

Wings of Adhira

J. Larklyte

Chapter One

Stairs. So many stairs.

You thought that you'd never miss them. Then the stairs ran out and you had to resort to climbing spikes. The harpies offered to carry you, and you told them where they could stuff it.

You wanted to, at least. But Lowrie told you not to rock the boat. Make nice with the monsters, he said, because they might just swoop down and skin us alive if you don't. Then he laughed. The fucking psychopath.

So you avoided the danger and indignity of being carried, but now one of them is staring at you as you work yourself into a thoroughly sweaty mess. It said that it was "spotting you". As if you needed distracting. As if having to keep an eye on it all the way through the climb might not cause your inevitable fall in the first place.

A gust of wind blusters past, testing your trembling limbs. To one side you can see the Landing, visible through a ragged hole in the wall. It's so far down. An unexpected storm might spell the end... all you can hope is that you make it all the way down. If you don't, no doubt these creatures will claim your corpse. Dig out your bones for scrimshaw, pare off your meat for use in their horrific experiments, and pickle your eyes for good measure, likely as not. You can't help but imagine a necklace of your teeth hung around the neck of your supposed spotter.

It tried to speak to you at first. Told you it's name was Adhira. You put a stop to that. If this thing has been assigned to watch you, it can't be important enough to waste your breath on. The older, more influential harpies will be at the top.

You find a place to take a break. A terribly small concrete ledge, worn away at the edges with rusted pipes bolted into the bottom. Your shoulders hurt. Your fingertips have been rubbed raw.

The thing has the temerity to sit next to you. You shudder as you feel it's dorsal feathers brush against your arm, feeling sick.

Where to look? Not downward. The dizzying drop is too much for you to handle right now. The city at the bottom has been reduced to a few dancing lights in between fuzzy brown shapes.

Not right - can't risk eye contact with the harpie. Ponwan has already been graceful enough to shut it up, you're not going to squander that by giving it an excuse to start up again.

Upwards? Your bones ache as it is, giving them a good view of how much further you'll have to climb would be suicidal.

You settle for left. There's not much over there. Just the concave inner wall and whatever's left of the floor. A worn mural has been carved into the patch next to you: an impassive looking face who's eyes are obscured by some kind of mechanical device. You don't understand the words inscribed beneath it.

"Magic may not be used to deliberately kill or inflict harm upon a person."

It's voice makes you jump. Your heart lurches upward as you begin to slip, teetering on the edge of oblivion even as your mind screams at you to get away. Conflicting instincts collide in your brain, at once urging you to flee and cling on for dear life.

It's wing wraps around your shoulder, keeping you firmly on the ledge. You twist and freeze up, finding yourself staring into the monster's eyes.

They're bright and browny-orange, glinting like a bronze ingot catching the light. They pin you in place, prey caught in a hunter's clutches. It's expression shifts from concerned to quizzical, heading cocking to one side. It's got coppery, windswept hair and is missing a tooth - one of the upper incisors.

"That's what it says." It says.

You try to speak, but can only emit weak yelps and stutters. It's wings are white like a gulls, flecked with black and grey. One of them has closed around you, shielding you from the wind. Desperate to look anywhere but it's eyes, you find yourself staring at the faded scars on it's shoulder, where the once-human arm was severed and replaced.

"I'm going to fly you the rest of the way, okay?"

You shake your head.

"Please? Your hands are scraped raw."

It'll drop you. Further away from the wall, where there's no chance you could catch ahold of anything and save yourself. It's talons will cut in you, you can almost feel them doing it already, flinching at the thought of them rending your flesh. You shake your head again.

It sighs, and lifts you up onto it's lap. It all happens so fast you don't have time to react. It's frighteningly strong, but it's lap feels... soft. You squirm about a bit. Mostly out of

principle. It holds you closely, enveloping you in downy warmth.

"Waaa-?!"

...Is about as close as you come to articulating any protest, about five seconds after the fact. Your synapses are too bruised and confused to work any faster.

"It's okay. I'll keep you safe. This must be pretty scary, without wings and all. But I've got you."

Once again you're assailed by visceral thoughts of torn meat. It's teeth digging your shoulder, biting down and ripping bloody chunks off the bone. Cruel talons holding you down, puncturing your skin as it leans over and locks lips with-

Wait. Stop. What the fuck was that? You cast about your mind but the errant thought has gone, scuttling back into your subconsciousness. Rightful fear and revulsion takes over in its place. You want to retch. You should want to retch.

"Let go." You mutter.

"Let go?" It asks.

"Get off me!" You shout.

It sighs, but complies, easing you back onto the uneven strip of concrete and taking flight. It's heart-wrenching to watch it flit upward to the next floor, doing in ten seconds what will likely take you hours. It waits for you up there, arms crossed.

Your battered bottom is back on cold, bumpy ground. Sweat pours out of you. It's going to be a long afternoon.

Chapter Two

The Eyrie. You managed to reach it. You didn't die. You kind of wish you had though. Your fingers are bleeding, flesh ground into paste and nails split, sending arcs of agony dancing up your arms at the lightest touch. Your knees are bruised, your lower back aches, your nose is sore from all the times you had to wipe it, and your bones feel as if they're made of stone.

And those bronze eyes watched you all the way. It's still there now, your attendant monster waiting for you to muster up enough spirit to rise. The floor has been a welcome reprieve for a couple of minutes, and the more time you spend lying on it the harder it seems to get back up.

Volition intercedes enough to roll you onto your back, and you look up at the Eyrie. Your first thought is of a panopticon - the whole thing is circular (predictably), and the inside of the circle is studded with holes of varying sizes, each of them an entrance to a nest. You could hover in the middle with a telescope and, light providing, have a decent look into any of them.

Actually... your vision is still a little blurry, but you do pick out hanging beads and curtains covering many of the entrances. Very colourful - it really brightens up the concrete and masonry. They some concept of privacy, then. Perhaps it's considered poor taste to dismember a child in public?

A lot of the walls are inscribed with murals and patterns, but you aren't in any condition to be making sense of them now. You suppose you need to actually begin pursuing your mission. Find the head monster and start convincing it the sun shines out of Lowrie's arse.

You notice that you're starting to attract a bit of a crowd. You wish you hadn't. A dozen or so monsters congregate around you, whispering among themselves, and more prowl over to join with each passing moment. That, more than anything, spurs you to find your feet.

Your brain does not agree with this decision. Light-headedness assaults you, sending you in a woozy stagger to one side. One of the monsters kicks up a foot and catches your arm, talons closing around your bicep. You scream and wrench it free, cutting two bloody furrows into the skin.

"This is Nancy..." You don't hear the rest of your escort's sentence, nor the reply she receives. Everywhere you turn are harpies. Your feet hurt. Your arm hurts. Your forearm is starting to itch as rivulets of blood run down it. There's nowhere to go. Everywhere you turn are harpies.

One of them looks familiar. Have you seen that face before? A missing child? A butchered child? It frowns at you, feigning sympathy and concern.

Your heart thuds and your breath comes in ragged gasps. You can hear nothing else. Everything else is a mess of incoherence and rustling feathers.

Who's in charge? What was the mission? Who sent you here?

And then, sweet oblivion as your mind throws in the towel. You don't even feel the impact as you smack back into the ground.

Chapter Three

You feel softness. Softness and aching, but it's the pleasant kind. A warm breeze caresses your face, carrying with it melodic chimes and an odd clinking sound. Your body stiffly informs you that it's on the mend, but warns you not to take it too far.

Fair enough, you answer. I'll just wriggle my toes a bit and see what's what.

Nothing untoward happens. You hear a quiet shuffle as a sheet crinkles on top of your feet. So far so good.

You tentatively flex your fingers, but a sharp pain raps you on the knuckles in response. You hiss and relax them, letting it recede into the background. Your forearms grumble as well - you feel a peculiar tension as stitches distend your skin a little. It doesn't hurt but it does feel... risky. So much for your arms.

Even with your eyes closed you detect warm, bright light. You peek through one of them experimentally. A concrete ceiling, painted in faded pastel pink. You're definitely in... someone's bed.

A flicker of fear tickles your stomach. A harpie's bed? Have they...?

You yelp in pain as you pull your arms over the covers, ignoring all the prior warnings they gave you. They're bandaged, but they're yours. You... probably should have figured that when you realised you still had fingers, huh? They throb admonishingly at you, but you haven't snapped any of the stitches.

Then again, your mind muses, don't harpies have vestigial

fingers? You swear you've seen digits on their wings before. They do all their fine manipulation with their feet, but still.

Shelve that thought, Nancy. Where are you?

You have a look around the room. Sunlight is flooding in through some blinds that rattle gently against the breeze. Delicate bone chimes swing back and forth atop the windowsill. The walls are covered in colourful drawings and scribbles - several loose sticks of chalk littered about the floor seem to be the culprits. You carefully lever yourself upright, setting your feet down on a reed mat beneath the bed.

Shit. You're naked.

You can't see your clothes anywhere. One thing you can see is the patchwork of bruises and scrapes all over your shins and knees, leering back at you in muddy hues of blue and yellow. A rugged web of scabs are growing over the worst of it.

No clothes, Nancy. Focus on what's important.

Right. You could festoon yourself in the bedsheets, but you're not sure if that would be more or less dignified than just walking about in the nude. Perhaps boldness would serve you better than worrying too much about being decent. You're here to impress the harpie leadership, aren't you? What could be more impactful than a naked warrior-queen, brazenly standing without shame, her body as bare and honest as her arguments!?

No. On second thought you'd actually like some clothes.

It's rather warm, at least. Especially given that you're up so high. There's a doorway separating this room from... whatever's

out there, complete with a hanging curtain. You creep over to it and strain to hear what might be on the other side.

Hm... there's a low humming. Could be some kind of lytestone stove. Then, to your horror, high-pitched shouts, shrieks and whoops, accompanied by the dry slap of bare feet running. It gets closer.

You should probably do something, but you freeze up. Struck by panic at the thought of being seen naked in front of a bunch of harpie kids, and the prospect of said kids possibly trying to eat you.

"Ssshh!" One of them hisses, just as the footsteps seem to pass right outside.

"What?"

"You might wake her up!"

"Have you seen what she looks like? Her fingers were really long and bendy."

"And blue!"

"Idiot, they aren't usually that colour. Garima said so."

You can see vague outlines through the curtain, gathered around the doorway on the other side.

"I want to see."

"Spying on someone while they're asleep is rude! And besides, Garima said no."

"No fair, Garima gets to go in whenever she wants!"

"Duh, because Garima's in charge of making her all better."

You can take no more, and clear your throat. The chatter goes silent.

"...Hello?" One of them says.

Oh, something in your brain says. They're just kids. I've dealt with kids before.

"Good morning." You say, stamping an authoritative tone over your words, "It seems like I'm up and about. I need one of you fetch..." Gamira, maybe? No, someone more familiar. "...Adhira. And some clothes. It's very important."

Someone giggles on the other side.

"Okay, miss!" One of them scampers off.

"...Does that mean I get my room back?" Another asks.

"Shh!"

You can't stop yourself from popping your head around the curtain. Outside is a landing, where two... well, one of them is clearly a harpie. You can't help but notice that the stitch-marks and scars took quite recent. It has brown plumage flecked with green. Maybe... five years old? It's a little stomach churning. There could be parents down below still desperately searching.

The other one is human. Similar looking age, Karinite heritage

by the looks of him. He takes a long look at you, as if trying to figure out whether you're scary or not, and then smiles.

"Adhira said you fell over." He says. More of a statement than a question.

"I guess I did. What's your name?"

"Nate." He answers, before adding, "But Gamira says I can pick a new one if I want."

"I'm Rivaan!" The harpie says, unprompted.

"A new name? Why?"

"Nate sounds stupid!" He answers, shaking his fists in a fit of rage, "So I'm picking a new one when I get my wings."

"...Oh."

"Not-Nate!" The harpie suggests.

Nate appears to seriously consider this, staring off into the distance and mouthing the name as if he's trying it on.

"...Nah. I want it to sound like red, because that's my favourite colour," -His shirt attests to this- "...Not-Nate sounds more like green."

The harpie nods, equally serious. You awkwardly hover over them as they start discussing which names are red sounding.

Your... rescue? -comes in the form of Adhira appearing at the end of the corridor. It takes a moment to observe Nate, the harpie

and your disembodied head before letting out a snort.

Your heart flutters. Probably because you're scared of being seen naked and vulnerable by a predator. Definitely that, you reassure yourself.

Nate runs up to it and hugs one of it's legs. It's quite surreal. Clinging on like a limpet, he looks up and issues his demands:

"I want my room back!"

"You can have it, once Nancy's back on her feet." It looks up at you, "...Which is right now, I suppose. But at least let her dress first."

Adhira herself is clothed. Technically. She has on an orange tube top and very short shorts. Some kind of bandolier's slung over her shoulder too, which she plucks something out of it with her talons. Nate shrieks in joy as he's lifted off the ground and briefly turned upside down.

The little harpie stands up on it's talon-tips, a devious look on it's face.

"Adhira wants to bonk you." It reports, with a conspiratorial wink, "I heard her say so. She said you had great legs."

You haven't quite processed that by the time Adhira shoes the little harpie away, presenting you with a bundle of cloth.

"The stuff you climbed up in was... uh, unsalvagable." It says apologetically, "And I've asked Kavin to repair your shoes - the soles were hanging on by a thread. So I've got you this instead."

You snatch the bundle and retreat, issuing a small grunt which hopefully communicates your consent. Unfolding the bundle, you find a sleeveless rust-coloured tunic, undies, shorts, and no shoes. Not even any socks. Well, when you all have talons for feet... a woven reed belt secures the tunic at your waste, and along with the cut-out on the back it all seems rather revealing. Down at the base of the column you tend to cover up pretty thoroughly, since there's rubble and rough terrain everywhere. Still, you feel much better once you've pulled it all on.

Adhira knocks. You steel yourself. The mission. The mission, the mission, the mission.

"Come in."

Adhira does so, staring at you as the curtain falls back into place behind it. You clench your fists and force some fire into your eyes.

"I demand to be taken to your leader. Queen. Marshal. Whatever! I have important business to discuss on behalf of Administrator Walcott and the Attakan-Tower Republic, refuge of the sick and needy, safe harbour in the storm of war, the land of care and opportunity."

"Okay. Do you... have a few moments for tea first? A bite to eat?" Adhira ventures, "Your hands are shaking."

Unfortunately, they are. You belatedly realise that you haven't eaten in days. The world does seem a bit wobbly.

"N-no. No delaying tactics!"

Adhira flutters her wings awkwardly, making you jump. Seems like the harpie equivalent of wringing your hands together, if her expression is anything to go by. Her hair looks really good in this light - shines like molten metal.

Wait, who said that? It's speaking again before you have time to scrutinise your brain for the culprit.

"Okay, so, about that. There isn't a queen, or a president, or... any senators, right? We have a few dozen flocks with their own polycules, nests, and philosophies on child rearing. Every week or so we'll hold a committee meeting that anyone can turn up to. If the committee decides to do something, we'll appoint a sub-committee of volunteers in order to... do it. Am I making sense?"

"...no president?"

"No."

"No queen."

"Nope."

"No... chairman?"

"Nada."

"Well... then who do I speak to!? This is a very important diplomatic mission."

"You could call a meeting if you like. Well, technically I'd be the one calling it on your behalf. Anyone interested in hearing what you have to say will come."

This is nightmarish. How do they get anything done? Will you have to speak to every one of these things one by one, and convince them all that Lowrie's the way to go? Your mind lurches at the possibility, all too happy to catastrophise at you so that you concretely, unequivocally know just how impossible-

"I'd like some tea." You say.

Chapter Four

So. You're sat in a harpie's parlour wearing harpie clothes, sipping harpie-made mint tea in the company of a harpie.

The worst part of all this? The tea is good. Really good. You really want to ask for some mint leaves or some cuttings so you can grow your own.

Where are the grisly labs? The bloodstained tools and operating tables? There's scrimshawed bones all over the shop - your cup is made of bone, there's bead curtains hanging in the doorways with bits of bone on them, the coffee table is a bit slab of bone... but that's really not a million miles from the furniture as the base of the Column anyway. What else would you use? Wood is for Patricians and other dickheads.

There's a shallow pool in the middle of the room that worries you. Do harpies... bathe in public? Is it like a bird bath? Are they expecting you to strip down and flop about in there at some point? Is Adhira going to? So many questions, and you're too nervous to ask any of them. To the pool's credit, it does have a pretty mosiac at the bottom.

Speaking of Adhira, she's sprawled out over a couch beside you. That little harpie... Rivaan, was it? Said that Adhira wanted to bonk you. Bonking. What even is bonking?

Shit, Nancy. You've been silent for a good five minutes now. You're probably making her feel awkward. Which is something you care about now? I guess? You don't know what to think. Lowrie probably didn't want you to sit in stony silence when he sent you up here. And... if the harpies are some kind of weird collective with no leaders, then any old harpie is worth propagandising to.

Right?

"So... Lowrie Walcott." You venture, "What do you think of him?"

Adhira draws her knees up to her chest, rocking gently back and forth as she ponders the question. You'd love to be her knees right now.

"I don't know what to think. I'm not sure what he thinks in the first place, you know? Does he want the Column to be a democracy? He calls it a Republic, but there's been no votes. He says we're supposed to take in the sick and the needy, but I've seen no state welfare programs or social services to back that up. I mean, if you were sick and turned up to the Refuge right now, you'd essentially be relying on someone to take pity on you of their own initiative, wouldn't you? He wants everyone to stop being frightened of Harpies, but there's no constitution or laws to actually establish that we have equal rights, or making it a crime to persecute us. And even if there were, there's no institution to enforce them. So is he a liar, or just blissfully unaware of how a state works? I can't figure it out." She says.

Oh no. That's not a good start at all. Do they all think that?!

"Well he's doing the best he can, I think."

"And that's a stateless collection of refugee camps held hostage by their own shipyards, locked in an eternal feud with harpie flocks?"

Definitely a bad start. She seems so dismissive. And so

confident! Is she annoyed? What... what exactly were you supposed to tell the Harpies again?

You recall Lowrie saying they should feel welcome, and not hesitate to come down to visit their new neighbours. Nothing about... states, and welfare schemes. You aren't even 100% what that means, if you're totally honest.

"Good neighbours help each other, you know? We're not being held hostage, the Shipwright's Guild just... um... controls all the means of production and has giant coilgun emplacements. To defend us, you see."

"I see."

It doesn't sound like she sees. Or if she does, then she's seeing something pretty calamitous. Those orange eyes are boring into you like a Castarian Inquisitor! You suddenly feel quite stupid. What is the plan? Did Lowrie actually tell you? He'd would probably say something warm and genial here. A joke that redirected the conversation down a safer avenue. Shit, you can't think of any jokes.

Adhira gets up, looming over you with a sudden sense of purpose. It's certainly intimidating, but you don't feel frightened. You do feel... weird, though.

"Nancy, have you heard of socialism?"

"No?"

"I see. What about historical materialism?"

"Uh... I have not."

"Mhm. And what about Adenauer's Complexity Threshold?"

"A threshold is the bottom of a doorway." That's probably wrong, but at least you can pretend it's a joke.

She sighs, "Okay. Since you have nothing better to do until the committee meets up, I'm going to teach you. If even a fraction of what you learn makes it back down to Lowrie I'll consider it time well spent."

"But, but... we look after each other already. Do we really need all this... theory?"

"That's called Mutualism, and we'll cover that too. I'm not partial to individualist theories myself, but I suppose it's worth looking into. If Lowrie establishes a people's bank off the back of this then maybe it wouldn't be so bad." She pauses to ponder again, "...Actually, some kind of library economy could be viable, given the population size."

"Ah! We have one of those!"

"A library economy?"

"Well. We have a library. It's a big ugly slab of concrete, but it exists."

"I see. Here's the plan: I'll test you at the end of the week, by which time the committee should be about to meet. If you pass, you get a reward. And you walk into the meeting with a few more tools in your belt. Okay?"

Your brain wonders whether it is okay. Isn't this just being

assimilated into another culture instead of making a case for your own? What would Lowrie do?

Hey, you'll need to take it easy for a while anyway, one part of your brain reasons. You're not up to lots of walking or climbing yet.

And besides, says another, you just came off as pretty cringe. I doubt she wants to bonk you any more. Show her that you're smart! That'll make you more bonkable.

Why must we bonk? And can we stop calling it that? It's childish!

...How do you have sex with a harpie, anyway?

"Okay." You say, because it's a simple word and if you wait any longer without saying anything then you'd look weird.

Her smile in response is a ray of sunshine, bathing you in warmth and radiance. It makes everything seem okay.

Chapter Five

You stare at the pencil. It's slick with sweat, liable to slither out of your grasp at a moment's notice. You do know how to write - Rosalind taught you, but you were a fully grown adult by then. You still feel clumsy when you're slowly sketching out letters and numbers. They always look... a bit wrong. Too large, or too misshapen.

Adhira's feet are like a blur by comparison. They dance across the page, and in their wake are beautiful, curving words. She characterises her script in ways you'd never have thought to do, underlining for emphasis, adding neat notes in the margins where you thought you weren't allowed to, leaving slick flourishes on the ends of her Ys and Gs. She wields her pencil like scalpel.

Looking back at your own pencil... it feels like a cudgel, battering the paper with inelegant lines and furrows. Is this feeling jealousy, or admiration? A potent cocktail of both, maybe?

She notices at your hands are idle.

"Hands hurting?"

"No, I just..." You don't want to make excuses.

"You just...?"

You don't flinch as her rests a talon on your shoulder. The sharp shard of keratin is comforting.

"I'm frustrated." You admit, "You write so well, and I'm here scratching away, wasting good paper. How am I supposed to understand all this philosophy when I can't even write it down

properly?"

She peers over your shoulder, one of her wings brushing gently against your back.

"I can read what you wrote. Anything more than that is just showmanship."

You look back at the mishmash of irregular letters and crossed out mistakes. Huh. You suppose you can read it.

"Can you explain this me to again?" The flash of embarrassment that wells up within you is dispelled as she smiles broadly, so happy to be asked for help.

"The Original Position is a thought experiment. A hypothetical situation we create in our minds to help us explore difficult problems and their consequences, hm?"

You nod. You've learned that a consistent flow of affirmations helps her from getting flustered.

"In this case, imagine this: you have been tasked with building a society. Everything from the governance to the architecture to the law. Whatever you say goes."

"Whatever I say?"

"Whatever you say. The problem with that is you're Nancy. And Nancy has a lot of pre-defined ideas about how society works, and what her role is within it. She might assume she has to get married, or that her gender isn't suited to ruling, or that she needs to build society in a way that protects her friends and lovers. The society Nancy builds might be very unfair for, say, a

class of people she doesn't like or empathise with."

"...Hm. Okay."

"The resolution to this paradox is to design from behind a veil of ignorance. Imagine that after you finished building this world, you have roll the dice. And this dice roll is going to decide your age, ethnicity, wealth, connections, and everything else about you. You wont be Nancy any more. You'll be a random person."

"Like reincarnation? I'd go around the Jailor's Wheel and come back?"

She nods in approval, sending a pleasant tingle down your spine.

"Sure, that's a fair way to look at it. Imagine you'll be randomly reincarnated into this society. That's the Original Position. And because you don't know who you'll be, you need to be impartial and ration during your design process. After all, you might end up being the poorest, sickest, most maligned person in the whole city. Because of that possibility, you'll ensure that everyone has the same basic liberties, you'll have to consider the plights of those you would usually discount or fail to understand, and as a result... you'll make a good society."

You could be Harpie. You could be a bedridden Ruinscaper, disabled after an accident on an expedition. You could be a child, lost and alone after being bundled onto a boat fleeing Rusalka. But... you aren't any of those things.

"How can I do that? I am Nancy. Don't I have... you know... thoughts and feelings that I can't get rid of for an abstract

thought experiment?"

"You do. And even subconsciously there'll be ingrained ideas you have about what counts as good. What cultural settings are unanimously agreed upon. On the other hand... you can't predict the future. Who's to say that in a hundred years we won't live in fear of barbaric, uncivilised 'pure' humans, who reject all transhumanism and have to be isolated and repressed as a result? Maybe the Veil of Ignorance can apply to the future just as much as the present."

"Okay, okay. Let's say it's possible to go full Tavala-brain and take the Original Position." You don't know. This all seems a bit utopian - you picture wise people in white robes holding debates in sunny pavilions without any attachment to reality. "How many people are actually going to be able to do that? Hello my name's Copernicus and I break rocks in the quarry all day. I get home and fall into bed for six hours before getting up to trudge back to work every morning. When exactly am I setting time apart for Tavala brain?"

"In that case, perhaps we should take steps to ensure that Copernicus doesn't have to work all day? Maybe we should introduce legislation ensuring he gets paid enough to live comfortably and only has to work for six hours."

"Uh-huh."

"And furthermore, perhaps we should establish other public services such as free libraries, healthcare and education so that Copernicus has enough free time and support to go full Tavala-brain?"

She's in her element, that much is clear to see. Pacing as she

speaks, sparring and tutoring in equal measure as she tastes each idea and notion. And you feel like you're being carried with her, weightless on the whelm of her words.

"This is socialism, isn't it?" You ask.

"In broad strokes. The community owns and provides all of these services, so there's no merchants throwing paywalls in front of them."

"And because we're sustaining the maximum number of Tavalabrain, decision making will be fairer?"

"That's the idea. Perhaps we can raise new generations able to conceive of ideas that we never could."

"Like loving harpies." You didn't plan to say it, but it slipped out regardless. Adhira lets out a small gasp, colouring slightly. Her dorsal feathers shiver.

"...Like loving harpies." She confirms.

You can't think of anything to say. Evidently she can't either, and you lock eyes. You feel yourself trembling slightly. Nervous, but not fearful. Not any more.

Chapter Six

It started after the committee meeting. Adhira said it went well. So well that she broke out the arrack...

Now your thoughts swirl together in a haze. You're draped over Adhira's lap and you can't quite remember how you got there. It's warm and fluffy though, and your brain equates that to great success.

Gamira sits on a perch opposite, a ceramic cup clutched on her downy talons. A straw lazy rolls back and forth around the rim - the Harpies seem to prefer using them, for whatever reason. You caused a few laughs the first time you drank directly from your cup, and they all took turns trying it.

Her wings are more like an osprey than Adhira's white and black gull wings. They're a lustrous brown, speckled with yellow and white. You've noticed that she always tucks them away as much as possible while talking to you. Probably to avoid scaring you. She's quite a lot more boisterous than Adhira, you decide, but better at reading other people despite that.

"She'll survive, but only just." Gamira says, making you pay a bit more attention.

"I'm just stunned they did that to one of their own." Adhira replies, "And for what? Having a conversation with Lavanya?"

"That simplified it enough to get the mob on board, innit? They're actually worried about it the Osseinwrights becoming the de facto ruling class and turning this place into another Korina or Pryajet. But there's nothing Liz can do about that, not to mention it's complicated. Hating harpies is simple."

Liz? Elizabeth Tanner? Sludgy opinions start to coalesce in your mind, telling you to speak up.

"Tanner? What happened to her?"

Gamira winces, "The Ruinscapers ousted her. I hear it got violent... Lavanya had to fly her up here to get treatment."

"There's no way. Lowrie would never..."

"Never stand for it?" Adhira asks above you, "He has no choice. Not unless he wants fighting in the streets... and he needs support from the Scapers and Osseinwrights. One or the other wont do."

"You don't get it." You grumble, "He doesn't think like that."

"In fairness," Gamira says, "Lavanya's said that too. He doesn't really... do politics."

"I don't get." Adhira says with a sigh.

You want her to get it. You feel an intense desire to look smart and say something she wont have thought of. But what?

"He's like the..." You begin, hoping that something clever will float up to fill the gap. Miraculously your brain obliges.

"He's the bridge." You say, almost headbutting Adhira as you sit up.

"He's the bridge." Gamira repeats.

"Yes. The bridge between the Refuge and all the ideas people that'll come next. Like me! You put all these ideas in my head - ideas that Korinan Plebians and Archmage serfs aren't going to have. They didn't have anywhere to learn them."

You slur a couple of words, but manage to get the gist of it out there. You reward yourself with another drink.

Adhira sips on her straw, ruffling her feathers.

"...True." She says, thrillingly, "This will take time. They managed to build a city and keep themselves alive, after all."

"A city full of Amersites, Korinans, Rusalkans, and way more besides. Nobody speaks the same language, most of us can't read or write, and we've carved a city out of a big stupid ruin." Your heart skips a beat as you thoughtlessly insult their ancestral home, "No offense."

They manage to convince you that they're offended for a full second, before bursting out laughing.

"No, you're right." Gamira says, "It is a big stupid ruin. You should know, you climbed up the whole thing."

"Yeah... silly thing to do, really."

"Why didn't you hitch a ride?" She asks.

You side-eye Adhira. She's looking at you too, head cocked to one side as she drinks through her straw.

"I, uh... thought Adhira would eat me. Or cut me up."

To your horror, she looks away crestfallen. Seeing her like that... hurts. Almost without thinking you scramble forward and cup her cheek, turning her face back to you.

"And... I'm sorry. Fear and other things just get... mixed up, you know?"

"O-other things?" She asks, shaking slightly as her eyes stare into yours. Gone is the aloof academia, replaced with anticipation that borders upon the frantic. It almost makes you recoil - but instead you feel determination. You want her to feel safe. Safe and beloved.

Chapter Seven

Oh no. Oh sweet spinning Tavalala no.

Why is it bright and sunny, why does your head hurt, and why are you curled in between a pair of feathery wings?

Eyes closed, Nancy. It's too bright as it is. You're not ready for eyes open yet. Let's focus on some other senses.

Alright: touch.

You do feel rather comfortable, it must be said. The sheets beneath you are soft, if a bit... sticky. You are quite hot, however. Perhaps a bit too hot. You worm a leg free and feel wonderful cool air caress it. Job done, off the waiting stem, 10/10. The wings around you shift about a bit, and you feel warm breath on your neck. That's fine. That can stay.

You also seem to be naked. Again. We'll get back to that.

Next up: sound.

Someone is breathing softly beside you, spooning you from behind. Sounds peaceful. You also pick out melodic chimes remarkably similar to the ones you heard the last time you woke up in an unfamiliar bed. That's quite reassuring, actually. At least you probably aren't passed out on a mattress in the street somewhere.

That's never happened to you before. For definite.

Smell?

Pretty good, if you say so yourself.

And... taste?

There's definitely an aftertaste of some kind. A little bit metallic, and little bit sour. You're also quite thirsty. And your tongue aches a fair bit, now that you're focusing on it. Good job, soldier.

You're not Ameer the Intrepid, so there's only one sense left. You prepare yourself.

The blaze of sunlight stuns you regardless. So much so you let you a small hiss - the wings squeeze around you a bit in response. Bit by bit, you open your eyes.

Yep. No denying it. You slept with Adhira. The evidence is overwhelming. There's feathers all over the bedsheets too.

Do Harpies stuff their own pillows? I mean, they probably lose feathers, right? The impulsive thought is too much to keep to yourself.

"Adhira, do you use your own feathers for pillows?" You croak, not expecting your throat to be so dry.

"Waa-?" Is the response you get.

If she's in anything like the state you're in, it might take some water for proper words to form. You wriggle free and alight on the floor, the reed mat scratching at your bare feet. This sudden reorientation makes world lurch as your brain protests, immobilising you for a minute or so as you sway haplessly about. The bedpost provides some purchase, and you boldly go in search of

refreshment.

Behold! There is a jug and basin. There's no handle - seems like it's designed for a harpie's talons to wrap around the entire neck. You persevere with both hands, quench your thirst, then stagger back with your prize.

Adhira has flopped onto her back, spread-eagled (spread-gulled?) over the bed like a morose carcass, surrounded by her own feathers. What a disaster. Her coppery hair is all over the shop, tits out, nether region on display for the world to see.

"Water." You declare, and crawl up onto the bed with jug in hand. With a mournful groan, she sits somewhat upright to sup from it. A fair amount spills out, running in rivulets down her tufty chest and onto her stomach.

"...Good morning." You say, once she's done.

"Hello." She says.

"Mind out." You say, and collapse onto the bed. Mostly on top of her, drawing out a small yelp of surprise. She's very comfortable.

"We had sex." She remarks.

"Mhm."

"You had sex with a harpie."

"Does that mean I'm in the flock now?"

"You can have sex without being automatically inducted, you

know." She shifts about, lifting you into a more natural position, with your head resting on her shoulder. You meet her gaze and feel a blissful little shiver run down your spine. Then another thought occurs.

"I have to share you, don't I?"

She smirks, "Everyone has to share everyone."

"So does that mean... everyone in the flock has done the deed with everyone else?"

"It's not mandatory, but most have tried. And sometimes we arrange orgies. Try one, if you like."

Your mind reels.

Chapter Eight

You've decided to go for a walk. A quiet but persistent panic has been simmering away in your stomach ever since morning. On a base level, you had fun.

But you also fucked a harpie. And it wasn't even a considered decision - your memory gets hazy about four arracks in. What exactly did you say that led to all that? You recall a keen sense of yearning, but also a potent mix of guilt and... fear of being misunderstood? You aren't 100% sure why your brain was coughing up that emotion.

A yammering clutch of harpie youths swoop past overhead, and you don't even flinch. You even asked a stranger to hitch a ride - the perch outside Adhira's flockhouse doesn't really connect to anything, and you didn't fancy the climb down.

It's cool in the centre of the Column. It must taper a little bit toward the top, because you recall the walls being so much further away in the tent-city at the bottom. A couple of huge fans spin lazily, letting fresh air and flying harpies in and out. Watching them get around so easily makes you feel a bit jealous.

...Wait, stop getting distracted! This is time for introspection, not admiring the scenery. The real issue, you muse, is that you can't really trust your own brain right now. It's hungover, prone to hedonistic impulses, and it's been trapped in a harpie echo chamber for the past few weeks.

So... grab a parachute and base jump down the Column? You could track down Copernicus or Klopp and pick their brains that way. Admittedly, just the idea of hurling yourself off the edge is exhilarating. You should probably do that at some point. But not

right now - you're expected back for lunch at some point. And you're supposed to be speaking at another adhoc committee meeting tomorrow anyway.

You do know of one human much closer to hand, though. Hopefully she'll be up to talking.

The Harpies have a couple of hospitals, but thankfully Elizabeth Tanner is housed in the one closest to the bottom of the Eyrie.

You find her in a right state - more bruise than woman. There's also a bunch of lytestone gadgets and equipment, and a... small pot of fungus, with a handwritten note. Typical Roz. They do a fair bit of fungi farming down at the bottom, but she's obsessed with the stuff.

"Lowrie had the nerve to leave that after getting me beaten up."

You hadn't realised she was awake. Tanner's a small woman - all the better for squirming into caves and crevices - with closely cropped hair and tattoos that spill up over the top of the covers onto her jaw and neckline. One of her eyes is covered by a gauze, but the other one peers at you wryly.

"The two of them just want to make a fuss over you. It's their way." You reply, "How do you feel?"

"Squeamish. I kind of freaked the fuck out when I woke up with all their tubes in me."

"I... think I can relate. How did this even happen?"

"Ugh." Her eye rolls, "Lowrie organised some kind dumbass of community luncheon where all the harpies did show and tell, then bullied me into showing up. Lavanya et al were there, some idiots rushed in to break shit, and we saw them off. I guess they took it personally enough to jump me. Them and half the Ruinscapers... I guess my boys are fickle."

"That's nasty."

"I'm over it now. I was ready to roll out of bed and go back down there, but... she talked me out of it."

"Lavanya did?"

"Yeah. They get inside your head, you know?"

"I er... yes. I know."

She latches onto your hesitation, "Go on. Spill the tea, I'm cooped up and in need of entertainment."

You steel yourself, but still can't meet her eye as you say it.

"I slept with one of them. Adhira."

Liz Tanner laughs. She quickly regrets it.

"Ow, ow, ow! Fuck! Weaver, I'm falling apart, send help!"

"Liz!"

She really does seem like she might be done for. In a moment of madness you're convinced that it must be your fault. Fate's

punishing you for sipping from the poisoned chalice, taking blood in exchange for the forbidden flesh you enjoyed.

But luckily for your future self, Elizabeth Tanner does not die. Her laughing fit dies down without rupturing her weakened form into a dozen pieces.

"I'm fine. Probably. Was it good? Asking for a friend."

"Asking for a... wait, you and Lavanya?"

"Shut up and spill."

You suppose it was good.

"Well... yes, but that's beside the point."

This information seems to be of great interest to Tanner, who takes a full five seconds to mull it over. You can't help but feel as if she isn't wholly concerned with you at this moment in time. Lavanya's a little on the old side, and from what you've heard she's prone to droning on endlessly about her collections of pointless lytestone toys and broken old artefacts. Then again, that's exactly the kind of thing a Ruinscaper's supposed to be interested in, isn't it?

"Okay." She eventually says, "So you did it and you enjoyed it. What else are you feeling?"

"I feel like I've been trapped with harpies for weeks. It must have seeped into me. And I feel... like a traitor?"

"What, you have someone else down at the bottom?"

"Uh. No."

"So you betrayed...?"

You shrug, flushing with irritation.

"I don't know. Lowrie?"

"I thought he sent you up here to learn more about them and make us all look good?"

"...Kind of."

"So as long as you performed well between the sheets then job done, right?"

"That was not the job!"

"We both know Lowrie's not a details guy. Yeah, you could've sat around drinking tea with them and chatting philosophy but the end result's the same, isn't it?"

"I did that too, actually." You admit.

"See!"

"Liz, I thought you hated them? Weren't you always on about how they birdsplain everything to you?"

Her eye looks away for a moment. She seems embarrassed.

"I do... they do. That and indoctrinating the kids and interfering in our work blah blah... but it's hard, okay! That all kind of melts away when one of them nerds out at you over their

stupid lytestone trainset. I get all angry again afterwards, and I'm angry before. It just... I lose it in the middle!"

That sounds very familiar. It sparks a bit of residual anger in you just listening to it.

"I know, right?! Adhira just yammers on about politics and all that bollocks until I just... forget! And then she gets all touchy feely apropos of nothing."

You meet each others looks, sharing in the embarrassment and frustration. But there's a humour behind it. Neither of you regret what you've done, even if commiserating about it feels cathartic.

"Maybe we're the problem." Elizabeth Tanner admits.

"Hm... well you feel angry, I feel guilty." Your fingers twist together, searching for a point, "No point in either, right? If we're going to sin, we might as well enjoy it."

"Yeah... yeah! I like that."

"Come and meet Adhira once you're up and about."

She says that she will. You believe her. You're kind of look forward to seeing the two of them standing next to each other - Tanner's so short, and Lavanya's practically eight feet tall. Or maybe she just looked that way the last time you saw her.

In the meantime, you're getting lunch. They'll be waiting for you back at the flock, with lunch. Adhira'll be waiting for you. The thought puts a spring in your step.

Here you are, miles above the gaseous ocean, surrounded by

sun-bleached concrete and curtains. The great big fans spin overhead as you emerge back onto the concourse, gazing up at flitting shapes going about their days.

...Maybe a kite? Or a glider of some kind? You'll to rely on something other than lifts if you're to stay up here. You'll work it out. You both will.