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BEASTLANDS

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BEAST LANDS

RACE TO FROSTFALL MOUNTAIN

JESS FRENCH

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*For all the brilliant beasts of our world,
to whom we owe everything.*



PROLOGUE

*Before there were people, there were beasts.
Before there were beasts, there were plants.
Before there were plants, there was an island.
Before there was an island, there was ocean . . .*

In the first age, an island was born. Made from the fiery lava of underwater volcanoes, it rose from the sea in a roiling dance of steam and waves. When the molten rock finally cooled, it formed a mass of land that was barren and lifeless, except for a tendrinous purple fungus that lay deep in its heart. Gradually the fungus sprawled its way up through the earth and over the land, new life sprouting in every place it touched.

In the second age, the plants came, flourishing in the rich volcanic soil. On the slopes of the island's only surface volcano, Mount Ataria, there grew a turquoise jungle, strung with climbers and vines. In the south was a deciduous forest, where the leaves turned red and gold as the seasons changed. And to the west the banks of

the watery fjords were colonised by mosses, lichens and enormous flowers.

In the third age, came the beasts. From tiny creepers scuttling over rocks to treetop acrobats leaping from bough to bough, they evolved to thrive across the island's many habitats. Huge winged creatures ruled the skies while colossal ocean beasts lurked in the shadowy seas. Beasts were everywhere; the air was thick with the scent of them and their squeaks and roars echoed through the mountains and forests.

In the fourth age, the first people arrived. They called themselves Lia'Oua – the people of the island – and they named the island Ramoa. They lived alongside the beasts and plants in harmony, taking from and giving back to the land in equal measure.

But in the fifth age, a new wave of settlers came from across the Viridian Sea. They found Ramoa to be wild, unfriendly and filled with monstrous beasts. They brought blades and fire and a hunger to conquer. As they slashed the trees and hunted the beasts they could not tame, the island whispered to the Lia'Oua, prophesying a time of great ruin. Wanting no part in the destruction, the Lia'Oua went underground, making a new home for themselves deep beneath the Shivertips. The settlers never saw the Lia'Oua, but they told stories of a legendary people that crept beneath the earth, whom they called Shadow Ghouls.

Where once the island and its beings had lived in harmony, there grew a divide between humans and all

other living creatures. The new settlers created three distinct realms and fortified their cities to keep out the beasts. The Fjordlanders created Freyavik, a city suspended over the water on sky bridges and stilts, the people of the Ashlands made their home in the hot caldera of Mount Ataria, and in the south, where the forests had been totally decimated, the Southlanders built a huge walled city, which they called Sophiatown.

Everything outside of these civilisations became known as the Beastlands, a wild and dangerous place where humans must not roam. The city walls protected their people from almost all beasts, save for the mighty winged creatures who could soar over them. To rid themselves of this final threat, the people of the Realms trained warriors to slay the sky beasts. The Fjordlanders had Tree Wraiths, who fought with poison blow darts, the Atarians had Scorched Ataris, who fought with fire and spears, and the Southlanders had Elites, who fought with bow and arrow. They were all efficient beast-hunters and eventually only two species of large winged beast remained: the warm-blooded pangron and the largest of all flying beasts, the mighty phaegra.

Eventually the Elites found a way to capture and enslave the pangrons, taking their eggs out of the Beastlands and hoarding them in watery caves deep below Sophiatown. They learned to ride the creatures and renamed themselves 'Sky Riders', adapting their bows and arrows into knucklebows, which were worn on the hand and more easily portable on pangron-back. Once the pangrons were

tamed, only the most fearsome of the winged beasts, the phaebras, were left.

The realms threw all of their resources into killing the phaebras until finally, on what became known as Vanquish Day, the last phaebra was destroyed. Each realm claimed the victory as their own. But even then, with the threat of the beasts extinguished, the settlers could not rest. They feared the other realms would invade and take over the cities they had fought so hard to build, so they kept their warriors ready, just in case.

Now, centuries later, the winds of prophecy are whispering again, foretelling a time of danger and great change. *Perhaps, say the whispers, a sixth age is coming . . .*



Sophiatown

‘Faro, *wait!*’

Kayla Karakka thundered along the narrow street in pursuit of her pangron, her leather boots smacking hard against the cobbles. Ahead of her, Faro was approaching the end of the street, where market sellers were setting up for the evening’s celebrations. He was too big to squeeze comfortably between the stone wall and the stalls, but he showed no sign of decelerating.

‘Slow down!’ Kayla shouted. ‘Faro, stop! You’ll break something!’

But she was too late. As he turned the corner, Faro lost his balance, instinctively opening his wings to steady himself. His right wingtip clipped a large pot of

spices, sending it crashing to the ground. Yellow powder cascaded over the cobbles.

The spice merchant shook his fist in the air. ‘Whose pangron is that?’ he shouted. ‘You should have that beast under control!’

‘Disgraceful,’ agreed another. ‘All pangrons should be safely locked away in the Academy.’

Kayla grimaced. She knew the rules. Pangrons were meant to be kept under close supervision, not running wild through the city. But Faro needed to stretch his legs and wings.

‘He’s mine,’ she called. ‘He didn’t mean any harm. I’ll pay you for the damage.’ She pulled a money pouch from her belt and jogged up to the stall, handing the seller her two largest coins.

‘A cadet,’ he grumbled. ‘Could’ve guessed it. You need to learn to keep your pangron in check. They’re dangerous beasts – someone could get killed.’

Kayla bit her tongue and her hand went immediately to her necklace, a shard of the eggshell Faro had hatched from a year earlier strung on a length of brown leather. It wouldn’t help to tell the merchant Faro was the gentlest, most loving creature she had ever known. The other citizens of Sophiatown only tolerated pangrons because they kept the city safe. They were weapons, not companions. Kayla did her best to pretend she felt the same way, but it was hard when Faro was the single most important thing in her life.

‘Give her a break,’ a nearby cloth seller chimed in.

‘If we come under attack, you’ll be glad to have our Sky Riders to protect you.’

‘With discipline like that they’ll be no good to anyone,’ replied the spice merchant. He wagged a finger at Kayla. ‘If I see your pangron loose again, I’ll be telling your wing commander.’

Kayla hung her head. She knew he was right. She loved Faro’s clumsiness and boundless enthusiasm, but if she was to improve her standing at the Sky Academy she would have to learn to control him in public. Being the daughter of a criminal was not an easy reputation to shake off. If news of this encounter got back to the Academy, Kayla would be in serious trouble. Wing Commander Barash already used any excuse to criticise Kayla and Faro, but a flagrant rule-breaking episode like this risked getting Kayla suspended, and that would mean losing Faro, which was simply not an option.

‘Sorry,’ Kayla mumbled. ‘You’re right. I’ll send him back to the stables. It won’t happen again.’

The merchant returned to his spices, shaking his head, and Kayla glanced around. Faro was out of sight now, but he had left a trail of yellow pawprints for her to follow. She raced past the rest of the market stalls, lungs burning with the exertion. She could hardly blame Faro for being excited. He had just spent three days locked in an underwater cave in the centre of the city. It contained a secret lake where the pangrons laid new eggs for Academy hopefuls. Earlier in the afternoon this year’s prospective cadets had each been let into the cave to swim

down and claim an egg of their own. Kayla had only been inside the cave once herself, during her own initiation this time last year. She remembered it to be a dark and mysterious place – for an animal used to flying every day, being shut down there for so long must have been torture. It hadn't been much fun for Kayla either; while her fellow cadets had sat around the watchtower playing cards and chatting, ignoring Kayla, she had taken to pacing the city walls, counting the minutes until Faro's return.

The pawprints led her through a tall archway into the city's walled gardens. On the grass, Faro was standing on all fours with his wings, which doubled as front legs, folded neatly by his sides. Kayla watched as he shook himself, releasing a cloud of dust from his shaggy red coat. He could do with a dip in the ocean to clean himself properly, but since the quarantine rules had come into effect, no one had been allowed to leave the city – even when flying.

As he swung his lean body vigorously from side to side, Faro's jowls flapped wildly, and a string of slobber flew in Kayla's direction, making her duck and squeal. At the sound of her voice, Faro looked over. His head was large and wide, covered in the same red fur as his body. When he saw Kayla, he reared up onto his powerful hind legs and unfolded his wide leathery wings. He looked enormous when he stretched himself like that. Usually Kayla's head reached just below his shoulder, but when he stood up he suddenly seemed about four times larger. Unlike the rest of his body, Faro's wings were totally hairless, the soft skin stretched so tightly over his bones

you could see the pulsing of the veins beneath.

The merchant's worries hadn't been baseless; pangrons had the potential to be deadly predators. But Kayla didn't see Faro like that. She was far more interested in the soft dark fur of his belly, which she loved to rub after a long day of archery drills, the vibrations that rumbled through his deep chest as he purred by the fire and the weight of his head as he snored on her lap. Of course, Faro had a powerful arsenal of weaponry at his disposal – sharp teeth and powerful jaws, a whip-like tail and razor-sharp talons – but those things did not define him any more than Kayla's knucklebow defined her.

'You have to stop running off like that,' she said, pushing her right hand into the thick fur of his neck and giving him a scratch. 'We'll get into serious trouble.'

Faro turned to look at her, his golden eyes sparkling mischievously. He lowered his head, as if asking her to stroke between his ears, but when she leaned in he gently headbutted her in the stomach, knocking her onto her bottom.

'Faro!' she protested, swatting him away. He pushed back, leaning over her and giving out a loud snort of hot, stinky air. 'Eugh, fish breath.' She grimaced as he ran his huge bristly tongue over her face, covering her in pangron drool. 'You could have at least cleaned your teeth.'

She didn't really mind, of course. She had spent the first twelve years of her life desperate to have a pangron of her own. Perhaps because of the tales her mother had whispered to her by candlelight when she was young, of

incredible sky beasts, freely roaming the skies, or maybe it was simply the desire to have someone she could rely on. Whatever the motivation, now that she had Faro, she wasn't going to take a second of it for granted.

He gave a deep, rumbling purr.

'I missed you too.' She rubbed his cheek roughly with her fingertips. Faro was Kayla's best – and only – friend. She couldn't imagine what her life would be like if she hadn't passed her initiation last year. Getting here hadn't been an easy journey. Considering who Kayla's mother was, nobody had wanted Kayla to succeed. But despite the obstacles the Academy had put in her way, last year Kayla had been one of the fastest hopefuls to retrieve a pangron egg from the Great Lake, and so she was enrolled as a Sky Cadet in Sophiatown's prestigious Sky Academy. Two moons later, Faro had hatched, and now he and Kayla were inseparable. Attitudes to Kayla within the Academy were still frosty, but she was determined to prove she and Faro deserved their places there as much as any other pair.

Kayla pushed Faro off and leaped to her feet. She had promised to take him back to the stables – and she would – but she felt sure they had time for a quick flight first. They wouldn't be long. The Initiation Day celebrations would be starting soon – and wouldn't let up until the end of Vanquish Day tomorrow.

'Are you ready?' she asked. Stupid question. Faro had been ready the moment she had picked him up from the cave.

He took a step backwards and dipped his head, inviting his rider to climb aboard. Kayla ran her hand gently along the mottled chestnut fur of his neck, leaned her weight into his body and swung her right leg deftly over his shoulder. As she tucked her heels under Faro's wings and grabbed his scruff, Kayla felt her body instantly relax. This was so familiar, so comfortable. While she was riding Faro she didn't need to worry about making friends or being expelled from the Academy. She could simply exist.

Faro took a few short paces, then Kayla shifted her weight forward and his gait changed once more. With a couple of bounds he was in the sky, his huge wings spread wide, cutting easily through the crisp air. As they rose, the Viridian Sea came into sight – wide and green. If only they were allowed to fly beyond the city walls.

Buzzzzzz.

A small winged hexapod zipped past them, dazzling sapphire wings glinting in the fading sun. It brushed by Kayla's ear then darted in front of her. Kayla pressed her heels gently into Faro's sides, nudging him to chase it. He understood immediately and shot upwards in pursuit.

The hexapod changed direction, darting suddenly to the right, but Faro didn't miss a beat. Kayla leaned into the turn, watching the gap between her pangron and the hexapod grow smaller and smaller. It was almost too easy. There was no creature in all the Realms that could fly like a pangron.

She wondered briefly if the phaegras of legend would

have given them some competition. Presumably not, considering it was the Sky Riders who had wiped the phaegras out in the first place. At the Academy, Kayla had learned how the first Sky Riders had captured pangrons and domesticated them, before using them to fly up to the phaegras' treetop nests and destroy them. Thanks to the valiant efforts of those early Sky Riders, Sophiatown and the rest of the realms were now safe from all beasts.

Faro closed in on the hexapod and Kayla imagined herself as one of those original riders, tearing through the sky in pursuit of a phaegra. She reached out a hand to snatch the hexapod from the air. Not quite close enough. She urged Faro on, stretching her arm as far as she could reach. Her fingertips brushed the fly's buzzing wings. It was almost within her grasp –

‘Sky Cadet Karakka, descend immediately!’

The shout from below broke Kayla's attention. *Don't look down*, she thought to herself. Wing Major Flynn, her flying instructor, was forever reminding Kayla to ‘look forward, stay focused, align with your pangron’. But it was too late. Her automatic reaction to turn towards the source of the sound had made Faro slow down, unable to read her instructions. The hexapod zipped away out of sight and Kayla cursed under her breath.

She leaned forward, peeking through the gap between Faro's wing and his head, to see a woman in uniform, with a grey-furred pangron at her side, waiting in the walled garden below. Wing Commander Barash. Kayla

gave an inward groan and shifted her weight, signalling to Faro to descend. He flapped his wings and turned a loose, lazy circle as he returned to the ground.

Commander Barash's hands were on her hips and she was tapping her foot impatiently. She wore the traditional Sky Rider uniform of leather riding trousers and purple jacket. Her hair was pulled into an immaculate bun. When Kayla graduated from the Academy she would be granted her own purple jacket, but for now she wore the yellow of the cadets. Kayla pulled awkwardly at her jacket's tails, wishing she had pressed it that morning. She didn't want her wing commander to have *another* reason to criticise her.

As Faro landed neatly on the grass, Kayla slipped off his back and stood to attention, raising two fingers to her temple in salute. 'Ma'am.'

'No flying today,' Commander Barash said sternly.

'Why?' Kayla protested. 'The initiation ceremony finished hours ago!'

'I gave you an order,' snapped the woman. 'Back to your quarters immediately. There's a citywide curfew.' She glanced at Faro. 'And stable your pangron until further instruction.'

Citywide curfew? Kayla had never known that to happen before.

'But when will we –'

'So many questions,' Commander Barash interrupted. 'Just like your mother.'

Kayla felt her face flush. She was *nothing* like her

mother. She gritted her teeth and stared defiantly back.

Commander Barash narrowed her eyes. ‘To the stables,’ she repeated. ‘Now.’

Kayla saluted and responded with a polite ‘yes, ma’am’, but it took all her self-control to do so. She marched back down the cobbled path towards the Academy, Faro padding quietly behind her, until they were back at the marketplace, where he headbutted her in the bottom.

‘Thanks for that, fluff brain,’ Kayla said. Faro rubbed himself along her side, purring noisily. He knew she wasn’t happy. ‘It’s just not fair.’ She scratched his cheek. ‘We haven’t been flying for days. And why can’t Commander Barash see that I’m nothing like my mother? I’m not trying to change anything about the Academy, or the way we use our pangrons. I’m just trying to fit in! It’s like she’s constantly waiting for me to slip up.’

She leaned into his body and sighed, taking comfort from his purrs, which rumbled right through her. As they stood there together, Kayla realised that the marketplace was unusually – eerily – quiet. When she had been here earlier it had been bustling with people, but now there was nobody. Candles flickered in the evening breeze, casting shadows over the empty stalls. Where had everyone gone? Was this to do with the curfew?

In the distance a bell tolled. Kayla’s heart pounded. That was the emergency signal for Sky Riders to patrol the city, all cadets knew that, but outside of practice drills, Kayla had never heard it ring. Had something happened? Was that why she wasn’t allowed to go flying?

Maybe one of the other realms was attacking!

She led Faro quickly through the deserted marketplace, passing the now-unattended spice stand, its grumpy merchant nowhere to be seen. Yellow footsteps criss-crossed the cobbles, suggesting the sellers had left the square in a hurry. They headed down a narrow alley, Kayla now keen to get back to the safety of the Academy, until a gust of wind whistled by, carrying voices. Faro's ears flicked up, swivelling in search of the sound. They stopped as whispered words swirled around them.

‘. . . can't be true . . .’

‘. . . on Initiation Day of all days . . .’

Then words that struck fear into Kayla's heart: ‘. . . a pangron . . . missing.’

Her blood ran cold. How could a pangron be missing? They'd all been underground for three days and had only been released an hour ago.

More whispers drifted down the alley.

‘I heard it was stolen . . .’

Stolen? Surely not. Sophiatown was the most fiercely guarded city in all the Realms. There were no greater warriors than its Sky Riders. Besides, it didn't seem possible that a pangron could be taken against its will. Something didn't add up.

‘You're not sleeping in the stables tonight,’ Kayla whispered as she turned back to Faro. ‘Come with me.’ She darted down another alley, glancing nervously around to check they hadn't been spotted.

The Academy handbook was clear that pangrons

should spend every night in the Academy stables, but Faro almost never did. And if there was a chance the pangrons were in danger, there was no way Kayla was letting him out of her sight.

At the end of the alley they approached a huge heap of barrels piled next to a basement door. The distillery – a building Kayla knew all too well, even better than the Academy watchtower where she now lived with the other cadets. After her mum had been imprisoned when Kayla was nine, she'd needed a place to live and a way to earn her keep, somewhere that would give her the best chance of getting into the Academy. Luckily, Padrig Shion, the city's Master Distiller, had given Kayla a job. He had worked her hard but treated her fairly and paid her enough to survive until she had passed the Initiation. She'd spent many an evening hauling barrels through this very door, her eyes always lingering on the towering spires of the Academy over the road.

They were so close – if they could make it across the street without being caught they would be safely back at home.

But suddenly Faro lurched forward, grabbing the tails of Kayla's flying jacket and yanking her into the shadows.

Moments later, a voice rang out. 'I'm just going to check down here. I thought I heard something.'

Kayla turned desperately to Faro, worried he would be seen, but he had already melted into the evening shadows. Kayla pushed herself back against the barrels, hardly daring to breathe. She watched as a city guard

took a few steps down the alley then retreated, calling out to his squadron, 'Must have been a mudrat. There's nothing there.'

'Thanks, boy,' Kayla whispered. If they had been caught, the guards would have forced Faro to go back to the stables. 'Wait here.' She gestured that he should stay. 'I'll check the coast is clear. Listen for my signal.'

She scurried past the barrels and poked her head out into the street. A group of guards lingered by the corner, deep in conversation.

'It's the prince's pangron, you know?' one of them said.

Kayla's eyes almost popped out of her head. Prince Ethun was in her year at the Academy. His slender tawny pangron, Ezra, was guarded by the palace's own personal security.

'It never returned from the cave.'

'Some people are saying it contracted the Scourge and the palace is trying to cover it up.'

Rumours about the Scourge, a sickness said to have been spreading through the other realms, had been bouncing around for a while now. Sophiatown had quarantined immediately and there hadn't been a single case inside its walls as a result. Kayla's city had always been selective about who was allowed in and out, but for the last year not a soul had passed through its gates. Even fully fledged Sky Riders had been forbidden from landing outside the walls so they wouldn't catch the Scourge and bring it into Sophiatown.

‘I heard the pangron was taken from *inside the city*,’ said another. ‘That’s why they’ve imposed a curfew. They think the thief is still on the loose.’

Kayla fought to remain calm. A thief in the city? She urgently needed to get Faro into the watchtower, but how in the Realms was she meant to do that with a bunch of guards stood right outside? She hurried back to Faro.

‘Bad news,’ she said quietly. ‘There’s no chance we’re getting you home that way. We’ll have to think of something else.’

Her pangron looked at her with his big golden eyes, and Kayla felt a pang in her chest. Sometimes it was actually painful to love something as much as she loved Faro. How could the other cadets have left their pangrons in the stables? After three days of separation, Kayla didn’t want to spend another second apart from him.

She tore her eyes away from her pangron and once again noticed the wooden barrels stacked up outside the distillery. A thought took shape and her skin prickled with excitement. ‘I have an idea. Come on!’