniper look up. It was Elder Rowan, hovering in the air. Around him the rest of the village watched warily from the sky and land. Their voices filled the silence left by the fire.

"It's the intruder Elder Rowan was talking about!"

"Was it the one that started the fire?"

"Did you see it shoot ice from its mouth?"

The Elder landed next to Juniper and Fir. Azalea walked and stood next to her, crossing her arms, as did Sumac.

"Juniper." He growled. "Care to explain to me why the intruder is *not* in the cells? Surely you've seen what it did to that tree – "

"And surely you've seen what *he* did to the fire." Juniper cut in. Fir was dying, and she had enough of the Elder's suspicion. "Now hush, I have something to say to the village."

Taking her cue Azalea shouted to the dragons around them. "Fellow villagers of Willowwood! Leafwings! Everyone!" Her voice carried through the wind as all ears turned to her. "Listen up – Juniper has something to say!"

She stepped back, nudging Juniper forward. "You got this." Juniper returned a wordless smile before turning to the crowd.

"Hello." Juniper began. "My name is Juniper, daughter of Cypress... and Maple." His soot-covered mouth flashed in her mind but she pushed it away.

“Like my father I am a forager, and yesterday afternoon I foraged into something I’d never seen before. But it wasn’t something. It was someone.” She gestured to Fir. “Everyone, meet Fir the Icewing.”

Gasps echoed throughout the crowd, shocked that “the intruder” had a name. “Fir is from the Distant Kingdoms,” more gasps, “and was blown to our forests in a storm. Since then all he had wanted was to return home. That was why this morning I asked Elder Rowan to meet with Fir, and help him in his quest.”

She shot a venomous glare at the Elder. “Instead, he locked Fir up in a cell, and told you he was an intruder trying to cut down our trees.”

“But he did!” The Elder called out. “I saw the tree his claws slashed through – the bark was damaged to the core!”

“And Fir is sorry for it!” Juniper yelled out before the crowd’s opinion soured. “He does not understand how we value the trees. It was an action borne of ignorance, not hate!”

Juniper spread her arms and wings to the ash and charred wood around her. “I swear by the trees that Fir is a good dragon. After I helped him escape his imprisonment, do you know what he did?” The crowd looked at each other. They already knew the answer.

“He didn’t run. He didn’t flee. He flew to the fire and put it out! He saved our homes! He saved our trees! We called him a threat. We were going to put him on trial. But still he helped us!” She shouted.

“And now?” Juniper pointed to Fir’s body. “He’s dying. Who here wants to see him die?”

A few voices murmuring “No” could be heard among the crowd.

“He fought the fire! He saved our dragonets!” Sumac waved to the crowd at that part. “So WHO HERE WANTS TO SEE HIM DIE?”

The chorus of no’s grew louder, advancing like the tide until it reached a fever pitch.

“Then help me. Help him!” Juniper pleaded. “Bring him to the healer’s pavilion. Let him be treated. Please, let us save him.” Juniper crouched next to Fir and turned him over, so that his injuries were clear for all to see.

Everyone was silent for a long moment. Juniper focused on listening to Fir’s pained breaths while Azalea and Sumac stared down the Elder.

It was Elder Rowan who broke the silence. “...Leafwings.” He called. “Bring the intru- Fir... Bring Fir to the healers.”

Juniper looked at the Elder. He gave a slight nod, then lifted off into the air.

“Junie!” Her head snapped up. It was Mother, shooting down towards her. She landed a moment later, sending a cloud of dirt and ash in her wake.

“Mother? You’re –” Juniper was cut off as Mother wrapped her wings around her in a tight hug. “Oh Junie,” she breathed, “When the fire hit I feared the worst. I’m so glad you’re safe.”

She stepped back and looked at Fir, professionalism replacing the emotion on her face. “But this... Fir... is in dire need of help. Somebody get a stretcher!”

A stretcher was soon brought, and Fir was loaded onto it. Mother and another healer hoisted it up as Juniper stood near.

“Azalea, you coming?” She shook her head.

“Sorry, but someone has to get Sumac’s parents.” She replied. “Besides, I have to find Dad and make sure our shop is alright.”

“Thanks Azalea.” Juniper thanked. “I owe you one.”

“And don’t you forget it!” She called back as Juniper took to the sky, following Fir’s stretcher on the path to the pavilion.

The healers had formed a protective circle around the stretcher as villagers crowded around the stretcher through the whole journey. A few still harbored looks of mistrust and wariness, but most looked at Fir with gratitude and awe. Juniper was allowed into the circle, keeping pace with Mother as she led the way.

“So, Juniper.” Mother looked at her. “You put that bandage on the Icewing, didn’t you?”

She thought back to when she first found Fir in the meadow. It was only yesterday when she was tying reeds on his wound. So much had happened during then.

“Yes. That was me.” Juniper admitted.

“Then you know more about treating him than anyone else here. Juniper, you will assist us as we treat Fir.” Mother declared.

“Me? Assist?” *In the pavilion?*

“Of course.” Mother answered matter-of-factly. “Why else are you coming with us?”

“Because I –” *care about Fir.* Juniper's thoughts finished her cut off voice. It was true, wasn't it? From the time he'd collapsed in the meadow the first time they met to now, he'd been reminding her of Father. Would she let him die in the same way?

“– I understand, Mother.” Juniper said instead.

“Good. I will focus on his throat and eyes. You’ll refix that bandage and tend to his burns.” She planned.

“Yes, Mother.” Juniper felt like she was her apprentice once again as they flew closer to their destination .

A few dragons had flown ahead of the group to tell the pavilion. Thus when they arrived a private room had already been set up. Flying over the rest of the general quarters Juniper looked at the patients. Like Fir, most were being treated for smoke inhalation and burns. A few had broken limbs and wings, presumably from falling timbers and branches. She passed her eyes over the filled hammocks and –

There. One hammock lay unused. How could she forget what it was?

Empty.

Juniper tore her eyes away from that hammock. She lifted up so that Fir’s stretcher was directly below her, cutting off her view. She couldn’t afford to look.

As they flew the rest of the circle dispersed throughout the pavilion to treat their own patients. When they got to the room the last healer left, wishing the two luck. Only Juniper, Mother, and Fir remained.

The room was small, located above the rest of the patients. On one side lay a shelf filled with healing plants and supplies. On the other lay a hammock onto which Fir was placed.

Mother began immediately. “Juniper, focus on the scale injuries – those burns and that wound.” She ordered, taking jars of herbs and bark with both claws.

Juniper grabbed a bandage roll for the laceration and gauze for the burns. She focused on the former first, examining Fir's side. Most of the reeds were torn if not missing, and the branches she'd used had splintered and cracked. She carefully removed it all, throwing the obsolete pieces to the floor before brandishing the bandage.

"Mother, lift him up for a bit." She obliged, and Juniper wrapped the fresh bandage around Fir's old wound. Now for the new ones.

Juniper unrolled the gauze, fitting it to a burn the size of her talon on Fir's stomach. The pink splotch was soon covered by the white fabric, returning the area to its familiar color. She continued with the other burns on Fir's underbelly before turning to his tail. The spikes on the end made applying gauze more difficult, but by this point she was well used to those.

During this time Mother had been rubbing paste on Fir's eyes, drawing out a pained hiss. She felt his forehead and froze.

"Juniper!" She turned. "The patient's temperature is so cold. Is that natural?"

She thought back to when Fir put his arm on her shoulder. She'd never felt so cold, saved for when he hugged her later.

"Yes, yes, that's natural for him." She allowed herself a small grin. "They're called 'Icewings' for a reason."

"Mmm." Mother nodded and went back to silent work, now focusing on Fir's mouth. His breaths had been becoming more forced and dry, sending shivers down Juniper's spine. She wondered what Mother thought when she examined his throat. Did she think of Father too?

"Juniper." Mother took a clawful of paste. "I'm going to apply paste on the inside of the patient's mouth and throat, so that the symptoms are lessened. You'll need to hold him down as I do this, ok?"

Juniper turned Fir over so that he lay belly down. She leaned over him, pressing her arms down on his claws. "Got it. I'm ready."

"Then I'll begin." Mother slipped on a glove before dipping a covered knuckle into the jar of healing paste. With her other claw she opened Fir's mouth, keeping it agape with two sticks placed on either side of his jaws. Then the gloved claw went in, smearing paste on his soot-covered throat.

It was as if a switch had been flipped inside Fir. He lurched back, almost twisting out of Juniper's grip. But she held firm, even as his tail lashed dangerously close to her. "Keep him steady!" Mother continued at the front. Fir began to hack violently as Mother's glove became stained with blue blood.

Suddenly Fir wasn't there anymore.

Suddenly Juniper was at a different hammock.

And Father was in it. Dead.

Juniper's head roared, her grip loosening. *I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I can't –*

"Your only mistake was making a promise you couldn't keep." She was back in the meadow, with Fir talking to her. *"But it shouldn't eat you up like this."*

The pounding in her head lessened, then disappeared. Her senses came back and –

"Juniper! Juniper!" Mother was struggling to hold Fir down. She was back in the room. "Hold him down now!"

Juniper pressed down again, her claws firmly determined to carry on to the end. Fir's rattling breath bled into her ears, but eventually his gasps softened. For a cold moment Juniper thought the worst had happened, but Fir began

breathing... normally. His chest continued to rise and fall, unburdened by pain.

Mother pulled her claw out of Fir's mouth and threw the glove away. "He stabilized." She told Juniper. "We did it." They shared a moment of relief.

"Now," Mother pointed to the door, "come with me."

After waving down a healer to watch over Fir for the night they walked to a balcony overlooking the village. Two moons hung brightly in the sky, illuminating faint wisps of smoke. Charred walkways could be seen below, as could the stream of Leafwings entering the pavilion.

They both leaned on the railing, watching it all. Juniper kept quiet. How could she even begin to approach Mother? What should she say to her after what she did? Juniper imagined the food at home, cold and uneaten.

"So, Junie." Mother asked. "How was your hatching day?"

Juniper gave a humorless chuckle. "It was... memorable."

"I imagine the Elder will have some words with you."

"Well I have none for him." Juniper turned her snout up. "He was wrong, and I won't back down on that."

"I'm not saying you shouldn't." Mother clarified. "I'm saying you should *understand* Elder Rowan. Know why he did what he did, and forgive him for it."

“The only forgiveness he should seek,” Juniper bitterly replied, “is from Fir.”

“On the subject of that dragon,” Mother’s eyes sparkled with interest, “you left to free him, didn’t you? That would explain the sleeping berries you took.”

Juniper looked down. There was no use lying. “Yes, Mother. That’s exactly what I did.”

“Clever girl.” Mother’s complement caught Juniper by surprise. “I loved that speech you gave after the fire too. You picked up a thing or two from me, didn’t you!”

Juniper blushed from the praise. She didn’t deserve it – not until she apologized.

“Mother, listen.” Juniper began. “I’m sorry for running out on you like that back home. I abandoned you, and hurt you, and – and – and – I’m sorry for leaving you after Father’s funeral.” She choked.

She laid her head on the railing, sobbing. “I was so *ashamed*, and just when I think it’s ok I do it *all over again*!”

“Juniper.” Mother sidled over and wrapped her wings around her. “Listen to me, Junie.” She took hold of Juniper’s face with her talons, her palms on either side of her eyes as she wiped away her tears.

“I told you back home, remember? *I’m* the one who should be sorry.” She consoled. “I should never have asked you to work after that funeral – *what was I thinking?*” Mother snarled to herself quietly before her attention returned to her daughter.

“There is nothing you need to apologize to me for. There is nothing you should be ashamed of.” Juniper felt her heart stitching itself together. “Thanks to you our village is safe, and I couldn’t be more proud.”

Juniper threw herself into Mother's wings, and the two stayed like that for a long time.

"Mother?" Juniper quietly asked.

"Yes Junie?" A soft reply.

"I was lying back home. I do want to cook with you, more than anything else."

"Well, I think you're in luck. It just so happened that I was making potatoes and taro,"

"With chocolate." Juniper added.

"With chocolate." Mother laughed. "When I had to stop. I still have potatoes that need slicing, taro that needs reheating, and I haven't even gotten to the chocolate yet!"

She nudged Juniper, smiling. "Want to go home and make a late night snack, Junie?"

Juniper smiled back. "I'd love to."

The two took flight, soaring under a pair of moons that shone a little brighter that night.

Chapter 11 – 3485

Fir woke up quickly.

Which surprised him. Given how terrible he'd felt when he first went unconscious, he expected waking up to be a slow, groggy, aching experience that was as unpleasant as it was long.

One moment he was drifting through darkness, feeling nothing among endless sleep. Then in the next, beams of light forced his eyes open as he hurtled into consciousness. That's when the pain hit. His head resumed pounding, his lungs resumed screaming, and his muscles reminded Fir of their soreness as his body begrudgingly grinded back to normalcy.

At least the bed he was on was comfy. It rocked gently back and forth, lulling him to sleep and – wait a minute, since when did beds move?

It must be those hammocks Juniper talked about. Fir stifled a yawn. *Someone should tell her what... beds... are...*

This time Fir woke up slowly.

His body still hurt, but far less so than before. The pain that did emerge soon receded to a manageable buzz. Fir's stomach growled.

I should probably get up.

Groaning, Fir opened his eyes. He was in the same room as before, hammock swaying gently as he lifted his head. Morning light gently filtered through the window behind him, revealing a shelf to his left and a door to his right. Confusion settled over him. Where was he?

Fir slowly pushed himself into a sitting position, holding both arms out to keep steady on the hammock. He remembered fighting the fire, then trying to call out to Juniper before collapsing. Was he in their healer's pavilion?

As if on cue he heard talonsteps from outside. The door opened.

It was Juniper, munching on some sort of vegetable. She glanced at Fir then paused, eyes comically wide in surprise. They stared at each other for a few moments.

"Hey Juniper." Fir greeted. "You got any more of those dragonberries?" His stomach growled in agreement.

Juniper took a step forward. "You're awake." She whispered. "You're really awake." She repeated louder, taking another step.

All of a sudden she ran up to Fir and poked his snout. "What were you thinking?" She scolded as Fir cowered. "Diving into smoke without protection? You idiot, don't ever do that again! You were lucky we were here to save you!"

"Yes." Fir agreed, looking at Juniper. "I was very lucky. I owe you my life."

"And I owe you my village." She responded, face clear with relief. "Just don't do stupid things like that again." She sternly ordered.

"Aye aye, captain." Fir made a mock salute.

"Junie?" Another voice called beyond the door. "You in there? I need you to get some—" The dragon who entered paused immediately. She was older, and had the same smattering of green and brown scales as Juniper. *Is she her* –

"Mother!" Juniper exclaimed. "Fir's finally awake."

“*Finally* awake?” He asked as Juniper went to the shelf.

“You have been asleep for three days.” Juniper’s mother answered, closing the door.

That long? Fir nodded, unsure what to say next.

“Silly me, where are my manners?. This is the healer’s pavilion. I’m Cypress, Juniper’s mother.” She introduced herself. “And you must be Fir the Icewing.”

“The one and only.” That much was true on Pantala.

“Juniper has told me so much about you.” Cypress winked and grinned.

From the shelf Juniper whipped around, face reddening. She looked as if she wanted to crawl into a corner and disappear forever. “*Mother.*” She hissed.

“What?” Cypress coyly asked. “She said only good things, don’t worry.”

“MOTHER!” Juniper looked ready to bolt out the door.

“If you say so.” Cypress fake sighed before turning to Fir with a more formal tone. “You suffered from smoke inhalation, minor burns, and a reopened laceration. We’ve wrapped up the cut but it's the other two that deserve attention. However, you’re. healing much faster than we expected. With injuries like that a dragon should be out for at least a week, not wake in half the time like you did.”

“We think it's because of your internal temperature.” Juniper spoke, still glaring at Cypress. “Your body is so cold that it resists burning and smoke in a way Leafwings can’t.”

Fir examined his claws, gladder than ever to be an Icewing. “Does this mean I can leave the pavilion?”

“Correct.” Cypress nodded. “You’ll be discharged and set loose – the whole village is eager to meet you.”

Someone knocked on the door. The three dragons turned to look.

“I’ll get it.” Juniper started. “It’s probably Azalea coming to thank you for saving your dad’s – ” She opened the door and stopped. “ – store...”

Elder Rowan stood at the entrance. “Hello, Juniper. I was overseeing the pavilion when I heard commotion from inside. May I speak to Fir?”

Fir’s blood boiled. This was the dragon that called him an intruder – a threat. He was the one who threw him in a cell, the one who was going to kill him out of fear.

“I have nothing to say to you!” He snarled. “How dare you come here!”

The Elder silently walked in. “You have every right to be furious at me.”

“And. I. Am.” Fir spit out. “I haven’t forgotten what you did in the meadow, nor what you were going to do had Juniper not freed me.”

“I don’t expect you to. You shouldn’t forget what I did.” Rowan conceded. “That’s why I’m here to apologize.”

In the stunned silence that followed the Elder looked back at the door. “That fire was going to destroy us.” He admitted. “It spread too suddenly and too quickly. Most were in the upper levels waiting for your... trial. We were caught unprepared because of me.”

“But you,” he turned to Fir, “you stopped that. Our homes are safe. Our trees live. Not a single villager had died. We’re even able to recover most of the shops all because of you.”

“These are uncertain times, and as leader I believed I had to act the way I did... but my reasons don’t justify my actions. I don’t deserve your forgiveness.” Rowan finished. “But you deserve this apology.”

Fir clenched his talons. After everything he did, Elder Rowan didn't deserve forgiveness. If he was Elder he would... he would... he looked at Juniper’s hopeful face. That made him pause.

If a strange dragon landed on the shores of Among-The-Evergreens, Fir would’ve been suspicious too. He thought back to the rhymes taught in childhood: *“If a dragon’s not an Icewing, They’re a danger to our crown.”* Would he really have acted any different?

Fir stood up from his hammock and approached the Elder. “Elder Rowan. I accept your apology.”

Juniper and Cypress looked pleasantly surprised.

The Elder humbly bowed before moving to the door. “Thank you. I have records and maps in the library in my treehouse detailing attempts at traveling east. They may prove useful in returning home. Come to my treehouse when you can, and I’ll be happy to help.”

He stopped at the entrance. “The village of Willowwood welcomes you, Fir the Icewing. Goodbye.”

Once the Elder left Fir looked at Juniper. “That was...”

“Unexpected?” She finished.

“Exactly.”

“Our Elder is more humble than you realize.” Cypress added. “Deep down he’s a good dragon.”

“Well deep down I’m hungry.” Fir patted his stomach. “Have anything good to eat?”

“Absolutely!” Juniper took Fir’s claws between her own. “We have a bunch of restaurants and food stands around the village. Let me give you a tour – you’ll love it, I promise!”

“I like the sound of that.” Fir nodded excitedly. “Lead the way, Juniper.”

“Once you finish that tour, forage some truffles for me. We can make soup with it for the festival.” Cypress called. Juniper nodded as they left.

She began the tour as soon as they left the room. Below them Fir saw rows upon rows of hammocks, filled with patients and healers bustling about.

“This is the main patient’s area of the healer’s pavilion.” Juniper gestured below. “You were in a private room carved into the tree itself.” She gestured behind them. Sure enough, Fir saw smoothed bark surrounding the door.

“Below this floor are rooms for storage and training.” She pointed down before flying up. “But those are boring – let’s go to the roof instead!”

The “roof” was the canopy of the tree the pavilion was nestled under. Spindly branches supported the cover of leaves that filtered light through, and Fir could see the silhouettes of the dragons overhead. As they flew to the roof a few dragons below noticed him. Their excited voices filled the space behind them as the two finally exited. Fir gave them a wave as he did.

Fir pushed through the leaf roof, joining Juniper perched on a branch. “Behold,” she announced with a flourish, “Willowwood!”

The darkness of the night and the chaos of the fire didn’t let Fir understand the size of the trees in Juniper’s village. The ones in the meadow were big.

The ones back home were huge. But the trees in front of him – including the one he was on – were *massive*.

These willow trees dwarfed Fir in every sense of the word. Each leaf was the size of him, connected to branches that would take many wingbeats to fully travel, themselves jutting from tree trunks that seemed to have no end. They reminded Fir of the Great Ice Cliff. Both were colossal, and stretched far into the sky.

But no one lived on the Ice Cliff; the same could not be said here. All along the tree trunks – and some branches – lay platforms and carved nooks serving as homes, plazas, and libraries. They dotted the trees like clouds in the sky, and at this time of day Fir could see Leafwings emerging, ready to begin the day.

“What do you think?” Juniper beamed. “Pretty cool, right?”

“The trees...” Fir murmured. “... they’re massive.”

“Yep, They’re our pride and joy.” She bragged, taking flight once again. “You can see more of it in the air, come on!”

A few Leafwings flew like they did, weaving through dense willow foliage. But most instead traveled on a dense network of walkways tied with rope, leaves, and vine. They linked across trees and branches, forming a second forest connecting the first.

His stomach growled again, louder. Juniper must’ve heard it, judging by her poorly hidden snicker. “The restaurants are below here.” She reassured, diving down. “Do you want to fly or walk?”

“Fly of course. A few branches won’t stop me!” Fir boasted.

They did. He flew into seven, getting whacked in the face each time before finally giving up. "My wings must still feel woozy from the fire." Fir brushed a leaf off his face.

"Sure." Juniper rolled her eyes. "Let's use the walkways from here on out."

Though they looked tiny from a distance, up close Fir saw the truth. The walkway they landed on was wide enough for ten dragons to stand side by side, reminding him of the snow paths back in Among-The-Evergreens. It was made of large timbers lashed together with sturdy ropes, while thick vines served as railing on the edges.

At the sight of that last material Fir stiffened. The vines looked similar to the ones used to tie him up, and he did not have fond memories of *that*. As they began to walk he repositioned closer to the center, following just behind Juniper.

"This is one of our main walkways," Juniper explained, "which is why it's so large. It connects a lot of homes to the shops and schools."

"Why are all the homes at the top?" Fir wondered. In his village homes and shops were joined in the same buildings, interspersed between public squares easy to reach by foot or flight. No one ever had to walk so far like the Leafwings did here.

"We prefer living in the canopies and treetops. It's just a Leafwing thing." Juniper shrugged.

"A Leafwing thing..." On the topic of dragons, a crowd of them had formed around Fir and Juniper as they spoke. One of them approached the pair.

"Excuse me?" He politely greeted. "Unless my eyes deceive me, you must be Fir the Icewing."

"That would be me." Fir smiled back.

“I must thank you for what you did the night before last, despite our dreadful actions towards you.” He pointed to a nearby willow. “Your ice breath cut off the fire from my home, and I cannot be more grateful.”

“What *was* that by the way?” A younger voice from the crowd piped up. “You opened your mouth and ice came flying out! How did you do that?”

“It’s called frostbreath.” Fir proudly explained. “Everyone in my tribe can do it.”

“What’s the rest of your tribe like?” Another voice asked, soon joined by more.

“Is it true you’re from the Distant Kingdoms?”

“What are the trees of your home like?”

“Where’s all the color on your scales? It’s as blank as paper!”

The questions overlapped into a deafening tide. Sensing this, Juniper spoke up. “Ask later!” She yelled. “Fir just got out of recovery – this is too much!”

A chorus of grumbles and sorries accompanied the crowd as they stepped back. Juniper continued walking and Fir followed, still at the center of everyone’s gaze. Soon they arrived at a large platform joined with several other walkways. Two of them stood side by side, each sloping downwards. Juniper seemed to contemplate between the pair.

“Say, Fir,” she inquired, “have any preference for food?”

He thought back to the berries he ate the first day they met. He’d grown quite fond of the taste – best to stick with something familiar. “Something like those berries you first gave me.” He answered.

Juniper turned to the one on the left. "Berry dishes it is." She decided.

"It's him! It's him!" An enthusiastic cry coming from the right bridge made them stop. A dragonet burst through the crowd, sporting familiar lime green scales. It was Sumac, the dragonet Fir saved from the fire.

"Hey kid." He crouched down as the Leafwing skidded to a stop.

"Hi Fir! Hi Juniper!" He chirped. "I heard from Hogweed who heard from Gingko that you two were on the walkway, so I ran as fast as I could and I found you! Whatcha two doing?"

"Just finding something for Fir to eat." Juniper pointed to the left path. "We're traveling right now."

"*That* way? Psssh" Sumac snorted. "I wouldn't go to those shops if I was you."

"And why is that?" Fir inquired.

"Because my dad's food is twice as good!" Sumac puffed out his chest. "You should go there, I'll show you. Please?" He looked at them with pleading eyes.

"Ok, ok." Fir relented as Sumac smiled from ear to ear. "You win."

"Woohoo!" Sumac whooped before turning and running on the right walkway. "Follow me!"

Fir and Juniper hurried behind him, racing through the walkway. They reached another platform, this time with fewer connected bridges. Sumac didn't even break his stride as he effortlessly switched onto the smallest one. Juniper didn't seem bothered by the path either; she easily kept up with the energetic dragonet.

Fir looked at the other walkways behind him. It seemed as if there was no rhyme or reason to how they were placed. In Among the Evergreens the streets were orderly and efficient, part of a clean grid making it easy for one to orient themselves. They were nothing like this chaotic, confusing mess of bridges. He made sure to stay behind Juniper at all times, her swishing tail telling him where to go.

The crowds from before thinned as their walkway became smaller, until Sumac turned and stopped. "We're here!"

The "here" in question was the joining of two thick branches of a smaller willow tree. Nestled between them was a flat space taken up by tables and chairs, illuminated by lanterns which hung between from woven vines. Among the lanterns a sign also hung, spelling out *Clover Cafe*. A passageway was also carved into one of the branches, but Fir couldn't see what was inside.

"Dad! I'm back, and look, look – you're not looking! I brought someone!" Sumac ran into the hallway.

A few moments later he came back out, and behind him followed an exasperated older dragon with pinkish-red frills. "What is it, son?" He wearily asked. "Did you bring another –" he looked at Fir and froze. " – customer?"

"It's the dragon that saved me – I told you it was Fir the Icewing!" Sumac bounced. "I brought them here since you make the best food. It'll be so cool!"

He glanced back at Fir. "Get it? Cool, because you have ice powers?" Despite the bad pun Fir chuckled.

"So you're the dragon who saved my son's life." Sumac's dad stepped forward. "My name is Tupelo, and I'd be honored to serve you two today." He gestured to the table. "Come, come, take a seat. The meal will be free – it's the least I can do to thank you. Son, get the menus!"

Juniper looked up at the sign. “The Clover Cafe.” She read aloud. “Why Clover?”

“It’s the name of my wife.” Tupelo looked sadder after saying that. “She passed away from the sickness a year back. After that I renamed the cafe in her memory, and have been managing ever since.”

“I’m sorry,” Juniper apologized. Fir saw an unreadable expression on her face. “I understand.”

They sat down near the cafe entrance so that they had a full view of the village around and below. The walkways stretched down and down, and even with his eyesight Fir couldn’t see where they ended.

From the back Sumac emerged brandishing two sheets of paper. “Menus!” He announced, handing them to the pair.

Tupelo went back inside, telling Sumac to take Fir and Juniper’s orders to him. They spent a few minutes in silence, puzzling over what to get. Fir scanned his options.

Fried frogs, roast snails, crispy crickets... Why is everything cooked? And what in the three moons are all these other fruits? Mango? Banana? Papaya? They sound ridiculous!

Fir vaguely recalled a scroll he’d read as a dragonet that discussed exotic foods of Pyrrhia. The fruits on the menu were said to be found in the rainforest, and the author theorized that eating them caused laziness seen in Rainwings. Why these Leafwings ate such harmful food was beyond him.

Juniper meanwhile made her decision quickly. “I’ll have the fried frogs,” she ordered, “with a side of papaya.”

Fir hesitated. “I’ll have a bowl of dragonberries, and a pig – raw, not cooked.”

Sumac did a double take. “RAW?” He gasped. “That’s gross!”

“No it isn’t!” Fir replied indignantly. “Raw food is the best food. You preserve the freshness of the meat. If anything, cooking your food is pretty weird.”

“I’ll have to disagree there, Fir.” Juniper joined in. “You’ve clearly never cooked in your life.” She and Sumac high-fived.

“You’re outvoted: It’s better when food is cooked.” He smugly declared.

Fir would not take that sitting down. “Is it better if you were cooked?” He shot back. “I’m sure it would’ve felt quite toasty. Perhaps I should’ve let you drop – better than being raw according to you.”

The conversation blew out like a candle.

Sumac paled, and stepped back. “I’ll tell Dad your order now.” He meekly mumbled before running off. Juniper put a claw to her mouth, then glared at Fir.

“What in the trees were you thinking!” She hissed. “Sumac almost *died* in the fire, I know you didn’t forget that!”

“I was proving a point,” Fir calmly explained, “that just because something is cooked doesn’t mean it’s better. In fact – it’s worse. Raw food is simply better.”

“That’s what you believe. Not us. There was no need to say that over harmless opinions.” Juniper gritted out.

“But some opinions are better than others.” Fir defended. “I was just proving why mine was superior.”

They sat in silence after that, until Tupelo came out with the food. He didn't speak to Fir as he placed their meals on the table, stiffly turning and walking back once finished. Sumac was nowhere to be seen.

Fir could *feel* Juniper's anger as she crossly bit into her fried frogs. But she turned away when he dug into his raw pig. He couldn't understand why – the blood was still dripping from the meat, so it wasn't rotten. Why did she look so... disgusted? Surely she didn't think raw food was that bad?

Perhaps he should do something else after the meal – *aha, I could work on getting home!* Fir brightened. The Elder mentioned he had old maps on traveling east in his treehouse. No Leafwing was able to cross the ocean, but that didn't discourage Fir. He was an Icewing; stronger and tougher than any other tribe! He had to be; if he wasn't that meant he couldn't go home. And if he couldn't go home then –

Enough. He cut off his line of thought. It was a path that led to no good.

Once Fir and Juniper finished their meals he stood up. "I'll be at the Elder's treehouse if you don't mind."

"No, I don't." Juniper looked back at the cafe passageway. "I'll stay here for a little while longer. See you." She gave an emotionless goodbye.

Fir had a feeling he did something wrong, but couldn't put his talon on why. No matter – there was work to be done. He took flight, confident he could navigate back to the treehouse.

Fir didn't look back.

Chapter 12 – 2618

Juniper watched Fir leave until he disappeared into the branches. Then she took their plates (holding Fir's blood-stained bowl with an outstretched arm) and went inside the passageway. A few haphazardly placed firefly lamps barely cut through the darkness she walked in. Finally the hallway widened into a kitchen with a window cut out to give more light. It shone down on Tupelo, wings and tail wrapped around a smaller figure buried under his neck. Even from here she could faintly hear Sumac's snuffles.

"I brought the bowls back." Juniper awkwardly held them up. "Should I put them anywhere?"

"Put them on the side, then leave. I know what happened" Tupelo irritably pointed to a stool on the right with his tail. "And I wish to be alone with my son."

Juniper said nothing, hurriedly placing them where told. She stopped before the exit – *something* had to be said to them.

"Sumac – Tupelo too – I am so, so sorry for what happened." Juniper apologized. "What Fir said was completely unacceptable, regardless of what he did before."

"He was so nice." The dragonet whimpered softly, peeking out from above his dad's wings. "Dragons who save you are supposed to be nice."

"Fir is," Tupelo shot her a withering glare, "but I don't know what got into him back there." Juniper conceded.

"When Fir asked if it was better if I was c-cooked," Sumac spoke again, "I felt like I was in the fire again. I couldn't breathe, I was so scared, I was... I was..."

"Terrified." Juniper finished. "Stuck in a nightmare you couldn't escape from." Sumac nodded hollowly and retreated behind Tupelo's wings.

“I sent Sumac to the shops below to buy ingredients for the cafe.” He narrated, “When news of the fire spread I raced to find him – but I couldn’t. I was so afraid I’d lose him, just like I lost his mother.” He caught his breath sharply.

“That Icewing saved my son, which is why I know he didn’t torment him on purpose.” He slowly thought aloud. What could’ve made him say that over food?” He looked at Juniper. “You know him the best – what do you think?”

Juniper thought back to the day she first met Fir. Their first conversation had been him trying to prove she was a Treewing, as if it was something to win. Later when she said he wasn’t a threat, he’d gone into a rage. What did he say after that? *“I am Fir, son of the Icewings, the strongest tribe there is!”*

“I think it was a misplaced sense of pride.” Juniper answered.

“Well, I don’t think that pride will be going away anytime soon.” Tupelo gave a humorless laugh. “Anything else you want to talk about?”

“No.” Juniper began to leave. “Thank you for listening to me.”

As she walked away Juniper looked back at the family. Tupelo's eyes had left the door, focusing on Sumac who remained in his wings. Juniper turned forward, mind full with the morning’s events. She had to think, to clear her head: to forage.

Before that, though, she needed a basket, which first meant a quick stop home. Without Fir to keep track of, Juniper arrived back at the main walkway much sooner. Flying may have been faster, but there was a pleasure to walking that Juniper appreciated. It was simple, slow, and enjoyable. Judging by the growing number of Leafwings on the walkways, it was an opinion shared by many.

But that didn’t mean they made fun of those who flew! Juniper wringed her talons. What pride was there for Fir to gain?

As she continued to walk her frustration faded among her talonsteps. There would be more time to think about that. Juniper reached the end of the walkway, stepping onto a platform connecting to six more. She automatically turned to the second bridge on the left, years of navigation bypassing conscious thought.

When she was younger, and still getting lost in the village, Juniper had asked Father why the walkways were placed so randomly.

“Because the forest follows no order, no clean grid like other towns build.” He told her. *“We are dragons of the forest. It is our home and home is in it. Can we make our home something it is not meant to be? Of course not. That is why our walkways are made the way they are – the way they are meant to be.”*

She thought about Father and smiled. There was still pain in his memory, but recently it's been far less.

Arriving home she stepped inside and found cooking ingredients scattered on the table, remnants of last night's attempts at making banana cake. Despite her and Mother's responsibilities as forager and healer, they'd both found time with each other.

Her task now was to get ingredients for tonight's cooking. Mother had asked Juniper to get truffles to make soup with, and truffles she will get. They grew beneath the surface, meaning she'd need a spade to dig them up. Juniper searched the house but couldn't find any. Giving up, she took a few coins and a reed basket before heading out. She'd buy the tool then forage on the floor. That meant a trip to the traders' circle, the place most damaged by the fire.

Despite the devastation, rebuilding efforts were already well underway. Arriving, Juniper spotted crews of builders alongside customers and foragers, tying tarp and lifting logs amid the little debris that remained. Most stalls were being repaired, but that didn't stop the shopkeepers from working. They simply sold their wares outside while their businesses were rebuilt behind them.

A few stores, however, had emerged nearly unscathed from the fire. Juniper made her way to one of them, a tarp-covered stall between the trunks of three trees still covered in faint white powder. A familiar friend with pink and gold scales emerged from the entrance, then stopped as she noticed her.

“Hi Azalea.” Juniper waved. “How’ve you be—”

“Juniper!” Azalea shouted, waving her over. “It’s been forever!”

“It’s only been three days.” She laughed, nudging Azalea’s wing with her own.

“Days *sh*mays.” She mimicked. “So much had happened that it felt like forever.”

Juniper opened her mouth to respond when she felt stares on her back. She turned and saw a crowd staring back at her with interest, excitement, and... awe? She’d seen those looks before, aimed at Fir as they walked to the Clover Cafe. But now he wasn’t here, and the crowd’s interest was focused solely on her. She stepped back.

“I *miii*ight have told everyone down here what we did the night of the fire.” Azalea whispered to Juniper, then spoke to the crowd. “Everyone, this is Juniper. She’s the one who found the Icewing, then broke him out, then made that big speech on this same spot!”

Oh right, he’d collapsed right in front of Aspen’s store after covering it in ice.

A chorus of oohs and aahs went up from the Leafwings present as Juniper squirmed.

“What was it like finding him for the first time?”

“Breaking him out must’ve been so cool.”

“Thanks to you he saved our shops. Three cheers for Juniper!” She felt like the world had been flipped onto its side, with her scrabbling to stay steady.

Before their cheers could be completed she ducked into the stall. “Juniper, what’s wrong?” Azalea followed.

“What’s wrong? It’s all wrong!” Juniper exclaimed. “Why am I being treated like a hero? Fir’s the one who saved us. I just... don’t deserve this kind of treatment.”

Azalea went quiet, blinking rapidly. Then a small noise escaped from her. *Is she trying not to laugh?* Juniper thought in disbelief. It was her indignant face that broke the dam.

Azalea’s face turned red as an apple as she let it all out, howling with laughter. “You’ve got to be kidding me!” She wheezed, rolling on the floor. “You think you’re not *special* enough to be honored by the village? What is this, a storybook?”

“Azalea, please be serious.” Juniper nudged her with a foot.

She stood up, wiping a tear from her eye. “Juniper, as the business-savvy daughter of a shopkeeper I can confidently say that you’re selling yourself short.”

Azalea pointed back outside. “I have a lot of friends in the shops, and I’ve talked to them. Their livelihoods might’ve survived thanks to Fir, but who’s the reason why Fir survived?”

“You made that distraction thou–”

“And you brought me along in the first place. That whole plan was your idea!” Azalea slapped her forehead. “Three moons you are denser than a rock. Juniper, you are better than you think you are. So start acting like it.”

A rustle from the counter cut their conversation short. “Good morning Juniper.” Aspen emerged. “Anything you want to buy? Take a look – most of my stock is unburnt!”

Juniper browsed through it, finally picking up a spade. It had a simple wood handle and a flat iron blade, perfect for what she needed. “Can I borrow this one?”

“A spade, eh? Going to dig up more surprises for Willowwood?” Aspen joked. “Of course you can borrow it..”

“Remember what I said, Juniper.” Azalea reminded her as she headed to leave. “Don’t sell yourself short. You’re our village hero.” She winked.

A village hero. Juniper didn’t feel heroic, she just felt like herself. Leaving Aspen’s shop she headed west, passing by the rest of the shops.

Attention returned to her quickly. Leafwings sitting behind the stalls nodded in approval as she walked by. Juniper returned it with an awkward smile. *Hmm, that didn’t feel genuine.*

Later a group of builders walked by, also nodding with approval. This time she gave them a lopsided grin. *That* sent them hurrying, looking back at her with frightened looks. Juniper ducked her head in embarrassment. *By the trees, that was so bad!* She cringed, running the rest of the way until she’d left the circle.

Based on the light she was heading west, further inland. *Good, more soil to dig through.* Juniper hefted her spade and set out. Azalea said she should act like a hero, so maybe she could practice while foraging.

First things first, how *does* a hero act? Juniper didn’t know. She racked her brain trying to remember the history books from school, but her mind came up empty. Azalea was always more interested in stories than her.

Perhaps she could wing it. The memory of the builders scurrying away from her manic face extinguished that idea like a light. Juniper needed something more, or else everyone would see who she really was. She imagined the crowds from before staring at her, only this time with cruel amusement instead of awe or respect.

Look at Juniper the fraud, they'd whisper. *The little dragon girl who is nothing but a lie.* Juniper took her spade and defiantly slashed the air in front her. She needed a plan.

Juniper couldn't remember stories, but she could remember dragons. That's when it hit her; If she could think of the heroes in her life and look at how they act, she could do the same thing, and no one would notice!

Her first hero came to mind: Mother. Nobody forgot how diligently she worked during the sickness, saving many lives in the process. She even made a heroic speech after Father's funeral, when she –

– asked Juniper to help her. She shook off the guilt like errant raindrops. There was nothing to feel guilty about, her talk with Mother that night made sure of it. Mother made her choice, and persevered even without her daughter. She was... She was...

Confident.

Juniper imagined the trait as a berry, plucking it from its bush and dropping it in her basket with satisfaction. Who knew "foraging" like this could be so fun?

Reminded of foraging, Juniper looked around. She'd walked farther than she had to, and couldn't see or hear anyone around her. But that was alright. She could be self-reliant – outside help wouldn't come and she didn't need it!

Juniper took her spade and went to work on the ground, digging into the soil. How was another hero she could emulate?

Her second hero came quickly: Queen Sequoia. Young and fierce, with dark green scales whose color was as deep as her spirit. Heroes were like that, Juniper was sure.

She thought back to Sequoia's visit to Willowwood, and felt a pang of regret. If only she was there to meet her, at least to see her close up. But the Queen was long gone now, flying to who-knows-where to meet with the other queens. To stand up to Wasp once more.

Juniper wondered what it must feel like to be Queen Sequoia, with the responsibility of an entire tribe resting on her shoulders as she confronted Wasp. What would she need for such a task? What would she need to be?

Strong.

Another berry, another bush, another (obvious) addition to her basket. Not her actual one though; it still remained empty as Juniper continued digging, the piles of dirt around her growing ever larger. Her arm began buzzing, demanding she stop. Juniper didn't – quitting wasn't something a strong hero would do. But as her claws too became sore she reconsidered. What if she didn't quit, but instead *relocated* to a new digging spot? Her muscles agreed to her splendid idea.

Juniper continued west as the sun rose into the afternoon. The air became hot, the willow's shade doing little to stop it. It all felt familiar. At this thought a feeling of déjà vu settled on her scales alongside the sticky heat. This was the same weather she found Fir in.

Fir, Willowwood's hero. The one who stopped the fire. She remembered her panic when he dove deeper into the smoke, saving much of the trader's circle despite the danger.

Determined.

Fir was determined... Determined to be an idiot! Unlike the other two Juniper wanted to smack him upside the head. What was he *thinking*, acting like that to Sumac? And why did he care so much over food? No one's forcing him to eat a certain way! What sort of pride was at stake, for him to defend raw food with such venom?

Juniper found another spot to dig, overlooking a beach off the coast of Dragonfly Bay. It had loose soil, making it easy for her to attack the dirt with fury.

Self-reliant. Strong. Determined. That's how a hero would act. But how to show it? Mother had the sickness, Queen Sequoia had Wasp, and Fir had the fire. Juniper needed a way to prove herself too.

She thought back to Sumac, shivering in terror within Tupelo's wings. Fir had to apologize to them, and no one but her could make him do that. It might not be as dramatic as a fire or plague, but it was something. Where did Fir say he was going?

He said he'd be at the Elder's treehouse. I'll find him there and bring him to the Clover Cafe to apologize. His pride can roll in poison ivy for all I ca-

Ting!

Juniper froze. Her spade had hit something. She dropped the spade and dug with her claws, excavating the rest of the dirt. Her talons grasped onto something solid, and pulling them out she gasped.

In her claws was a lantern with a metal casing and handle, topped with a spiked cap. Leafwings didn't make metal lanterns. That meant the lantern was made by... *This far east? It can't be.*

Hivewings were here.

Chapter 13 – 2601

This time, Fir only flew into five branches on his way to the Elder's treehouse. That might've been because he flew straight up until he reached the open sky, or because he was feeling better! He liked the second explanation more. It meant he was closer to being able to travel home.

"There is no known path east." Elder Rowan's declaration reminded. *"All who have tried it were never seen again."*

Fir chortled. The Elder had been wrong about him, and it wouldn't be surprising if he was wrong again. Besides, what was it that Juniper told him in the pavilion? That his Icewing blood made him tougher than a Leafwing. They may be unable to travel to Pyrrhia, but he could. He would.

The Leafwings on the walkways noticed his ascent. They pressed onto the railings, cheering as he flew by. Fir drank it up, a refreshing reminder that he was stronger and better. A few dragonets took flight behind him, waving excitedly. He did a midair flip for them, and they looked at him with awestruck eyes. They reminded him of Sumac after he saved him from being

–

– cooked. Fir's smile disappeared. Sumac's pale face and Juniper's horrified expression made his heart lurch. But what was he supposed to do, sit there and take it? Let the great traditions of his tribe be trampled by those who don't know better? Fir was just trying to teach them better ways of eating – he was trying to *help* them.

They'll understand later. Fir brushed away his worries. *I'll make them.*

Popping out above the treeline, Fir swiveled his head. Juniper said the Elder's treehouse had a roof which was visible from his height. Finding it, he traveled quickly. As he did the sun beat down on Fir, much to his scale's discomfort. Such temperatures never came to the Ice Kingdom, but at least the trees blocked out the harshest sunlight (perhaps the branches weren't completely annoying).

The shade from below beckoned to Fir. but he refused. He'd dealt with worse heat during the fire. Besides, he was almost to the treehouse anyways. Better to endure through it than to concede.

Diving back down at the roof Fir saw the Elder's treehouse in its entirety, and it was a far cry from the night of the fire when it was deserted. Today the treehouse was filled with dragons. Leafwings chatted on the nooks and ledges dug into the tree, while even more bustled around at the entrance. It was clear something was being planned, though Fir didn't know what.

Work continued around him as he landed, the villagers too busy to pay him much attention. Fir approached a guard who was standing near the entrance, tail lazily tapping the floor. As the guard made eye contact with him he stiffened, staring straight ahead. That puzzled Fir until he took a closer look and realized who he was looking at.

This Leafwing was the one who guarded his cell, the one who came when he startled his partner. He'd scared Fir with threats of violence - now it was time to return the favor.

"Hello there." Fir could see the guard begin to sweat as he sauntered over. "I want you to show me where the library is in this treehouse."

"O-Of course, Icewing." He stammered, holding up a shaking talon. "It's on the second hallway to the right, behind the third door on the left."

"Thank you." Moving closer Fir whispered in her ear. "What were you going to bet on? That I'd be beaten, or killed?"

“K... I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it, I promise. It was just a fun bet!”

Fir scowled at that last part. “Fun?” He snarled in the terrified guard’s ear, wisps of frostbreath visible in the air between them. He wanted to turn those wisps into a storm of ice, and freeze this callous Leafwing into a statue of ice. But what would the others think? What would Juniper think?

“You’re lucky I’m more merciful than your tribe.” Fir finally hissed before turning and marching beyond him, leaving stunned onlookers in his wake. He could endure the rage because he was better. And with the help of the library, he’d show it by crossing back home.

Unlike the forest, the hallways of the treehouse were much easier to navigate. The Leafwings bustling through them parted as he hurriedly passed. Finally he arrived at his destination.

The door to the library was made of dirtied wood with hinges that groaned when opened. Going inside the smell of mildew hit Fir as the aged floorboards underneath him creaked from strain. The hubbub from outside faded into a barely perceptible hum. It was immediately obvious he was in a place of history.

Fir didn’t see any librarian around, though he didn’t mind. A couple of tables and chairs lay on the right end. Over them a series of signs hung over rows of shelves filled with... with...

This isn’t a scroll. Fir took one in his claws and examined it. Instead of one unbroken paper to unfurl, the contraption he held had many sheets glued and tied together on one end. Slabs of dried bark sandwiched the paper, whose ends rested on his claws.

He pulled the slabs apart, causing the paper between to dangle back and forth. Fir quickly closed the ends, afraid of somehow damaging it. Trying again, he slowly turned the front slab over. And it worked!

This must be how I read it. Fir rapidly flipped through the pages of the book, skimming through the words and pictures on each. Finally he reached the end and... there was writing on the other slab.

What's this? Fir curiously peered at the letters, tilting his head in an effort to understand. He rotated the book out of curiosity and saw he'd been holding the thing upside down. Fir looked around – good, no one else was in the room to see his error.

The words on the slab now made sense. It read “*The Exceptionally Comprehensive Encyclopedia of Insects for the Discerning Entomologist*”.

“So that’s what this is.” Fir mused aloud. “An encyclopedia.” It sounded smart, but Entomologist just sounded silly; whatever it was, he didn’t know. And he didn’t want to. Fir put the encyclopedia back on the shelf. The pages were filled with pictures of centipedes, weird winged things, and a whole slew of critters that made Fir shudder. Instead he browsed through the other encyclopedias, reading their titles out loud and flipping through the pages.

“Rowan and Juniper.” *A love story with those names? Ew.*

“The Count of Mount Kudzu” *An aristocrat seeking rightful revenge? Sounds like something straight from the sagas – I like it already.*

“The Legacy of the Leafwings.” Fir paused. Perhaps that legacy included attempts at traveling east; it would be useful to read if it did. He grabbed the encyclopedia and sat down at a nearby table, flipping to the first sheet of paper.

“Why not just use scrolls?” Fir muttered to himself. Scrolls had handles that allowed for an easy grip and smooth opening or closing. This encyclopedia required him to flip each paper from right to left. What if someone’s dirty talons touched the paper, or damaged it by accident? That was a problem scrolls never had to deal with.

Annoyed, Fir flew past the pages until he reached one titled “Table of Contents”. His eyes skimmed down the sections: “Foreword”, “The Legend of the Hive”, “The Twins of Queen Zelkova”... Aha!

Page 53, the start of a chapter titled “Journey to the East.” That sounded promising. Fir eagerly flipped to it and began reading.

As we all know, many centuries ago a dragon arrived from the mythical Distant Kingdoms. She was a dragon unlike any had ever seen before, with scales as black as midnight, and wings as dark as the fate she saved Pantala from.

Fir stiffened. Black scales?

She did this through her great power, the power to see the future.

His talons began to shake.

Her name was Clearsight.

Fir bit back a shriek and leapt away from the table, stumbling onto the floor. It can't be, it couldn't be. Clearsight, that vile consort to Darkstalker? *She* traveled to Pantala? Juniper mentioned a dragon who guided Pantala to a bright future, but Fir couldn't believe she was referring to that witch.

The book went on praising Clearsight, calling her a “savior” and a “miracle”, detailing how they built *temples* to her. They worshiped the accursed Nightwing! Fir wanted to gag. It also said she was the mother of the whole Hivewing tribe – another reason to dislike them.

If this is what the village believed, Fir pitied them. But he wasn't angry. The Leafwings had no way to know of the Nightwing's cunning and deceit. It was only natural they fell to their lies. Fir made a mental note to tell Elder Rowan the truth about Clearsight and her despicable tribe the next time they met.

As the centuries passed after Clearsight passed away, belief in the existence of a continent to the east waned. One priest of Clearsight, a Hivewing named Tapinoma, became distraught at this disbelief and took matters into her own talons.

Fir turned the page and was greeted with a group of four dragons, looking out to the ocean.

Tapinoma decided to travel east to the Distant Kingdoms and record her journey for future travelers. With her was Mangrove, a Leafwing of prodigious strength, Pigsaw, another Leafwing known for his gluttony, and Sunrise, a Silkwing renowned for her calm nature.

They left on the brightest night, when the three moons hung fully over the sky. One week later Pigsaw returned, carrying a map of their route and telling of an endless sea that made traveling impossible. He was the only one to return.

Fir turned the page and was greeted with a map of an ocean. It was filled with sketches of small islands whose quality and number decreased the further east they were. The sketches stopped only a few inches from the Pantalan coast, leaving the rest of the paper blank.

Only fragments of the map they created remain today. This book has reproduced it to the best of its ability.

So that was what he was reading: a book. At least it rolled off the tongue better than “encyclopedia”.

After the failed adventure, there have been no major attempts at exploration east. With the Book of Clearsight saying nothing of visiting the Distant Kingdoms, it is likely this sentiment will remain.

Well, that was useless. Fir closed the book. Then his curiosity piqued. The Book of Clearsight? What else has that Nightwing done? Setting the book aside he scoured the rest of the shelves looking for an answer. At last he pulled out a basket full of history textbooks, the dust from opening one making him sneeze.

Book of Clearsight... Book of Clearsight... Fir searched through the chapters. Ah, there it is.

The Book of Clearsight, the textbook read, was Clearsight's final gift to Pantala. It contained her predictions thousands of years into the future, along with advice on how to navigate it. It rests in the Temple of Clearsight within the Hivewing palace, and is used frequently to guide the tribes.

Given the current tensions between the Leafwings and Hivewings, the book was obviously lying. The village – no, the whole tribe – had to know that Clearsight was a threat, and that her book contained only lies.

But what other false information was there in the Leafwing books? Fir had to know. He began by scouring through the rest of *The Legacy of the Leafwings*. Most of that legacy involved gardening and horticulture, with entire chapters detailing great forestry efforts on Pantala's woodlands. He liked those chapters; they were the most relatable.

What wasn't relatable was the lack of emphasis on the dragons who created those legacies. Icewing legends focused on individual heroes, with only the greatest of foresters mentioned in the songs of his village. But the book rarely mentioned names. Instead it focused on the cooperation needed to achieve those legacies, and the benefits it brought to the tribe.

The chapter Fir passed earlier, titled "*The Twins of Queen Zelkova*", was the same. He'd expected tales of a great duel between the siblings for the Leafwing throne, a battle of strength where only the most powerful prevailed – just like in the sagas.

Instead he read a story of two inseparable twins, working together their whole lives and leading the tribe into an age of wise rule and prosperity. Where was the conflict? Where was the civil war? This wasn't a legacy – it was a let down.

Wanting a better story Fir put the book away and reached for "*The Count of Mount Kudzu*". He devoured the book and found it wanting. The Count was such a weakling! Instead of fighting his enemies in honorable combat head-on, he laid traps and witty schemes to bring about their downfall. He

even spared one of the villains at the end. He had to admit the dialogue was good, but still!

Out of desperation Fir picked a new book from a whole different shelf. It was called "*Ash of Green Gingkos*". He didn't know what a gingko was, but he gave it a read anyway.

The story was about a Leafwing named, to no one's surprise, Ash. She was a hopeless daydreamer at odds with the sensibleness and practicality of her friend Guava. Fir hoped the book would be about Ash's quest to quash her frivolousness completely, and become exactly like her role model friend through determination and will.

But her romanticism remained through the ending of the book. Ash instead tempers her imagination with prudence, using common sense to find a compromise between imagination and respectability.

Fir couldn't have agreed less with the ending, almost throwing the book in frustration. Decorum and respectability were the most important traits for any dragon to have. If romanticism got in the way of practicality, then an Icewing would erase it entirely through determination, instead of using prudence as an excuse for compromise.

He hoped the book was part of a series, so that he could read more about Ash – to make sure she stops daydreaming, that is.

The rest of the shelves beckoned to him, full of books waiting to be read. Choosing another wouldn't hurt, right?

Someone knocked on the door.

Fir jumped, almost falling off the chair.

"Hello? Is someone inside?"

Fir opened the door. A Leafwing stood in front of him looking slightly concerned.

“Oh – it’s you. The Icewing.” She stammered.

“That’s me.” He affirmed. “And who are you?”

“I’m Hickory, the librarian and head steward. It’s closing time, so I need you to leave the room.”

“Closing time?” Fir echoed.

“Yes. It’s earlier than usual since we’re preparing for the New Year of the Trees festival.” She cheerily replied. “It’s happening in a week, and there’s so much planned for it”

“I’ve never heard of it.” Fir flatly replied.

“Don’t worry, Elder Rowan can tell you all about it. He’s going to make an announcement outside the treehouse right now this evening if you want to find him.”

“Evening?” Fir exclaimed. “Isn’t it still the morning? That’s when I got here!”

“The morning you say?” Hickory smirked. “Are our Leafwing books that much more interesting than your Icewing ones?”

Fir scowled, his mood darkening in an instant. “Of course not.” He huffed before walking away. He would show them the truth tonight, during the announcement happening outside. There Fir would tell the entire village about Clearsight’s lies. He’d tell them of a better way of life with beds and scrolls, raw food and orderly streets.

It was the least he could do.

Chapter 14 – 2870

The least Juniper could do was confirm her hunch. Hivewings never ventured so far east, and a single lantern shouldn't be her only evidence. She dug through the rest of the loose soil, finding a pile of charred logs suggesting a former campsite. Had it not been buried so suspiciously, she would've stopped there.

Instead Juniper circled through the foliage around the site, foraging not for ideas or truffles, but for talonprints. She found some only a few minutes later, leading to a willow tree with its lower branches cut off. She bit back a hiss, blood boiling after witnessing such a disfigurement.

So that's where the firewood came from.

Turning to the beach Juniper took flight, soaring closely over the sand. The sky was quickly being covered with clouds, and a faint breeze picked up over the waves. The sand near the waves looked pristine, but the same couldn't be said for the sand closer to the treeline. Pairs of talonprints littered the area, leading to the campsite discovered earlier. Another set of prints led back out from it, approaching the sea before abruptly ending.

That must be where they came and left.

Returning to the campsite Juniper pulled the lantern back out. She'd been so caught up with its metal exterior that she neglected to look at its center. The center would confirm everything.

Leafwing lanterns were made from wood and vines, with fireflies at the center to provide light. Torches were only used in villages, and were never carried into the forest for fears of starting a wildfire.

For their lanterns, the Silkwing used paper and – unsurprisingly – silk. They were dainty and beautiful, completely unlike the one she held.

The only similarity lay in the center. Unscrewing the spiked lid at the top Juniper reached inside and pulled out a thick strand of silk. It was warm to the touch and gave off a faint glow in the evening light.

A metal lantern lit with flamesilk? This was carried by a Hivewing. But what were they doing here?

Juniper put the facts together. First, Queen Sequoia stopped by at Willowwood as she traveled west to meet with Wasp once more. She had warned Elder Rowan about increasing reports of Hivewing tree cutting, and then the next night after she left a fire started from the forest floor?

It couldn't be a coincidence; Hivewings were sent to burn down Willowwood. The realization filled her with dread and she dropped the lantern, chills washing down her back like rain.

The Elder needed to know. The whole village needed to know. Juniper took flight immediately, the fear of what Wasp could do to her home filling her wingbeats so that she returned to Willowwood before sundown.

The traders' circle was closing up as Juniper returned, with Leafwings shuttering their shops before heading higher up the trees. Wingbeats and excited conversations filled the air but she ignored it all. Juniper would have to be determined – which meant no distractions!

“Juniper, there you are!” A distraction flew in front of her path, forcing her to stop and hover.

“Hello Azalea.” Juniper grumbled.

“Don't be a grouch.” Azalea did a flip in the air. “The New Year of the Trees festival is less than a week away! The fire burned a lot of preparations so we've been working extra hard for that and rebuilding our shops and everything's been so busy but so exciting at the same time!”

Juniper couldn't help but feel better in the face of her optimism.

“I've been working on painting the banners and streamers since the ones we had were broken.” Azalea winked. “I haven't been punished for my little stunt at all. Not that I'm complaining!”

Should she tell her about the Hivewings starting the fire, about the threat facing their home? Juniper hesitated.

“I’ve been stocking up on paint jars the whole afternoon. Tomorrow I’ll be practicing my scale painting, and I *need* to have enough black and blue paint for what I’m planning.”

Azalea looked so happy; how could she replace that with worry, right before the festival?

“Hello? Pantala to Juniper?” Azalea’s voice snapped Juniper out of her thoughts. “You were staring off into space. Everything alright?”

“Of course!” Juniper put on her most convincing smile.

Azalea crossed her arms skeptically. “I know you, Juniper. You don’t look alright, you look stressed out.”

“What? Me? Phsss,” she waved it off, “it’s nothing.”

Azalea looked at Juniper with concern. “It’s not nothing. It’s something. You told me about Fir, and I helped you then. You can tell me now.”

No, Azalea couldn’t be told. She’d become as worried as her, and the festival’s enjoyment would be ruined.

“In fact,” Azalea continued, “you can tell me while we try out some paints. I have some new designs I’d love to test onto you.”

Juniper could tell her after the festival. Heroes are supposed to shield others from burdens and worry, right? She was just being strong for Azalea.

“Unless you want to go see Elder Rowan’s announcement. It’s happening soon outside his treehouse. Rumor has it that it’s about the Hivewings.”

Juniper stiffened. Azalea seemed to notice. “Talk to me, Juniper?” She asked.

An announcement? Juniper could tell the Elder her findings, and the village too! But Azalea was waiting for a response. She had to say something.

“I told you Azalea, it’s nothing.” Juniper insisted. “There’s nothing to talk about. I’ll be at the Elder’s announcement.” With that she turned and flew skywards.

“Then come back after the announcement!” Azalea pleaded. “Ok?”

“Sure!” Juniper called, tossing the spade back to her. “We can do it later.” Much later. She could feel Azalea’s stare burning the back of her head, but right now she had a mission to complete.

The weather began drizzling lightly, and Juniper flew faster. She didn’t look back.

Soon the Elder’s treehouse came into view. A small crowd had already gathered around a raised dais, reminiscent of the one at the trial only a few days ago. They milled about anxiously as Juniper landed onto a nearby branch. She scanned the rest of the crowd, looking for familiar faces but finding none. Aspen and Azalea were down in their shop, preparing for the festivities. Mother was in the pavilion, treating the rapidly dwindling number of burn patients. Tupelo and Sumac were nowhere to be seen. And Fir...

As if on cue he emerged from the entrance doors, flinging them ajar. He strode towards the dais, which confused her. Was he going to make a speech? What about the Elder?

Juniper didn’t have to wait long for her second question. From a ledge above a dragon descended, landing on the dais with a resounding thud. It was Elder Rowan, dressed finely for the occasion.

On his forearms he wore ebony bracelets inset with beechwood carved with images of willow trees. A necklace made from pale green vines hung above, with designs of leaves carved from the dark mahogany squares woven into it. And on his head lay a diadem made of willow wood, with a shade of brown a compromise between the color clashes below.

Fir stopped and hesitated before backing away.

“Leafwings, villagers, everyone.” Elder Rowan began as the rain picked up. “Thank you for coming to this announcement. As you all know,” he narrated, “four days ago our humble Willowwood was visited by none other than her majesty Queen Sequoia!”

A cheer went up from the crowd, Juniper clapping enthusiastically. The Elder waited patiently for them to subside.

“She stopped at our home for the night, before leaving the following morning for her monthly meeting with the queens Monarch... and Wasp.”

The last name set off boos and grumbling as Juniper joined in. Even Fir was shaking his head. Rowan held his claws up for silence.

“Last morning the meeting had ended, and we now have news of what happened.” The Elder pulled a letter from a pouch behind his wings, straightening his wings before reading it aloud.

“In the most recent meeting of our tribes, Queen Wasp has declared a new prophecy told by the Book of Clearsight.” Juniper saw Fir flinch at that, “It is as follows: the time has come to unite the tribes. You must bring them all together under the leadership of one queen, Wasp of the Hivewings. Otherwise, a terrible fate will befall every dragon on the continent.”

The crowd erupted in fury, and the forest was filled with shouts of anger. How could the Book of Clearsight possibly say such a thing? Meanwhile Fir looked... vindicated?

Elder Rowan tried to speak but his voice was drowned out by the crowd. He took a deep breath and tried again.

“SILENCE!” He bellowed. The entire audience went quiet, shocked at seeing their Elder yell. “I am not finished yet.”

“In response to this declaration, Queen Monarch has agreed to hand over her power. Queen Wasp now rules over the Hivewings and Silkings.”

The mood of the crowd turned to pure shock. Other villagers simply stared in disbelief, Juniper among them.

“But before handing over her crown our Queen Sequoia demanded to see the Book of Clearsight for herself, finding the declaration to be ‘awfully convenient’ and ‘suspicious that it never came up before’. I, for one, accede with our queen’s sensible request.” Everyone nodded in agreement.

“Queen Wasp, however, refused, and the meeting ended in hostility. There is still no resolution to the reports of tree cutting, and there now remain only two queens of Pantala.”

The weight of the news sunk into the audience. Juniper couldn’t believe it. The kind Queen Monarch gave up her crown?

Voicing her confusion, a Leafwing from the crowd spoke up. “Why would the Book of Clearsight say such a thing? I don’t believe it!”

Their voice was joined by more and more, until the whole crowd pleaded for an explanation. The Elder struggled to give an answer, but from the corner of her eye Juniper saw Fir climb onto the dais.

“I can answer that. Leafwings, listen to me!” Fir announced as the Elder stepped back in confusion.

“You need to know the truth: The Book of Clearsight is a LIE!”

Juniper nearly fell off her branch. Elder Rowan almost stumbled off the platform. The entire crowd gasped. A bolt of lightning illuminated the scene, and the sound of thunder filled the stunned silence that followed. Fir pressed forward.

“Clearsight is a deceitful, lying Nightwing! She cannot be trusted! Anything she has written are falsehoods, and it’s time you knew the truth about it.”

“That can’t be!” A voice from the crowd called out. “The Book of Clearsight is never wrong!”

“Then is it right for Wasp to become your queen? Is that what you want?” Fir asked the crowd. An embarrassed silence filled the air.

“No one wants that.” Elder Rowan strode towards Fir. “And the Book of Clearsight does not want it either. Queen Wasp is lying.”

The accusation traveled through the air as Juniper hopefully listened on.

“If the Book of Clearsight truly said what she claimed it did, why did she refuse to show Queen Sequoia the book?”

“Because it's full of lies.” Fir repeated.

“Because *she* is full of lies.” Rowan countered. “Queen Wasp denies any involvement in tree cutting, despite growing reports in the west. Of course she would lie again.” The crowd murmured in agreement.

“Then Wasp and the book are both liars.” Fir declared. “Clearsight wishes to deceive you, don't let her any longer!” The audience grumbled in disagreement.

Fir, what in the trees are you saying?

“The Book of Clearsight is *not* a book of lies!” Elder Rowan snarled. “For countless centuries it has guided the continent, and despite your service to the village I will not have you slander Clearsight's final gift.”

“A gift? More like a curse.”

“Tell me, Fir,” The Elder's tail lashed dangerously, “what do you know of the Book of Clearsight?”

“It is a book of prophecies written by Clearsight, a dragon as dangerous and deceitful as the rest of her tribe.” He confidently answered.

Juniper bit back a hiss. How dare he insult Clearsight! The rest of the crowd glared at him with contempt.

“The Book of Clearsight,” Elder Rowan corrected, “is a record of predictions, warnings, and advice given to us by our beloved Clearsight. She saved our tribes from disaster, using her powers for the benefit of all Pantala. She is not dangerous. She is not deceitful. Clearsight protected us again and again – but you wouldn’t know that, would you?”

He turned to the audience. “Let us remind Fir of what the Book of Clearsight has done for us.” Elder Rowan held up a talon. “During the reigns of Queens Tawny and Magnolia, there came a dry season hotter than anything that came before. But Clearsight’s book warned us about this, and told of underground reservoirs that saved hundreds from dying of thirst.”

He raised a second talon. “The dryness turned our trees into tinder. So when lightning struck in the rainy season a wildfire engulfed the continent, threatening to turn all of Pantala’s forests to ash.”

Elder Rowan let that sink into the Leafwing audience as the thunderstorm picked up. A continent without trees? Juniper didn’t want to think about it.

“But once more, the Book of Clearsight came to save us. It warned of this exact scenario, and advised us to build firebreaks across the whole continent. We listened to Clearsight. We obeyed Clearsight. And our forests – our homes – survived because of it.”

The crowd cheered their agreement while Fir narrowed his eyes. But the Elder wasn’t finished. He raised a third talon and the crowd hushed.

“But I would be a fool to say that wildfires were the only dangers to our tribe. There was another threat we faced – each other. This is the story of Queen Zelkova’s twins”

The crowd buzzed with confusion, but Fir’s head perked up in recognition. Juniper didn’t know why.

“During a time of many comets and falling stars, a pair of twins hatched in the Royal Hatchery of the Leafwings, ruled at the time by Queen Zelkova. The

Book of Clearsight spoke of a brutal civil war that threatened to tear our tribe apart should the twins be separated.”

From the look on Fir’s face, he seemed to know what the Elder would say next.

“It advised us to keep them together, so we obeyed. When Zelkova passed away the bond between the twins remained unbreakable, and together the two made the Leafwing tribe flourish. Clearsight saved us from a war of Leafwing succession, and gave us prosperity in its place.”

The Elder turned his full focus on Fir, who retreated a few steps back. “So do not dare insult Clearsight, or her blessed book. And if you wish to speak further, I advise you tread carefully with your words.”

Fir opened his mouth but no words came out. He looked to the crowd, eyes searching through the faces, yet found none who were friendly. His gaze lifted to the branch Juniper sat on and the two made eye contact. He wanted her support – she could see it clearly on his face.

But memories of what he said to Sumac resurfaced. Fir needed a lesson on his arrogance. She shook her head and looked away.

Sorry Fir. This time I won’t defend you.

The look of betrayal in Fir’s eyes said it all. It was soon replaced with anger as his face contorted with rage.

“You’re wrong.” He spat out. “All of you, WRONG! After everything I did – don’t say I didn’t try to help you!” With that he took to the sky, ramming through the canopy and flying away until his white scales disappeared from view.

An awkward silence set in as the villagers wondered what to do now.

“Well, that concludes the announcement.” Elder Rowan sighed. “More announcements will be given when news arrives. I will retire to my quarters for the night, and will accept no visitors.” With that he turned to leave.

Juniper's stomach dropped. She still had to tell him about the Hivewings! She glided off the branch and onto the dais, hurrying after the Elder.

"Stop right there!" A guard stepped in front of Juniper. She halted and gawked; it was the same guard she fed sleeping berries to in the cells.

"No one is allowed to see Elder Rowan at this time." He smirked, recognizing who Juniper was and relishing the moment.

"Wait! Please, it's important. I found something about the tree cuttings – the Elder has to know!" She pleaded.

"Sure, you want to 'help the right dragons and redeem my errors.'" He mockingly quoted. "How about you get lost like that Icewing, and come back with some proof?"

Juniper glared at the guard, then backed away. Inwardly she scolded herself. Why didn't she bring any evidence back? How could she have forgotten? The rainstorm picked up in intensity, torrents of water pouring down the canopy.

She leapt from the platform and glided through the trees, moving east towards the campsite where she found her proof. It wouldn't be pleasant to travel in such weather, but Juniper had no other choice.

Speaking of travel, where was Fir going? Juniper shook off her worries. She had to be confident, like the village hero Azalea said she could be. Besides, he wouldn't fly too far away – not in this weather.

Chapter 15 – 3423

Fir shot far through the sky, traveling north and soon east once he reached the ocean. Showers of needle-like raindrops blanketed his scales, a furious

wind blew towards land to buffet his wings, and thunder deafened his ears with every ominous rumble.

He could've avoided it all if he didn't fly above the canopy, but Fir didn't care. Nothing – *nothing* – could convince him to go back within the trees, into that forest filled with those ungrateful Leafwings.

When he strode onto the dais following the Elder's announcement he was so sure they'd listen to reason. The Book of Clearsight had told them to submit under Wasp, and everyone knew that was clearly nonsense. One queen ruling over three tribes? Ridiculous! It was the perfect time to sway the village.

The howling wind unfurled into a gale, swaying his wings west, away from home. Fir resisted and corrected his course as his memories resumed.

But everything went so wrong. The crowd, once angry and confused at the Book of Clearsight's commands, became hostile to *him* once he told them the truth about its author. Generations of Icewing fact, passed down since the time of the accursed Darkstalker, spat upon by ignorant ears.

Still, Fir wouldn't give up. He'd bottled his rage and endured the disrespect the same way he endured the fire, until the Elder spoke.

A bolt of lightning struck in the distance, heralding another roll of thunder that assaulted Fir's ears. From the brief light he could see the shoreline. Gritting his teeth he veered right, now flying directly against the wind.

Elder Rowan solely blamed Wasp for all their problems, and Fir agreed with him that she was at fault; the Hivewing had Nightwing heritage – deceit would naturally run in her blood. But Rowan acted as if she didn't use the book to create those problems in the first place. How could someone think like that?

Then the Elder launched into a lecture of all the times when Clearsight's predictions saved them. Storms, wildfires, civil war – pah!

Ridiculous!

Fir spat out a wisp of frostbreath, chilling the air in front of him. He could hear the ocean churning below, the inky black waves barely visible even to his sharp eyesight.

What he could see was Clearsight's ultimate plan: to have her descendants rule Pantala. She couldn't subjugate the other tribes if its dragons were all dead, which was why she "saved" them – more dragons to control meant more power to be gained. Icewing wisdom on the true nature of Nightwings let Fir look through to this ulterior motive, but the Leafwings simply failed to see it.

Even Juniper didn't.

Out of everyone in the village, Fir thought she would at least support him. Juniper stuck with him in the meadow, broke him free from the cells, and defended him when no one else would. That was why her betrayal hurt the most.

Stinging raindrops – only raindrops – rolled down his snout. With a shake he threw them off.

If the village wouldn't listen, so be it. Fir never intended to stay for long anyways. He would fly back to the Ice Kingdom to where he belonged, and leave the Leafwings to their fate.

The storm had other ideas.

The farther Fir flew out to sea the worse the gusts became, until his wings and teeth rattled from the force. Normally he would descend and fly closer to the ocean, but without any light he could blindly crash into a wave and drown. The other option was to fly higher, exposing himself to more intense winds and risking being blown back to Pantala.

Unless, Fir hoped, I go high enough.

If he could get beyond the clouds, to a level where the wind was calmer, then he would enjoy smooth flying all the way back to Pyrrhia.

Fir imagined the view he'd have beyond the clouds. It'd be just like flying over the forest – calm and peaceful, full of freedom, and dotted with familiar stars proudly watching his return home.

What a tale he'd tell to his family; every storyteller in the tribe would sing of him for generations! He'd be known as Fir, fisher of Among-The-Evergreens and traveler of continents. He would be glorious. He would be listened to. And all he needed to do was fly higher.

Determination filled Fir from horn to tail until his whole body buzzed with new energy. He climbed higher and higher with every wingbeat, eyes squinted against the rain.

The rain, though, was nothing compared to the wind which howled in defiance of Fir's efforts. He roared back, but could barely hear himself over the gale. He bellowed again but it was cut off with a gasp as his muscles burned for air.

Fir felt himself pushed back from the wind, so he angled forward to keep himself in place as he rose. Yet the higher he went the stronger the wind became, and the more forward he tilted until he no longer gained altitude. Instead he flew completely against the wind, fighting for every inch.

The hopeful energy from before had evaporated, and Fir could feel himself weakening with every wingbeat. It was now or never to break through. With a renewed push he heaved into the clouds, one final attempt to see the stars.

Dark clouds surrounded him, hanging like an oppressive specter that smothered the little light there was. He felt himself grow tired, and with one last burst of energy he desperately pushed higher. His claws reached to the clouds and pulled them apart to reveal the stars shining above and –

– they weren't there. Only more black clouds and an endless wind.

It howled again with glee at Fir's failure, and to his horror he found himself surging back towards land.

No no no, not again...

Fir plunged from the clouds, spiraling to the ground while fighting just to stay airborne. It was one he knew he couldn't win. His muscles screamed in protest and his wings ached with exhaustion, while his head pounded with despair.

I'm going to die. I'm going to – no! Not yet! He angrily resisted. Fir forced his eyes open as a massive bolt of lightning struck nearby, revealing the entire forest canopy. Its leaves and branches were now his only hope for survival.

He spread his wings again, now angled with the wind as he half-fell, half-glided to the ground. He could see the trees growing larger, threatening to consume him like the sea. But unlike the ocean, this time he would let it.

The canopy was so close that Fir could hear the patter of rain on leaves. Focusing on a dense patch of forest he tucked his wings in, curled his legs, and pulled his arms over his head. Then he shut his eyes, braced himself, and hoped it would be enough.

Great Ice Dragon, save me once again.

His prayer had to work, there was no other way. He couldn't bear to die so far from home. Besides, he'd never be forgiven by Ju-

CRACK!

Only a scant few leaves covered Juniper from above as she flew. Predictably, they didn't do much to stop the rain which incessantly stung at her scales. She looked up at the leaves, *demanding* they block more of the downpour, and immediately regretted it. An insidious raindrop had decided now would be the right time to land on her eye with a wet *plop*.

With a hiss Juniper whipped her head back down, blinking furiously. The undergrowth had never looked so inviting. How easier it would be if she traveled below, without the wind or rain to worry about.

But it would be slow. She reminded herself. And I'm on a mission!

With that Juniper unfurled her wings fully and emerged above the canopy, ready to speed through the rest of the journey – and again, immediately regretted it. She instantly got pushed from the rear by a wild gust of wind and careened straight into a willow tree.

With limbs wrapped in branches and snout stuffed with leaves, Juniper reconsidered her travel method.

Maybe the forest floor was the better way to go. She admitted, slowly untangling herself from the tree. Once she did, Juniper quickly climbed down and down until finally landing on the muddy floor with a *squelch*. She cringed; walking in mud would be slow and dirty.

Still, better than fast and dangerous. She shrugged before setting off.

Fir would have disagreed. He would have flown the fastest route above the entire forest, braving the weather no matter how much it hurt. The fire proved that. Juniper remembered when he dove deeper into the smoke, and how much it scared her. By the time he collapsed when it was all over, she was terrified he'd died.

Thunder roared from above and Juniper jumped. She looked up at the worsening weather. The storm sounded ready to swallow whole anyone foolish enough to challenge it, and she hoped Fir hadn't tried to. It was one challenge he couldn't beat.

The only challenge Juniper had made itself clearly known as she continued: mud. So. Much. Mud. Fed by a limitless stream of rainwater from above it pooled around her talons like berries in a basket.

At first it was irritating, splattering onto scales and dirtying her talons. Soon it morphed into an inconvenience, sticking to the bottom of her claws and

slowing her gait. Finally it became an obstacle on par with the wind and rain, bogging Juniper down like quicksand with every step. It wasn't long before her speed slowed to a crawl, much to her annoyance.

By the trees. She grunted, pulling her leg out with a hard-earned *pop!* *If this keeps up I'll be stuck here the whole night!*

Juniper looked down at her stained claws and wondered what to do. If she continued like this, slowly trudging through the bog that was the forest floor, it really would take until morning. The problem was that the deeper she stepped the more mud stuck on her, the more mud stuck on her the slower she went, and the slower she went the deeper Juniper stepped.

It was like being ensnared within the willow tree when she tried flying faster; how would she untangle herself now?

She pondered until an idea came to her. If being slow saved her up above, then maybe being fast would help her down below. Yes, that would work for sure!

Juniper dug her claws into the mud, muscles tensed and tail steadied for balance. She took a deep breath, kept her eyes forward, and exploded into a run.

The plan was simple: The less her feet touched the ground, the less of a problem the mud would be. All she needed to do was keep running. Her talons became a blur as dodged past trees and overzealous bushes, always one step ahead from sinking down.

As she galloped through the forest Juniper felt a sense of wild freedom. Here she was, sprinting through a storm to get evidence of a Hivewing campsite. Hivewings! It was dangerous! Thrilling! And so, so exciting. *This* was what it meant to be a hero, she was sure.

No wonder Azalea loved books about heroes. Once Juniper got back, maybe she should read those storie-

Snag!

Juniper looked down and saw her left claw lodged in a wayward root. Silly her, it must've gotten stuck while she was daydreaming. To free her claw she just needed to stop and –

Oh wait. I'm running. Juniper remembered. That's when she tripped.

With a sharp *crunch* her claw broke free of the root, sending jolts of pain up Juniper's arm as she tumbled head-over-tails into another willow tree. The impact shook loose a few leaves which fell daintily on the defeated heap that was her body. A few landed around her and were swallowed up by the mud, who chortled at having reclaimed its Leafwing prize.

After a few minutes the “prize” dragged herself up, groaning.

By the trees, running was stupid.

Juniper rolled so that she sat up on the tree, mud dripping down her snout. She raised her left claw to wipe it off but jerked back with a hiss. Pain radiated from it like petals from a flower as she gently cradled the injured claw.

I take it back. Running was VERY stupid.

Gripping the tree with her other claw Juniper shakily stood up. Picking a leaf from her teeth she contemplated what to do. Top or bottom, it seemed no matter where she went she'd ram into a tree. It wasn't like she could fly through the middle of the forest and –

She paused and thought it over. She *could* fly in between the trees, couldn't she?

“By the trees, I'm stupid!” Juniper cried out over the rain. Now more than ever she wished to go back in time and stop herself from trying to challenge the mud or sky. With a begrudging huff she took flight, weaving through the branches just as she should've done earlier.

Juniper traveled a lot faster after that, now that she didn't try to do something she couldn't. Soon she would arrive at the camp, find the lantern, bring it back to Willowwood and protect them from danger!

Juniper snapped back to attention as she instinctively banked right to avoid a tangle of vines. Daydreaming could wait this time.

What couldn't wait was her destination which came into view. She quickly landed and looked around. The hole she dug from before was now an overflowing puddle, but next to that was the lantern! Apart from the flamesilk inside having been completely extinguished, it looked the same as when Juniper found it.

Satisfied, she grabbed the item and turned to leave. The rain had died down and she couldn't see lightning. So why did she hear thunder? It rumbled from the clouds above the beach, getting louder by the second.

That's not thunder... Juniper realized with a sinking feeling. She instinctively backed away into the treeline, taking cover behind a cluster of bushes.

For once, it was an action she didn't regret. A moment later four dragons burst through the clouds, flying straight to the campsite. They cut through the sky with knife-thin bodies and four equally sized wings that droned louder and louder as they approached.

Those are... Hivewings. Juniper covered her snout with her claws and sank lower behind the bushes. Hivewings. Here. In the flesh. It wasn't long before they landed.

"And here we are again!" The one with yellow scales and black claws announced triumphantly, brandishing an axe in one claw and a net in the other.

"Yes, Dauber. We are." Another dragon, blood red save for a crown of black scales on its snout, landed beside him. "And if you don't keep quiet you'll let the whole forest know about it!"

“Cardinal, boss, calm down.” A third Hivewing with another net slung over her back remained hovering in the air, orange scales glinting lazily at the two below. “There isn’t much forest left to know, not after the fire we started. Isn’t that right, Firefly?”

Juniper kept a claw clamped over her mouth, stifling an angry gasp.

“R-Right, Petaltail.” The last Hivewing, with a mix of subdued red and yellow scales, landed. She held a lamp which flickered weakly in the rain. “Still, we should remain vigilant!”

“You need to loosen up a little.” Petaltail rolled her eyes before finally landing, giving Firefly a light punch on the shoulder. “Too much stress never helped anyone.”

“But too much idling does!” Cardinal snapped. His tail lashed with annoyance, and Juniper could see a sinister stinger at its end. “Queen Wasp ordered us to cut more willow wood, not to talk.”

Wasp was coming for Willowwood. Juniper felt the same fear she had remembering Father’s death. But this time, it was all real.

How did I ever think this would be exciting?

“Can we rest first?” Firefly piped up. “The storm was rough, and the winds were so strong. My wings hurt.”

“You don’t need wings to cut down trees.” Dauber replied. “Now come here with your lamp – I can barely see a thing!”

“That reminds me, aren’t we supposed to have a lantern as well?” Petaltail asked. Juniper tightened her grip around it and slowly began to inch back.

“Yes, Petaltail’s right.” Cardinal nodded thoughtfully. “Firefly, you were supposed to carry two lights, but I only see you with one. So.” he narrowed his eyes on her, “Where. Is. It?”

“It’s here!” Firefly yelped. “I buried it under the campfire – it was so heavy to carry back.” She whined. “We’ll dig it out and relight it with my lamp, easy.”

“Now you tell us.” Dauber grumbled. “Let’s get it out then.”

“No, we can’t.” Petaltail cut in. The others looked at her with confusion.

“That puddle, over there.” She pointed to the hole Juniper had dug up. “That was where we camped. Firefly, you filled the hole in, right?”

“Right.” She repeated.

“Meaning,” Petaltail looked from side to side, “someone else dug it up. Someone who saw the lantern. Someone who *knows we’re here*.”

Dauber rushed to the hole and reached in, upending the pond water. “I can’t feel a lantern boss!” He yelled. “They must’ve taken it with them!”

“Curses.” Cardinal snarled. “Everyone, fan out and search for that Leafwing.”

“It’s no use, they’re probably long gone by now.” Firefly groaned.

“Wrong again, Firefly.” Petaltail looked down. “See these talon prints? They’re fresh – and not ours. All we need to do is follow. ”

“Good thinking, Petaltail.” Cardinal nodded as Petaltail preened. “Dauber, follow those prints!”

They’re going to find me. Bands of fear squeezed around her heart as Dauber approached the bush. She had to do something, and fast.

On one talon, she could fight. It was a stupid idea and Juniper knew it. Fighting four armed Hivewings with a sprained claw? Might as well fly through the storm; she’d die either way.

On the other talon, she could run. The Hivewings would never catch her in the trees. Juniper could take the lantern with her, present it to the village, and return with them.

But is that what a hero would do? She wondered with doubt. Heroes had to be strong and fight, not run away. But fighting would be suicide. Her options felt like choosing between the ground and sky – should she be swallowed in the mud or torn apart in the wind?

Neither, that's the answer. Juniper chose the middle path, flying through the trees between the mud and wind. And it worked! If she did the same here, it just might work again.

Dauber's talonsteps grew louder and louder. Juniper tensed, coiling into the bush. She gripped the lantern like a mace and settled on a final plan; swing at him with the lantern, *then* escape. That would surely enrage the Hivewings, making them chase after her instead of cutting down trees.

Just have to time it right... now!

Dauber poked his head through the bush just as Juniper swung the lantern at his face. The metal crashed into his snout, sending glass shattering through the air.

CLANG!

“YOUCH!”

“Dauber, what's wrong?”

“A Leafwing! IT HIT ME!” He roared back.

“After it!” Cardinal's voice rang out.

Juniper turned and fled. She leapt into the air, gaining distance from the group behind who took flight in pursuit. Vines and branches fell in her path but she deftly dodged between them. A tree trunk appeared directly in front of her, so she rolled right, gripping the bark with her left claw for balance and–

Her vision went white from pain. Juniper felt herself falling, hitting the ground with a sickening *thump*.

I have to keep flying. She gasped, looking behind her. The enraged Hivewings' voices were getting louder. *I have to move now.* Fear won over pain as Juniper took a running start, jumping into the air again and–

“I got her!”

Thick ropes descended on Juniper, tangling her wings and forcing her to the ground. She struggled to get up when a dragon landed on her, slamming her head into the mud.

“There it is!” Dauber snarled. A massive bolt of lightning struck nearby, illuminating the rage on his face. Juniper’s heart leapt to her throat.

“Good work Petaltail.” Cardinal appeared next. “Dauber, you can do the honor.”

“Thanks boss.” He laughed. “I’ll make it quick.”

Spirits of the trees, Clearsight, if you can hear me: please please save me. She weakly squirmed. *I don’t want to die he–*

CRACK!

Chapter 16 – 3041

Waking up in pain was becoming a recurring theme in Pantala. Fir blearily opened his eyes to a familiar throbbing headache. Considering how he was still breathing, his plan of flying into the trees must’ve worked.

Presently he lay curled belly-up within a willow, branches and vines tangled into a blanket blocking him from the light drizzle that the storm had devolved

to. Even the clouds were beginning to dissipate, letting the starry night sky peek through the cover. Among them Fir could see the North Star, mockingly glimmering out of reach.

Three moons, flying in the storm was a bad idea. He sighed. Pining at the skies could wait; right now he had to untangle himself.

He grabbed the branch he was on and lurched forward. The vines wrapped around his chest immediately pulled him back down. It was as if Fir was trapped in the cell again: tightly bound and helpless, with no way to save himself. The thought made him panic.

I need to get out of here! Fir struggled against his binds. His arms swung wildly, nearly hitting his flailing legs while his tail thrashed back and forth. The tree shuddered as chunks of its bark splintered under the onslaught, but only for a moment. Then the willow struck back.

It started with his tail, trapping it in a cluster of leaves and dulling its motions until he could move it no longer. Then it wrapped vines around his legs when they were outstretched, their position permanently kept. Dismayed, Fir raised his left claw to swipe at the vines – exactly what the willow wanted. A bundle of branches snagged onto his talons, wrapping around until he couldn't bring his claw down. With no other option he vainly flapped his wings. They too became stuck.

In a matter of seconds, Fir became trapped in a prison of his own making. He couldn't have been more angry. Problems like these kept happening to him, but no matter how hard he tried he always failed! They played through his head one by one.

The first was when he spent the whole day fishing off the coast of Among-The-Evergreens. No matter how many times he cast his net, he couldn't catch a single fish. Fir refused to quit – what kind of fisher couldn't catch fish? So he stayed when the weather worsened. Look where that got him.

Fir laid his right claw on his side to avoid further entanglement. He'd preserve at least a shred of his dignity.

Caught up in trees as foreign as the dragons that live in them; *that* was what he got. Fir did his best to look past those differences. Even when Elder Rowan accused him of being a spy he didn't give up on arguing his innocence. But it wasn't enough. He was captured and put in a cage, scared and humiliated until Juniper freed him.

At least the fire was one problem he easily fixed. But was it that easy? His lungs disagreed, as did Juniper. She sounded so scared when he first collapsed, and so relieved when he woke up. Could he really call it a success? Fir didn't know anymore.

What he did know was that Clearsight, and anything she said or wrote, can't be trusted. It was a fundamental truth about her tribe, one as solid as the Great Ice Cliff which protected all Ice Kingdom. His conviction was strong, his will to reveal the truth to Willowwood even stronger. And still he failed. Could he even call himself an Icewing anymore?

He looked to the shining stars for answers, but received none. They lit the path home, so close yet so far. Fir used his free claw to wipe his eyes but it didn't stop the tears. Defeated, he laid down and wept. Wept for the failures he couldn't prevent. Wept for a tribe who didn't believe him. Wept for a home he couldn't return to no matter how hard he tried.

New droplets ran down willow leaves, joining the muddy ground far below.

After a while they ceased, passing along with the storm. Fir sniffled. Even if crying won't help him escape, it still felt good.

Getting out of this tree would feel better, though. But with only his snout and claw Fir didn't know how he'd do it. He wished he had his left arm – how easier things would be!

Currently his left claw remained outstretched in front of him, trapped in branches stronger than they looked. Focusing on those branches, Fir made out three. Two wound around his talons before shooting off in opposite directions, while another curled down his forearm until reaching his shoulder.

Moving his right claw would be risky, so Fir decided to use his teeth. He turned his head to the branch tied around his arm and opened his jaws. Craning his neck forward he slowly closed them until he felt the branch on his teeth. He tightened his jaw and pulled back, tugging left and right until the branch broke in two with a satisfying *snap*. Shaking his arm the loose wood fell off, letting him pull his claw closer.

Without the extra distance Fir brought his right claw to help. He started scraping his talons against the branches hoping to cut it loose, but it didn't work. The tree limbs merely bent around his claws, making it impossible to get a grip strong enough for cutting. After two more attempts, each almost ending with a tangled right arm, he switched tactics.

Looking closer at his restraints, Fir found something interesting. The two branches that circled his left claw ended at a tangled knot just beneath his wrist. What if he untied it? Carefully he pried the knot open, drawing strand after strand of branches. It reminded him of weaving fishnets with Father, only now in reverse. Finally the knot loosened, and his claw went free.

Fir's efforts went faster now that he had both arms free. He continued by untying his legs, shimmying them out one by one when their binding vines slackened. The ones wrapped around his chest were cut and bitten, falling harmlessly to the forest floor. To free his tail he brought himself forward, this time with nothing to pull him back down. All that was left were his wings. Reaching out, Fir unhooked the branches tied on his wing spikes. He'd freed himself.

"YES!" He rejoiced to the sky. "I did it!" Fir did a victory stretch, relishing in his earned freedom.

Freedom to do what? After what had just happened, Fir wasn't so sure he could get home. At the very least he had to pack supplies before trying again, which left returning to Willowwood as his only option. Things would be... awkward, to say the least. But he didn't know what else to do.

He remembered that the wind blew him west, further into Pantala. Looking at the North Star, he oriented himself east. With luck he could return to the village by dawn.

Fir gripped onto the bark to climb up, then stopped. Normally he'd fly over the trees without a second thought, but what if the storm came back?

Still, I need the stars to guide me. He thought. *What do I do?*

Aha! An idea came moments later. *I'll fly in the middle, just under the canopy. The trees will cover me, and I'll still see the stars.* Fir decided. It wouldn't be too difficult anyway; he'd been getting better at flying through the forest. He could speed through it as quickly as flying in the sky!

Two whacked branches later, Fir slowed down. He already had one headache today, no need for another. How did Leafwings travel so well through trees? He thought back to Juniper's fluid flying the night of the fire, and how he struggled to keep up.

He should ask her for tips on flying through forests the next time they meet. *Who knows, it might help me on my journey back.* Fir mused.

A sudden branch came into view. Quickly he ducked down and around before they collided. *Ha! I'm getting better at this!* He grinned. *Take that, tree!* The willow shook in defeat, and he could've sworn it said something.

Fir's ears perked up. Trees had no mouths, but he heard voices.

Foragers? Juniper? He brightened. Maybe she went to go find him after he flew off. He quickened his flight, ready to call out.

"We must tell Queen Wasp!" Fir froze. That wasn't her voice. And what Leafwing served Wasp? Everyone in Willowwood refused to bow to her. A sinking suspicion took root in his heart, and he skidded to a stop before descending to the forest floor.

He crept low to the ground, mud staining his scales. After a moment's hesitation he rolled around in it. *Ick.* Looking like a Mudwing was not

something he liked, but he couldn't stick out like a sore talon. Better safe than sorry – Juniper would say that, wouldn't she?

As Fir crawled he saw a light coming from ahead. It glowed with an unnatural orange that didn't come from the moons. He narrowed his eyes. *What's going on there?*

The voices grew louder too. Fir listened as he continued.

"It could be scavenging the ruins, we don't know."

"That seems highly unlikely and you know it, Firefly."

"You shouldn't have hit it so hard, Dauber."

"Why shouldn't I? It attacked me!"

At that moment Fir peeked out from behind a bush. The dragons he saw were not Leafwings. There were three of them, standing in a clearing overlooking a beach. Their scales were mixes of red and yellow, they each had four wings atop whip-thin bodies, and they all were arguing fiercely.

There was no doubt who they were. So *these are Hivewings*. Fir narrowed his eyes. *What were they doing here?*

"Don't blame me for defending myself." The yellow one – Dauber – continued. He was cradling his snout for some reason. "Maybe if you used your tail stinger, *Cardinal*, we wouldn't have this problem."

"If I did, *Dauber*," the Hivewing with red scales, *Cardinal*, answered, "the Leafwing won't be able to speak. We need it to talk."

What Leafwing? Fir puzzled. *I don't see any.*

"Look, it's waking up!" The one with red and yellow scales exclaimed. At that, the Hivewings moved and jostled. Dauber stepped out of the way, revealing a net wound around–

Fir's heart dropped. It took everything he had just to remain quiet. *Snow monsters, no. It can't be her.*

Bound inside the net Juniper lay unconscious, blood dripping from an ugly mark on her forehead.

"See, I told you I didn't hit her that hard." Dauber smugly replied.

Fir wanted to turn him into an icicle, and smash it to pieces with his tail. But it'd be a death sentence to fight three dragons at once.

What do I do?

"Petal tail, get over here!" Cardinal called.

To his left an orange Hivewing emerged from the trees, dragging a net in one claw and an axe in the other. Another net was slung over her back. "Coming, boss." She grunted. "Willow wood is heavier than you think."

Four dragons at once. Even better.

From the ground, Juniper groaned softly. Petal tail's attention snapped to her. She dropped the net and joined her friends, who formed a semicircle facing the Leafwing.

"All of you, stay silent and look menacing." Cardinal ordered. "I shall speak to the Leafwing." They murmured in assent.

The net shifted as Juniper woke up. "What in the trees..." she trailed off, eyes widening as she realized where she was.

"Hello there." Cardinal smiled, dangling a lantern. "You must be the one who stole our light. Not a very good first impression, you know!" He jumped back as Juniper lunged at him, jaws outstretched to bite. She missed, and hit the ground with an unceremonious *thump*.

"And this is why we use gags." Petal tail remarked.

“Shut up.” Cardinal hissed. He turned to Dauber and nodded. The yellow Hivewing grinned and delivered a vicious backhand across Juniper’s snout.

Fir shook with helpless rage. There had to be something he could do – anything. Waiting around did nothing!

“Now.” Cardinal sighed. “Feel like being more cooperative?”

“Choke on a branch.” Juniper spat.

“That can be arranged.” He turned to the net Petaltail had been holding. It was filled with the trunk of a small willow tree, along with cut willow branches and shaved off bark. “And it will be if you don’t watch your tongue.”

Upon seeing the net, the color drained from Juniper’s face. “That was a *sapling*.” Her voice cracked. “You murdered a *sapling*.”

“We cut down a tree.” Cardinal rolled his eyes. “You Leafwings, so sentimental about your plants. *Ridiculous!*”

That last word made Fir stiffen from familiarity. He’d said that word too. *Pull yourself together!* He chastised. Right now he needed a plan.

“Though I will admit they look quite beautiful.” Cardinal commented, looking Juniper up and down. “Which is why Queen Wasp is so interested in them. But before that interest can be explored further, there’s something we need you to answer for us.”

Cardinal crouched down until he was inches from Juniper. “We know there is a Leafwing settlement here called Willowood. Is it destroyed, or does it still stand? Tell me now.”

Juniper stared defiantly at Cardinal, her snout remaining shut.

“Please say it burned down.” The red and yellow Hivewing whispered with talons crossed. “Please please please – Queen Wasp will be so proud of me!”

“Firefly, quiet!” Petaltail shushed her.

Hivewings started the fire. Fir slowly nodded to himself. It certainly made sense. Was that why Juniper was here, to prove it?

Juniper glared daggers at Firefly. "Then you're out of luck. Willowwood still stands. Wasp will only be disappointed with you."

Firefly deflated. Fir almost felt sorry for her. Almost.

Cardinal glowered. "Well that certainly complicates things. Firefly!"

"Yes?" She sullenly asked.

"Fly back to Queen Wasp. Tell her that Willowwood has not fallen. Go now!" He barked.

"R-Right now?" Firefly looked confused.

"Yes. Right. Now." Cardinal repeated. "If the settlement remains, there'll be Leafwings who'll try and stop us from further tree cutting. The Queen must know so that her plans can change accordingly."

"Yes boss!" She saluted, placing her lamp down before taking flight. She flew above the canopy and through the skies above the sea, slowly disappearing into the horizon.

I guess waiting around did something after all. Fir shrugged. The odds had tipped in his favor, even if he was still outmatched.

"So, Wasp wants to destroy my home." Juniper hollowly spoke to Cardinal.

"Queen Wasp. But yes."

"She wants to cut down our willow trees."

"Yes."

"...Why?" Her voice rasped.

“Because she wants to.” Cardinal answered matter-of-factly. “Queen Wasp commands, and we obey.”

“Was telling me your plan one of her commands?”

He shrugged. “No. But who do you think you’ll tell before you die?”

They’re going to kill Juniper. Horror washed over Fir. She’s going to die... unless I do something. Now.

Lessons from the Icewing sagas would tell him to charge immediately, and defeat the enemy with superior strength and endurance in a rousing triumph. But he already did that with the storm. He flew straight into it and wasn’t strong enough to win. Fir was lucky the crash didn’t kill him – the Hivewings definitely would. Dauber was large, Petaltail wielded an axe, and Cardinal had a stinger on his tail like a Sandwing. Fir didn’t even have a weapon!

“Petaltail, fill your other net with another tree.” Cardinal ordered. “Then we’ll deal with the Leafwing wretch and get out of here.”

“I will, I will.” She soothed, dropping the net next to the other one before approaching Juniper. “I just think there are other uses for the Leafwing apart from killing it.”

A net. Fir knew how to use a net. Very slowly, he crawled sideways, staying on the edge of the clearing circle where he was hidden.

“Like what? I say we kill her.” Dauber contested.

“You’re just mad she landed a clean hit on you.” Petaltail snarkily replied.

“Why you–”

“Quiet.” Cardinal cut in and turned to Petaltail. “Give me your reasoning.”

“We could use our captive as a bargaining chip.” She calmly explained.
“Something to help us when we strike at Willowwood.”

“That’s dumb. You’re dumb.”

“Says you.”

Cardinal put a claw to his face. “Clearsight help me.”

As they bickered Fir crept to the nets until they were between him and the Hivewings. The one on his right was filled with wood, while the one on the left remained empty. It looked just like the one he used for fishing.

Even with a weapon, though, Fir would still be fighting three at once. He needed something else. After losing to the storm he couldn’t count on his physicality to save him.

Wait. Fir paused. *Count... Count... The Count of Mount Kudzu!*

He remembered the book from the Elder’s library. When planning revenge against his many foes, the Count used stealth and surprise attacks to tip the odds in his favor. The element of surprise, combined with his frostbreath? It just might work.

Fir tuned in to the Hivewings’ discussion just as they finished.

“I’ve heard both your arguments,” Cardinal announced, “and Dauber is right. Keeping the Leafwing alive complicates things. Petaltail, collect more wood. Dauber, kill it.”

“No! Wait!” Juniper’s cries made Fir’s talons shake.

He looked to the stars for comfort. *Great Ice Dragon, bless me today. May the stars be your eyes watching over me tonight.*

Petaltail rolled her eyes, looking back at Cardinal as she walked to the net. “Alright then, feel free to make a huuge mistake.” She called. Fir tensed his claws. He just needed to wait a little longer...

“But when we need a hostage, don’t say I didn’t–”

Now!

Fir sprang up, coming snout-to-snout with Petaltail. Her eyes widened in shock as he swung his claws through her neck. She went down in a spurt of blood, dropping her axe. He grabbed it and the net as Dauber and Cardinal turned and stared. The latter spoke first.

“What in Clearsight’s name are you?”

Fir blasted frostbreath and charged.

Chapter 17 – 2869

A wave of frostbreath swept over the air above Juniper.

Fir? She couldn’t believe her eyes. Yet there he was: armed, covered in mud, claws covered with Petaltail’s blood, and *ferocious*.

Cardinal rolled backwards, whip-like reflexes letting him duck under the blast. Dauber instead put his arms up just as the frostbreath hit him. The chilling smoke crashed onto his claws, talons blackening from frostbite. Two of them fell off with a sickening *snap*. He screamed as Fir threw his net, pinning the writhing Hivewing to the ground.

In the chaos Juniper began gnawing at her own net, biting the rope which bound her claws. The sooner she could escape the better.

With Dauber incapacitated Fir turned his attention to Cardinal, who flared his wings and snarled.

Fir reared his head back, jaws opening for another blast. Cardinal quickly pivoted and threw the lantern he'd been holding. It hit Fir with a resounding CLANG, causing him to stumble back.

In the precious few seconds that followed, Cardinal lunged forward, tail stinger raised to strike. If it pierced Fir the venom would make short work of him. Thinking quickly, Juniper raised her tail and slapped it over the Hivewing's feet. He tripped, falling face first into the hole she'd dug.

Cardinal pulled himself out, head dripping wet. His furious eyes whipped to Juniper as his stinger went up again, aimed at her chest.

I need to roll now. I need to roll—

“HEY!”

Cardinal turned just in time to see Fir running towards him, axe gripped tightly. He swung in a wide arc, weapon sailing from the side.

Suddenly it stopped. Cardinal lashed out, striking the arm holding the axe before it could go further. The Hivewing crouched low, letting Fir's momentum carry the Icewing over and down until he too faceplanted. His axe clattered next to Juniper.

With Fir splayed on the ground Cardinal deftly leapt on top of the Icewing, pinning his wings with his back talons. His front claws seized Fir's horns and shoved his face into the mud.

Fir's front talons raised to swipe at Cardinal but missed. Bubbles of air popped through the mud around him, growing smaller and smaller by the second.

Cardinal bent low, hissing in Fir's ear. “You should have stayed hidden, you moons-cursed freak.”

By the trees, he's choking Fir to death. Juniper bit her net with renewed effort but it wasn't enough. Fir was on his own. His pale blue spikes rattled as his struggles became weaker and weaker. That gave her an idea.

“Fir!” She called out. “Use the spines on your back!”

The Icewing’s talons stilled, and for a moment Juniper feared the worst. Then they pumped up with all his strength. He stiffened his spikes as Cardinal lost his grip, falling directly onto them.

The Hivewing howled, scrabbling to escape the impalement that stabbed his belly from a dozen places. Fir took a deep breath and roared, Cardinal’s blood wet on his back.

Juniper grabbed the axe with her teeth and began sawing the net. The rope broke, and after a quick shimmy she was free. Gripping the axe in one claw and the nearby lantern in the other, she faced to enter the fight.

Fir and Cardinal grappled with one another, rolling in the mud. The Icewing’s sharp claws pummeled Cardinal’s belly as their tails lashed for an opening. Fir looked at Juniper and his eyes widened.

“Juniper!” He shouted. “Behind you!”

She turned and saw Dauber breaking free of his own net, tearing the rope apart with jaw and claw. Hissing ice clung to his forearms, sending trails of smoke that rose to meet bloodshot eyes.

He charged. “Come here Leafwing! FOR QUEEN WASP!”

Juniper raised her axe, but Dauber was too fast. He barreled into her like a boulder, the impact loosening her grip on the axe and lantern. She and the weapons flew through the air, skidding on the mud until stopping next to the lamp Firefly left behind.

Dauber pinned her down and grabbed the lantern, hefting it like a mace. Juniper dug her back claws into his underside but the Hivewing didn’t care.

“I’ll make you pay for that swing.” He growled. “With a taste of your own medicine!”

Juniper had barely enough time to cover her face with her claws before the lantern came crashing down. Dauber swung again. And again. And again.

She felt something crack, whimpering from shock. Dauber switched tactics and aimed lower, slamming the lantern on her exposed underbelly. The blow knocked the breath out of her lungs as her vision went white. But it wasn't from pain as she expected – it was from frostbreath.

“Juniper! Fight back!” Fir must've found an opening to help.

The glimmering smoke clipped Dauber's wings, creeping down the delicate membrane. He screeched, the noise making her wince. But with the Hivewing distracted, she acted.

Turning to her left, Juniper grabbed the lamp Firefly left behind. She tore through the paper covering until reaching the center, where flamesilk curled within a glass bulb attached to a metal pole. Holding the end like a branch she waited until Dauber looked back down at her. When he did, she swung.

The glass shattered on impact, coils of flamesilk leaping onto the Hivewing's face. Juniper lunged forward and bit his frostbitten claw as his snout began to singe. With Dauber's frozen talons in her jaws she pulled back, and with a crisp *snap* tore off his left claw.

Dauber's shriek reached fever pitch, echoing through the forest. He collapsed, remaining claw weakly scrabbling over his face. The taste of his frozen scales in Juniper's mouth made her gag. She spit it out with haste, then took back her axe and approached the Hivewing, ready to... kill him. The gravity of what she was about to do hit her.

If Dauber gets up he'll have another chance at killing me. Juniper justified. The Hivewing has to die. Better safe than sorry. That's what a hero would do!

She hesitated. *Then why can't I do i-*

A crashing sound behind her made Juniper turn. She saw Fir backed up against a tree trunk, getting viciously attacked by Cardinal. For every blow he

blocked or dodged the Hivewing got another through. Already, Fir's arms bled blue from fresh cuts.

"Juniper! Help!" He cried, jerking right. A second later Cardinal's stinger plunged into where he once was, bark shattering from the impact.

Thoughts forgotten, she sprinted to help. Her sprained left claw protested its treatment but she ignored it.

Cardinal swiped from the left, talons aimed at Fir's eyes. He blocked it with both claws and opened his jaws, calling another blast of frostbreath. Quick as a flash the Hivewing grabbed Fir's jaw and tilted it up. White smoke flew into the sky, covering the branches above with ice.

Fir's eyes went wide at the talons so close to his neck. Victory at hand, Cardinal's claws traveled down to his throat and—

Juniper's axe came swinging down, burying itself in his spine.

Cardinal roared, rearing back. Juniper pulled and the blade popped out, bits of bone stuck on it. Blood spurted from the wound in rivers which flowed onto her talons.

Fir took the opportunity as Cardinal staggered. He sprung forward and wrapped his jaws around the Hivewing's neck. Cardinal stared back at him, pure hatred in his eyes. Fir returned the look. He clamped his mouth and tore the Hivewing's throat out.

Cardinal slumped to the side, dead before he hit the ground. The pounding in her head faded, and silence reigned for the first time since the fight. Wind whistled softly until Juniper cocked her head. That wasn't wind.

She looked behind her and found Dauber crawling towards them. His face and snout were charred dark from flamesilk burns while his wings and talons were blackened from frostbreath. Similar injuries, earned in opposite ways.

"Do you think you've won?" He gasped.

“Yes.” Fir hissed.

Dauber laughed hysterically. “I wasn’t talking to you, freak. I was talking to the Leafwing.” He looked at Juniper.

“Listen here and listen well, wretch. We’re coming for you. Queen Wasp grows stronger and your tribe cannot resist us.” He coughed, specks of blood coming out. “These forests will die, and there’s nothing you can do to stop it.”

Fir walked forward and stood on Juniper’s left. He supported her sprained left claw as she did the same with his injured right arm.

Dauber got up on all fours, towering over the two. “You two haven’t won, because Hivewings never lose!”

With that he sprinted towards Juniper, bloodlust in his eyes.

“Juniper, look out!” Fir called up his frostbreath. She raised her axe, but could feel her vision begin to slide.

Dauber leapt, claws outstretched. “FOR QUEEN WA–”

“There!”

A spear sailed through the trees and buried itself in Dauber’s side. He tumbled into the mud, shuddering for a brief moment. Then he went still.

They looked left, to where the spear had come from.

Two Leafwings in wooden armor burst out of the trees, scanning the clearing for more threats. Juniper did a double take – they were the guards she fed sleeping berries to! The younger one who called her “sweetheart” held a spear over her back, while the older one who’d questioned her kept his eyes on the target he’d hit.

The pair of guards looked at Juniper and Fir, shocked. She wondered what they must look like: covered in mud and blood, injured from head to tail.

After a moment the guards recovered and shouted. "They're here!"

Behind them more rustling and voices could be heard. One of them popped through.

"Where? Where?" The dragon froze.

"Azalea?" Juniper couldn't believe her eyes.

"Juniper?" Azalea looked at her, then Fir, then at the Hivewing corpses scattered in the clearing. "W-w-w..." She struggled to speak.

"What in the trees is going on here? Have you found my daughter—" Mother burst behind Azalea. Upon seeing Juniper her voice cut off.

"Hi Mother." Juniper shakily smiled.

"Junie?" Mother stared in complete shock, claws on her mouth in horror.

"What *happened* to – come here!"

I'm fine, Mother was what Juniper wanted to say. Instead a pained gasp left her throat. Mother ran faster, growing hazier in her vision. Something was leaning on her left. Juniper looked and saw Fir, eyes closed and limp. She could barely support him.

Huh, maybe I'm not fine. Juniper fell forward, the world growing dark. She passed out just as Mother caught her.

Time passed, but Juniper couldn't keep track of it. Sometimes she could just barely make out sounds and lights, but only for a moment before it slipped away. She felt like she was covered in moss, stifled from the outside world

This is what Fir must've felt like after the fire. She thought before falling back into a dreamless sleep.

Juniper woke up. Light spilled in from above as she looked around, finding herself in the – clearing? Why was she still here? Why was it daytime? And where was everyone?

“Fir? Azalea? Mother?” She called. No one answered.

She looked to the sky, putting a claw over her eyes to block out the sun. Still nothing. Putting her talons down, Juniper was surprised to find them covered with blood.

My blood... it can't be.

Spotting a puddle Juniper ran across the clearing, skidding to a stop once she reached the hole. She frantically peered down and froze.

An axe was lodged within her throat, the end of the blade peeking out from the other side of her neck. Juniper wanted to turn away from the sight, but couldn't. Instead with trembling talons she gripped the handle and pulled it out.

An ocean of blood began rising around her, pulling her deeper and deeper into it. Juniper screamed, but her voice was drowned out by the droning wingbeats of hundreds – no, *thousands* – of Hivewings flying overhead.

The trees around her started to burn, and from the carnage Dauber emerged. His scarred face twisted into a smirk. “We’re coming for you, wretch.” The Hivewing pulled out a blood-stained lantern. “Hivewings never lose.” With that Dauber catapulted forward, laughing.

She couldn't run. She couldn't hide. She could only watch as the lantern swung at her, sailing overhead before it crushed her –

Juniper woke up, jerking back. This time she lay in a hammock, in a room she recognized as part of the healer's pavilion. Judging from the light it was afternoon.

A small gasp came from her left. She turned and found Mother sitting on a chair beside her, staring at her sprained claw as she gently held it. Immediately she stood up at the sight of her daughter awake.

"Junie, you're awake." She whispered, eyes shining with relief. "Thank the trees you're awake."

Juniper held Mother's claw in her own, smiling reassuringly. "It's alright now, I'm fine."

"Don't lie to me." She said it as a statement, not as an accusation. "Juniper, I am your Mother. And a healer. I know that you aren't fine."

That was when she noticed the purple splotches on her chest, and a bandage wrapped over her snout.

"You have bruises on your face and ribs, as well as a sprained claw and a fracture on your snout." Mother looked Juniper in the eye. "Those Hivewings did those to you, didn't they?"

"They did." Memories of what'd happened resurfaced. Juniper pushed them back down.

"Clearsight curse them." Mother furiously whispered. "Junie, after you collapsed we flew you here as fast as we could. The entire way I was so scared I'd lose you, like I lost your father. Do you understand?"

Juniper silently nodded.

"Just—" Mother swallowed. "— Just promise me you'll stay safer in the future. I can't lose you too."

"I promise." Juniper sat up. "I'm tougher than I look, trust me."

“That you are.” Mother hugged her.

“By the way, how *did* you find us?” Juniper asked.

“That would be thanks to your friend, Azalea.” A voice answered from the door. It opened, revealing a grinning Fir. Apart from a mark on his forehead and bandages on his arms, he looked fine.

“She was the first to notice you were gone, when you didn’t come to her after the... Elder’s announcement ended.” He looked away.

Oh yeah. Juniper had completely forgotten about her promise. She left for the campsite after Fir flew off – after his look of betrayal.

I didn’t betray him. She reminded herself.

“We all thought Azalea went mad. She barged into the Elder’s treehouse, demanding we send an armed search party to find you. Elder Rowan almost threw her out, until she mentioned Hivewings.” He continued.

Juniper recalled Azalea telling her about the announcement, and how it was about Hivewings. She’d reacted with fear after having just discovered the lantern, and Azalea had noticed. Did that cause her to do all of this?

“Azalea guessed you were east of the village since you previously foraged there. They must’ve heard the fight, and arrived just in time.” Fir shrugged. “I’m glad they did. Ice spirits bless that Azalea – the complete opposite of a lazy Rainwing.”

Again with that arrogance. Juniper noticed.

Mother seemed unperturbed by Fir’s comment as she walked to the door. “Elder Rowan ordered me to tell him when you woke up. He wishes to speak about what you saw that night, and I think he’s waited enough.”

“Waited enough? How long was I here?” Juniper asked.

“Junie, it’s been two days.” Mother answered.

“Well, more like one and a half.” Fir soothed. “It’d be two if you woke up this midnight.”

“When did you get up?” Juniper shook her head. *That long?*

Fir preened. “Yesterday. Woke up in the evening, and I’ve been feeling fine since!” His arm’s stiff movements said otherwise.

“Since then, I’ve heard Fir spent his time reading in the Elder’s treehouse.” Mother commented.

“I never thought you were a bookworm.” Juniper said to Fir, surprised.

He ducked his head. “They were useful, some more than others.”

“On the topic of ‘others’, the Elder should know you’re awake. He wants the full story from both of you.” Mother walked past Fir. “I won’t be gone for long, make yourself comfortable!” With that she left, leaving Fir and Juniper alone.

He sat down. “I must say, I wasn’t expecting my first meeting with Hivewings to be the way it was.”

“Me neither. I wish it could've been different.” *I wish I didn't have to kill.*

“Agreed. There were so many mistakes I made during that fight.” Fir snarled with annoyance, counting with his talons. “I made my frostbreath too obvious, I got cornered in front of a tree, I–”

“Fir, stop.” Juniper covered his talons with her own. “What matters is that we’re alive. And I want to thank you for that. You saved me.”

“Just returning the favor.” They laughed. “You helped too in that fight. I never thought of using my spikes like that. Good thing you did.”

“I just hope we never see Wasps’ soldiers again.”

“Wasp had plans on Willowwood. You know they’ll come back.” Fir raised his snout dismissively. “And I say let them! I’ll beat them back again if I have to. Icewings always win!”

Juniper stiffened. *Hivewings never lose*. Dauber’s words echoed through Fir. Something had to be done.

“Fir?”

He paused. “What is it?”

“We need to talk.”

Chapter 18 – 3676

“Talk about what?” Fir tilted his head. Juniper looked oddly distressed when he reassured her that he would – that *they* would – always win. He had no idea why.

“About you. More specifically the way you’ve been acting in the village, and to my tribe.”

“Is this about Clearsight?” Fir rushed to defend himself. “Juniper, listen, you have to believe me. Clearsight is–”

“Stop.” Juniper cut him off before he could continue. “It’s more than just that. The issue with Clearsight is a leaf. I’m talking about the stem.”

Fir tilted his head, confused.

“I’ve been noticing something about you since the day we met, and it’s about time we addressed it.” She looked him in the eye.

“Fir, why do you think you’re better than us?”

In an instant the mood of the room changed. The spines on his neck bristled. “Juniper, what in the three moons are you talking about?” He pulled his claws away.

Now it was Juniper’s turn to count with her talons. “Let’s start with the day I first found you. After you woke up I said that you weren’t a threat. Remember what happened after that?”

He remained silent.

“You thought I was calling you weak, so you flew into a rage. Then you declared that you were an Icewing: ‘the strongest tribe there is.’” She quoted. “And you kept mentioning ‘lazy Rainwings’. Do you realize how arrogant that sounds?”

“But it’s true!” Fir exclaimed passionately. “The Icewing tribe is the most sophisticated, advanced tribe on Pyrrhia. For thousands of years our society has been one of order, duty, and strength.”

Juniper looked unconvinced, so he switched to focusing on Rainwings. “Rainwings, on the other claw, are the complete opposite. They do nothing but laze around in the sun all day, eating fruit and living in trees and – ”

“*What did you say?*” Juniper growled, looking ready to jump out the hammock. “In case you haven’t noticed, *we* eat fruit. We live in trees. Are you calling us lazy?”

“I – I...” Fir backpedaled. “I didn’t mean it like that! I was just saying some of the things they did, that’s all.”

“Sure, sure,” she snarled, “you were just listing things we *coincidentally* happened to do too.”

Fir waved it away. “You don’t understand.”

Juniper interrupted him. “Yes, I do. How convenient it must be that my tribe does the same things those ‘lazy Rainwings’ do, the same things which make

them 'beneath' Icewings. You must think our ways are inferior. That would certainly explain your behavior to Sumac."

Fir had to uphold his tribe's ways. What he said to Sumac was necessary, and Juniper needed to understand that.

"I was protecting the honor of my tribe's traditions!" His voice rose.

"You reduced a dragonet to tears." Her voice remained calm.

"Sumac learned to respect raw food." Fir cooled his tone.

"Sumac learned to be traumatized!" Juniper burst out.

"I was showing him better ways of living!"

"So you admit it. You think our way of life is inferior, that *we* are inferior." Juniper shook her head. "By the trees, you're just like the Hivewings."

Something snapped in Fir.

"I am *nothing* like the Hivewings!" He exploded, standing up and throwing the chair. It hit the wall with a sharp clatter. "How DARE you compare me to them, to those *spawn* of Clearsight."

She rolled her eyes. "Three moons, again with Clearsight! Why do you hate her so much?"

"Because she—" Fir stopped. This was his last opportunity to prove Clearsight's evil to the only dragon willing to listen. He needed a careful explanation if we wanted any chance of success. He walked to where he'd thrown the chair and picked it up while Juniper watched warily. Fir set it next to her and slowly sat down.

"To understand Clearsight, you need to understand two things about her." He began. "The first is that she was a Nightwing."

"A Nightwing..." Juniper repeated thoughtfully. "I assume you don't like them."

“The moons will be eaten by snow monsters before I do.”

She rested her head on her claws, listening intently. “Why?”

Fir took a deep breath. “Because they came for our magic.”

“Did you just say magic?”

“Yes.” Fir nodded to a skeptical Juniper. “We call it animus magic, and those who wield it are known as animus dragons. They can enchant anything to do whatever one pleases, at the cost of their soul.” He gestured to his heart at the last part.

“For thousands of years our tribe wielded animus magic, using it to enrich our tribe through the form of ‘gifts’. They included the gift of subsistence, providing free food so that no one goes hungry.”

“That sounds wonderful.” She agreed.

“Exactly!” Fir nodded. “But that’s not all. There’s the gift of splendor too, which built the grandest palace to have ever existed! Imagine the Elder’s treehouse but a thousand times larger – *that’s* how majestic the gift made our palace.”

“Have you seen any other palaces to compare yours with?” Juniper questioned.

Fir stumbled. “Er, no – but that’s since the other tribes are dangerous. We had to defend against them, which was why one animus made the gift of defense, protecting us from hostile foreign dragons.” He looked at the door. “Juniper, imagine if your tribe had something like that. You’d be safe from Wasp forever.”

“Maybe.” She wistfully conceded. “But what do Nightwings have to do with this?”

“They stole our magic.” Fir spat. Seeing Juniper’s confused face he sighed.

“Animus magic is passed down through blood.” He explained. “Knowing this we bred our animus dragons into the royal line, so that our wise queens could use the power responsibly.”

“What if a queen isn’t wise? Wouldn’t that be a problem?” Juniper piped up.

Fir brushed past her question. “Thousands of years ago the youngest scion of that animus bloodline was Prince Arctic, our beloved. He was days away from giving his gift to the tribe when the Nightwings came.” His talons clenched.

“Through deception and threats they stole Prince Arctic away from his rightful home, taking our animus magic with them in one cunning stroke. Never again would our tribe be blessed with gifts, all because of the Nightwings ”

“Was Clearsight the one who stole Prince Arctic?” Juniper asked.

“No, but that doesn’t matter in the slightest.” Fir attested. “The whole tribe showed their true colors that day. Yet Clearsight had a second sin, one that set her further apart from her tribe.”

Fir swallowed. “Clearsight was the consort to *Darkstalker*.”

Juniper’s reaction couldn’t have been more stale. “Who?”

At that moment Fir realized he could never be a teacher. Explaining it all to her was getting frustrating.

“Darkstalker,” he answered, “was the most evil dragon to have ever hatched. Don’t ever let anyone tell you otherwise.”

“Considering no one else on Pantala knows who he is, I don’t think anyone will.” Juniper quipped.

Fir continued his lecture. “He was the son of Prince Arctic and Foeslayer, the accursed Nightwing who seduced him in the first place. Darkstalker was an animus too, and he used that magic to *kill* his father, our prince.”

“But...why?” Juniper slowly asked.

“Because Darkstalker hated Icewings, along with the rest of his tribe.” He sneered. “And he used his magic to kill hundreds. Every night under a full moon he’d kill an innocent Icewing, and write threats that he’d slaughter us all using the victim’s *own blood*.”

Juniper stared back at him with horrified eyes. “That’s... a lot to take in.”

He softly responded. “I know you Leafwings value the lives of trees as if they were your own. The night the Hivewings caught you, I saw the pain and fear in your eyes after seeing that cut sapling. Can you imagine feeling that every night, knowing there’s nothing you could do to stop it? My tribe did, and we will never forget the dragon responsible.”

“That dragon wasn’t Clearsight.” Juniper protested. “You said yourself that Darkstalker was the killer.”

“But who stood by him the whole time?” Fir retorted. “Who supported him? Who served him? Who *loved* him? Clearsight, that’s who! And before she used her power in Pantala, she used them to kill countless Icewings during the war we waged to save Prince Arctic.”

“I said it before and I’ll say it again. Clearsight is not the dragon who you think she is.” He extended a claw to her. “Trust me. Please.”

Juniper was silent for a long time.

“We have tales too, you know.” She finally whispered. Fir’s claw remained hanging. “When Mother said you read them I was surprised. I thought they’d have an impact on you, but I was wrong.”

“What do you mean?” Fir growled. He pulled his talons back.

“We also have stories about Clearsight.” She repeated. “Your tribe isn’t the only one.”

Before he could say anything Juniper continued. "Fir, I believe you. Animus magic, Darkstalker, Arctic – all of it, because I trust your tribe's stories. Because I trust you."

She put up her claw. "What I ask is that you do the same for me, and listen to what *we* have to say about Clearsight. Everything Elder Rowan said about her is true. She averted wars, protected the tribes, and through her book, preserves our future to this day."

"The Book of Clearsight wants your tribe to be ruled by *Wasp* – by *her* descendants!" Fir's exasperation bled into his voice. "That was all part of her plan, don't you see?"

Juniper's claw stiffened into an accusing point. "Do you realize how insane you sound? A dragon saves countless lives and you think she's evil?"

"Yes!" Fir cried. "Because she's a *Nightwing*, and Icewing stories say they're evil!"

"Leafwing stories say at least one of them is good." Juniper's wings drooped. "But you don't care about what we have to say, because you think you're better than us. And even after all that's been said you still haven't told me why."

"I don't need to tell you anything." He seethed. "Why do you care so much anyway?"

"Because it'll kill you!" Juniper swung herself out the hammock, sitting on its edge. "You almost died in the fire because you thought you could handle it, and I bet you flew in that storm thinking you were 'superior' enough to fly against it. Let me guess: trying to go back to Pyrrhia where no Leafwing could?"

Fir flinched. She was spot on. "That's rich, coming from you." He countered.

"Excuse me?" Her voice chilled.

Fir crossed his arms. "In the forest you can fly faster than any Hivewing. So how in the world did they catch you – in fact, why were you there in the first place?"

Juniper bristled. "I was collecting evidence that they were near Willowwood. When they arrived I... quickly attacked them before fleeing."

"That plan must've worked wonderfully." He let the sarcasm drip through his teeth.

"Don't mock me, that's what a hero would've done!"

"Oh ho ho! You're a hero now!" Fir laughed. "Yet you say I'm the arrogant one."

"Fir you–"

"No. You've said enough. Now it's my turn to speak." He shot her down.

"You say I think I'm better than everyone else, and that it's putting me in danger." He swung a talon at Juniper. "But look at you! You think you're a hero, that you're above the rest of the village. I bet you went to the clearing alone and attacked those Hivewings because you thought you could handle it."

Fir stepped closer so that he looked down on Juniper. She stared defiantly back. "We're the same, you and I. Everything you accuse me of applies to you as well."

"So you admit it." She whispered. "You think Icewings are better than Leafwings."

"You think you're better than them too." He narrowed his eyes. "Hypocrite."

"Get. Out." She hissed.

"With pleasure." Fir stiffly turned. Before he could reach the door it opened.

“Ah, hello Fir.” Elder Rowan walked in, Cypress close behind. “Checking up on Juniper, aren’t you? You look–” he paused, reading the expressions on their faces.

“Oh...” he quietly muttered. “Something here is amiss, isn’t it?” Their silence gave the Elder his answer.

“What’s wrong?” Juniper’s mother called from behind the Elder. “Does Juniper need new bandages?”

“Not at all.” The Elder calmly answered. “Cypress, please wait outside for a moment.”

“What? Why?”

“Don’t worry, it won’t be for long.” He gave her a reassuring smile. “I promise.”

Elder Rowan closed the door behind him. “Juniper. Fir. From the looks on your faces you need to talk, and I think I can help.”

“We’ve already done that.” Juniper miffed. What she wanted was for Fir to leave. After everything she did for him, he thought her whole tribe was beneath him! How in the trees could a dragon be like this?

Worse, he said she was just like him. The idea made her shudder. She wasn’t like him at all!

Or am I?

No, no, no. Juniper quashed the thought. Fir was wrong. Wrong about Clearsight, wrong about Leafwings, and wrong about her.

Elder Rowan stood in between her and Fir. “Not long ago you two fought three Hivewings together. That’s no small feat, yet now you both glare at each other like enemies. Why?”

“Three moons.” Fir growled. “You’re almost as nosey as Juniper.”

“I told you to get ou–”

“Perhaps I am.” The Elder’s voice carried through the room. “And what was it that Juniper tried to uncover?”

“He thinks his tribe’s better than us, that *he* is better than us.” She fumed.

“You cast doubt on the teachings of my tribe. It’s insulting.” Came the crisp reply.

“I assume Clearsight is the subject of those teachings?”

“Of course.” Fir haughtily sniffed. “Clearsight is an enemy of the tribe, and will stop at nothing to see the Icewings ruined.” Juniper felt her tail lash out of the hammock.

“Tell me how she would do that.”

What?

Fir looked at the Elder with shock. He looked back with complete sincerity. “Huh?” He echoed, reflecting her own confusion.

What is Elder Rowan doing? Why isn’t he arguing against Fir like he did before?

“Tell me how Clearsight would harm Icewings.” He repeated. “Tell me what your tribe says about her.”

For a few seconds Fir stared, mouth opening and closing before forming into a smile. “Glad to see *someone* is open to reason.” He preened.

Juniper had to stop this. “Elder Rowan, what in the trees are you saying?”

“What must be said.” He responded. “Go on Fir, I’m listening.”

“Well,” the Icewing enthusiastically began, “Clearsight was the closest ally and lover of Darkstalker, the most reviled dragon in the history of Pyrrhia. She helped him as he terrorized our tribe – it’s a long story.”

“I believe you. Go on.” Came the Elder’s reply.

“Um...” Fir faltered, not expecting such a positive reaction. Considering what had happened last time they spoke, Juniper didn’t blame him.

“Er... Her biggest threat lay in her power to see the future. She used it to give the Nightwings an advantage over us in the war we fought to save our prince – again, it’s a long story.”

The Elder nodded. “Fascinating. What happened to her?”

Fir fidgeted. “We... thought she died. After Darkstalker was stopped, Clearsight disappeared. No one ever saw her again.”

“Fir, is that what you think happened to Clearsight?” The Elder asked.

He remained silent for a long time before answering. “No.”

“Do you agree that she instead went to Pantala and created a legacy that lasts to this day, as told by Leafwing history?”

“...Yes.” Fir suddenly lashed out. “But that doesn’t change what Clearsight did to my tribe! Icewing history is true – all of it!”

“If Clearsight hated Icewings that much, why didn’t she tell us about your tribe?”

On hearing that question Juniper saw Fir freeze as if the gears in his mind became clogged with honey. The only other time she’d seen him look so stunned was when she’d first welcomed him to Pantala.

Elder Rowan started to walk in a circle around Fir. “Do you remember when we first met? I called you a threat and a danger to our tribe *not* because you were an Icewing, but because I thought you were related to the Hivewings.”

His tail pointed at her. “The first time I ever even heard the word ‘Icewing’ was from Juniper, the day she told me about you. Do you believe me?”

Fir nodded slightly, mouth remaining shut.

“After our argument the night of my announcement I retired to the library in my treehouse, intent on searching for something – *anything* – Clearsight might’ve said about Icewings.” Elder Rowan shook his head. “But in the end I found nothing.”

The Elder stopped right in front of Fir.

“You say Clearsight hated all Icewings. That means she should've passed on that hatred to Pantala and turned the whole continent against your tribe. Yet she didn't. Is that the action of a dragon who hates you, or a dragon who doesn't?”

“Clearsight helped kill hundreds of Icewings.” Fir whispered. “Of course she hates us.”

“She was protecting her tribe, as was I when I ordered your capture. But I came to regret my actions, and changed because of it. Clearsight could've too. You can as well.”

Fir put his head down, glaring daggers at the floor. “Never. I can't – I won't – abandon my tribe like that no matter what you say. I'm stronger than that! I'm stronger!” His talons began to shake.

Elder Rowan put a wing on his shoulder. “Accepting what other tribes have to say doesn't mean you've abandoned your own. Nor is it a weakness – it's a strength. Had I not believed Juniper, had I not ‘abandoned’ my beliefs, you would've lost your life. Was what I did a weakness?”

Fir shook his head. The Elder continued.

“Superiority is a shield. It protects against the unfamiliar by convincing us we’re better, so that we can overcome it. But the unfamiliar isn’t always something to be defeated. Our tribe possesses countless centuries of stories, traditions, and ideas just as unique as yours. All I ask is that you open your heart and mind to what we Leafwings have to offer. Can you do that, Fir?”

With that he finished, letting silence fill the room. Juniper watched Fir, seeing what he would do next. The Icewing’s eyes remained downcast, tail tapping next to his talons. After a long minute he looked up, meeting her eyes with a small nod before turning to the Elder.

“..Yes. I – I think I can do that.”

Elder Rowan sighed in relief. Juniper let a huge smile break through.

“Thank you for putting your trust in our tribe.” He extended a claw and Fir shook it. “Tomorrow evening our New Year of the Trees festival will take place. I encourage you to participate.”

“I’ll consider it.” Fir said. “Though I admit I know nothing about the festival.”

Juniper leapt from her hammock. “Don’t worry! Azalea and I can tell you all about what we do. Music, dancing, scale painting, we’ll help you!” She promised.

“On the matter of help,” Elder Rowan turned around, “we need to talk as well, Juniper.”

The Elder wanted to speak with her? About what? “But why?” She backed away as he approached. “What did I do?”

“It’s not about what you did,” he sharply answered, “it’s about what you *didn’t* do. Why didn’t you tell anyone about the Hivewings?”

Juniper wrapped her wings around herself. She didn’t want to talk about it.

Sensing this, Fir walked next to her. "It's okay Juniper." He twined his tail with hers. She leaned into it.

"I... wanted to be a hero, and I thought that was what a hero would do; take on burdens so that others wouldn't have to. I didn't want Azalea or Mother or anyone else to be as worried as I was."

"I can assure you that they were." Elder Rowan crossed his wings. "Azalea was a panicked mess when she came demanding we search for you. The only dragon more afraid than her was your mother. Do you realize how scared she was? The only time I saw that much pain on her face was when your father passed away."

"You don't have to remind me!" Juniper snapped. I saw the worry on Mother's face too! I was trying to be strong for her, that's all!"

The Elder chuckled. "You and Fir are more alike than you think, both trying to be strong in your own way. I've already told him, so let me tell you: working with others is not a weakness."

He pointed to himself. "Believe me, Juniper, when I say you've done so much for our village. You found and befriended Fir, defending him when everyone – when I – saw only danger. Your actions led to our village being saved, and it was you who discovered the presence of Hivewings so close to home."

She blushed under the praise. From the corner of her eye she could see Fir grinning.

"You accomplished so much because you had dragons by your side to help. To push them away is foolishness, you know this."

Juniper thought back to Mother, and the hole she filled in her heart. To Azalea, who helped her reach the cells when all seemed lost. To Fir, who stopped the fire and fought the Hivewings, both times risking death.

Risking death... for me.

“You’re right, Elder Rowan.” She humbly nodded. “Somewhere these past few days I must’ve forgotten, forgive me.”

“You are forgiven. Everyone makes mistakes.” He walked to the door and opened it. “Cypress, you can come in now.”

“Finally!” Mother exclaimed, hurrying inside. “What were you three talking about?”

“Nothing much.” Juniper shrugged, shooting a quick wink at Fir. He returned it, trying very hard not to giggle. Mother looked at him with a concerned expression.

“Just a reminder on what it means to be strong.”

Chapter 19 – 3344

For all their talk about strength, it was clear to Fir (and everyone) that Juniper still needed to rest. Cypress announced as much the moment she came in, much to her daughter’s disagreement. Fir stood on the sidelines as the two argued.

“But Mother–” She whined.

Cypress sharply cut her off. “Don’t ‘but mother’ me, Juniper!” “You need time to heal.”

“Why can’t I recover outside the pavilion?”

“Because I am your healer and your mother. You will stay here until tomorrow. My word is final.” She took a bandage roll from a nearby shelf. “Now let me wrap this around your snout.”

“Yes, Mother.” Juniper surrendered, sitting back down on her hammock. Fir gave her a pitying look. He lay on the chair and curled around it, making himself comfortable.

“I can keep you company – it’s not like I have any other plans.”

She simpered. “Thanks Fir.”

Only a few minutes ago he’d called Juniper a hypocrite. Now he scooted his chair closer to her hammock until their wings almost brushed.

The dragon who made that happen spoke near the door. “That’s quite convenient. With both of you here I’d like to ask what exactly happened that night at the clearing.”

Fir felt Juniper stiffen beside him as she sunk deeper into the hammock. Considering what she went through, he understood why.

“I’ll tell you.” Fir took the lead. “It began after I crash landed when trying to fly through the storm...” He started with how he arrived at the clearing, traveling through the forest until stumbling upon it. Reluctantly he continued to describing what he saw the Hivewings do to Juniper.

But should he go into detail? He quickly became uncomfortable under the expectant eyes of Cypress and the Elder. Would Juniper be okay with what he said?

As if sensing his doubt she spoke up. “I’ll take it from here.” Grimacing, Juniper recounted what had happened to her, holding nothing back. Cypress’s breath caught in her throat while Elder Rowan looked on with genuine sadness.

After such a depressing account Fir had to admit it was cathartic describing the fight that happened. Once he finished the story he could’ve sworn that the Leafwings looked at him – and Juniper – with more respect than before.

“I must admit, that was certainly a lot to take in.” The Elder whistled softly. “If you don’t want me to, I won’t spread the story. But I suspect Azalea had already done that for me.”

“She most definitely has.” Juniper confirmed.

With their story told, Elder Rowan left shortly after. Cypress followed, though not before (tightly) hugging Juniper. He watched them with slight envy.

As she left Cypress closed the door behind her, leaving him and Juniper alone.

“You feeling alright?” He asked. “Talking about what happened to you must’ve been difficult.”

“It was.” She admitted, wrapping her tail around herself. “But funnily enough, the more I spoke the less it hurt.”

“Juniper, listen. I’m... sorry I called you a hypocrite.” Fir looked away. “I shouldn’t have been so defensive. Not to you, not to Sumac, not to anyone.”

“And I shouldn’t have called you arrogant.”

“But I was. You weren’t imagining my sense of superiority.”

A beam of light reflecting through the room’s window, casting sunlight over Juniper’s face. “You were speaking the truth about me too. I just didn’t realize it.”

The light shrunk, creeping onto Fir. “We were both right about each other, then.”

“I think we were.” Juniper’s wing brushed over his back. He carefully flattened his spines as it passed.

“If you don’t mind, could you tell me more about Clearsight? I want to know more about what you Leafwings think of her.” He confessed.

“Promise you’ll listen?”

“I promise.”

Juniper gave a satisfied smile. “Then I’d be delighted to tell you.” Fir rested his head on his talons and listened as she began to narrate things he never heard nor believed. Both became less true as the hours passed.

Eventually Juniper became too tired to talk, and Fir grew too drowsy to move back to his room. He slept on the floor, not minding it one bit. Waking up the next with a yawn, he stretched his joints and saw Juniper stirring from her sleep as well.

“Rise and shine Juniper!” He stood up.

“What for?” She flopped to the side, throwing a wing over her face to block out the light.

Fir inhaled, unfurling the plan he conceived the day before. “I want to talk to Sumac, and I want you to come with me.”

That got Juniper’s attention. “You want to apologize to him?”

“Yes. I was thinking about it last night and – it’s the least I could do.”

“That’s wonderful!” She leapt from her hammock.

“Thanks, I think it will be *aaaAH!*” He yelped as Juniper suddenly took him by the talons and pulled him to the door.

“Let’s go!” She bounced out the entrance and took flight, soaring to the leaf roof. Fir followed close behind, glad for her enthusiasm.

They emerged through the roof to a familiar view and dived down into the branches. Fir ducked and weaved, mimicking Juniper's flying with an accuracy that startled him. He flew into two branches before they spiraled and landed onto a walkway.

Any déjà vu Fir felt from the last morning they did this disappeared under the mood of the villagers around them. Before, they looked at him with awe and Juniper with mild interest. Now it was Juniper who was the object of admiration while Fir received more mixed looks. News of how he spoke about Clearsight must have spread throughout the village, as did Juniper's efforts against the Hivewings (no doubt the work of Azalea).

"It's those two."

"About the Icewing... did you hear what he said about Clearsight?"

"Never mind that. Did you hear about how Juniper found the Hivewings and defeated them?"

"I heard the Icewing helped too."

"She was the one who found them. I heard she bravely stood her ground even when outnumbered!"

"Ooooooh." A chorus of voices went up as Juniper ducked her head. Though she was in front of him Fir was sure she was blushing. Her embarrassment didn't deter the crowd who began a bombardment of questions.

"Juniper, when did you first discover the Hivewings?"

"What's it like fighting them?"

"I heard they had stingers on every arm and tail – was it scary?"

He remembered Juniper's discomfort the last time she talked about it, and that was only with Cypress, Elder Rowan, and him. Out here must be a hundred times worse. Slowly her steps faltered, stopping entirely under the

surging crowd. As Juniper wrapped her wings around herself Fir flared his own, stiffening his spines.

“Hey!” He stood side-by-side with Juniper.

“Ask later! Juniper just got out of recovery – this is too much!” He quoted what she’d said a few days ago. Juniper recognized it and gave him a small grin.

“This again?”

“I swear I heard this before.”

“I guess we’ll have to ask Azalea for a retelling.”

“She’s going to love it...”

The wave of Leafwings dispersed as many continued on their way. Juniper visibly relaxed.

“By the trees, I hope I don’t have to go through that again.” She started walking once more, Fir matching her stride.

“You won’t. Not with a big scary Icewing next to you.” He joked. Juniper whacked him with a wing and chuckled.

“Sure, and I’m a Silkwing!”

Fir remembered the news of the tribe bowing to Wasp and fell quiet. Juniper looked regretful too, not saying a word either. The two walked in awkward silence until reaching the Clover Cafe. He could see the passageway leading deeper into the tree,

“So, ” she started, “feeling worried?”

“A little anxious, yes.” He admitted, moving past empty chairs.

“I’ll wait out here while you go in.” Juniper sat down. “Good luck.”

I'll need it. Fir nodded to her and stopped in front of the passage. Darkness filled the hallway as if spilling out from the tree it was carved into. He readied himself one last time and stepped inside.

Even with his sharp eyesight Fir could barely make out the path ahead. On the sides he could see outlines of nooks and ledges holding lamps, though they'd long since extinguished. It all sent creepy shudders down his tail, which was the last thing he wanted to be feeling.

As Fir progressed further he heard faint chopping sounds coming from ahead, punctuated by occasional clinking. He took another step and all at once the darkness dissipated.

To his left Fir saw three doors, each leading to separate rooms. Two of them were slightly ajar and adorned with flowers that seemed to pop out of the bark itself. The third remained shut and bare.

Straight ahead was a round window letting light spill through onto what looked like a living room. A sprawling bright green carpet lay underneath soft-looking cushions, creating a very homely atmosphere.

Fir turned to the right and saw –

He froze.

Sumac, carrying a stack of plates, stared back at him with shock – and a clear tinge of fear. Guilt squeezed Fir tightly with its talons.

The dragonet's eyes widened before he stumbled backwards, plates dropping to the floor with clatter. He backed up until he hit a stool, tail wrapping around it.

“Sumac? What happened?” Fir looked up and saw a spacious kitchen laying beyond a counter. It was covered with various pots and pans full of food.

“Son? Are you alright?.” The voice – Tupelo's voice – grew louder from behind a wall.

“Did you drop some–“ The Leafwing appeared next to the wall and froze immediately at the sight of Fir.

“You.” He hissed.

“Greeting Tupelo.” Fir respectfully began. “I–”

“Dad!” Sumac squeaked.

Tupelo moved like lightning. “Get away from my son!” He roared, throwing himself protectively in front of his dragonet. The window’s light from behind cast a sudden halo around his body. It obscured his face and set his wings flickering with white-hot glow. Tupelo splayed them out, his newfound wings of fire making Fir reflexively step back. The darkness of the hallway welled into the corners of his vision.

“Wait!” He pleaded. “I just want to–”

Tupelo cut him off with a growl. “I don’t care what you want! You are not welcome here. I suggest you leave now, before I grab a pan and–”

“I want to apologize!” Fir yelled. Tupelo’s words died on his tongue as he looked at him with confusion.

“I just want to apologize.” Fir repeated quietly. He took a tentative step forward.

“Stay where you are.” Tupelo dug his talons into the wood floor.

He stopped. “Sumac. You have every reason to be afraid of me. I save you one day, then the next I imply you should’ve been killed? Nothing justifies that. Nothing.”

What are you doing Fir? He took a step back, then another. Tupelo remained unmoved by his words while Sumac remained hidden and silent behind him.

A voice slithered into his ears, creeping from where the shadows of the hallway lay. They beckoned to him. *The dragonet insulted your tribe. Icewing honor must be maintained – but it's melting away with your groveling! Leave and show no weakness! Insults deserve punishment! He had to be punished!*

At that moment the light from behind Tupelo shone onto Fir, hitting his scales and bursting into a dazzling glimmer. For a brief moment the hallway lit up with light – his light.

By that logic, I should be punished. Fir didn't forget the choice insults he lobbed at Clearsight the night of Elder Rowan's announcement. He'd insulted the Leafwing tribe's heroine. He'd cracked their honor with the bite of his words. He should have faced retribution.

But none came.

Juniper wished to understand him, only lashing out because he did so first. Meanwhile the Elder swayed him using patience that Fir mistook for weakness. He understood now. True weakness meant turning tail and leaving. What would true strength be?

Fir marched up to Tupelo until the halo dissipated, revealing a face torn between hostility and fear. Like father, like son. Both had the same source which stared face to face with the older Leafwing.

Before Tupelo could react, that source dropped to the ground in the deepest bow of Fir's life. He bent his elbows and knees until wood grazed his belly, setting his tail ramrod straight along the floor. He tucked his wings to the side, bared his neck, and spoke.

"Tupelo. Sumac. I, Fir of the Icewings, humbly apologize for the words I said to you, and for the pain I've caused because of it." Confession said, he held his breath.

A long minute fit snugly into the ensuing silence. Fir kept his gaze down, fixing it on Leafwing's talons. For the moment they remained still.

Suddenly he spotted movement behind Tupelo's wings, a small shadow flickering to and fro. It emerged from underneath to reveal Sumac. Though his wariness still remained, the fear in his eyes had been replaced with curiosity.

"Why?" The dragonet whispered, hiding behind Tupelo's leg. "Why were you so mean to me?"

Fir lowered himself further until his eyes were on the same level as Sumac. "Because I was an arrogant idiot, one who thought an attack on raw food was an attack on my whole tribe." He shakily exhaled. "One who thought he could do no wrong."

Slowly, Sumac crept out of his hiding place. A shuffle from above indicated Tupelo's watchful gaze. The dragonet came closer, placing his front talons on his snout. He sucked in his breath to stop loose frostbreath from escaping.

"Did you mean what you said? That you w-w-" Sumac choked. "That you wished I'd fallen into the fire?" He asked, looking ready to cry.

Never.

"Not one bit, Sumac." Fir softly answered. "The moons will fall out of the sky before I mean it." As evidence he gently brushed him with his snout, nuzzling the sniffing dragonet. "Don't ever think I meant what I said then. Not now, not ever. I don't regret saving you in the slightest. And if you were to fall into another fire," He brought a claw forward to pat Sumac's head.

"I would gladly dive into it for you again."

Sumac's eyes shined, and Fir's heart skipped a beat. The dragonet leapt on top of him, wrapping around his face in an ecstatic hug.

"I knew it I knew it I knew it!" He squealed. "I *knew* you couldn't be a meanie!"

"Hey, watch it!" Fir playfully shook his head as Sumac hung on, laughing.

A set of claws descending from above, gently holding Sumac and pulling him away. Fir looked up to see Tupelo cradling his still giggling son.

“Fir?” The tone of his words softened. “Stand up please.”

He obliged, unfurling his wings as he did so. Some of the window light reflected onto them, white and green filtered light filling the room. Fir thought the combination looked quite beautiful.

Tupelo spoke again. “Juniper told me a misplaced sense of pride caused you to act the way you did to my son.”

“Yes, it did.”

“That dragon knows you too well, eh?” He wryly smiled, Sumac copying the expression.

Spirits underneath the ice, please tell me I’m not blushing. Fir prayed.

“But not well enough. I have yet to see that pride within you. Unless...”
Tupelo grinned, “Juniper also helped you lose it?”

“She did.”

“Ooooooh! I know why!” Sumac chirped. “It’s because they’re in love! Fir and Juniper sitting in a tree, K-I-S-*mph!*”

In a flash Fir put a talon over Sumac’s mouth. “That will be enough of that.” He curtly told him.

“My lips are sealed.” The dragonet promised, pushing Fir’s talon away. “On one condition.” He preened, confident in his power. Tupelo watched on with amusement.

Great Ice Dragon, please find a way to get me out of this. “Name your price.” He braced himself.

Sumac pointed to a small pot on the counter. “You have to eat some roasted pig!”

“..What?”

“We’ve been cooking a lot of food for the upcoming festival.” Tupelo explained. “Don’t worry, we can spare some for you.”

“Last time you ate raw pig.” Sumac accused. “So now, I want you to eat one cooked.”

Fir squirmed. “Erm, not thanks. I already ate.” On cue, his stomach growled. *Great. Just great.*

Sumac tried his hardest not to giggle. “No you didn’t. Anyways: Fir and Juniper–” He returned to singing.

“Stop it!” Fir wrung his talons.

“I’ll sing it to the whole village.” The dragonet stuck out his tongue.

“Fine, fine.” Fir grumbled, walking to the counter. “I’ll try it.” The food in question consisted of a series of cut pinkish-red strips stacked within a sturdy wooden pot. Reaching inside he took a slice, sniffing cautiously.

“Come on Fir!” Sumac heckled. “Eat it!”

Here goes nothing. Fir bit off a quarter of the slice and chewed.

The last new food he tried were the dragonberries Juniper gave him the first day he woke up. Alongside prey caught from his (rapidly improving) claw fishing skills, he’d kept himself well-fed on Pantala. Those raw dragonberries had completely shattered his expectations of food during his introduction to the new continent.

The roasted pig slice did not shatter such expectations. But it still tasted good.

“Hm.” Fir swallowed. “Not bad.” The food left a smoky aftertaste in his throat, one too similar to smoke. Despite that the taste was unique, comfortably soothing his hunger. With plenty of cold water to wash it down, he could see himself enjoying the meal every day.

Fir’s stomach growled again, reminding him not to be picky. He finished the rest of the slice in another bite before reaching for another.

“Not bad, hmm?” Sumac crowed. “I told you cooked food was better.”

“Let’s agree to disagree.” Fir ruffled the dragonet’s head. “But thank you for the food, and for forgiving me.” He turned to the hallway.

“Take the pot with you, and leave it on a table once you finish.” Tupelo returned to the kitchen. “I assume Juniper is as hungry as you.”

“Bye Fir! See you at the festival!” Sumac waved. Fir stepped into the hallway, looking back one last time before leaving.

“Since you’re carrying food, I’m guessing Sumac forgave you.” Juniper eyed the pot with interest, licking her lips.

“Thankfully yes. Dig in.” He held out the pot. Juniper grabbed a slice and downed it in one gulp. Fir slowly took another one as well, causing her to stop and stare.

“I thought you liked your food raw.” She said in between bites.

Fir chewed into a slice. “I do. But that doesn’t mean I can’t enjoy cooked meals as well.” He licked his teeth clean. “How much food will the festival have?”

“Lots, don’t worry.” Juniper promised. “Everyone in Willowwood cooks something for the New Year of the Trees. Mother and I are cooking truffle

soup, though I still have to... find truffles." She rubbed the back of neck, abashed.

"Couldn't find any yet?"

"I got sidetracked with Hivewings."

"I almost forgot." Fir looked down and saw the pot had been picked clean. At least his stomach didn't rumble anymore. "Well if you're getting food for the festival, I suppose I should too. I'll catch some fish and bring them back for you to cook. How does that sound?"

"Ooh, fish and truffle soup." Juniper murmured thoughtfully. "Sounds like a plan. Meet me at Aspen's shop in the trader's circle when the sun is at its highest."

"Whose shop?"

"The one between three trees. You covered it with frostbreath during the fire."

Fir nodded, remembering the event. He placed the empty pot on a nearby table and took flight. "Then see you soon, Juniper!"

"See you!" She called.

Fir looked back at her too before wheeling towards the sky. He glimpsed the coast in the distance, then faltered. The morning sun already blazed hot, blistering his arctic scales. So he skimmed just beneath the canopy, between the sky and forest.

Chapter 20 – 3997

For the second time that week Juniper went to borrow a spade. Her descent through the forest let her admire the preparations being set up.

Out of all the Leafwing tribe's festivals, the New Year of the Trees was by far the largest. With origins so old they've long been forgotten, the celebration centered on the vast forests of Pantala from the smallest sapling to the largest willow. To honor the trees was to honor the forests, and to honor the forests was to honor Pantala.

In practical terms this meant decorating the village willows from top to bottom. Juniper saw plenty of that being done by dragons busily hanging streamers and lamps, wrapping around the trunks as they went on higher and higher. After days of preparation only the highest branches remained uncovered. More villagers flew to fix that, coming from below with crates full of ornaments.

It didn't take long for Juniper to arrive at the source of all those supplies. With festival preparations laid on top of existing rebuilding, the trader's circle buzzed with activity. Leafwings packed flags, pennants, and banderoles with frenetic pace before rocketing skywards, their wingbeats permeating the air alongside eager discussions about new decorations and designs.

One such discussion carried with it a familiar voice. Azalea's voice. Juniper found her just outside her shop, regaling a few wide-eyed dragonets.

"And then WHAMMO!" She raised her wings as her audience leapt back. "The spear hit the last Hivewing just in time, saving the day for Willowwood."

Juniper slowly clapped behind her. "Bravo. I couldn't have said it better myself."

She turned. "Juniper?" The dragonets behind her gasped.

"Afternoon Azalea. Just stopping by to borrow a spade. Need it to foraaah!" In a flash her friend had smacked her on the chin with a wing. As Juniper reeled, Azalea grabbed her by the horns.

“JUNIPER! You idiot!” The dragonet audience left quickly, scurrying back into the crowd.

“What in the trees were you thinking?” Azalea barked, shaking her until she stumbled. “Do you know how worried I was when you didn’t come back? I was terrified!”

“I know, I know. I’m sorry.” Juniper soothed. She received a whack from Azalea’s tail for her efforts.

“Sorry doesn’t cut it!”

“Azalea, I just got out from the healer’s pavilion. Can you please let go of me?”

With a strained huff her friend relented, stepping back before jerking a talon to the shop, the entrance tarp closed shut. “Inside. Now.”

Juniper wondered why the store’s entrance was closed. Going inside she understood why; it was a mess. Jars of insects and sap lay piled dangerously high on the shelves, creating a teetering labyrinth that looked one gust away from collapse. More goods remained strewn on the ground, collecting dust and dirt with every step as Azalea marched Juniper to the counter covered with tools.

Juniper had to know what was going on. “Azalea, what happened to the store?”

“It’s nothing. Nothing happened.” She hollowly answered.

“I’m not blind Azalea.” Juniper stopped. “I’ve never seen the shop like this. Tell me what happened!”

Azalea whirled around, eyes glistening. “I told you Juniper – it’s nothing! There’s nothing to talk about.” She curled her talons. “That’s what you lied to me about.”

“Where’s Aspen?” Juniper concernedly asked.

“He’s setting up decorations near the Elder’s treehouse. At least he tells me what he’s doing.” The venom in her words made Juniper flinch. “Why can’t you do the same?”

“Azalea I... I didn’t want you to feel worried.”

“Well you failed!” She burst out. “Ever since you didn’t come back after the Elder’s announcement I was so worried. First I went to your treehouse – but you weren’t there. There was only your mother, who was as anxious as I was.”

Azalea rummaged through the counter, throwing several tools off the side before picking up the spade Juniper had last borrowed. “Then the both of us went to the Elder’s treehouse to find you, but you weren’t there either. The dragons who remained said the announcement was about the Hivewings – *and that’s when I figured it out.*”

She jabbed a trembling talon at Juniper with her free claw. “Before the announcement, you stiffened up when I mentioned Hivewings. I didn’t think much of it then, but at the announcement I put it all together. You – the one who’d discovered a whole new dragon species– must’ve encountered something related to the Hivewings. Isn’t that right?”

Juniper carefully nodded, avoiding Azalea’s eyes. Instead she looked at the debris on the ground.

“Of course it is. We both suspected as much and it scared us to death that you were flying right into it. So we acted. I acted. Do you know how that search party was created in the first place? You know, the one that saved your *life*?”

“Elder Rowan told me you barged in and demanded he make one.” Juniper quietly answered.

“Oh, I barged in alright.” Azalea gave a stiff smile. “I slipped through the entrance and led the guards on a wild chase as I searched for Elder Rowan. He appeared out the library door just as I got caught, demanding to know what in the three moons was going on. So I told him, and you know what happened next.”

“Azalea, I...” Juniper didn’t know what to say. “I just want to–”

Azalea covered her ears. “Stop. Please, just stop.” She thrust the spade to Juniper then turned away. “You want this, right? Take it.”

Juniper left it in Azalea’s claws. “Why is this place so messy? You still haven’t told me why.”

She sighed. “Dad gave me permission to convert the store into a scale-painting booth for tonight. But then Hivewings happened and the whole tribe wanted to hear the story and – *aaargh!*” She slumped her head in her talons. “I have half a day left and all I’ve done is make more of a mess.”

Azalea tossed the spade to Juniper. “So here’s your thingy to forage for truffles, I know that’s why you came here. Go off on your own again if that’s what you want to do.” Her tail pointed to the entrance. “I’ll handle this alone.”

Late morning light bled through the tarp leading back outside, barely illuminating the inside of the store. It offered a meager dim gray lighting at best, as if suggesting Juniper go outside for more. She looked out to it, thinking of the things she could do: Forage truffles, meet Fir in the afternoon, and cook a scrumptious soup just in time for the festival!

A shuffling sound behind her made Juniper look back. It was Azalea, slinking farther along the counter in a halfhearted attempt at sorting through the mess. She said she could handle the work alone, but Juniper knew that wasn’t true.

“*To push them away is foolishness, you know this.*” That’s what Elder Rowan told her the evening before. Juniper was foolish once – she wouldn’t be so again.

She put the spade back on the counter. “Where should the tools go?”

Azalea looked confused. “What?”

“Where should I start? I can’t clean something up if I don’t know where to put it.”

As Azalea realized Juniper’s intention she narrowed her eyes. “You’re not cleaning anything up. I told you I’ll handle this alone.”

“Come on Azalea. Work with me?” Juniper pleaded.

She bristled. “No. Go away.”

In response Juniper plopped down on the floor, arms crossed defiantly. “Well I’m not going anywhere, so you might as well make me useful.”

Azalea didn’t respond, ignoring her while working alone. Juniper just sat and waited, tail tapping. Minutes ticked by as she watched Azalea, boredom not enough to budge her.

What did budge were the shadows dimming the store. The rising sun cast ever more light inside, pushing back the darkness shelf by shelf. It advanced past the entrance, through row after row until Juniper could feel its tingle on her back.

The light had the other effect of revealing how disorganized the shop truly was. Azalea kept her eyes locked on the counter, unwilling to be reminded of this fact. Juniper continued to wait.

“Tools go under the counter. The larger they are, the lower they’re placed.” Azalea finally whispered. Juniper grinned.

“Say no more!” She leapt up and vaulted over the counter, landing next to her friend.

“Hey! Careful!” Azalea jumped back. “Didn’t you say you just recovered from the healer’s pavilion??”

“I had plenty of time to heal.” Juniper began sorting through the items on the counter with gusto.

“Hm.” She dropped the question and joined in the sorting, buoyed by Juniper’s speed.

“So how will the painting booth be laid out?” Juniper asked, juggling two baskets.

“I want a clear space in the center, with paints and brushes on nearby shelves.” Azalea hefted a pitchfork and pruner. “But I don’t know where to put the existing goods. I guess I’ll have to sort it out.”

“I guess *we* will have to sort it out.” Juniper corrected.

Azalea gave a side-eye. “Is this your way of apologizing?”

“Maaybe.” She cleared the last of the clutter off the counter. “Azalea, I know how much you love to paint. This is the least I could do.”

Azalea didn’t answer, moving to the shelves and grabbing jars. “Our work here isn’t done yet, not with the shelves and floors like this.”

Juniper examined the store, now fully lit up. She envisioned the whole space as a basket, with each shelf like a jar. If she could stack items when foraging, she could help organize here.

“Wait,” She called. Azalea stopped and turned.

“Moving jars won’t solve anything.” Juniper explained. “Not while the floors are blocked. First we should take everything on the floor and put it on the counter, just to give us room to walk.”

Azalea put down the jars. “That sounds reasonable.”

A small part of Juniper wilted as the pristine counter became filled once again, but the cleaned paths between the shelves made it more than worthwhile.

Azalea dumped the last armload of goods. “It’s done. Now what?”

“Now, ” Juniper looked around, “we focus on moving only the shelves in the center after we empty them.”

“Brilliant plan.” She gestured to the precariously stacked items on the shelves. “If we try that a jar will surely fall and break. Dad’s going to have my head if that happens.”

Juniper paced, searching for another way. “I know!” She announced. “We move only the sap jars and keep the ones with insects on the shelves we move. That way we won’t have to lift the heaviest items.”

Azalea opened her mouth to protest, then closed. “Jars with sap *are* heavier than those with insects...” She muttered. “Your plan might work.”

“One of the many lessons learned as a forager.” Juniper declared, picking up the topmost jars. “That, along with knowing how to sort.”

“Are you implying I *don’t* know how to organize?” Azalea indignantly cried. “I grew up in this shop. I can do it way better than you!”

“Show me.” Juniper challenged. “First one to finish their half wins!” She raced to the edge, carrying two jars of heavy willow sap.

“You’re on!” Now it was Azalea’s turn to leap over the counter, running to the other half of the store.

With competition came speed, the two working like lightning to win. Juniper grabbed another two sap jars only to find Azalea holding twice that amount with her tail and wings.

“I think I’m catching up!” She catcalled.

“In your dreams!” Juniper redoubled her efforts.

With the sap jars stashed away it was time to move the shelves. Grabbing the bottom of one with both claws, she carefully (but still quickly) lifted it up. Juniper steadily stepped to the side, placing it down with a grunt. She looked

up and saw Azalea smugly looking at her, three of her shelves already moved out.

“How?” Juniper breathed.

“It’s called ‘pushing’. Azalea pantomimed with her claws. “You should try it sometime.”

“Why don’t you try winning? She shot back, pushing her next shelf with haste.

“I will, don’t you worry.”

Juniper shook her head and trained her eyes on the next space to slot the shelf in. With one last push she fitted it in, turning around for the last shelf and–

And saw Azalea finished with her side, smiling smugly. “Why don’t you try winning?” She parroted.

“I told you I’ll handle this alone.” Juniper mimicked back.

“Touché.” Azalea walked over and helped her move the last shelf. After that they cleaned up the counter again, resting on the top. “Now what?” She asked.

“You tell me.” Juniper spread her talons to the open space they’d made. “It’s your studio after all, not mine.”

“Well,” Azalea replied thoughtfully, “we need a stool, along with a spare mat to even the surface and catch any paint.” She rummaged through the counter, pulling them out before pointing to a shelf off to the side. “My paints are in there. Bring them to the counter.”

“No problem.” Juniper took them out and whistled. “By the trees, I never knew you had so many colors.”

“Too bad most won’t be used.” Azalea sighed.

“What do you mean?”

She laid out the mat, fussing with the corners. “Red, blue, purple, and pink. Those are the only colors that’ll be used.”

“What about orange or yellow?”

“Too much like Hivewings.” Azalea answered. “With all that’s happened it’ll never be used, alongside green, brown, white... So many unused colors. So much wasted potential!” She complained, drooping. “I just wish I could use them.”

Juniper looked up. Covered by the foliage of three willows she could just barely see the afternoon sun. Fir would be coming back by now.

She froze. *Fir. White. I have an idea.*

“Azalea?” She moved to the exit. “Stay here.”

“For what?”

“You’ll see.”

“Wait!” Juniper stopped as Azalea called. “Thank you. I mean it.”

“Don’t thank me yet.”

With that Juniper left, flying higher to find Fir. She didn’t have to search for long. He soared in from above with conspicuous silver-gray scales. In both claws he held bundles of wriggling fish, stopping next to Juniper when he saw her.

“Just as promised: fish.” He puffed out his chest.

“They smell.”

“They’re *delicious*. Here, take them.”

Juniper complied, holding out her talons as far as possible. “Yuck.”

“Yum, I know.” He corrected. “Are you going to cook them now?”

“Not yet. I have a favor to ask.”

Fir tilted his head. “What favor?”

Juniper jerked her head to Azalea’s store. “How would you like getting scale-painted by Azalea?”

“No, no, no, absolutely not.” Fir turned away. “My scales are fine the way they are, thank you very much.”

“Come on!” Juniper pestered. “There are so many colors that would match well with white: orange, yellow, brown...” Fir kept shaking his head.

She tried one last time. “What about green?”

Fir stopped shaking, thoughtfully considering her last question. “White and green, huh...” He began to nod his head. “You know what? I’ll do it. Lead the way.”

Yes! Juniper happily flew back to Azalea, Fir close behind.

“Behold!” She trumpeted, entering with a flourish.

Azalea stood up. “Juniper, what are you—” She stopped upon seeing Fir.

“Hey Azalea.” He greeted. “Juniper asked if I wanted to get my scales painted by you. He spread his wings. “I agreed.”

Azalea said nothing, mouth wide open in shock. Slowly she turned to Juniper, an overjoyed smile growing larger on her face.

Juniper did a little bow. “Now you can say thank you.”

“EEEEEE!!!” Azalea sprinted into the air and landed on Juniper, wrapping her in an ecstatic hug. “Thank you thank you thank you!”

“No, thank you.” Juniper patted her friend’s head. “You saved my life.”

“And mine.” Fir added, watching them amusedly.

“I-I don’t even know where to begin.” Azalea pushed Fir into the center space, where a stool and mirror had been set up. “Will your scales react with paint the same way? I never worked with white or gray before. This is so new... I love it!” She bounced with excitement.

“My work here is done.” Juniper picked up the fish knocked out of her talons. “I’ll bring these back home. I guess I’ll see you at the festival?”

“How come? It’s still the afternoon.” Fir sat down.

“Doesn’t matter.” Azalea brought out a bucket of water and a whole tray of brushes. “It’s going to take hours to experiment and find the right patterns – I can’t wait!”

Fir preened under her enthusiasm. “Leave some soup for me then, Juniper.”

Azalea grabbed a few bottles of paint, eyeing Fir with artistic intent.

“I will, don’t worry.” Juniper promised. Ingredients in claw she exited the shop, flying back home.

In a short time she arrived at the front door, faintly hearing the now familiar sounds of cooking. Inside Juniper found Mother chopping carrots next to a bowl of uncut onions.

“Good afternoon Junie!” Mother looked up. “Found those truffles yet?”

Juniper held out the fish. “Not quite.”

She gawked. “Since when did you learn to fish?”

“I didn’t. Fir did.”

“Did he?” Mother nodded thoughtfully, a faint smile forming. “Whatever would it mean?”

“What do you mean by that?” Juniper questioned, grabbing a knife to chop onions.

“Nothing at all.” She nonchalantly replied.

“Mother?” Juniper raised an eyebrow.

“We can use the onions and carrots to make a fish vegetable soup. We’ll need garlic for flavor – dice that after the onion. I’ll work on the fish.”

“Mother.” Juniper crossed her arms and curled her tail.

“What?” She innocently replied.

“You know what.” Juniper tapped her foot. “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

After a long pause Mother answered. “Junie, Fir clearly has feelings for you.”

“Do we have salt? I don’t think we have salt.” Juniper peeked into the closet. “We’ll need it for the soup. Why don’t I go out and get some?”

“The salt is right here.” Mother held up a wooden can.

“But we’ll need pepper too!”

“Also here.” Mother held up another can.

“Thank the trees!” Juniper clapped her talons. “For a moment I thought we ran out.”

“And you clearly have feelings for Fir.”

Three moons, please tell me I’m not blushing.

Sensing her embarrassment, Mother relented. "But that doesn't change the fact that we have soup to make. Finish cutting the garlic, chop chop!"

Juniper gladly went back to work, focusing on the food in front of her.

"You wouldn't want to be late for the festival after all." She continued. "Especially with all the things it has. Food, booths, singing, *dancing*." Mother bumped her side at that.

She shot her flustered look, onion almost slipping out of her talons.

"Ok, ok." Mother soothed. "I'll stop, I promise."

"Do you really think so?" Juniper quietly asked.

"Think what?"

"That he... that he has..."

Mother wrapped a wing around her. "Of course I do."

Juniper and Mother shared a warm look as they cooked side by side.

"And we're done!" Azalea stepped back, holding a paintbrush soaked in green and admiring her handiwork. Said handiwork sighed in relief.

"Finally." Fir stretched. "How long have I been standing still for?"

"A couple hours, give or take." Azalea tilted the mirror around and stepped back. He turned to look at his reflection. His eyes widened.

Fir saw himself decorated from tip to tail. Streaks of dark green paint, starting from his forehead, branched along his back before ending in leaf

spirals intricately traced within the outlines of single scales. More of the paint curled along his horns, wings, and arms, complementing his white scales at every location.

For his paler gray scales Azalea used a brighter green that worked just as well. The lighter paint started from his jaw and ran down his neck, chest, and sides, following the same designs of lines and spirals used up top.

By the spirits under the ice, I look like a tree dragon. Fir grinned. *And I love it.* Blue, white, purple, gray – and green. The list of respectable colors had grown.

“So, what do you think?” Azalea framed Fir with her talons.

Fir nodded approvingly. “I thought it’d be a disaster. You proved the opposite.”

“Think of it as thanks for saving the store.”

“I thought the search party returned that favor.”

“Eh.” She rolled her eyes. “I can say thank you twice.”

“And I can say it at least once. Thank you, Azalea. I look amazing.”

“I’m the best, I know.” Azalea lit a few lamps and placed them around the floor, compensating for the light the setting sun struggled to give. “Just be sure to mention who painted you. I can’t wait for customers.” She washed the brush, setting it on the counter.

In the distance, Fir could faintly hear music beginning to play. “The festival must be starting.” He walked to the entrance, exchanging goodbyes with Azalea before leaving through the tarp.

Outside a crowd bustled among the rest of the trader’s circle. They stopped and stared at him.

“Three moons, is that Fir the Icewing?” A Leafwing inquired.

He tipped his wings. "The one and only."

"Didn't you insult Clearsight?" Someone menacingly asked.

"But he fought those tree-cutting Hivewings!" Another countered.

The villagers began to argue among themselves until Fir spoke again. "It's true. I spoke harshly against Clearsight, then flew away in a rage." He stopped, his mind swirling between Icewing teachings and Leafwing stories.

"I have no love for Clearsight." The Leafwings grumbled at that. "But recently, my hate for her has lessened too. I don't know what to think of her anymore," he shrugged, "but I'm open to opinions."

The crowd went silent for a long moment.

"Enough about that!" A voice called out. "How'd you paint yourself so well?"

Fir jerked a talon to the shop he left. "Azalea's painting booth. All the credit goes to her. Try it yourselves!" With that he took flight, rising above the lights from all the booths in the trader's circle towards the music higher up. Before he could a dragon flew past him, then stopped suddenly.

"Fir?" The dragon turned around midair. It was Juniper, looking so shocked Fir thought she might fall out of the sky.

"Good evening Juniper. Azalea just finished painting me. Like what you see?" He flexed his wings.

"I... I..." She flustered, looking him up and down. "I do. A lot."

"Good to hear." Fir did a flip. "The festival is starting. What should we do?"

More Leafwings could be seen around them, streaming along brightly lit walkways and flying through decorated trees. Music and laughing could be heard all around them.

“We could buy trinkets from the booths.” Juniper suggested. “Then try all the food – including the fish soup we made. I made sure to cool it.” Fir smiled at that.

“Later we can stroll along the walkways and listen to music. They all lead to the dance platforms that last all night.”

“Plenty of time.” Fir and Juniper circled around the trader’s circle as they talked. “Will you be dancing?”

Juniper ducked lower. Fir thought he saw a blush forming on her. After a few seconds she flew back up to him with a determined expression.

“Everything all right?” He asked.

Juniper took a deep breath. “Fir? I have something to ask.”

“Ask away.” He coolly replied.

“Tonight, will you dance with me?”

Now it was Fir’s turn to almost fall out of the sky. How should he respond? What should he say? But something deep down eased his doubts, replacing it with a single answer.

Fir looked at her, holding her claws in his. “Juniper, it would be my pleasure.”

They both blushed, then smiled, then blushed some more. As the moons rose they shopped, ate, and listened to music side by side. Finally the two danced the night away together, as the moons and stars shined on from above.

Chapter 21 – 3266

The last time Cassava flew over the ocean the sky shimmered bright blue. The blanket of clouds overhead today had other ideas. But he was Willowwood's messenger, and a few clouds wouldn't stop him!

More than a few clouds, I must admit. He perched on a tree overlooking Dragonfly Bay and recalled his route.

Starting from the north beaches of Pantala's "knee", Cassava planned to fly west until reaching the mouths of the two rivers that fed into the bay. Once there he would follow the one flowing southwards until reaching Queen Sequoia's southern forest palace.

With his route refreshed Cassava took flight, soaring above the water. He positioned himself halfway between the forest and bay so that he could admire the ocean while being visually tethered to land.

Eyes flicking to the trees he sighed. Despite worrying stories of tree-cutting happening all over the continent, at least the ones here still stood. Queen Sequoia would make sure of that.

Cassava remembered attending the last meeting of the queens, quill and parchment ready to record. He recalled Queen Wasp's order to "unite the tribes", Queen Sequoia's fury at such a demand, and Queen Monarch's immediate submission of her tribe.

His shock at this turn of events was eclipsed only when he returned home where, after giving his report to Elder Rowan, he laid eyes on a dragon of a whole new tribe.

Fir – that was his name. An "Icewing" of gray and white, unlike anything he'd ever seen. First impressions were... sour, to say the least. The dragon had launched into a tirade against beloved Clearsight, much to his chagrin.

But apparently he helped stop a massive fire that threatened to destroy Willowwood, and fought a tree-cutting incursion alongside a fellow villager –

Juniper. The two had remained inseparable since the New Year of the Trees festival a few days ago.

Cassava's pouch thumped against his chest. He cradled it, feeling the letter inside. Its message told of all that had happened at Willowwood, and was to be delivered to Queen Sequoia as soon as possible.

Uncertain times loomed ahead for Pantala, and unease settled all over his scales. But he had hope. Hope in Queen Sequoia's fierceness. Hope in Elder Rowan's wisdom. And hope in Juniper and Fir's exploits. If they couldn't keep Willowwood safe, who could?

He left his question unanswered, gaining altitude in the air. All this worrying would turn his scales gray.

On the topic of gray...

Cassava rolled over to look at the clouds above. They seemed to be dissipating, letting light finally shine through. Something bright hit his eye, causing him to cover his face with a claw. Once it passed he looked back up at the yellow and red sun.

But the sun wasn't supposed to be red. Not at this time of day.

Cassava blinked, squinting his eyes until more features could be made out. The "sun" looked like a dragon, with a tail and...

His eyes widened. *Four wings.*

Cassava dove, trying to gain as much distance as he could.

The Hivewing dove as well, splitting the sky with speed. He could hear its wingbeats grow louder behind him.

Fly faster. I need to fly faster! Cassava looked back one more time and spotted the Hivewing holding something. It was some sort of curved wood piece with its ends tied together. Something was placed in between, the Hivewing arching it back. All in all the contraption looked like—

A bow. Cassava surged forward in panic. *It's trying to shoot me down. The Hivewing's trying to ki-*

Something slammed into him, knocking the breath from his lungs. Then he was falling, darkness growing from the edges of his vision. Cassava craned his neck only to find an arrow lodged in his chest. He howled in pain before inhaling sharply, tasting blood in his mouth.

Three moons, the oceans getting closer. Maybe from the arrow. Maybe from falling. Probably both. Definitely both. He felt himself grow dizzy. *Snap out of it! I need to-*

Cassava plunged into the ocean with a *crack*.

From above Firefly hovered to a stop, bow in hand. Reaching her quiver she nocked another arrow, aiming at the waves. Nothing came back up.

"Fast and accurate. You're fitting into our unit quite well." Another Hivewing descended next to her, looking at the water. "Is the messenger dead?"

"Yes." She replied. "I placed the shot with care."

"Good work."

"Thank you, Captain Atta." Firefly saluted.

"With the Leafwing taken care of, Sequoia will never know what will happen to Willowwood. We can now strike with impunity."

"And avenge my comrades." Firefly darkly added. "The ones who killed them will pay. Willowwood will pay. By the light of the three moons, *I swear it.*"

I swear I'm in a dream. Fir felt snowflakes falling on his snout. It didn't snow in Pantala, meaning this had to be fake.

The stars above him looked so real though. They shined and glimmered like gems among the green-gold aurora of the Great Ice Dragon's frostbreath. Aurora borealis were always so beautiful every time they appeared over home.

Home. The wind began to worsen.

Fir took flight, soaring to the skies. Buoyed by strong gusts, more snow smothered his scales but he pressed forward. The familiar constellations lay just ahead, he could reach them!

The wind howled in disagreement, and he could feel the gale pull him down below dark clouds crowding above. just like before.

Not today, storm!

Fir cricked his neck and spun, bending the wind around him so that he could ascend unimpeded. It worked. With one last whirl he exploded through the cloud cover, escaping the gusts below.

His eyes widened with awe at the view. Up here the arctic sky looked even more beautiful, more bright and vivid and serenely quiet without any chaotic wind.

"Stars, look at me!!" Fir shouted in triumph. "I made it! I braved the storm!"

The stars said nothing, glimmering coldly.

"Stars?" Fir tried again. "What's wrong? Why won't you speak to me?" His question echoed through the air before being smothered by silence.

Something wasn't right.

Fir flew higher, calling again and again. "Bear stars? Reindeer constellation? Anyone?" He turned to the North Star. "Answer me!" he yelled.

The lights in the sky remain mockingly out of Fir's reach. For every wingbeat he climbed they shrunk back and dimmed, with even the aurora fading away into space. Finally they completely extinguished, leaving him in total darkness.

"No..." Fir whimpered, trying to fly faster. The air around him began to stick onto his scales, wrapping around in familiar lines and curls. Slowly they enveloped his body until he couldn't even see his own talons.

In desperation Fir dove back down, so that the wind may blow away the dark. But it surrounded him as far as he could see. There was no escape. He would never—

"Fir!" A voice rang out.

With that his surroundings melted away like ice in the sun, replaced with gentle sunlight. Fir's eyes drifted open as he remembered where he was. In Pantala. In Willowwood. In Juniper's home. In the guest room. In a hammock. A very comfortable hammock. He looked up and saw Juniper at the door waiting impatiently.

"Get up." She demanded.

"Nah." Fir flopped over and closed his eyes, wriggling deeper into his hammock. "Too comfy."

"Let me help you with that." He heard Juniper's talonsteps come closer.

"Help me with whaaaah!" Fir yelped as she flipped the hammock upside down, causing him to tumble onto the floor.

"Rude." He complained, rubbing his head..

Juniper fixed the hammock. "With that out of the way, good morning Fir." She wrapped her tail around his.

"Good morning, Juniper." He beamed as he stood up.

“Sleep well?” She opened the door. Fir hesitated. His dream was anything but pleasant.

“Of course.” He answered, confidently striding out the room. Before he could enter the hallway Juniper scurried in front of him, wings raised.

“Ah ah ah.” She wagged a talon. “Guess what’s for breakfast.”

“How about I go to the kitchen and see for myself?” Fir unsuccessfully tried to move past her.

“No. Use your nose, I believe in you.” Juniper encouraged.

Fir rolled his eyes and lifted his snout, analyzing the smell of food coming from the hallway. After a moment of concentration he declared, “It’s sugared taro with walnuts!”

Juniper threw her wings over her head. “By the trees, we need to work on your sense of smell.” She left the room disappointed.

“Hey!” Fir caught up to her in the hallway. “I had to be at least close, right?”

“Not in the slightest.” A voice from the kitchen dashed his hopes. It was Cypress, putting two plates on the table.

“You made pancakes?” Fir couldn’t believe what he saw.

“Using almond flour and sugar.” Juniper took a seat and began eating. “Not taro or walnuts. Like I said, your nose needs some improvement.”

He harrumphed before joining her at the table, digging into his meal. “At least I guessed the sugar right.”

Cypress grabbed a pouch of sleeping berries with her tail. “I’m off to the healer’s pavilion. Clean the plates when you finish.” She glared at Fir. “With *water*, not frostbreath.”

The previous breakfast he'd covered his plate with ice, convinced it would clean it better than water. Instead the frozen plate shattered all over the floor. Fir received an earful from Cypress for that.

Fir ducked his head. "Yes ma'am. Wouldn't dream of it." Cypress nodded and headed out. Once her wingbeats faded away he noticed Juniper looking at him with a barely hidden smirk.

"What's so funny?" He tore a chunk out of his pancake.

"Ma'am." She tittered. "I never thought I'd hear you call another that."

"You must think it's amusing."

"No, I think it's hilarious." Juniper finished her last bite. "I'm glad you're here Fir, in our home."

Home. Something knotted in his stomach.

"I'm not hungry." Fir suddenly stood up, taking the unfinished pancake to throw away. He didn't feel like eating anymore.

"Not hungry?" Juniper echoed. "Look how much food you left!"

"I'll be fine." Fir washed his plate and began to pace near the entrance. "Are you ready to leave?"

"...Yeah." She reluctantly replied before rummaging through the pantry, taking out a pair of baskets. "I'm ready."

"Good." Fir grinned, stepping outside. He took a deep breath, the knot from before loosening from excitement. "Let's go get my net."

The two leapt from the treehouse and dove down through the morning forest. Fir twisted and spun, avoiding collisions as he flew through layers of leaves. Passing by other Leafwings, Fir didn't get as many stares as he used to. The villagers were getting used to his presence – not that he minded. Fighting through crowds was more trouble than it was worth.

“So Fir,” Juniper called out, “you excited for the fishing contest?”

“Of course!” He twirled around a branch more than triple his size before letting himself free fall. At the last moment he flared his wings and regained control.

I’m getting good at this. He thought with satisfaction. His skill was a testament to how well he was adapting to the Leafwing forest.

Adapting to *their* home.

Fir didn’t feel so well again. He furiously shook it off, letting the wind whistling around him carry the feeling away. It had no place here, not today – he had a competition to win!

“I still don’t know why you refuse to use a spear.” Juniper flew next to him. “Won’t a net be too cumbersome?”

Organized by Elder Rowan as a friendly village sport, the fishing contest was taking place this afternoon, with everyone allowed to compete. Fir, of course, couldn’t resist.

According to Juniper, Leafwings practiced spearfishing and used sharp wooden pikes to skewer their catches. But Fir was an Icewing, and he fished with nets. Using spears would be akin to betrayal – the thought made him shudder.

“I grew up being taught how to fish using nets, not spears. I’m just more comfortable with it. Besides, it reminds me of home.” Fir answered, his voice catching at the end.

“I understand.” Juniper brushed her wing with his.

Does she really? Fir quashed the thought. She was trying to be nice. “We usually use spears for battles. I *could* use it, but it wouldn’t be the same.”

“You were in a battle?” Juniper asked, shocked.

“Not a real one, no.” Fir corrected. “Every dragonet undergoes basic combat training, in case we need to be called up for wars.”

“That didn’t happen to you, right?” She looked uneasy talking about the subject.

“Never. There hasn’t been a major war in recent memory. But if one ever starts my tribe will crush our enemies in a matter of weeks!” He boasted.

Juniper grew unusually quiet at that. Fir gently nudged her with his snout. “Hey, it’s ok. We fought off Hivewings before, they’re not a threat to us.”

She regained her composure, returning his gesture. “I know.”

Their conversation was cut short as they entered the trader’s circle, aiming for Aspen’s shop. Flying closer, Fir saw Azalea waiting outside. She waved once she saw them coming.

“Hey Juniper! Hey Fir!” She greeted them as they landed.

“Morning, Azalea.” Juniper examined the Leafwing’s talons. “Is that paint I see on your claws?”

“It is.” She wiggled them proudly. “My painting booth was so popular during the festival that we’ve made it a permanent part of the shop. My own booth.” She dreamily sighed. “Green and white paints are all the rage now.”

“I wonder why.” Fir stepped through the tarp, the other two following him inside. The store was laid out like a large triangle, with each edge consisting of a large willow whose trunk stretched into the sky. The canopies of the three trees formed a roof dozens of wingbeats high, letting through the hubbub from the rest of the circle.

In the middle of the room stretched rows of shelves filled with jars and tools. The edge to the left of him had more such aisles, while the one to the right hosted a mirror, stool, and a collection of paints. It was clear where Azalea had set up her shop within a shop.

Directly ahead of him Fir saw a counter running in front of the third edge. A large net had been slung over the counter, and the dragon tinkering with it looked up at his entrance.

“Ah, Fir. You’re just in time.” Aspen greeted. “The net is just about done.”

“I like what I see.” He strode delightedly to the counter.

“Fir?” He stopped. An excited voice piped up a few shelves down. He heard the gleeful pitter-patter of talons scrabbling on wood before a head popped over the shelf to his left.

“Hey!” Aspen barked. “No climbing on the shelves!” His words fell on deaf ears.

Fir beamed and raised his arms to catch the dragonet, who instead cartwheeled onto his forehead before determinedly clambering onto his neck.

“Woah there! Be careful.” Fir cautioned, flattening his spikes. Like with Aspen, his warning also went unheeded. The dragonet rested himself atop his neck, poking his snout through the space between his horns.

“Fir! You’re here!”

“It’s good to see you too, Sumac.” He raised a claw to tickle the Leafwing’s frills.

“Stop it!” Sumac laughed, swatting his talons away. “Whatcha doing here?”

“Fir has to pick up his net for the fishing contest happening this afternoon.” Juniper answered from behind, her and Azalea delightedly watching them.

Sumac’s eyes gleamed.

“Do you want to come and see?” Fir offered.

He slouched. "I can't."

"Why not?"

"I have to buy ingredients for Dad. It'll take forever!" He rolled over dramatically.

"What foods do you need to get?" Juniper asked, stepping forward.

"Dragonberries, kumquats, strawberries, and grapes." Sumac listed, counting them out with his talons.

"Well," Juniper tapped her chin, "the competition is being held over the shores north of Willowwood. In fact, I'll be foraging near those beaches today. Want to guess what I can find?"

"What?" Sumac's eyes turned hopeful.

"Oh, I don't know." She shrugged. "Maybe some dragonberries, some strawberry bushes, a few thickets of wild grapes..."

"And kumquats?"

"Perhaps." Juniper grinned knowingly, holding out a basket. "I might have a better chance of finding them if I had an apprentice. But who could possibly help me?"

"Me! Me!" Sumac reached out towards the basket, almost tipping over in the process. Fir caught him before he fell, placing him back on top.

"Taking away my customers are you?" Aspen joked good-naturedly.

"Only for today." Juniper replied.

"Well if you're getting an assistant, I think I'll get something too." Fir resumed his walk to the counter, heart swelling as his eyes gleefully ran over what lay on it.

Save for different materials, the net was designed identically to the ones he used to wield. The main part of the net consisted of a rectangle made from knotted rope ringed with small metal hooks. Within these borders, rows of crisscrossed rope created a mesh fine enough to catch even the smallest of minnows. Finally a hole had been cut out in the center, from which a sturdy strand of vine led out to a carved wooden handle.

“Oooooo. Is the net good?” Sumac whispered.

Fir gripped the handle, reverently lifting the net. “Yes. Yes it is.” He whispered back. Just holding it brought back pleasant memories from Among-The-Evergreens, from home.

“Given your awestruck face, I’m guessing you like it.” Aspen proudly remarked.

Fir nodded. “I love it.” He couldn’t wait to use it.

As if reading his mind Juniper pointed her tail to the sky. “Let’s fly. Come on Azalea.”

“Absolutely!” She unfurled her wings.

“Not.” Aspen sternly interrupted.

Azalea sputtered, dismayed. “But Dad—”

“Don’t ‘but Dad’ me, young lady.” He admonished. “In case you forgot, you have a painting booth to run. Do you plan to abandon it just as the day is starting?”

“I’ll open it in the evening?” Azalea offered.

“Not in my store you won’t.” Aspen crossed his wings. “I won’t let you shirk off responsibility that easily.”

“But I’ll miss out on the contest!” She pouted. “And yesterday I told Juniper I would come with her. I’d feel terrible if I broke that promise. It’s not fair!”

“Azalea. *Enough.*” Aspen’s growl silenced his daughter. “I cannot believe you right now.”

He moved from the counter and towards Azalea, chilling the room as he passed. Sumac crouched lower from his perch on Fir. He pet the dragonet reassuringly.

“It was you who asked me to let you set up a scale painting booth. It was you who asked it become a permanent part of the shop. And it was you who, in doing so, took on a *responsibility* to manage the booth you created.”

As he spoke, Azalea’s eyes took a sudden interest to the floor.

“Now you want to abandon your job.” Aspen shook his head. “But you will not. It does not matter that you are scared of missing out, nor that you feel guilt over letting Juniper down. Azalea, you have a duty to stay and help, not to run away. Do you understand?”

Azalea swallowed, curling her talons helplessly.

“Yes, Dad.” She answered, defeated. “I understand.” She turned to Fir and Juniper. “Sorry guys, but I won’t be coming. Tell me what happens, alright?”

“I can tell you what’ll happen right now.” Fir slung his net over his back, aiming lower to avoid entangling Sumac. “I catch the most fish for the whole village to see. Just you wait!”

Chapter 22 – 3189

“Hold on a little longer Sumac, we’re almost there.” Juniper flew upside down above Fir as she reassured his passenger.

“Ok.” He chirruped, quietly watching the trees they flew past. His silence lasted for a whole minute.

“Are we there yet now?” Sumac’s voice carried through the wind once more.

“No, Sumac, we still aren’t there.” Fir’s tail threatened to twist itself into knots. “You’ll have to wait.”

“But I don’t want to wait!” Sumac complained. “I’m bored.”

“...Bored, eh?” Fir’s voice turned mischievous. “Juniper, hold my net.” He rolled it up before tossing it to her while Sumac watched, confused.

This is where the fun begins, Juniper thought to herself as she slowed down, hanging back to see what the Icewing would do. She didn’t have to wait long.

With a flick of his wings Fir suddenly shot up through the forest, weaving past branches and climbing higher until he soared fully vertical.

“Are you bored now?” Fir whooped. He twirled in a loop-de-loop around a branch as Sumac held on to his horns for dear life.

“Noo! I take it back, I’m not bored! I’m not bored!” Sumac wailed, covering his eyes with his wings. “Fly normal again – I don’t wanna fall!”

As if a talon had been snapped, Fir stopped. He righted himself before steadily descending next to Juniper. “You’re not going to fall, Sumac, not with how hard you gripped my horns. And if you do, I’ll catch you. You know that.” He reassured the dragonet.

“I don’t care. Falling is scary.” Sumac sniffed. Fir patted his head comfortingly.

“By the trees,” Juniper commented, “you’re practically his older brother now. Going to switch families next?” Fir snorted and shook his head. As he did his jaw inexplicably tightened in a way that made her uneasy. A single poke from Sumac broke the tension and ended his half-hearted protest.

“Of course not. I already belong to one.” He looked to the sky, squinting at the sunlight. “I wonder what they’re doing.”

“Well, Mother’s at the pavilion as usual, and I’m here with you!” Juniper confidently answered. “What are you talking abo – oh.” She clamped her mouth shut as she realized what he meant.

Fir made a dismissive gesture with his wings. “It’s fine. I was just rambling.” He turned to face forward again, but as he did Juniper saw something darker flicker in his eyes – something painful.

Great job Juniper. You just had to ruin it for Fir, didn’t you?

Before Juniper could scold herself further she caught a faint whiff of sea salt. She sniffed again and the odor reappeared, stronger than before.

Sumac eagerly pointed ahead to where the treeline was ending. “It’s the beach!” He cried. “We’re here!”

Thinking quickly, Juniper unslung the net and returned it out to Fir. “Here, you’ll need it to win.” Reminded of the contest, his eyes sparked with anticipation..

“I can’t wait.” He shivered in excitement. The next second he dove, gaining speed as he burst through the forest. Juniper followed from above and soon emerged over the forest canopy. The height gave her a full view of the beach below.

Located just in front of the lapping waves, Juniper saw collections of stones stacked together in circles. These rings stretched in equal intervals along a good chunk of the shoreline peppered with Leafwings milling about.

Most villagers were laying down on the sand, patiently waiting for the games to begin. In the meantime younger dragonets frolicked on the beach, splashing in the ocean and scurrying on the sand with glee. Their peals of laughter couldn’t help but make Juniper smile.

Closer to her, carrying empty baskets and jars, she recognized her fellow foragers meandering on the treeline. They stood uncertainly on sandy grass as if wondering whether to start foraging now or to wait until the contest

had started. Juniper decided on the latter; she and Sumac could see it begin before they went to work.

The last and smallest group of Leafwings loitered near the stone circles, carrying long three-pronged fishing spears and bags decorated with wrapped vines. They chattered animatedly with each other, comparing spears and miming throwing techniques.

Their conversations died out as Fir landed, flourishing his net. The other competitors curiously approached, firing off questions which he gladly answered. Juniper flew closer to listen in.

“—and just before you pull up, you throw the net by the handle and let it drag below the waves.” Fir demonstrated. “Any fish in the way are caught and brought up with you.”

In the chorus of ooohs and aaahs that followed, one competitor stepped forward. “But won’t you tear up the ocean floor?”

Juniper did a double take. It was the guard she’d drugged, the same one who’d asked her for proof and nailed Dauber with a spear.

“Spearfishing is precise, targeting only the fish you want to catch.” He continued to a surprised Fir. “Your net would trough across the whole seabed, damaging everything in its path. How would you avoid that?”

Fir considered the question before answering firmly. “By being careful, and not reaching too deep.”

The guard considered Fir’s reply. “I suppose so.” He nodded. “The name’s Hornbeam. I believe we’ve met before.”

Fir chuckled. “We have. Considering your skill with the spear, I should’ve expected you’d be here.”

“The events leading up to that night were my fault to begin with.” Hornbeam admitted, looking at Juniper. “But enough with the past. May the best dragon win.” He extended a claw.

“May the best dragon win.” Fir repeated, shaking his outstretched talons.

The moment of camaraderie was interrupted by a loud yawn. Sumac, looking supremely uninterested, unfurled his wings and slid down Fir’s back. He hit the ground with a *thump* before sprinting away, joining the first group of dragonets he saw.

Juniper meanwhile flew back up into the air, rising higher and higher until her wings spread from one end of the beach to the other. Sunlight from above spilled onto her scales who gladly absorbed the light which coated them.

With nothing to do but wait, she looked down and admired the view. Sumac playing, Fir happily chatting, everyone – *everything* – looked so beautiful today. The beach buzzed vibrantly with her fellow villagers, their bustles of activities creating a living forest of Leafwing life.

“Wretch. We’re coming for you. These forests will die, and there’s nothing you can do to stop it.” Dauber’s voice wormed its way into her mind, unseen claws raking her with dread.

No. No. NO. Juniper inhaled sharply, pressing her talons over her head. She dove back into the forest and curled tightly into some willow leaves.

“Everything is fine, Juniper.” She told herself. There was no ocean of blood, no burning trees, no wingbeats of a hundred hostile Hivewings – it was all in her head. She looked at the beach for proof. The sea shined blue, the trees rustled in the wind, and the only sound she heard were the faint voices of the dragons on the sand.

“Everything is fine.” She repeated confidently. Dauber’s threat was an empty one. He lost. The picturesque scene today proved that. With her confidence regained Juniper flew back over the beach to look for Fir and Sumac. But before she could, another Leafwing emerged from the forest. The dragons around her went quiet and bowed. She turned around.

Elder Rowan strolled onto the sand, carrying a small pot filled with soil. Following the crowd Juniper knelt, only for the Elder to pull her back up.

“Stand up everyone. No need to bow, I’m not royalty.” He strode to the shoreline as he began to speak.

“My fellow Leafwings – and Icewing.” A few titters went up at that. “I must say, the past two weeks have been quite eventful.” The crowd nodded in agreement.

“Eventful, and worrying. Eventful, and frightening.” His voice darkened, and even the sun appeared to dim. “The outside world came to Willowwood, for better and for worse.”

To break the somber mood Elder Rowan threw out his wings. “But here we are today, better than ever!” The crowd cheered. Juniper clapped her talons.

“And what better way to celebrate than with some friendly competition?” He gestured to the circles. “The rules of the contest are simple. All competitors will fish over the surrounding bay for an hour, returning their catches to the stone ring that belongs to them. Once the hour is over, we will weigh the fish from each. The dragon with the heaviest catch is the winner, who will then claim their prize.”

The Elder held up the pot. Juniper craned her neck for a closer look. Yellowish green stems sprout from the dirt, ending in a crimson U-shaped mouth capped with spines.

Spines that looked a lot like teeth. *What am I looking at?*

“Within this soil, straight from the Poison Jungle itself, is a venus flytrap. A rare and deadly plant known for eating animals... and dragons.”

Excited gasps filled the air. Onlookers whispered frantically among each other. Dragonets dared each other to stand closer to the pot. The fishers seemed twice as determined to win than before. Even Fir took an interest in this new flesh-eating plant, looking shocked such a thing could even exist.

“So without further ado: Competitors! Take your marks!” Elder Rowan bellowed.

They sprinted to their stone piles, legs tensed and wings flared. The dragonets playing by the sea scrambled clear of their path.

“Ready!”

The fishers readied their spears. Fir raised his net.

“Begin!”

The crowd roared as the dragons took off, scattering clouds of sand and sea spray in their wake.

“Go Fir!” Juniper cheered. She watched him bank sharply upwards, soaring over the others who hovered just above the waves. To her right she heard a loud splash, followed by a commotion. Juniper turned to look and saw Hornbeam flying back to his pile, his spear weighed down with an impaled fish.

“Wow, he’s good.” Sumac sidled next to Juniper, clambering on top of her back for a better view.

In the distance Fir dove, turning into a plummeting white and gray blur. At the last moment he cast his net and pulled up. It powered through the water, dragging a plume of water to the surface before breaking off. As he returned to shore she saw a catfish tangled within the rope.

“Fir’s good too.” Juniper replied. “You know what else is good?”

“What?”

She held up a basket. “That you’re here. We have some foraging to do.”

Sumac deflated. “Aww. But I want to watch Fir fish.”

“You still will.” Juniper assured. “But we have work to do first. Your father needs those ingredients, and I have my job as a forager.”

“You sound like Aspen.” Sumac dejectedly pointed out.

“Don’t worry, I’m not as strict as he is.” Juniper promised. “We’ll leave, forage quickly, and come back to watch the contest. It’s always the most exciting at the end.”

“Promise?”

Juniper nodded and took flight, slinging her two baskets over her arm.

“I promise you Sumac, dragonberries are here.” Juniper waited patiently.

“AARGH!” The whirlwind in front of her didn’t listen. “Then where is it? I can’t find that stupid dragonberry bush. ”

Sumac laid his eyes on an unlucky shrub. He furiously leapt onto it, tearing aside branches in search of his prize. All he received were scratches along his underbelly.

“This is dumb.” He grumbled. “Foraging is dumb. The hidden dragonberries are dumb. Where are they? Where? WHERE?”

“Sumac! That’s enough.” Juniper picked the dragonet up from the bush and placed him back on the grass. “You will not insult the noble art o foraging, not while I’m here.” She sternly glared.

Sumac eyes turned downcast and glassy. Juniper hesitated. She’d definitely been too harsh. Defending some “honor” by yelling at a dragonet? Not even Fir did that anymore.

Crouching down, she put a wing over Sumac. "Sorry about that, I know you're just frustrated. Is this your first time?"

"Yeah." He glumly picked a blade of grass and shredded it with his claws. "The Shopkeepers handled getting the food. I just had to pick the freshest fruits to buy."

"And therein lies the problem." Juniper declared.

"What problem?" Sumac stopped fiddling with the grass.

"The problem is that buying fruit and foraging for it are completely different." She took his claw in hers and began to walk, pointing to the foliage around them. "In the trader's circle you were taught to find what was worth the most, and choose only that. But out here you aren't buying. You are gathering."

Juniper approached a willow tree whose trunk looked solid and unbreakable. Undeterred, she ran her talons over it, prodding for an opening. At last when she found she carefully removed the loose piece of willow bark, dropping it in her basket.

"A good gatherer finds value in everything he sees," Juniper explained, "from the deepest stone in the stream to the tallest leaf in the sky."

She took a blade of grass and braided it around his talon as if it were a ring.

"Everything has a value, even when you think it doesn't. Remember that Sumac, and you'll grow tall and strong."

Juniper knew that if Father was watching, he'd be proud. The wind rustled the foliage around her, and from the corner of her eye a patch of hyacinths peeked through.

Maybe he still is.

"Um, Juniper?" Sumac's question snapped her out of her thoughts. "What do you mean by that?"

She gave a knowing smile. "I mean you need to look more carefully."

"How?"

"By being more observant."

"Easier said than done." Sumac miffed.

Juniper thought for a moment. "Then let's try this." She slowly began. "Tell me something you can smell."

Sumac looked at her like she was crazy. "Huh?"

"Go on." Juniper encouraged. "One thing you can smell, tell me."

The dragonet took several deep sniffs, raising his snout to the air. "I smell... the ocean. Too obvious, I know."

"That's ok, that's ok." She soothed. "Now, what are two things you can hear?"

Sumac tilted his head, ears swiveling back and forth. "Your voice."

"That's true." Juniper admitted.

"And the trees swaying in the wind." He finished confidently. "What's next?"

"Tell me three things you can touch." She challenged.

Sumac took it in stride. "The grass under my claws, the willow tree... and you!" He leapt forward and bopped her on the snout.

"Hah!" Juniper fell down, flopping melodramatically. "You're too good." Sumac glowed from the praise.

"But one last thing – what are four things you see?"

Sumac opened his mouth to answer, but stopped. He took a good, long look around. "I see the sky, cloudless and blue. I see the willow leaves." His eyes traced down the branches. "I see roots above ground too. And next to that I see..." His eyes widened. "A bush."

With slow steps Sumac approached his finding. He carefully pulled aside outlying thorns and stopped, eyes exuberant.

"Dragonberries, I found them!" He whooped, eagerly picking his prize. "Look Juniper, I—" Sumac stopped and read her face. "You knew where they were this whole time, didn't you?"

"Guilty as charged." She confessed.

"Why didn't you tell me earlier?" He demanded.

"Because you had to find it on your own. The lesson wouldn't have worked any other way." Juniper wagged a talon.

"A 'lesson,'" Sumac muttered, "were you taught the same when you were a dragonet?"

"Yes. My Father did." Juniper looked around but couldn't find the hyacinths from before. "I'll never forget what he taught me."

Sumac must've picked up on the tinge in her voice. He didn't ask further, instead going back to foraging for his other fruits. Juniper sighed and went back to collecting willow bark. She'd filled almost a quarter of her basket before Sumac hollered.

"Ooh! Ooh! Look at these kumquats!" He proudly held one up, its orange skin paling in comparison to Sumac's shining face.

"Good find." Juniper twirled her basket, looking up at the willow leaves she had to collect as well. She latched onto the bark and climbed into the blanket of foliage, stuffing bundles of fronds into her basket.

“Dad says kumquats make great fruit cakes.” Sumac licked his lips. “And if you add carrots too, the whole loaf turns so orange!”

“Is that so?” Juniper pleasantly asked.

“Yeah! That’s why our nickname for it was ‘Hivewing Cake’ since it looked like –” He and Juniper went mute at the tribe’s mention.

“Hivewings.” Sumac uncovered a strawberry patch, picking them into his basket. He popped one in his mouth and went somber, shrinking in worry as he continued.

“Dad said they started the fire and want to cut down our trees. Why do they want willows? Will they come back?”

Juniper curled more leaves around her talons, trying not to think of Firefly’s departure. That Hivewing might’ve escaped, but she was only one dragon.

“No, Sumac.” She lied. “They won’t try to attack us again, not when Fir and I already fought them off. You don’t need to worry, I promise.”

He looked relieved “I know, but...” A flicker of doubt danced through his eyes.

“But what?” Juniper now gripped and twisted the entire branch around her claw.

“I listened to Juniper, and Dad, and conversations at the markets.” Sumac pulled down a thicket of wild grapes, scraping the midnight-black fruit into his basket. It rustled violently once he let go.

“They say the Hivewings might return, and that they won’t give up until all the willows are cut down. Juniper? It scares me.” He quietly admitted.

It’s all your fault Sumac’s like this. Juniper squeezed her talons around the branch until it stung with sharp pain. She looked down and found her claw bleeding from being pressed too tight. She untangled herself and climbed down the tree towards Sumac.

“Don’t be scared. We stopped the Hivewings.” *We had to have. The forests will live, because I did everything to stop them.* Juniper buoyed both their spirits. “Did you collect everything you need?”

Sumac nodded. “Let’s go back!”

“Alright then, hang on.” Juniper gripped his basket with her tail and hoisted him on top of her before taking flight. Soaring back to the beach, she wondered how many fish Fir had caught. As they exited the treeline she looked out at the beach, and stalled.

Though still on the outskirts, Juniper could feel that the atmosphere of the beach had changed. Why were dragons gathered in a semicircle around a certain part of the shore? Why did they all look so tense? Why was no one fishing?

And why were the adults blocking dragonets from looking at the center?

“Juniper? What’s happening?” Sumac peeked from above.

“I don’t know.” She landed and handed both baskets to him. “Wait here.”

Juniper flew low and fast, landing a few talonsteps before the crowd. She pushed her way through the other Leafwings, each looking shocked and horrified.

Finally she burst into the center and found Fir staring numbly alongside Elder Rowan. Juniper followed their gazes down...

...To his net, entangled with a drowned and arrow-lodged Leafwing corpse.

Chapter 23 – 4113

“By the teeth of the Great Ice Dragon...” Fir breathed, mind still reeling from what had just happened.

When he first saw a dark green shape in the water he assumed it to be some new kind of fish. But the size should’ve given it away; no fish was that large. Undeterred he’d cast his net, and once Fir felt it grow heavy he eagerly pulled it up.

Another fisher had been flying next to him as he did. She glanced at Fir’s catch and nearly crashed into the ocean with a wailing shriek. That made him look down too, at a corpse vacantly staring back. He’d almost dropped his net.

Now it lay dropped on the beach. Stray water from the body dripped onto the sand, spreading outwards where its dried blood couldn’t.

“What – Who –” Fir stuttered. He didn’t know what to say; no one did. They all stood unmoving like frozen statues.

Elder Rowan broke the stillness by moving to its side. “This dragon is Cassava, my messenger.” He crouched down and gently closed the Leafwing’s eyes, standing back up once he did.

Someone parted through the crowd. Fir turned and saw Juniper staring at him, the Elder, then down to Cassava. Her face twisted with horror, shock, and guilt.

Guilt?

“No...” She mouthed, trembling like a stray leaf. “No no no no...” She crumpled to the ground, trying and failing to look away.

“It’s *all* – *all my* – ” With a voice barely higher than the waves, Fir heard Juniper whisper something. Whatever it was, he couldn’t stand idly by. He hurried to her side at once.

“Juniper, look at me.” Fir cupped her face in his talons, throwing his wings over her to block Cassava from view. “Look at me and breathe. You’re going to be okay.”

“It’s *all my fault*.” She quietly whimpered. Fir tightened his wings around her and looked up at the crowd. Sorrow masked itself on each face as many turned to leave, unable to stomach the grisly scene.

From behind, Fir heard the Elder straighten his wings. “Hornbeam, gather a few guards and cover the body. We will bring it to a safe place for burial.” He commanded with barely a shake in his voice.

“Once that is done, report to my treehouse for an emergency meeting. Fir, Juniper, you both are to come as well. It will begin in half an hour.” The guard bowed and left while Elder Rowan turned to the crowd.

“Leafwings...the contest is canceled. Stay on the beach if you wish, but I am returning to Willowwood. He looked like he wanted to say more, but stopped. “That is all.”

Fir turned his attention back to Juniper. “Let’s go back.” he gently coaxed. “At the very least, we should have lunch.” His stomach rumbled in agreement.

Juniper remained unresponsive, buried in his chest.

The crowd evaporated as more and more Leafwings left. Their absence let Fir spot a familiar dragonet waiting near the trees, carrying two baskets and a stricken expression.

“Come on Juniper.” Fir tried again. “Sumac’s waiting for us, worried sick.”

“Sumac....” The name made her stir.

Fir nodded and pulled Juniper to her feet. “That’s right. He’s our responsibility – it’s no good to stay here, right?”

“Right. I promised him – *no good*.” Before Juniper hung her head again Fir shook her back into focus. He took flight as she reluctantly followed behind.

Fir traced the lines in the sand with his eyes while they flew, mind sifting with questions. Juniper's shock and horror was understandable – he felt the same too. The feelings numbed his senses like a frigid plunge into the ocean.

Cassava's waterlogged scales flashed in his mind. Now was not the time to think about drowning.

It was instead time to think about guilt. Namely, why Juniper felt it. She must know that all the fault lay with the enemy: With the Hivewings. For the life of him, Fir couldn't figure out why Juniper would feel otherwise. They'd have to talk once he returned home.

To their home, not yours. How could you forget that?

Fir looked up from the sand. It messed with his mind in a way he didn't like. He landed next to Sumac, noticing the tension in his wings.

"How's it going Sumac, enjoy foraging?" Fir lightly punched him on the shoulder as Juniper landed to the side.

"Fir, what's happening?" Sumac worriedly asked him. The dragonet's eyes pleaded for an answer, one Fir struggled to say. Should he tell Sumac the truth, or protect him from it?

Seeing him silent, Sumac instead focused on Juniper. "Why were you all in a circle near the shore?" He questioned her. "Please, tell me." The Leafwing said nothing, eyes downcast.

"It's... not good news." Fir responded carefully. "But it's one the adults will take care of. I promise you don't need to worry."

The young Leafwing looked unconvinced. "Don't be worried? I already am."

Juniper's breath hitched in her throat before she swung her head back to the shore. Sumac followed her example, turning to the trees and sitting down with a huff.

Stuck between two Leafwings, unbudging and facing opposite directions, Fir's spikes ruffled furiously. *Why in the three moons are they both being so weird?* Fir's spines threatened to pop out from his back. He took several deep breaths to rest them down. If he had to take the lead, so be it.

He began with the easier of the two. Sneaking up carefully, Fir pounced on Sumac and bundled the dragonet in his arms with one fluid motion.

"Let me go!" Sumac struggled to no avail. Fir ignored him and walked up to Juniper, placing the smaller Leafwing over her back.

"I'm going to get my fish. Both of you wait here." Fir sternly ordered before flying back to his stone circle. Nearby, Elder Rowan alongside a few other Leafwings had covered Cassava in a deep green shroud, and were loading him into a makeshift stretcher. As they did he grabbed a clawful of fish by their tails and flew back.

Fir saw Juniper talking to Sumac, her voice faintly drifting through the air. She went quiet on his arrival.

"We'll return Sumac to the Clover Cafe," Fir proposed, "and use these fish to barter for lunch."

Sumac nodded. Juniper said nothing. With no opposition he led the way back home, the flight as muted as the beach. In the silence Fir began to brainstorm once more. Why were his two favorite Leafwings behaving the way they were?

Once more Fir began with Sumac. Somehow, he had broken his trust when he promised the dragonet not to worry. An issue of confidence had arisen, and there was only one way to fix it.

"Sumac, do you trust me?" Fir bluntly asked. The young Leafwing looked startled at the question but gave no reply.

"Do you trust me?" Fir repeated.

"Yes." Sumac finally murmured unconvincingly.

He switched tactics. “Why *don’t* you trust me?”

“Because... because you were wrong. You both were wrong.”

At the word “both” Juniper flinched. Something happened during their foraging, that much he deduced.

“Wrong about what?” Fir continued to probe.

“About worrying.” Sumac gestured behind them to the beach they left. “You tell me not to worry about danger. You promise you stopped the Hivewings.” He looked down on Juniper. “But I’m scared. Everyone’s scared. You lied to me.”

Juniper shook so hard Fir thought Sumac might fall off. He quickly took her claws in his to steady her flight, brushing their wings as he did so. The trembling lessened, then stopped.

Fir turned back to Sumac. “We didn’t lie to you.”

“But you were wrong.” He countered.

“Exactly.” Fir confirmed. “We were wrong. I was wrong. So let me be right.”

Fir took a breath. “Willowwood is still under threat, and Wasp clearly hasn’t given up yet. Though I wish I could, I can’t tell you when the danger will end, nor how.” Sumac began to cower.

“But let me make you a promise I *can* keep.” Fir picked the dragonet up and looked him in the eyes. “May the spirits under the ice be my witness: I promise I will protect you from anything that comes, no matter what.” He put Sumac back on Juniper. “Do you believe me when I say that?”

Traces of doubt still flickered across Sumac’s face.

“When we Icewings swear by the spirits under the ice, we mean it.” Fir pledged.

His confidence swayed Sumac, who nodded in acceptance. "I believe you, Fir."

He was halfway there. "Do you believe in Juniper too?" Fir pressed.

Sumac thought about it for a long minute. "I... still trust her too – I trust you Juniper." He boldly proclaimed. "You were wrong, but you didn't lie. Below him, Juniper shifted. A slight reaction, one Fir almost missed.

Almost.

As a cluster of leaves passed between them, Fir saw Juniper imperceptibly shake her head. Something was still wrong with her.

Sumac didn't notice. He busily looked ahead to their destination, crying out when he saw it.

"Look, we're here!" The dragonet pointed to the Clover Cafe, its tables occupied by a few villagers busily munching away. The trio landed past the entrance where Tupelo waited, tail ominously tapping on the branch floor.

"Sumac, where in the trees have you been?" He strode forward as his son hopped off Juniper.

"Dad, I–"

"I sent you to the trader's circle. *To the marketplace.*" Tupelo sharply stressed. "Yet here you are, flying in from the opposite direction. Don't tell me you ran off to watch the fishing contest!" He looked at Fir. "He did, didn't he?"

Sumac curled his wings. "I did, but I still–"

"What did I tell you to do?" Tupelo glowered.

"To go to the trader's circle..." Sumac meekly answered.

“And get ingredients for the cafe. I can’t run it without food to cook.” Tupelo crossed his wings, disappointment clear on his face. “I see you couldn’t keep your promise, son.”

“Yes he did.” Juniper interrupted, speaking for the first time since the beach. She took one of her baskets and thrust it into Tupelo’s claws. His eyes peered down and widened, snapping back and forth between her and Sumac.

“We foraged near the beach. Dragonberries, kumquats, strawberries, and grapes.” Juniper recited. “Everything you need, Sumac collected. He kept his promise.”

The stress on the word aroused Fir’s suspicion, causing him to frown. Did Juniper make a promise to Elder Rowan that he wasn’t aware of? He’d have to find out at the meeting.

Tupelo slowly slung the basket over an arm, anger extinguished like fire under frostbreath. “You did, didn’t you?” He picked up a kumquat and tested it with his claws, nodding approvingly. “Good job son.”

Sumac stood up straighter, tipped his wings back, and lifted his chin as high as it could go. With a prideful snort he strutted into the hallway leading to the kitchen. The faint smells of cooking wafting from inside reminded Fir of one other thing.

He approached Tupelo and held out the fish. “Will this be enough for a lunch for two?”

The Leafwing accepted Fir’s trade, taking it with his other claw. “Of course. You’ve caught some fine fish. Speaking of which,” Tupelo examined Fir’s empty talons, “Where’s your net? What happened at the contest – did you win?”

Fir and Juniper solemnly looked at each other. He checked to see if Sumac had left before facing a perturbed Tupelo.

“The contest was cut short after my net pulled up a dragon. Leafwing.”

“A Leafwing body in the bay?” Tupelo gasped. The customers around them leaned in, quieting their conversations to hear theirs instead. “Are they alright? Hurt?”

Fir hung his head. “No. He’s – he’s gone. Elder Rowan said his name was Cassava.”

Tupelo stepped back, dismayed. “Cassava, *dead*?” The dragons around them had gone completely silent.

Fir nodded. “Found in the ocean, with an arrow in his chest.” A smattering of frightened murmurs swept through the cafe.

“By the trees...” Tupelo muttered, apprehensively glancing back at the hallway. “Does Sumac know?”

“We didn’t tell him.” Fir assured.

“But eventually he’s going to find out.” Juniper looked up at the other leafwings who’d been at the beach beginning to filter in from the trees above, spreading the word to the villagers who rose to meet them. “Everyone will.” The three stood in uneasy silence, unsure what to say next.

“Well then, what food would you like to order?” Tupelo awkwardly asked, trying to relieve the tension.

Fir shrugged. “I’ll have a roast pig and...” He looked questioningly at Juniper.

“I’m not hungry.” She flatly replied, eyes still fixed on surrounding trees where news was being relayed to the rest of Willowwood.

“Not hungry? You mean you want to skip lunch?”

Juniper hissed, making him jump. “Yes, I do. You of all dragons have no right to tell me I can’t.”

She had him there. Fir relented as Tupelo left to cook. While they waited, the villagers around them began to leave. It started with a few Leafwings

discreetly leaving payment on the tables before furtively hurrying onto the walkways. Slowly this secrecy disappeared until whole tables stood up and left en masse, their faces identical to those on the beach.

Tupelo returned some time later, staring at his now empty cafe. "All this fear's going to be bad for business." He handed Fir a pot. "I can give you half the fish back if you want."

"Keep it." Fir opened the lid and waved it in front of Juniper. "Last chance." He advised. "Take it or forever hold your peace." She begrudgingly took a single slice and turned away with a snort.

At least Juniper isn't looking dolefully watching the trees anymore. Fir allowed himself a small smile. He inhaled his meal with speed while she slowly chewed.

As they finished they heard wingbeats coming from below. Hornbeam emerged from over the railing. The spear gripped in his talons wobbled as he stopped to hover.

"Fir. Juniper. You are to follow me at once. The meeting will start soon."

"How did you find us?" Fir returned the empty pot and took flight alongside Juniper.

"It's well known that you two often eat here." Hornbeam answered. "Word spreads quickly." The two followed him as he ascended through the village, along walkways and platforms and homes and shops.

Everywhere they passed he could feel the tension, palpable enough to be cut with a claw. Fear smothered the air like an invisible fog, growing thicker and thicker the higher they rose. Once they arrived at the Elder's treehouse, they were ushered indoors by a few anxious attendants.

The hallways inside buzzed with nervous energy. Stewards trailed through the doors, carrying reams of parchment and ink. Within many rooms they passed Fir could hear frantic writing as quills tore on paper.

Other chambers opened to reveal guards stiffly marching to the exits, carrying stacks of wooden weapons and armor. A few nodded to Hornbeam as they passed by. He returned the gesture with a shallow flick of his tail.

Despite all the hustle and bustle he saw, Fir couldn't help but be reminded of the treehouse during the fire: full of a feeling that something was very wrong.

At last Hornbeam stopped before an unassuming door, sharply knocking three times. "Elder Rowan? We're here."

It opened, but not by a dragon he expected to see.

Hickory, the Leafwing who'd closed the library the night of the Elder's announcement, gestured inside. "Hello again Fir." She greeted. "And Juniper – your reputation precedes you. All of you, come on in."

They entered into a secluded office, floor creaking from their steps. On every wall Fir saw richly embroidered tapestries and nailed wood carvings that seemed to occupy twice the space they took up. Each decoration depicted scenes filled with Leafwings, with titles such as "*The great founding of Willowwood*" and "*Willowwood hosts the Queens.*" One such tapestry, showing two Leafwings flying between shining stars and deep forests, especially caught his eye.

A sprawling carpet, made to resemble a thick cluster of willow trees, dominated the office floor. Here and there small saplings rose out of the wood, unfurling tiny green leaves that shone like jewels. Everywhere Fir looked, rug or wall, he saw something honoring the village – its trees, its dragons, or both.

The owner of this whole collection sat at the end of the room, tired green scales dimly lit by thin window slits. The desk in front of him held a large map and various potted plants, including the venus flytrap introduced at the beach.

"Take a seat, everyone." Elder Rowan pointed his wings to scattered chairs, inviting them closer. "We have much to discuss."

“Quite.” Hickory took a seat to the left of the Elder, tracing the carpet with her tail. “We must find alternative delivery routes before it’s too late.”

“Alternative *what* now?” Hornbeam incredulously asked. He took his seat at the right, opposite to Hickory’s. “You’re not possibly thinking of sending another messenger.”

“Of course not.” Hickory rolled her eyes. “I plan to send multiple.”

Hornbeam almost fell out of his chair. Fir quirked an eyebrow, unsure if he’d heard her correctly. Juniper meanwhile looked interested, listening intently as Hickory explained.

“Let’s review the facts. Twice now, Hivewings – under orders from Queen Wasp – attempted to burn down Willowwood and the surrounding forest, but were thwarted thanks to Fir and Juniper.”

Elder Rowan nodded. “Continue.”

“Which brings us to today. Cassava, one of your messengers, was found shot and drowned in the ocean. I think it’s obvious who’s responsible.”

Hornbeam harrumphed. “Get to the point already.”

“The point,” Hickory tilted her wings inward, “is that Wasp wants us trapped, isolated, and alone. I propose we don’t give that weed what she wants.”

She flared her wings, covering the tapestries behind her. “Under my supervision, our stewards and librarians have made multiple copies of letters asking for reinforcements. We’ve drafted several routes for our messengers to stealthily arrive at the southern forest palace. Once they do, we will have all the security we’ll need.”

“And if they get caught?” Hornbeam countered. “We won’t be able to find their bodies to bury.”

Fir shuddered at the thought.

“True,” she admitted, “but that’s why I need your help.”

“Excuse me?” Hornbeam gaped.

“As head of the village guard, you can delegate dragons to help. If your guards accompany the messengers to Queen Sequoia’s palace, the increased security will boost their chances of making it.” Hickory explained. “So, what do you say?”

Juniper beamed. Hornbeam wiped her smile off her face.

“Absolutely not!” He slammed the shaft of his spear into the willow carpet, denting the area where several roots connected.

“We don’t know how many Hivewings are surrounding our village. Sending our dragons into an unknown blockade is a death wish through and through.”

He rested on the carving behind him, depicting a group of dragons locking claws. “We must work with what we have and train the villagers in combat. My subordinates have weapons ready to be distributed. Let’s not risk lives on a far-fetched mission!”

“That ‘far-fetched’ mission will save us all, unlike newly-trained Leafwings against Hivewing soldiers!” Hickory lashed her tail.

“Better than nothing if – no, *when* – we’re attacked. The trip to the palace and back is several days long. We have to assume the worst will happen before that time.” Hornbeam tightened his grip until his knuckles bled white.

The heated debate went on, with Fir and Juniper nodding or shaking their heads with each argument brought up. After a while a small shape flitted through the darkening window above Elder Rowan. It was a wasp, yellow body waltzing itself in. Fir watched as it buzzed around the two arguing Leafwings, catching their attention, before landing on the venus flytrap on the Elder’s desk. The insect crawled over the plant’s jaws, biting its stem here and there, before it fluttered away unpunished.

As the wasp approached him, Juniper tried to shoo it away with her wings to no avail. It merely retreated for a moment before reengaging the next. Finally Fir aimed a well-placed spurt of frostbreath at the errant bug, turning it into a frozen corpse that clattered onto the carpet with a muffled thud.

Fir swept his handiwork to a corner with his tail. Attention now on him and Juniper, the Elder spoke.

“Juniper, Fir. You’ve fought Hivewings before, more than anyone in the village. You’ve heard the plans, their strengths and weaknesses. What are your thoughts?”

Juniper moved first, sitting beside Hickory. “I say we ask for aid from Queen Sequoia.” She smoothed the rug with her tail, admiring its entwined branches. “The very presence of royal soldiers will deter the Hivewings. It’s the best promise of safety we’ll get.”

Elder Rowan nodded thoughtfully. “And what about you, Icewing?”

Fir considered his choices. His last fight with Hivewings was close, only winning thanks to surprise, frostbreath, and Juniper’s quick thinking. He had to admit how helpful reinforcements would be.

His eyes fell back to the map, where Queen Sequoia’s forest palace was marked halfway across the continent.

Could he really agree to sending dragons that far away, through dangerous patrols and ice-spirits-know-what? What if those messengers died like Cassava, never to see their home again?

Something squeezed inside Fir until he almost gasped. Without hesitation he moved next to Hornbeam, underneath tapestries of glorious achievements. “We should work with what we have, training and preparing defenses.”

Juniper softly shook her head, looking at the map once more. Fir decided to try and sway her.

“Doesn’t the distance worry you at all? Continent-wide journeys are more dangerous than you think!” He argued. “I learned that the hard way.”

“Don’t Hivewing numbers worry you at all?” Juniper parried. “Fighting alone is more dangerous than you think! I also learned that the hard way.”

Before she could continue, Elder Rowan interrupted. “I see then that the vote is tied. As such, I will deliberate alone.” He gestured to the exit. “I will announce my decision tomorrow afternoon, outside the treehouse.”

“Yes, Elder.” Hornbeam and Hickory bowed and departed. Fir and Juniper followed. As he left he saw the Elder steeple his talons, forehead creased and worried. Then the door closed.

Darkness had fallen outside, heralded by lively crickets and fireflies. As Juniper made ready to return home Fir looked up to the sky.

“Fir, why’d you stop?” She turned and asked.

“Go on without me.” He kept his eyes on the stars. “I’ll return later.” Juniper hesitated but assented, leaving on her own. After she was gone Fir soared into the night. He needed to be alone.

The single crescent moon gave a lackluster shine to his scales. At least the stars shone brighter without serious competition. Once he passed through the cloud cover, Fir looked around and made sure he could see no one else. Satisfied, he flipped his back to the ground and let the stars fill his eyes.

They would speak to him today. His nightmare wouldn’t happen again.

“Hello?” Fir called out, hoping for a reply.

Hello. The stars answered. His heart leapt.

“There you are! I was worried.” Fir sighed, doing a flip.

Where are you? The constellations frigidly asked.

“What?” Fir hovered.

Where are you?

“I’m in Willowwood. In Pantala. You know that.” Fir tilted his head. “So what?”

So what? The rabbit star made itself heard. “*Where are you supposed to be?*”

“...Home.” Fir admitted, looking to the coast. “But I don’t know how to get back.”

You are afraid.

“Lies!” He snapped up. “If there was a way I would’ve found it. I’ve been scouting the whole week. It’s not my fault!”

You are afraid you’ll never come home again. The twin bear stars growled.

Fir hung his head.

And you never will, because you won’t fight for it.

“What do you mean?” He roared.

You’ll fight for the Leafwings. The reindeer constellation mocked. But you won’t fight for a way home? What do you have to say for yourself?

Fir struggled to speak. He opened his mouth but not a sound came out.

Your lack of effort is a betrayal to your family, your village, and your tribe. The North Star accused.

“No.”

You’re a Coward.

“No!”

A Coward and a Traitor.

“NO!” Fir wailed, pressing his claws to his ears. He spun into a freefall and let the wind rush past, carrying away the voices of the stars. But he couldn’t bring himself to escape into the trees, to hide like a craven.

So he remained within the clouds, sobbing tears that fell freely below.

Chapter 24 – 3236

Juniper freely fell through the trees, gliding until the branches around her melted into a blur. The less she could see her surroundings the better. It was all in danger thanks to her.

All I had to do was stay hidden. All I had to do was lie. Juniper cursed herself for the umpteenth time that day. The Hivewings could have left thinking Willowwood was gone. Her village would’ve remained secret, hidden, and safe.

Instead they all were under threat, an attack not a question of if, but when. Because she tried to be the hero, because she couldn’t resist squashing a Hivewing’s hopeful enthusiasm at the destruction of her home.

Speaking of home, when will I get there? Juniper increased her speed. The sooner she could go to bed the better. She wanted the day to be over as soon as possi-

Thwack!

Something hit Juniper on the head, and she felt herself flipping head-over-tail in the air as she spun into a free fall. She face planted into a tree trunk before unceremoniously tumbling onto a platform.

“Owww...” She cradled her snout, slowly getting to her feet. Juniper looked up and saw another dragon standing over her.

“Three moons, are you alright?” Azalea peered down, offering a claw to help. Juniper took it and pulled herself up.

“Give me a minute.” Juniper steadied herself on the tree trunk, feeling woozy. “How’d you find me?”

“I heard you were in the Elder’s treehouse for some meeting, so I waited nearby.” Azalea answered. “What happened?”

“Nothing.” Juniper buckled under Azalea’s skeptical stare.

“Nothing? Please.” She rolled her eyes. “You were so lost in thought you flew into a branch! I’ve never seen you do that. Something’s on your mind.”

Juniper nodded. Azalea deserved to know it was her fault. “Fly with me. I’ll tell you on the way.”

“Let’s walk instead.” She turned to a walkway. “One collision is enough for one night, don’t you think?”

She had a point. “Fine.” Juniper grumbled, walking beside her.

As the platform behind them faded into black, Azalea began. “So, the meeting. Tell me what happened.” The firefly lamps along the bridge made her curious eyes shine with the smallest tinge of anxiety.

“Essentially, the meeting was about what to do against a Hivewing attack.”

Azalea’s features fully shifted to worry. “An attack? I heard the rumors, but is it that bad?”

“Yes.” Juniper gripped the railing. “The fire, the search party, and now Cassava. Wasp wants us gone.”

And there’s nothing you can do to stop it.

“So what’s the plan to stop her?” Azalea hopefully asked.

“We have two. The head steward wants to send multiple armed escorts to Queen Sequoia in order to request support. The captain of the guard—”

“The one you drugged?”

“The same.” The two snickered, remembering their jailbreak escapade. It had only been two weeks since then, hadn’t it?

“He prefers saving our strength within the village, along with arming and training us to defend any attack.” Juniper explained. “I supported the steward. Fir supported the guard. Elder Rowan will break the tie and decide on a course of action tomorrow morning.”

“That’s... a lot to take in.” Azalea quietly pondered. “Royal reinforcements are sure to keep us safe, but traveling that far to the palace? I’d get too homesick.”

Juniper suddenly remembered something from the meeting. When tracing over the route on the map, Fir had looked close to suffocating. She almost stood up to see if he was okay before the Icewing sat next to Hornbeam.

“All that danger so far from home would be too much for me.” Azalea continued. “Maybe I could make warpaint or camouflage instead. What do you think?”

“Hm? Oh right, yeah.” Juniper nodded absentmindedly.

Azalea narrowed her eyes. "I see you're spacing out, Juniper. Something's still on your mind. Talk to me?"

"Of course." Juniper promised, swallowing a gulp. It was about time she confessed.

"I don't know how to say this but..." Her voice trembled. "This is *all my fault*."

Azalea whipped her head around. "Juniper, no. Don't say that."

"But I have to!" She burst out. "Because it's true!"

"How?"

"Remember the Hivewings Fir and I fought at the clearing?" Juniper's steps slowed to a crawl. "There were four in total, but one of them left before you came. That one escaped knowing Willowwood wasn't destroyed by the fire, because I boasted that our village still stood."

Azalea fell silent.

"Cassava's death, the fear, the worry – it's all because I couldn't keep my mouth shut." Juniper hung her head in shame. "It's eating me up, and I deserve it."

"Say that again and I swear by the trees I'll whack you with my tail." Azalea grabbed her claw and pushed forward. "Are you telling me you think you're the reason why we're in danger?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying." Juniper winced from her bluntness.

"Well you're wrong!" Azalea snarled. "Wasp is the reason we're in danger. Her soldiers are the reason we're in danger. It was only a matter of time before they discovered Willowwood's existence and you know it."

“It could’ve been postponed.” Juniper muttered. “We could have more time, but thanks to me we don’t.”

The duo approached her treehouse, warm light visible within. Azalea quickened her pace, rushing to the door and throwing it open. “Hello? Cypress?”

Mother entered the hall, beckoning the two with her wings. “Azalea, Junie. Come in! I heard what happened during work. Are you two alright? And where’s Fir?”

“Cypress, I have a question.” Azalea pushed Juniper to the front so that she faced Mother. “Is your daughter responsible for Cassava’s death?”

Mother froze, looking alarmed. “Of course not. Juniper, do you–”

“Yes she does.” Azalea nudged her forward.

“By all the trees in the forest – Junie, how could you think that?” Mother closed the space between them and enveloped Juniper in a tight hug. “That tragedy has nothing to do with you.”

“The Hivewings know we’re here because I told them Willowwood survived.” Juniper wriggled out of her embrace. “It has everything to do with me.”

Something hit the back of her head and sent Juniper stumbling into Mother. She turned and saw Azalea winding her tail. “I did say that if you blame yourself again, I’d wallop some sense into you.”

“Weren’t you the one who discouraged flying so that I wouldn’t hit my head again?” Juniper raised her tail threateningly.

“It’s only okay when I do it.” Azalea smugly declared.

Juniper pivoted to the side and swept the tip of her tail in a wide arc, whacking her friend clean across the cheek. "Two can play at that game." She challenged.

"Oh now it's on!" Azalea crouched, getting ready to leap at her. Juniper squared her shoulders and raised her claws to block. Before they did, Mother stepped in between them.

"Stop it you two. I won't permit sparring inside the house. On that note, is Fir still outside?"

Juniper nodded. "He asked me to go without him. I think he wanted to go flying near the stars again."

"What for?" Azalea inquired.

"He likes being close to the constellations, I think it reminds him of home." Juniper then yawned, bashfully stifling it before Mother and Azalea could notice. They did.

Mother chuckled. "After everything that's happened today I hope the stars give him comfort." She pointed a wing to the kitchen. "It's getting late. Azalea, before you go should I bring you some food to take home?"

She waved the offer away, strolling to the doorstep. "No thanks, I'm not hungry." Before Azalea left she looked at Juniper one last time. "Remember, you're not a villain."

"And there is nothing you need to apologize for." Mother stood next to Juniper and put a reassuring claw on her shoulder.

"Nothing." Juniper repeated. The dragons around her smiled in approval.

Mission accomplished, Azalea departed while Mother retired to her room. Juniper rummaged through the pantry and ate a talonful of berries before going to bed. She closed the door, curled up within her hammock, and closed her eyes. Sleep would come soon, free of today's guilt. Mother and Azalea were right; she was sure of it.

The single thin sliver of moon out tonight cast an almost imperceptible shadow in Juniper's room. Said shadow had started out touching the edge of her hammock. Now it barely crossed over the windowsill, a stark reminder of how much time she'd spent sleepless.

Juniper groaned and turned the other side, not wanting to be reminded.

So much for sleeping quickly. She threw her wings over her head for the twelfth time, hoping it would cool herself to help doze off. For the twelfth time, it didn't.

Exasperated, Juniper gave up and stood from her hammock. She stalked over to her window and looked out at the serene starlit night.

Except this couldn't be the sky, because there wouldn't be pink clouds at this time of night. Juniper reached out with a talon and felt the press of smooth canvas. With a jolt she realized she was looking at the painting Azalea gave her, which blankly stared back at her.

Her friend had clearly worked hard on this piece. Squinting into the darkness Juniper made out all its intricate details: The silhouettes of willow trees meticulously sketched with pinpoint accuracy. The splash of midnight blue on the horizon, fading softly but steadily into pitch black. And the brocade of stars dotted through it all, each a crafted jewel.

But no matter how hard she tried to convince herself it was real, Juniper knew it wasn't. Deep down the painting would never be genuine. Deep down it was all her fault.

"There is nothing you need to apologize for."

Juniper had hoped Mother's words would stitch her heart back together the way it had the night of the fire. Instead she still felt hollow. Something vast and empty had opened up inside her, unable to be filled. She likened it to an arrow ripping through her, screaming *"your fault, your fault, this is all your fault"* as it flew away with everything inside her, leaving only a shell behind.

Juniper remembered the bolt buried in Cassava's chest and hurriedly quashed that analogy. She decided to think about something else.

To the right the real night sky beckoned from the window, faint moonlight turning the air a shade of silver. She approached it and looked outside. Save for the occasional chirping cricket, nothing could be heard.

Perhaps on a different day this silence would've been comforting, like being bundled in a thick blanket. Tonight it reminded Juniper of a burial, grim and solemn and burying any sound that tried to cross.

So what about tomorrow?

Next morning Azalea would undoubtedly spread word of the meeting. She'd tell all the dragons in the trader's circle and every customer who came to her until the whole village would know. What would Willowwood want to do? Juniper idly speculated. Only time would tell.

For now she remained peering over the windowsill, letting the cool air wash over her snout. Maybe she could fall asleep here, propped up against the windowsill. Or maybe on it; she could easily fit within the window's large confines. Such thoughts faded as quickly as they came. Her eyes slipped shut as she felt herself drifting away. The wind blew again in rhythmic gusts, lulling her to sleep.

Until she remembered the wind wasn't supposed to be so choppy, nor was it supposed to be getting louder. Juniper snapped awake as she strained her ears to the sky, eyes strained against the dark. Then they widened.

Something burst through the clouds, rapidly descending through the night. It stopped and hovered for a moment, unsure of where to go, before resuming its path. A path that brought it closer and closer to her home.

Hivewings are already here! Juniper fell back with alarm, frantically looking to the door. She had to wake Mother – she had to warn the village – she had to – to...

Juniper collapsed onto the floor, covering herself with her wings.

It's no use, they're coming for me. She bit back a whimper, resigning herself to what would happen. Soldiers burning and cutting the trees, looting and marauding with impunity. Willowwood turning desolate and empty, all because she failed.

She had to escape. Run, hide – anything! With shaking talons Juniper stood up, noticing something off with her eyes before listening to the wingbeats to gauge how much time remained. The loudening noise made her pause in confusion; it didn't sound like a Hivewing.

Juniper crept back to the window and looked up. The dragon in the sky grew larger, and she made out pale white scales. *By the trees*, she realized.

It's Fir.

The Icewing dropped through the sky with no regard for slowing down until he saw Juniper. Once he did, Fir angled his wings flat against his descent and stalled through the air. With a *whoosh* he landed on her windowsill, poking his snout through the gap.

“Watch it!” Juniper jumped back from his sudden arrival. “You almost scared me!”

“Sorry.” He huskily apologized. “Mind if I come in?”

“Of course.” Juniper watched Fir carefully fit himself through the opening before landing on the floor with a weary *thud*. “Mother’s asleep, so be quiet when you step into the hallwa- eh?”

She stared as he brushed past her with callous speed, moving quickly to the door with his head turned away.

“Fir?” Juniper caught up to him and laid a claw on his shoulder. “Are you okay?”

He flinched, jerking sideways away from her touch. Her concern mounted. Why was Fir acting so weird?

“I’m fine.” He still wouldn’t look at her, moving to the door once more.

“Fir.” Juniper held his arm and gently squeezed. “Look at me.”

He remained turned away, so she raised a claw and slowly turned his head towards her. She gasped.

Fir’s face glistened with tears, wet streaks running down puffy eyes and damp scales.

“By the trees!” Juniper exclaimed. “Fir, you’re crying.” She ran her talons over his snout, drying them as best she could. Strangely, Fir looked as worried as her.

While she continued to fuss, Fir softly spoke. “Juniper, you’re crying too.”

“What?” She echoed, moving her other claw to check. Fir stopped her before she could.

“Allow me.” His wings probed forward and carefully brushed over her eyes. Sure enough, Juniper felt droplets chilled from the cold scales.

She blinked several times, finally registering her own tears. “I... guess I was.”

“It’s because of Cassava, isn’t it?” Fir questioned, circling around her.

“What gave it away?” Juniper gave a humorless laugh. “It’s not like I bawled into your chest this afternoon.”

Fir shrugged. “Maybe it did. But tell me this.” He glared intensely at her. “Why do you think it’s your fault?”

Juniper knew what would happen if she told Fir. He would be shocked, then do his best to convince her that she wasn’t to blame. Azalea and Mother had already tried the same song and dance. She didn’t need someone else to try and “fix” her.

“It’s been a long day, we both need to sleep.” Juniper moved back to the hammock. Fir jumped in front of her and threw open his wings to block, cornering her next to the painting.

“You’re avoiding the question.” He accused.

“No I’m not, I just want to sleep.” She feinted to the side, trying to dodge past Fir. He simply turned his larger body to the side and splayed out his tail, looking very unimpressed.

“Yes you are. I know because I did the exact same thing when you pressed me about Clearsight.” Fir recalled. “I also remembered how we loudly fought after I tried to deny it. Do you really want a repeat of that?”

Juniper didn't, not one bit. But what else could she say?

She changed the subject. "It doesn't explain you though. What do you have to say for yourself?"

"I asked first."

"Overruled. This is my room." Juniper countered, leaning smugly against the wall.

Fir sighed, making his way to the window. He laid his head on the sill and took a deep breath. "Juniper? I miss home." He slowly replied, looking at the sky with a mix of pain and longing. "And it... it *hurts*." His voice cracked. "*More than ever before.*" He buried his head in his claws.

"Oh, Fir." Juniper stepped beside the Icewing and wrapped her arms around him, both of them sinking to the floor. "Is that why you spent so long flying?" He nodded sadly, resting under the curve of her neck.

"The stars always remind me of home. Usually that gives me comfort, but not tonight." Now he kept his eyes away from the window, fixing them on the hammock.

Juniper laid her head overtop Fir's and looked at the sky which gave him so much anguish. "If it's too much, you don't have to keep flying to the sta—"

Fir jumped so quickly he nearly hit Juniper's chin. She jerked back just in time, coming to sit under the painting as he stood up. Outside the clouds shifted, letting a slice of weak moonlight illuminate his newfound trepidation.

"By the teeth of the Great Ice Dragon, don't say that!" He yelped. "I have to see the stars, there's no other way. I can't – I can't..."

He can't lose hope on going back to his tribe. In a moment of clarity, Juniper felt the world slide into place. He's terrified he'll never return home.

The worst part was that Juniper couldn't see any way to allay his fear. No known route existed to the Distant Kingdoms, and Fir's last attempt almost cost him his life. Still, she should say something to comfort him. Maybe an encouragement that he'll find a way. She opened her mouth –

– and instantly snapped it shut. She knew how little empty promises meant in the face of a hollow heart. It was something talking couldn't fix.

Instead Juniper wordlessly embraced Fir, flaring her wings to block the window. He visibly relaxed, and returned the hug.

“Thank you.” He whispered.

“No problem, I understand.” They twined their tails together.

“Let me guess why.” Fir slowly moved to the painting, admiring the picture. “You feel responsible for Cassava's death, and for the current Hivewing threat. All because one of them left that clearing early, knowing Willowwood still exists.”

“Mother and Azalea did their best to convince me otherwise. Feel free to give it a go.” She braced herself.

“I don't think I will.” Fir's refusal surprised Juniper. “You're right, it's been a long day. We should both get some sleep.” He plodded next to the hammock and made himself cozy on the floor.

“Isn't that uncomfortable?” She asked.

“Not really. Many in my tribe sleep on ice shelves, and they're practically identical to the floor.” He yawned.

“Well it won't work for me.” Juniper approached the ends of the rope keeping the hammock afloat, undoing the knots as Fir watched confused. The woven

leaf fell to the floor, unfurling into a spacious mat. She parked the impromptu mattress next to him and curled up atop it, scooting nearer to Fir until their wings brushed.

“Good night Fir.” She drowsily closed her eyes.

“Good night Juniper.” Came the sleepy reply.

The moonlight fully receded from the windowsill, leaving the room in peaceful dark.

Chapter 25 – 4254

The dark clouds Fir flew through in his dream were anything but peaceful. The stars made sure of that. Where before they remained constantly out of reach, now they pursued him as he descended through the clouds.

Fir nosedived to gain more distance, steadying his tail to keep balance. Despite the burst of speed, insidious whispers from above caught up to his ears.

Coward. Traitor. Coward. Traitor. It incessantly thrummed, words morphing into solid tendrils that grabbed at his wings and tail.

“Get off me!” Fir thrashed against his restraints in vain. They steadily lifted him up towards piercing lights in the sky that tore away the clouds, denying him any cover.

Coward! Traitor! Coward! Traitor! His ears felt like they were going to burst. The stars' cold indifference turned into white-hot fury as he approached, roaring to a crescendo –

– until he opened his eyes and breathed a sigh of relief.

Sunlight. It was just sunlight filling the room from corner to corner as it spilled through the window. Fir woozily blinked and looked around. He was sprawled on the floor, cheek squished against the green floorboards.

No, scratch that. Wood wasn't green. What was he on?

Fir peered down and saw that he was on an unrolled hammock, the leafen weave rustling as he ran a claw over it. Satisfied with the answer he moved his other claw to stand up.

It didn't budge.

Confused again, Fir turned to the other side where his claw refused to move. He groggily looked over his shoulder and froze, mouth parting into a surprised 'o'. Then it shifted into a warm smile.

Talons wrapped around his own, Juniper lay curled up next to his side. Their wings rested on each other's back while their tails remained tightly twined together. Fir settled back down, pressing up against her. He was content to remain comfortable like this for just a while longer, basked in afternoon light.

The afternoon. Today. Elder Rowan is announcing the plan today afternoon!
Three moons, I have to get up!

The Leafwing sleeping next to him wouldn't make it easy. But Fir had once untangled himself from a tree; how hard could Juniper be?

Very hard, as it turned out.

Beginning with his tail, Fir slowly unwound it from Juniper's, being careful not to cut her with his spikes. Unfortunately from time to time she'd shift and stretch languorously in her sleep, forcing him to stop and time his movements. But eventually he finally untwined his tail from her's.

Compared to the task before, removing his wings was trivial. He simply lifted them up and away from the Leafwing. The same could not be said about Juniper's wings on him. With no other option Fir gently nudged them back onto herself. Every twitch of her wings slapped his snout like a heavy wind, but he finished nonetheless.

Lastly he turned to his trapped arm, its jailor sleeping contentedly. Fir twisted his claw back and forth, prying out of Juniper's grip. Once he was free he'd wake her up too. With one more tug he slid his claw clear, and moved a talon to poke the Leafwing awake.

"Juniper? Are you awake?" Fir quietly asked.

She didn't stir. "Juniper?" He moved closer until their snouts touched. "You need to wa—"

Juniper's eyes snapped open.

"BOO!"

Fir shrieked.

He flew into the air, wings panickedly flapping until he hit the ceiling. Breath knocked out of his lungs, Fir fell like a stone and landed on the floor with a *whumpf*.

"What in the snow monsters..." He breathed, looking up to find Juniper grinning back at him, putting a claw to her snout as her face turned bright red. Fir continued to stare, causing a small squeak to escape from her mouth. At that point the dam broke.

“BWAH! BWAHAHA!” Juniper exploded in laughter with tears in her eyes, slamming a claw to the floor as she rolled off the hammock mat in shaking fits.

Juniper was awake this whole time. She’d been toying with him!

“Seriously?” Fir growled, on his feet in a flash. He towered over the prone Leafwing and shot her a simmering glare. She took one look at him and descended into giggles.

“You should have seen the look on your face!” Juniper guffawed, trying and failing to stand with trembling talons. “You sounded like a baby dragonet, it was priceless!”

“Hm.” Fir strode to the door with his last shred of pride, refusing to pay Juniper’s antics any more attention.

“Where are you going?” She stopped laughing.

“Outside, of course.” He rolled his eyes at her. “To hear the Elder’s plan.”

Juniper’s eyes grew to the size of moons as she stood up in an instant. “His plan. I – I forgot...”

“Clearly.” Fir snarked. “So if you don’t mind I’m going to–”

“We’re going to be late!” Juniper whizzed past him, rushing out the door.

“Hey! Wait for me!” He galloped behind.

“Time waits for no one!” Her tail swished over the corner before slithering out of view.

“But you can!” Fir slid through the hallway and skidded into the kitchen, seeing Juniper furiously rummage through the pantry. She pulled out two pouches and threw one at him.

“What’s this?”

“Dragonberries.” She stepped to the door. “We can eat them on the fly.”

The pair burst outside and took flight into the trees, effortlessly zigzagging through branches in between bites. Fir let his instincts take over navigation as he pondered the upcoming announcement. What plan will Elder Rowan pick?

Personally, Fir expected him to favor Hickory’s plan. Training an entire village was a tall order even with help from all the guards, especially when the alternative required far fewer dragons.

He wondered how those messengers would be selected. Hickory probably had a list of volunteers ready to undertake such a mission. The village would surely celebrate their bravery and loyalty.

No one celebrates cowards and traitors. Especially not your tribe. Especially not you.

Fir didn’t need this right now. He turned his attention to the dragonberries, enjoying their delicious taste instead.

But the inexorable thoughts returned, relentless in their demands.

Return home, prove your devotion to your true home. Don’t fear the storm!

On cue a strong gust of wind blew east towards the coast. Fir let it fill his wings, sagging to the right of Juniper as the two drew closer to the Elder’s treehouse.

They heard their destination before they saw it. A trickle of sound falling from above, teasing strands of noise Fir struggled to hear. Finally he weaved through a cover of leaves, and stopped. He wouldn't have to strain his ears any longer.

Before him sprawled two hundred Leafwings in the largest village gathering he'd ever seen. They surrounded the Elder's treehouse, filling the front entrance and dotting the balconies and rooftops above. Beyond that the crowd continued upon the connected walkways and platforms, as well as within the willow trees that jutted from all sides.

The drizzles of voices from before exploded into torrents of conversation, each droplet full with tense anticipation. Fir tuned in to a few of them as he and Juniper perched some distance away.

"...ava's funeral is tonight. I still can't believe he's gone..."

"...lot less to buy in the market, foragers afraid of venturing too far..."

"...Queen Sequoia will protect us, we just need to get to her..."

"...cut off from the outside, we can only rely on ourselves..."

"By the trees." Juniper breathlessly looked at the throngs of her fellow villagers. "Virtually the whole village is here."

"Do you see anyone we know?"

"No." He scanned the many Leafwings in attendance but couldn't find any familiar faces. Juniper, Sumac, Tupelo; if they were in attendance, they were hidden under sheer numbers.

But no amount of numbers could ever hide Fir, his Icewing scales as conspicuous as always.

A few Leafwings on the nearby trees noticed his and Juniper's arrival, causing them to quickly fly over.

"Hey," one of them said to Fir, "you and Juniper were at that meeting last night right?"

Seeing him nod, the villager continued. "What's Elder Rowan going to choose? Do you know?"

"No idea." Juniper answered, deflating their hopeful looks. "He sent us out to make the final decision alone. We're as in the dark as you are."

Another Leafwing spoke up with worry in her eyes. "But you know how to fight Hivewings, right?" She shyly asked.

"A little bit." He winked to a chuckling audience. Even Juniper smiled as she rolled her eyes.

"So how do you fight them?" She asked. "I mean I'd rather avoid it if I can, but just in case..." the villager trailed off.

Juniper raised a claw comfortingly, facing the small audience that had formed. "The first thing you need to know about Hivewings are that they're fast and lean. That makes them difficult to hit, and hard to escape from.

"But the real threat is from their stingers." Fir took the lead. "Some of them will have them on their tails – and wrists, according to the library books. Be careful when dodging, and don't get pinned down."

Their answers made the villagers more nervous. They muttered anxiously as the Leafwing who'd first greeted them stepped forward.

"That... doesn't sound so good for us." He rubbed his neck. "Speed? Venom? It's not like we have frostbreath too. How do we deal with that?"

“Stealth.” Fir pointed his tail to the surrounding foliage. “Use the trees for sneak attacks and cover. Hivewings don’t know these willows like you do.”

“Like *we* do.” Juniper bumped his side. “You’re not a stranger anymore, Fir. You’re one of us!” The villagers whooped in agreement.

Traitor. Fir felt his blood chill.

Juniper discreetly nudged him again. *Hey, it’s ok.* She silently reassured before speaking. “And don’t forget to get creative. Spears and claws aren’t your only weapon. Nets and lamps work too, they’ll never see it coming!”

Before she could continue, silence swept through the crowd. Heads swiveled to the front entrance with hushed interest as Fir confusedly followed suit. At the base of the treehouse the door opened with a haunting creak that reverberated among all present.

The next moment, Elder Rowan emerged.

A smattering of gasps erupted at the sight of him. Even from a distance, Fir’s sharp eyesight could clearly see that the old Leafwing had not slept last night. His wrinkled red eyes scanned across the stunned audience as he tiredly stepped outside. All eyes on him, the Elder cleared his throat for a long moment and took a deep breath.

“Leafwings of Willowwood.” He began. “I first would like to thank each and every one of you for bearing with me in these uncertain times. It is never easy to wait, so I am grateful for your patience.”

He rubbed his eyes from the harsh sunlight. “As you know, two proposals were put forward with the intention of protecting our village for whatever may come. Both were furiously debated in last night’s meeting, among trusted and experienced dragons.” Fir swore the Elder looked at him when he said that.

“After hearing their arguments I spent the night deliberating alone, as you may have noticed from looking at me.” Elder Rowan faintly chuckled. “And now I have come with my decision.”

The crowd shuffled forward, necks craned and ears raised as hundreds of dragons held their breaths.

“Between sending more messengers to reach Queen Sequoia’s palace or retaining all our villagers to train into guards, I, Elder Rowan, choose...”

Fir tightened his grip on the branch he perched on.

“...both.”

The air exploded with surprised whispers. Fir looked at Juniper, who stared back with equal bewilderment.

“Head steward Hickory and guard captain Hornbeam have assembled a stealth team comprised of our swiftest messengers and bravest guards to reach Queen Sequoia’s southern palace undetected. For the sake of speed and secrecy, they’ve already left a few hours ago.” He stopped to let them digest the news.

“...explains why I didn’t see them today...”

“...could’ve told us sooner so we could say goodbye...”

“Spirits of the forest, watch over them.” Juniper whispered a quick blessing.

Fir hesitated. He didn’t think the Great Ice Dragon liked helping other tribes. Would it be sacrilegious to try? Doubt kept him paralyzed as the Leafwings around wished good luck for the team.

Good luck. Come back home. Fir looked to the skies and silently gave a blessing. No one could argue with that; he certainly didn't.

Coward. The sky whispered.

Fir jerked his head down and bit back a snarl. It was afternoon– the stars weren't even out yet!

“However, their departure does not excuse us from our responsibility,” the Elder continued, “which is to protect our home and each other. If the worst comes to pass, we will – we *must* – defend ourselves. The village guards will organize both a firefighting and basic combat training program on the walkway platforms, open to all adults. Don't worry, spears will be provided.”

Worried bubbled through the audience like water over a fire. Elder Rowan cooled it with more words. “For most, staying alert, trained and ready within Willowwood is all you will need to do. But I know many of you must leave the village boundaries, and venture deep into the woods. I am, of course, referring to the foragers.”

Juniper slightly paled. Fir put a wing around her, his turn now to wordlessly comfort her.

The Elder held up a claw. “I promise I have no intention to restrict foraging. Instead, for the time being, foragers will travel in larger groups – with guards – for safety. And remember: if a group encounters Hivewings, they are to *retreat immediately*.”

Fir nudged Juniper for emphasis. “Should I repeat what he said?”

She put a claw on his mouth and pushed him back. “Hush, you.”

Elder Rowan took a step back. “For now, that is all. Hornbeam and Hickory will help in these new training and foraging rules. I will be available in the

evening. Until then, stay strong. By the power of Clear sight and the forests, this will end soon." With that he yawned and went back inside.

Things moved swiftly after that. The two Leafwings materialized from the crowd and began directing dragons to various platforms with hasty efficiency.

"Well, there goes my foraging plans." Juniper remarked, glancing at the stream of departing Leafwings.

"What will you do now?" He asked.

"Find a group," she spread her wings, "then go from there. But first I need to get baskets and jars from home. How about you?"

Fir felt a small breeze guide him to an answer. "I'm going to go flying over the coast to..." He felt her gaze burn into him. "...scout for Hivewings?"

Juniper looked unconvinced. "You really think that 'scouting' will be good for you?"

He fidgeted. "It'll clear my head."

"Training can do the same." She countered.

"I don't need to train." Fir huffed.

"But the villagers do." Juniper crossed her arms. "And they need your experience."

"They could use yours too." He accused.

"Not really. You did most of the fighting that night." She began to hover back, looking away.

Fir deadpanned. "Your idea to use my spikes turned the tide of battle. You defeated Dauber, and landed an axe hit on Cardinal where I couldn't."

"Sorry, can't hear you! I'm off to forage." Juniper covered her ears.

"Wait!" He almost fell off the branch. "Don't –"

"Promise me you'll train! Bye!" With that the Leafwing dove away into the crowd.

" – avoid the question." Fir finished. He sighed. Him and Juniper would have words later.

Infuriatingly, she was still right. Staying to help train would do Willowwood more good than flying off. With a resigned flick of his tail he took flight, wandering through the crowd until he found a platform.

It didn't take long to find one. Two walkways later he found himself landing on a platform, joining eight other loitering Leafwings. They looked at him like dragonets gazing at Among-The-Evergreen's temple to the Great Ice Dragon for the first time; with awe, respect, and relief.

"Thank the trees!" One of them exclaimed. "It's Fir the Icewing. He'll teach us how to fight!"

"Wait, what?" He stepped back. "I think you're mistaken. I'm not teaching–"

"There you are!" A voice from above made him turn. From a tangle of willow branches a familiar friend burst forth, her father carefully trailing behind.

"Hi Azalea, Aspen." Fir greeted them both.

“Hi Fir!” Azalea chirped back. She wore a small pouch which jostled as she paced excitedly. “So, what are we learning today? I’m guessing claw-to-claw combat since there aren’t any spears, right?”

“Three moons – no no no.” Fir shushed her. “I’m not here to teach anything.” *I’m here to watch on the sidelines, and figure out how to not feel guilty staying here.*

“That’s surprising.” Aspen landed, noticing his daughter’s crestfallen face. “We all assumed you would teach with the guards, given your history.”

“Elder Rowan said it himself. The guards will teach, and I’m not a guard.” Fir felt his spikes ruffle. Why was everyone dumping jobs onto him all of a sudden?

Before he could fume further another set of wingbeats approached from below, revealing itself to belong to Hornbeam. He carried several boxes with his arms, legs, and tail.

“Ah, Fir. How convenient.” The guard captain set down one of the boxes with a relieved clatter, pausing to take a breath.

“Stressful morning?” Fir inquired.

“Hectic doesn’t even begin to describe it.” Hornbeam tiredly lamented.

“Crafting and distributing the spears is already a hassle. Adding teaching on that is going to wear us to the bone.” He shrugged. “But we all have our jobs to do, and so it must be done.”

The guard looked at the group of villagers behind Fir with interest. “Speaking of jobs, are you going anywhere soon?”

“Not really.” Fir didn’t like where the conversation was going. “But I don’t think I should–”

“Excellent!” Hornbeam cut him off, thrusting a box of spears into his arms. “We guards are stretched thin as is with the stealth team and foraging escorts. This platform group is all yours to instruct.”

“Hold on!” Fir protested as the Leafwing flew off. “This is your job, not mine!”

“It is now.” Hornbeam called back, vanishing into the foliage.

“Great. Just great.” He muttered under his breath, turning around to face the expectant class. They excitedly stared back.

“Very well.” Fir exhaled, gesturing to the box. “Take a spear and gather round.”

“Ooh I can’t wait!” Azalea was the first to take one, twirling it in her claws before the wooden end hit her snout. She held it more carefully after that.

“Have you ever used a spear before?” He asked her with a growing sense of dread.

“Erm, no.” She bashfully admitted. “I never had to. None of us had to.” The rest of the Leafwings nodded in agreement.

Fir forgot this tribe didn’t mandate combat training like the Ice Kingdom did. That’ll make things significantly harder. But he didn’t want to deal with this now. He had to put his errant thoughts to rest and reconsider a way to get home – not play pretend as a classroom teacher!

“Well, at least you know which way to hold it.” Fir picked one up for himself, recalling combat lessons taught years ago. He could run a short Icewing training regimen. Might as well get this over with.

“Alright then, let’s begin with posture.” He assumed a standard attack stance, standing up on his back legs with his head ducked low. His left talons hovered in front while his right talons gripped the spear, which he held close. Then he arched his wings on either side and poised his tail to the left.

“This is a combat stance. It allows for fast attacks meant to overwhelm your opponent – like so.” Fir lunged forward and slashed his spear along a wide arc in front of the gawking group.

“But, what if we can’t move that fast?” Azalea looked unsure, as did Aspen and a couple of older villagers.

He swept his tail to the floor around them. “Practice makes perfect. Get to it!”

Fir spent the next few minutes watching the Leafwings do the former, and get no closer to the latter. Forget perfection; they weren’t even passable.

Azalea had speed but lacked balance, her awry spear skidding and dipping with every move. Aspen’s problem was the opposite. His steady movements were too slow and easy to read. Everyone else had a mix of those two issues, exacerbated by simple inexperience.

“Enough!” Fir halted Azalea as her spear slipped from her talons. “Do you know what you’re doing wrong?”

“Um... maybe?” She offered.

“You lack balance, your footwork is sloppy, and your spear is wobbling like a leaf in the wind. How do you expect to hit anything?” He exposed her weaknesses one by one. Azalea remained silent, her head down.

“Train harder and fix your mistakes.” Fir picked up her spear and handed it back.

“But I can’t.” She looked up.

“Why not?” He snarled.

“Because this combat stance is impossible!” Azalea exclaimed. The Leafwings behind her looked just as exasperated.

“Wrong. It’s very much possible.” He assumed the stance again to show her.

“For *you*, Fir. But not for us.”

“Explain.”

Azalea pointed to his back claws. “The legs you’re standing on; they’re different to ours.” She raised her own to highlight the difference. While Fir’s feet arched upwards, the Leafwing’s were splayed flat.

“We can’t stand in that posture like you can. It’s *physically* impossible.” Azalea continued. “And none of us have ever even *used* a spear before, of course we won’t be able to handle it like you can.”

Frustration gnawed at the edges of Fir’s talons. All he wanted to do was get this training over with as smoothly as possible.

“Like I said. Practice makes perfect.” He recited. “I’m in charge, not you.”

Azalea narrowed her eyes. Before she could say anything Aspen came up and put a wing on her shoulder, causing her to relent.

“Fine.” She didn’t look at Fir. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Good.” He took flight. “After some time, break off into sparring groups and train against each other. I’ll be leaving for a bit.”

“Wait, you’re leaving?” A villager called as he left. “What about us?”

What about me? Fir angrily thought to himself. *What about the stars that won't shut up? What about getting back to my tribe? What about not dying far from home?* He bit back a snarl.

Fir cleared the canopy and emerged into open air, its emptiness a complete contrast to the chaotic bustle below. The sky would clear his mind. With a possible Hivewing attack on the horizon, he'd need any peace he could get.

Hopefully the stealth team will bring reinforcements before anything happens. They could keep Willowwood safe, and he could focus on traveling.

But what if they don't arrive? The thought crept through his mind, spreading shivering fear through his bones. He'd have to fight. Everyone would have to fight. Azalea, Aspen and every other Leafwing.

They'd get torn to shreds.

Fir staggered mid-flight, inhaling sharply. By the teeth of the Great Ice Dragon, what was he doing? Willowwood could be attacked. Dragons he knew could be attacked. He had to prepare them.

Instead he ran away!

"Three moons!" Fir shouted. "I'm a hypocrite!" The empty clouds said nothing in return. He immediately dove back into the forest, ready for a second go.

Fir found the platform not long after. Without him the Leafwings had broken off into meandering groups, only a few continuing to halfheartedly train. They looked up as he landed on all fours.

"Well, look who's back." A familiar dragon sauntered up to him. "Rejoice! Our glorious teacher has returned from his great voyage, let us bow down to him and- "

"Azalea, you're right."

“-what?”

“You’re right.” He said it again louder, gaining the attention of the whole platform. “About the stance, and the spears, and what I’m trying to teach.”

“I tried to teach you to fight like Icewings because it was easier for me, even though it could never work.” Fir continued. “So if you – if all of you – are okay with it, I’d like to try again. I promise I’ll do better.”

Silence reigned in the air. Fir held his breath.

“What?” Azalea echoed.

He looked at her confused. “Didn’t you hear what I said? Should I repeat it?”

“Yes, please do.” She gave him an innocent smile. “I’d gladly accept you humbling yourself before me again.” With that she and the rest of the villagers laughed.

“By the ice spirits,” Fir rubbed his eyes, “you’re just like Juniper.”

“I agree that an altered training regimen would be beneficial.” Aspen sidled next to him. “So where do we begin?”

“I’m not sure.” He admitted. “But I’m sure we can find something. Perhaps I could teach a more defensive stance, focusing on movement through trees”

“Using our strengths to our advantage.” Azalea nodded. “I like that. By the way, if we’re changing things up could we possibly use deadly insects as weapons too?”

He did a double take. “Deadly insects?”

“Yep!” She hefted her pouch. “I picked up a few from the store before we came. I have bullet ants, bombardier beetles, even a citrus striped centipede! Wanna see?”

Fir jumped back. “No no no no no. No thanks.” He grinned. “But still, good idea.”

I can teach them to hold their own. Then I can go home.

Chapter 26 – 4831

“Are you sure you don’t want to go home?” Juniper asked the newest (and youngest) member of the foraging group

Sumac confidently shook his head. “Nope!”

She tried again. “There are other groups with dragonets your age. Everyone here is an adult, you’ll be lonely.”

“Sumac wants to be in the same group as you.” Tupelo informed Juniper as he picked his son up. “After you dropped him off yesterday, the foraging trip was all he could talk about.”

Juniper racked her mind for something else. “Still, don’t you two have a cafe to run?”

“Technically yes.” He sighed. “Although ever since the fishing competition, business has dried up. There hasn’t been a single customer since yesterday.”

“Oh.” She dejectedly replied, looking for a way out of the conversation. Juniper’s plan was simple: find a group full of strangers, mind her own business, and forage at a distance, peacefully alone for the day.

Recently, seeing dragons she cared about didn’t make her feel well. Especially when their problems were her fault. Her scales began to itch despite the cool air of the forest floor.

“But I’m sure they’ll come back soon.” Tupelo continued. “If anything, this is just a shopping trip before that happens.”

“Juniper said shopping and foraging are completely different.” Sumac proudly announced. “You need to find value in *everything*, Dad.” He wagged a talon.

Tupelo tousled the dragonet’s frills. “Already a master forager, are you?” He playfully asked before his expression became serious. “Speaking of foraging, when do we leave? I think our group is ready.” Said group milled about in front of them, making small talk as they waited. Juniper took a closer look.

Along with her, Sumac, and Tupelo, five other Leafwings formed their foraging group. Two of those villagers were guards, laxly gripping sharp wood spears. One of those guards noticed Juniper staring and glanced at her. She froze.

Now her group had one less stranger in it.

The guard Juniper had fed sleeping berries to, the one who guarded Fir alongside Hornbeam, hurried towards her with venomous recognition dawning on her face.

“You.” She hissed, stopping just in front of Juniper. “What are the odds.”

“Juniper, do you know this dragon?” Tupelo asked, looking between them back and forth. “Who is she?”

The guard turned to him. "My name is Laurel. I was one of the guards watching over Fir the Icewing, until *someone* here tricked me."

Laurel had been so kind the night she broke Fir out, even calling her "sweetheart". The transformation from that dragon to this figure made Juniper recoil.

"I had to break Fir out. He was innocent, and we wouldn't have stopped the fire without him." She defended.

"You could've given us one of your speeches about how he was good." Laurel snorted. "Convince Hornbeam and I like you did with everyone else. But nooo, lie through your teeth and leave me snoring in the cells while all the excitement happens outside!"

Her outburst left the whole group speechless. Everyone but Sumac. "So what?" He piped up. "Juniper can't undo what she did. Why're you still so grouchy?"

"Im 'grouchy,'" Laurel narrowed her eyes, "since I want an apology."

Out of all the things Juniper expected her to say, this was the last on her list. Before she could respond, wingbeats from above drew everyone's attention. A few moments later Hickory landed, flushed red from head to tail.

"Good afternoon Oleander, Laurel." The head steward greeted both guards.

"Good afternoon!"

"Afternoon." The latter grumbled.

If Hickory noticed Laurel's displeasure, she didn't show it. "Are you waiting for anyone else before leaving?"

“No.” Tupelo answered.

Hickory shrugged. “Then feel free to go. We’ve just finished delivering spears to every training group. Did you know Fir’s teaching on one such platform? Forests bless him – the guards are already stretched thin as is.”

Juniper wondered how the Icewing felt after she left abruptly. Knowing Fir, he probably wasn’t happy.

“It’s settled, then.” Laurel turned, bitterly eyeing Juniper. “Let’s get going.”

She could worry about Fir later. Right now she had more pressing concerns.

Hickory departed soon after, leaving the foraging group to set off into the forest. They’d only walked for a minute before Laurel resumed her harangue.

“So: an apology. Out with it already.” She pressed.

“Why do you want one so badly?” Sumac interjected, glaring at the guard from his perch on Tupelo.

“Because I deserve one!” Laurel whipped back to Juniper. “Tell me, do you know how long we were unconscious from those berries?”

“Um... fifteen minutes? Half an hour?” Juniper fidgeted under her darkening stare. She had a feeling her answers were very, very wrong.

“Seven. Hours.” Laurel spat. “I was out for the whole night.”

“So was Hornbeam.” Sumac countered. “And he’s nowhere near as grumpy as you.”

Laurel’s tail lashed. “Of course he isn’t. Why would he? Hornbeam landed on the table. Don’t you remember, Juniper?”

The events of that night replayed themselves in her memory as the guard narrated. “While Hornbeam dozed peacefully on his chair, I fell on the floor. It would certainly explain why I woke up on it.”

Laurel continued as Juniper remained silent. “Turns out, sleeping on a cold hard surface with your entire body pressed on your left wing isn’t exactly the healthiest position. It tends to cut off blood flow, making you unable to fly for days. Days!” She shouted.

Juniper discreetly tried to step away, only for Laurel to close the distance. “Why didn’t you sit me back up? You could’ve at least rolled me off my wing!” The guard’s spear dipped dangerously low.

“That will be quite enough.” Tupelo strode in between them.

“I disagree.” She hissed. “Especially when this is clearly *all her fault*.”

Juniper flinched as if struck, the words more piercing than a spear. Tupelo worriedly glanced at her reaction and flared his wings, obscuring her view from Laurel.

“I said that is enough.”

“Yeah! Leave Juniper alone!” Sumac pitched in.

Laurel growled. “Fine. But before this foraging trip is over, I will come back for what I deserve.” From behind the cover of Tupelo’s wings, Juniper saw her silhouette grow smaller alongside her talonsteps. It looked like the guard was moving to the other end of the group – not that she was complaining.

“I hope she didn’t bother you too much.” Tupelo turned with a comforting expression. “Out of all the guards our group could have. What bad luck.”

“I knew I should've joined a different group.” Juniper lamented, regretting every decision she'd made up to that point. “Then all this could've been avoided.” If only she didn't immediately leave to forage, or stay after seeing Laurel, or...

Sumac crouched and leapt off Tupelo, landing on her snout (and cutting off her thoughts). “Now you're the one being grouchy.” He hooked his talons underneath the sides of her mouth and lifted up, giving her a makeshift smile. It remained even after he let go.

“If you went to a different group, Laurel would still be grumpy. She'd still try to make you sad. But here, you have *me!*” The dragonet sang as he clambered over Juniper's head, finally settling on her neck. “Let's go foraging!”

“Ok, ok.” She chuckled. “We'll get going. Tupelo, are you coming with us?”

“No thanks.” The older Leafwing turned down her offer. “I'll stay closer to the main group. Remember what I told you Sumac: don't wander too far off!”

“I won't.” He promised, puffing out his chest.

Tupelo turned to Juniper. “Make sure he doesn't.”

She nodded. “I will, I promise.”

With a satisfied nod Tupelo quickened his pace, joining the main group ahead. Juniper immediately veered left into a dense thicket, ready to begin work at last.

“So Sumac, have anything to forage in mind?”

The dragonet shook his head. “Dad already has ingredients, so no.”

“In that case,” She looked around, “what do you say we pick some roses?”

“Roses? Where?”

Juniper grinned and tossed her head. “Right here! We’re at the edge of a rose bush patch.” She could feel Sumac’s eyes widen as verdant red petals peeked out from the tangled undergrowth, enticingly beckoning them to come closer.

“So pretty...” He murmured, shifting forward atop Juniper. “Let’s go!”

“Ah ah ah.” She stopped Sumac before he could jump off. “Be careful of thorns. They can draw blood if you’re not careful.”

“You sound like dad.” He slowly slid down Juniper’s side and warily approached the tangle of brambles.

“Guilty as charged.” Juniper waded into the thicket. Minutes passed as they both quietly worked.

“So Juniper,” Sumac broke the silence, “what are we going to do with these roses?” He leaned into a bush, both arms swallowed up by foliage as he rummaged determinedly. A few seconds later he pulled out a shredded clawful of red petals, and frowned dejectedly.

“We,” Juniper hop-stepped deeper into the shrubs until they came up to her shoulders, “are going to make a bouquet.”

“A bowcket?” Sumac stopped searching, looking at her confused.

“A *bouquet*.” She enunciated, “It’s an arrangement of flowers meant as a decoration or gift.”

“Ooooooh.” Sumac nodded. “So that’s what they’re called. The florists always had those bunches of blossoms and–” he cut off, looking apprehensive.

“What’s wrong?” Juniper slithered her tail into a gap between errant thorns, carefully tugging them aside.

“Don’t bouquets need different kinds of flowers? The ones the stalls sold were always so colorful.”

“That’s true.” She admitted, probing a claw towards the rose stems. With a triumphant tug she cleanly pulled out a pair of fresh roses. “I know! We’ll make something else.”

“Like what?” Sumac excitedly asked.

Juniper remembered her time with Father as she confidently answered. “We’ll take some nearby leaves, braid it with the rose stems, and make a–”

Suddenly she stiffened, crushing the petals between her talons. The roses fell from her grip, disappearing into the thicket as she stumbled back. The next moment a stinging pain shot up from her feet and through her underscales. Juniper looked down, and saw the lower half of her body trapped in bleeding thorns.

“–laurel.” She whispered, feeling herself being swallowed up by the brambles below.

“Juniper?” Sumac worriedly called out. “You went quiet at the end. What did you say?”

“I – I said we’ll make a laurel.” Juniper felt her throat dip. Luckily she still spoke loud enough for the dragonet to hear. “It’s a braid you wear on your head. Keep foraging.”

“Ok.” Sumac didn’t notice the rose barbs wrapped around her. He quietly went back to picking. She thanked the trees for that – the last thing she wanted was for him to get worried too.

Bursts of prickling pain between Juniper's scales made her bite back a hiss. Every movement made the thorns dig deeper, as if to discourage her from escaping. It worked. With a resigned huff she went still, remaining trapped but no longer in pain. Sumac could collect the rest of the roses.

"Juniper? I need help." The dragonet's plea shattered that idea. "It's too hard to get past the thorns. How do I avoid them like you?"

The barbs covering her legs seemed to snicker in the breeze. "Just be careful," she encouraged, "and listen to the wind to know when they'll move."

Sumac cocked his head to the side, closing his eyes as he did what she said. "I don't hear anything, it's all quiet." His eyes snapped open. "Wait, where's everyone else?"

In her worries over Laurel and getting trapped in the bushes, Juniper had completely forgotten to stay with their foraging group! She'd promised Tupelo she wouldn't let Sumac wander too far; look at how that turned out.

"By the trees." Juniper bitterly muttered, looking down at her leafy restraints. She had to get out of the rose bushes and lead Sumac back to the others.

All she had to do was untangle herself. Juniper was a forager; she knew the forest like the back of her claw. How hard could some bushes be?

Very hard, as it turned out.

Juniper began taking confident steps, boldly moving out of the thicket. But the farther she moved the tighter the thorns pressed until they became too much to bear. Finally with a strangled yelp she backpedaled, all her progress sacrificed in an instant.

That was why her next attempt at escape took a different approach. This time, Juniper would move very slowly so as to not aggravate more pain. Hope

refreshed, she tried again. Inch by inch she took tiny steps towards the path, where Sumac waited there impatiently.

“Come on Juniper!” He tapped his tail. “Our group’s probably halfway to the beach by now.”

“Patience, Sumac, is a forager’s best friend.” She kept her eyes down, focused on avoiding the ensnaring branches. It grew increasingly difficult the further she moved. More and more bushes appeared in her way, creating a menacing forest of thorns. Fresh plumes of pinpricks alerted Juniper to the new barbs caught on her leg, which added to the growing pressure on her legs.

Finally, a mistake. Juniper misstepped and overshot her claw, burying it in a spiky shrub.

“Ow!” She reared up, clutching her hissing hand. Now on two legs, Juniper stumbled away from the path as her wings flailed. She felt herself teetering to the side, threatening to fall deeper into the thicket. With a desperate push she thrust herself back onto four legs, and found herself right where she started.

Sumac watched blankly. “Juniper, are you stuck?”

“No!” She tried to raise her talons for a thumbs up, but found it too difficult to move.

“You’re stuck.”

“Perhaps. But don’t worry!” Juniper reassured. “I’ll find a way out and carefully escape.” She began to try again.

“That’s not going to work.” Sumac paced back and forth.

“Yes it will.” She insisted.

“No it won’t.”

“Then what else do you propose?” She harrumphed.

The dragonet leapt into the air. “You need to jump!”

“Jump?” Juniper looked at the thorns binding her to the forest floor. Such an idea sounded absurd.

“If you try to be *careful* and *slow*,” Sumac drawled, “the bushes will trap you and pull you back in. Instead you need to jump and break free!” He flew into the air as Juniper watched enviously.

Despite her jealousy, she had to admit Sumac had a point. Wallowing through the thicket had tried and failed, but quickly ripping free might succeed. The thought of “ripping” made Juniper’s scales shudder. She didn’t want to think about how much it could hurt.

“Go on Juniper, jump!” Sumac heckled. “Dad’s probably worried where I am!”

My promise to Tupelo, right. With a deep inhale, Juniper steeled herself. Then he catapulted into the air.

For the first moment, she felt as weightless as a feather. Next came countless popping sensations that rushed into her talons, flowing past her claws and through her underbelly before abruptly cutting away. In its wake came a dull buzzing pain, but it strangely didn’t bother Juniper.

Instead she floated back onto the path, joining a celebrating Sumac. Once she landed the two began hurrying forward towards the group, doing their best to make up for lost time.

“See? All you had to do was jump away from the pit.” Sumac clambered onto Juniper as she took flight, gliding faster through the forest.

“Indeed.” She admitted, marveling at how little the rapid exit had hurt. “It sure beats remaining stuck in thorns.”

“Yeah.” Sumac trailed off, lost in thought. “By the way, what’re you going to say to Laurel?”

“Oh, her.” From up ahead, Juniper heard faint voices. “I don’t regret what I did to free Fir, but I’m afraid how she’ll react if I tell that to her face.”

“Just jump through it.” Sumac advised. “Letting things stay like this will just make you all grouchy for longer.”

Juniper shook her head. “I don’t think so. A dragon and a thorn bush are two different things.” As the first Leafwings came into view she landed, letting Sumac hop off before looking for Tupelo. They didn’t have to search for long.

“There you are!” Tupelo emerged from behind a tree, clutching a bundle of reed grass and a satchel. “For a moment I thought you two ran away.”

“Who? Me?” Juniper gave him an easygoing smile. “I’d never run away.”

“You couldn’t.” Sumac wittily remarked. Juniper smothered his snout with her wing. He squirmed free and playfully darted around her, giggling as she tried to catch him.

Tupelo observed them with a mirthful gaze before frowning. “So, what *did* you two forage anyways?”

Juniper stopped and looked at her empty talons. “We were picking roses, but none of them were good enough to bring back.”

“Really?” The older Leafwing tilted his head, peering closer at her claws. Juniper hid them with her tail before he could notice the scratches.

“In that case, take this.” He handed the satchel to her. Curiosity piqued, she looked inside and found a glass jar rustling inside.

“The benefit of slow business is that I have a lot of time on my claws, time I like to spend experimenting with new recipes.” Tupelo explained. “I’m thinking of adding willow sap tea onto the menu, but I don’t know how to collect it.”

“Don’t worry.” Juniper slung the satchel over her back, feeling the jar rest on her shoulder. “I got you.”

“I got you now!” A familiar snarl emerged from her left, accompanied by a still hostile Laurel. “Now that you’re back, you have a few things to answer for.”

“I’m afraid Juniper can’t do that.” Tupelo defended. “She and my son are foraging willow sap for me.”

“Besides, collecting it is slow and time-consuming.” Juniper turned away to leave. “Good day, Laurel.”

The guard snorted. “Run away if you want. I’ll be waiting the next time you come back.” Ominous warning delivered, she sauntered away.

“Come on Sumac, let’s go.” Juniper handed him a jar as she surveyed the willows in front of her.

“What’ll you do the next time you come back?” He asked, turning the jar in his talons.

“I don’t know yet.” Approaching a particularly large willow tree, Juniper pressed her ear up to the bark and wrapped her wings around it until they covered half the trunk. As Sumac watched wide-eyed, she put a talon to her snout and closed her eyes, breathing softly.

Thrum.

Thrum.

Thrum.

“We’re in luck.” She stepped back. “This tree is full of sap we can harvest.”

“But how?” Sumac circled the tree with curiosity.

“Watch and learn.” Juniper ran a claw along the wood, talons lightly scraping the bark as she looked for an opening. She found one just under where the trunk sprouted off into a branch, where the bark was soft enough for her to pry open.

“Sumac? Come here please.” The dragonet hurried next to her. “Hold the jar just beneath my claws and keep it there.”

“Ok.” He nodded, lifting his arms over his head as he stretched to reach where she pointed.

“I’m going to cut through a part of the bark.” Juniper explained. “Once I do, sap will flow out like water. Let it fill into the jar when that happens and we can go back to Tupelo.” She began carefully cutting away.

“But if we go back to Dad, then we’ll be going back to Laurel too.” Sumac pointed out.

Juniper paused. “Yeah, that’s true.” She looked up to branches above her, thinking about the different paths to take.

On one talon, she could swallow her reservations and give Laurel the apology she wanted. But why should she? Sleeping berries were her best bet to break Fir out, and Azalea’s news of the fire was more important than sleep!

On the other talon, saying all of that to Laurel herself was something Juniper didn't want to go through. She didn't even want to *think* about how the furious guard would react to that.

"Juniper? My arms hurt." Sumac whined from below.

"Hold on." She nodded and absentmindedly resumed cutting, continuing to stew over what to do. Maybe she could compromise and half apologize? Say sorry for lying but not for propping her back up, or vice versa.

"Juniper, where's the sap? The jar's getting heavy – I can't keep it up for long."

Yet a half-apology would be flimsy and hard to defend, especially if Laurel presses for more. Still, it could work. A full apology or a compromised one: which to choose?

"Juniper!"

Sumac's cry snapped her back into focus. The sap – she had to release it! Without hesitation Juniper deftly cut into the willow, prying open loose bark until the first streams bursted out.

"There! Sumac, are you rea—" She looked down and froze.

The dragonet had fallen over, jar rolled off to the side.

Juniper gasped as the sap spilled onto the grass, absorbed by the dirt before disappearing into the soil. Her and Sumac watched in shocked silence as the stream lessened, until a few dribbles of sap crawled lazily down the bark. That too dried up, leaving them with nothing.

"Sumac!" She growled, causing the dragonet to shrink away. "How could you drop the jar? We wasted the whole tree because of you!"

“Me?” He indignantly cried. “You were the one going so slow!”

“You had one job.”

“But I told you the jar was too heavy!”

Juniper quirked an eye. “No you didn’t.”

“Yes I did!” Sumac stamped his tail on the ground. “I said I couldn’t lift the jar because it was too heavy! And what did you do? Waited until I fell!”

She opened her mouth to deny it, but no words came out.

“My arms were *shaking*!” He continued.

“I... I...” Juniper looked away. “I was preoccupied.”

“But yOu hAd onE jOb.” Sumac parroted before his face became sullen. “I thought foraging with you again would be fun. So much for that.”

“Sumac, wait!” Juniper took a step towards him, only for the dragonet to turn away.

He sat himself down a few willows away and looked up at the sky. “No, I don’t think I will.”

Juniper snatched the jar from the ground, contemplating throwing it at a tree. In the end she decided against it, instead curling up next to a tree.

Of course now I think about the sap, she glumly criticized herself. You’re a forager, for forest’s sake. Why can’t you focus?

The question was purely rhetorical and she knew it: Laurel – and the Hivewings. Fear of the former, alongside guilt over the latter. She felt so

scatterbrained because of them, waiting for her memory to wander through before ensnaring her–

–like thorns on a rose bush. Juniper stood up, feeling something slowly click. She rested a claw on the tree trunk for balance as her mind began to think – No, *that's how I get pulled back in.* She furiously shook her head. *Don't walk. Leap.*

Juniper strolled to where Sumac sat, who gave no reaction as she approached. “Sumac, are you sure you don't want to forage?” The dragonet remained silent, wings stiffly tucked away.

“I know, I know.” She shrugged. “Why bother again with sap?” Sumac faintly nodded, still faced away.

“A few years ago, I thought the same thing too.” Juniper began to narrate. “That's when I decided to drink some willow sap for myself.”

Sumac's ears perked up.

“One morning, while my father and I were out foraging, he found a tree bursting with sap. As he began to cut through the bark and into the sapwood, I kept my snout right behind the jar I held.” Juniper placed her ear on another willow and smiled. “So once the sap began to flow, I threw the jar away and opened my mouth as wide as it could go.”

Sumac smothered a giggle. Juniper lifted him from behind and placed the dragonet on her neck.

“Never in my life did I drink something so sweet. After that I pestered my father to go sap collecting again for weeks.” She pointed to the tree. “I'll tell you how to release the sap. How about it?”

“Yes!” Sumac flexed his talons. “I'll do it!”

“That’s all I need to hear.” Juniper walked up to the willow in question and stood up on two legs, jar held in one claw.

“Put your ear to the tree and listen.” She instructed, feeling Sumac lean forward. “Do you hear a soft thrum?”

“Yes.” Sumac excitedly whispered.

“Good. Now look at the bark and find any loose wood you can peel.” Juniper told him. A few seconds later she heard pieces of trunk hit the ground below.

“Juniper? Some sap is dripping down. What should I do?”

“Carve out a small circle with your talons.” She answered immediately, refusing to let her mind wander away. “Start with shallow cuts, and use those to go deeper.”

Minutes passed with only the sound of small claws scraping wood being heard. Juniper kept herself focused in the present, using the trails of sap traveling down the wood as an anchor.

Finally, Sumac shouted. “Woah!” On cue, Juniper held out the jar as a river of sap roared forth. The sound of it filling the glass was like music to her ears.

Until Sumac stuck his head into the stream.

“Ack! Phhflbflt!” He staggered back from the force of the sap, slipping down off Juniper.

“Sumac!” Her other claw let go of the tree to catch him, causing her to tip back and fall. They landed with a *whump*, the impact knocking the breath out of her lungs. Still, she aimed the jar as best she could while Sumac – now covered in sap – reopened his mouth.

Eventually the river stopped flowing, and Juniper checked the glass jar. Just over half of it had been filled with sap. The other half dripped on a dragonet who grinned from ear to ear.

“You were right.” Sumac licked his snout. “It is sweet.”

“I wonder what your dad is going to say,” Juniper chuckled. “when he takes a look at you. We should go back. *Walk back.*” She clarified before he could climb onto her. “I’m not getting my neck covered in sap.”

Sumac softly whined but complied as the two set off. He looked about to say something before cutting himself off.

“What is it?” Juniper asked him.

The dragonet looked conflicted until a determined look won over. “What’ll you say to Laurel once we get back?”

Juniper let her eyes slowly wander through the forest, picking out more and more Leafwings the further they walked. “I’ll tell her what I think, and leave the rest to her.”

Soon they found Tupelo, who noticed their return. “Thank you Juniper.” He took the jar, noticing Sumac’s sap-stained scales. “Taste testing already, eh?”

Sumac sheepishly nodded. “It’s sweet!”

“You should get that washed off.” Juniper advised. “Otherwise it’ll dry and become impossible to remove.”

“There’s a stream nearby.” Tupelo pointed with his tail. “Follow me, son.”

Juniper followed them to the water where Sumac promptly splashed in. Other Leafwings had gathered around the stream as well, chatting and

foraging along the bank. One of those dragons carried a familiar spear as she looked in the opposite direction.

“You should go before Laurel sees you.” Tupelo nudged Juniper.

“No.” She determinedly stepped forward. “It’s about time I faced her.”

As she approached Laurel, the guard seemed to notice her arrival. She turned around, eyes widening once she saw who it was.

“Juniper.” Laurel grumbled, stalking towards her. “Ready to apologize?”

“Mmmm, no.” Juniper flatly replied. “I have nothing to apologize for.” Laurel gaped, mouth quietly opening and closing.

“As you might recall, Hornbeam recognized me with Fir when Elder Rowan captured him. The entire village thought the Icewing was a threat, and you expect me to suddenly convince you in a speech? Please.” Juniper gained momentum.

“Of course I’d lie to you. It was the only real option I had to free Fir. And do you know what happened after I did? My friend Azalea told us that Willowwood was burning.” Juniper pressed forward as Laurel stepped back. “I would only apologize if I wasted precious seconds rearranging your beauty sleep instead of rushing to help save the village. But I didn’t, so I won’t.”

“I...I...” Laurel stuttered.

Juniper looked over the water, gazing at her reflection. Azalea was right. It was only a matter of time before Wasp’s soldiers discovered Willowwood’s survival. She may have alerted the Hivewings early, but in doing so she helped the village prepare for the threat. That was nothing to tear herself apart over.

It was something to forgive herself for.

“Laurel, I give you no apology.” Juniper looked at the mute guard. “Deal with it as you wish.” She turned and walked back to Tupelo, who looked relieved – and proud.

“So, now what?” He asked.

“Now?” Juniper rested her head on her claws, watching Sumac wash the sap off. “Now we go home.”

Chapter 27 – 3242

Now I go home. Now I go home. Fir repeated the phrase in his head as he flew east in the dead of night.

Fir made his decision the previous evening, the day Elder Rowan announced his plan. In the hours of training and practice, whispers of conflict between Leafwings and Hivewings permeated the air alongside villagers’ talk of protecting their home.

All of it reminded him of who he was, and where *his* home lay. He was Fir, son of the Icewings, hatched and raised in Among-The-Evergreens. The simple truths of who he is and where he belonged drove him forward.

Away from Willowwood.

Focus, Fir. Focus! He sharply reminded himself. The Leafwings would understand. Besides, he’d already helped them through training. Fir softly smiled, thinking about their progress.

In only two days, his group had improved considerably. After plenty of footwork drills and ditching the spear, Azalea could dodge and weave better

than anyone else. She made that clear during the sparring sessions he held today, where the Leafwing danced around her opponents with ease.

Until she went up against her father. While his daughter eschewed the spear for mobility, Aspen retained the spear in a heavily defensive stance. Luring Azalea to where the platform narrowed into a walkway, he did a good job holding her off before she backed away. Reaching into her pouch, she plucked out a wriggling stinkbug and hurled it at Aspen, ending the match quite decisively.

And training along with it for the next half hour as they waited for the smell to subside. Antics aside, they were all so much more prepared. He knew he'd done well enough to leave with no regrets.

Immediately, one of them surfaced.

Don't think about Juniper. Don't think about Juniper. Fir made a valiant effort to not look at the trees below. He left a note back at home – *her* home – telling about his departure. It'd be enough for her not to get upset.

At least, that's what he hoped.

Fir shot upwards, reaffirming himself among the windy clouds as the forest shrunk away. Leaving abruptly was his best option. What else could he do?

Announcing it to the village would've been... complicated. Dragons might interpret it as a betrayal, and nobody wanted that. Besides, Juniper would try and talk him out of it. Better to rip off the bandage than to let it peel. The faster Fir did this, the better all of them would be.

A strong gust pressed his wings back down, accelerating him to the ocean visible in the distance thanks to the pockets of starlight that peeked through the night. The weather tonight had wind strong enough to fill his wings. Nature itself wished to guide him home. Who was he to reject its path?

The tool he'd brought to travel along it rustled on his back. Fir unslung the net and held it in his claws, trying not to think about the corpse it once held.

After the first day of training, Hornbeam approached Fir with the net he'd caught Cassava in, wrapped inconspicuously in a deep green blanket.

"I can dispose of it for you." The guard had carefully asked. "Considering its history as of late, I'd understand why you wouldn't want it."

Fir said yes regardless. Crafting another net as large as the original would've taken time, with no guarantee the weather would be on his side. Tonight it was, and he'd make the most of it.

Before leaving, Fir had tied leaves and reeds over the holes of the net so that it more resembled the makeshift sail that brought him to Pantala. The materials of one continent would once more bring him to another – this time without injury.

Practiced movements kicked in as Fir felt the wind billow. In a fluid sweep, he tossed the net on top of him and hooked its sides with his wings. At the same time he raised his arms and grabbed the front edges until the net billowed out like a second set of wings.

He'd use it to fly much faster than the Leafwing expedition of the past. He'll shorten their week-long trip into a couple of days, aided with rest breaks on the island chain. Fir roughly memorized their locations with frequent library visits. And with less effort needed to flap his wings thanks to the net, he was confident his preparations would be enough.

Fir steadied himself and looked to the horizon as growing winds lifted him up beyond the clouds, into the gazes of hundreds of stars.

One in particular stood out to him. Highest in the sky, the north star sat as a beacon in the night. Just from looking at it, Fir felt his confidence restored – could a gift from the Great Ice Dragon have done anything else?

It will guide me home. Fir let the wind sink him under the clouds. Just focus on the stars, and all will be well.

Emerging on the bottom, he noticed the forest beginning to fade as he approached the beach. Something tugged in his heart, but Fir refused to acknowledge it. His mind was set, and his path would not change. As proof, he angled his wings to soar higher while pointedly looking away from the trees.

Again he basked in the light of the stars which glowed on his scales, as if imparting their resolve onto himse-

Traitor.

Fir's head shot up, eyes scanning the sky in disbelief. "Who said that?" He called out. "Show yourself, I dare you to say it again!"

Very well. The rabbit star twinkled. Traitor.

"Hypocrite!" Fir shot a blast of frostbreath at the aberrant constellation. "You're the one who told me to go home! That's what I'm doing!" His words were given no response as the rabbit star pranced away.

He harrumphed, swooping down with the aid of a stiff breeze. It appeared the rabbit star was as twitchy and nervous as its namesake. Fir remembered the arctic hares that roamed outside his village. They all were so flighty, hopping along the snow before fleeing at a moment's notice. Those animals never stuck to a single path.

Because if they did, they'd be devoured. The back of his mind whispered.

The forest dwindled as Fir approached the coast. Sand and jagged rocks swallowed up the ground where trees once stood.

Suddenly he didn't feel like flying so low. With a flick of his wings Fir moved to correct his position. Rising above the clouds he made sure to focus on the North Star, and it alone. No more distractions. No more fear.

You are afraid. The twin bear stars rumbled.

"By the teeth of the Great Ice Dragon." Fir growled, shooting the ursine pair an acrid glare. "Get lost."

Very well. The two wandered away on a course known only to themselves. Bears had that tendency as well, trekking through tracts of tundra and swathes of snowdrifts. Solitary but free, they made their own path.

As the cyclic gale pushed downwards once again, Fir let it carry him until the beach became visible. But over the next few seconds it sped away from view, dim yellow dunes replaced with deep indigo shoals who themselves began to melt into the oily black sea.

A whole new world unfolded beneath Fir, leaving him alone within it to think.

Of course I'm afraid. He rationalized. *The last time I did this wasn't very pleasant. Such memories linger after all; it's only natural.*

...

Oh, who was Fir kidding? That wasn't why he was afraid. Leaving Willowwood – *that* was his greatest fear, the fear of never seeing Pantala again.

Or Juniper.

Fir's claws let go of the net to cover his face, pressing on his eyes so that they remained dry. It didn't work. Trying something else, he took deep, full breaths until his shakiness went away. Then he grabbed the net again and skyrocketed to the stars, where he wouldn't be reminded of the land he was leaving.

Unlike the nights of the past few days, not a single star spoke as he flew among them. Fir wanted them to stop condemning him, but once that they did he felt unsettled. He didn't want the stars like this. He wanted them to guide him, to say something.

But what do you have to say for yourself? The reindeer constellation broke the silence, its light illuminating his face. Fir gaped, unable to make a sound. It was now his turn to give no response.

What do you have to say for yourself? The star asked again. Fir's eyesight shifted, and for a moment he saw the deer's antlers fall away, each below one end of the horizon. He blinked again and saw nothing of the sort.

Three moons, what was happening to him? Fir closed his eyes, recalling what he knew to anchor himself. Every winter, when the coldest months of the year arrived, reindeer shed their antlers to be lost amidst the all-consuming snow.

This constellation wanted him to lose something too. What it was, Fir didn't know.

It could be his disloyalty, as the rabbit star accused him of. Yet he was already returning to his tribe. What treachery lay in that?

Maybe his fear, as the twin bears insisted. But leaving Willowwood couldn't be helped, so what did they mean?

Perhaps... Fir felt chills as he slowly reflected. *Perhaps the stars want me to—*

At that moment a rogue air current knocked Fir askew, and panic replaced rumination as he fought to steady himself. The strengthened wind pushed him down, throwing him into now-turbulent clouds. He tumbled within it, rising to the stars before falling low enough to see the surface.

Midnight waters stared back at him. Fir couldn't even see the coast anymore. Another round of gusts shook him out of his sightseeing and back into reality.

Put simply, the clouds were too dangerous to fly in. The air within it was too turbulent, and Fir had to gain altitude if he wanted to travel home.

Alternatively, he could dive down and escape the worst of the wind. But no wind meant the journey would be impossible, which meant he would have to—

No.

Yes.

No!

Yes!

Fir trembled as a storm more potent than the one outside raged within, punctuated by bursts of memory.

Fir, soaring over endless snow-capped evergreen forests.

Fir, weaving in between two majestic willow trees.

Fir, feasting on a freshly caught trout the size of his arm.

Fir, feeling his mouth water after dining on roasted pig.

Fir, listening to his father's gentle advice.

Fir, teaching an eager Sumac how to claw fish.

Fir, twirling above his picturesque village.

Fir, dancing close with Juniper long into a beautiful night.

“Great Ice Dragon.” He whispered. “Save me.”

Fir let go of his net, letting it billow up and away while he plummeted towards the ocean. As the wind lessened he rotated and flew back towards Pantala.

I've done it, I've really done it. I'm staying.

Fir's blood shifted from molten sun to frozen ice and back again in a perpetual cycle. Horror and delight warred to dominate his headspace as he landed on the beach, but after seeing the violent waves behind him he kept moving to the treeline.

There at last, sitting under a wizened willow which protected him from the wind, Fir let his emotions out.

“What in the snow monsters DID I JUST DO!?” He yelled, raising an arm to strike the tree before pivoting to a nearby stone instead. Fir raked his talons across the mossy rock, feeling shredded lichen settle on his scales. He continued attacking the boulder until his claws ached, at which point he switched to bashing it with his tail.

Eventually Fir stopped, staggering back underneath the willow. He grasped its trunk for support as his head churned to process his future.

Since the day he'd arrived on this new continent, the desire to return home had been at the forefront of Fir's mind. It had always burned bright day in and day out, persevering him through thick and thin. But now he felt that hopeful spark extinguish amidst the uncaring gale, far from the starlit sky.

Fir laid his head on the cracked stone. “Ice spirits, what did I just lose?” He closed his eyes.

For one thing, the net was gone. A connection to his village fishing tradition, severed once more. And his whole village too, now that he'll never see

Among-The-Evergreens again. By that point, why not go the full length? No point in denying it:

Fir lost his chance to return to the Ice Kingdom, to see another member of his tribe again. To reunite with his family.

Oh no. A sudden thought made him stand ramrod straight. Fir had been gone for well over a week – does his village believe he's dead?

Great Ice Dragon, please don't let them think that. He nervously paced, because if they did that meant Father would have to perform funeral rites for his own son. In the absence of a body, he'd take a keepsake in Fir's place. That object would then be entombed within a casket carved from evergreen wood, and thrown into the ocean.

Another snowflake spinning into the sea, never to be seen again. Fir choked from the thought, falling to the ground in a trembling wreck. He forced himself to breathe again, fighting back the black spots which encroached on the edges of his eyesight.

His battle lasted on and on, though. Fir lost track of how long he remained collapsed. Every time the darkness retreated to the edges of his vision, a sudden lurch from his heart would bring them roaring back. Again he forced his lungs to work, and again thoughts of despair struck back.

One such blow turned Fir numb from horn to tail before melting into a torrent of sweat that ran down his snout. On top of suffocation, he now felt as if drowning too.

Great, just great. Fir cynically observed. He'd have chortled too if there was air to spare. Said air found itself swallowed up by a tide of regret which howled alongside the wind.

Traitor. He gasped for another breath.

Coward. His eyes burned from sweat.

Weak. A vision flashed before him, mockingly depicting happy memories in the Ice Kingdom. Fir lowered his head and looked weakly at the damaged stone, accepting the end. Regret would make him pay for failure.

Get up.

Fir's head rose in recognition. That – it couldn't be.

Juniper's voice rang out again. *Get up.*

I can't. He looked away. *It hurts too much.*

Let me help you with that. She mischievously offered.

Fir remembered a memory from two days ago, where the Leafwing flipped over his hammock with him still in it. The day after that she'd pretended to be asleep before scaring the living daylights out of him.

Though he'd never admit it, Fir loved it when Juniper pranked him like that. He smiled, and more memories came to replace the old.

When first traveling to the beach, he'd sped through the forest with Sumac clutching his neck in a death grip. Admittedly, the dragonet's squeals were a guilty pleasure as he gleefully rocketed up and down. Fir never imagined he'd treat the little Leafwing, once saved from the fire, as a younger brother – not that he complained.

The sweat on Fir's scales began to subside.

How could he forget Azalea either? The dragon's enthusiasm was infectious, and he relished the sheer excitement that shone from her during their

meeting in the cells. Not to mention the scale painting; three moons, he loved that.

Tupelo's food and Elder Rowan's guidance. Aspen's craftsmanship and Cypress's hospitality. Even Hornbeam's (mutual) respect for his fishing skills. He let the past week spent living in Willowwood, *with* Willowwood, wash over him.

A minute passed, and Fir sat up on his knees. Another, and he stood fully. As his breathing stabilized he reflected again on his predicament.

Admittedly he'd suffered quite the setback in trying to go home. Large nets weren't weaved overnight, and when another storm would hit is anyone's guess.

Regardless, some practical lessons had been learned. Next time, he had to pack food, provisions, and materials to fix the net while on his journey. The thought of a "next time" gave Fir tentative hope. He could try again. He wasn't trapped yet.

"I'm not trapped." Fir repeated, raising his voice. "I'm not trapped! I'm..." He thoughtfully cut himself off. "Not trapped in what?"

Traps were lethal and deadly, full of lies and danger. Willowwood was no trap. It's Leafwings weren't either. Fir clamped his snout, embarrassed by his words. He enjoyed living in the village with its dragons, that much could be said.

Yet could he say the same about himself? Whispers of "*traitor*", "*coward*", and "*weak*" replayed themselves in memory, threatening to topple Fir again. This time, instead of driving them away, he entertained those thoughts.

Traitor – who did Fir betray? The Ice Kingdom, of course. He idly scooped a clawful of dirt while lost in thought. The schools taught that every loyal Icewing loved their tribe above all else.

“But I do love my tribe!” Fir threw the soil at the willow, seeing the clump burst into a hundred pieces against solid bark. “I’d cross the whole ocean to prove it!” He affirmed.

His tribe probably thought him dead, though. Fir hesitated. In the Ice Kingdom, traitors became dead, and not the other way around. He wasn’t some sniveling backstabber just because of a failure! The Queen wouldn’t condemn him for that; there was nothing to fear.

Coward – what scared Fir? That was easy: dying. Dying and never coming back to Among-The-Evergreens. But thanks to his choice, he wouldn’t be seeing a shred of snow for some time – the exact definition of his fear.

Could that mean crossing the ocean was true cowardice? Fir struggled to wrap his head around the concept. Icewing law labeled cowards as those who abandon their duty in fright. Since he had no duty from the tribe to return, and returning meant obeying his fears, that meant he shouldn’t be feeling so terrible.

So why did he?

Fir dug out another mound of dirt and rubbed it onto the furrowed stone, filling its scratches with packed earth. If crossing the ocean was cowardice, staying in Willowwood logically acted as its inverse: bravery. Bravery supports duty, meaning his duty belongs to them.

The earth seemed to slide under this new shift in perspective. Had Fir failed his duty not Among-The-Evergreens, but to Willowwood?

“Yes.” He put a talon to his temple, his thoughts clicking together. “I have, haven’t I?”

Traitor. Fir abandoned Willowwood in their time of need, when enemies circled just out of reach. He left the village. He left its dragons.

He left Juniper with only a paltry note, after everything they'd been through.

Fir left the ground below in a flash, shooting through the trees like an arrow before emerging into the sky. The opposing wind failed to halt his ascent as he accelerated through the clouds, fueled by shame.

Coward. The stars called to Fir, who finally understood. He'd abandoned his task to help prepare Willowwood in favor of an ocean crossing driven by fear.

No longer. Fir vowed, tightening his jaw. *With the stars as my witness, I will do my duty.*

Chapter 28 – 4142

“With the trees as my witness, I cannot believe what I’m seeing.” Juniper remarked to Azalea as the two stood in Tupelo’s kitchen, watching Sumac down his fifth glass of willow sap.

“Me neither.” She agreed as the dragonet tossed the empty cup aside, reaching for another.

“We should probably stop him.”

“Yup.” The pair moved towards Sumac. Azalea pulled the target mug away as Juniper wrapped him in a constricting hug, keeping his arms from reaching out.

“Hey!” Sumac wriggled unsuccessfully. “Let me go!”

“So you can stuff yourself with more sap?” Juniper didn’t budge. “You’re going to be sleepless the whole night.”

“And sick.” Azalea added.

“Just one more?” He looked at her with innocent eyes.

“No.” She pinched his cheek as Tupelo walked in, the older Leafwing surprised at the amount of empty cups littering the floor.

“If my son is any indication, this willow sap tea will be a huge success.” He swept the cups with his tail.

“If your son doesn’t drink it all.” Azalea handed the mug she picked up to him. “This would’ve been his sixth.”

“His sixth?” Tupelo looked at Sumac with shock. “I’ve been gone for five minutes!”

“I know.” The dragonet smugly replied as Juniper let go.

“And you didn’t stop him?” Tupelo turned to her and Azalea.

“We thought he’d be full after two.” Juniper shrugged.

“After that, we wanted to see how much further he could go.” Azalea grinned, hiding behind her friend as Tupelo glowered.

“So you think my son is a test subject?” He crossed his arms.

“Yes!” Sumac happily chirped from the floor before clutching his stomach with a sick face. “Dad? I don’t feel so well...”

“Of course you don’t.” Tupelo admonished his son as he scooped him up. “Off to bed with you now.”

“But I don’t feel sleepy!”

“Too bad.” He looked at Juniper and Azalea. “It’s getting late. Shouldn’t you two be heading off as well?”

“Of course.” They turned to leave.

“By the way,” Tupelo asked, “where’s Fir?”

“Flying under the stars again.” Juniper answered, looking uneasy. “We’ll be going now.”

The two left for the exit, remaining silent as they emerged outside. Save for a few night patrols, no other dragons could be seen. In their absence an ethereal silence settled over the air, seemingly uncomfortable with its own quietness.

Azalea put a wing over Juniper’s shoulder. “You alright?”

“No.” She admitted, the pair strolling out of the cafe. “For the past few nights, Fir’s been spending longer and longer flying. I know he’s sad over not being able to go home, but I don’t know how to help.”

“I don’t know how any of us could.” Azalea stepped onto the walkway. “It’s not like *we’re* on a foreign continent like he is. I couldn’t even begin to imagine it.”

Juniper nodded. “I’ve been trying to envision myself in his scales and see how I’d feel. I thought if I understood his emotions, I’d know what to do.”

“Did it work?” Azalea seemed to already know the answer.

“Not at all.” She sighed. “Turns out feeling sad and knowing what to do about it are two different things.”

A nearby firefly floated close to Azalea, landing on her outstretched talon. She let the insect scurry over her claw as it illuminated her scales with a gentle light. “If it gives you any comfort, Fir looked fine today during training.”

“Really?” Juniper hopefully asked.

“Yes! You should’ve seen it.” Azalea animatedly narrated. “The Icewing taught us different combat stances and moves all through the morning. Then after lunch he held sparring matches.”

Juniper whistled. “You? Spar?”

“Better than you’d think.” Azalea playfully jostled her. “I was too fast to catch. Dad couldn’t keep up.”

“You sparred with Aspen and won?” Juniper skeptically asked. She found it hard to wrap her head around how her friend had managed against the larger Leafwing.

Azalea clutched her heart. “You wound me Juniper!” She pantomimed fainting, falling to the floor. “Have you no faith in your friend?”

“So melodramatic.” Juniper rolled her eyes, cracking a smile. She held out a claw to pull her back up. “How’d you do it?”

“My natural skills, of course.” She smirked. “Along with an extra tool. Dad donated most of the shop’s venomous insects to the Elder’s treehouse, but not before I borrowed a stink bug.”

Juniper stared. “Azalea. You didn’t.”

“I did!” She cackled. “The look on Dad’s face was priceless! We had to stop training for half an hour to let the smell fade...” Azalea trailed off before her voice jumped back. “But still – priceless.”

“I don’t think using insects was the point of sparring. Can’t you only use weapons?” A stiff breeze from higher up blew onto Juniper. She let the cool wind wash over her wings.

“In a fight, everything is a weapon.” Azalea quoted. “Fir taught that today. Said he learned it from you.”

“Me?” Juniper disbelievingly turned to her friend.

“Yes, you.” It was Azalea’s turn to roll her eyes. “He told us you used a lantern to defeat a Hivewing – a lantern!”

“It was a lamp, actually.” Juniper clarified, remembering how she’d incapacitated Dauber. “Fir distracted him with frostbreath, giving me time to grab the flamesilk center and swing.”

“Bugs, lights, they all can be weapons. Right?”

“Right.”

Azalea used what she could to win, just like her. Suddenly, Juniper could easily see how her friend won against Aspen. Before she could think further they arrived at her treehouse.

“Just remember. Fir might be struggling, but if there’s anyone he’ll open up to, it’s you.” Azalea stopped walking.

“Even so, that Icewing can be more stubborn than a boulder.” Juniper quietly stepped inside. “And I wouldn’t have it any other way. See you tomorrow, Azalea.”

“See you.”

Juniper discreetly closed the door behind her before tiptoeing through the hallway. She turned to the right after reaching the kitchen and crept up to the entrance of Mother’s room, putting an ear to the door. Sure enough, soft snores could be heard from the other side.

Mother didn’t sleep early, meaning Juniper must’ve been staying up longer these past couple days.

Hanging out with friends, and waiting for Fir to land. She admitted to herself, quietly walking to her room. The Icewing’s midnight flights were rubbing off on her sleep, though Juniper couldn’t complain. The time spent talking and comforting each other during those late hours were hours well spent.

The door opened with a muffled *creak*, letting Juniper enter. Judging by the audible wind whistling from the window, a thick cloud cover must be blocking the moonlight outside. It would certainly explain why the space was almost pitch black.

Squinting her eyes to the right, Juniper made out the outline of Azalea’s painting. She turned left and stepped in the opposite direction, towards a vine jutting out the ceiling from which hung a firefly lamp purchased the day before. An indigo cloth hung over it so that its light faded after a few talon-lengths. She tossed to the side to fill the air with yellow light.

Illumination taken care of, Juniper turned to the center of the room where her hammock rested – on the floor. She’d insisted that Fir sleep on something other than hardwood. It wasn’t the thickest of mattresses, but neither of them minded.

Lost in thought, Juniper didn’t even notice herself stepping on the hammock until a crumpling sound alerted her to something.

Something distinctively *not* a leaf. Looking down, Juniper couldn’t help but be surprised at a small piece of paper wedged between her talons.

Paper? She cocked her head before going back to the lantern, holding the mystery in her right claw. Her left claw gripped the lamp that she held next to the paper, which on closer inspection revealed itself to be a rectangular note.

“Huh. Did Fir write this?” Juniper wondered aloud, scanning the words with interest. “I wonder...”

The last word died in her throat while she continued to read, suffocated by growing shock. Finally it erupted into a shrill gasp as she fell to the floor, the lamp dropping with a clatter.

No, no no no. Juniper’s head spun until she heard blood pounding in her ears. *It can’t be. Fir, he – he wouldn’t do this.*

Yet the words on the note remained unchanged. That didn’t stop her from vainly reading it again.

Juniper,

I can’t stay here any longer. Every time I fly, the stars remind me of everything left behind. You’ve seen how much it’s affected me. You’ve seen how bad it gets. I can’t stop thinking of home.

It’s too much.

Which is why I have to return to my tribe. I’m sorry for being so abrupt, but it’s better I don’t drag this on.

Goodbye Juniper. I’ll never forget you.

– Fir

“...why?” She choked out, feeling tears blur her vision. A few fell on the note, creating stains that bled through the letters.

“...why?” Juniper stood up and took a single shaking step before falling back down on the hammock mat. She buried her snout within the woven leaf, bit into it, and screamed, hoping the muffled noise didn’t wake Mother up.

“WHY?”

She curled up into a ball, crying.

Everything that’s happened. Everything they did. Everything they went through together. All of it, just for Fir to leave. And the worst part?

He couldn’t even tell it to her face.

Her eyes burned again, this time not only from tears. Juniper clenched her claw which held the note and squeezed, watching it crumple into twisted pulp. Once it did she walked to the window and held it over the edge. There she shredded the paper line by line, still tearing up while tearing down Fir’s message.

One by one, bits of writing spiraled down. A few became caught on willow branches, holding on the best they could. But a single gust from the worsening winds above shook them away to join the rest as they all spun into an empty dark.

Empty. Hollow. Juniper felt her face contort beneath a flood of emotions which threatened to wash her away. She gripped the window ledge for support, feeling the wood splinter beneath her grip. But amidst the grief and anger, seeds of confusion steadily pulsed.

“Why did you do this, Fir?” Juniper tore away the last of the note, biting back further tears. Crying won’t help her think, nor would looking at the sky where he was leaving–.

Don't say forever, don't say forever. She stiffly turned away and approached the fallen lamp, cradling it to her chest. The light helped her think. Seeing it illuminate the surrounding floor, Juniper focused on what she knew.

Fir. Fir missed home. For the last two days, she'd clearly seen that. The Icewing flew around the village hours into the night, and returned looking sadder than when he'd started. Yet as Juniper thought further back she recalled more subtle signs farther into the past, ever since the festival and their dance.

Fir's frequent library trips to the Elder's treehouse. The concealed pain in his eyes at the mere mention of "home" or "tribe". He'd even told her outright his problem! But Juniper thought his pain would fade – that *she* could help it fade.

She should've known better after the rumors began. Some Leafwings spoke about Hornbeam offering back Fir's fishing net that'd caught Cassava, and the Icewing accepting.

Juniper didn't think too much of it at the time. Now she did it with a frenzy, wrapping herself in her head. It didn't take long for regret to grow alongside it.

The signs were there all along, weren't they? You knew Fir's stubbornness. You knew he wouldn't let a problem like that "fade away". She numbly nodded.

Azalea said it herself. You're the only one he'd open up to. Juniper drooped her wings, obscuring the lamp and shrinking its light.

And still you failed. You failed him just like you failed Father.

"No!" Juniper jolted up, flaring her wings. "By the trees, no! I didn't – I didn't –" She sank to the floor, wrapping her wings and tail around herself. "It can't possibly be–"

All my fault.

But the light didn't lie. It shone unimpeded upon an empty and hollow room, never to be visited by an Icewing again.

Forever.

The tears came back with force, bursting from sobs that shook Juniper to the core. She didn't do enough to soothe Fir's worries, and now he was gone. There was only her to blame. Following this idea, dark tendrils enveloped her mind.

That's right: suffer. They bit into her like thorns. *You deserve this.* Juniper could only muster a faint whimper in response as grief pressed on her heart. A high-pitched wheeze from her throat alerted Juniper that perhaps her lungs were being squeezed too. Uncomfortably so.

Searching for fresh air she tried to stand up but found herself immobilized, panting for air. Every fresh breath was cried away the next moment, leaving her lungs devoid of air. Dark spots looped at the edges of her vision, curling deeper and deeper like—

— *like barbs on a rose bush.* Juniper's eyes widened as an idea took root. Sumac said all she needed to do was jump. A leap of faith sounded pretty appealing right about now.

Another wheeze made her double over. Juniper had to act — now. Envisioning her guilt as thorns from the thicket, she braced her legs and sucked in air. Before another tear could fall, she pushed herself from the hammock mat and staggered to the window.

Anguish clutched at her legs, doing their best to pull her back down where it could dominate her mind. Juniper forced herself past it, solely focused on

getting to the window until at last her front talons felt familiar wood. Without hesitation she threw her head outside and took the deepest breath she could.

In, out. In out. Juniper just breathed, minutes melting by.

Gradually her vision refocused, a relieved calm settling over her. Feeling slightly better, she tilted her head down and looked at the sprawling dark below.

Fear and guilt; that was all it offered. It was all any hollowness could give. She shook her head, and looked skywards. Despite her “jump”, Juniper’s heart still bled raw. Fir’s departure had left a hole she knew wouldn’t be filled for a long time.

Still, she’d been through this before. She’d loved Father too, and had mourned his passing with as much grief as now. Yet she carried on, supported by Mother, Azalea, and most importantly, herself.

Juniper looked at the clouds which blocked the shining stars, feeling only more tears decorating her face.

But one day, I’ll look at the sky and smile, thinking about what I still have. She vowed. *And not about what I’ve lost.* Promise made, Juniper let a small spark of hope warm herself. She could get through this, no matter the guilt.

As unceasing winds roiled the clouds, a stray breeze brought with it an idle thought. Just the dark below entrapped Juniper, could the sky above have done something similar with Fir?

She could easily imagine that: the Icewing’s perseverance being worn down night after night, unable to stop and so remaining in pain. All while stubbornly hiding its true extent, even to her.

Like thorns in a thicket, Juniper's guilt over the Hivewings and Cassava had been overwhelming. They paralyzed her from moving on when that was exactly what she needed to do.

Perhaps the stars did the same for Fir, the fear that he'd never return home pushing him to leave when he should've stayed put. If this was true, Juniper understood the feeling.

Wordlessly she backed away from the window and turned to the lamp. She hooked it under a wing before moving to the door, opening it quickly but quietly.

Juniper knew what Fir felt, trapped in his own mind. When that happened, the only way to be freed was for another to pull you out. She would be that dragon for him.

But first she had to catch up to him. Heading into the kitchen and opening the pantry, Juniper knew exactly how.

Within the forest, trees occasionally become poisoned. Whether from disease, insects, or old age, there were times when the all-important willows crept close to death. In those cases Elder Rowan visited the dying tree himself, and used a strange green liquid to revitalize the plant.

During the sickness, he distributed vials of it to the healers. Though the stimulant was unsuccessful in treating symptoms, Mother still kept a few spare vials. Juniper took one the size of her talon and contemplated the grass-green liquid within. Reportedly, it gave a huge burst of energy for a short time before leaving you tired to the bone.

Given Fir's head start, it was her only hope. Juniper drank the glass without hesitation and flew to the door.

Woah. She stopped, marveling at herself. Already she felt bigger, stronger, and faster. The vial must be taking effect.

Then I have no time to lose. Juniper burst outside before leaping onto the roof with a loud *thud*, lightning in her veins. She craned her neck to the horizon – but suddenly stopped and sniffed once, then twice.

I smell smoke. Before Juniper could widen her eyes she heard wingbeats coming from above, and with it a droning noise which rang over the growing wind.

A second later, Hivewings burst through the clouds.

Fir burst through the clouds with a new apology on his tongue. Addressing the air as an audience, he began.

“Juniper, I’m sorry. And...” He trailed off, not knowing what else to say.

“By the teeth of the Great Ice Dragon, I need something longer than that.” Fir growled. With how short his letter was, such a brief explanation would be insulting! He twirled around to clear his head and went back to thinking.

Should he talk about the thought process that convinced him to flee so abruptly? Probably not. He was apologizing for leaving, not justifying it like in his note.

Three moons, how did I think that was a good idea? Fir lamented, hoping Juniper hadn’t stumbled across it yet. Given his luck, she likely has already. He fearfully imagined how she would react to his bluntness. Shock? Grief? Anger? Despair?

Fir angled his wings against the wind and sunk to the treetops for more speed. Knowing Juniper, she'd probably fly to the coast herself to talk him out of it. He had to return home before she left it.

His wings jerked from a sudden realization. Home; he'd called Willowwood home.

Not the time, Fir. Focus on flying. He chastised himself. Semantics could wait for later. With how much the wind was picking up, Fir couldn't be caught in the open when the storm hit unless he wanted to be blown out to sea. Thankfully he made out a dull glow in the distance.

It was Willowwood at last. Fir angled himself towards the light, though not without an inkling of doubt. During his night flights he had to search for the tops of treehouses to get back, since the village was never bright enough to spot. What could be the reason behind the sudden change tonight?

Unless... could that be a search party for me? Fir staggered mid flight. Immediately he knew who did it; Juniper, following Azalea's example, must've organized the whole village to bring him back.

"Juniper, you didn't have to." Fir whispered, blinking furiously before redoubling his speed. He had to get back before they left for nothing. Meanwhile the wind defiantly blew in his face, as it had for the whole flight. He took a deep breath to pump his wings –

– and almost hacked his lungs out.

"By all the snow monsters!" Fir covered his snout with a claw. "Is that *ash*?" It had to be – he'd recognize the smell of soot anywhere. But why here?

Worry settled over his wings which beat harder through the air. Despite the added noise, faint crackling sounds could be heard over the wind. It too sounded eerily familiar. With growing dread Fir swooped over a patch of towering willows and looked down.

A raging wildfire looked back, confirming his fear.

“Three moons!” Fir dove, frostbreath gathering in his mouth. He saw green shapes cast over the harsh firelight, revealing themselves to be a panicked Leafwing patrol throwing water and dirt at the inferno.

One of them noticed his descent. “Hivewings! Watch out!”

Hivewings? Why would they – oh. Oh no. Fir skidded to a halt as the dragons realized who he was.

“Wait – it’s Fir the Icewing!” A dragon exclaimed. “Quick, help us!”

As much as he wanted to ask questions, fighting the fire came first. Circling the edges of the blaze, Fir let loose his frostbreath to contain its spread. Then he shot additional blasts throughout the center, killing the flames.

“Thank the trees.” A Leafwing flew next to him. “We thought the whole forest was going to burn doaaa!” He yelped as Fir grabbed him by the shoulders.

“You said Hivewings.” He growled. “*Why did you say Hivewings?*”

“Because I saw them!” The Leafwing shook Fir off. “Two of them appeared through the clouds and dropped these weird pots. Next thing we know, everything was on fire.”

Fir didn’t hear that last part. He’d already begun to fly away to Willowwood. If Hivewings were attacking the village, he had to get to Juniper.

“Wait!” The villager called. Fir looked back at him, who gestured wildly to other bright spots in the distance. “Before they flew to Willowwood, the Hivewings started other fires. You have to help them, or else the whole forest will be decimated!”

But what about Juniper? Fir hesitated, torn over what to do. His emotions screamed at him to return to Willowwood, but reason kept him still. If he didn't fight the fires, they would surround the village and swallow it in flame. Not even his frostbreath would be enough then.

"Alright," he nodded, "I'll stop the other fires."

Great Ice Dragon, watch over Juniper. Fir prayed without hesitation as he soared to the next fire. *And Juniper, don't you dare get yourself killed.*

"Juniper, don't you *dare* go outside again! You'll get yourself killed!" Mother's voice thundered from her room as her daughter, who'd returned inside to wake her up, ignored her words.

"I'm going outside!" She flung open the door.

"Junie, no!" Mother's voice broke with fear. Juniper hesitated, but only for a moment.

I can't curl up and hide. She steeled herself, searching the skies for Hivewings. *This is my home.*

Movement to the right caught her eye. *There* – a flash of orange scales behind a willow. Juniper took flight and trailed the tight knit Hivewing group while they sped just above the treetops. She (wisely) flew under the cover of foliage, remaining unseen while still able to see the squadron as a few of them took strange objects out of the bags they carried.

Juniper squinted, confused at what she saw. They looked like clay pots with rope sticking out of them. One of the soldiers barked an order, causing the

Hivewings carrying the pots to stop and hover. They took out strands of flamesilk held with tweezers which shook in the wind, lit the rope on fire, and threw them into the trees below.

A few seconds later, the platforms under her burst into flame.

Clearsight preserve us! Horrified, Juniper climbed higher as panicked shouts joined blistering heat to fill the air below. The Hivewings turned to the carnage they created, giving her a glimpse of their faces. One of them had a bow slung over their back, along with familiar red and yellow scales.

That was all she saw before they continued their flight, looking unbothered – no, *satisfied* – at what they'd done. Juniper squeezed the branch she held onto until her talons dug into her palm.

They can't get away with this. She vowed. I have to keep following them.

A snapping noise could be heard underneath as the inferno ate through a walkway's vines. Juniper's mind yelled at her to descend, and help fight the fiery threat.

Then what about the Hivewing one? Juniper appeared to be the only one tailing them, and someone had to have eyes on them. Best for that role to fall on a Leafwing who'd hid from those dragons before:

Her.

Fir was still out there though, leaving Pantala.

But I have to protect my home! She fiercely countered, closing her eyes.
Spirits of the forest, please guide Fir back.

With that, Juniper refocused on the departing Hivewings and resumed flying. She needed to believe that her village could fight the fire. That Fir would return.

And that they'd all make it through the night.

Chapter 29 – 5341

Can I make it through FIVE MINUTES without seeing another wildfire? Fir snarled to himself as he arrived at Willowood, fresh from extinguishing the forest fires outside it. The one *inside* it blazed ferociously, waves of heat washing over his scales. He dipped to the side and surveyed the damage.

Whereas the previous fire started from the bottom and spread higher, this one burned from the trees and walkways above, spitting tongues of fire and burning debris which fell below. Fir flipped belly up for a better view–

–at a pile of burning planks barreling towards him.

Woah! He banked right and narrowly avoided the smoldering wood as it screamed past. No, wait – those screams were coming from the villagers. Dozens flapped around him with buckets of water and sand, joined by dozens more fleeing the buildings underneath the inferno. Almost half were armed, though spears didn't do much for firefighting.

Frostbreath, however, did. Fir rolled his neck and went to work.

First he aimed at a strip of burning walkway, shooting frostbreath straight at the structure. Unfortunately the ice arced below, missing the target and almost clipping a few Leafwings on its way down. Moving closer instead, Fir flew below the thick of the fire and angled his snout at the brightest patches of flame. This time the frostbreath landed, slowly shrinking the hissing blaze. Out of air, he sucked in a breath.

And almost fell out of the sky.

“By the snow monsters, not again!” Fir managed between painful coughs, feeling his lungs blister from the sudden heat. He dove away and landed within a willow, gulping mouthfuls of cool air. He wasn’t going to be as reckless as last time.

Although that begged the question: what else could be done?

Just then, Fir heard rustling beneath him. Moments later a familiar green head popped through the foliage.

“Azalea?”

“Fir!” The Leafwing wriggled past him, revealing two buckets of water she carried over shoulders. “Why’re you down here? The fire’s up there.” Azalea flew up as he followed her.

“I was thinking of a plan.” Fir grumbled, eyes scanning for any falling debris. “How did the fires even get so high? And why aren’t the Hivewings attacking?”

“I know, it’s so weird!” Azalea agreed, hovering beside a platform on fire. She threw water from one of her buckets, dousing the flames. “They just dropped out of the sky, threw some weird clay things, and suddenly fire was *everywhere*.”

“Huh.” Fir walled a ring of frostbreath around the trunk of a burning willow, halting the blaze from advancing further.

“Then they flew off that way.” Azalea continued, pointing with a talon. “The Hivewings didn’t even try to attack us. They just stayed above it all.”

“Above it all, you say?” Fir questioned, an idea beginning to form. “Azalea, get a damp towel and follow me with as many dragons as you can. I have a plan.” With that, he shot into the sky.

As Azalea’s calls could be heard below, Fir crested over the fire and looked down. The flames illuminated rows of charred willows and burning leaves that spread like gashes through the village, courtesy of the violent wind.

Yet despite its size, Fir knew this fire for what it was just: a candle, burning from the top down. And just like the ones in Tupelo’s hallway, if you extinguish the top, the whole fire goes with it.

“Fir, here’s the towel you asked.” Azalea stopped beside him, followed by a small troupe of anxious villagers. “Now what?”

“You’ll see.” He turned to the crowd. “Leafwings, listen up! To defeat the fire, we need to kill it from the top!” He drew a grid in the air in front of him. “With my frostbreath, I’ll wall off the blaze into smaller sections. Once I do, smother it with everything you got!” The villagers roared in agreement, ready to move.

“Then let’s go!”

Fir fell into a dive, keeping the wet cloth pressed to his snout while taking shallow breaths. Once close enough he unveiled his mouth and unleashed his frostbreath, letting it cut a line through the flames before reaching the edge of the fire. Then he stopped, put the towel up, took a few deep breaths, and did it again.

Behind him, teams of Leafwings poured water and sand wherever they found fire, and the sounds of sputtering flames filled Fir’s ears like music. He continued to partition the wildfire, creating manageable pockets as he went.

Occasionally a mistimed breath made his lungs spasm, smoke and heat clogging his throat. When that happened, Fir flew higher and paused his

efforts. Forcing himself to do nothing was difficult, but falling unconscious helped no one.

Soon the inferno over the treetops dimmed, then died. While further lights glowed ominously below, Leafwing reinforcements from above and returning patrols sped to put those out as well.

Amidst the movement, Azalea congratulated Fir. "Thank the trees. There are still fires lower down, but I think we have those under control now. We've stopped those Hivewings once again!"

"No, not yet." Fir shook his head.

Azalea tilted her head. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that this can't be enough." He gestured to the fire. "The Hivewings already tried to burn us down. They wouldn't try the same thing twice. Azalea, did you see what direction they went?"

"Yes, actually." She pointed to his left.

"And what could be in that direction?" Fir mused. There was the healer's pavilion, the Clover Cafe, and—

"The Elder's treehouse." He gasped. It all made sense.

"Oh yeah, Elder Rowan's in a meeting with Hornbeam and Hickory." Azalea informed. "Someone needs to tell him about the... oh... *oh no*."

Fir looked her in the eyes. "Azalea, once the fire is completely dealt with, gather all the Leafwings who can fight and bring them to the treehouse."

She nodded. Satisfied, Fir turned to fly as fast as he could. "And while you're at it," he called back, "find Juniper!"

“Find the Elder and slit their throat.”

Juniper paled upon hearing those words. Hidden in the surrounding trees, the three Hivewings didn't notice her covering her mouth as they stood atop the roof of the Elder's treehouse.

“Once you do, we will meet back here and head west. Queen Wasp will be waiting for a report.” The one speaking tipped her head, as if bowing to the mere mention of Wasp's name. The helmet the Hivewing wore made it hard for Juniper to tell.

“But captain, the wind's getting stronger...” The second one remarked, looking worriedly at the sky. “It's been blowing harder and harder east this whole night. I think we should wait for the others to arrive and leave. We've done enough with the firebombs.”

“Absolutely not!” The third soldier – Firefly – snarled, brandishing her bow like a club. Not a trace of the Hivewing's past meekness could be found in her rage which boiled onto her compatriot.

“In case you forgot, *Antlion*, our orders are to destroy Willowwood. To kill a beast, you can't just singe its scales. The whole head must be cut off!” Firefly unholstered an arrow. “This mission will not fail again. Understand?”

“Firefly, enough!” The helmeted captain rebuked her subordinate, talons grasping the hilt of a knife as she scanned the forest. “Keep your voice down and wait for the others. We can't afford to be detected.”

Juniper tensed, staying as still as possible behind the dense foliage. Her scales helped her blend among the trees which the three Hivewings looked

through. After an eternity of silence she heard distant wingbeats. Firefly confirmed who they belonged to.

“Finally. Took them long enough.” Two more Hivewings landed on the roof, each carrying bags and wicked sharp spears.

“Bristletail. Chalcis.” The captain nodded. “Report.”

“Yes captain Atta.” One of them replied. “Despite the wind, we’ve successfully set fire to the outer forest. The Leafwings will be too busy putting them all out.”

“Then let’s get to work.” Atta climbed down onto a balcony, followed by her four soldiers as they entered the treehouse.

“Finally!” Firefly’s voice echoed. “I can’t wait to...” Her voice faded as she disappeared inside. Carefully, Juniper followed.

By the trees, what am I going to do?

As Fir burst through the main entrance to the Elder’s treehouse, he reminded himself of what he was going to do. Find Elder Rowan, Hornbeam, and Hickory before together flying back to the others, where the whole village could fight off the invaders.

If my memory is right, the meeting room is on the bottom floor. Fir sprinted through the hallway, retracing the route. Soon he heard faint voices drifting from a familiar door, and without hesitation he threw it open.

“Hornbeam! Hickory! Elder Rowan! We need to leave now!”

Their faces stared blankly back at him.

“Fir?” The Elder spoke first. “What’s going on?”

“Has something happened outside?” Hornbeam stood up, rattling the bundle of spears which rested on his back.

“Don’t tell me that...” Hickory’s eyes widened.

“Yes.” Fir confirmed “Hivewings. They’re he–”

“Say no more!” Elder Rowan leapt from his desk with an energy that belied his age. “Gather the village! Fir, where are the Hivewings?”

“Right here.”

In the stunned silence that followed, Fir continued uninterrupted. “They threw something called ‘fire pots’ across the forest and Willowwood before flying in this direction. Elder, I think they want to kill you while everyone else is distracted.”

“That... would explain why no one came to tell us in all the chaos.” Hornbeam slowly processed. “And since this treehouse is the tallest in the village, it would be the obvious target.”

“Exactly.” Fir jerked his head to the exit. “Which is why we need to leave, and join up with the others. Come on!”

“Wait!” Hickory held out a panicked claw. “We’re not the only ones in this building. There are stewards and scribes working in the upper levels.”

“This late?” Fir cursed his luck.

“Organizing supplies for the past few nights.” She sadly replied. “We have to warn them!”

“Then we mustn't waste time.” Elder Rowan strode out the door.

“We?” Hornbeam asked incredulously. “Elder, you need to escape!”

“And leave those dragons to their fate?” He snarled back. “No, I refuse to run away. And if that puts me in danger, so be it.”

“You can't be serious.” The guard gasped, looking at Hickory. “Tell him that!”

The head steward shook her head. “Every pair of claws will help. I have no complaints.”

Desperate, Hornbeam appealed to the last dragon he could. “Fir, you know this is madness. Elder Rowan's job is to lead us. How can he do that if he dies? Surely you agree.”

A few hours ago, he would've. But not anymore.

“No, I don't.” Fir shook his head. “Elder Rowan's duty is to protect Willowwood and its dragons. Tonight, he will. We will.”

I will.

“To abandon that responsibility, that is true madness.” Fir clenched his talons. “So what are we waiting for? We have Leafwings to save.”

I have to save the Elder. Juniper squared her wings and landed on the balcony, following the squadron of soldiers inside. They loitered just outside the balcony door, where the hallway split into three paths.

“We have a lot of rooms to cover. So split up.” Atta pointed at Bristletail and Chalcis. “You two search the left hallway. We’ll handle the rooms on the right.”

“And if none of us find their Elder?” Antlion questioned.

“Then converge on the center hallway.” Firefly answered as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Leaders always live in the highest place they can. Leafwings are no different.”

Except we are. Juniper thinly smiled. *Elder Rowan lives on the bottom floor, meaning there’s still time to warn him.*

Slowly slowly stepping back, her talons backpedaled to the balcony where the lower levels were just a short flight away. She knew where the Hivewings were, and what they were going to do. Her goal now was to warn the others, and fight the threat with the whole village.

But without Fir.

Not now! She refocused: no reckless attacks tonight.

Until a shrill scream stopped her cold.

“What was that?” A soldier from the left called. “Captain Atta, did you get the Elder already?”

“Not quite.” Firefly answered back. “Only a random Leafwing, just given Wasp’s justice.”

There were other dragons on the floor. *And they're killing them.*

Juniper felt sick to her stomach. The balcony behind her gestured to the wider forest, safe and hidden from the danger in front. She could leave right now, just as she should've that night in the clearing.

But no one else was in danger then. Juniper took a step forward. Now, not even home is safe. Peeking cautiously from the doorframe, she tentatively poked her snout into the hallway to see. Both groups of Hivewings remained busily busting down doors, not bothering to look back.

And a few doors down on her right, a growing dark puddle stained the wood floor.

Juniper made a dash for it, leaping across the floor before skidding into the center hall. Tensing up, she put an ear to the floor to hear for any approaching talonsteps. Luckily, none came. With a shaky breath she stood up and faced the door in front of her.

Ok Juniper, she prepared herself, think of what you'll do. Put a talon to your mouth to shush whoever's there, and quietly lead them out. Or maybe downstairs. She shrugged. *One of those two. Here goes!*

She turned the knob and pushed, opening the door with a silent creak.

"Hey!" Juniper whispered as she stepped inside. "Don't freak out, but come with me if you want to li...ive? She stopped after realizing no one was in this room. Instead a large table occupied the space, filled with glass jars containing scores of wriggling insects.

Why are all these bugs here? Juniper crept closer, noticing a piece of paper lying underneath one of the jars. She picked it up and began to read.

Recent contributions of venomous insects to be used for combat. Don't lose any!
– Hickory

Aha. Azalea had mentioned this before. Aspen had donated a lot of his stock, and this is where they must have ended up. If so, that must mean –

Juniper excitedly searched through the jars, peering through insect after insect. Finally the one she wanted caught her eye. Curled up in a still ball, a certain citrus-striped centipede stared warily back at her.

Armed with a new strategy, she grabbed the jar and headed out the room.

Fir headed into a room and grabbed the shoulder of a Leafwing sleeping there, shaking them awake. “Hey! You awake?”

“Wh- Whaa?” The villager jerkily stood up disoriented. “What’s going on? I promise I wasn’t sleeping on the – Fir?” She gaped.

“Hivewings might be in this treehouse, getting ready to attack.” He pushed her to the door.

“Attack?” She jolted fully awake. “But I can’t fight, I’m a scribe. I don’t even have a spear!”

“We’re not asking you to fight.” Elder Rowan appeared, putting a wing on the Leafwing’s shoulder as he guided her out. “Just find other villagers with spears and tell them to come here as fast as they can, alright?”

She nodded and left quickly, her talonsteps echoing through the hall.

“That’s the last of them on this floor.” Hickory reported, stepping beside Hornbeam. “There’s one more steward above us, on the highest level.”

“Meaning it's the last.” Fir took a deep breath. “And I’d wager a sealskin that the Hivewings will be there.”

“Then we mustn't be unprepared.” Elder Rowan turned to Hornbeam, grabbing the spears off his back. There were three in total, distributed among the Leafwings. Considering he had frostbreath, Fir didn’t mind.

“Hornbeam and Fir, since you’re our best fighters you both will lead the way.” The Elder strategized. “Hickory and I will remain behind you two, ready to hand over our spears for melee or hurl them ourselves.”

“Yes, Elder.” Hornbeam nodded as the four approached the staircase, stopping for a moment at the base. “Spirit of Clear sight, let the trees preserve us.”

Spirit of Clear sight, please make sure I don't die. Squeezing the jar she held, Juniper sneaked back into the hallway and looked both ways. To her left, Atta, Antlion, and Firefly had already turned the corner, out of view. But to the right, Bristletail and Chalcis could still be seen kicking down doors. She chose to tail the smaller group first.

Creeping closer, Juniper ducked into a room a safe distance away, eavesdropping on what the soldiers said.

“Hey Bristletail, the hallway splits off here.”

“It does?”

“Yeah. The one to the left leads to some outside balcony, and the one to the right...” The Hivewing could be heard shuffling. “... just leads to more rooms.”

“Then we both turn right.” Bristletail gruffly replied. “Simple as that.”

“I know, but could I go outside for a moment?” Chalcis asked. “I can hear the wind from here, and I want to see how bad it is.”

In the ensuing silence, the Hivewing’s words proved true. A huge storm must be brewing outside for the howling wind to be heard inside.

“Find.” Bristletail stepped away. “Do that quickly and return.” Two pairs of talonsteps accompanied those words. Juniper poked her head out the room just as the Hivewings’ tails flitted from view. She quickly followed, intending to deal with Chalcis first.

The wind washed over her the moment Juniper turned the corner, intensifying with every step. Ahead Chalcis struggled similarly, four wings billowing out. With the gale masking any sound, she unscrewed the jar and carefully held out the citrus-striped centipede.

A short throw is all you need, you can do this. Juniper practiced the motion while crouched, her tail sweeping back and forth. *Just have to time it right and...*

“Chalcis!” A shout from behind broke her concentration. It was Bristletail, screaming at the top of his lungs. “Look behind you!” Chalcis duly turned around, eyes widening at the sight of Juniper.

She chucked the centipede at his face, the critter landing on his snout.

Chalcis shrieked, scrabbling backwards. A moment later his legs froze, and he collapsed unconscious.

“No!” Bristletail roared, growing louder as he sprinted towards Juniper who in turn ran away, glass jar tucked under her arm.

Skidding next to Chalcis she grabbed the spear from the limp Hivewing and backed up onto the balcony, pointed her weapon to the hallway towards the charging soldier. Juniper exhaled and braced for impact.

An impact which never came. Seeing the spear in front of him, Bristletail stopped his advance. Snarling, he reached into his bag and pulled out a firepot. Then he set it alight with flamesilk, arched back, and—

Juniper leapt into the sky, getting as far from the floor as she could. A second later the pot streaked over it and into a tree where it burst into flames, sending waves of heat that nipped at her heels.

The real threat flew in from right behind as Bristletail gave chase, landing on the roof where Juniper had scrambled onto.

“Bloody Leafwing!” He roared, any semblance of stealth forgotten as he furiously reached into his bag.

He’s going to throw another one. Juniper looked for a hiding spot but found none. Even if she successfully dodged, the roof would be set ablaze. Attacking, meanwhile, would force her into spear combat with a trained soldier. And flying away into the worsening winds above didn’t seem appealing at all. She had to somehow incapacitate the Hivewing now, with only a spear and a—

Jar. Remembering the last fight she was in, Juniper had an idea.

Feigning retreat, she shuffled backwards while waiting for Bristletail to fully commit. With the extra space he soon did, grabbing another strand flamesilk with tweezers.

Leaving him vulnerable.

Juniper cocked back her arm and threw the glass jar. It sailed through the air before hitting Bristletail on the snout, shattering into a thousand pieces.

Howling, the Hivewing dropped the unlit pot and scrabbled at his face. In that time she darted forward and thrust her spear, piercing the soldier's back leg deep enough to draw blood. Then she stamped out the flamesilk, extinguishing it for good.

"Blasted tree-kisser!" Bristletail recovered remarkably quickly, swinging his spear like a club in a wide arc. Juniper danced out of the way, escaping back onto the balcony and running into the hall with another plan.

She turned the corner and hid behind the wall, spear held tightly in both claws as she waited for the Hivewing to arrive. He did in short order, heralded by stalking talonsteps that echoed through the hallway.

Juniper readied herself for an ambush, steeling herself for the blood she'd have to spill.

There's no other way. I have to strike first. She heard the talonsteps grow louder, then stop.

Suddenly Bristletail leapt past Juniper, giving her a haughty grin. "I'm not stupid, you know."

With that the Hivewing slammed into her, knocking her to the floor as he raised his spear. Juniper's eyes widened as it sailed down in a murderous arc. She barely blocked the strike with her own weapon, feeling cold iron graze her arm.

Bristletail's attack continued. The soldier pivoted his spear, and in a fluid motion disarmed Juniper. Her spear clattered some distance away, too far to reach.

Smirking, the Hivewing raised his spear for the killing blow, holding it with both front talons. As such his back legs flexed to support his whole weight, giving Juniper one more chance. Drawing back her own feet, she kicked Bristletail's wounded leg as hard as she could.

Bristletail howled, stumbling to the side. Juniper threw herself off the ground and grabbed her spear, scoring a hit on the Hivewing's arm before backing into the hallway.

To her right lay the balcony, offering escape. To her left remained more rooms, filled with possibly more Leafwings. Although considering the noise their fight had made, Juniper doubted any remained. That left escape as her best option.

Bristletail, however, realized the same thing. Despite his injuries he lunged forward, angling to her right. Juniper was forced to dodge left, deeper into the treehouse.

"I swear to Clearsight, you won't see the light of day again." The soldier vowed before charging straight at Juniper. She held out her spear to keep him at bay but Bristletail blocked it with his own, abandoning weapons in favor of claw-to-claw combat.

"Got you!" The stronger Hivewing grappled with Juniper, lifting her up before throwing her onto a door.

Ow! Stars of pain flashed over her eyes as the doorknob collided with her back. Dropping her spear, Juniper vainly slashed her claws to keep Bristletail's jaws at bay while he tightened his grip on her throat.

"Goodbye, filthy villager." He hissed as her vision began to darken.

Then the door behind her opened, sending them both tumbling down.

“Stay sharp.” Fir looked to his group as they ascended the stairs. Hickory, Hornbeam, and Elder Rowan all nodded solemnly. Step by step, the wooden floorboards creaked among deafening silence.

Until distant thuds could be heard above.

“What’s that?” Hickory cautiously asked.

“Sounds like a fight.” Hornbeam quickened his pace.

“If so, there’s no time to lose.” The Elder agreed, looking to the door they were approaching. “We need to be ready for whatever comes our way.” On cue, the wood entrance rattled with a loud BANG!

Immediately the group went quiet.

“Fir, I’ll open the door.” Hornbeam whispered at his side. “When I do, give whoever’s there a face full of frostbreath.”

Fir nodded, wisps of ice already chilling the air in front of him.

Hornbeam crept to the side of the door and twisted the handle. “Here goes.” He breathed before throwing it open.

Two dragons tumbled through, each struggling with the other as they rolled over the stairs. Hornbeam shouted in surprise while Fir narrowed his eyes, seeing the distinctive black scales of a Hivewing.

The next moment they widened as he recognized who was under it.

“Juniper?” He gaped.

“Fir?” She dumbly looked back.

“What in the three moons are you?” The Hivewing glanced at him incredulously before noticing the three other Leafwings surrounding him. For a long second, nobody moved.

Juniper acted first, kicking her opponent in the stomach and pushing him to the side, rolling safely away. Hornbeam followed with a deep thrust into the soldier’s heart while Fir finished the job with a blast of frostbreath. The Hivewing went still, his body slipping down the rest of the stairs.

After that they all hurried onto the next floor, closing the door behind them before finally relaxing. At least, three of them did. The other two just stared at each other.

“Juniper...” Fir struggled with what to say. “I’m—”

She slapped him across the face, the sound echoing through the hallway. “That was for leaving.” No one moved as the Leafwing came closer to Fir, who remained frozen in shock.

Suddenly Juniper threw open her wings and enveloped him in a tight hug. “And this is for coming back.” She whispered, resting her head on his. He saw tears glistening in her eyes and leaned into the embrace with equal intensity.

“Juniper, I’m sorry for leaving that note.” Fir murmured, twining their tails together. “Once this is all over, I’ll tear it to shreds.”

“Already did.” Juniper nuzzled his neck. “But I just want to know, what made you come back?”

Fir looked her in the eye. “You did.” He smiled, brushing her cheek. “You and your home.”

“Um, speaking of home.” Hickory awkwardly interrupted their moment. “We should probably focus on defending it first. I hear more dragons coming.”

Sure enough, overlapping talonsteps could be heard growing louder and louder.

“Could it be the last steward?” Hornbeam hopefully asked, looking at Juniper.

Her face fell. “No. The Hivewings... got to them before I could.” She sadly pointed to the corridor on their right, where in the distance a pool of blood could be seen.

“Forests preserve us.” Elder Rowan muttered, paling slightly before regaining his composure. “In that case, there’s no reason to be here. We must regroup with the rest of the village before...” He trailed off, head tilting to the side.

Fir followed the Leafwing’s gaze to the left, where, at the end of the hallway, a Hivewing soldier stood slack-jawed.

“Captain Atta! Firefly!” He screeched. “THEY’RE HERE!”

“Wait, Firefly?” Fir could’ve sworn he’d heard the name before. “Wasn’t that one of the Hivewings whoaah!”

“Not the time!” Juniper grabbed his talons and her spear as the group retreated to the balcony, away from the three Hivewings who gave bitter chase. Seeing the soldiers armed with spears, Hornbeam and Hickory darted forward and threw open some of the doors, providing makeshift cover to protect their escape.

“Fir! Juniper!” Hornbeam called, backing towards the two. “Throw your spears, then follow up with frostbreath.” They nodded and readied themselves.

Juniper and Hornbeam wound their arms and launched their spears at the incoming soldiers. The Hivewings, for their part, dove into rooms to avoid the projectiles.

“Advance!” One of them, probably Atta, ordered after the spears sailed past.

“For Queen Wasp!” The Hivewing who’d originally spotted them charged forward, followed by his squad until they staggered at the sight of Fir.

“Three moons!” Firefly lowered her bow in shock. “What are you?”

“Your friends in the clearing asked that question too.” Fir snarled. “Let me give you the same reply.”

Juniper watched Fir fill the hallway with deadly frostbreath which raced towards the panicked Hivewings. At the back of the line, Firefly scrambled into a nearby room. Captain Atta meanwhile dove to the ground, relying on her helmet to protect against the cold.

Antlion was not so lucky. Gaping in a bewildered stare, he suffered the full blast as streams of frostbreath ran into his open mouth. The ice froze his neck solid, creeping across his ears, wings, and claws before he tumbled onto the floor, dead.

“Holy Spirit of Clearsight!” Firefly screamed.

“And now we go.” Hornbeam turned tail, followed by her and Fir. Arriving at the balcony she saw Elder Rowan flying away alongside Hickory, the latter’s spear stained red. A quick glance at the hole in Chalcis’s neck confirmed the source.

“Here, take my spear.” Hickory handed the weapon to her. “You’re much better at throwing than I.”

Juniper looked at the blood-soaked tip apprehensively. “Hopefully I won’t have to.”

Soon all five of them landed safely on the roof. The wind above pressed on their wings, making it difficult to wholly fly away. And so they half-flew, half-ran over the treehouse. Juniper unfurled her wings and glided, dipping up and down among a sea of gusts.

Finally they arrived at the other end of the roof. “Elder Rowan!” Hornbeam pointed to the forest in front of them. Despite the loud gale, shouts and lights could be heard coming from it. “The whole village is almost here. We can fly to them right now!”

“A wise idea.” The Elder nodded and took flight despite the harsh current.

He made it a few wingbeats from the roof before two Hivewings burst from underneath him.

“Elder!” Hickory screamed.

By the trees, they must’ve sprinted the whole length of the treehouse to get here. Though unable to believe her eyes, Juniper still noticed the sheen of sweat glistening on Firefly.

The Elder lurched back towards the roof, where Fir and Hornbeam had already lunged forward to protect him. Hickory and Juniper meanwhile attacked from the sides, trying to pin the soldiers before they could claim their prize.

Atta was the first to try. Knife unsheathed, she thrust the blade at Elder Rowan. Luckily at that moment the wind intensified, blowing face first into him while filling his wings as if they were sails. The extra speed allowed the Elder to crash onto the roof, dazed but alive.

Seeing their target out of reach, alongside the four dragons shooting towards them, the Hivewing captain fled in the opposite direction.

“Firefly, this mission is aborted!” Atta barked, struggling to gain altitude in the wind. “We leave *now*!”

“No!” Her subordinate refused. “Their Elder remains breathing! And the white one – it said it killed my friends!”

“Forget about your friends! Atta roared back. “We need to stay alive to tell Queen Wa-*urk*!” Before she could finish, Azalea descended from a willow branch. Like thunder striking the ground, she swung a claw across the Hivewing’s head, knocking her helmet off and replacing it with a nasty gash.

Behind followed three more villagers who grappled the stricken Hivewing, dragging her into the trees. Juniper didn’t envy the captain’s fate.

That left Firefly, alone and outnumbered. Faced between a forest full of enraged villagers and a rooftop filled with the Elder’s bodyguards, she elected to take her chances with the sky. Juniper and her group gave chase nonetheless.

Unfortunately, the soldier’s four wings gave her an advantage in the turbulent air. Using two of her wings as balance and the other two to propel herself, Firefly gained more and more distance between her attackers.

“Give it up, Hivewing!” Hornbeam taunted. “You’ve failed, and now there’s nowhere to hide!”

Firefly nocked an arrow on her bow. “You’re right. I’ve failed the mission and Queen Wasp again.” She snarled, deftly remaining out of reach. “But I won’t fail my friends. Cardinal. Dauber. Petaltail.” The Hivewing drew back her bow as they faltered back.

She's trying to shoot the Elder from this distance? Juniper doubted he'd have remained still. What was the soldier planning?

"This will be for my comrades." Firefly tilted her bow away from the Elder, and towards the four pursuers. "Retribution!" She let go.

Juniper finally realized the Hivewing's plan. But by then it was too late. Accelerated by the wind and guided with pinpoint aim, the arrow rocketed past Juniper before burying itself in Fir.

Chapter 30 – 3462

Fir's first hint that he wasn't alright was the sizable arrow embedded in his chest – alongside the frightening amount of blood emerging from it.

The second was Juniper, who looked at him with pure horror in her eyes. It pained him to see her like that, and immediately Fir wanted to fly over and comfort her.

But for some reason his body refused to move. That surely explained why he found himself falling rapidly. Dimly aware of the clouds rushing away, Fir braced for impact.

An impact which never came; wizened claws wrapped around his back, slowing his descent onto the roof. He turned his head and saw Elder Rowan, repressed panic visible on the old Leafwing.

Dread began to slowly settle over him.

“NO!” Juniper wailed, almost falling out of the sky herself. Next to her, Hickory and Hornbeam watched on with despair. And behind them all, Firefly’s face broke into a sickening, triumphant grin. Fir’s eyes widened as the Hivewing drew another arrow, looking straight at Juniper.

Look out! Fir wanted to shout, but the loudest he could muster was a thin gasp. Thankfully Elder Rowan heard his words, and repeated them to the rest.

“Look out behind you!” He bellowed. “The Hivewing’s taking another shot!”

Juniper whipped her head around and saw Firefly getting ready. Fir wanted to scream at her to flee, and put as much distance from the soldier as possible to avoid getting hit.

Instead she let loose a roar that seemed to scatter the winds themselves. Juniper shot after Firefly, a green and brown blur ripping through the sky with unnatural speed.

The Hivewing too looked taken aback at Juniper’s ferocity, wings fearfully flapping away. As the Leafwing drew closer the soldier frantically drew her bow in a desperate attempt to shoot her down.

It failed.

Before the arrow could even be loosed, Juniper skewered Firefly through the stomach. The tip erupted out the Hivewing’s back in a satisfying spurt of crimson as the wind began to calm.

Juniper coldly pushed her spear away, letting the impaled soldier tumble through the air. He watched Firefly disappear below the roof, knowing she had a long way to fall. Fir softly tittered at the thought before his lungs violently seized, blue blood dripping from his snout as he collapsed onto the roof, shuddering in pain.

“Fir!” Battle forgotten, Juniper hurriedly dove towards him, passing by Hornbeam, Hickory, and Azalea who also approached.

“Hold strong, Icewing.” Elder Rowan put a claw on his shoulder. “I’ll summon help, don’t worry.” With that he took flight amid fading clouds, quickly flying to the rest of the villagers.

A moment later, Juniper skidded beside him. “Spirits of the forest...” She gasped, looking at his wound. “This can’t be happening. It *can’t* be...” She trailed off, tears glistening from the corners of her eyes.

“Hey, Juniper.” Despite the pain, Fir cracked a smile. “Long time no see.”

“Shut up!” She bursted back. “Can’t you see this is serious? You’re– you’re –” Juniper’s voice broke.

“You’re *dying*.” She began to cry.

Grunting, Fir pushed himself up to a sitting position and moved towards Juniper. Once close enough he brushed his wings over her snout and wiped away her tears, just as he’d done before.

“Shh. It’s ok.” He consoled her, feeling tears in his eyes as well.

“By the trees, you’re a terrible liar.” Juniper gave him a broken smile. “Aren’t you afraid of never returning home?”

He was silent for some time.

“Maybe it was the week I spent living in Willowwood, with Azalea, Sumac, and everyone else.” Fir spoke again. “Maybe it was when I confided in you my deepest fears, or when we danced together in the festival.”

He closed his eyes. “Perhaps it was when we fought side by side that night in the clearing, or when you freed me from the cells. Perhaps it was before all that, when you first offered me those dragonberries on the day we met in the meadow.”

“Fir, what are you talking about– *mmf!*” Before she could finish, he threw his wings around Juniper and kissed her. After a moment of shock, the Leafwing leaned into it. As moonlight peeked through the clouds, the two remained locked together for long, precious seconds.

Finally he backed away. “Whenever it was, somewhere along the line I started to care. To *love*,” he emphasized that word, “this second home I’d found, and the strange tree dragons within it.”

Fir looked at Juniper, whose scales shone elegantly under the moons. “One of those dragons was particularly strange, always disagreeing with my infallible logic. Do you know where she could be?”

Juniper softly laughed and pressed her snout to his, until their eyes were less than a talon-length away from each other. “I almost forgot you said that.” She whispered, their tears mixing freely before landing on the roof.

Other sets of claws could be heard landing as well. Fir turned and saw Elder Rowan returning with a sprinting Cypress, carrying a roll of bandages. Behind her followed Azalea and the rest of the villagers. Also on the roof were Hornbeam and Hickory, standing away at a respectful distance. They watched as Juniper’s mother knelt beside him.

“Lay down now.” Cypress ordered, handing her bandage to Juniper as the healer applied pressure around the spear. “Junie, wrap this tightly around the sides to stem the blood. There isn’t time to take him to the pavilion.”

“Yes Mother.” She nodded, face set with determined professionalism.

As the two Leafwings worked in silence, Fir gazed up at the now clear sky. A tapestry of gleaming stars gazed back.

So pretty... Despite his current state, he smiled at the sight.

The Great Ice Dragon must've sent frostbreath to adorn the night, but it seemed to have changed on its journey to Pantala. Instead of green-blue lights snaking beyond the horizon, Fir saw waves of red and purple that twisted in between the moons before bursting across the sky.

The sight almost resembled a massive eye. It was different and strange to be sure, but no less beautiful.

"Pass me more of the bandage, Mother." Juniper tugged, pulling up blue-soaked fabric. Fir felt his chest tighten, though he didn't feel much better.

No matter, he could admire the hundreds of stars shining bright tonight! It didn't take long for him to pick out all the familiar constellations.

To his left, the twin bear stars wandered into view. The pair left behind rivulets of silver stars, creating a glowing path that stood out from the dark. Among this river, Fir next spotted the rabbit star as it dipped in and out of view. For a while he played this sudden game of hide-and-seek, enjoying the unpredictability.

Further away, the reindeer constellation trotted into view as well. Its antlers were missing, however, perhaps lost somewhere within the stream left in the bears' wake. At least it looked relieved.

"We need more pressure. Juniper, press your talons on his chest." Cypress hurriedly pointed, sounding strangely tense.

The next moment, warm claws laid themselves over his heart. Fir felt himself relaxing as he put his own claws over her's. He squeezed them reassuringly, looking up at Juniper. The Leafwing stiffened and turned away, shaking. He looked back down and saw most of his underbelly stained with blood.

His blood.

Before Fir could panic, a glimmer from above seized his attention. Hanging highest over the night sky like an irreplaceable jewel, the north star shone with a light only it could give. Noticing his gaze, it spoke to him at last.

Fir, son of the Icewings. It approvingly declared, the words alone filling him with pride.

Brave. The bear stars rumbled.

Loyal. The rabbit star winked.

And true. The reindeer constellation nodded.

Fir preened under the praise. But before he could relish for long, a spurt of blood erupted from his mouth.

“It’s just as I feared.” He heard Cypress say. “His lung’s been hit, and probably an artery too.”

“What do we do?” Juniper’s voice rose, edged with hysteria. “Mother, tell me there’s a way!”

Cypress met Fir’s gaze, and her face fell. “I’m sorry.”

“No no no no...” Juniper murmured, violently shaking her head. “NO!” She collapsed on him, snout falling on his bloodstained chest.

Moving quickly, Fir lifted Juniper’s snout and bundled her claws within his own. “Juniper, please don’t cry. You did all you could.”

“I couldn’t save you.” She sobbed. “And now you’re going to *die* here.”

Fir tilted her head to rest on his, whispering softly. "But you did save me, don't you remember?"

Juniper looked at him confused.

"You saved me in the meadow. And from the cells. And during the fight in the clearing." He coughed again, feeling something run down his jaw. "Three is an awfully large number, don't you think?"

Juniper hugged him again, as if trying to stop the bleeding with her body. She filled half his view as she tightly twined her tail around his. The other half was left to the stars, and the frostbreath in the sky shaped like an eye.

An eye. Fir's own widened. Is the Great Ice Dragon watching me?

On cue it brightened, enveloping his view as if offering an invitation.

"Fir..." Juniper whimpered, gently nudging him. He refocused on the Leafwing's face, noticing it streaked with tears.

"Juniper..." He softly kissed her. "The pain's fading away now."

"Please don't go." She sniffled.

"I'm sorry." Fir's voice broke, crying just as hard as Juniper. "But you know what?"

"What?"

"Soon I'll be among the stars." He smiled, looking at the sky which proudly looked back. "We can see each other every night."

"Was flying among them not enough?" Juniper quietly laughed.

"I guess not, my love."

She gasped.

"You look lovely when you're flustered." Fir simpered, darkness creeping from the edges of his vision. "I'm so glad you're here – I'd feel too afraid otherwise."

"By the trees, what will I do without you?" Juniper murmured.

"Grieve. Cry. Mourn." He answered, feeling it harder and harder to speak. "But I know it won't break you, because you're too strong for that. I should know."

Juniper wrapped her wings around him as the two lowered flat over the roof. "Thank you for landing in Pantala, my Icewing."

"Thank you for finding me, my Leafwing." Fir's eyelids grew heavy.

The Great Ice Dragon, accompanied by all the stars, beckoned for him to join. One eye looked to them while the other remained on Juniper, as she gently cradled his head. His heart could easily hold love for each.

The best of both worlds, remaining by my side. Fir beamed, feeling himself slipping away.

I'm glad I'm home.

They buried Fir the next sunset in the meadow where he was first found. Under the protective shade of a wide willow tree, next to a stream which cooled the soil, the area was noticeably chillier than its surroundings.

Juniper knew he'd appreciate resting here.

"It is said that more may pass in mere weeks than during whole decades." Elder Rowan's voice cut through the melancholy, lamp-lit air. "And I believe these past two have exemplified this saying."

He looked to the upturned grass beside him, face creased with sorrow. "For the second time in our continent's history, a dragon from the Distant Kingdoms arrived at our shores. Now he joins the first in eternal slumber."

The Elder looked to the assembled Leafwings, taking a breath. Practically the entire village had come, standing on the ground and in the trees in a loose semicircle. Out of all of them, Juniper stood closest to the grave.

"I first called Fir a threat, but I couldn't have been further from the truth. He's a hero, one who made the ultimate sacrifice to protect our home." He continued.

The stealth team had returned in the morning, bewildered by the events of yesterday. They also arrived with no reinforcements, not that they were of any use now. The messengers explained that similar attacks had happened all across the Leaf Kingdom, and that by the time they'd arrived the palace could offer no more soldiers.

Juniper kept her head locked straight ahead. Someone nudged her wing, and looking up she saw a subdued Azalea giving her a sympathetic expression.

Apart from Fir, three other dragons died last night. The first was the steward, murdered in the treehouse by the Hivewings. Manihot was his name according to Hickory. The second was caught by falling debris, leading to a fatal plummet to the forest floor. The final Leafwing was asleep when a fire pot exploded above her hut. She had no way to escape. Their funerals had been done in the afternoon. Now only one was left.

Opposite of Azalea, Mother squeezed Juniper's talons with understanding on her face. She knew all too well the pain of losing a loved one right in front of your eyes.

Juniper offered the two a weak smile that didn't last for long. She focused again on the Elder.

"So let us remember Fir today as one of our own, now and forevermore. May he nurture our home as he did in life." Elder Rowan concluded. "Would anyone else like to give a few closing remarks?"

Juniper nodded. "I would." The eyes of almost two hundred Leafwings snapped onto her as she stepped forward. The Elder backed away, giving up his spot to her.

Turning slowly, she looked at the crowd. Juniper had been in this position before, appealing to the village to save Fir's life. His loss still felt surreal, sending shivers up her spine – and fresh tears down her snout.

Her audience shared in this grief. Azalea and Mother, eyes dimmed to a shadow of what they once were. Hickory and Hornbeam, wings drooped from familiar guilt. Juniper even saw Sumac, peeking at her from beside Tupelo. The dragonet's head remained downcast, and even at a distance she could see the faint glimmers of teardrops falling down.

He looked just like her, heart consumed until nothing remained. How long would Sumac feel empty after this?

Too long.

She paused for a moment. Then Juniper opened her mouth.

"Have I ever told you all about about the time Fir first spoke to me?"

Confused murmurs spilled through the crowd. Elder Rowan looked at her questioningly.

“It happened when I found him sprawled unconscious in this very meadow, the day before I told the Elder. I’d just finished wrapping up his nasty side wound, and was thinking what to do next.” Juniper reminisced, looking to the exact place where it had occurred.

“All of a sudden I turned around, and found Fir staring right at me. For a long couple of moments, we both were completely quiet.” Juniper saw a small smirk grow on Azalea’s face. Her friend had an idea of what was about to happen.

“I remember thinking to myself ‘what will this mystery dragon possibly say to me?’ during those few seconds. I made a million guesses in my head, each of them wrong. Because the first thing Fir said to me was,” Juniper inhaled.

“Three moons, it really is a tree!”

Like a sapling splitting through barren earth, faint smiles emerged from the attending Leafwings. Azalea covered her snout, emitting muffled chuckles that caused Mother to glare at her.

“And that was why our very first conversation was on whether or not I was a plant.” Juniper smiled at the memory. “Obviously Fir was wrong, so he instead argued that I was a *Treewing*.” Scattered titters broke out at that. Even the Elder quietly snorted.

“To prove it, Fir used logic I’d never seen before. By getting me to admit that leaves were on trees, he exclaimed in a moment of triumph:” Juniper paused for effect.

“SO THERE! *Treewing* is right after all – you said it yourself!”

Sumac giggled, his high pitched chirps lightening the air. Even the lamps seemed to shine brighter.

“At the time I was so mad, but looking back now I can’t help but laugh.” Juniper raised an upturned claw to the other village. “That was a memory I had with Fir, one I won’t ever forget. Would anyone else like to tell theirs?”

“I would!” Azalea called, raising her voice. “Mine is from last week, during the night of our New Year of the Trees festival when I was scale painting Fir. While I had experience doing it before, that was only for Leafwings. With him, well... I had more trouble.” She sheepishly admitted.

“I’d started painting Fir in the afternoon. But because I’d never worked on an Icewing before, I spent hours just trying out different designs to see what worked. By the time I finished, the festival was already beginning.” Azalea recalled.

“But despite having to sit still for so long, Fir didn’t complain. He merely sat through my failed attempts, giving encouragement no matter the mistake.” She straightened. “I’m glad he was patient with me, and I won’t ever forget it.”

“Ooh! I have something too! I have something too!” Sumac loudly piped up, waving his arms. Tupelo shushed him with his tail, stern eyes rebuking his son for such behavior.

“No, no. It’s ok.” Juniper gestured with her wings. “You can speak, Sumac.”

Unsilenced, the dragonet eagerly began. “A few days ago, Fir did something similar with me. He took me to the beach to teach me how to fish, but instead of a net or spear, he taught me something called ‘claw fishing.’” Sumac made air quotes with his talons.

“Fir told me to wade into the bay, keep my claws underwater, and wait for the fish to come.” He stamped his foot. “I thought it was stupid. Why hope for prey to arrive when you could hunt it down? But Fir insisted, so I waited.”

Sumac reached out with a claw, squeezing the air in front of him. “And waited, and waited, until a fish finally swam up to me. But when I pounced it swam away! That’s when Fir told me about perseverance, and how claw fishing was a way to practice it. It took a while, but eventually I caught a fish all by myself.” He proudly announced. “And for the record, it was delicious. I’ll never forget the taste.”

“Fir forgave my error in judgment, despite my hostile actions.” Elder Rowan warmly praised.

“Fir had the integrity to apologize to my son, even after he’d become the village hero.” Tupelo nuzzled Sumac.

“Fir made my daughter happy.” Mother looked at Juniper. “And I couldn’t have asked for anything else.”

“I appreciated his interest in our tribe's history.” Hickory added.

“And he’s a skilled fisher too!” Hornbeam grinned.

Other villagers began pitching in too, their voices overlapping into an indiscernible buzz. Yet its warmth could be clearly felt, lifting the spirits of all present.

After that Elder Rowan moved to finish the proceedings, ending the funeral on a bittersweet note. While most villagers trickled back to Willowwood, Azalea stepped towards Juniper and put a comforting wing over her.

“Juniper, if you ever feel overwhelmed, you’re always free to stop by the shop. I can teach you how to paint if you want. It’s very relaxing – and quite therapeutic.”

“Thanks Azalea, I appreciate the offer.” Juniper replied. The two remained silent for a minute.

“On the bright side, things can only get better from here.” Azalea continued. “The stealth team said that Wasp and Queen Sequoia are meeting soon for a peace summit. Once they do, this violence will be behind us for good. I’m sure of it.”

“Hm. I guess time will tell.” Juniper looked away. “Tell Mother I’ll be gone for some time.”

“I will. See you tomorrow.” Azalea turned and walked away.

Once everyone had left, Juniper made her way to Fir’s grave. She sat over it and dug her forehead into the dirt, mourning alone.

“Why did you have to die, Fir?” Juniper sadly whispered. “We miss you. I miss you. So, so much.”

She squeezed her wet eyes shut. “I wish we had more time together. Time to laugh, talk, and love. Yet here we are.” Remaining motionless atop his resting place, Juniper lost track of time, oblivious to the outside world.

Eventually she opened her eyes, and looked up to the darkening sky. Faint lights could already be seen peeking through the foliage. Juniper smiled.

She didn’t know if the peace summit was enough to end the fighting. She didn’t know if Wasp would finally stop.

But there was one thing Juniper knew. As she took flight, threading through the forest until reaching the open sky, she reminded herself of what that was.

The stars were out tonight, and her Icewing was among them.

The End