

THREADS OF TRANSFORMATION

by ellerean

for gloam

It was Muarim who encouraged her to reach out to the other birds. *They're just like you*, he had said, as she'd watched them from afar. *Maybe they're waiting for you to say something.*

It was a stupid idea, even as she started to hover outside their social circle, trying to grab a thread of conversation. They weren't unfriendly, but they weren't like *her*, not that she could explain what that meant when Muarim asked.

So she wasn't sure how she'd ended up in the herons' tent, drinking spiced wine. Nor did she know where they had acquired such a luxury, served in cracked pottery that must've traveled with them from... well, she wasn't sure. Serenes? Phoenicis? All she knew was the oversize mugs were nothing like what they used at meals, a stark difference from the dented and battered tin they ate their rations from.

But the wine was nice, wherever it came from, and warm on the way down. She was comfortable enough in a corner of the tent, cross-legged on the floor, but these beorc tents weren't made for birdkind. They were so *small*, once they were filled with the wingspan of several birds. So it was impossible to hide in this increasingly small space, as if there were any chance she *could* after Leanne had invited her to join them.

"Nice, isn't it?" King Tibarn said, lifting his own mug of wine.

"Yes," Vika replied, holding her mug in both hands. "Where did it come from?"

Tibarn shrugged as he smirked, and Vika wished she could retract the question. It was none of her *business* where the hawk king acquired what she assumed was his personal stash. Once again, she'd tried to make conversation, but wound up hunched in the corner, again.

"Do not tease Vika," Princess Leanne said, turning to face her. "Spoils!"

Of course, she thought, sipping the wine, trying not to think too hard about it.

Vika had been around laguz before, of course. It had been much different at the manor, with the serving and cleaning and farming. She hadn't made anything like *friends*, scoffing at the thought of her master permitting such a frivolous thing. She sipped at her wine, the spices tickling her senses, and marveled at the birds' easy conversation before her. How King Tibarn threw back his head when he laughed; how Reyson always look mildly annoyed. And the *wings*, so many wings crowded in one tent, unfurled and beautiful and unashamed. Vika was suddenly conscious of her own wings, how she always held them tight to her back. They were merely a tool to be used, not something to show off—or so she'd been led to believe, if the old master had anything to say about it.

"We're heading off," King Tibarn said, presumably to Princess Leanne, as Vika only had a view of his wings. "Don't stay up too late."

Reyson acknowledged her first before their departure. He paused when he turned around, as if she were something interesting to study. Vika knew about the herons' keen sense of perception—they all did by that point—and she wondered what he saw, if there were things she didn't perceive herself. She wondered if he saw himself in her thoughts, but no, they weren't *mind-readers*. Maybe.

"Goodnight, Vika," Reyson finally said, with a small smile.

Vika set her mug on the ground. She made herself stand up to address them *properly*, not hide in the corner like a slave. “Goodnight, Prince Reyson. King Tibarn.” Vika turned toward Princess Leanne, bowing her head slightly. “Thanks for inviting me.”

Princess Leanne furiously shook her head. “You stay!”

Vika looked around, as if Leanne could be speaking to anyone else. But, no, the princess stared at her directly, fists on her hips. It was a command Vika could politely refuse, claim that she also needed to rest up after a long day of battle. But then Leanne clasped her hands, beaming at her. Vika glanced from the princess to Prince Reyson, whose face betrayed nothing; King Tibarn was even less help, blocking the entrance with his massive bulk. She was cornered, and not of her own volition. That even when they departed, leaving the escape route open, Vika could think of no good reason to leave this very happy princess alone.

Vika felt suddenly stupid in her own skin, arms hanging awkwardly as Leanne rushed toward her. When she grasped her arms with both hands, the rest of Vika’s body felt like it plunged into an icy river. It *burned* under those hands, smooth on her grimy arms. She was assaulted with the very scent of her, fresh and earthly like the forest itself.

“You are here,” Leanne said, squeezing. “I am... happy.”

She twirled around, so quickly that Vika jumped backward to avoid getting smacked by those white wings. Leanne hummed to herself, a soft tune that Vika couldn’t quite place. It could’ve been fragments of galdrar for all she knew, which was virtually nothing. But Vika didn’t feel any different, and besides, she didn’t think the magical songs worked that quickly—or what it would feel like. Or why she would do that at all, here in a tent.

Vika rubbed the feeling back into her forearms. She tried not to think about this new sensation, of being *touched*, not by a whip or back of a hand. She barely knew Leanne at all, but it was the princess who had formally invited her to the tent with the rest of them. *Come*, she had said, a request Vika had doubted was for her. Because despite Muarim's urging, the other birds *weren't* like her. They were soldiers, having fought together before; they were family, of the same breed. And she wasn't so foolish as to try befriending *King Kilvas*, who skittered about and didn't stay in one place. Not that he had reached out to her, either, some nameless former slave who got roped into this army. She should've stayed with Muarim and Tormod; they were probably still awake in their shared tent, talking strategy, or about how nice it was that she was making friends—

“Sit!”

Vika hadn't noticed that Leanne had turned back around, clutching a small satchel. She was smiling, and Vika wondered if she'd said anything else while she was busy zoning out. But there had been a command, and despite her best efforts, she saw no logical reason to refuse. Princess Leanne joined her on the floor, carefully unknotting the small satchel. "What's all this?" Vika asked, as Leanne shook its contents out on the floor: Tiny stoppered pots; small brushes of varying sizes; a box with a hinged lid; a wide-toothed comb of wood. Leanne picked up the comb, examining it on both sides like she had never seen it before.

In reply, Leanne cupped the back of Vika's head. Her touch was delicate, but not tentative, as she began to massage the base of her skull.

“W-What are you doing?” Vika stammered.

Again, Leanne said nothing, but began to gently comb Vika's hair.

Vika couldn't recall the last time she'd done anything with her hair, besides the daily ritual of running her grimy fingers through it. She held back a cry of protest as the comb found each and every knotted tangle, as Leanne worked it through the matted mess in the back. Vika lowered her head, gritting her teeth despite Leanne's delicate touch. The comb scratched at her skull, with Leanne gathering hair in one hand to work out a particularly stubborn knot.

"Boys," Leanne said, her golden hair gently swishing as she shook her head. "No understanding."

Vika winced as the stubborn knot was dislodged. "What don't they understand?"

Leanne's light laughter was a warm mist on her lowered head. "Grooming."

She didn't think the boys looked *that* bad, even after the toil of battle, day after day. But it was nothing like *this*, with Leanne's fingers through her detangling hair, the wooden comb now running smoothly through it. From crown to base, one side then the other. Leanne ran both hands through her hair, pushing it back off her forehead.

"Better!" She set the comb down, beaming.

Her hair still felt greasy, Vika thought, raking her fingers through it. But it didn't snag and pull, which was a vast improvement.

"Now..." Leanne selected one of the small, stoppered pots, but immediately shook her head and set it aside. She opened the box, its small hinges silent, shielding its contents from Vika's view with her arm. Leanne glanced from the opened box to Vika and back. Finally, she nodded, then selected one of the small brushes.

"What are—"

“Eyes closed,” Leanne interrupted.

Vika sighed, but curiosity overcame her. She shifted uncomfortably, hands resting on her knees, pulse quickening each second that nothing happened. There was the gentle sound of shifting skirts, Leanne moving somewhere Vika couldn’t discern. Then, that familiar scent up close, an earthy perfume and radiating warmth. She tensed, anticipating those warm hands on her shoulders again, but felt a faint tickle at her eye instead.

“Princess,” Vika said, trying her hardest to keep her eyes closed, “what are you doing?”

There was only a soft giggle in reply, the tiny paintbrush wisp across her eyelid. The answer was obvious, once Vika took two seconds to think about it. But it didn't seem possible, as the brush tickled the corner of an eye.

“Be still,” Leanne whispered, though Vika hadn’t dared to move at all.

Vika had obviously seen makeup before, spread out in excessive quantities at the manor. The master's wife had loved the stuff, her face puffed with copious amounts of white powder and charcoal pencils. Vika hadn't understood any of it, and was commanded not to touch the vanity, even though she'd never had a desire to. She didn't know what that powder felt like, but didn't think it was anything like this—she couldn't feel the weight of whatever was going near her eye, even as Leanne started to trace along her eyelid. It was soothing, in a way, having her do whatever she was doing. These tiny pots and brushes were different. There was no powder nor discernible scent, the brushes a mere wisp on her skin. Leanne hummed as she swiped a corner of Vika's eye, and Vika was certain her cheeks were pink, though from neither the makeup nor the spiced wine. Leanne cupped her cheeks, and Vika heard...

not a voice exactly, but *something* in her mind, as Leanne rested her forehead against hers.

“Listen,” Leanne whispered, breath tinged with spearmint.

Vika *felt* the memory, rather than see it—cold wind through clean hair; heart pounding too fast. A forest, running down no path that she could see, tendrils of winter-bare branches catching on her ruffled feathers. Uneven ground through thin sandals, wanting desperately to *fly*, but urged to remain grounded. She’d forgotten their names immediately, the tiny beorc and his tiger guardian. But it didn’t matter, running away from the manor, far, far, farther than she’d ever run before. *Keep up, Vika!*, a voice now close to her heart—

The forest *sang*.

Not a forest to the desert at all, the memory drifting, weightless even as she touched the ground. *Yes!* said the voice in her mind, a voice she didn’t think belonged to her. A voice for singing, for laughter, the melodious tune of a song she didn’t know. A warmth spilling into her soul, a tingling in the hands that clasped Leanne’s skirts, different than the warmth of spiced wine. A knot in her chest she hadn’t known was there, a song vying to break free—

“Vika.”

A hushed voice, a whisper on downturned lips.

When had she opened her eyes?

“You... hurt.”

Vika wrenched her hands from the folds of Leanne's skirt. She stumbled back hard, ignoring the shooting pain in her spine as she studied her hands, one side, then the other. She examined the underside of each arm, expecting the sudden gush of blood, pushing aside the illogicality of a nearby foe, but not impossible—

“No.” Leanne shook her head. “Here.”

A fire burst in her chest when Leanne touched her rapidly-beating heart. *Only the skin*, she told herself, but felt those fingertips beneath the surface. It was the princess's turn to close her eyes, head tilted, as if... listening. She bowed her head, a shimmer in those transparent lashes.

“Here,” Leanne repeated, softer. “Leanne... help.”

The *help with what?* lodged in a dry throat, eyes wide as Leanne grasped her shoulders. Vika wasn't transported, not exactly; they still knelt face-to-face in that tent, the same coarse floor under her knees. But the air *shifted*, brighter despite the growing darkness outside, as Leanne's tuneless hum blended into song.

Vika had heard stories of Serenes's transformation. The stories were always different, in the breadth of its rebirth, in the number of herons, in the lyrics of song few in Begnion understood anyway. She looked around frantically, waiting for fragments of stories to come true—a heavenly light, or vegetation crawling over the tent walls, or the sudden appearance of a midday sun in the midst of night. Leanne's palms were both warm and cool, the song a whisper but so, so loud. Vika tensed, anticipating the *change*, of whatever would come next—

But it was only a song. Maybe. It was only a heron doing *heron*-like things, hands roaming over her shoulders and across her back, pulling her closer, that lilting song at

her ear, Leanne grasping with unexpected strength as Vika breathed in a faceful of golden hair, the song muffled against her neck.

She stared down Leanne's back, at the soft feathers around the exposed wing joints, at all that hair pooling on the floor.

It was too long until she realized she should maybe hug Leanne back, because that's what this *was*, wasn't it?

Her arms wouldn't move. There was no reason for it, but she simply couldn't make them do anything. It had been too long, anyway; a response would be stupid after such a long delay, and what if Leanne pulled away as soon as Vika tried to do anything?

It was a small relief when Leanne sat up, but Vika missed that warmth immediately. There was nothing magical about it, nothing particularly *heron*. It was just—

“Friends,” Leanne said.

Vika wondered, not for the first time, if herons truly were mind-readers.

The scattered remains of makeup pots and brushes lay beside them, where Leanne had unceremoniously dumped them out of the satchel. They had scattered across the floor like a trail, most of the pots on their sides, but the stoppers firm enough to keep their contents inside.

“Is this”—Vika glanced at the makeup pile—“magical or something?”

It felt like a stupid question even as she asked, but it made Leanne smile. “You feel different?”

Vika combed back her untangled hair with her fingers. “I think so. Maybe?”

Then, the heron princess laughed. It wasn’t the kind of teasing laugh Vika hated, the one that pretended to be of good humor. It was the laugh of easy friendship, one that should’ve been impossible in the midst of bloody war. Leanne picked up the small makeup box, setting it on her palm like an offering.

“Friends,” she said. “No magic.”

“Then... why all this?” Vika vaguely motioned to her face, to the layers of eye makeup and she couldn’t remember what else.

“Friends!” Leanne picked each discarded item from its wayward pile one by one, setting them in a neat row. She gently blew on the brush she had used, dispelling a fine mist of pink powder. She studied the small brush, then grasped Vika’s wrist. It took little effort for Leanne to uncurl her hand, setting the brush in an open palm.

Leanne nodded, once. “Take turns.”

The wooden brush was smoother than she expected—it felt like the handle would slide out of her hand easily. “You want me to do your makeup?”

Leanne sat up straighter, hands at her knees. “Yes!”

“I’m— I’m not very good at this, princess.”

Leanne studied the neat row of pots, then selected one seemingly at random. Though the bottle was semi-opaque, Vika could see a slight green shimmer inside. “Practice.” She popped the stopper off with her thumbnail. “Like battle, but fun.”

Leanne held the bottle between thumb and forefinger, waiting for something to happen. Vika stared at it, chewing her bottom lip, but finally—carefully—accepted the proffered makeup. She peered into its shimmering green interior, which was a color that felt strangely familiar. Like a vision, a scent of new life and ancient magic.

“All right.” Vika dipped a tiny brush into the ordinary pot of makeup. “Close your eyes, Princess.”