

## Flop

“It was the most horrific sight I ever witnessed. A tiny fist gripping more bone than flesh. One living finger melded to the corpse beside it. Tenebrea forgive me, I would have to cut the babe to disconnect them.”

-Midwife report

Eliya killed her twin in the womb. He'd been a stillborn, deformed and emaciated, part of his skull exposed for her mother, hysterical and screaming, to find. The stories said her mother wailed for three days, locked in her room, holding its corpse while her baby girl smiled for whomever was willing to hold her.

She didn't know if these tales were true. Her mother refused to speak about it and neither did she have the heart to ask. What she did know was that the people around her; her neighbors, her classmates, her acquaintances, her enemies... they knew the tale and believed in it. They believed, they feared, and they shunned.

“The surface world is as wrought with scum and decent folk as our own home,” scavenger Davies remarked.

At nine-years-old, she'd yet to see the sun, but scavengers like Davies had, their ventures above ground the only means of fresh food for her people. The central market spread around them, situated in one of the bigger caverns Aswan had to offer. Eliya hated being dragged along

on these trips. Her papa, blinking pitch black, white-less eyes at her, claimed it would 'keep the wild out of her, to be around normal folk.'

“Not in front of *her*,” papa warned. The word ‘her’ spoken like ‘it’ rather than ‘she.’ Eliya mirrored her papa’s scowl, blinking back hard. Davies glanced at her, shaking his head in disapproval, but refraining from saying anything. All the scavengers of the surface world came back ‘addled by the sun,’ papa claimed, but Davies was the best so his ‘eccentricities’ could be excused to some extent. There were some lines even Davies wasn’t willing to cross with her papa, Trent Relent, the most powerful merchant around. Her being one of them.

Her Dokk ‘clacked’ under her. She let it bite at the end of her dress until a sharp sting told her Flop had gone for her toes. The unbalanced, disfigured creature keened happily when she kneeled down to sit beside him. She smiled down at him fondly. He was no larger than her two hands together. But pride filled her at knowing it was all her own creation.

Her people used to create dragons. They manifested darkness and wove it into life forms fit for the very earth to tremble under; hordes of fairies, groups of griffins, whatever the mind could imagine, what the strength a person’s darkness measured could come to life.

Until they’d been banished.

Eliya was an outcast among outcasts, living among a human race thrown thousands of feet underground and locked away to rot in the caverns of Aswan. The Lantis, children of the god of death, had been denied the right to walk along the surface of the earth for many generations now. To dwell in darkness for all eternity until they caused their own extinction through violence and cannibalism, at least the surface dwellers hoped that would be the case. Without the children of light, darkness could only bring life into existence in the form of boneless, skinless creatures, terminally ill from birth.

“I heard Owen’s Dokk was given actual life,” Papa murmured, glancing down at her own like it was a disease. Unfit as she was. “The boy’s father is exceptionally talented at weaving darkness into being.”

“Nah,” Davies told him, “father didn’t have anything to do with it. It was the mother.”

She could practically hear the smugness in his voice and the smoldering anger in her papa’s silence. Women were considered weak, their ability to manipulate and create from darkness nil, especially when compared to the males of Aswan. Their purpose was to breed an army, a population driven to military living, in order to reinstate their race to the surface world. To remind the world that they may be banished, but they were far from dwindling into nothingness. The Dokk, whose core were crafted from darkness, were creatures only half alive, waiting for the surface dwellers to finish the job with skin and bone. But true life had not been created between the warring factions in hundreds of years. And now the Lantis used their Dokk as weapons.

“Dying,” Davies continued, “...and still, she manages to create a Dokk more resistant to their nature than anyone else, it’s lasted a year already, can you believe that?”

“Dokks don’t last more than a few months, at most, rumors must have twisted it into useless dribble,” papa said stiffly.

Words tumbled out of Davies mouth. Words that made her shy away from her papa.

“Rumors, huh? I know some other rumors you seem to hold dear to your heart.”

Papa's skin, milky white, darkened to grey. Davies seemed to know, seconds too late, he'd taken a step in the 'gee, don't you want to exile yourself?' direction. She put her hands behind her back to hide their tremor.

Adults always whispered loudly. They pretended like they didn't want anyone to hear them, but she'd learned it was the opposite. They wanted everyone to hear what they had to say. People wanted to hurt her, but they didn't want to get in trouble for it. So when they whispered, she heard everything, every insult and rumor. Dark and filthy on their tongues, like when the soldier came home covered in grime and blood, not their own. Their words spilled over until she drowned in them, telling the same story; how a *girl* like her garnered so much talent in creation.

An infant, who'd drained her brother of his gift, until nothing remained. Insinuations of her stolen power alluded to her being unnatural and more of a thing than human. It brought many a people of different natures together under one common cause. At tables. In alleys. In long forgotten caverns. In public haunts. Within institutions and outside of them. It was not often, after all, that one of the most powerful families in Aswan allowed for a *mistake* to be known.

"I misspoke," Davies finally said.

"You spoke," papa snapped, as if *that* was all the offense needed.

"Twenty percent discount on this month's supplies?"

The man tried for an easy going smile, but her papa continued his unrelenting stare. He shrugged as if to say, 'well, I tried, what more do you want from me?' Her father, in turn, folded his arms in front of him.

"Thirty," Davies sighed.

Her father made an agreeable noise and she, certain that there would be nothing unfortunate directed her way, ignored them.

She turned her attention back to Flop, adjusting the long red scarf around his neck. The gift had been from Triad before he left, part of his uniform, for her to hold onto. The Dokk she created with the image of a bird in mind, had been something else the scavenger's talked about frequently; tiny animals with body parts that helped them fly. She only knew of the bat's wings, but her mother usually pulled her away before she could get a good look. Her attempts at creation left the 'bird' with floppy things on either side. They were too thick, Davies had told her gently, like palms of one's hands rather than the light, thin workings of a wing. Davies had promised to sneak her one down though, next time he went up, so that she could see what he meant.

Flop made a very loud 'squack' noise as it toppled over. She righted him, but the Dokk squirmed and yelled in a strange, strangled voice. She should have made his voice prettier. One that would sound more like a flute. Cheery. She needed cheery.

Sharp eyes turned her way.

"Eliya, stop playing with your monster, go to your mother," Papa commanded.

She did not bother to look in the direction of the women several feet away, she could practically feel the flinch her mother gave at her husband's words. Eliya stayed where she was, kneeling on the ground, eyes averted.

"Did you hear me?"

"I don't want to."

"I wasn't asking."

"Then you're being rude."

She can't say the smack to the back of her head was unexpected, though the hit still brought unwelcome tears to the surface. She stubbornly kept her eyes cast down, knees locked, fingertips dragging in the dirt to keep her balance. Her hair, hopefully, hiding her trembling lips.

“Move, *Nex*, before I am forced to do something I will regret.”

She stilled at the name. Her insides icing over as it left her father's lips. A name children in her class whispered, that adults muttered as she passed, one that sometimes left even her mother's lips when the woman thought her far off.

*Death.*

She scooped Flop up. The deformed bird squeaked up at her through a beak too small for its body. It wiggled in excitement, causing a fond smile to stretch across her lips. Flop was her friend. Flop wanted her near.

She scurried to her mother's side. She wished Triad was here. She wanted a hug really badly, but the tense body beside her would offer no relief to the squirming in her belly or the stinging in her eyes, even if she was brave enough to chance it. She was alone.

Something hit her hand. She looked down, long strands of black hair falling onto the squirming figure in her hands. She gasped as she realized she was holding too tightly onto him. He had pecked her.

“Sorry,” she whispered.

“What are you mumbling for, Eliya? A lady must speak confidently, as if she knows exactly what is going on at all times. Speak up if you must speak at all,” her mother lectured, though she seemed to do it absentmindedly, seeing as her eyes and attention never diverted from the fellow merchant's wife she spoke with before she'd wandered over.

“I was talking to my Dokk.”

A grimace turned her mother's lips downwards, adding wrinkles to a face worn down by children and heavy makeup. Her body turned slightly, the woman's back facing towards Eliya with as much force as the stone walls that surrounded them all.

*Stupid, she was so stupid.*

Why couldn't she just leave it alone? Why did she have to mention her Dokk? Why did she have to open her big, stupid mouth? She brought her fingers along Flop's back, the little deformed bird whining like a dog. She'd gotten that wrong too. Apparently they only chirped.

The first time she'd jumped off of a cavern's cliff, she'd been three-years-old. Her mother's shriek had echoed after her, mingling in chaotic symphony with her own delighted laughter. Her Dokk at the time, her first creation, had possessed puny batlike wings incapable of holding up a rather large toddler. They'd dropped hard and fast, like a crippled baby bird in its first, and final flight.

Her father had leaped after her. His tendrils of shadow clawing at the wall, leaving long jagged gashes, and its hold rough as it wrapped around her. Her body had hit the shadow hard. Her baby Dokk had screamed and whimpered as it sunk into his shadow and ceased to exist. Her nose bloody, her first Dokk dead, and the arms of her father around her, are what brought on her sobbing fest that day.

*"Hush Nex!"*

His 'comfort' had only worsened her state. Her parents, when they found themselves displeased with her, let slip the name.

They were often displeased with her.

As they entered their home, papa and her mother disappeared quickly from her presence. The servants gave her a wide berth, she blew a raspberry at them as she cradled Flop. The little

creature attempting to duplicate the sound, but it coming out more as a wisp of air. Still, the attempt, made her smile.

Dokks could not speak until they were given official life. She didn't know why. Her teacher at the academy had told her and her classmates once, but the explanation was one she didn't understand. Something about a voice being connected to a soul or to the thing inside that allowed real thoughts to form instead of the mindless following of orders given during its initial creation.

Flop seemed more than capable of thinking for himself though. He explored and snuggled with her and followed her around. He was nice and loyal and chatty, he talked so much that the maids often complained about him, so how could anyone claim he didn't have life? That he didn't have ideas? They were silly adults and they just didn't understand. Flop was a real person... bird... whatever. He was real.

Eliya carried Flop into her private quarters. The Dokk peered up at her, his grating squeak seeming to ask, 'We play more?' She smiled, setting him down on the bed with care. He nestled into the covers, a little slower than before, his eyes roving over her with rapt attention.

"We'll play tomorrow," she promised.

Later that night she startled awake. Hacking breaths reached her ears. She launched herself upwards, hands scrambling to feel for something soft, familiar. But Flop was nowhere to be found. Her feet hit ground. She spun in search of the deformed bird so quick, she felt sick not just with worry, but dizziness.

"Flop?"

Meant to be quiet, but so loud. The name shrieking past her lips until it crashed without response against every wall. She grabbed at the blanket, yanking without thought, with a mind

numbing expectation. But not this time. No, no, not this time. Not *him*. Tearing fabric joined her panicked breaths and the fading sound of something... dying.

The bed stripped, still no Flop. She knocked into the side table as her feet stumbled backwards. Something squished beneath her foot. She snatched the pale appendix up as if burned. Whirling and kneeling at the same time, she avoided slamming her forehead into the table by a hairs width, eyes taking in the half melted creature looking up at her with fright and confusion. He crooned, voice cracking, trying to inch himself closer even when his efforts only caused one of his deformed wings to crack down the middle and ooze to the side.

She scooped him up as gently as possible, snuggling his being against her own, willing her darkness to strengthen him. The tendrils wrapped the little creature in its kind folds, but it did nothing to slow the pace of its death. She whimpered, rocking back and forth, as Flop shuddered and hacked.

Footsteps sounded down the halls.

Eliya paid no mind to the sound though, not even when they stopped at her door, nor did she look up when the frame moved sideways to reveal her papa standing at the entrance. She did, in fact, force her body backwards as he stalked across the room to hover over her. His large hand reached out and she screamed. She screamed until she was hoarse, until the roar settled down to a raging sob, to every vile insult she could think of; ‘Get back!’ ‘You can’t!’ ‘Not my friend!’ ‘You jerk!’ ‘You monster!’

Her papa had said nothing, until the last word slipped out. His entire presence remaining strangely calm in the face of her own wild temper and agony. His hand, when it reached out this time, was cautious and seemed almost caring. For a moment, it seemed as if he was going to place it atop her head, as if he was going to comfort her.

But then it moved downwards and wrapped around Flop, the large fingers managing to encircle the little deformed bird with ease. When he spoke next, papa's words consisted of the loud whisper she knew so well.

“We both know which one of us is the monster.”

With a gentle squeeze, Flop's sharp voice faded out with one final, fearful wail. Shadows and the darkness that was his core splashed against her chest and down her pants to land in a heap at her feet. Only the red, tattered scarf remained, pulled against her body like a lifeline. For a moment, it sat there, like a carcass, before sinking back into the darkness around them. As if he'd never existed at all. As if she hadn't spent months carefully putting him together, willing all her love and care into him, yearning for him to take shape so that she...

And now she was again.

All alone.

Papa's words and Flop's fear and her mother's silence, somewhere in the folds of the house, crumbled her into a ball of hurt. Her fingers found the floorboards, nails dragging along them, wood spearing tiny fingers with specks of red. She pulled and tugged, trying to dig her friend out, but he hadn't fallen into the floor, he had *disintegrated* into the air itself. Her mouth opened, she looked up at her papa, gesturing wildly at the floor, at his indifferent poise, the tiniest, almost pleased air encircling him the longer he watched her. In that moment, she felt as if she should want to claw his eyes out, to leave nothing but flesh ridden holes dangling beneath his lids. But the 'thump,' 'thump,' 'thump' was much too loud. Her insides had been carved out, her heart left a husk, beating minutely in insistent hallow drags, as empty as the floorboards before her. There was not a trace of Flop left.

She hugged herself, bitter, angry tears settling themselves strong in the corner, protesting anything that might resemble a fall, as if even they were unwilling to admit defeat to *them*. Her people. An outcast among outcasts. What would she give to be just a normal outcast? Davies words attacked her.

*“The surface world is as wrought with scum and decent folk as our own home.”*

A place where no one knew her. A place that hated her, but didn't recognize her. She blinked her eyes, the tears fading into half dried marks on her face. She would a monster, but not *the* monster. A monster with anonymity.

Later she would note that it was as if her papa was there and then suddenly wasn't. It was possible she'd gone into shock. Though she suspected something worse. A refusal to accept he'd been there, or had been a part of, her decision of freedom. Her mind had simply wiped him out of this moment in her life. Denial warranted caution for its self-delusion as much as acknowledgement for killing ones hope, and thus, ability to move forward. Moving too far in either direction denies one clarity in both.

She sat up. Her decision solidifying a half formed desire she'd not been able to identify until then; belonging. She could become a scavenger, addled by the sun, one among many. She could be anyone she wanted. She wouldn't be a Relent, daughter of merchants, nor would she be Nex the monster. Especially not Nex.

She would be Eliya...

Red caught her attention. Flop's little scarf. Crawling forward, her fingers clenched around the soft material. Shaking, she hugged it to her, willing all the strength from its small, ragged edges into herself, then brought it upwards to tie around her neck. The knot hung heavy there.

She would be Eliya Flop, the Scavenger, addled by the sun.