

## Under the Sapphire-Eye

By Uluscri

There was little Kal could focus on other than the grand oak. They did not understand how the others could roll past a thing so solid and ancient—a thing that seemed to breathe life into the forest around it while smothering most of the monstrous blue sky. Only *most*, though, for as hard as the broad leaves tried to dam the sapphire sea, some leaked through. It was a thin comfort from the consuming sense that the universe was watching. Something so insubstantial as that grand nothing was never meant to have color, and yet there it was, screaming down upon the earth.

Even the humans rode past with little regard for the oak—they who claimed to be great lovers of all life. They who had created Kal's people and many others as nothing more than work animals. As Kal looked up, they grew to envy the near-mindless beings rolling underfoot. Their purpose was to pick peaches so that humans could brag that their fruit was grown rather than manufactured.

The first evil that had been done to Kal's people had been granting them too much consciousness. Even so, it was an evil that allowed for greater things.

The humans were starting to stare, and Kal realized their thoughts had stopped them for some time. Not only were their looks saturated with confusion, but hints of fear and disgust played in their tiny eyes. Kal shifted the basket of peaches to a more comfortable grip, though all they ended up doing was tightening their hold on the woven grass. Their kind had been made to climb in the guts of the planet, not deliver peaches.

It was the last basket Kal needed to bring in, and then they could gladly go home. Flee from the sky.

The storehouse stood squat, but proud, at the end of a dirt trail cutting through a wide field. Trees ringed it—much too far to provide any cover. The vast eye opened above them.

Kal focused their unblinking eyes to the path. Their feet sunk into the dirt, and though it was no farther than an inch, the footsteps trailing behind brought an undercurrent of fear. There was no hiding in such a world, as though the ground itself was a clay tablet waiting to be read. It was all worth the horror, for greater things lay beyond the barrier Kal edged along. The field may have been wide as any gulf under the earth, but it was nothing unpassable.

The storehouse buzzed with electricity. Kal felt it sparkling from the circular lights fitted into the walls. Even being under the roof so briefly filled Kal with a sense of rightness, that that was what they had been made for. They hated it.

Footsteps shifted through the grass. A prickling went through Kal's soft form.

A human was there—the woman who oversaw the ones who worked. Red hair flowed straight from her head to her knees, framing a short blue form. She did not wear much, nothing more than a few loose scraps of cloth for all Kal cared or noticed.

What they did notice, however, was the *âshclet* perched on her shoulder. The strange creatures were one of several kinds of being that the humans seemed to favor, though Kal had never understood why. The purple creature had six legs and wings so film-thin, they were transparent through their rainbow sheen. How the things managed to fly, Kal did not know. Strangest about them were their bulging, beady eyes.

"Kal," Fechlys said, more a command than a greeting. "Walk with me."

Kal bristled at her tone. "Why?" they asked.

"Because I want to talk to you about why you're here." The *âshclet* fidgeted nervously from her shoulder. "If you're willing, of course."

Kal expected to find an unsettled air in her gaze, but found only calm curiosity. Despite Kal's purpose there, admiration came. Here was one who was not afraid of, disgusted by, or pitying of Kal's kind—a thing which was exceedingly rare.

*Perhaps this could be an opportunity*, Kal thought.

"Surely," Kal said. "Where do you want to go?"

"Back the way you came," Fechlys said, before striding out into the open field.

Kal hesitated at the storehouse door, then took the first stuttering step. The sharp blue grew above them, seeping its tendrils through the trees in its war against the horizon. Impossibly far above, so that the brief glance that Kal stole set their blood churning.

"Why do you shy from it?" the woman asked without turning back.

"The sky? It's an eye without a pupil. Something that sees, but with nothing to see through." A shiver crept through Kal. "I wonder how you aren't unnerved."

Fechlys shrugged and turned her head up. "Many think it's beautiful."

"Why?"

She thought on that for some time, then chuckled. "I don't know. It just is. Maybe it's the color."

Kal made a disappointed sound. Nothing to learn. *Perhaps there is no hope for us after all.*

"So you don't find it too bright out here?" Fechlys asked. "I thought your kind was made for low light."

There was that word again. *Made*. "My eyes can handle far brighter light than yours can. One of the few good things to come from being made."

Fechlys stole a half-glance over her shoulder, but said no more for some time. She led Kal to the ancient oak in the middle of the orchard, found a nearby boulder, and sat. Kal stayed standing over her.

"Why are you here?" she asked after more than a few breaths. "Not just on the surface, but working here of all places?"

Kal considered it for a moment, staring at the oak, but found no reason to lie. "I wish to learn how to live on the surface. See what joys there are to be found here. Most of your trades I've tried are little more than tedious. I mean to head for the capital soon."

The woman's brow rose. "But you seem to hate it here."

"I'm learning so that we can build better bodies for ourselves—ones capable of living here."

Fechlys breathed out. "My question is still the same. Why?"

That time, Kal answered without hesitation. "There must be more for my kind than darkness." They pointed a hand to the oak and rubbed the rest of their many hands together. "There is life here. True life, not the scraps you throw down there."

Fechlys nodded slowly. "That I can understand." After a moment, she tilted her head, startling the *âshclet* on her shoulder. "What if there is no space? It's beginning to run out even for us."

Kal froze and said nothing. The only sound was the rustling of leaves.

The woman whistled. "I see. So it would be war, then?" A thundering moment passed between the two of them, where the slightest motion may cascade into spilt blood. Kal was not a warrior, and truly wanted no death.

Thankfully, she spoke calmly instead. "Well, if it comes to that, I will gladly move out of your way."

Kal clicked in surprise. "Truly?"

"Yeah." She smiled. "Sounds like you have it worse than I do."

Kal had no words. A long silence settled in that forest, and for a time, it seemed the trees were reluctant to sway.