

Eaters of Dust, Eaters of Flesh

By Katherine Nabity

She flew upward, though in the dark it was difficult to tell which way was up and which was down.

This was her world now. Utterly dark, in a way that she could not have imagined before. It was not like a closet, dark except of the strip of light along the bottom of the door. Even on a moonless night there would be a slim line of gray where the stars had given their light to the world. This was infinitely darker than that. And she flew, never having seen her wings, but knowing they could loft her up, using the darkness as their air.

She misjudged the distance to the outcrop, as she had every time past. She caught the top of her wing against the stone, and flesh tore. The flare of pain brought tears to her eyes. As with the darkness, pain had grown by magnitudes. The first time, she had decided that she never wanted to feel that pain again, but she couldn't stay below. She couldn't. They said there was no reason

to fly; the stone above was not worth the effort. But she had found the top of the outcrop. And him.

She let her wings hold her steady. Carefully, she pulled herself up. When she came to be crouching on the top of the outcrop, she folded her wings and licked her fingers. Here the dust that settled on the rocks tasted like sugar. She didn't know why. Maybe it had to do with him, the one that lived here. That it was because of what he ate, that the dust from his wings coated the place with vile sweetness. She found nothing vile about the taste or him.

"You're back, little one?" His voice was soft and musical, like wood and clouds.

"I said I would be." She hoped that she didn't sound as young as she was. She knew he would not have accepted her if she were one of the old below. They were content to eat whatever the ground provided. This life was their punishment. It was not hers.

"Will it be different this time?" He moved nearby, the rustle of his skin and feathers.

She bit her lip and winced. "Yes."

"Good." His whisper surprised her. He was next to her and she only felt his warmth after she expected to. She heard him breathe and spicy clouds surrounded her. "Don't disappoint me, lovely. I have not had a pupil in a very long time, but it's long past time for you to finish your lesson and gain your reward."

She nodded and knew he could see her. His eyes had gained a sight that she coveted. He had told her she was beautiful when she first found him, and she knew he told the truth.

"Come."

His hand wrapped around her wrist, warm a second after she needed it to be. He led her into the cave where he lived. She could feel the massive density of stone above her.

He tugged her hand and brought her down to kneeling. Fear brought the taste of bile to her mouth. It was wicked, and her wings twitched with the desire to flee, back to the ground, back to the dry comfort of the dust. Her muscles ached with the effort not to run.

He placed her hand against something cool and soft, like a sea sponge under the surface of the water. He let go and left a trace of cardamom behind. She let her fingers slide against the object. There were light prickles against her palm, and the object curved inward, dipped and ebbed like rolling hills that no longer existed, that she only remembered. When she reached the junction of the neck and jaw, she knew that it was a dead body that he wished to share. She brought her fingertips to her mouth and tasted. The decay had left them tasting of salt and basil with the sweet aftertaste of a flowery perfume scent. Her fingers would have flown away with their own wings if she didn't earn for something more than ground and clay.

"Don't be startled or afraid," he whispered. "Do you question when they tell you to eat the dirt beneath their feet? You should, for you have wings." His breath was filled with pepper now. Anger. He had seen the shock in her face, the unease in her fingers. Even if he had no eyes, he would have seen it. "Don't

question this," he spoke again, "for you have no flesh but what you take."

"Yes," she said and knew it was true. She sunk the tips of her fingers into the flesh. It parted as easily as if she had talons. She brought cold blood and flesh to her lips and tasted it. It was every flavor she remembered from the bitterest walnut to the coldest, freshest milk and honey. And as she swallowed she could see the outline of him in, black in the darkness, and the smallest cobalt glitter of his eyes.

"The first step," he breathed. And smiled.

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