

## Journal of a Traveller

It was during the end of the winter that I set out. The sun was low in the sky that morning, casting a mixture of red, orange, and yellow over the snow that yet remained to be molten. The tundra that was my home grew limited and stale. My heart ached for adventure, travel, and new frontiers, as I braided the hair that rested on my shoulders. Throughout the winter, I had let my hair grow. It shielded my neck from the cold. But now that spring approached, I braided it in order to limit the length. This was customary to my people, at the time. But it was out of practical value that I decided to braid it, not necessarily out of custom. My hair was brown like the bark of a tree, illuminated by the warm summer light. My soul filled with wanderlust, I left the safety and security of my lodging. It was not like I had no decent life at home. On that tundra, I had sturdy walls, a warm bed, and all the food I could ever need. But the deer and wolves that inhabited these plains started to feel too familiar. As powerful and feral as these creatures could be, I longed for true, mystical might. The kind that you could only find far from home. The kind that would make you stare in awe, even when it charged to kill. That was what I sought, and I would not find it on these plains. But making such a journey would be a fool's errand on foot. The places that I wanted to visit were hard to reach. And I would surely die of natural causes before I could ever have visited all of them. That was why I took Coco. He was a truly magnificent creature. Wings that spanned wide and great, feathers dark brown, bordered by white and a softer, near orange, brown. Yet his beauty could be mistaken for neglect. A predator of the skies was what he was. But Coco and I shared a special bond. Many a traveller had heard the stories of 'The Wolf Taming an Eagle'. As much as I enjoyed these rumours, I respected the friend that I had made. We did not share a bond of master and servant. It was a bond of friendship, forged by mutual respect. You see, we fought on that mountain top. It was only when I proved myself master of the grounds and snow below, and he stated himself as lord of the skies above, that we ceased our battle, and set out together. He has never left my side, ever since.

He did not prefer to stick around these plains for long. He preferred the mountain ranges and highlands. So, when I had need of him, I would whistle a call. And he always responded. That morning I looked up at the sky, letting the cold surround me as the snow started to land on my face. I took a deep breath, watching that cloud of warmth rise up and disappear into the blue and white. I then readied my hand in front of my mouth and breathed in, before letting out that whistle. A song that would draw him in. And there he was, soaring high above the clouds at first, he started to glide down. As if he had been anticipating my call, he approached, casting a heavy gust of wind onto the ground below him as he landed, flapping his wings to keep his balance as he came to a stop. I walked up to him and stroked my hand over his beak, whispering a greeting to him, before rising up onto his back. I knew that he could carry me. He was many times stronger than I was, after all.

Now this is where I will stop telling the story of my own. Instead, I will let the creatures of the wild do the rest of the talking.

## Scales of the Deep

The first creature I found, was after about a day of flying. The water stood high and flooded most of the beaches. But it was not by the shore that I found this beast. This specific creature made up for in strength and prowess, what he lacked in subjective beauty. I noticed this one when I was flying closer to the waves, on Coco's back. I spotted a glistening underneath the waves. Mesmerised by the sudden appearance, I glanced down, only to be greeted by a different kind of glisten. What I had seen earlier was the mirroring of the light, by one of the serpent's many blue scales. I was caught off-guard when the second glimmer originated from a whiter surface. A sharp, jagged fang suddenly shot towards me, out of the water, as the creature tried to rip us down into the ocean with him, his domain. But Coco was faster in realisation than I was. Coco shot up into the sky, out of reach, as the serpent's jaws clashed back onto each other, giving you that empty, growling feeling in your stomach. Not because of hunger, but because of the terror that filled my heart. I came to my senses quickly, though, when we were well out of range. The serpent had lifted his head out of the water, still making a snarling noise at us from below, before coiling back down into the dark abyss of the ocean. Coco dived back down, reading my thoughts. One sighting was not enough. I had to witness that again. The true terror and fear that this creature was able to cast upon us, was more than any spell could ever achieve. Coco cruised just above the waves, before quickly flying back up, when I spotted bubbles below his wings. Coco flew us straight up, towards the clouds above, when I looked back down, to see the snake's jaws clasp back to each other again, just barely missing the feathers on Coco's tail. I had that small moment to look into his eye. A burning rage in the green iris, is what I saw. A burning rage of pure power and anguish. I saw no cruelty in his soul that day. We provoked him by crossing his waters, and it was out of honour and principle that he assaulted us.

I understood this, from my own times as a warrior. Home is a sacred place. And when you make many enemies, both seen and unseen, due to stature, you risk your own security. And when that same safety is violated by someone out for, maybe, glory, or riches, it is upon your honour that you must show the world that you are not to be trifled with. That you will bite back if someone violates your ideals, principles, and security. I saw that same kind of virtue in his eye that day. Sadly, it was also the last time I would see him. I could just barely make out the many coils of his body, as he disappeared back into the depths as soon as we left his territory. The skies belonged to us, but the seas were his. I could respect that. And so, we left him to be with the waves, as we ascended back up the clouds. Back to our own domain.

## Antlers in the Night

The next creature that I found, was very much the opposite of the serpent in the deep. Where this animal lacked strength and power, it compensated greatly with its beauty and grace. Where the previous beast was terrifying, this one was enchanting. And I found myself staring for many moments. I found this beauty at night, when the full moon stood high in the sky, casting silver over the treetops of that forest. These woods stretched on for many hills, far beyond the horizon. And though many would argue that nothing lasts forever, the locals were convinced that this forest was endless. But I was not here for the culture behind it. My fair share of people, I have had. This was about nature. For this part of my journey, I left Coco by the edge of the forest. I understood that I did not have to request for him to wait for me. He was loyal enough to stick around. And so, I entered the forest that night, on my own. And dark as the deck of leaves made this place, the rays of silver that escaped between the treetops made for a wonderful sight. I nearly had a skip in my step when I passed over roots and fallen branches. Winter had long since passed, and I found myself halfway into the next spring. The perfect time to explore such a wonderous place.

I found the creature in an open field. Deep in the forest, there was a clearing. The trees parted to make way for a pond, with a great oak standing in the middle of the field, its branches hanging over the water below. At first, all I saw was the oak, already taken aback by the sheer size of it. It was when I walked onto the clearing, that I spotted that magnificent animal. A stag with antlers the size a crown only fitting for a king of the forest. His hide was white like snow, almost shimmering in the moonlight. And his antlers were luminescent, glowing brightly in the darkness. His eyes peered at me from behind the oak, as he slowly revealed the rest of his body. I believe he realised his own enchanting nature, as he did not run away from me, instead watching me stop in my tracks as soon as he appeared. His irises were hazel, his pupils grand, like a true window into his soul, in the darkness. And as we stood there, staring at each other, a thousand fireflies ignited themselves and rose up from the grass below our feet. They flew and hovered little more than a meter above the ground, covering the clearing in a gentle golden glow. A true king to the forest, that was what the stag was. He seemed so natural, compared to the horror of the sea serpent, yet his beauty was unmatched in all of the animal kingdom. At least, to me it was. I had half a mind to carefully walk up to him and attempt to pet the fur of his head. But as I respected the serpent's territory, I forced myself to respect this creature's purity. Surely a godsent if there was anyone up there at all.

I spent another ten minutes there, taking in the scene, which I would only get to see once in my entire life. I was in the exactly right place, at the exactly right time. I could not have timed this better if I tried. And as much as part of me wanted to go back to that moment, as the sun rose, and the stag left me, I treasured that memory. An experience such as this, it has the capability to change people. It was the very incarnation of beauty and purity in nature, with the perfect place to be called his home. After that day, I did not so much care if that forest was endless or not. But I sure did hope so. With all my heart and soul.

## Winged Grace

The final creature that I encountered during that specific journey, was more or less an indirect combination of my earlier encounters, but unlike the situation with the Reaper and the Spider Queen, I would get a chance to state my case, before getting assaulted. This creature was both terrifying and stunningly beautiful. And now, finally, I had encountered a lady of the sky. For many years I expected Coco to be the most amazing, winged creature to roam the skies. And though I could never even hope to repay his friendship and loyalty, for which I would be forever grateful, he could not match this encounter. And for a few moments I wondered if this encounter would end well, in the way that the previous ones had ended. I wondered if I would walk away from this one with all four of my limbs. But I had Coco to back me up, and I knew that he would not let me go down without a fight. If push came to shove, I would send Coco away. After all, he was the one of us with wings. I could not ask him to stick around when escape could be so easily achieved. But fortunately, that would not be necessary. The creature I met in those mountains, between many frosted peaks, was the very thing that inspired bards and poets to these tales of adventure and glory. I could never have hoped to find something like this. But deep inside, I had always wished for it. And maybe, subconsciously, I did look for it. In that cave, in the side of one of the peaks, a dragon mother slept, guarding four eggs. Her scales, unlike the sea serpent's, were crimson, like the fire in her heart. And though the base was that deep red, the edges of the scales grew brighter, almost orange, like embers all over her body. When I entered that cave, she was asleep. I had noticed the snoring, but I had expected it to be a bear, or maybe even a troll, of sorts. What I found instead, was this reptilian flyer. When I entered the cave, and noticed her, I froze. A dragon, or a wyvern, it was hard to tell, for she never got up. Instead, she did wake from her slumber, opening those big, threatening eyes. Eyes as red as her scales, peered at me from the darkness. And maybe she did ready an attack, ready to set me and everything in the area ablaze, if it meant protecting her kin for yet another day. It was only when I raised my hands, away from the blade on my hip, that she calmed down. Her movements slowed, and the glow that had settled in her throat, started to fade again. I could see the flames leaving her chest, settling deep inside, once more. I looked at the eggs, as I thought. With the final two creatures, I granted them my respect. But from this reptile, I yearned for her respect instead. Hopefully not through combat, like I had experienced with Coco. But maybe through a gesture of faith. Dragons were noble in nature. Like many animals, they could be mistaken for being cruel. But they were not. If anything, it was blue blood that coursed through her veins. And maybe that was what I had to acknowledge. The way of the warrior is not always to fight. Sometimes, to bend the knee, requires more power than anything else. And that was what I did. I knelt down on the stone underneath my feet, bowing my head down before her. And when I bended the knee, the fire in her eyes settled, like her body had done, and she closed her eyes, before slowly lowering her head in return. Though she continued to shield her children, she showed no further hostility, which was more than I could have hoped for. I left that cave again with my life, and the respect of a mountain queen. My journey was completed. The road home remained.

## Final Steps

The way back to my home, on the frozen plains, was quiet and peaceful. It would cost me a week, in total, to return to from whence I came. Most of those days, Coco and I soared above the clouds, as I watched the sun rise over my head, and set behind my back. And sometimes we left the deck of clouds, to witness nature below. Mountain ranges, plains, forests, oceans, shores, not at all in that order, and some more than others. Maybe that dragon had been the queen of the mountain, but Coco still remained as lord of the skies, back home. And having seen these creatures, it reminded me of how Coco and I met. Coco and I met in no different way. By accident, by being in the same place, at the same time. I wondered, if I had not met Coco, would I maybe have tamed a dragon? Or a sea serpent? That very stag, perhaps? Yet I doubt that anyone would have saved me from that cavern if I had not met him, or from a fiery death in a different realm, perhaps. I would have it no other way. Coco was more important to me than anything I owned or possessed. I would burn my house down if that were the only way to keep him with me. But luckily, that would not have to happen. Not yet at least. And this would definitely not be the last journey I would take. These would maybe the last steps of the one I had experienced right now, but they would not be the last steps ever. Not a chance. There was a whole new world to be witnessed and mapped, down below. And maybe I would not be the one to see it all, but I was definitely going to try. This journey has been truly special, and exactly what I asked for, upon departure. I could not have asked for better success. I took a deep breath above the clouds, on the last day of the second week, even though the air was stale so far up. I had gotten used to it. And as we descended, there it was. My humble home, on the tundra, far away from any major cities, yet the closest I would ever get to a home that was befitting to me. Once again, I would have it no other way. I watched the house grow from the size of just barely an ant, all the way to one fitting for a human. And as my friend came to a halt again on the ground, settling in the grass outside my home, I left his back again. As always, I walked up to his head, and stroked his beak, whispering my gratitude to him. Without him, this journey would not have been possible. It would have taken me years, just to finally get to the stag, even if I knew where it was. And the serpent, he would have swallowed me whole if I had gone by ship. My feathered companion, I had much to thank him for. But I believe he understands. And as I released him again, watching him depart back to his home in the highlands, and mountains, I enjoyed the gentle spring warmth on my face, even here on the tundra. When Coco was out of sight, I retreated back into my home, where I took out my journal, settling in front of the fireplace that had long since rested in ashes. I took some of the firewood that remained and placed it in the opening, igniting it with the help of some kindling and flint. That was where I wrote of my encounters with these wonderful creatures. I will never be able to record the full extent of what it means to behold them in the wilderness of nature, but I can at least try. Here I will end my record. I hope that whoever finds this, will find my stories to be as special as I believe them to be as of now.

A journey passed,

Wolf