“What’s up, Anastasia, what do you want to do now?” Nikanora asked once they had both left the temple.

“I have to go to the market and do some shopping, since I don’t have anything for tomorrow’s breakfast. And you?”

“I don’t know yet… though I think I’ll come with you. I actually wanted to find myself some baubles.”

Anastasia looked at her friend surprised, but a second later she scoffed:

“Hey, it’s the men that must appeal to you, not the other way around!”

“Do you think I’m doing this for them? I, myself, want to look decent.”

“Fine, fine.”

The priestesses spread their wings, then flew into the air and made their way to the city.

The market was set up at the other end of the city, but that posed no issue. The women were soaring above multi-storey buildings as it was stipulated by the current traffic regulations– they were passing other citizens all around. Many aves exposed their bare torsos, boasting their rich palette of colourful feathers. Men showed off their glistening stripes, and women presented their artistically formed patterns.

Of course, the priestesses could not resist throwing spiteful words and comments about how ravishing they would look if they also decided to dye their feathers.

A resonant voice broke through the din. Upon flying up closer, they noticed a man – judging by his court uniform, a clerk – who was sitting on a perch affixed high up in the air, leaning against two columns. A handful of people stood in the square in front of him.

“Tomorrow at noon in the arena, in the name of our benevolent Matriarchs – Euphrasia, Tryphena and Amaranta – there will be an execution of aves sentenced to death for crime against Ellia!” the man said, then unrolled a parchment. “The names of the traitors are as follows…” He proceeded to list the names of a dozen or more citizens, the names of whom only a few rang a bell to Anastasia and Nikanora. It filled them with fear. “No different fate awaits those who dare conspire with the enemy!”

They decided not to listen any longer, and so they flew from the square.

“Terrifying,” said Anastasia “This can befall anyone.”

“Indeed… but we both know how it is.”

This event reminded her of the unfortunate reality. The Kelaghi wielded mind thaumaturgy, thanks to which they could influence others: they formed illusions, forced victims into obedience, and even took control over them or changed their memories. After all, it was often said that the corvidae, before they were banished from Ellia, managed to leave spies in every city. They would not have to be there in the flesh – the falconidae themselves could also collect intelligence.

This fact constantly kept the society in line. The citizens were asked to examine one another. And if someone was suspected of cooperation with the corvidae or their spies, they would be thrown into the dungeon and interrogated until their true alignment was ascertained. No one was treated leniently by the authorities – no matter if the falconidae assisted the Kelaghi willingly or not, every such aves would be considered a traitor and sentenced to death.

Anastasia would always think in the back of her head whether the person she is talking to has had anything to do with the corvidae. She felt exhausted from it all, but she was not the only one. For her own peace of mind, she believed that currently there was no better way to deal with this issue. Right now, however, she did not want to talk about it, and she knew that neither did Nikanora.

“Listen, would you want to head over to the arena?” she asked.

“For what purpose?”

“I want to have a look around. Just for a second.”

“Well… I’m in no hurry, after all.

They soared even higher into the air, rising to an inconceivable height which led to one of the most glorious structures in the entire city.

The arena above the clouds was built with a plethora of purposes in mind: aves would confer there about state-related issues, hold theatrical plays, organise battles. Seated in the stands, everyone could see the action, even if the show’s participants decided to abandon the podium in the building’s centre and head for the skies instead. At the moment, the arena was empty. Anastasia latched herself with her feet to an edge above the stands, from where, sitting, she examined the creation in its entirety. Nikanora joined her soon after.

The friend opened her beak to say something, but the former did so before she had the chance.

“Geraki always liked to come here.”

She looked at Anastasia with surprise. And understanding.

“Oh right…”

“He adored the performances. He would say that it’s great entertainment and that, thanks to them, he could learn something new. On top of that,” she laughed, “there was always somebody to gaze at.”

“Oh, please, how can you say such things!” Nikanora replied casually. “But I understand what you mean.” She sighed. “How many years have passed, already?”

“Since he left for the army? Two.”

“That’s a lot of time… I don’t know what I’d do if someone close to me spent so much time away from the city. Knowing nothing of their wellbeing, on top of that… I’m sorry. It must be difficult for you.”

“Don’t worry. I could get used to it.” Anastasia held back for a moment. “Besides, a year ago Geraki wrote me a letter. You know, a messenger arrived, delivering messages all over the city. I asked him about the war, but he would only reply briefly. Overall, he wasn’t very talkative.”

“And what about the letter?”

She sighed deeply.

“Geraki is holding up great. They’re doing well, but it’s still too early to say whether they’ll be able to hold back the corvidae.”

Nikanora briefly stared at her friend astounded but recovered quickly.

“I’m sorry, Anastasia, but we probably shouldn’t be talking about this. At least Geraki is alright and let’s stick to that.”

“You’re right,” the other replied a second later, then stood up. “Now let us head for the market.”

“Sure.”

Wings spread, they left the arena.

Upon arriving above the market, they noticed food and jewellery even from such a great height, all sparkling with colours so distinct that distinguishing them from their surroundings was an easy feat. Of course, the whole area was bustling as usual; more so on the ground, although many others were flying by, too.

Anastasia wanted to descend when Nikanora placed her arm on her shoulder.

“Look!” she said, and pointed towards the horizon.

“Where? Wait, let’s go higher up, there’s too many aves here.”

They did so. At that moment they saw something far from an everyday occurrence: a troop of armed falconidae was heading for the city.

“These are… ours,” noticed Anastasia, not withholding her surprise. “But what are they doing here?”

“How would I know? Let’s get closer.”

The priestesses noticed that the curious aves also halted their affairs to take a closer look at the unexpected visitors. Anastasia felt uncertainty.

This could mean everything. Had the war ended? Were these the only surviving soldiers, retreating and fleeing death? In that case Geraki…

*No! First find out what’s going on, then let your imagination roam free.*

After a second Anastasia noticed that the troops were dragging other falconidae, chained and shackled. She peered closer at the silhouettes.

And fear overtook her. She squealed involuntarily.

“What’s the matter?” asked Nikanora.

She struggled to say a single word. At last, she uttered: “That there… it’s Geraki!”

Her brother was flying, head downcast, next to other prisoners.