

Much Ado About Bluebottles

By Frances Pauli

"Hurry up, Tr'lia!" LiLi sang over her shoulder as she hopped through the market's wide aisles. Her clawed feet stirred little puffs of dust as they scrabbled for purchase. "Come on!"

"I'm coming." Tr'lia sighed. She clutched the netted bundle of wares more tightly in her green wings and increased her pace. Her friend's feathered back bobbed between the rows of booths like a fat, blue cloud. Tr'lia smiled and suppressed a chuckle. Who could blame LiLi for being excited? "The festival doesn't start for two days, LiLi," she called. "We won't sell anything today."

"They're already shopping!" LiLi hopped higher and flapped her short wings for emphasis. She was hurtling forward again before she hit the ground. Her little fantail twitched, an arc of blue, as she landed and continued her hustle.

Tr'lia shifted the bundle's weight again and followed her friend. She flipped her own long tail feathers higher above the dust and kept after LiLi. Occasionally a shadow would pass over, the silhouette of some early shopper looking to see what the bazaar had to promise. Tr'lia wanted

to see as much as they did, but LiLi would not be deterred. She tried in vain to catch a glimpse or two of the wares in the booths as they ran past.

The festival had come to their aerie at last. Her feathers ruffled at the thought. Flocks would be arriving from the farthest reaches of the desert to trade, to compete in the games, and to show off for one another. The plain below their cliff homes already teemed with the camps of visitors, strange visitors, and their wares already filled the makeshift booths of the bazaar.

LiLi put distance between them as Tr'lia's mind wandered from their task. The booths to either side of her demanded attention. She saw ropes twined from dried grasses, grasses that had been diligently cleared from the Flocks' territories to prevent the Plants gaining any purchase here. She saw carved stone bowls, bone utensils and armor crafted from the exoskeletons of the giant insect herds.

She saw the vendors. They perched above their goods in plumages of impossible variety, and Tr'lia wanted to see them all.

"Tr'lia!" LiLi chastised from far ahead.

"I'm coming." Tr'lia snapped. LiLi had no bundle to carry. Her wings were too short for much labor, and it fell upon Tr'lia to heft their year's work to the stall. "Don't get into a molt over it!"

The friends had worked all year together, trading babysitting and odd jobs for cast-off feathers. They'd spent long evenings twining and weaving and perfecting their crafts, all for today--all for the chance to be included in the festivities. LiLi was right to be in a hurry.

Tr'lia stood a dozen strides from their booth when she saw the pet vendor. LiLi perched over their tables, flapping at her and churning up clouds of dust, beckoning for her to get a move

on. But the pet vendor's booth seemed more enticing and far more exotic. Tr'lia's scaled legs slowed. She cast an eye over the spread of mesh cages and listened to the buzz of wings inside.

She stopped. She shifted her netted bundle to one yellow hip and examined the little cages. Three bluebottle flies skittered around inside a small, mesh cylinder. Their exoskeletons gleamed iridescent below the continual buzzing of their translucent wings. Another case held an emerald beetle the size of Tr'lia's fist. It hissed and waved its long horn at her when she peered closer.

"Ho, HO!" a voice from above called. "A pet enthusiast, a connoisseur!"

Tr'lia looked to the perch above the stall. The crimson sky faded into peach as dawn spread over the market. The light cast a pink glow around the fat vendor that stared down at her. His feathers would have been lovely, had they been clean. Obviously not big on preening, their owner had let them fade into a mish-mash of dingy hues. Tr'lia identified reds, browns and purples through the grime.

"Hello," she said.

"And a good morning to you, my dear!" The man shouted, and a crooked crest rose in an arc over his brow. "A little shopping, on a fine day, yes?"

"Yes. No," she answered. "I'm vending today."

"And so you are, so you are." The vendor launched from his perch so suddenly that Tr'lia took a step back. He landed in a plump plop behind his table-ring of pets.

He shook himself, ruffling his plumage and dislodging a small flurry of down in the process.

"But these are lovely, no?" He pointed one long sharp tip feather at the three bluebottles.

"Yes," Tr'lia said politely. "They are."

"Yes! And quite unusual, no? Quite unique."

"I've seen some before," she said. "A traveling vendor brought some last winter."

"Oh NO!" The dirty man was taken aback. "Surely not like these," he protested.

"Bluebottle flies." Tr'lia continued quickly. "They *are* lovely."

The pet vendor just harrumphed at her and reached below the counter. He pulled out a tray of slender glass domes and set it down next to the flies. "And what about these?" Triumph and something of a dare shone in his black eyes. "I suppose you've seen these as well?"

"No--no." Tr'lia shook her head and stared at the domes. Her feet trembled and begged to back away from the stall. The feathers on her neck rose a little against her will. Inside each perfect glass container grew a bright green plant. Each shiny stem arched upwards, terminating in a bulbous, toothy green mouth. Sticky goo collected between the lips. "Where did, where did you get those?" she whispered.

"Ha Ho!" the man sang. His crest stood so high it nearly straightened. "You haven't seen *these* before."

"No," Tr'lia eyed the glass suspiciously, as if it might shatter at any moment and release the horrid things. "Aren't they dangerous?"

"Certainly so!" the vendor sang happily. "But for the brave, the *skilled* keeper, a true treat!" He reached under the counter again, and she braced herself for his next revelation. All he produced, however, was a stack of thin leaflets. He held one out to her, bobbing his head rapidly. The leaflet read: The Captive Care of Plant Species.

"Tr'lia!" She heard LiLi's voice, frantic and moving in their direction.

"No." Tr'lia shook her head, refusing the proffered leaflet. "I have to go." She twisted her head and looked over one shoulder. LiLi waddled across the dirt aisle and she looked far less

than happy. If she saw the plants, well, Tr'lia didn't want to deal with an irate LiLi all afternoon. "Thank you," she told the old vendor without looking back in his direction. "Goodbye."

"Plants!" LiLi scoffed for the twentieth time. "He's selling plants, here!" She nibbled on her bit of roast fungus and clucked furiously.

"They're cut off from the nodes, LiLi," Tr'lia said with more calm than she felt. "They're probably harmless. Otherwise, they wouldn't have let him bring them in." She took a bite of her own 'shroom. "These are good."

They'd bought the fungi from the booth next door after laying out all their crafts. The smell of mushrooms roasting had been too much for either girl to resist. Now both sat clutching the rickety perch over their stall, watching with awe as the number of booths spread across the plain continued to grow.

"We'll never have time to see it all," Tr'lia commented.

"We will if we sell out fast." LiLi still insisted that they'd make sales early. It would be nice, to sell enough that they could enjoy the festival in style, but Tr'lia couldn't see it happening today.

"They're just looking today." She motioned to yet another group of passing shadows. "They want to see everything before they buy."

LiLi clucked to herself, resenting Tr'lia's logic. She turned her head toward the distant camps and managed to remain silent for about thirty seconds.

"Look!" she shouted, hopping up and nearly tumbling Tr'lia from the perch. "They're practicing for the games!" In the distance, the formations could be seen flying their maneuvers

against the orange-pink sky. They swooped and dove as one, nearly touching, then scattering into some other pattern.

"They'll save the really fancy stuff for the contests."

"I know that." LiLi didn't turn away from the horizon and the shapes flying there.

Tr'lia checked below them again, eying the lines of feathered bags and sashes critically. The rows were straight, and the feathers shone beautifully in the sun. Still, she couldn't resist the impulse to hop down into the booth, to tidy up the lines just a touch.

She was smoothing out the feathers on her favorite bag--made from cast-offs she'd traded from the healer's wife--when LiLi settled in a puff beside her.

"Don't look now," LiLi whispered.

"Where? What?"

"Don't look over there." LiLi had her head lowered. She nodded across the market aisle, toward the pet booth. "They're watching you."

"Who?" Tr'lia looked despite the warning.

"I said *don't* look!"

Two young cocks leaned against the counter where the rows of cages sat. They were slim and tall and wore vests of woven grasses over their arching breasts. Both had feathers of slick black with white stripes along their wing edges, but the taller of the two had a brilliant green head topped with a slim, pointed crest. It curled backwards over his shoulders. They both stared in Tr'lia's direction.

"Who are they?" Tr'lia dropped her gaze and played at inspecting the bag again.

"They're milkers!" LiLi clicked her beak disapprovingly. "Look at their vests."

"You said don't look." But Tr'lia could see LiLi sneaking peeks in the men's direction and couldn't resist another look.

Plant milkers. The thought caused her scaled knees to tremble. You had to be crazy or suicidal to be a milker. She cast another quick glance in their direction. They were young; maybe they just wanted to *look* like milkers. She imagined it would seem daring to brave the forests. And the milkers did supply the flocks with chemicals for the healers' medicines. She shook her head. They were too young--too young to wrangle plants.

They were probably posing as milkers to impress people. They probably worked for a chemist and saw a lot of the milkers come and go. Maybe they bartered for the vests, or made them themselves.

"They're coming over here!" LiLi burst in on her musing. Her voice whistled through a clenched beak. "Tr'lia!"

"Shhh. Settle down, LiLi, maybe they'll buy something."

"Didn't you see the way he was looking at you?"

"Shut up, LiLi." Tr'lia couldn't help wondering which he LiLi referred to. She smoothed the red-feathered bag and forced herself to breath very slowly.

"Hiee." The deep voice rolled across their counter. LiLi squeaked. The milkers stood opposite them, shining in the sun and smiling.

"Hello," Tr'lia said. The crested one stared at her in a way that made her cheek feathers want to puff in embarrassment. She turned away quickly.

"Nice feathers," he said.

Shocked, she turned back to find him admiring the red bag. "Oh, right." Her cheeks puffed despite her efforts. "It's made from our healer's feathers."

"It's pretty." He leaned on the counter, raising his eyes to her face with deliberate leisure.

Maybe he is a milker, Tr'lia thought. Something about the way he moved reeked of confidence, and the vest looked pretty authentic close up. He was older than she'd thought too, and his eyes looked right into you.

"It's thirty five." LiLi, forever-practical LiLi, interrupted. "And that one's twenty." She pointed to the sash the other milker fondled.

Green head ignored her. He clicked his beak softly and pointed to another bag. "What about that one?"

"That one is from LiLi's mother," Tr'lia said.

"It's twenty also," LiLi added.

"It's lovely," Green head said politely. "Don't you make any with your own feathers?"

Tr'lia's recalcitrant cheeks puffed again. Her voice failed her.

"This one is hers," LiLi blurted. She offered him the sash Tr'lia had made after her last molt. Ignoring Tr'lia's pleading look she added, "It's seventy five," quoting double what they'd priced the sash.

Tr'lia wanted to strangle her. She wanted to rip the sash from Green head's grip and take quick flight for the nearest cave. She wanted him to stop running his long, black wingtip over the sash. Her tail twitched.

He stroked the wide yellow middle, woven from her breast feathers. He turned the sash, eyed the green border and peeked up at her matching wings. He lifted the end and admired the red fringe she'd woven from the feathers of her head. Tr'lia prayed for death.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"What?" Tr'lia tore her gaze from the sash.

"Her name's Tr'lia," LiLi said.

"How old are you," Green head smiled at her and cradled her sash.

"Sixteen seasons," Tr'lia said. The feathers along her back stood up slightly.

"You'll be nesting soon." He bobbed his head and the curling crest raised just a touch.

Tr'lia could hear LiLi's horrified clucking, but it seemed far away.

"Yes," she answered him.

"Seventy five, was it?"

"Yes."

"I'll take it."

"Tr'lia dear, are you well?" LiLi's mother asked. A sweet hen, who looked like a puffed up version of LiLi, she had agreed to help the girls with the booth during the festival. Now she perched over them, peering down on occasion between bouts of preening. "You're so quiet today."

"She's mooning over a plant milker," LiLi said. Her mother just missed their first, and only, sale of the day.

"I am NOT," Tr'lia straightened her legs and leaned over LiLi. She glared down at her.

"Oh no, dear," LiLi's mom clucked. "What would your poor mother say?"

"I'm not mooning," Tr'lia insisted. What would her mother say? Her mother would go into a full-blown molt over it.

"Why don't you girls go look around? Have some fun before you get too busy."

"Good idea," LiLi chirped.

Tr'lia had split the sash money with her, and she sensed LiLi was dying to spend it. They left the booth and wandered along the aisle together. LiLi cooed over the wares and inhaled the scent of fungus cooking with a hungry glint in her eye. She nudged Tr'lia's wing.

"Stop looking for that milker, Tr'lia. Let's get another 'shroom."

"I wasn't," Tr'lia said. "I want to go see the pets." She headed across the aisle without acknowledging LiLi's sulk. The pet vendor hunched up on his perch with his head tucked under one wing.

"Tr'lia!" LiLi sang behind her. "I'm hungry!"

The plants were not on the counter. Tr'lia eyed the sleeping vendor and cleared her throat.

"Tr'lia, no." LiLi slid up beside her. "Your mother will *kill* you."

"I'll have my own nest soon."

"But you don't yet."

"Hush, LiLi. I'll buy you a mushroom."

LiLi pouted, but stopped protesting and looked at the cages of insects. Tr'lia cleared her throat again, and then clicked her beak sharply.

"Ho HO!" the vendor cried. His head snaked its way from under the grimy wing and swiveled to look at them. "Back again."

"May I see the plants again?"

"No Tr'lia," LiLi whined.

"Shush, LiLi."

The vendor plopped behind the counter and retrieved the tray of glass domes.

"Your mother--"

"Hush." Tr'lia eyed the plants and tilted her head from side to side. They had a lot of teeth. "I'd like to make a purchase," she said.

"When your mother kills you, can I have that bag?" LiLi asked.

"Shut up, LiLi." Tr'lia hugged the red-feathered bag to her side. The leaflet on plant keeping lay safely hidden within. "She's not going to kill me."

"Wanna bet?" LiLi took an enormous bite of her 'shroom.

"They're only Bluebottles," Tr'lia said, raising the mesh cylinder to the light. The three flies flashed blue and pink in the afternoon glow. "She won't mind so much."

"But you bought that book."

"Be quiet about it, LiLi. You hear me?" Tr'lia hugged the bag closer. The rotten vender had charged her almost as much for the leaflet as she'd paid for the flies.

"If she finds it, she'll go into a molt."

"She won't find it." Tr'lia scanned the market crowd, hoping for a flash of green. She tucked the container of flies into the bag and smiled. "Besides," she said. "I'll be nesting soon."