

Xenom always enjoyed play time with the few friends he was allowed by his parents to visit regularly, even if he was only given a half hour every day to do so at most.

An excitable, red, winged puff who hardly fit in a society of strict, religious Birdons gleefully made his way home after another chance to show his friends how much his flying had improved, as well as show off some neat tricks. When one's life was spent studying religious texts he could hardly understand, there was very little he could do to pass the remaining time. At the very least, he had a loving family in the ones who adopted him; it was obvious from the onset that he was no biological son of theirs, but he seldom was hurt by this truth, and often laughed off those who called him different. To him, "different" or "strange" was a grand achievement. Still, it would be nice to not be the only non-Birdon in town; at least he can physically fit in well enough, given his ability to fly alongside them.

Xenom's saunter turned more into a skip as he reached his hay-ridden home in this sheltered community. He got to the door and knocked before turning it open. "I'm back!" he yelled, before continuing straight to his room, likely to study more depending on what was laid out for him to do. Occasionally, he would instead be tasked to help with the chores around the home as the father stayed late as a member of the small town's council; his days only grew busier and busier, it seems.

A soft sigh could be heard from another nearby room. "It's 'I've arrived,' young Xenom. Be a dear and remember your greeting."

"R-right--!" The red puff froze for a moment before walking back, in order to close the front door to their home properly. "I've arrived!"

"There's hardly a need to yell it to the world, is there?"

"S-sorry, mother," he responded, struggling to curb his loud tone.

The owner of this voice was Brisda, an albino Birdon who often wore colored decorative feather tips to stay more presentable; she hid her softened smile with the book she had indulged herself in, waiting for her adopted son's arrival. "You can greet your own mother properly if you'd like, if you so wish."

"Right, ehm, greetings, mother." After his 30 minutes of fun, he always did have trouble keeping a handle on the traditions and customs that even he, as an obvious outsider to their sheltered community, was expected to uphold as part of this religious town. Then again, as far as he was concerned, he was no outsider; he remembers no life outside of the stone walls that erect the borders of the town itself. He was a full-fledged member, and while he showed tremendous struggle as a young child to maintain the customs of his culture, he was determined to act as well as he possibly could, despite those staggering difficulties. "Are there any, um, duties, for me to fulfill?"

"Try not to stammer." Brisda stifled a short laugh as she listened to Xenom trying his hardest. "It is hardly becoming of a man to do so."

"Ehm--" Caught off-guard, Xenom steeled his nerves, slowing his speech in order to be more deliberate. "Yes, mother." He didn't want to disappoint his parents, who love him abundantly. "Are there any duties for me to fulfill tonight?"

"I have finished with chores for the evening and won't need help with cooking until later tonight. Why not try to read through some of the texts again? It would impress Helios if you managed to memorize more of the texts before he arrived." The Birdon kept her eyes glued to the book, turning a page and only momentarily glancing back at her young son.

"Sounds like a plan, thank you mom!" The excitable puff's volume rose once again, and he yet again dismissed any of his learned mannerisms in exchange for swiftness and expediency, before dashing off to do what he was told. Brisda never had the opportunity to correct him this time around.

The calm mother lied back more in her softened grass seat, and continued to read while smiling to herself all the more. She may not always approve of her son's rambunctious nature in their otherwise quiet home, but she still could hardly imagine a life without him. Far from a model son, he still did more good than bad, and was that not all you could ask for?

She watched the sundial-styled clock above the shuttered window on the wall in front of her, noting the time she had left until she needed to prepare their evening meal. About 20 minutes, she noted silently.

The sun was beginning to set along the quiet town, though there was little acknowledgement of it at all. Darkness covered the land and made a concerted effort to remove the brightness that illuminated their homes. Soon, the natural light of the sun was instead replaced with the artificial illumination of hanging lanterns that were prepared both within homes and around town. There was little to panic over in the dark, as they knew they were well protected.

Xenom had settled into his room, a transformed storage room that gave him just enough room and furnishing to sit down and study his texts, before moving off to sleep right next to the thick, wooden table where any books would remain. It was cozy, but enough for him.

After sitting himself down, he pulled up the nearest book to him, which his mother had left for him to re-read. He groaned to himself, and buckled himself down to crack at it. Hopefully, he could get this done quickly.

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A couple dozen minutes had passed, and Xenom, with louder, audible groans, slammed his body down on the sturdy desk. He might as well have not even opened the book. He pleaded with a loud call, "Mom, do I really have to do this? I really don't wanna!"

"Hm." Brisda, who had now moved to the kitchen in preparation for their meal, left to see her son in his small room. "Is something the matter, Xenom? You seemed able to do this when you entered."

He looked back, his gaze averting eye contact. "Y-yeah, but..."

"Remember your manners."

With a slight pause, the red puff changed his tone quickly. "Y-yes, mother. I thought that I'd do what you wanted me to do, I can't focus on it. I'm really sorry, honest!"

"Well, you tried to accomplish it. Would you like to assist me with our meal for the night?"

*'Yes, please, anything that'll let me get moving!'* With a widened gaze and a soft stretch and raise of his wings to either side of him, it was clear which option Xenom would choose. "I'd love to help with dinner, please!" He hurried himself off of the wooden chair, closing the book and tossing it aside. "What are we going to have today?"

"I had not yet decided that, so why not come with me, and we can decide together." Brisda smiled; it helped in making her feel less lonely around the house to have him around. "Come, I can certainly make you busy, my child. Let us prepare for dinner, shall we?"

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About an hour had passed, the door opening and shutting as both Xenom and Brisda worked together to finish up the family dinner, even if the winged puff only helped in gathering the tools necessary for the job. It was a clear alert to the father's arrival, so the two finished briskly and walked on over together to greet him proper.

Xenom, the first to walk through to the front room, bowed softly. "Ehm, good evening, father!" he spoke out in a smile. "How do you fare?"

In contrast to Brisda, the father figure, a Birdon who worked as part of the town's council, looked well older than her despite their comparable age to one another. If anything, he was the younger of the couple, an abnormality within this culture. Perhaps it was the pigment he did retain, as opposed to Brisda's albino appearance, which made his fading color a more notable aspect of his age. Or perhaps it was his time on the council, especially as the work hours became longer and longer. Regardless, his brown feather coat, well-kept and groomed, still shined through despite its fade, leading to a rather ruthless appearance to his form. "Xenom. It is time we had a word with you."

"We?" Brisda, delaying slightly to ensure preparation was perfect, stepped out from the kitchen, joining Xenom's side. "I am afraid I don't follow, Helios."

"Yeah, what *are* you talking about, dad?" Xenom's smile lessened, feeling a more tense air as his father's face hardly moved. "I've been doing so well in my studies! I'm learning everything you wanted me to learn!"

"And yet, you aren't learning not to speak against your father, *outsider*."

Outsider. It was a word Xenom heard over and over from neighbors, and one that spat out the same tense, unreasonable venom they desired to spit at the bastard child who dared to consider himself one of them. And now, it was his own father ready to spill that same poison down onto him. "F-father, have I not been good?" His face turned a fearful blank, eyes narrowly focused on the angered Birdon. "I'm sorry, I'm really trying, please..."

"...Brisda. Honey, you do know what I am referring to." Helios never even turned to look at his wife, opting instead to continue glaring down upon the scared puff. "The council has decided."

Brisda gasped under her breath, and now jumped in between Xenom and her husband. "No, don't say another word!"

Of course, his own mother's strong reaction caused further stress within the troubled child. "M-m-mom, what is he talking about? What..."

"Xenom, you will appear before the board tomorrow, bright and early, to be tried as a traitor. More specifically, to be found guilty as one."

"A traitor?" The red puff remembered reading that word within the texts he was meant to study. Those known to be traitors against their goddess were to be sacrificed publicly, as a cleansing of their dark souls. He shivered profusely, eyes beginning to fog up with tears. "Mom, h-he's just joking, i-is he? I'm not a...a traitor..."

"Listen to yourself, Helios!" Brisda spread her wings, forcing the other Birdon's attention to square in on her. "You and your council are calling a child who has taken up our ways to be an enemy to the pantheon! You promised me that you would never allow them to move forward with this!"

"Stay silent! I am discussing with the outsider, not you."

"Why would I?! He is *our* son, in everything but blood!" Brisda's voice continued to grow louder and louder, a normally stoic attitude breaking down into an unseen chaos. "What changed, Helios?! Has your thought truly shifted to this?"

"My thoughts and opinions are nothing in the face of the council, and certainly not in the face of the pantheon! They have deemed this outsider to be an enemy of the people of this town! So, he shall receive his just punishment!"

The albino Birdon shuffled closer to Xenom, who seemed incapable of doing anything more than cowering close to the wall after being presented with such information. "What of this punishment is just?! To a child, honey! A *child*!"

"You would choose this outsider over the welfare of our town? Over your own husband?!"

"We raised him, and I would choose our son, outsider or otherwise, over myself! How can you live with yourself, condemning him to death?!"

The brown Birdon stepped back, his eyes widening. "You...I thought you would understand, given this town's plight!" From a harness strapped around his body, he pulled a mid-sized stone dagger, often used for such sacrificial purposes. "If you will not listen, then I will do the deed myself!"

"N-no such thing!" Brisda, understanding that her words of reason will never get through to her husband if he is this dedicated to the council's cause, ceased the words and moved straight to action, shoulder-checking him as he prepared his blade. She was able to tackle him straight into the wooden cabinets of the room, forcing them to shatter into a mix of glass shards and wooden splinters that wounded them both.

This physical contact in itself was enough to snap Xenom, still with tear-filled eyes, out of his fearful stupor. He seemed entirely numbed by what this argument signified. Was he never considered true family? He's just been lied to, manipulated to believe that he would be safe here. However, none of that was more important than seeing his own mother taking his side, placing her own life on the line to keep him out of harm's way. He didn't want to lose anyone at all, let alone her. "M-mom!"

The confused child tried to run to his fighting parents, but it was said mother who stopped him, the first to stand herself up after the collision. "Run. It will not be safe for you here anymore."

"Guh--!" Xenom's body, frozen in place, tensed and shivered as he stared into his mother's yearning eyes. "Mom, n-no...please, I don't wanna leave you..."

She smiled. "I know you don't. I will follow you, wherever you are. I promise you. However, you have grown your wings, you can leave your nest! Now go!"

Xenom searched for words, but his mind, racing with a flash of a thousand memories and emotions, did not follow with a response. However, he shut his eyes, and ran straight out the door, ready to fly out. With a single hop, he shot to the skies, slowing in vain for his mother to follow close behind. Surely, she would leave as soon as possible, and waited well over a minute, praying up to the goddess. Hoping, praying, believing.

Instead, it was his father who came out in no time, with a loaded crossbow, aiming up to the skies at his red body, which sadly served as a proud beacon, even against the evening skies. With little hesitation, he shot at the puff, forcing him to accelerate his path away from the town walls and towards the dark unknown.

However, while he did succeed in avoiding the first fired arrow, the second shot him straight through his right wing, forcing him to gasp in severe pain as he spun forward, hurtling towards the treetop of a deep, thick forest. As soon as his body passed through the thick canopy, it disappeared into nothing, shrouded by a natural cover greater than any building could muster.

Soon, horns sounded across the town, an alert sent out for fugitive retrievals. The town's council and militias would aid in a land-wide search for the outsider who dared to refuse his righteous punishment in accordance with the pantheon.