

NIGHTFALL

by Kirstie Olley

Marrille could hear Sario coming before he reached the library. Unlike all the other members of their flock, he wasn't born from dove stock. His bones were still hollow to allow for flight like theirs, but he was an eagle: taller, thicker, more muscular. You could hear that extra weight in his footsteps.

As Marrille shifted to hide behind some book cases, tucking her wings in close, she heard the faint tapping, almost muffled by Sario's footfalls, that meant someone else was with him.

Marrille clutched the book to her chest and hoped it wasn't her mother.

"Smidling, there's no point in hiding, we all know yer in here." Sario's voice boomed as he stepped through the entrance. His voice always boomed, probably because of his massive chest, so big and round it put wine barrels to shame.

She sighed. He was right. They would find her and she'd only be in more trouble for hiding.

"I'm back here," she called. "I've been running numbers and checking facts."

"Not again." Her mother's sigh caused Marrille's feathers to bristle like echidna quills.

"I just think we should be rationing harder, and trying to find food sources that don't require sunlight. I know we have a great store of gems from the mine so we can buy anything we want now, but once people start realising the crops are growing scarcer the prices are going to shoot up and—"

"What's this nonsense about crops?"

Marrille edged forward, heart leaping. Finally, her mother was asking questions too.

"There's talk from the farmers, the crops aren't growing as well. Some people say that time is still moving forward, that the sun is weakening and night will fall soon."

"Gossip from farmers is not fact. This flock has survived the last twenty nine years of dusk, we will continue to survive as we are. Besides, The Last Lords broke the World Clock so night would forever be held back."

"I think the Last Lords made a mistake. Time is still moving in so many ways: we age, crops grow, normal watches still keep time – it's only the sky and seasons that have been halted. They might have made a mistake—"

"They broke it because dusk had lingered a whole year, they calculated Nightfall would last long enough to kill every living thing that needs sunlight. They broke the clock to buy time to save us all but heavens help us they killed themselves doing it. Now no more of this." By the end her mother's voice was shrill, her face darkening.

"But—"

"Enough!" Her mother's voice echoed amongst the books. She'd puffed up her feathers too, showing her dominance as flock leader. "I'll have no more talk of this."

Marrille opened her mouth to argue. She wanted to explain how she thought the broken World Clock might also extend Nightfall, but her mother's eyes thinned to razors and cut her words down.

"Marrille, you're not a fledgling anymore, you need to stop playing with books and work

harder. You have good wings, you'll be flying out with Sario for more food tomorrow morning. See there, what you wanted, more rations. Now go to your nest and get some rest."

Even as she stomped out Marrille's mother's feet made less noise than Sario's. Sario waited, looming over Marrille, his arms folded across his chest while his banded wings lay flat against his back.

"Why do yeh provoke her, smidling?" he asked, a smirk on his lips.

"I don't try to provoke her, I just want what's best for the flock. It's going to be my job one day, and I want there to be a flock when that day comes. If we don't find alternate food sources and start planning for Nightfall better I'm not sure that day will come."

Sario brushed his arms from elbow to wrist swiftly at the mention of Nightfall. It still surprised Marrille every time to see the giant eagle being so superstitious. He was so large he should have nothing to fear, but Nightfall did that to a lot of people.

"Yeh'll be a great leader." He smiled down at her. "I'll keep trying to convince her to listen but, well, yeh know how she is."

Marrille rolled her eyes but smiled too.

"So I imagine yeh'll be here for a few more hours then?" Sario asked, making toward the door.

"Mmmhmm." Marrille was already re-opening the huge book at her side filled with information on the Last Lords.

"I'll come back for yeh later. Just don't tell yer mother."

Marrille nodded, eyes already fixed to the scribblings on the page as the guard left her alone.

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The tips of Marrille's toes rested on empty air, the rest of her feet on wind-worn granite. The sky shone deep orange, far to the east it mottled purple like an ugly bruise. It was mid-morning but the sky glowed with dusk. The sky didn't change colour with the day like the books claimed it once had. What must it be like to watch the sunrise, or see the blinding light of midday when, supposedly, the sun rode so high your shadow was a murky puddle at your feet?

"Ready, smidling?" Sario asked, removing his cloak to free his wings and stuffing it in one of the baskets hooked on his arm.

Sometimes Marrille wondered how someone as large as Sario could fly. Wouldn't all that muscle weigh him down?

He fluffed his wings, gave them a partial stretch then threw himself over the edge. His wings caught the wind as they unfolded and her answer lay there. Just one of his wings stretched wider than her entire wingspan. He gave his pinions the slightest twitch and banked so he could swoop close.

"C'mon, smidling," he called.

Marrille pouted. When would he stop calling her his old-fashioned name for fledgling? Still, better than treating her like an actual fledgling as her mother did.

Refusing to look back at her mother, Marrille unfurled her wings and leaped out into the open air. The wind caught in her feathers and they pulled taut in her skin.

They glided for a while, the wind perfect. Below the craggy grey and black rocks gave way to a tangling bramble of green and brown.

Abruptly the verdance of the forest changed into the red and beige of an unnatural desert. Beneath her, silver and shadow speckled the orange sands. The gigantic gears of the World Clock sunk into the shifting sands of the desert.

The Desert of Gears they called it, though she'd seen an atlas made before dusk and it hadn't been a desert, just mountains called the Molhraving Range. She'd read in one book the sand wasn't even real sand, but rather tiny fragments of the World Clock.

The currents changed and flight required more effort. Marrille shifted slightly behind and to the side of Sario so she could coast in his slipstream, but it wasn't as smooth and easy as when there were more of them than just two.

With nothing but the dusk sky around for miles it was impossible to not think of Nightfall. *How can superstitious Sario fly a straight line like that out here?* She wondered, looking at him as he flew just ahead of her. *It must scare the wimbles out of him, but he never lets it show.*

Without warning a sudden gust slammed into her side, flipping her over, splaying wings and legs akimbo.

Marrille dropped. The ground rushed up with terrifying speed. She beat her wings, pinions raking at the sky like fingers scrabbling for purchase on a cliff face. She kept plummeting.

Orange sand raced for her while her wings and heart beat a hard staccato together.

Just above the sand she managed to catch enough wind beneath her that her fall plateaued. She coasted on the wind, her plunge over but her heart still thundering.

Grains of sand skimmed below her, close enough to touch. She should touch them, even if just to see if they really were fragments of the World Clock so fine as to imitate sand.

"Marrille!" Sario's voice sounded unusually shrill. In all her life she'd only heard him call her by name twice: the day she first flew and fell too far, and the day her father died.

"Marrille!"

"I'm here. Still on wing." She banked around a massive charred gear, coasting on the breeze and came to perch atop it. Sario soared overhead, spotted her and landed beside her.

"Last Lords, yeh gave me a heart attack."

"I lost the wind, I wasn't prepared. I won't let my concentration waver again," she said, averting her eyes, hot-faced.

Something twinkled in the sand, catching her eye. Curiosity made her leap from the gear, wings flaring to slow her descent.

Sand was the strangest thing she'd ever felt beneath her feet. It shifted and gave, like damp dirt, but slid in a different way. She looked at her feet, marvelling at the thousands of tiny granules beneath them. The dusk light made the colours shift from beige to gold to tan to orange. Beautiful, but the lack of certainty in each step felt treacherous. This may be the closest a ground-bound person came to experiencing the risks of flight. You never knew when the wind might change. You never knew when the sand might shift.

She tottered forward, slow cautious steps to where she had seen the glimmering at the base of another gear.

"Smidling, what're yeh doing?" called Sario, unwilling to land on the ground because his weight meant he couldn't take off from there.

"Just a moment, I saw something." She walked into the long shadow of the gear. Stuck in the sand by the base lay a staff, like in the pictures of the Last Lords, or the older mystics.

Marrille stooped, reaching out. The staff didn't want to leave the gear at first, sticking

tight, but Marrille pulled again and it came away with a jolt.

On closer inspection the staff wasn't as magnificent as one of the Last Lord's staffs. Those were always drawn as long as their owner was tall, with grandiose designs on top. This staff wasn't quite as long as her arm. The end looked like a key. It might have been a nasty mace if not for its light heft and slender haft. The staff resembled the remnants of the World Clock, ancient, ruined, but somehow still strong, easily going to outlast her own bones.

"Smidling, hurry up. You know it's best not to linger."

"Look what I found!" Marrille held her find aloft.

"Fine, yeh can keep it, but hurry 'n take off. Yeh always want to look at all the other types of people when we get to town and I don't want to be late returning."

Marrille sighed. Who wouldn't want to pause and admire all of the scales, tails, fur and fins of the other races? She swore last visit she'd seen a stone skin lumbering, large and pitted like granite, but Sario had dragged her off before she could look closer.

She reached up for a tooth of the nearby gear, grabbing hold and hauling herself up. She scrambled up three more and gauged that this should be enough height to take off from. She waited for a good gust of wind and launched.

Sario followed suit, and though the wind stole the words he grumbled, she could still tell he was muttering. She held the staff in one hand, keeping it close against her chest to minimise wind resistance. It felt warm nestled so close.

A flock of hawks burst from a pile of rubble, shrieking at the sight of prey.

Sario bellowed a war cry and hurtled forward. "Fly back to the eyrie, I'll hold them back!"

At their core the hawks were birds like she and Sario, but they were darker, large claws grew from their fingers, and their faces beaked more. They covered their faces and bodies with warpaint and looked unwashed.

They shot toward Sario and Marrille watched, frozen.

"Get going!" he screamed, diving to crash into the nearest foe, muscles flexing.

Marrille beat her wings, hastening her escape, but her gut wrenched. Four against one, even if that one was Sario? She couldn't roll on those odds.

She turned, spotted her target, and folded her wings, plummeting. She was smaller than him, but with gravity on her side – and luck too perhaps – she would smash him right out of the sky.

Her target raised his head, looking away from Sario who wrestled two others in mid-air. He saw her and spun, dodging. She would have rocketed right past him, but she thrust out the staff and it slammed into his shoulder with a meaty thud and a sick crunch.

The hit jolted, jarring her from her flight path. With some awkward flapping she righted herself and pounded her way skyward to help Sario.

She raised the staff again, high overhead. It felt heavier and seemed to be trembling in her hands. Her wings flapped madly to keep her aloft as she maneuvered into position. Then she slammed the end down on a hawk's head.

Out of the sand nearby a giant silver gear rose, grains of sand glittering as they fell from it. Marrille could feel an extra weight dragging on the end of her staff. Her glance flicked between the weapon in her hands and the floating gear, the she smiled and swung the staff at the nearest hawk. Her swing fell short, but the gear rocketed toward him.

Most of the hawks turned. Menace faded from faces streaked with ochre and they fled.

Marrille grinned and turned. She pointed the ornate end at the only hawk who wasn't

fleeing, a woman with a fistful of Sario's crest, raking her claws across his face. The gear altered direction, now flying at the woman.

Sario struggled to disengage, losing a handful of crest feathers in the move.

The gear slammed into the hawk with a *whud* that dropped her from the sky, then Marrille moved the staff and sent the gear hurtling back into the desert. The sand flew up in a wave as the gear sank back home.

Sario looked at Marrille with wide eyes. She stared down at the weapon in her hands. He brushed his hands, elbow to wrist and asked, "What is that thing?"

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Marrille sat in the steaming hot spring soaking the agony from her muscles. After the fight with the hawks Sario had insisted they still needed to fetch the provisions. Flying home with the stuffed-full baskets alone would have strained her, but thanks to the fight by the time the eyrie came into sight Marrille had wondered if she was going to make it back at all.

There had been praise for her on their return; it wasn't often a little dove could face down hawks. Sario hadn't mentioned anything about the staff's powers, only that she had wielded it like a mace. They'd shared a look then, an awkward 'we'll talk about this in private first' kind of look.

Among her sweat-soaked clothes at the spring edge lay the staff. She didn't like it that far away from her. It felt wrong. The staff was important. She'd found it for a reason. That thought was terrifying and exhilarating – like her first free fall.

As she stared at it she wondered how it controlled the gears, but another thought crept in, something that made her eyes slowly widen.

Finally she could do something about Nightfall.

She dried herself hastily and raced to her room to re-dress.

After belting her wrap on she headed for the library, bare feet slapping on the stone. She'd need a book on clockwork, ideally something about repairing watches or clocks. It would be a good idea to grab something about surviving in the desert too. She looked around, wondering what else to grab.

"Marrille, was that you?" her mother's voice echoed behind her as she ran into her room, arms packed full of books.

"Yes, Mother."

"Did you see the dress I picked out for you?"

Marrille looked at it. Her mouth twisted. "Yeah, but I've got something I have to go do."

"And what is more important than eating dinner?"

"I have to rebuild the World Clock."

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"You can't be serious about this!" her mother's voice shrilled.

Marrille stood on the eyrie's launchpad for the second time that day. The wind beat at her, far rougher than that morning.

"I have to do this, Mother."

"You must not! The Last Lords broke the World Clock with good reason."

"I think they were wrong. Time needs to be fixed."

"You're only a child, what would you know of things?"

Marrille glared with the ferocity of a hawk. The staff vibrated in her hand. "I'm not a fledgling anymore, I'm eighteen."

"If you do this, I'll disown you." Her mother spoke so slow and calm Marrille froze where she stood.

The whole flock gathered around them, making Marrille's shame public. She looked at their faces, trying to see if anyone believed she had the right of it. Faces turned to avoid locking eyes.

She looked at the twins, her younger sisters. Their eyes brimmed with tears, but they looked away. One sister buried her head in the other's shoulder, the taller one never even glanced at her.

Her gaze fell on Herthall, the blond boy she'd kissed not that long ago. He'd rejected her afterward because she spent more time in the library than with him. It was no surprise he looked away so quickly he surely wrenched his neck.

Fine by her. She'd only kissed him to see what it was like anyway.

Every face turned from her, and with each one that glanced away her bones felt heavier – if she was this heavy could she fly?

Her eyes fell finally on the man who stood closest to her: Sario.

"If yeh do this ye'll bring on Nightfall." His face was stonier than the granite of the eyrie. "I won't help."

Now her bones were stone too. She'd never survive if she jumped from the launchpad. Her eyes stung. Sario turning away hurt worse than the entire rest of the flock.

"Marrille, if you stop now I'll forgive this flight of folly. Come back from the edge." Her mother held out a hand to her, enticing her back.

"I'm sorry. This is what I have to do."

"Then this is what I have to." Her mother's voice shook. The out-stretched hand grabbed now, fingers closing tight around Marrille's feathers. "I can't let you do this." She yanked. There was a moment of resistance, Marrille's skin tried to stick with the feathers, pulling away from her bones and muscle for an instant, but then the feathers wrenched free and Marrille cried out.

This is the original beginning of Nightfall, from the anthology 18. You can read the full story with the newer opening by grabbing a copy from <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00K4CNEJW>