

1: Beautiful Fledglings

1823

United States of Ungathu, formerly Harpyfolk Land of Ciloth

The State of Miadar, formerly Krieww Territory

Dralox County

Berzogtown

Essodel Plantation

Ben despised much of his life, but marrying Rit and producing five wonderful children with her was not among his life's trials. Yet, the injustice, the abject cruel horror of being the literal property of another, conflicted with everything it meant to be a person, parent, and spouse. So, Ben leaned against one of the many sweet gum trees native to Miadar's Eastern Shore region. Long before him, enslaved Birdfolk would hollow out the trunks of the trees and use them as a cradle for their children. Ben and Rit had benefitted from their ancestors' ingenuity. The seventy-foot trees with bright green, star-shaped leaves were made even lovelier in the fall when they turned a magnificent scarlet. But the medicinal benefits of the yellowish resin revealed when the bark was stripped away told the sad tale of enslaved life on the Essodel Plantation.

Thankful for the hand-me-down boots he wore, Ben's feet were protected from the sweet gum's prickly burrs but not from the inhumane creature who stood before Ben, telling him the unthinkable.

The unconscionable.

From a height of twelve feet, Master Gyzad spoke to Ben in a tone he knew well. His mind was made up, and he would not be moved no matter how Ben or anyone else felt. But sometimes, though rarely, a sliver of something akin to pity would enter the Dragonkin's golden reptilian eyes.

Brief. Shallow. But, in the end, inconsequential.

"I purchased a mine in Pelduth Neck, so I need a servant of your caliber to grow my hoard. You'll be the head ground-scraper among the other servants. That will please Rit. Make her proud of her husband."

As always, Ben remained silent, revealing none of his internal thoughts. Dragonkin did not have conversations with the so-called ground-scrappers. No equal exchanges of ideas and opinions existed between dragon masters and the flightless bird shifters they referred to as "servants."

Master Gyzad is only gifted at talkin' his mother into payin' for another one of his hoard-makin' schemes. They've all failed, so he can't afford but one slave. I ain't no servant. Servants have a voice and a choice. They define their future and control their present, includin' where they live. He thinks that because he permitted me to marry my Rit, I should be forever grateful for his "kindness." Damn him, I am grateful. But Master Gyzad don't do nothin' from his heart. Me and Rit gave Mistress Essodel five more slaves to add to her hoard. A slave, that's what I am. I don't care what Master Gyzad calls me. What his kind has created on this continent is a system of slavery. Plain and simple. What they choose to call it matters not a squat. No more than my righteous anger changes where I'll go in a week.

Golden eyes watched Ben, but he gave the Dragonkin nothing other than cool silence, satisfying Master Gyzad's craving for absolute obedience. "Good, then it's settled. You'll travel with me to Pelduth Neck. Be my overseer." Master Gyzad threw his bald head back and laughed as if the sweet gum behind Ben had morphed into a traveling menagerie. Even if the tree could and had, Ben found no humor in being forced to leave his wife and children and made to oversee fellow enslaved Birdfolk. Since silence was all he had to latch on to, he pulled it to him with both hands. "A ground-scraper in a province of gryphon slave catchers. With me as your dragon master, not one of those impure hybrid bastards will dare lay a talon on you or question your authority over my servants. Yes, yes," he said, his boastful arrogance punctuated by another loud bark of laughter. "So, don't look so forlorn, Overseer Benjamin Wren."

A hand wider than the span of his face slammed onto Ben's right shoulder.

He winced, unable to conceal the pain of having even a Dragonkin in human form lay a meaty hand on his person.

"Did that little touch hurt, Ben?"

The answer was obvious, but that wasn't the point of the question. Long, rough fingers dug into Ben's shoulder, pushing against delicate bones he'd rather not have broken again.

"So skinny and frail, you ground-scrappers. It has never taken much to snap one of you in two. Yet, despite God not blessing you with strength, size, flight—hell, much of anything physically useful at all, you make excellent servants." Tightening his grip and ripping a whine of protest from Ben, Master Gyzad grinned and nodded as if literally pressing his point into Ben elevated him to godlike status. "Don't think I don't know what your quiet acquiescence means. Birdfolk may be weaker than Dragonkin, but you are more intelligent and resourceful than most. Don't get any ideas into that bird brain of yours of escaping when traveling between towns."

Master Gyzad's thumb pressed hard against Ben's clavicle. He had no doubt the dragon shifter's instinct was to break the bone as an indisputable example of his predatory might over a weaker creature. But self-restraint or common sense stopped him from injuring his new overseer. Ben might indeed be a flightless bird, a damn ground-scraper, as the Dragonkin had taken to calling bird shifters like him. Still, even a physically weaker shifter traveled faster in their animal form.

"Mother wouldn't like it if I made it difficult for you to travel. She wants us both in Pelduth Neck in a week, and I'll be damned if I carry you on my back." With a hard squeeze and then a shove that would surely leave a bruise, Master Gyzad released Ben.

He wanted to breathe a sigh of relief. No, he wanted to gather his family and fly them far away from there. But Birdfolk did not fly. His wings were useless for anything as lifesaving as carrying his children away to freedom. But Ben had known no other life save this one, which did not stop him from dreaming about one day having his freedom.

I'll be a free man. A bird shifter owned by no one but myself. My family, too. We'll all be free. But first I must keep them safe. I ain't skinny or frail. How could I be when I've labored my entire life?

Still, there was no greater foe or hunter than the Dragonkin. Physically, Birdfolk did not compare.

Legs as weak as a nestling taking its first steps, Ben slid down the tree like the skinny, frail ground-scraper Master Gyzad had called him his entire life.

Master Gyzad's mocking laughter hurt his pride in a way his rough fingers had not. "I told Mother you would react this way. But not me. Distance from our mate and hatchlings means nothing to the Dragonkin. But to Birdfolk and Harpyfolk, you live for nothing but your flock. It's how the Harpyfolk of this beautiful nation were defeated so easily. You should've seen it back then. It was nothing but indefensible villages and acres upon acres of untamed and unclaimed land. They were doing nothing with all of this bounty."

Ben closed his eyes, uninterested in another one of Master Gyzad's distorted history lessons. In his mind's eye, he saw his lovely wife, Rit, surrounded by their five children. They turned and smiled at him, as always when he was the last to enter their cabin at the end of a grueling day. Their smiles propelled him from one day to the next, giving him hope in a way the Dragonkin's God never had.

There's nothin' to be done. I gotta sit with Rit and figure out how to prevent my move to Pelduth Neck from tearin' our family apart. Dragonkin has never cared about Birdfolk families. Master Gyzad reminded me of somethin' I shouldn't have forgotten. I won't forget again. Never.

Opening his eyes, Ben pushed to his feet, wiped the dirt from his pants, and stood to his full five-ten height. Nothing compared to the twelve-foot Master Gyzad, but size and physical strength did not make a person of consequence; their character did.

"Well, look at Overseer Ben. All grown up at the tender age of thirty-six. You'll need that spine when you come face-to-face with Pelduth Neck's gryphons."

Ben did not fear gryphons any more than he was afraid to die. But Master Gyzad and his mother, Mistress Essodel, knew Birdfolk well. As long as Rit and their children were owned by Mistress Essodel and resided in her aviary, Master Gyzad would be assured Ben would always return to his family. Because what did freedom matter when no one was around to share it with?

"I'll explain everything to my wife."

"Good, good. Don't forget to tell Rit you'll be my head man in Pelduth Neck."

"She'll be proud, as you said. So proud." Ben smiled, granting Master Gyzad what he craved—obedience, even when given with an invisible spoonful of sarcasm. Without waiting for his dragon master's permission, Ben strolled away from the old sweet gum tree and the even older Master Gyzad, and toward his family and home.

Little Araminta, or Minty, as the family called her, was only eighteen months old. Would she remember him after being away from home for weeks? Shaking off the dread, Ben picked up his pace and ran the rest of the way home.



“Bring them all the way inside, Rit. I want to see how much they have grown.”

Rit never liked the intrusive sound of a Dragonkin in her mind despite never knowing any other existence. What she despised even more, however, were times like these. Refusal had never been an option, not if she valued her life and those of her children. So, holding Minty close to her chest, Rit tightened her grip on seven-year-old Robert's hand, who, in turn, looped his free arm around Soph's waist, Rit's ten-year-old daughter.

“Come along,” she told the children, nodding to her two oldest daughters, Linah and Mariah, to follow. As they did each time they were summoned to Mistress Essodel's mountain, Linah's and Mariah's customary joviality shriveled like rotten fruit on a vine.

Few Dragonkin still resided in the mountains, but Mistress Essodel was from a bygone era, preferring her scales and fire to anything human and weak. Despite the voice in Rit's head, Mistress Essodel did not dwell at the mouth of the mountain, which would've made her command an easier task to complete. Instead, Rit and her children had to walk the long distance to reach a dragon who, if there was indeed a merciful god, would've died years ago. But no, Mistress Essodel coveted her life as much as she did her hoard.

“Momma,” Minty whispered against her neck. “Scared.”

So am I, baby, but I have no choice. I'm sorry.

“Don't want to.”

Minty did not cry or scream about being called before the ancient dragon, as her older siblings had. Rit hadn't scolded her children for acting instinctively. No more than she would admonish Minty for voicing her genuine fears.

Rit nuzzled the side of Minty's head, a natural response to the tightening of the arms around her neck and the legs that struggled to stay wrapped around a protruding stomach that, not too long ago, had kept Minty safe and warm.

“I know you're scared. But we talked about this before we left home. Do you remember what I said?”

Minty's head nod was answer enough.

Fire-smoothed limestone surrounded them on all sides. It was an unnatural look. Rit couldn't begin to fathom how long it had taken Mistress Essodel to transform the mountain into a home suitable to her exacting tastes.

“Good.” Rit shifted to her left, checking on Robert, who reminded her so much of Ben in his steadfast bearing and intense silence that her only son was Ben Junior in all but name.

“I'm fine, Momma,” Robert said, sensing her eyes on him. “I won't cry this time. I promise.”

“Me either,” Minty said, letting Rit know she remembered their conversation, too.

“Do your best. But, if you can't keep it in, try to cry quietly.”

“Yes, Momma,” Minty and Robert said in soft, sweet voices captured by the limestone and tossed back at them in a gentle reverberation.

They plodded along, Rit acutely aware of Linah's and Mariah's barefooted steps behind her, just as she was of their heavy exhalations.

“Momma?”

“I know, Mariah,” she said to her twelve-year-old, “I see them.”

“B-but . . .”

“Don't look,” Linah told Mariah.

“I'm tryin' not to, but . . .”

Linah blew out a deep breath, a sign of her own unsettlement. “Give me your hand and close your eyes. You, too, Soph. I'll lead and make sure you don't step on anything. Or anyone. We'll walk around the bits and—”

“Linah,” Rit said, but not fast enough to prevent the first part of her sentence from slipping free and reminding the younger children that the path to Mistress Essodel was paved with, as Linah was about to say, bits and pieces of spat-out cow and Birdfolk remains.

“Yes, ma'am. Enough said about that. I got them.”

“Thank you.”

Linah is only fifteen, but she's had to grow up fast, just as I did. Just as we all must, but maybe my Minty will have a little more time to be a child. Carefree and unbothered by the ugliness that is our lot in life.

“Except for me and Linah, everyone should keep their eyes closed. Nothin' is important to see until we get to Mistress Essodel.”

That wasn't true because this mountain portion revealed an ugly, enduring truth about Dragonkin like Mistress Essodel and her offspring. Not only did much of the mountain floor contain evidence of Mistress Essodel's disregard for the lives of Birdfolk to the point of permitting baby dragons to feast on any unfortunate slave, but the walls served as a morbid reminder of what happened to slaves who deigned to escape.

Whereas the earlier parts of the mountain were a mix of browns, blues, greens, and yellows, the walls in this section were scorched black with human- and bird-shaped indentations.

Now that Linah is fifteen and capable of runnin' away and survivin' on her own until she reaches a slave-free state, Mistress Essodel wants to remind her, remind all of us, what will happen if we try to escape. No one has ever escaped Mistress Essodel and her sons.

The sights above and below sickened Rit, but she trudged along because no good options existed.

“Ah, there you are. I expected you sooner, Rit. Did you encounter one of my grand-hatchlings on the way?”

That sentence was meant to frighten my children because we both know her son's latest brood of dragon babies only visits when Minister Breembat does on Sundays. And they've already come and gone, thank God.

Rit halted at the entrance to Mistress Essodel's lair. It opened into a cavern that extended four hundred feet east to west and double that length south to north. Even in the mountain's depths, light beamed inside but not from the yellow glow of the morning sun.

Piles of glistening treasure filled the cavernous space. Perhaps greed and power drove Dragonkin to obsess over collecting anything they deemed beautiful, unique, and valuable. Rit couldn't understand such a drive, especially since it led to the near extinction of the indigenous Harpyfolk tribes of this country.

No matter how many times she saw Mistress Essodel, Eater of Bravehearts, Champion of the Deathlord, The Dark Dygen, Eternal Fire, as she liked to remind Rit, not that she knew what a dygen was, the sight of the tremendous scaly beast never ceased to take her breath away.

At 164 feet, with a wingspan equally long, few modern-day Dragonkin could rival Mistress Essodel's size. Like her oldest offspring, Master Gyzad, most dragon shifters stopped growing at seventy-five feet, which was still a lot of dragon to contend with.

Mistress Essodel did not perch atop her hoard of treasure, shined to demanding perfection, but was curled around the piles of gold goblets, coins, and priceless jewels.

The obscene majesty of so much consolidated wealth against the backdrop of such a menacing creature was a disturbing visual display.

But Rit had stood before Mistress Essodel many times, and this day would not mark her final occurrence because the dragon collected more than jewels.

She stepped forward with her children, wanting this face-to-face meeting over as quickly as possible but knowing Mistress Essodel would not be rushed.

"Good day, Mistress Essodel. I've come as commanded."

"As you shall always. Why do your young ones not look upon me? Tell them to do so now."

"No, Momm—"

"Hush and do as our mistress says," Rit whispered to Minty. Then, "All of you," Rit added in a louder tone, infusing her directive with as much comfort as she could offer them.

One by one, the children complied, including Linah, who had slammed her eyes shut the second Mistress Essodel had come into view. Now, every member of the Wren family, except for Ben, stood wide-eyed before Mistress Essodel, their owner.

"Well done, Rit. You and Ben make beautiful fledglings. Tell me their names and ages."

Rit bobbed her head in acknowledgment, then proceeded to reintroduce her children to Mistress Essodel, knowing the dragon had forgotten nothing, least of all the slaves that had added to her hoard.

"This is Linah, my eldest. She turned fifteen last month." Rit handed Minty to Linah, who met her gaze with banked tears before going to her sister. She continued the introductions, standing behind each child as she said their name and age. "After Linah is Mariah at twelve, followed by Soph at ten and Robert at seven." Returning to Linah's side, she placed a soothing hand atop Minty's woolly hair. "And this little one is Minty. She is—"

"One year and six months in March. They are lovely, indeed. But I want to know how much lovelier they can become."

She means their value. Today was unavoidable. I'd hoped for more time before Soph would be expected to work like me and her older sisters.

"Show me," Mistress Essodel demanded, her voice a low hiss of power in Rit's mind. Lifting her head from the cave's floor, her slight movement caused an avalanche effect. Shiny gold coins slid downward until they joined others already at the base of her body.

Rit stripped off her dress, turned her back to Mistress Essodel, and smiled at her children. "I know we haven't done this much, but you know what to do."

Barely. Only children ten and younger were permitted to transform without permission of a Dragonkin. Birdfolk who were Minty's age couldn't shift at all, making them "useless" to a dragon with Mistress Essodel's taste until they turned five and could perform the act. Until then, her youngest was safe from the Dragonkin's obsession with Birdfolk like the Wrens. Unfortunately, with an uninspired color palette, boys like Robert were destined for harsh mines or plantation work.

"Like Mistress Essodel's gold coins, you have two sides. Unlike her coins, neither side is visible at the same time. To show our other side, we must transform or shift our shape from one version of ourselves to the other. It ain't difficult. You just need to hold the image of your other self in your mind. Hold it and see yourself becomin' it on the outside."

To demonstrate, Rit closed her eyes, not because her transformation required the act, but because, for young shifters, limiting external stimuli aided the process. Still, she conjured an image of her avian form, a lithe body with multicolored wings.

She didn't break apart. No painful cracking of bones, realigning of organs, stretching of the skin, or any number of physical changes enslaved children assumed occurred with the shift before being taught the truth by a parent or community elder. Rit simply relaxed, relishing the pleasure of being permitted to take bird form. The sensation of air she'd never felt under her wings washed over her, caresses so strong she trembled from the breeze of euphoria that was her avian form. But her jubilation was as short-lived as the feeling of flying through the sky was nonexistent.

When Rit returned to herself, she stood as a five-three Sankofa bird native to the Birdfolk continent of Sika, which, ironically, in the language of her ancestors, meant gold. A bright green plumage led to wings the color of a ripe dragon fruit tipped in the peach-pink of a juicy papaya.

"Gorgeous," Rit heard Mistress Essodel say, a tendril of speech across her mind as if the dragon hadn't meant to project her thought.

Rit agreed with Mistress Essodel on little, but she did her assessment of the majesty of Sankofa Birdfolk. Yet, her life, and the lives of the millions of Sankofa stolen from their homeland, would've played out differently had Mistress Essodel and her ilk not thought them "gorgeous."

But the cruel hands of fate could not be turned back in Sankofa's favor, so Rit pushed away thoughts of what could have been. Instead, she continued instructing her children in a way the Dragonkin could not. For all their might, the Dragonkin could not speak aloud in their animal form, and their telepathy, while unique to them, was limited by proximity and the number of recipients of their message.

Yet, Birdfolk physiology permitted verbal communication in both forms, so Rit told her children to “Envision your Sankofa form — vibrant feathers, a long, thin beak, eyes capable of seein’ far and near, toes forward facin’, and talons sharp. See your bird. Become the bird.”

While Mistress Essodel may have found Rit’s form attractive, the mother in her couldn’t have been prouder as first Linah, then Mariah, and finally Soph transformed. Their chest feathers ranged from the same emerald green as Rit’s to Ben’s sapphire blue. Whereas her wings were a mix of peach and pink, her children’s wings combined blue and green in a vivid gradient effect. Striking, but without the kaleidoscope of colors the most enchanting Sankofa birds were known to have.

“Well done,” Rit praised her children, her voice chirpier than her human one.

“Yes, well done, indeed. Quite the investment. You have added nicely to my hoard. This is the future. Beauty and entertainment.” With a flick of a wing, Mistress Essodel shoved mounds of her expensive jewelry aside, creating a ripple effect that shook the mountain floor. *“Show me why I am the smartest Dragonkin in this state and beyond. Show me why those abolitionists will always live on the fringes of society, their ideals naïve and their pockets wastelands where influence goes to die.”*

I’ve never met an abolitionist. One wouldn’t dare show their face on Mistress Essodel’s plantation. But Birdfolk have been enslaved by the Dragonkin for hundreds of years. I don’t think we will ever be free if we haven’t gotten our freedom in all that time. But I can still hope, right?

Mistress Essodel shoved even more of her finest gemstones out of her way, and Rit knew what would come next.

She turned to Robert while gently using her wing to push a silently sobbing Minty to her older brother. “Go home and take your sister with you.”

“B-but, Momma. That’s a far walk back through the mountain. It’s dark, Minty is crying, and . . .”

Rit did not have time for her son to be a typical seven-year-old. Mistress Essodel only saw her slaves’ children as another piece of her collection, not people with feelings, except for the emotion of fear, which she took much pleasure in evoking.

“Do as I say. Go home. Follow the same path we took, and you and Minty will be fine. There’s nothin’ else in these mountains but us and Mistress Essodel.”

She hated sending her children home alone, but the trek was safer and shorter than staying for what was to come. Rit didn’t want her youngest to see what would happen next, although the aftermath wouldn’t be much prettier. Still, once they saw her and their sisters again, they would be in human form, the transformation hiding some of the brutality done to them.

Robert cried neither silently nor briefly, but with racking sobs that had Rit wanting to wrap him in her wings and fly him away to safety. But the power to do either was beyond her, no more than she could shield her daughters from Mistress Essodel’s intentions. Rit wasn’t a violent woman. She’d never struck anyone, least of all her children. Yet, each time she was summoned before Mistress Essodel, by herself or, worse, with her growing children, she wished she had the might to bring the mountain down on the dragon’s head, crushing her under its unforgiving weight.

But, like Robert, she possessed nothing that could alter her circumstances. So, just as he took Minty's little hand and walked away, Rit returned her attention to Mistress Essodel.

"From this day forward, Rit, I expect you to bring your fledglings to me as soon as they can transform. The ones here resemble you and Ben too much for me to keep claiming originality. The colors, while lovely, do not represent the spectrum of the Sankofa. Perhaps the other two will diversify my offerings. Only time or more nestlings will tell." Mistress Essodel rose to her full height while seated on her hind legs. The spikes on her back grazed the mountain wall behind her. *"Now, dance until I tell you to stop. Dance until I've been entertained. Then, and only then, will I permit you to stop. When that is done, when you have served your lady well, I will take my feathers, for everything you have belongs to me. Now dance!"*

Rit danced. So, too, did her daughters. They danced and danced and danced.

When they finished, when numb toes and trembling legs had them crashing to the ground, they had no energy left to protest when a shifted Mistress Essodel plucked every colorful feather from their body.

Every.

Single.

One.