

Cool sea mist tickled my face as I leaned on the railing of the ship. Casevan and Lachlan had taken some time once we got out into deeper water to show Kalo and I the ropes of how to sail. It was fun to learn, but extremely tiring and I found myself looking for a small reprieve from the work. I kept myself busy at home, sure, but I much preferred working at our family stall. Usually, I was much better at articulating myself, charming the likes of any Crederian that made their way to our corner of the market. This trip, however, I found myself stumbling over my words and fumbling with my hands. Maybe it was because I was so far away for the first time? I could definitely handle myself, despite Kalo's protesting.

As if he could be summoned, a muscled arm bumped my own as Kalo bumped me slightly as Kalo leaned on the rail next to me. "How are you holding up?"

"I'm...ok." I answered but my voice sounded foreign in my own ears. I *did* miss home. Our mother's soft singing, my siblings bickering, our cozy little hut, the bountiful gardens outside. I think I missed the familiarity. It was fun seeing new places and people, but I had been gone for over a week at this point. I didn't tell my mother where I was going. I simply told her I was heading out into town and left a small note explaining where I'd be in the spell book she was studying so she would find it later after I was long gone. I couldn't have her coming to track me down and tell me not to go after Kalo. Looking back on it, it was pretty selfish of me to make everyone worry. I just wanted to see the carnival for once, but now I might not get to after all. I spoke softly as I leaned my head on Kalo's shoulder. "I think I'm just a little homesick."

"Oh?" Kalo mused as he leaned his head on mine. "I thought you were ready to see the world? We haven't been away from home *that* long yet." I was not about to listen to him poke fun at me. I huffed and moved away from him, trying my hardest not to pout. He was used to leaving for long periods of time to gather things and trade with distant caravans, but I had to admit, I wasn't. Kalo's voice broke my train of thought, and he pulled me into a small hug. "It doesn't get easier being away from all of you, you know. I don't like to leave, but I have to." Kalo's face was...sad. "I really love being home and dealing with all the chaos, but we all have our places to help and that's mine. Travelling is nice, but it can be dangerous. This will be a good example of how things can go wrong, no matter how safe they may usually be."

He was right. I hated it, but he was. I could handle myself and I knew the basics of self-defense, sure, but threats like this? Maybe he would train me to fight if I asked. That way I could be more prepared next time. "You could always teach me to really fight when we make it home?"

Kalo smiled and looked my face over as I peered up at him from the hug. “Ok, fine. I’ll teach you to fight when we get back.” I smiled up at him, happy with the agreement. He would teach me to fight. We would make it home.



The afternoon sun was hot as we moved about the ship getting ready to port. Lachlan wanted to make sure we stopped to gather more supplies at an outcropping called Prika’s steps.

“Now, don’t get all worked up and move fast.” Lachlan placed a hand on the railing, blocking the offloading ramp, making sure we all listened to him. “They hold games here, but we don’t have time t—”

“*Games?!* ” I blurted out, stepping closer to the older bab, his good eye narrowing on me. “What kind of games? Are there prizes?”

Lachlan pinched the bridge of his muzzle. “Lots of ‘em. All different kinds.” He sighed as he looked at my excitement. “And yes...there are prizes.”

This sounded *exactly* like what I needed to perk up for the fight! “Can we please, *please*, do a couple games?” It felt like asking my mother for permission to use some rare gem to make a new piece of jewelry. I put on my biggest pair of glittery eyes, batted my lashes a little, and stuck my bottom lip out slightly, just for good measure. “I think it would be a good break for us from all the hustle and bustle, don’t you?”

Lachlan looked over my face, his hard expression softening. Yes! Just like Mom and Kalo. “Ok, ok, *fine*. One game each since that’s the entry limit.” He looked away and sighed again, defeated this time. “But we hafta make it quick.”

I jumped up and hugged him around the neck, his body stiffening in shock as he caught me before tilting down slightly to let my feet touch the ground again. “Thank you, thank you, *thank you!*” Lach moved aside and I ran down the ramp past him. “Come on guys! Let’s GO!” I heard small chuckles as I ran, small remarks of ‘she sure is something, Kalo’ but I didn’t care. I needed the break. This was going to be fun!



The crowds of Crederians, all faces happy and unbothered, was a wonderful reprieve from the dread of battle that had Windan's people in its grip. The rest of my companions in tow, I moved through the crowds to the pawbird atop his perch crooning about the games. They spoke so enthusiastically about each one, making it harder and harder to decide which to join. The others watched on with various expressions.

"Well, which ones are you all going to join?" I tilted my head toward the babs next to me and they all exchanged glances, nudging each other.

Kalo spoke first. "Well, the pearl hunting for me, of course."

Prince Helius cocked a small grin and looked over to where Kalo was standing. "Of course. Treasure hunting for the treasure hunter. How fitting.~" He teased. "Well, I guess it's no use to join that game. Kalo showed us he was more than capable of finding things that didn't want to be found. None of us would stand a chance at winning against him." Kalo laughed at Helius' remark and slugged the prince on the shoulder. They must have gotten to know each other well from the way they acted. "I'm good around swords and daggers, maybe target practice for me."

A low bellowing laugh came from the oldest of our group. Lachlan clapped a paw on Helius' shoulder. "Well, if ya don't want t' look a fool, ya better pick somethin' else, lad."

Helius spit out a laugh. "Bring it on you salty old man."

Lachlan's face twisted into a slightly terrifying smile, all teeth and determination. He was just a fisherman. What skill could he have against a prince with formal training? "We'll hafta see how fast you regret those words."

Casevan let out a breath, his eyebrows raising. "Oh, you'll regret it, Prince." Lachlan and Casevan exchanged glances, stifling laughs. I was genuinely confused, but eager to watch the match between them. Lachlan wore an eyepatch so he couldn't even see fully. How could he be so confident? Unless the patch was for looks? So many questions. "I'm personally undecided. Are you thinking you want to try one on your own, Flor? If not, I could join whichever you think would be the most fun."

That was a great question. Which *did* I want to do? I loved swimming, so the ring race sounded fun, but against jeweled Crederians I would be a sitting duck. On the other hand, diving could be a good alternative. "I think I'm going to do the diving competition. How about it, Cas?"

The group looked at me and Lachlan's head tilted down slightly; his expression that of concern. "Lass, you know that the diving is from all the way up th—" The pawbird called out that this round's entries were about to close and drowned out the rest of Lachlan's warning. I waved a paw to the rest of our group and moved toward the perched announcer to sign up, motioning them to follow. They glanced at Kalo, and he smiled, shrugging slightly before they all followed in suit.



Pearl hunting was up first but was particularly hard to spectate. Kalo was bounding and scouring, nose to the ground, totally in the zone as he filled his belted pouch with pearls. One after another we saw him jump from little floating island to the next, scaling up trees, and diving headfirst into the water. We could all see him muttering to himself as he worked. Before he started, he said finding pearls would be easy, but finding the golden pearl was his goal. Continuously he'd pop in and out of sight as we tried our hardest to keep track of him.

For a long while we couldn't see him and took advantage of a small bowroo selling assorted snacks from a small tray that hung around his neck. My gosh, they were expensive, but so worth the coin. The horn sounded and we scanned to find Kalo bounding up from over a hillside, grinning from ear to ear, a small golden pearl clutched between his front teeth.

"Oh, of course." Helius laughed as he shook his head, seeing Kalo had once again done the impossible.

Kalo moved to the podium where other Crederians were counting and calculating their finds, and he found a spot to spill the contents of his pouch into a small basket. It took him a bit to make sure he didn't drop any, but the little basket was nearly *brimming* with pearls of all shapes and sizes, small numbers painted onto their surface. The golden pearl he kept in his paw, his face twitching every so often like it was tickling his hand.

The announcer was impressed with the number of pearls he had found, but his face truly lit up as Kalo opened his palm. The little golden sphere rolled slightly in his paw, before seeming to hop out of it. Kalo moved to chase, but the pawbird laughed loudly. "That's quite alright! Little fella has to get ready for the next round, after all.~"

Kalo just smiled along and laughed as he was awarded two pouches, one full of golden coins and the other full of dazzling pearls, unlike any I had ever seen before. Perhaps

they were native to these isles? After showing us his prizes, Kalo smiled and jiggled the bags, the contents making satisfying clinks.



Next up was the target practice. Lachlan and Helius moved over to the platforms, various weapons lined up for the choosing. They were both offered bows, but Lachlan declined. As if I hadn't noticed until now, Lachlan wore a leather bandolier with about a dozen worn-looking throwing knives strapped to his chest. I gaped. Maybe he liked alternative fishing methods to spice things up every so often? Prince Helius also seemed to take notice and said something to him that we couldn't hear from the viewing stands. Lachlan bellowed out another laugh and gestured a paw out for Helius to step up to the platform first, the other bab hesitating a bit before moving.

The prince took one last look at Lachlan and his knives before glancing at his own, singular, heavy sword. He shook his head, cursing as he picked up the bow and strapped the quiver to his back. Helius tested the bow's draw before giving the announcer a nod to start the round. Fast, too fast, the floating targets danced in the air. Some launched forward, some backward, and just as fast the prince drew arrow after arrow firing them into the targets as they moved. We watched in awe as it seemed as soon as it began, it was over. Helius panted slightly, placing the bow down in front of him, shooting Lachlan a cocky grin over his shoulder. The other mantibab gave a small head tilt of approval as the prince approached him. The pawbird crooned out Helius' score and he looked somewhat disappointed, no doubt wanting something closer to perfect.

Lachlan patted him on the back, like the prince was a child, and groaned as he stepped up to the platform as if his knees hurt. Casevan snorted and I leaned in. What an odd bab. I noticed Kalo looked unamused with his antics as he reclined back in his seat as if he was uninterested. "Helius is going to get cooked."

I turned back just in time to see Lachlan roll his neck and shifting his paws as he cracked his knuckles, before giving the signal to start the round. That eyepatch was still on. Like lightning itself, this mantibab loosed daggers faster than my eyes could keep up with them. Somehow only the soft thudding of them hitting the targets alerting me to the fact he had thrown another one at all. I let out an audible gasp as we watched him. My upper body was practically going over the railing as I leaned in, trying to see how he was doing it. There was *no* way. He was a *fisherman*. Wasn't he? Even faster than

Helius the round ended, Lachlan not looking phased at all. No panting like Helius, he didn't look tired. He just waited patiently as each target was tallied and then floated down to him gently. He wrenched out the knives, each one almost buried to the hilts. His score was perfect. Dead center on each and every target.

No way. "Kalo, did you see that?" I screeched to him, my arm pointing out towards the field. "There is *no* way, right? That was *crazy*!"

Kalo just rolled his eyes and crossed his arms, kicking a leg up against the railing. "Oh, I saw it. Sure was something."

Casevan's brows rose and then furrowed slightly as he looked in Kalo's direction. "I'm with Flor. He's my father and I didn't know he could do that."

Kalo's head jerked back. "You don't know? Your dad is *famous*."

Casevan looked at him with a genuinely confused expression. "A solider in some king's army, a long time ago, doesn't give him that kind of skill now."

"That's *not* what he is famous for." Kalo shrugged. "I'm surprised you don't know what your father's main job for the majority of his life has been. You'll have to ask him sometime."

"Well, can't *you* just tell me?" Casevan cocked his head to the side, raising a brow.

Kalo leaned forward and rested his arms against the railing. "I don't think that would be a good idea."

Casevan and I exchanged looks. Ugh. Kalo really did know a little something about everyone and he always said / was the gossip. Casevan looked down toward where the prince and Lachlan stood in the arena, a puzzled expression on his face that was lined with worry. I think we both wondered what he could be hiding.

The target practice contestants went up one by one, some extremely good, some just having fun with it. After all was said and done there was no denying who had been the one to beat. Lach howled a bit when the pawbird announced him as first place, Helius coming in 3rd after a poised kanti who had used needle-like throwing knives in their trial. The prince glowered slightly but smiled none the less. The two of them walking away from the podium with a sack of coins each. Lachlan also carried a beautifully carved bow made of a pretty and rich colored wood with a matching leather quiver with swirling patterns of floating isles and clouds stitched along it.

“Here you are, lass.” Lachlan outstretched the bow and quiver towards me and I shot my paws up. “Consider it a gift for when Kalo teaches you how to fight when you get home.”

Had he heard our conversation on the ship over here? My face reddened and I gripped the bow in my hands. It was beautiful. Swirling carvings also covered the bows frame, tipped with pretty pearl accents at the tips and some also inlayed into the deep groves. “A-are you sure? This is a really nice bow and you won it fair and square. If it’s not your...style, you could always sell it?”

Lachlan let out a laugh. “It’s got nothin’ to do with my ‘style’, lass.” He could hardly contain the smile spreading on his face. “I wouldn’t dare sell somethin’ that has proper use t’ someone who needs it. Besides, I don’t need the coin.” He patted my hand softly as he handed me the quiver. “Consider it a thank you for givin’ me an excuse t’ show the Prince who’s really in charge around here.”

Helius choked on the water he was drinking and tried not to spit it everywhere. “You listen here, you old bas—” The announcer called for the diving competitors to begin lining up, cutting our conversation short yet again. They really knew how to use their timing.



Casevan and I moved over to the line of Crederians, all shapes, sizes, and colors. We took turns taking a couple practice dives off a tall diving board, Casevan surprising me with how nicely he could dive. I definitely had my work cut out for me, but it seemed like a piece of cake. I didn’t have a particularly great diving form, but I would make sure I looked damn good doing it. The line stretched up a winding slope that led to a hilltop around one of the floating isles above. One by one the line shortened, and it seemed as though people were disappearing rather than diving as I didn’t really see anyone...*dive*?

Casevan was unusually quiet after his talk with Kalo during the last competition. I wondered if Kalo knowing more about his father than he did was bothering him. I didn’t want to pry, but I was also very curious about Lachlan. “Cas, are you ok?”

He turned to me and shrugged a little before answering. “I just have a lot to think about, I guess. It’s just weird to think I might not know more about my own father than someone I just met?” He gave a sidelong glance as he continued. “I knew he had lots of

connections with other places and people since he seems to know someone everywhere we go, but it just feels...off."

I felt like I could relate. My mother had lots of secrets too. To no one's surprise, Kalo seemed to be the only one of my siblings who knew anything about them. "I think I know how you feel. Our mother has lots of secrets too, but she always tells me I'm too young, too precious to know such things." I placed a paw on his shoulder gently. "Maybe if you ask him nicely, he'd tell you? I mean, if you didn't think there was anything more to ask, maybe he wouldn't think to mention it beforehand. Besides, with a performance like that, how can he *not* expect some questions?"

Casevan smiled and leaned into my touch slightly. "You're right. I'll have to ask him."

The line crept ahead slowly but surely. Casevan and I chatted about various interests and hobbies, finding we had more in common than we initially thought. I liked his company. It felt like we had always known each other, things just flowing with a familiar ease that made me feel comfortable around him. I was relieved to know we lived in the same town; it would be hard to say goodbye to someone I felt could be a close friend by the end of this trip.

Finally, we turned a particular bend, and then I saw it. A floating rock escorted by two skullcrackers that hoisted waiting Crederians up into the clouds. Where were they going? Why were they going up that high?

Casevan must have seen my expression as he leaned close to me and spoke in hushed tones. "You did realize that this is a high dive competition, right? Like...a *really* high dive." I swallowed hard, feeling like there was suddenly a lump in my throat. I wasn't *afraid* of heights...I mean, at least, yet. I tried to speak, but just shook my head instead. "Aahh, I thought as much. Well, this will be fun."

The line waned and I tried not to jump over the edge now just to keep the water closer. The two skullcrackers motioned for Casevan and I to step onto the rock once we were the next two in line. "The skies await!"

The view was one of the most beautiful I had ever seen, both on the way up and once we got to the small floating isle above. It almost made the crippling fear dissipate for a little while. Another glittering skullcracker waited by the edge where a long board stretched out into the open air. No way. *Absolutely no way*. I felt my legs buckle slightly and I wobbled, bumping into Casevan lightly as I tried to steady myself.

"Hey, hey, hey." Casevan grabbed my face in his paws and cooed softly. "You can do this! It's just a deep breath and a big jump, then it's over before you know it." His words

were reassuring, but my eyes kept darting over his shoulder at the open air. “What would make it easier for you? Do you want me to go first so you can see it’s ok or would you rather I go after so I can cheer you on?”

I thought about his words carefully, trying to decide which made me want to throw up less. “C-could you go first?”

Casevan smiled softly and squished my face in his hands. “Of course.” He let go of me and I wished he hadn’t. Slowly, he walked away from me, backing up to the board without breaking eye contact. “See nothing to worry abo—” And just like that, he slipped off the edge of the board, letting out a small scream as he fell. I darted to the edge, the awaiting skullcracker and I looked over carefully and they tried to stifle a laugh. Casevan flailed uselessly before tucking in his arms and legs, making a laughably huge splash as he managed to cannonball during a diving competition. A moment later, his head poked up from the water and he waved his arms around at me, flashing big thumbs up before swimming over to the finish.

“Well then, it’s your turn now! Make it count!” The skullcracker’s voice almost sent me over the edge.

“R-right!” I didn’t know if he had done that on purpose, but I *had* felt a little better about the jump...that was until I stepped onto the board. I reeled back a few steps, trying not to slip until my back paws touched solid ground again. ‘*You can do this!*’ I could do this! Casevan’s voice cheered me on from somewhere below me and I willed my legs to move. I held my breath as I took off running down the board and jumped off the edge. Feeling of my hair as it whipped in the air, my fur in the breeze, my weight becoming so light that I felt like I was flying. It was liberating. The fear mixed with adrenaline as I dove toward the endless blanket of water. It seems like a second and a lifetime all at once before my paws cut through the glittering surface and into the warmth of the ocean. Bubbles tickled my cheeks and limbs, and I swam back up toward the surface, my head finally breaching the air above. I took in big breaths of air, laughing and whooping along with my companions who called my name from the sidelines. I wiped the excess water from my eyes before smiling up at my brothers- I mean brother, singular- and swam to meet them.

Lachlan let out a low laugh and wrapped a towel around my shoulders as I gazed up into the sky. “I tried to warn ya, lass, but ya ran off before I could finish.”

“That’s ok! I’m glad I was able to do it after all and maybe I wouldn’t have if I knew beforehand.” I beamed a smile to Casevan, who encouraged me like Kalo would have if he were there instead and it meant the world. “Thank you for everything.”

Casevan and I definitely did not place on the podium, but each received a beautiful seashell bracelet with delicate knots and a shimmering pearl souvenir for doing our best despite the challenge. It was kind of a cute thing to match. Like a shared memory, we now each had a small piece of Prika's Steps to remember this trip by. We milled about various shops, Kalo and I picking things out for our family along the way. Lachlan worked to gather up the extra supplies we would need for the rest of the voyage, while Casevan and Helius moved things back onto the ship.

Once we were ready, we all stepped back onto the imposing ship's deck, bidding the wonderful distraction goodbye. The small amount of ease I felt faded away like the floating isles as we sailed toward the ever-darkening horizon. After leaving the isles, I had so many questions and I wasn't sure I would ever have the chance to ask them. A battle was coming and we all needed to make sure we were ready. It was time to hunt.