

The Prayer of a Dove

Soft rays of sunset gleamed through the branches and leaves of the Wildmother's temple. It consisted entirely of a gigantic tree, and at its center stood a large, intricately carved shrine depicting the goddess of the wilds herself. Her form was decorated with a variety of gifts, donations, and bounties, but only one visitor was at the shrine tonight. She whirled around it as a snow-white blur, adjusting disorganized offerings, cleaning any remnants of filth, and putting out candles for the night. Swiftly finishing her efforts, she descended to the ground with large, dove-like wings, preening them slightly to remove any grime, and dusted off her green-and-blue vestments. After ensuring her cleanliness, she then knelt down at the base of the shrine, clutched onto her holy symbol - a small wreath of tiny, interwoven white lilies, with a miniature bow notched in the middle - and draped her head in prayer.

"Thank you for yet another glorious day, Wildmother. I, Beatrice, am grateful to live amongst your blessed creations of earth, sea, and sky." Her coos were as soft as the gentle breezes passing through the temple. "I am one of your most devout followers, and I am more than thankful for" - her words were suddenly interrupted by a large yawn escaping her mouth - "thankful for knowing that you will be there for anyone who needs you the most."

Beatrice paused her prayers to lower her wings and look around. After making sure that nobody was within the vicinity, she huddled her wings close and continued to speak in a soft whisper. "Though, dear Wildmother, I confess that I am currently one of those people. I have been using my divine magic for good, but each passing day, the necessities for it are becoming more and more overwhelming. While I want to help whenever I can, it feels like my healing abilities are being taken advantage of. Even the clergy encourages me to use them whenever

possible, whether or not I” - Beatrice’s eyelids began to fall, and she shook her head awake upon realizing it - “whether or not I have been getting enough sleep at night. The less energy I have to help myself, the more discouraged I feel about helping others. I fear it may have disastrous results if this continues, and I desperately plead for your guidance in these trying times, Wildmother. What am I to do?” She opened her beak agape and yawned her last few words out of her mouth. Her head drooping downward, she repeatedly murmured the question to herself before eventually falling asleep.

Upon opening her eyes, Beatrice quickly bolted them open, having found herself outside the comforts of the Wildmother's temple. She was instead in the midst of a vast field of flowers that stretched endlessly across the lands. Grasses danced with the soft breeze, and morning sunlight shone above them like a warm blanket. On occasion, clouds of cotton drifted through the pastel blue sky, offering shade to Beatrice as she looked around her unusual surroundings. However, what caught her eye the most was the shrine of the Wildmother. Although it was significantly smaller - approximately the same height as the average aarakocra - it still brought Beatrice great joy knowing it had come with her. With nothing but the whispers of the winds to witness her words, she held onto her holy symbol and bowed her head to pray.

"I know not where I am, but where there is nature, there is your presence, dear Wildmother. If you have heard my plea, I beg of you to help me. Will my expectations of being a healer loom over me forever?"

As if the winds themselves were speaking, Beatrice heard a divine, feminine voice weave within them. "Life and death are hand-in-hand. Forever never truly lasts, but it is up to the individual to decide what shall live and what shall die."

"But what are the decisions of the self compared to the decisions of others? If a pure heart is hurt for doing what they love, then is it worth being pure in the first place?"

"True purity resides only within the self. The graciousness of the wilds is only powerful by living for no one. Whether destroyed, twisted, or displaced, it always manages to thrive. It follows its own rules, and if some rules must be broken, then they shall."

Beatrice's plumage ruffled as she felt the winds blow a different direction. She turned around toward the shifting breeze and, still clutching her holy symbol, gradually spread out her wings. The rushing air, gentle land, and comforting warmth existed in perfect harmony all around her, and she closed her eyes, taking all of it in before murmuring one last question. "Wildmother, through the trials of skies, land, and seas, will you always be there for me?"

A moment after saying her words, Beatrice felt the slightest touch of something atop her head. She opened her eyes and turned back, but was only able to catch a mere glimpse of a certain figure. Long, tangled locks of hair enveloped her form, various plant life growing all around her like vines. She stood as tall as a great tree, with her skin the same shade as oaken bark. Despite how intimidating she seemed, a pleasant smile grew on her face, and bright, verdant green eyes looked directly at Beatrice's, who knew all too well that it was the Wildmother herself. However, by the time she blinked, she had suddenly returned to the temple, faint moonlight now dappling through branches and leaves with hints of stars twinkling up above.

Beatrice made a few hard blinks, wondering if the experience was simply a dream, only for her to catch something sliding off her head. It was a laurel wreath, its leaves as healthy as freshly revived nature in the spring - the same color as the Wildmother's gaze. A slight breeze

then dashed past her, whispering in the same voice from her vision. "My winds will always be there to guide you, Beatrice, no matter how faint or strong they may be. Do not forget that."

She was about to give thanks before a sudden voice echoed through the temple's chambers, making her plumage ruffle as she flinched. "Beatrice! We need your help again!"

"Coming!" She replied, knowing that it was the voice of another cleric in her clergy. However, before departing, Beatrice looked at the goddess' shrine and the laurel wreath. "Thank you for being with me, Wildmother," she quietly cooed, weaving divine magic together to envelop the gift in a soft, golden light. Placing it above her head, she then outstretched her wings, flapped them, then flew away.