

I don't know where Kutter came from. He just flew down from the glare beyond the clouds, a menacing look on his avian face. His chrome-green feathers reflected the light seeping in through the treehouse window. I was drawing up an important treasure map. I didn't have the treasure, though.

Kutter's expression softened when he saw me there, sitting and ten years old.

"What are you?" Such a rude question, I often think.

"I'm a Michael," I answered. Whether I was an idiot or sarcastic, I can't remember. "What's your name?"

His scaly talons gripped the wooden floorboards. He peeled his feet from the wood and peered through the hole I called a window.

"I'm called Kutter."

It was then that I noticed his winged arms. The feathers ended in a sharp point... probably sharp enough to cut.

"So... what do you cut? You must be a really good chef if you can cut things like onions, tomat—"

"I think you misunderstand. 'Kutter' is not an English word. It comes from the language of my people."

His feathered back was still facing me. I returned to my cartographic activity.

"Long ago, we would fly to Earth frequently. Many people mistook us for birds, so much so that—" Kutter turned around and saw that I was no longer visibly paying attention.

Obviously, I was if I can remember what he said. But the birdman wasn't satisfied.

"Are you a child?" he asked. The question wasn't rhetorical or sarcastic.

"Um... yeah. I'm kind of a 'tween.' Well, not really."

Kutter sighed, and white feathers ruffled outward from beneath the green ones on his neck. "I thought you were an adult human. It's been a long time since any of the harpies have been to Earth."

"Harpies? Does that have anything to do with that instrument thing?" I mimed the action of playing a harp.

"What? No. Again, it's not an English word."

"Oh. Why are you on Earth anyway, if the harps — harpies — haven't been here for so long?"

"You don't seem like a very good listener, so pluck one of my feathers."

I was hesitant at first.

"Why?"

"You'll see," he said impatiently, but excitedly. "Here, take this loose one on my wing."

I gently pulled the reflective green feather from Kutter's outstretched arm. It felt much heavier than I'd ever have expected, and where I expected softness, rigidity surprised me.

"Now, prick your finger with it. Make sure to draw a little blood on the tip."

I took a step back.

"What! No! I don't want to do that. I hate when the doctor does that."

Kutter's neck feathers fluttered again.

"I imagine you feel it will hurt? It will not. Just lightly touch the end."

"Like this?"

I barely touched the end of the feather, and all of a sudden, its stem darkened to the color of blood, as if it had filled from my finger. It didn't hurt, but it did scare me. I dropped the feather. When I stooped to pick it up, I was no longer in my treehouse — at least it didn't seem like it.

Hundreds of harpies like Kutter soared in the sky or walked on land. Dozens were perched in enormous trees the size of skyscrapers. Young harpies giggled and chased each other in the underbrush, alternating between the ground and the air. I was in a forest, but it seemed like I was the size of a mouse. Each harpy was maybe seven or eight feet tall — Kutter himself was maybe six and a half — and the babies were four or five feet tall. There were alcoves cut into the bases of the gargantuan trees, some with markets set up and others that seemed to lead down into the ground via a spiral staircase. There was a chatter in the air, the sound of maybe thousands of harpies speaking in a language I could not understand. Each birdlike creature was zooming by so fast, I couldn't understand them even if they were speaking English. My young mind was racing, overloading on information. Suddenly my treasure map seemed like child's play.

"This is Althesia," Kutter said from somewhere I couldn't immediately see. His talons were the first thing I saw. He landed gently in front of me, both wings outstretched like he was Willy Wonka showing off his chocolate factory. "What do you think?"

My eyes were searching for something to latch onto that might be normal, something that I was used to.

"I— what— where did we—"

"We didn't go anywhere," Kutter said, then wrapped his wings around my head like he was shielding me from something. It was dim, but I could see the wooden floors of my treehouse at our feet. I gasped.

"We're still in the treehouse? But how?"

Kutter retracted his wings and the stunning illusion returned around us.

"When you gave your blood offering, I was able to share my homeland with you, but only a visual and auditory replica."

"You mean, I can't touch anything here?" I looked around at the hyper-realistic world that surrounded me.

"We are but mere ghosts to this world. Go, try to touch something."

The nearest object was a fifteen-foot pole that had signboards all along its height written in characters I didn't recognize. I placed my hand on the wooden pole, expecting it to feel rough, but instead I felt nothing. My hand passed through it as if it were a hologram.

"Everything you see here is a projection of my world in real time. It's not exactly teleportation, but it's pretty close. I can only bring visitors once they give a blood offering."

"I didn't really offer my blood," I said, still wrapping my head around how none of these trees or giant bird-people were physically there.

"Well, it doesn't have to be exactly 'willing.'" He inspected my face, which was no doubt a mixture of perplexed and entranced. "Would you like a tour? I am a guide, after all."

I agreed to a tour, on the condition that he would take me home by dinner, or my mom would start to worry. Plus, it was a school night, and I still hadn't started my homework. Kutter agreed, then revealed a harness that was somehow hiding under his feathers. I was meant to strap myself in on his torso as he flew in the air. Having never even been in a plane before, I

think my hesitation to fly in a precarious dog harness attached to a magical flying human-sized bird was warranted.

“You won’t fall,” Kutter said, in his soothingly impatient tone. “These straps are practically a part of me.”