

Before the land turned, there were sky-beasts. Great creatures of the air and wind that drove storms. Lighting and thunder were their songs. They were the inspiration for the ancient's dragons, wyrms and hydras. However, the sky-beasts haven't been seen in a millennium. Today, the sky-beasts returned.

Scientists had given us twelve years before the climate changed beyond repair. It only took nine. The world flooded and the skies burned. My own home had long been in ruins. Instead of telling me stories of Atlantis or Shangri-La, my mother told me about New York and Hong Kong. Those cities were supposed to have been the height of human innovation and accomplishment. My mother had let out a wry laugh when she told me that. "Those cities were no monument to human achievement, they were a testament to our pride," she looked away, "And our greed."

So, I grew up on stories of how the world was before. Everyday, I saw refugees walk by our home. I was seven the first time I saw one of them fall. I was nine the first time someone was unable to get up. My mother told me not to meet their eyes. Their eyes were haunted, their bodies haggard. I looked away.

At sixteen, I listened to the radio as world leaders screamed their rage at one another. They blamed the farmers. "How dare you work our lands like this!" They blamed the immigrants. "You ruined your own land and now you're trying to take what is rightfully ours!" They didn't blame the oil barons. They didn't blame the meat industry. They didn't blame themselves. I turned off the radio.

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The breeze coming off the bay was salty as I breathed in. I threaded my hand through Lyon's fur and surveyed the storm on the horizon. Already, I could see lightning crackling through the bruised colored clouds. "Come on, Lyon," I sighed, "Let's go get more sandbags."

Lyon and I walked back through the reeds, my boots squishing in the mud. As I was stacking the sandbags around our fence, I heard Lyon let out a low growl and saw her hackles rise. When I looked up, the storm clouds had moved even closer. The wind was whistling through the reeds like angry whispers and the lighting was flashing like my mother's eyes sometimes did when I brought up our fence. My mother hadn't always hardened herself against the suffering of others, but after the Great Wave that decimated most of Europe, my mother's behavior had changed. She locked our doors at night and had me collect debris to build a makeshift fence around the house.

I wished I could just snarl back at the storm and scare it away like Lyon did with the rodents that always scurried around. Maybe if I hardened my eyes like my mother and squared my shoulders with defiance, everything would just go back to the way things were before our world was ruined. "Come and get me. I dare you!" I wanted to yell.

By the time we got inside, the rain was upon us. It was deafening. It pounded in my brain and rattled my soul. "Mother, are you in here?" I shouted over the din. "Up here," I heard her

voice call down from the attic. I climbed up the stairs and we didn't speak again as we settled down to wait. Soon, I heard water trickling from downstairs. Then it was flowing, then rushing. I cursed and ran down the stairs. A piece of debris had broken a window in the kitchen. There was now an angry gash and water was spurting through it like blood through an artery. I shoved the table against the gap where the window used to be. The water flow slowed but I could still feel the anger of the rain pushing against the gash. I was so tired. Storms like these used to be a once in a few years type event but now they happened every six months or so. Now, they were just life.

When the rain eased up, I worked my way to the front door and yanked it open. The sky was an ugly purple, and blood red clouds were illuminated every few minutes by lightning before thunder shook the sky. I pushed open the gate to the fence before my mother could call me back. The landscape was unrecognizable. It was like a graveyard of memories. A watch was frozen at 3:10. A scooter was mangled next to a deflated ball. T-shirts and muddied jeans spilled out of trashbags like they were still waiting for their owners. I was picking my way through the items when I first heard it. Wingbeats. Birds didn't nest here anymore. The high frequency of storms was a good enough deterrent for them. But, there it was in the corner of my eye. Great golden wings that seemed to call to the wind with every beat.

I felt my blood run cold and I bolted, Lyon at my heels. I'd never really seen a creature bigger than a horse before, and now some great bird lion thing was chasing me down. *Stop.* I skidded ungracefully to a stop at the sound of that voice in my head. The voice sounded ancient, it was as rough as any rock in the oldest mountain. "What the hell," I said, whipping around. The creature had landed and was folding its wings behind its back. Great golden eyes were staring me down like it was trying to decide if I was prey. "What are you?" I asked, squaring my shoulders. *I'm a sky-beast. I'm the creature that drives the storms and floods and fires and earthquakes.* It tilted its head. *Have you humans really forgotten about us?* I stared at it blankly. It snorted. Above us, lighting continued to crackle like it was drawn to this creature.

*Did you never hear the legend of the sky-beasts, child?* Those gold eyes were unnerving. "No." *Then let me enlighten you. My story is older than your precious nations. We sky-beasts first made the world. We drive the forces of the world, but we cannot create them.* My mouth was hanging open and I'm sure a tsunami could have crashed over me in that moment and I wouldn't have noticed. I wondered if the beast could smell fear. I eyed him warily. "So if you made the world, why are you here now?"

*I'm here because you could be a force in this world, Etta. You can help humanity to reverse what they've done, but I cannot force you to acknowledge your own failings.* I looked at it, uncomprehending. "My own failings?" *Yes, how many times have you ignored those that need your help because it was easier to pretend they did not exist?* "I can't help everyone. I can only save myself." *You don't need to help everyone. Just stop hiding and take responsibility for the state of the world. It is the only way to move forward.*

I said nothing. *You have to see the world. When you're ready, find me and I'll show you what you've been hiding from all these years.* With that, the beast took off. His powerful wings bearing him quickly out of sight.

My mind spun as I trudged back home through the reeds. Sky-beasts were supposed to be the stuff of legend, but wasn't New York just as much of a legend to me? I reached our fence. There was a young woman leaning against it and looked like she was in incredible pain. I hesitated. Look away my instincts whispered, but the words of the sky-beast echoed in my ears.

"Are you alright?" I asked the woman. "Water," she croaked. "Ok, just stay here," I winced, stupid Etta, it's not like she could go anywhere else. I grabbed her a cup a water and walked back outside, Lyon at my side. She smiled at me gratefully and took small, careful sips like she was scared to waste any of it. "Don't worry, there's more if you finish it," I told her. "You don't know that for sure," she said, standing up. "Thank you for your kindness, but I have to keep going."

I watched her retreating form and came to a decision. I had allowed myself to turn a blind eye for too long, it was time for me to listen to the sky-beast and acknowledge the state of the world.

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"Mother?" I called out. I found her in the kitchen making bread.

"Mother, I met a sky-beast today."

"Did you?"

"I'm serious. I did."

"Well, I just turned yeast into gold."

"Mother, why did you have me build a fence?"

Her hands paused in their kneading of the bread. "I've told you, Etta. The people out there are beyond our help. All we can do is survive today."

"That's not what the sky-beast said. He said that I need to open my eyes. He said that humans are the cause of this mess," I gestured to the window that was still broken, "He said that I need to see the world and help repair what we've broken"

"So what, you think that thing is right? It isn't, Etta." Mother said harshly. "This world doesn't need fixing. Our planet has survived a billion years and if humans really are the problem, then the earth will just get rid of us." Mother stood there fuming. For the first time in years, I looked into her eyes. They were pale and the wrinkles lining her young face had deepened. She walked over to me and pulled me into her arms. "Etta, it's arrogant to think that humans could be the cause of all this. We don't control the tides or the hurricanes. What comes, comes. The future is no concern of ours, do you understand?"

As she spoke, memories flashed through my mind. The woman against the fence, the bruise colored clouds, the trash bags of clothes. I made my choice and pulled myself out of her

arms. “I’m sorry you believe that, Mother, but I believe that we owe our future to each other. My life isn’t behind this fence, this wall that you’ve built to shield yourself from your own guilt,” I paused, “I’m going to go, Mother. I hope you change your mind.”

I didn’t wait to hear her response. I grabbed my bag, whistled for Lyon, and left the door open on my way out. Let her do the work to get up and close it, I scoffed. At least that way she would be forced to look at the fence she insisted I build.

Each step I took felt like a breath of new life. Through the fence and out to the marshy land beyond. I forced myself to look at the footprints that the despairing had left over the years. That was my first step in accepting my own compliance. “Hi.” I set my bag down and Lyon sat patiently by my feet, regally intrigued by the sky-beast in front of him. *Ah, so you did come.* “Yes. I realized you’re right. There’s so much suffering in the world and I want to help.” He nodded and I took that conformation that I had said the right thing. *Now, get on my back. We have much to see.*

“Get on your back?” He tilted his head. *Did you not hear me, little one?* “No, no, I did, but are you saying we’re going to fly?” I’d never flown in my life. Planes were banned except for the jets of the megarich and the military. *You can close your mouth, you’ll catch mosquitoes. But to answer your question, yes we’re going to fly. It’s time for you to see your world.*

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Flying was incredible. I swear I left my heart on the ground as we took off. In three powerful sweeps of his wings, we were soaring high above the reeds where I’d spent my life. I reached out and let my hand trail through a wisp of a cloud. I giggled at the water vapor that was left behind on my palm. The constant knot in my chest unraveled to reveal a thin cord that I dared call hope. This moment was what I had to protect.

As we glided lower, the camps came into view. As the sky-beast dipped past the entrance, I could see the shacks of scrap metal and children playing on the dirt paths. When we landed, children rushed towards me, clutching at my braids and my hands. Their faces brightened at the sight of the sky-beast and Lyon. I looked through the gaggle to find one of the older ones to take me to the leader of the camp. She led me away and I looked back to see Lyon being lavished with attention and the sky-beast looking content as he let the children chitter excitedly over his wings and gently pet his feathers.

From what I’d read about the camps, they were dirty, disorganized places filled with the worst of humanity. That didn’t seem to be the case as we wove through the shacks and paths. There was a type of organized chaos here. Within the chaos, there was a sturdy type of hope here that was so different from the fear I grew up with. The girl stopped at a structure that looked a little sturdier than the others, “His name is Sama al Abbas,” she said and then dashed away back to where the sky-beast was now basking lazily in the attention and sunshine.

I raised my fist to knock, but the door opened before I could. “Um, hi,” I said to the man in front of me. He looked to be around fifty and his dark skin contrasted with his near golden eyes. “Hello,” he said politely, “Can I help you?”

I opened my mouth to speak, but hesitated. I didn’t have any grand speech prepared, so I settled on the truth. “The sky-beasts are back.” “Oh?” “I know it sounds crazy, but it’s true. At first, you know I thought that meant that our world was going to end, but now I realize that our world has been ending for a long time. The sky-beasts came back to give us one last chance to realize how much we have screwed up. And I’m taking that chance.” I waited a beat as Abbas stared at me before he said, “So what can I do?”

“I need to learn as much as I can about the reality of our world, so I thought seeing the camps would be the best place to start.” I said. “Well, then you can follow me,” he said, stepping out and closing the door behind him. Abbas started to talk as we walked back through camp.

“The refugee camps were supposed to be a temporary fix, but now they’ve stood for fifteen years at least, maybe longer. As more climate refugees started pouring into wealthy countries, the rhetoric surrounding how countries should receive refugees started to get hostile. So, the refugees were packed into camps and told they were lucky to even be allowed to stay,” he said, turning to me. “So what do I do?” I asked.

“I would start with helping people accept their own failures, greed, selfishness, and cruelty. Accepting responsibility is only the first step on a longer journey, but it’s the most powerful one.” That didn’t seem hard to do, but then I thought about how I hadn’t even been able to convince my own mother. Abbas looked at me sadly. “I’m sorry that this is the world we’re leaving you, little one,” he turned to look at the rest of the camp.

“What if I’m not strong enough to change people’s minds?” “Then you will have to find your strength.” We had reached the entrance of the camp and I could see the children clambering onto the sky-beast’s back. Sama al Abbas pointed to the children, “I find my strength in your generation. You all have such courage, take heart in it.” I left him there as I walked towards the sky-beast. He bowed his head in order to let the children slide down. They threw their arms lovingly around his neck and giggled their goodbyes. As they dashed away, I turned to him and said, “I’m ready to see the world.” *I was hoping you would say that, little one.*

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We were soaring through the air now, letting the thermals push us higher. We’d been flying for months, visiting every corner of the world. I saw the ancient cities that were now underwater and the places where people had nestled to form little communities out of the wreckage. My heart had broken over and over as I saw the conditions in which people lived. Yet, I hadn’t let myself look away. I took the man’s advice and found my own source of strength within the despair surrounding me. Slowly, people were beginning to talk about rebuilding in a way that existed in harmony with nature. I found my strength in their resilience.

In the faint glow of dawn, I could see the areas that floods and fires had ravaged. Through the ash and muck there were faint green sprouts I could spy as we wove through the clouds. I breathed in deeply and laid back on the sky-beast's back. Up here, the air was so crisp it almost hurt to breathe in. As I looked up, I saw the constellations stretch out before me. They had been named after the heroes of old and I smiled as I traced their shapes in the stars. "I've decided to make you a constellation," I said to the sky-beast. *Is that so, little one?* "Yes, and I'll call it Spe." *And what does that mean?* "Hope," I said as we flew to the sunrise of a new world.