



NICK ALIMONOS

THE
FERAL
GIRL

Tales from Aenya

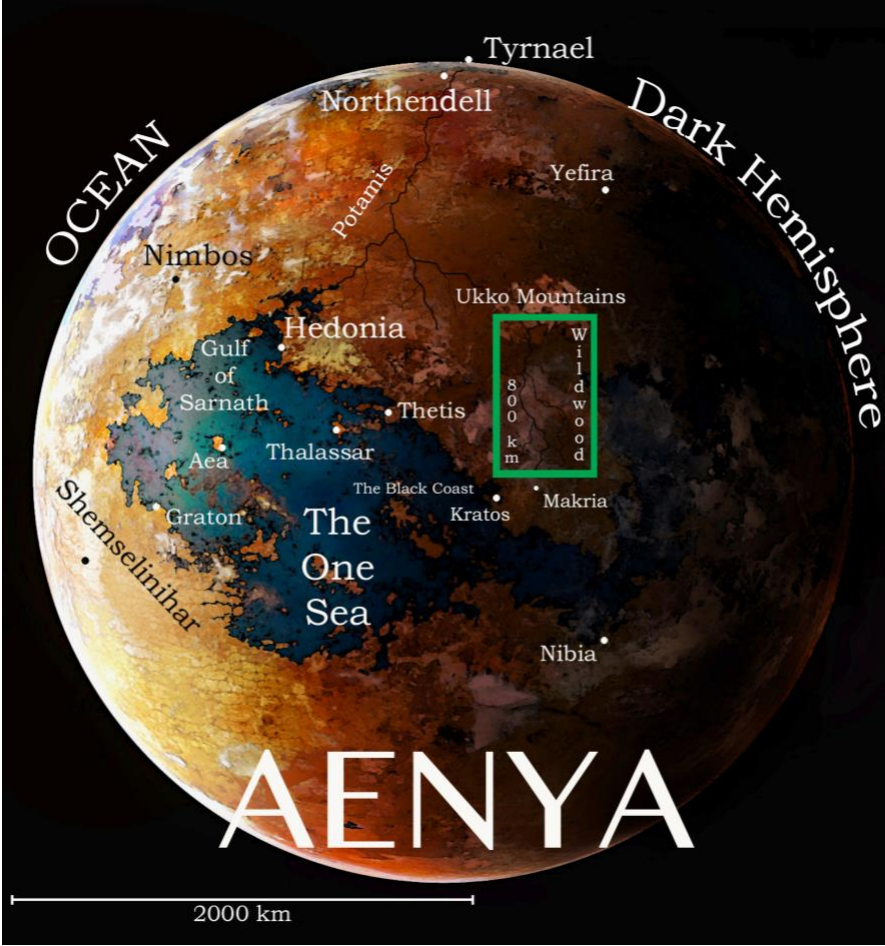
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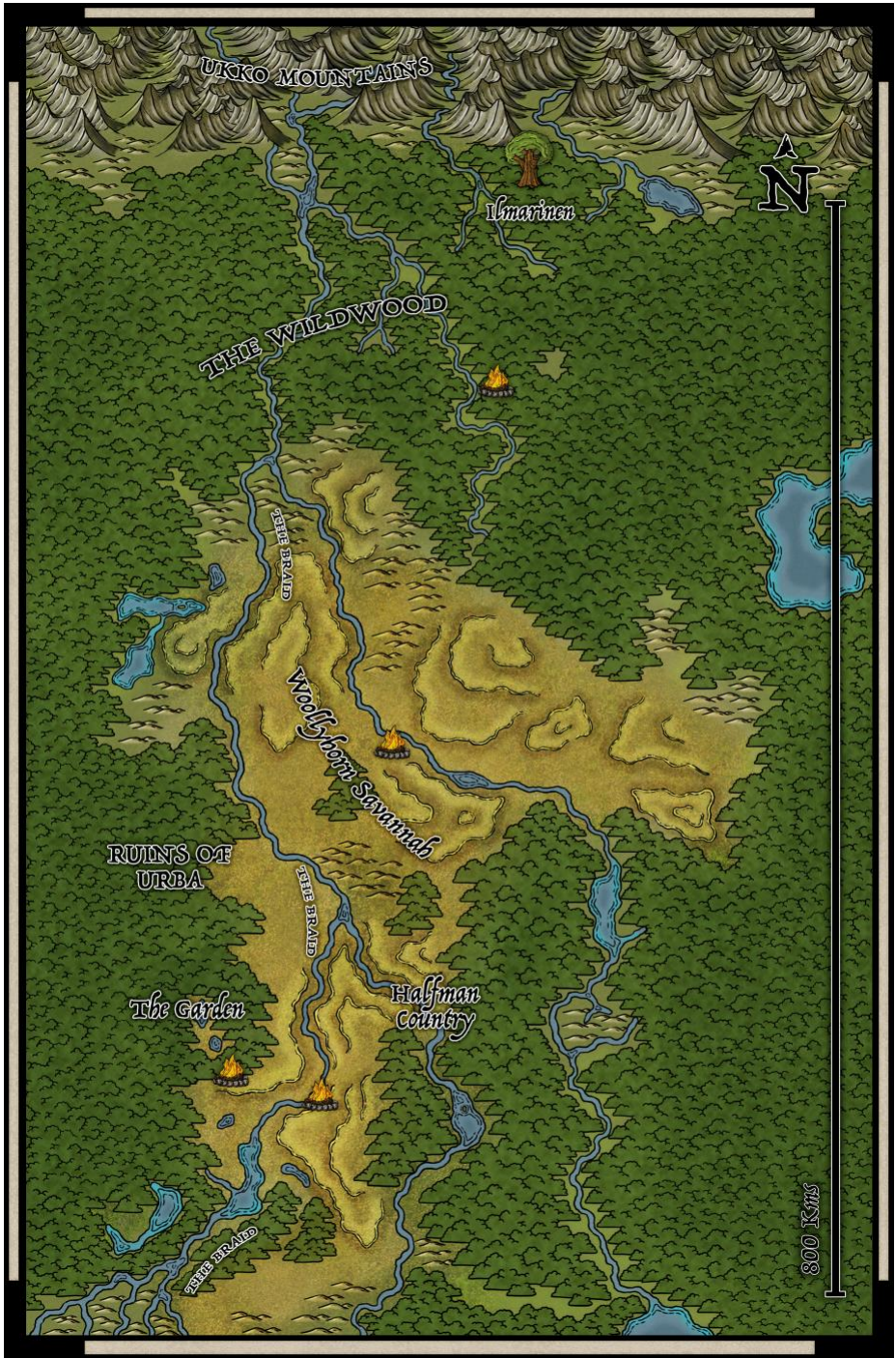
Books in the Aenya Series
(in chronological order)

The Feral Girl
Ages of Aenya
The Princess of Aenya

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“The lonely road is the longest.”

—Song of the Journeyman wanderer

Thelana pulled at weeds until her knees ached and her fingers turned raw. She yanked the green shoots slowly from the roots, lest they grow back, and wrestled with the stubborn red stems with their thorny petals until her palms started to bleed. *Invaders*, Baba called them. Each of her brothers and sisters, eleven in all, was responsible for a portion of the field. Once, she asked Father why the invaders had chosen to sprout in such numbers when they never had before, but he gave no answer.

As the setting sun painted the mountains gray and purple, Thelana decided she had done enough work for the day so her father would not reprimand her. She brushed the dirt from her thighs and the muck from her soles, then started for the giant tree crowning the hill. *Old Man Oak*. It was the way home.

A plum tree stood along the path in a glade of swaying heathers and disintegrating dandelions. She loved the sweet flavor of the yellow fruit, how they popped in her teeth, and the season was suitable for their picking. But the soil looked parched, cracked at the roots like aged pita, and the barren limbs that grew from it shivered with nothing to offer her but kindling.

Supper that day left her stomach hollow and groaning for more. The boys had brought nothing home from the woods, so Mana resorted to her usual stew of carrots, oats, and potatoes, with a pinch of mountain salt and basil

The Feral Girl

mixed in for flavor. The portioning was meager, and to Thelana, it tasted a little better than boiled water. Still, she knew not to complain, even when the younger ones voiced their displeasure. A stern look from Father—his hand raised— usually shut them up, turning their eyes to the contents of their bowls.

“All the gods ask is that we endure,” he said. An old proverb, one he liked to repeat, but which had long lost its power to console. “A little patience,” he went on, “a few days until the grain comes in, and your mother will have us a feast.”

Borz, her eldest sibling, stood abruptly from the table. She could see his hunter’s markings glinting in the firelight, the impressions of every animal he had killed running from his thigh and hip to his ribs. He was old enough to jump the sacred flame, take a wife, and start a family. But for the past two years, on each night of the Solstice, he made no effort to court any of the maids from the other families, knowing what it would mean to abandon his own. “I am to blame for this, Baba. But I will do better. We need to delve deeper. Two, or three days at most. There are great beasts in the far places. I’ve seen them. Game enough to feed us for cycles. But we must find the courage to venture further out into the Wildwood.”

“No.” Father’s voice betrayed no emotion, his countenance like the stone golems littering the hills of Ukko. “You don’t know the dangers of the world beyond our borders. Out there, you eat, or you are eaten.”

“Our ancestors were proud hunters!” Borz countered, thumping his chest. “They weren’t afraid. We can learn to do as they did.”

“I don’t want to hear any more about our ancestors. The Goddess will provide. Aenya has never failed us.”

Thelana looked from one man to the other. Baba’s face was flecked with gray and lined with the ravages of too many suns. His once broad shoulders were now sunken and the sinews of his body rounded like an overused spade. Her brother was who Baba had been, brimming with pride and passion and eager to prove his worth. As always, she sided with the younger version. How could her father be so stubborn? Too blind to see the changes to the climate? She shot from the table, leaving her bowl wobbling and half-empty, angered and wanting everyone to know it.

When all was dark, she lay across the fingers of Old Man Oak, watching the stars drift across the dome of Aenya as her siblings slumbered in the boughs below. Everything she knew of the world was Ilmarinen. The Ukko Mountains guarded the north, with its painted caves, cascading falls, and the Braid River flowing from it. Flowering valleys of orange and violet stretched from east to west. And an impregnable forest, the Wildwood, bordered their country to the south. *But there has to be more than this*, she thought. The embers of the gods came wheeling up from the horizon every night, only to settle back behind the Greater

The Feral Girl

Moon by morning. From whence did such lights arrive and whither did they recede? To and from other lands, no doubt, lands outside of Ilmarinen, places her parents never told her of or did not know existed.

A commotion stirred her from her reverie. She crouched in the branches, listening to the voices rising to her ears. Her parents often argued in the depths of eclipse when they believed their children were asleep. She could hear them shouting at one another and knew that her siblings, the older ones in particular, were likely disturbed by the noise.

Baba's and Mana's disagreements always revolved around the same exhausted subjects. Her mother did not wish to worry the family, to let on how bad things were becoming, but Father insisted they prepare for the worst. Tonight, the same conflict rang through the timbers of the house. But something felt a bit different this time. Thelana could sense it in the unusually hushed way her parents were speaking. It was as if they were desperately trying to keep some secret. Then, her brother's murmuring voice added to the clamor, and she had to hold back a gasp lest she be discovered.

Why is he there? He's never there!

She climbed the rope ladder from her bower, quietly as a huntress, peering through the arch of creepers framing the window into the main room. The clay chiminea blazed with a soft orange glow, illuminating the besom in the corner, the weeds growing through the

floorboards, Baldr softly wheezing in his wicker bassinet. Mana and Baba stood in a deep well of shadow beside the dying flame, between their youngest and eldest sons.

Thelana could always tell how her brothers were feeling, whether they were cold or ill, or if they'd spent the afternoon daydreaming about one of the neighbors' daughters. But Borz betrayed no emotion but anticipation. He nervously paced the room, his small hairs standing in sharp relief in the dim blaze. The mirth in his face, which so often lifted her spirits, was absent. When his mother moved to embrace him, she could see the bloody rim of her eyes. It looked as if she had spent the night fighting tears.

The knock at the door startled the four of them. Thelana was unaccustomed to the sound and grew frightened. Father had built it only recently, to keep scavengers from their larder, but she could not imagine any animal making such a racket. It could not be anything pleasant, she surmised, given her brother's sullen expression. Then her mother, her face just as grave, tugged at her father's elbow, pleading. "Are you sure?"

Baba drew his fingers tiredly across the hairs of his face. His grooming habit had become less consistent, his beard more disheveled with every passing day. Now, a sudden intensity came into his eyes, and he adopted a harrowing appearance Thelana had never seen before. He possessed the face of a man who has tried

The Feral Girl

everything, mulled over every possibility, only to find hopelessness.

“Bryseis, we’ve discussed this.” He turned to his wife but was unable to hold her gaze. “The larder is empty. There is no other way.”

The door reverberated again like a living thing, and Thelana considered what a strange thing it was having a door in her house. Ilma danced and dined and made love in open fields. Their rooms were partitioned, if at all, by curtains of ivory, amber, and lapis lazuli. While fences kept livestock from wandering into the woods, solid barriers prevented wild creatures from ransacking their stores. That Baba would have felt the need to fashion a *door* for their home suggested there were dangers to keep out.

The knock came a third time, more forcefully than before, and her mother turned faint. She looked as if she might topple, but Borz was quick to lend her his strength. Then Father reached for the grip.

The people entering the room dazzled Thelana’s senses. They had to be *ilma*, she did not doubt it, the same kind of animal as herself. She could make out the meaty brows of their faces and the tuft of short-cropped hair growing from their apish skulls. And, while the men did not grow beards, she ascertained their sex from their broad shoulders and stubbled chins. But it remained to be seen whether either of them possessed navels, hairy limbs, or male genitals. To her eyes, they were like beetles from collar to abdomen, with the soft parts of their bodies

hidden under reflective carapaces that bloomed with reds and yellows in the light of her parent's hearth. Most likely, they were ilma of a different sort. Their hides and the fittings for their weapons were too finely worked for her people to produce.

The strangers spoke in somber tones and only to Baba, gesticulating where language failed them. Mana receded into a corner all the while, as if she could not suffer their presence, and in like manner, they averted their eyes from where she stood. Thelana tried but failed to discover the nature of their discourse, but she was reminded of the Harvest Moon, when families from across the land gathered to barter for crops. Father was trading with them, she realized, haggling for a better deal, yet she could not fathom what her family might have to offer such people.

One of the men walked out, allowing a rush of cold air to swirl through the open doorframe, and Baldr began to wail. Mana lifted the boy to her bosom, shushing him, as the man returned carrying two heaping sacks. Baba pulled the knot from the bag, sifting a handful of grain through his fingers, as the two strangers moved to examine her brother. They looked over his teeth and fingers and heels, and every other part of his body, as if Borz were a prize hog, and Thelana understood, with a sudden tightness in her chest, that the men were appraising him.

They led Borz through the doorframe and her parents followed. Thelana crept down to the

The Feral Girl

base of the great oak in pursuit, tiptoeing along the roots to the front of the house. She found them under the arbor, where fruitless grapevines grew in abundance, coiling about the posts and hanging down from the slats of the awning. Baldr straddled his mother's hip, clutching at the garland of flowers she always wore.

"What will we tell the children?" Mana was saying. "Don't they deserve to know? To say goodbye, at least?"

The situation was not unexpected, nothing her parents had not debated countless nights before. And yet, Baba chose his words carefully; whatever his answer, it could only be final. "Bryseis . . . the children . . . you know how they can be. Thelana especially. She has such a strong will."

"It's not too late to find another way. He is our firstborn son. My son. *Please.*"

Borz placed a finger under his mother's chin, caressing Baldr's soft, wispy hair with his other hand. "You've taught me to be strong, mother. Now you must find the strength to do what's best for the family. This is my duty, and I am not afraid to do it."

She tried to speak, to dissuade him from going, but could do nothing but break in his embrace.

The strangers became restless as the rest of their company awaited them in the distance. She could just make out the silhouette of a caravan, the fires flickering from their torches,

beasts of burden tethered to wagons, indistinct banners rippling silently in the dark. Baba pulled his wife away, ever so gently, and the man who had appraised her brother now wrapped him about the waist in a long skin to hide his penis and scrotum and the parade of animal-shaped pigments—his many proud kills—encircling his hips. They were changing him, Thelana thought, covering his body to more resemble themselves.

Borz was led from under the arbor without a word of farewell, like an aurochs shackled to a plow. She wondered how her parents could bear to witness it, how her father could stand motionless as Mana quailed against him, her hair dashed across her face like a willow, as Baldr wailed and slipped from her thigh.

As the sight of Borz diminished, Baba twisted in the doorway, looking out into the deepening darkness. But he did not call out. Her father did nothing that night but wring his corded arms until his wrists reddened beneath his knuckles. Until Borz was no longer there.

Thelana should have screamed, chased after him, fought to save her brother somehow. A piece of her was being cut out and she could only peer from behind a wall and quiver. She knew the loss would fester in her for a lifetime, and yet she was helpless, a child paralyzed by uncertainty, who could but watch—watch as her life and everything she knew of the world unraveled.

The Feral Girl

That night, and every night thereafter, Thelana would ask herself why she had kept herself hidden, why she had been unable to stir herself into action. At the very least, she could have called out to him before he was led away.

The strangers were an enigma, entirely alien to Ilmarinen and her peoples' way of life. But they would not be the last to arrive. Stragglers invaded her homeland in the ensuing years, burdened by their belongings, many of them wounded, dying, and in desperate need of shelter. Most looked down upon her family, calling her *uncivilized*, *primitive*, and *naked*, words she knew to be condescending, if nothing else. Despite her father's admonishments, she learned what she could of the strangers, their habits, and enough of their language to barter, yet none of them knew her brother's whereabouts.

The Outsiders complained incessantly, like small children. They hated the food and the bugs and the lack of bedding, and walking anywhere without first shodding their feet was a constant ordeal. On hotter days, when they doffed their shells to reveal their underlying coats, their pale-as-milk shoulders cooked under the sweltering sun. Even as they looked down upon her people, and insulted them with names she did not understand, Thelana and her siblings chided them, knowing what frail creatures they truly were.

But in the passing twilight, when the moons lay drowsily in the sky, Thelana could only think

of her brother and of the men who took him. To Baba, the strangers were people in need, and he treated them as he would any Ilmarin from a neighboring farmstead. But for her, they were an invading species that came to occupy their beds and consume their food and rob them of their offspring. They imitated humans in every way, but ilma could never be so unfeeling, so greedy, to trade food for children. And in the dead of eclipse, when all lay slumbering in the arms of Old Man Oak, she conjured memories of Borz, imagining him as he had been that night, his pride stripped away as those things in the shadows prodded and probed him, muttering secrets with her parents, those men with the gaping holes where their hearts should have been.

No, they are not men, she decided. Only people with human faces. Face People.



DAY 40

“Goddess’ blood!”

Her quarry raced ahead, its feathered legs kicking up pine needles, its elongated neck rising and contorting, its stubby tail vanishing between the ferns. Again she cursed. Even with her arrow in its throat, the bird continued to outmaneuver her.

She pushed through the brambles, led by a trail of frothy-pink blood, a crimson leaf, a wet stone. The chobo’s three-pronged markings were becoming harder to find. Her supper was gaining ground with every ragged breath she took, and she could not afford to lose it over the hard roots of the trees.

Where are you now, you dumb bird?

Her spear was of worked ash, fastened by twine and molasses to a tip of chipped stone—an instrument of death in her hands—but useless if she could not get within reach of her prey.

She shut her eyes, quelled the heaving of her bosom to listen to the frightful stirring in the

undergrowth, and sped off again. Her pursuit led her into a dense jumble of flora. Limbs of ash and juniper clawed at her sides, thorns snagged at her braid, nettles blinded her. She managed her way by the snap of twigs, and the knobby roots jabbing her instep, while the soft brush of scale leaves left the slick touch of moss on her feet.

Water flowed somewhere within earshot. She could sense it, the humid air settling on her shoulders. The chobo was likely tiring, losing blood, growing thirsty. Her prey was sure to stop for a drink, and she would catch it there.

She hurried into a sprint, following the report of water as the foliage cleared and the ground evened. Further ahead, the ridge sloped down into a valley, where the tumult of the stream filled her eardrums. *Good. The noise will muffle my approach.*

A copse of birches sprouted by the water's edge. She slipped between them, their slender boles offering little cover, keeping low as she crept toward the bank. Falls roared from a place she could not see. The gushing stream was like white webbing, dashing to froth against the rocks and spraying the air with mist. She knelt, her throat parched, her bones simmering. Pebbles of red and green and yellow glistened beneath her kneecaps. But the water was cold, blissfully cold under the scorching sun. She washed the sweat from her face and neck, drank deeply from her cupped hands, then retrieved her spear to resume the hunt.

The Feral Girl

The stream lapped against her calves in the shallows, stiffening her joints, while the undertow threatened to carry her away. She would need to maintain her footing, keep to the water's edge while crouching among the rocks to keep from being seen.

After less than a passing, she spied the bird standing by the bank, a short way from where she had started. She could hear its pained, wheezing breath from the hole made by her bow. Her arrow still protruded from its neck, like a feather gone astray, the bird having no way to remove it. It was a pitiable sight, dreadful even, but also somehow comical.

She watched the chobo dip its enormous beak—the bird's head was mainly beak—into the water. It showed no signs of alarm, seeming unaware of her presence. She waded into the depths to mask her sound, if not her smell, the stream swelling to her pelvic bones, the chill awakening her senses. Suspicion grew over the bird's large disc-shaped eyes, but it was too dimwitted or too weary to retreat. The current lapped against her belly, tugged at her every step, the slick moss caking the streambed threatening her balance. She resisted the urge to squirm as minnows darted between her ankles and nibbled at the fine hairs of her thighs. The chobo poked its head down for another drink, the continual loss of blood driving its thirst. She clung to the slippery edges of the boulder, paces from her kill, her spear fast

in her hand, her heart pregnant with anticipation.

The chobo was taller than her by a head and would feed her for a cycle. But should it dash away, she knew she could not rush from the stream in time to catch it. And her arrows were spent. She had only the wooden shaft in her hands to rely on. But she decided against throwing it. If her aim were off by a hair, she would lose her supper for the night. She needed to get in closer. Shock the bird into inaction.

She sprawled over the rocks in a sudden burst, her movements muffled by the rumbling falls, the truncheon of her spear high overhead. The chobo's eyes were like shining drops of tar, lost in the scaly folds of its beak, and those eyes took immediate notice of her. But she was prepared, breaking over the din of crashing water with a ferocious cry. The bird stood paralyzed as the point of her shaft plunged deep into its body. She shuddered against the ensuing cacophony of honks and squawks and thrashing feathers, holding firm to the stony bit snagging its beak and vertebrae.

He just wants to live, like me, like any other animal would . . .

But it wasn't just any animal. It was her food source. She had to do as Borz had taught her. Act without feeling.

It's just a big, stupid bird, Thelana. A big chicken!

She tightened her hands about her spear, twisting down into the chobo's body with all of

The Feral Girl

her weight, until the creature no longer struggled.

Her fury subsided, she found herself in a daze, bloodied feathers sticking to her bosom, the stream ebbing about her ankles. The chobo was limp, its neck lolling against its side. She removed her arrow and tugged at her spear, thanking the gods that neither was broken. Her fingertips, still trembling, were stained crimson. Remembering Baba's lesson, she apologized to the bird and thanked the Goddess for the sustenance it would provide her.

She had not eaten in days and could not wait to bring the meat to her campsite. But how was she to move it? She was alone, and the bird weighed more than she did. Two possibilities vied in her skull. She could cut the animal into pieces, which would take some time, or she could relocate. The stream promised ample water, but the moisture in the air would prove difficult for making fire, and attract biters come nightfall.

Forgetting herself and her surroundings, she neglected the swaying in the trees, the grumbling in the earth. A towering figure blotted the sky like a passing storm cloud, leaving a shaft of sun to blind her as she turned her gaze to the emerging King of the Wildwood. Apex predator of apex predators. *The Tyrant*. Its nostrils flared, damp cranial cavities sized to fit her skull, and a mouth to swallow her whole opened to reveal rows upon rows of serrated knives. She screamed, but not

in fear. Once, she had been beyond terrified and had run into hiding. And she would no doubt hide from the Tyrant again. But today, she was pained with hunger. Today she was angry.

This is my kill! You can't have it! You can't!

The saurian's minuscule eyes—black and round as olives—took no notice of her. She raised her ash weapon and cried again, but her threats came to no avail. The Tyrant snatched her kill in a single bite, leaving the dead bird's lower half to dangle from its jagged teeth. But she refused to surrender what she had fought so long to keep, wrestling to tear a morsel from the carcass, if not the whole foot. She could be satisfied with a foot, anything to delay hunger for another night. Except the Tyrant was not one to share, and righting its enormous skull, she felt herself rising, following the bird into that monstrous gaping maw. Letting go, she fell hard into the shallow water as the saurian thundered off, satisfied with its poached meal.

A wave of dizziness passed through her as she regained her footing. She had spent too much of her energy pursuing the chobo, and now her insides were protesting. Dragging herself from the water, she wondered how she had managed to chase the bird so far across the forest. Hunger had driven her, she supposed, but now, she doubted whether she would have the strength to return to her campsite.

The Tyrant. She did everything she could to escape its notice, from hiding her scent to learning the pattern of its outings. Still,

The Feral Girl

whenever she managed to kill anything bigger than herself, the Tyrant emerged to steal it away, leaving a ruin of vegetation in its wake. Two great hunters dominated the Wildwood, yet there was prey enough only for one.

Thelana started for camp, the sun skirting the tops of the trees, the earth turning dry under her feet. The forest was a living thing, and could turn into a bog after heavy rain. Darkness and moisture summoned insects, which she hated more than she feared. A sheen of sweat created a barrier against the smaller biters, but the sweet smell of her body lured the deadlier variety. The whine of the dragon mosquito, the flutter of a bird-wasp, the buzz of swarming fire-gnats, these were constant causes for dread. She was all-too familiar with their stings, after being unable to sleep on one side or another for close to a cycle. Even when the pustules shrank and the skin healed, some blemishes remained, until her body became like a canvas decorated by their mandibles.

The sun was melting into the turquoise disc in the east, casting bands of orange and yellow against the horizon. Eclipse was drawing near and she was still a good way from sanctuary. Monsters stalked in the gloom of night, she knew—nigh invisible under the moon's faint glow—hunters who hungered for supple flesh and bones easily torn apart.

Weary with exhaustion, her insides hollow and aching, she reached her campsite as the last colors of day dulled to shades of gray and

indigo. A sudden gale greeted her as she entered the meadow she called home, the welcoming, all-encompassing arms of the camphor tree casting a long shadow across a mottled sward of grass and clover.

Her nightly ritual involved relieving herself at different locations, to mark her territory; starting a fire in the recesses of the camphor's roots; and scarfing down whatever she managed to scrounge up for the day. If she had the strength, she might whittle sticks into arrows, chip away pieces of slate until they were sharp enough for spearheads, or reinforce her shelter to protect from the rain. But tonight, her every sinew throbbed, and her spine and shoulders still hurt from falling into the streambed. Hunger was also taking its toll, blurring her vision, and turning her limbs sluggish and unresponsive. She could not hope to spark kindling in such a weary state and could only pray that the night keep balmy.

Olivoids paraded down the trunk of her tree. The oval-shaped beetles shimmered blackly in the dim light, and could pass for tiny fruits when they were not moving, but she was on to their ruse. She scooped them up one-by-one, dozens of tiny legs and yellow feelers squirming against her tongue, exploding in a pungent pulp between her molars. She hated the taste. But it was food.

She climbed methodically, her toes and fingers recalling every twist and knob in the camphor's bark. A makeshift cot of bamboo and

The Feral Girl

beard moss awaited her at the top, thatched between the limbs a hundred feet in the air. When she first gathered the lichen for the padding, she awoke in the night with a terrible itch and a head full of bright red bugs. She learned to smoke them out the following morning.

Few predators could reach her there, where she lay her head to rest, and in the treetops, the winds gusted too fiercely for the biters to fly. Once, in the pitch of eclipse, she caught herself tipping over the edge, but even then, she never developed a fear of heights.

Like a bird in its nest, she inspected the curtain of leaves enclosing her arbor. The foliage kept her hidden from hungry eyes but grew wild in all directions, crowding in on her sleeping space. She tested the strength of the branches, which sometimes softened after a storm or were weakened by the white hungry bugs living inside them, then probed the hollows of the bamboo frame, finding her flint arrowheads, a knife cut from a saurian's tooth, and *the flower*. The orange blossom, the *ilm* her father had given her before she was sent away from home, was her most prized possession.

Taking up the small ivory blade, she carved a notch into the far stalk of her bedframe. Every notch represented a day, but as the elements eroded the green outer layer to its fibrous inner core, she could only hope to count the passage

of time in her head. The cutting was more ritual now, something to prepare for sleep.

She eased onto her flank, her muscles no longer tensing, her body succumbing to the memory of prodding roots and thorns, and the river rocks battering her spine.

The last sliver of day receded, and the woods faded into shadow, until only the stars remained. She counted every flicker through a window of intersecting branches. The regularity of the heavens comforted her, for no matter how troubling her ordeals, the same constellations emerged night after night to greet her.

“Those are the gods watching over us,” Baba explained to her once. “They are all sisters to one another. Each a mother to her world. Like the Goddess is to ours. Like Alashiya.”

The stars moved in a great circle about Aenya, the way her people gathered about the Solstice Fire, and in those glittering arrangements, she could make out the Phoenix, the Archenelk, and the Horned Skull of the Taker. She remembered sitting on her father’s lap as he pointed them out.

Was Baba thinking of her now? Were the crops yielding enough to feed her family? Who was sick or wedded or welcoming a new child? She had only the past to look to, remembering how they played and laughed and danced.

Amina loved to scold us, to everyone’s annoyance, all too ready for motherhood. She showed hair about her loins for years, but had

The Feral Girl

yet to find her destined mate, despite her ceaseless yearning.

Anja. The boys fancied her the most, and she knew it. She never walked past still water without pausing to admire her reflection. Her hair was the color of sunshine, cascading like strands of gold from her nipples to her abdomen. She spent more time knitting garlands of heather, lavender, and jasmine than seeding crops.

Britannia was Thelana's co-conspirator, always bruised and looking for trouble and wanting of a bath. Mana yelled at her for roaming too far into the woods and tracking dirt into the house. Of all her sisters, Thelana missed Britannia most.

Aliaa was the know-it-all, familiar with every plant good for eating, healing, or that could make you sick. She collected bugs at her bedside, could tell you the meaning of the stars, and knew the secrets of letters. Thelana did not doubt that someday, Aliaa would go to live among the Mountain Folk, as a Keeper.

Nicola was scrawny, quiet, and prone to illness. She was born sick, and despite her parents' efforts, never managed to grow stronger. When the famine started, Thelana worried more for Nicola than anyone else in the family.

Then the boys. Laine and Vaino, the twins, forever bickering, always trying to outdo one another, their antics never failing to make her

laugh. They hated fieldwork like the rest but were pressed to work harder than anyone.

Lodr and Heimdl could go nowhere without their tools, a chisel, an ax, and a cart for hauling logs. They had plans, those two, to build houses together, and when they were not planning, they joined Baba in the hunt.

Baldr was the last to be born. He was either too young or too proud to hide his erections. Mother never chided him for it, but we all laughed. Even hungry, even after days without eating, humor lifted our spirits.

Then there was Borz. She sighed and her body quaked with his memory.

They should have sent him out into the woods, not me. Thelana had known fourteen years, sixteen maybe—she was beginning to lose count—since escaping from her mother’s womb. She was still a child, barely showing hair about the loins, scarcely old enough to jump the sacred fire. What did she know of survival that Borz had not taught her? She could never be as strong as he was.



2008



DAY 43

The sun rested like a fiery bowl atop her back, blazed through her eyelashes, and the smooth stones seared her soles where she walked. She wiped her brow, her vision swimming in sweat, her eyes salty and stinging. The gods could be unkind but were not wholly to blame, for she had abandoned her sanctuary too soon, and the Eye of Solos was nearing its zenith.

Thelana was not ignorant to the way temperatures changed throughout the day, but with an empty belly and a mouth like a shriveled leaf, she could not have endured another passing sulking in her tree. The broader branch of the Braid was far to the west, so she headed for the smaller stream nearby, hoping it had not turned to dust with the coming of the dry season.

The heat found less purchase on her neck and shoulders when she stood fully upright, so she held her head high and exposed as she went looking for water. She kept to the shady path littered with maple leaves and pine needles and

The Feral Girl

continued through the copse to a wide area she did not recognize. Young aspens towered all around her. She could not see past them and was at a loss from whence she had come or in which direction she had been moving. The striped boles of the trees possessed an uncanny symmetry, their slender shadows reflecting in perfect rows across the forest floor, and the deathly stillness of the wind lulled her weary mind, luring her deeper and deeper into the gathering of aspens until she was overcome by a sudden fear of losing her way.

All you have to do is sit. Sit and think your way out, Thelana.

She lowered herself against an old poplar, the smooth bark fitting between the blades of her back, a tangle of nettles below cushioning her buttocks. She prodded her brain for ideas, for any solitary thought, but her skull felt as hollow as her stomach—empty of everything but the hectic chattering of the crickets. They were complaining, she did not doubt, about this awful heat.

A lot of good that'll do you . . .

She sat with her face buried in her knees, her braid like a rope—a lifeline—in her hands.

Mana's voice sounded above the din of laughter, over the rushing, dashing, plopping waves. The lake was so clear she could count the pebbles along the bedrock. Her younger sisters were busy at play, hopscotching along the chain of rocks, as her older siblings, lost in the mist, focused on their grooming and bathing. Water

cascaded down from a fissure in the granite beyond the bend, breaking into three separate falls, into *The Three Sisters*, as her people called it, marking the sacred place that none of the boys, not even Baba, were allowed to visit.

Only Ilmarin females were permitted to witness the Sacred Rite of Wo, when girls displaying hair about the loins came to offer their blood to the Goddess. Blood was the essence of life, without which no living thing could draw breath, and life given to the river was returned in the form of plentiful harvests and successful childbirths.

Here, Thelana was free to loosen the threads of her hair, and when after four days their blood was spent, her siblings' braids were entwined again, typically by a mother, an aunt, or a mentoring sister. Girls were done up this way before they were old enough to walk. The styling helped prevent infestation by parasites while keeping snagging thorns at a distance. But the braid meant a great deal more, defining her sex as much as her *noumena*. Without it, she could not count herself among the Ilmar. Females who let their hair grow wild and unkempt could not even be considered human. And it was her mother, always her mother, to whose loving fingers Thelana entrusted its weaving.

Mana . . . Mana . . .

The world came rushing back, and her mother's face shrank away, her firm but gentle smile; her reproofing, yet reassuring, slate-gray

The Feral Girl

eyes; every detail of her mother's features sinking, thinning to nothing in the flickering light. She woke to find an iridescent beetle gnawing at her thigh. It was pretty in its own way, changing from violet to crimson in the shifting light. She plucked it into her mouth and swallowed dryly.

Her head felt heavy, unmoored, like a plank of wood adrift. She straightened her knees and planted her palms into the leafy ground, each motion bringing spasms of pain. The sun god had abdicated from his throne as she slumbered, but his light remained, flashing between the slender aspens.

She shifted to her feet as a sudden gust rattled the leaves, stirring the small hairs of her body and rolling her braid across her shoulder. The air was warm and wet and sticky. She followed the stifling sensation into a tangle of flora, acutely aware of her surroundings. The clamor of life thrummed in her eardrums—the buzz and hum of flyers, the throaty croak of an amphibian, the rustling of waking hunters, the twitch of hidden prey. She had to be more than familiar with the noises each creature made. Mistaking a tree toad for a saurian could mean the difference between eating and getting eaten.

Frilled bracken bent against her knees. Jade-limbed nettles brushed at her sides. The grove enclosed her as she continued through it, awakening at her trespass. Every gnat nibbled at her ankles. Lizards darted from her steps. An

azure moth went fluttering across her nose, carried up by the wind to a hyacinth bulb, its translucent wings folding in perfect mimicry of the flower's blue petals. The touch of the Goddess was omnipresent, guiding her, reassuring her.

The terrain grew into an uneven tapestry of crisscrossing roots, weeds, and pinecones, and she was forced to move more slowly and deliberately, her feet reading every subtle feature, every knob and length of bark, every prickling pebble, each crackling leaf and clover poking from her toes. Thorns proved more of a nuisance than a hazard, rarely penetrating the outer layer of her soles. And yet pain, she reminded herself, had its uses. *Pain sharpens the senses, keeps you alert, wakes you when you're feeling complacent.* Or so that's what Borz told her.

But the stinging sensation now shooting up through her instep set her brain on fire. She held back a yelp, having suddenly transformed into a one-legged, hopping creature. *What in the Goddess's name did I just step on?* Some angry thing with pincers, no doubt, squirming its last under her weight. But she did not pause to investigate it, refusing to lift her foot to examine the broken skin, assuming—praying rather—that a very large insect, anything with fewer than eight legs, had done the deed. A spider bite meant days, sometimes cycles, of misery.

She spotted a pear-shaped fruit, tantalizing her with its hues of orange and purple, but

The Feral Girl

when she last ate what looked like an apple, she spent the night heaving out her insides. Strange fruits were a risk, as was the family of mushrooms growing from a cypress hollow not ten feet away. More than anything, she needed to sate her thirst, and fruit could only mean water nearby.

She found her way through the tangle of trees into a shallow depression. Brightly colored moss caked every rock and root, leading her to a ravine, where the earth was rich and black and stuck to her soles in clumps. But the bustling stream she remembered was little more than a trickle. She squatted over the embankment, her throat dusty and bitter, her fingers drawing handfuls of mud, but the water clinging to the topsoil disappeared with every desperate stroke.

This is so . . . unfair! I did everything I was taught! Everything Borz showed me.

She wanted to scream, but her voice was missing, dried out like the riverbed. All she could manage was a croak above a whisper.

“I did . . . everything . . .”

She clenched her fists at the sky, at the Goddess for allowing her to starve, at her parents for sending her out on her own. The outer world was cruel and unforgiving, and she did not possess the strength to suffer it longer. If only Borz or Baba were around to tell her what to do. Their voices—sounds of human speech—she needed it more than ever. But she could no longer rely on them. Could not hope for

the impossible. She was alone and too far from home to return.

For some time, she lay there, half on her side and nearing oblivion, when a mound consisting primarily of mud and vines started up from the base of the ravine. She did not hesitate, sliding onto her stomach, her hand latching to the strange moving object. It looked like a small boulder, as broad around as her arms could reach, but was evidently alive. She flipped the creature onto its back, and it kicked at the air with its scaly legs, its head and tail withdrawing into its shell.

Sinking to her ankles in mud, her spine aching from the strain, she managed to drag the tortoise to the lip of the slope, where it plopped into the soft soil, nearly tipping her over. She brushed away the dirt and grass, revealing its ridged carapace, and considered how she might kill it. The tortoise could be skewered from the hole where its head poked out, but her spear lay forgotten in her tree. She then tried prying the shell apart, a hand clasping each side, but as she did so, a glimmer shone in the hollow of its collar—the tortoise's eyes—was it afraid?

No. I won't feel pity for you. I can't afford it . . .

Her strength spent, she resorted to stomping the animal to pieces, but its jagged outer edges would tear her feet apart.

A rock. I need a big rock!

The ravine was littered with them, rocks like giant eggs, smooth and round and yellowed

The Feral Girl

with lichen. She picked one up the size of her head and hoisted it up above her shoulders.

“Please don’t.”

Nicola stood opposite the riverbed, her brown pupils shimmering from between her knobby cheekbones. “Please,” she murmured. “Don’t hurt him.”

Thelana clenched her eyelids, not wanting to see her sister now. “Go away, Nicola. You’re not really here.”

“But why do you have to kill him? He didn’t do anything to you.”

“It’s not about that, sis. I’m hungry. You know how that is.” She waved her away and turned back to the tortoise, hoisting the rock again.

The tortoise extended its scaly appendages from its shell, and its shriveled head reminded her of her grandmother, the rare elder blessed to see beyond sixty years. Then it opened its jaws in a slow, protracted gesture as if speaking to her, as if pleading for its life.

“No!” Thelana cried. “I need to kill you. Don’t you understand? Goddess knows you need to die so I can live.”

Baba’s voice rang out in a low, sullen tone, and she found herself in a field of heathers, pink stems moving in waves against her calves, the mountains of Ukko glistening whitely on the horizon. A twig of a girl no more than nine stood beside him, her ribs and pelvic bones jutting from beneath her sallow flesh like an unearthed fossil.

Nicola was despondent, pleading with Father, tugging desperately at his arm. A goat knelt between them on its haunches, strapped over a white stump, bleating meekly. Baba held a cudgel in his hands—a simple rock fastened to a tree limb—prepared to smash the animal's skull, his face lined with the ravages of many sleepless nights.

“But why do you have to?”

Thelana had never fully understood why he looked that way, so tired, so worn, so beaten down. *Defeated*. Baba had known no more than forty years, yet the last few seemed to count for decades. Now she understood why. When she lived in Ilmarinen, hunger was an everyday concern and the subject of most discussions. But actual starvation was a thing she could only have imagined, a distant yet ever-present threat, and her imagination had fallen short of the reality. And yet Baba knew, knew what it meant to perish when food becomes scarce, and he somehow managed to keep them from it. From the worst of all fates.

“Nicola.” His voice was uncompromising. “I told you to stay in the house, didn’t I? This isn’t for you to see.”

“But, Baba, Fleet didn’t do anything wrong—”

“It’s not about that. Now, do as I say and go home.”

Thelana recognized the animal. She was more of a kid than a fully grown nanny, her horns just beginning to show like swollen nubs

The Feral Girl

above her yellow-white brows. Thelana's family had been present for her birth, and Nicola had held her as a newborn, watched her sup at her mother's teat. They raised goats for milk, never for slaughter. But the world was changing, becoming colder, delivering invasive weeds that choked the life from the crops.

"Do as Baba says and come away, Nicola." Her voice remained firm. Unfeeling. And the young girl surrendered in her arms. Buried her face in her big sister's shoulder.

Baba stared at them as if noticing his daughters for the first time, his pupils crowned red, the whites turned hard and yellow by the sun. "I didn't want you here either, Thelana."

"I don't mind. I can help you do it . . . if you need me to."

"I know you can," he said. "You've always been strong. But I want you to take your sister home. Now." He faced slowly away and took up his cudgel again. Fleet no longer bleated, keeping limp and quiet under the ropes. Did she know she was about to die?

"It won't matter if you do it!" Nicola cried as she was led away. "I'm not going to eat her! I'm not! You'll see! I promise . . ."

Thelana tugged at her wrist. An immense oak awaited them in the distance. Home. "That's why you're so skinny, Nicola. You need to build up your strength or you're not going to make it through the high moon."

"But why does Fleet have to die so we don't? Why do our lives matter more than hers? That

isn't fair." Fresh tears washed over the little girl's cheeks. Too great for her elfin face.

"It's just the way things are now," Thelana explained, bending to pluck a pink stem from the ground and tucking it behind Nicola's ear. "Now you look pretty." The small gesture was enough to convince her to dry her eyes and come away.

Thelana hated these visions, when she could no longer affix her mind to the present. It signaled the looming of the Taker. The arrival of Death. Her body was growing too feeble to sustain her in the physical world. Yet she could still spot the tortoise. It somehow righted itself and continued toward its hovel at the bottom of the ditch, gaining momentum as it edged over the slope.

Fleet had meant little to her. Thelana never mourned its passing, nor any of the beasts she helped Baba slaughter that year. Predators killed to survive. They did not pity. They did not feel remorse. And she was ilma, fiercest of predators, whose teeth was the knife, whose claws was the spear, whose hand was the rock. She loomed over the tortoise, the rock heavy in her arms, watching her prey make its slow escape, its stubby hind legs kicking futilely across the damp black earth.

She screamed, and the rock came tumbling down from her grasp. Followed by a single tear.

"I'm sorry, Nicola."

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