

A SKY FULL OF  
SWIFTLETS



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A Sky Full of Swiftlets  
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Published by Visibility Fiction, 2013

When I was a child, the sky was full of swiftlets. I would wake up before dawn and wait for them. In between the liminal time of dawn and early morning, they would arrive, a flock of tiny dark shapes darting about in their own language of flight. I would watch them, wishing they would stop flying, because they were so fast, so *swift*.

Yet when I grew older, all I wanted was to see the swiftlets fly. That was when the Two-Headed came and turned my home into burning fields. That was the time when the sky was empty.

The Two-Headed were vile beasts who came in their shining ships, wielding their energy weapons. They bore the heads of Terran equines, hideous abominations with red eyes and sharp teeth. They plundered my home and forced us into hiding. I was young then, no more than eleven.

Jadeen taught me archery. We did not have energy weapons. We had seen the damage such weapons wrought. We fought back the way our ancestors had.

The Hiders attacked the Two-Headed in hit-and-run raids, destroying their camps, stealing their food, because they were consuming *ours*.

I was angry and I grew more so when I turned fourteen.

I cut my mane off on the Day of Light Winds, our New Year. It was a significant day. The harvest was done and the sun was warm, inviting. The fields would shimmer with the ripening gold *saleet*, the grain my home was known for. It was the day when the grandmothers would pound the grain into flour, before making the grilled buns filled with meat and chopped river chives.

It was the traditional day of plenty. Everyone looked forward to it. I cut my mane, telling myself it was my own rite of passage.

The surviving families had retreated into the *nashot* cliffs, tunnelling into the myriad caves. Swiftlets used to live in these caves, building their delicate bowl-shaped nests on the inner cave walls. Now they were gone, the caves bereft of their fluttering wings and high-pitched chirps. Where the swiftlets used to fly rose tiny fire places, surrounded by huddled groups of men, women and children.

We had all grown used to the layers of guano and the rippling sea of insects feeding on the dead and dying. Children had learnt how to cover their noses, ears and mouths when they slept.

Looking at my family and friends fuelled an anger within me. They should not be suffering like this. I stalked out of the cliffs, into the humid night, bow in my claws.

The night wind brought the scents to my nose. The *sula* trees so alive with amber sap. The vines of glow-blooms lighting the night path. Somewhere, a clear stream cut through the forest: sweet sweet *aqua*. We were the descendents of Terran colonists, but our bodies had evolved.

I smelled a rank disturbing scent, like rotting algae ponds: The Two-Headed.

My nose wrinkled. I licked my upper canines. They had not grown sharp yet. I had not come of age. My rite of passage was not over.

I crept purposefully forward, my night walk now a hunt. My feetpads moved quietly on the forest loam, feeling it warm and awake through the sensitive skin. There was a band of Two-Headed roving about. They were inching towards the *nashot* cliffs.

I got down on my knees, crawling. A part of me wanted to alert Jadeen, my father and the uncles. Or rally the grandmothers. For a moment I was afraid.

Their guttural snorts informed me that I was close. They were pacing in front of one of the least explored cliffs. The smell of guano was overwhelming. Their equine faces grimaced, showing their unnatural teeth. "Horses do not have sharp teeth," one of the old grandmothers had told me. She was the Storykeeper, protecting our histories. Except the Two-Headed were not horses.

They were beasts.

They stepped into a cave, their talons holding black cylinders, their energy weapons. I bared my teeth, my skin-hair bristling. I drew an arrow and nocked it, preparing to fire when ready. My heart thumped against my chest, vibrating against my ribcage.

Noises echoed around me. The cave had an unusually wide chamber with a soaring roof. My feet sank into a thick sludge of guano and I almost growled aloud in annoyance. The band of Two-Headed was in front of me, unaware of my presence.

There was a soft distinctive chirp. Like a whistle.

Another chirp answered it.

I stood stock-still, listening in disbelief. That chirp. That *song*. Could it be?

Slowly, half-awed, I looked up, seeing the tell-tale signs of nests. A couple of fleet dark shapes flew in the dim interior. Shadows moving in shadows.

My heart beat harder now. *Swiftlets!*

The fury within me solidified into hard red-hot steel. I fired the arrow. There was an unearthly howl, amplified by the cave chamber, and the sizzle of energy weapons being activated.

I ran.

“That was a stupid thing to do, Bei,” Jadeen snarled at me, his eyes bright with anger and worry. “Shooting in the dark like that. You could have gotten yourself killed!”

My father glared at me too. The womenfolk clustered nearby, wrapped in their patterned shawls, their eyes shining in the darkness.

“I am sorry,” I said, shaking my head vigorously, the short mane rustling against my nape. “But I saw something. Something important. The swiftlets are back!”

Jadeen's aged face lit up for a moment, before crumbling in on itself like brittle clay. “No. Impossible. They disappeared twelve circles ago.”

“It is true, Jadeen. I heard them.”

Whispers. The women talked among themselves, some of them pulling their shawls tighter, as if chilled.

“They disappeared. I saw the last nests burned,” Jadeen repeated, his tone strict. I stifled down a desire to yell at him to listen, *to listen to me*.

“I heard them, Jadeen. They are in the unexplored part of the *nashot* caves.” My claws balled into fists.

Jadeen looked at me levelly. He sighed deeply, slapping his hands on his thighs. He suddenly appeared older, more weary.

“Take us there, Bei.”

We headed towards the cliffs when we knew that the Two-Headed were not active. They were often inactive during the day. The sun seemed to hurt them. Jadeen was the first to enter the cave, followed by my father and the rest of the menfolk. I gripped my bow in my hand, smelling the guano and listening for the telltale chirp.

Second Uncle lifted the gas-light up, illuminating the entire chamber. The light flared, soaring up the cliff walls like a live flame. We followed the light, seeing the palm-sized nests woven from the spittle of swiftlets, clinging to the walls in the shape of crescent moons. I could see the wonder in everyone, the sparkle in their eyes. Silence. Amazement.

Jadeen picked an abandoned nest from the cave floor, examining it in his hand. “Tien!” He used the word for amazement. “*Tien!*”

“Now do you believe me?” I said, catching glimpses of tiny darting shapes above our heads.

Before Jadeen could answer, the sky collapsed.

The Two-Headed attack was unexpected. They used roaring bombs, crumbling the cliff walls.

The menfolk yelled their battle cries, launching themselves into combat. I shuddered, my bow before me, the arrow nocked. My hands shook. I wanted so much to fight. Protecting the swiftlets had become my passion, my own personal fight, but I was afraid.

Two-Headed soldiers fired their energy weapons. My loved ones were falling around me. I saw Jadeen mouthing something as he fell, a gaping wound on his left side. My uncles were trampled under cruel talons. They were bleeding from their mouths, choking on their own fluids. Yet they fought back, stabbing with their knives. Father battled a black-furred Two-Headed, slashing red gouges into its barrel chest with his *nif* dagger. Even in the heat of the battle, I found myself shocked that the Two-Headed bled red, just like us.

I must have shouted something. All I knew was my rage, bubbling up like the hot springs in the valley, incandescent and burning. Images passed before my eyes: my mother and the grandmothers making the grilled buns for the Day of Light Winds, their nimble fingers knitting the buns together; Jadeen teaching me how to hold the bow correctly; the *saleet* fields lush with life and hope; and the swiftlets dancing in the sky.

My *nif* dagger was in my hand. A red haze covered my vision. I tasted blood. Hot, metallic, edged with an odd sourness.

I stared into two pairs of crimson eyes and two large open maws with jagged teeth. My claws were smeared with fresh blood, tightly clenched around the hilt of my dagger. The blade was buried deep in a Two-Headed's chest.

With a guttural curse, I grounded the dagger deeper. The Two-Headed buckled, trying to throw me off. I could hear its laboured breathing. I bared my fangs.

The Two-Headed's mouths bled. Dark red blood, now coating my arms. I kicked my feet into its gut. I wanted it to *die*.

A violent spasm threw me backwards and I found myself flung away. The Two-Headed staggered towards me, my hilt jutting out from its chest. It was dying now, but its eyes still burned with hate.

I sobbed. My ribs felt as if they were broken into pieces. The last thing I saw was the Two-Headed reaching towards me.

“Shh,” said a feminine voice – *Ma?* – and I felt a gentle caress on my cheeks. I opened my eyes to see my aunt leaning over. “Drink this.” The edge of a bowl touched my lips and I sipped greedily, tasting the familiar bitterness of herbs.

I winced. My sides were terribly sore now, neatly bandaged up and held into place with a binding band.

“Where... *Ma?*” I spoke like a little girl and I hated it, even though I was weak and wobbly like a kid. I was fourteen, about to turn fifteen. I was growing up.

“She is with your father and Jadeen,” my aunt smiled sadly. “They are hurt badly, but they will live. We are strong people, Bei.” She squeezed my hand. “Strong people.”

She gathered her shawl and the half-finished bowl of herbal brew, moving away to tend to other injured. I saw my uncles, similarly bandaged, delirious with pain.

The women sang in the night, their voices reedy but sincere. Their song was of the swiftlets, silent and brave in the morning light. I listened, sobbing into my blankets.

Despite my mother's and aunt's stern reprimands, I managed to shuffle my way to the *nashot* cave. The week-old smell of the Two-Headed lingered in the air like rotten eggs. I let my senses guide my way. The cave beetles and insects had removed any traces of the skirmish, yet an echo of anger remained. I could feel it on my skin.

Sunlight was streaming down from cracks in the natural ceiling, bathing the chamber in gold. I raised my arms up, feeling the warmth. Yes, the nests were there. A few of them, not the hundreds of old, but they were there. I could hear them now. Their chirps. Their songs.

Something startled the swiftlets and they began to dart about in a mass of black wings and black bodies.

For a moment, the chamber was nothing but a swirling cloud of swiftlets. I drank in the sight, remembering it so I could tell my children if I lived that long.

“Bei.”

I turned around to see my teacher. “Jadeen.”

His eyes were fixed on the swiftlets, full of wonder. “This is amazing.”

“Yes.”

We watched the swiftlets in silence. The alarm over, they slowly settled and returned to their crescent-shaped nests.

“Bei, we have decided,” Jadeen said, hesitation in his voice. “We are moving.”

A splash of cold shock hit me, followed by indescribable fury. “*No!*”

“We have to. The Two-Headed know where we are.”

“No! What about the swiftlets? Do they not need protection too?”

“Bei, the village needs our protection. Think about the women, the children.”

“No! What about our memories of the swiftlets? Do you want our children and their children to forget about the swiftlets?”

I must have crossed a line. In my state I dared to cross many. A claw swiped across my cheek. Jadeen glared at me. “We have no choice, Bei.”

“We have a choice. We can choose to fight back!”

“No.”

I lifted a trembling hand and touched my stinging cheek, both ashamed and angry. I watched Jadeen walk away, limping from his injuries, and I watched my childhood leave with him.

So I did what I could.

I cut my mane off on the Day of Light Winds. While the women made the grilled buns and the village prepared to celebrate, I threw my mane into the wind and made my way alone into the wilderness.

I had grown up, I told myself, the wind cold against my exposed scalp. I sucked in a lungful of air, trying to feel brave.

The swiftlets would fly again.

--The End--