

## Aliaheim the Gryphon

(Word Count: 1985)

Joan wished she'd brought warmer clothes. The air frosted on her breath as Aliaheim's powerful wings caught a thermal from the beach below, lifting them ever higher. She was tempted to tuck frigid digits beneath her armpits, but didn't dare risk relinquishing her handholds.

*Stop squirming*, the Gryphon said into her mind.

*It's cold! Brrrrrrrr*, Joan replied, sharing the feeling of ice biting into bone through their bond. Inside her shirt, Klein puffed his fur in agreement.

*Freezing! Freezing!* he agreed.

*I'm warm. Snuggle up to me.*

She gritted her teeth and clawed into his mane of feathers, pulling herself down to lie flat, careful not to crush the gerbil between them. By the time she was done shifting to get comfortable, the heat from his body had already warmed her chest. Resting her cheek against a soft patch of down, she breathed deep and watched a wind-filled wing - air rustling through plumage of ivory and gold. Her Mother's heritage of Beastmaster's blood had bonded her to the creature when they'd spilled it together in mutual survival, and the connection between their minds had only grown stronger since, revealing further depths to his ancient prowess. In all her seventeen years, she'd never encountered an animal so fierce and proud.

He looked back with a fist-sized eye at the horizon, and her vision shifted and sharpened in a nauseating moment. She saw the distant tower jutting into the twilight sky, dwarfing the trees and standing over the hills. It took her a moment to realise that Aliaheim was sharing his perspective, and seconds more to notice the storm brewing behind the brickwork, rage manifested by magic.

After learning of Silenius the Sorcerer's plans for Aliaheim, she couldn't have done *nothing*. She couldn't have abandoned her new friend to such a fate. She'd like to have seen his reaction when she'd fled with the Gryphon, but she supposed that tempest tantrum would have to do.

Klein quaked against her chest, sensing the peril at their backs. *Danger. Run! Fly!*

*Can you stay ahead of that?* she asked.

*I don't think so.*

He snapped his gaze forwards again, cutting their shared sense. Joan squinted through the dimming light as her sight returned. Opposite the Crystal Coast and endless ocean to their left, the edge of the Ahree Desert blurred the sinking sun with heat waves. Caught between the two inhospitable wastelands, a tropical buffer stretched southward like a highway of life.

*Land in that clearing. We can make camp by the spring.*

*Afraid of getting wet?*

*No. I'm afraid of falling, or being fried by lightning.*

*Land! Ground! Run, hide!* the gerbil chimed in.

*Those woods are teeming with Necromobs. Silenius will find us.*

*Better hunted than dead.*

The Gryphon twitched his head in irritation. *Death comes for us all, Pup. It has claimed the rest of my kind.*

*I know, Ali. I'm sorry. But I'm not ready to leave this world behind.*

*There are worse fates to endure.*

Joan felt bars pressing in around her, the defeat and humiliation and bitter resentment of captivity. She felt the crushing hopelessness of knowing no escape, of being rendered no more than a possession, stripped of identity and agency until she was no longer an independent entity. She knew the blinding potential she'd unleashed from that cage, the pride

and rage she'd restored to him. Now he used that gift to cleave the wind and carry them to freedom. She couldn't ask him to risk going back. He would never go back.

The air began to charge with energy, and she looked over a shoulder to see the storm gaining on them with alarming speed. *What do we do, then?*

Her stomach lurched as he began beating the air with powerful thrusts, pouring on the speed. She flattened herself against his back, careful not to crush Klein, and squeezed his tense neck with all her strength.

*Bad beast! Land! Hide!*

*Hush, prey. The trickster's storm doesn't scare me.*

The Gryphon's wrath and conviction resonated across their bond, so strong that she forgot to be afraid. The skies belonged to them, *they* belonged to them, and nobody would hurt his new friends. They would not be caught, and they *could* not be caged. He would die first, and he would do it with blood on his beak and wind filling his wings.

Thunder crashed and Aliaheim unleashed a deafening screech. Her own rage came bubbling to the surface in an unstoppable rush, and she joined in with her own shout. The air warbled with their cry before they were swallowed by the dark nimbus.

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Joan nestled against her fierce friend's fur and feathers, trying to sap any trickle of warmth from him. Rain lashed her face, her back, biting through to her bones with icicle teeth. The growling clouds smothered their sight, only breaking the darkness with the occasional crackle of lightning, and the wind tore at them like the hands of a dozen starved beggars.

Through their bond, she felt Aliaheim's exhaustion growing, his strength waned over a dozen hours of fighting the forces. The storm had immediately whisked them out over the roiling waves, prohibiting a landing, and stripped them of all sense of direction. Unable to navigate back to shore in the darkness, they'd found themselves in a fight for survival.

A current of air buffeted them, filling his feathers and tearing at her hair, and they were suddenly buoyed from beneath. Her stomach dropped as they rose through the layers of clouds, the deluge at her back lessening. After a minute, only frigid thin air remained.

Joan raised her gaze from her feathery pillow as they broke through the final layer of cloud cover, emerging above the storm. Her breath caught in her throat at the sight that greeted them. Consumed by the chaos below, she'd never known such serenity could exist just beyond the storm's borders.

An iridescent aurora wove through the sky like falling Faerie dust. Two moons backlit the waves of colour from opposite angles, casting the canvas of roiling clouds in gentle relief. Only a few pinpricks of light shone through the shaded blankets, the strongest stars barely able to penetrate with their own offerings of illumination.

Aliaheim steadied out, the dark surface of the tempest below occasionally backlit by a distant thunderclap. He soared, head twitching about to take in the view.

"It's beautiful..." she said, frost catching on her breath.

*I can't navigate by this light.*

Klein shifted against her side. *Day coming. Dawn soon.*

*Hang in there,* she added, feeling the ache of the Gryphon's muscles through their mental linkage. She leaned into the sensation, leaned into him, offering what little strength she could to ward off the encroaching exhaustion. The distinction between them blurred as he accepted the kernel of energy she offered.

She flattened herself again against a bed of feathers, hissing through her teeth at the shared sensations. Their chest heaved like a blacksmith's bellows, back strained like a taught sail, wings screamed as if every feather were on fire. Her prickled skin and chattering teeth faded like a half-forgotten thought, a creeping cold that claimed a corner of their joint awareness. They both stayed where the agony was warm.

Time seemed to suspend itself as they continued to glide, seconds taking minutes to pass and minutes only taking moments. Pre-dawn light began to stain the sky pink, and they watched together through eagle eyes as it illuminated the cloud cover. Far ahead of them, they spotted the storm's edge.

*Nearly...*

Joan couldn't tell whether the thought was hers, his, or both. All that mattered was the surge of fresh energy that spurred them towards that sighted end, the feeling of flying out over empty air when they reached it, free to look down at the ocean below. The sun peeked over the horizon to their right, scattering glare along the tops of waves, and they cherished every ray of warmth that reached their wings.

*We were turned around, Aliaheim grumbled.*

The words formed a wedge between their minds, and she cleaved herself from his embrace to sit up and look with her own eyes, scanning the endless ocean. They were facing north, but there was no telling for how long they'd been *flying* north. The storm had swept them so far out to sea that she couldn't spot the land that should lay to the west. The horizon was only blue, and...

It... curved. From so high up, she noticed a bend to the horizon that she hadn't before. It was all around them, from west to north to east, and she wondered if Silenius' storm had ushered them into some far corner of the world where they'd be herded over an edge. What

lay beyond her vision, after the world fell away from them? Was it a void? The thought chilled her another impossible degree.

The Gryphon puffed his feathers and twitched his head about, sensing her unease.

*What?*

*We've reached the end of the world.*

He followed her sightline and gave a squawk of amusement. *The world has no end,*

*Pup. It goes on forever.*

*Then where's the rest of it?*

*Beyond sight, where all forever things lay.*

Joan tried to reconcile his wisdom with what she saw. In all directions, the ocean seemed to fall away from them. She couldn't tell how steep the angle was, but if the world continued forever - continued to fall away from them in all directions *forever* - could it be... round? The revelation claimed all the room inside her head.

*It's a sphere,* she realised, sharing the shape through their bond as more than a word, more like an image or concept.

*If you say so,* Aliaheim replied with a tinge of disinterest. The *why* of things mattered little to him, so long as he understood the what and the how.

Overjoy and overwhelmed by her new perspective, she tried to convince him of the gravity. *If we flew east for long enough, we could find the continent's western coast. It might even be quicker than crossing the Ahree Desert.*

*You have a young view of forever,* Pup. His eagle eyes drifted to the east, wandering the horizon. He tensed after a moment and a glimpse of the stark sun rocked her mind. She nearly fell from the saddle.

*Hey!* Joan doubled over and shielded her eyes, but he pushed the image of his focus over the bond.

*Don't squish!*

*Look*, the Gryphon urged.

She pushed through the bright pain and saw into the rising sun, to the speck of land beneath it. Looking up from the crook of her elbow, she stared until her eyes watered, and managed to spot the dot on the horizon. She shared the image back, silent confirmation that he wasn't hallucinating.

Relief flooded their bones, pride and determination radiating along their tired muscles. The storm was a receding smudge in the sky behind them. They were going to make it.

Aliaheim turned eastward and redoubled his efforts. She tucked in close and watched through his eyes as they flew into the sun, reassuring Klein with a pat.

The island grew on approach, much larger and further away than it appeared. After an hour of flight they knew they must be approaching a colossal peak, though they still couldn't spot the base. After another hour, they could see the base and small archipelago that surrounded it.

They surveyed the ring of islands surrounding the main mountain. Together, the five smaller islands might amount to a tenth the landmass of the other. It took a lot longer to scan the base of the behemoth, moving their attention upwards. At their altitude, they were still beneath the peak.

Synchronised with her friend, Joan knew how close they came to falling out of the sky when he spotted the group of Gryphons circling there.