

THE LORD OF THE CUCKOOS

Chapter 1

Pindar was supposed to have been killed, along with all the other birds in the forest who had the misfortune to be unhatched inside their eggs the night that Kukhachak the Cuckoo led his raid against every nest in the forest. But Pindar survived. He alone survived. Here's the story of what happened to this premature runt of a pigeon, and how he became the unwilling leader of all the birds and animals of the land.

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Slinck. Slurp. Ach, I'm all sslurpy tonight. Can't keep the spit inside my lips, dribble dropp. Sslpp! On a quiet night, that'd give me away, them'd hear the ssss-drip!-plip of my spit on a leaf, and fflit-squawk I'm caught and gotta return another day. But not tonight! All bangetty with thunder and kssh-roaring with heavious rain, thwack, twack-rain on the leaves and my poor a-soaked fur, such miserable I, such hungry-poor miserable I. But a-least the thwacking shushes the dripping of my spit!

That's the weasel who talked like that. He was stalking a pigeons' nest, hoping to steal an egg or two to suck down for tonight's dinner. It was an awful storm tonight, with relentless cold, relentless rain, soddening the whole forest terrarum to shiver in nests, holes, burrows and dark places.

Whfff! Can you whiff 'em! Them eggs. Them's what brings on the spit. The smell of 'em. Nothing like an egg to make a weasel spitty. Fish, feh, if I must, and a little rabbit or so, it's the tck-tssch-fffssurp! of an egging that I crave. And there's the whfff of three, four, five pidge eggins in that nest, all for me, all off-white warm, resting nudgily under their mother pidge. Mother pidge, ktch! sits between me and my egging tonight. So, slip quick, Waixel, slip up the bark, slip in the nest, tip out the egg, and slink-slurk away. Ready now, fffft-fff!

The tip of Waixel's tail twitched.

If you know what you're looking at, you can tell just when Waixel's about to make a move. His tail gives the slightest shudder, right at the tip, like a horse's flank when a fly lands on it, only slighter, barelier. You have to know to watch it, but if you're looking at it just before he slinks, you'll see the tip of his tail gives him away. The rabbits knew to watch for it, and it has saved many of their lives. Many, but not all. And the thing is, if you don't see it, if you're not watching Waixel directly as he begins to move, well, then, you won't see him move at all, and the next instant he's simply not there anymore, gone, vanished, without so much as a whirling leaf, or an unsettled shadow. The weasel word for vanishing in plain sight is *ephlaplach*. Waixel was a master of *ephlaplach*.

He was at the pigeon's nest. At it. Clinging to the underside, unseen, unsuspected, unclean, untrustworthy, unloved. The scent of eggs was strong here, overpowering to a weasel. Waixel's eyes grew larger, then small, then large, and his head lolled at a droopy angle to his left shoulder, as a long line of spittle gathered, then hung out the left side of his mouth.

Caution. Mustn't be caught. Not now, not now I'm so close, so close. Eggs tonight, O Waixel, you wicked clever wet-matted miserable wonderful clever creature, you! Eggs tonight!

Waixel slowly, imperceptibly, moved out from the underside of the nest to its outer edge, with the patience of the hungry, now lifting his grey-green eyes just over the rim of the nest and peering in. The mother pigeon, drenched with rain but puffed with maternal protectiveness, sat upon a clutch of five off-white eggs. She nudged one of the eggs back under her wing.

Just then a crack of lightning.

Waixel shortened his neck two inches and brought his head below the rim of the nest, but still clung there, waiting, waiting.

Minutes went by, but Waixel did not move a single muscle. Not his neck. Not a leg. Not an eyebrow. He was two inches from his dinner, but he would wait. The unforgiving rain could pound at him all it wanted. He would wait. The spittle in his cheeks could gather and pour out a puddle below him, he would wait. Tonight he would have eggs.

It was twenty minutes Waixel clung there before he heard the pigeon give out a sweet coo-shudder, a coo-shudder that meant sleep. The tip of Waixel's tail twitched. Then he extended his neck, raising his eyes above the nest's rim. The mother pigeon's eyes had gone to slits. Her wing was still extended over the fifth egg, but not so much as before.

Should be easy. Could just ssslip it, I think, maybe not even her the wiser for it. Or I could skrreak and kkreeka-grabbit and leappit-t'pound-t'pound the branch the trunk the ground the ground the hole and gone! Much more exciting, that!, but only one egg to be got that way, for never the night would she sleep it again, so only one egg to be got that way. So sssffff-shsh now. Soft, lift the egging-tshh, will Waixel now softly now lift, softly now softly now softly now liffffft --

Waixel clenched the twigs of the nest with the claws of his back feet like talons, allowing him to rise up and arch over into the nest, his front paws stretched out in front of him like trembling pincers.

Close. Quiet. Quiet. Slink. Slurrrp.

But just as he was about to touch the warm tasty crackly pigeon shell, Waixel cowered at something overhead, cringed himself back out of the nest, and slunk away, as if he had never been there at all, without a sound, without a shiver. *Ephlaphlach*. So quiet had he been that the mother pigeon continued on in sleep.

Waixel had had every reason to cower away in fear. What dropped into the pigeon's nest was to be the last creature the mother pigeon ever saw.

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Kukhachak was a formidable bird, about the size of a raven, and unusually black for "his" species. He was a pavonine, the largest of the cuculus species, commonly known as "the" cuckoo. But Kukhachak was no common bird. Even for the hawk-like pavonine, his beak was unusually elongated into a nasty sharp spike. But it was his scar which made Kukhachak so frightening. A great grey-black scar ran across his entire left side, and on it feathers grew no longer, leaving a slick ridge: a constant reminder of a violent fight to the death Kukhachak had had with a hawk six years ago. A fight which Kukhachak had won. But it had cost him the better part of half of his left wing. Kukhachak was a violent, crafty bird and had used his enormous size and pointed beak to frighten other birds, both larger and smaller than he, and since his dramatic victory over the hawk, none had challenged him, acquiescing to him the title of *Keus Ora*, Lord of the Cuckoos.

But “Lord” was not good enough for him. He wished to be *Reus Genu*, Regent of all Birds and Animals. Regent. Currently this honor was held by the ancient wolf Puquallax. No bird had ever reigned as Regent. Kukhachak had long ago decided he would see that changed.

His left wing was a problem. The fight with the hawk had left the wing shortened, more like a fin than a wing. He could fly, but awkwardly and painfully.

As Waixel slunk out of sight in the forest foliage, Kukhachak dropped down onto the edge of the pigeon’s nest, bringing with him a large, densely-speckled egg, clutched in his right claw. Kukhachak’s egg was longer and more oblong than the sleeping mother pigeon’s eggs, but when he placed the speckled egg in the nest and nudged it towards the sleeping pigeon, the unwary mother wrapped her wing around the speckled egg as if it were her own.

Kukhachak grinned an evil, twisted smile.

Pigeons! he snorted softly to himself, *so reliably stupid! Even in the morning light she’ll not notice the size of the cuckoo’s egg. Tch, she’ll not even notice she went to sleep with five eggs under her wing and awoke with but one! Ah, such blessed, blessed serene stupidity! Where would I be without the foolish pigeon? I thank you, pigeon, I thank you and all your sisters and daughters and mothers and fathers for staying foolish and trusting. Tch!-sh-tch-shudder the day there’s a pigeon born who has a quarter, a tenth, the sense of the cuckoo. Tkha! Shudder the day.*

Kukhachak cautiously hopped to the pigeon’s other wing, where one of the pigeon’s eggs had slid a little out from underneath her wing, its squatted-round end protruding just enough for Kukhachak to clip onto it with his black-grey talon. Then, slowly, skillfully, he pulled at the pigeon’s egg, easing it out from under its mother’s wing with gentle twisting. *Now left, now right, now just a little more in the clear.*

The rain continued as welteringly as before, but Kukhachak was undisturbed. If anything, the rain made the egg's shell more lubricious and helped his night's work of stealing the pigeon's eggs out from under her.

The first egg came clear, and still the pigeon slept on. Kukhachak balanced on his left talon and malformed left wing, and held the pigeon's egg out over the side of the nest, and let it drop, cracking open into a hundred shards and a mass of partially-formed pigeon chick-body. The partial chick now twitched and heaved, unable yet to breathe air, sucking and breathing for embryonic fluid, gasping in its burst yolk sac. It was perhaps a week before this chickling was to have been born and its lungs were unprepared for air, its spine yet incapable of straightening.

Without a word, Waixel darted in from the shadows of the underbrush, picked it up in his teeth and slunk back into the foliage, where he tore it in half and devoured it in two ravenous swallows.

In the nest above, Kukhachak had his talons on a second egg. This egg was lodged with its larger end underneath its mother, making it a little trickier to twist free unnoticedly. Kukhachak needed to work the egg even more slowly than the first, taking his time to twist it each direction patiently, unhurriedly, watching very carefully for even the slightest movement along the arch of the wing.

So intently was Kukhachak watching for movement of the wing, he didn't notice when the mother pigeon slid open a terrified eye. She knew with a mother's instincts that her brood was in danger, and if she moved, the attacker (*was it a hawk? So black, so silent!*) would kill her instantly. She waited for the right moment to strike.

It came when the hawk (*no wait! The scar, the twisted beak! It were Kukhachak! It were Kukhachak the cuckoo in her nest; what were he after with my eggs!*), when Kukhachak

slipped the egg out from under her and held it out over the edge of her nest. *He means to drop it over! He means to kill my brood.*

The pigeon righted herself alert and clamped her beak onto Kukhachak's ankle.

Kukhachak did not let the egg go. It was not because he could feel no pain -- he most certainly could -- but rather in him he had impulses stronger than flight and panic. Kukhachak's first impulses always, always, were to fight first and flee after. Unusual in an animal, but unheard of in a bird. It was his impulse to attack before all other responses, which made Kukhachak such an indomitable warrior and why all feared him. No, he did not let the egg go. Kukhachak suddenly wrenched his neck around backwards and plunged his beak into the back of the pigeon's neck.

The pigeon cried out, slapped her wingtips like sharpened weapons in Kukhachak's face. He sat the egg down and launched himself at her, his talons spreading like an attacking eagle's.

He was more than thrice her size. It was not a fair fight. She, however, was fighting not only for her life, but for her children's lives as well. There was not time to take to the air. His talons would be on her in the blink of an eye. She tucked her head. His talons strafed the air over her, and grabbed only feathers at the back of her neck.

This gave her a fraction of a second to respond before his next strike. She leaned backwards as quickly and as powerfully as she could and snatched Kukhachak's face with her talons, hoping to get at his eyes. But he had twisted his neck at the last instant before she grabbed him, and she had hold mainly of his beak. With two forceful moves, he whipped his neck to the right, freeing himself of her talons, and then he sliced his beak directly across the pigeon's throat.

It was a lethal gash.

She fell backwards, twitching and gasping. Kukhachak hopped to the edge of the nest and began nonchalantly to preen and clean himself.

“Take your time,” he said to the pigeon, watching her out the slits of his eyes. “I’ll wait.”

She slid to the floor of her nest.

Kukhachak lifted his left claw to his beak. “You cut a little of my skin, I think. You should be proud of your last moments alive.”

She blinked wildly, comprehending for the first time what has happening at her throat. She began to reel.

Then she saw the speckled egg, which was right next to her. She blinked again. Then looked at her own white unspeckled eggs. Then back at the speckled egg, and then at Kukhachak.

Kukhachak realized too late that this pigeon, astonishingly, actually had some intelligence and had, against all odds, recognized his egg as not one of her own. And now with her dying breath, she meant to harm it.

He would not let that happen. He leapt towards her.

But she had already struck.

She had plunged her beak deep into the cuckoo egg. It ran red with blood; there had been a growing chick inside. And she had killed it.

She stared at Kukhachak as she died.

He was enraged. In fury and revenge, he attacked the remaining eggs in the nest. He pierced one as she had pierced his; he clawed another apart, tearing the nearly formed embryo into flesh and bone. The other two eggs and their mother he tossed out of the nest onto the forest floor, where they splattered.

Kukhachak flew away, his crippled left wing beating frenzily three times for each stroke of his right; the crazed, unpredictable flight of a nearly-psychotic, vengeful but very powerful *Keus Ora*, Lord of the Cuckoos.

Waixel slithered out from the underbrush, pulling first the two chicklings then their mother into a hollow fallen log, wherein he engorged until his head spun. And then he slept.

Meanwhile, in the nest, inside the shell of the one remaining egg, the one which Kukhachak had pierced with his beak, a tiny premature pigeon chick clung to life, shivering and wounded, but still alive.

His name was Pindar.

Chapter 2

Pindar hatched four days later.

Fortunately for him, Waixel had made himself ill with over-eating and had lain inside the hollow log the rest of that night, and it rained night and day the following week, so there were no prowling badgers or wolves either to devour him. By the time he hatched, some three days early, Pindar was desperately small and malnourished, but he had fully-formed internal organs, and needed now only some food in order to survive.

But food for a newborn chick comes, of course, from his mother and for Pindar, this was not to be. He lay on the floor of his nest, his eyes not yet opened, but his mouth gaping wide.

“Food?” he asked of anyone willing to listen. But there were none to hear. “Anyone? Food?” he would ask every few hours until nightfall when his eyes opened and he saw by moonlight that he was alone.

Well, almost alone. Next to him lay the remains of Kukhachak’s embryonic offspring. “Food?” asked Pindar of it, but it did not answer, and its foul stench made Pindar a bit fearful of it. He crawled to the far side of the nest and stared up at the night sky until sleep overtook him. If he did not somehow find food tomorrow, he would not survive.

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A pair of grackles chased each other across the morning sky. Or rather, to be exact, a male grackle chased a female, as she swooped and darted first this way, then that, a lusty red worm dangling from her beak.

“That’s my worm!” shouted the male, swooping and darting after her. “Give it back!”

“Mrff aww nff vrst!” said the female, for her mouth was full. Her name was M’rak. Both she and T’rak, her husband, were iridescent-black, but M’rak had a distinctive blue patch on her breast, vaguely the shape and size of an almond nut.

T’rak had been trying for some twenty minutes to get the worm from M’rak. It was less about the worm itself than it was the thrill of the game. He and M’rak were still young grackles. This was their first full autumn. They would probably begin a brood together in the spring. But right now, it was more fun simply to chase after each other all day, and the worm was merely and excuse. But, *quawk!*, she was fast! T’rak could never flit past her, could never out-speed her; she was always a half-tail length ahead of him -- always! *Always!*

Well, if he couldn’t out-fly her with speed, he could on occasion out-maneuver her. Usually she anticipated his every flap, his every turn and banking, but every once in a while, if he began a move on the back edge of a thermal, he was able to scoot out of it while M’rak still rode in it, giving him a split-second advantage to bank left when she thought perhaps he would bank right. Even then, she was so quick, she was usually able to counter his feint and still remain ahead of him, but every once in a while on a sunny morning when both a thermal and an updraft were just right, he was able to pull off a move which took her by surprise.

This was one of those mornings.

He felt the drop of the back of the thermal which still buoyed his young swift M’rak, so he collapsed the covers on the tops of his wings. and was suddenly three feet directly below her -- where she could not see him! It would be, to her, as though he had disappeared. Because she could of course see both left and right simultaneously, she had only two directions she must first look: up or down -- and if she chose up first, he would be able to make a swoop for the worm.

She looked upwards.

Before she could get a look downwards, T'rak swooped upwards at her back left flank and closed in on the worm in her beak.

He caught hold of its pointed, writhy tail end.

Even with her first look in the wrong direction, M'rak still had been quicker than T'rak had expected, and had jerked her neck away from him, so he caught hold of only a small final section of the worm. (*How does she do that?* admired T'rak. *What a grackle!*)

But he was able to make a lightning-quick re-grasping of the worm, clenching it now about a third of the way along its body. M'rak gripped at the head's end, also about a third of the way.

T'rak reversed the direction of his flapping, hovering mid-air, beating the air furiously. The worm acted like a short rope, causing M'rak to spin around.

The two grackles faced each other, mid-air, joined by the worm between them, which neither of them would drop were it the last thing they did.

"Mff it, T'rak! Frr'mine!" said M'rak.

"Grff na," said T'rak. "Frrs frf."

"Flggo!" said M'rak.

"No, you flggo!" said T'rak.

"V'gist!"

"Kaa-y'kaa, y'Kaa!"

And they both pulled and pulled harder.

Until the worm snapped in half.

“Quawk!” said both T’rak and M’rak in surprise. And the worm plummeted, headed for the forest canopy below them.

M’rak was the first to swoop, arcing down to catch back her half before it disappeared below the treetops. But that very swoop gave T’rak the advantage, as he was able to see where M’rak’s trajectory would head her, so he cross-patterned her, and dropped between her and the worm’s halves, cutting her off before she could get to hers. He spiraled to his worm, caught it in his beak, and soared away with it, triumphantly.

“Free you back in th’nest!” T’rak squawked as he sped across the sky and out of sight.

M’rak landed on a tree branch and scowled, watching him go.

Bested!

She hated losing to him. She was the fast one; she was the quick one. And furthermore, that was her worm, not his!

But she would not go back to the nest after him so easily. She would not let him call himself the winner just like that. She would, at the very least, *halve* his victory by finding what remained of the worm, and she would bring it back to the nest and taunt him with it. Perhaps even entice him to chase after her for it.

What fun.

But first things first. She would find that worm half if it took her all morning.

She plunged into the forest and began looking.

*

Pindar had had a terrible night. His emaciated body craved nutrients desperately. The morning had not brought him any food and he was not long for this world. He lay on his back

and opened his mouth feebly in one final sad hope someone might, at the last possible moment, come along and save him with some food. He closed his eyes and gave one final feeble caw.

And something dropped into the back of his throat.

Ironically, it nearly choked him. By the time he'd kaffed twice and worked what had fallen into his throat back out to the end of his beak, he'd sat up, too astonished to swallow, too astonished to do anything more than blink.

An iridescent black bird hopped onto the branch next to Pindar's nest.

"Hey," she said, "You seen a worm? Well, half worm."

Pindar shook his head no.

"Hey!" she said again. "There it is!" She pointed at what had fallen into his throat.

Pindar blinked again. "Oh. You mean this? This dangly thing is a worm?"

"What'm I, stupid? Drop it."

Pindar spat the worm out onto the nest floor. "I didn't know this was called a worm, and I didn't know it was yours. You can have it back."

The bird hopped into the nest next to the worm. She had a pretty blue patch on her breast which caught the morning's sun as she said, "Pushover!"

As she reached down to take up the worm, she saw how emaciated Pindar was, and how newly-born he must be. "Whoa," she said. "Nothing but feathers-n-bones! Where's your mother?" M'rak picked the worm up in her beak.

"What's mother?" said Pindar softly. "You can have that back too if it's yours."

"You're killing me here," she said, and dropped the worm back in front of Pindar. "G'head," she said. "You eat the worm."

"What's eat?" he said.

M'rak narrowed her eyes into slits. "I'm not falling for it. I'm not feeding you. Y'got me? I'm not being your mother. Have the worm. Have a nice life."

She flew away.

Pindar, understanding very little of what just happened (only, really, that this bird had wanted the worm), Pindar picked up the worm with his beak, waving it at the receding bird.

"Wait! You forgot your --"

The worm quick accidentally slipped inside Pindar's mouth and slid down into his gullet, gone forever.

"I'm so sorry!" he said. But the bird was long gone, and now the worm was his to keep, apparently.

His first nourishment.

*

Pindar's second nourishment was also an accident: a distracted fly who didn't see Pindar's mouth coming. Pindar quite liked the taste of the fly, actually, and spent much of his second day waiting for another one and round towards sunset he succeeded in snapping one. He found this quite satisfying, and looked forward to his next day when he might try for a third or fourth.

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And so passed the first week of Pindar's life, waiting for accidental flies. And he was not an unhappy little bird, all told. Though he did grow a trifle bored about his fourth and fifth day,

wondering why catching flies was all there was to his universe. He was not tall enough to peer over the edge of his nest, nor did it occur to him to try to climb out, as the bulk of the universe seemed to take place directly above him, directly in Up: branches, leaves, sky, yes, and occasional crossings of birds and the sometime scampering of a rodent. (Waixel, we will discover shortly, had become very busy with dangers of his own, and could ill-afford to come back to visit the pigeon nest, nor had he any reason to believe any additional eggs remained after Kukhachak's violent visitation a week back.) Pindar had gained the use of his legs, which he found most delightful, as they allowed him the exploration of his entire terrain.

This morning, for instance, he marched three paces to the southwainward, whence he came face-to-twig with the inner rim of his nest. "What's here?" he exclaimed aloud, in mock surprise, as if he had just discovered it for the first time, "Why it's a twig! Look at that!" He stood and pondered its marvelousness, then said with heroic declaration, "I wonder what's on the other side of the world?"

Whereupon he took an about-face and marched three paces to the northwainward, and ended up face-to-twig with the inner rim of that part of his nest. "And what's here?" he exclaimed aloud, in mock surprise, as if he had just discovered it for the first time. "Why it's a twig! Look at that!" He gazed at it in wonderment for a moment, then said, "I wonder what's on the other side of the world?" Whereupon he took an about-face and marched to the southwain until he was face-to-twig with the inner rim.

He stared a moment, then blinked a little, but did not speak. He about-faced, looked at Up, then sat down and sighed, waiting for the next fly to happen along.

"This," he said to himself, "This is not a very interesting world."

*

Kukhachak, the *Keus Ora*, Lord of the Cuckoos, sat quietly by the dying Regent's side. In the shadows, not hidden, but respectfully distant, was Waixel. Regent Puquallax breathed shallowly, hollowly. There was a rattling of some fluid with every breath he took, in and out.

Regent Puquallax was a grey wolf, and had reigned long and harshly, and what reverence there was in his den tonight was not out of respect for the power which came with the Regent's title: not for the ruler himself. Puquallax had treated his own wolf-cousins and brethren so severely and ungenerously that there were none of them here at his side as his life was drawing to a close.

Kukhachak offered him the carcasses of some field mice whose necks he had wrung himself, for the Regent's joints had grown too stiff for him to catch his own food.

"My lord," said a soft, feminine voice, "Forgive me, but your time with us is growing short, and you still have not named your successor. Have you made your choice?" This was Varixa, the golden fox; a beautiful, seductive creature who would gnaw your neck in two if it would serve her ambitions.

The Regent nodded very slowly, in between rattling breaths. "I have chosen my successor, yes." He closed his eyes momentarily, wheezing like an October wind. He was very tired; speaking was a great effort.

Kukhachak dropped one of the mouse carcasses; his claws were quivering.

Waixel slunk out from the rear of the den. A thin two-inch line of spit hung at his right bottom lip.

A much-scarred hawk sat just inside the entrance to the den, peering out, pretending to guard the Regent against his enemies, but she was very much listening for her own name.

The Regent sighed. “How obvious the all of you are! At least Kukhachak has attempted outright bribery. I should reward him for that alone.”

Waixel cleared his throat. “I could bring un you a doz new fresh mice-carcs,” he said, “ffff’t’d cause you to name me Regent.”

“I did not mean his bribery to be admirable,” said the Regent. “Merely honest.”

Varixa again bowed her head. “My lord,” she said, “Here is the honest truth. You will not live out the winter, and we all know that. If you don’t name your successor, we are all of us in this den tonight so ambitious for your crown, we might fall to killing each other to get it. Your naming your successor will prevent much shedding of blood.”

“Will it?” said the Regent. “Or will those of you whom I did not name merely assassinate my successor the instant he leaves the cave. Do you not think that I don’t see the hawk positioned at the entrance? Laukna the Hawk, is it?”

Laukna nodded her head. “Tez.”

“I don’t know, Laukna, if you are keeping my enemies out...or in.”

“Haird t’say,” said Laukna, “S’pose all an us be finden oot day after y’death which av us tiz for ye and which t’agenna....”

“But by that time....”

“Aye, by that time. Y’need anythin’, my laird?” asked Laukna, “Water?”

“No.”

Varixa pressed a third time. “As the blood from *canis lupus* once was one with that of *vulpes lupus* -- ”

“Stop, Varixa. I’m an old wolf, but I’m not senile. And I’ve never been naive. There is no bretherhood between wolves and foxes, nor will there be upon my death. You’d as soon have all the wolves slaughtered, my dear, and leave your foxes to rule in my place.”

“Not my foxes, my lord. Me.”

“You’d make a fine Empress, Varixa. Calculating, patient, beautiful.”

“Do you name me, then?”

“Ah, Varixa. I admire your brashness. Here’s what I will do for you, Varixa, in deference to your invented notion of kindred blood. I will tell you, and all assembled that, yes, I intend to name you as successor.” There was an audible intake of breath which traveled through the entire council. “I intended to name you as successor a few days just before my death, but I will do so right now if you wish.” Varixa hesitated, not wishing to appear overly covetous, but underneath her golden fur, her skin was trembling. “Come,” said the Regent. “Let it be known throughout the forest terrarum that upon my passing, it is my will that Varixa of the North Forest be my successor as Regent from the moment of my death to the moment of her death. Anon.”

“Anon,” echoed Varixa, barely audibly. Her eyes went wide and nearly white for a vulnerable brief, brief moment, then she sat back on her haunches and said, “Thank you for telling me, my lord.”

The Regent rose. “Now, if you’ll all leave me, I shall retire for the night, and presumably waken in the morning. Good night.”

The council disbanded quietly, somberly.

*

Waixel's home was a narrow dark tunnel which ended abruptly up against a gnarl of tree roots. Waixel liked the security which the roots afforded him, as an encroaching enemy could not make a sudden strike, but would have to wind and clink and crawl instead. Waixel kept his burrow scattered with dry leaves, which crunching would also alert him to any approaching danger. Waixel lived alone, and was happy in his miserable loneliness. Tonight he had especial reason for misery: he had not been chosen as the Regent's successor. This was not exactly a surprise to him, of course, nor did he particularly want to be Regent, but with the title of Reus Ora came considerable land, and with considerable land came considerable comfort and peace, which is what he was really after. *Varixa!* he thought, *pfaugh!* Well, he would visit her at first light and congratulate her. First off, a weasel could ill-afford making enemies of ravenous foxes, and secondly, well, Varixa and her ravenous foxes were a powerful pack in the forest terrarum, and if Waixel had learned anything in the days of the Regent's waning power, it was to keep his friends close, but his enemies closer. He was not sure in which category was Varixa.

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It disturbed Varixa that no one ever trusted her. She had done nothing to deserve the reputation of someone who broke her word, or said one thing directly to you but another thing when your tail was turned. Her ancestors had long before given the fox this reputation, and Varixa knew she was up against a long tradition of tricksters and manipulators, but she had found it a lifelong frustration getting anyone to believe she was not of that same mind.

It didn't help that she had comraded herself with a weasel, whose species had perhaps only a slightly worse reputation than her own, and in the case of Waixel, it was well-deserved, and often well-observed. She knew it had been a calculated risk allying with him. She would be viewed with his terrible taint, true, but perhaps at the end of the day they would find that she herself had navigated her way through the tricky politics and social maneuvering without ever having had to lie to anyone or dissemble.

That Puquallax had named her as his successor was a remarkable thing. She knew in her heart she would make a wonderful Regent -- she was true, righteous, fair-minded and imperious if need be. However, Puquallax still had some weeks if not even months left to live, and in being singled out as his successor, Varixa realized there would be some factions happy to back her and protect her, and other factions ready to turn on her or even assassinate her.

She was not entirely sure in which category was Waixel.

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Several days after discovering accidental flies, Pindar discovered accidental water, which was a good thing, confined as he was to his own nest until such time as he discovered the power of flight in his young pigeon wings. Rain, of course, brought him water, and though it was a tedious affair lying on his back, his mouth open, catching a drop or two at a time, at least over the course of a good rainstorm, he would manage to swallow down the minimal amount of water to sustain his life. In between rains, however, water was a very precious commodity in Pindar's nest. On days of sun, there was no water to be had, which was a terrible situation. But days of drizzle were almost worse, as there really was only enough dropletting in the air to tantalize Pindar into lying on his back with his mouth open, but in reality, probably just as much moisture

evaporated from his mouth as he was able to swallow down, and at the end of a drizzly day, Pindar felt actually thirstier than on sunny days.

That was, until he discovered the Frond. Overhanging Pindar's nest was a single drooping finger-point of a frond. Over time, droplets would coalesce into a single larger drop which over more time would grow longer enough as to roll off the broad of the leaf, only to cling maddeningly at the point just out of Pindar's reach, onto the lip of the nest, wasted, gone, gone, gone. Only to be replaced moments later by another drop. Which, too, would gather, and then *plip* onto the lip of the nest, wasted, gone, gone, gone.

It was enough to drive a dehydrated young pigeon chick mad.

Pindar would do anything to get at that dripping. But what? What could he do about it, alone, weak with hunger as he was, and as yet too young to fly.

Or was he?

Hour after hour, day after day, Pindar would start at the far edge of his nest, and run as fast as his stubby twiggy legs would take him, flapping his stubby fuzzy wings with a frenzy. But the result was always the same: the inside of the nest approached before any loft or any flight of any kind had been achieved, and Pindar remained a flightless bird.

But the drip haunted him unrelentingly. He was thirsty beyond tolerance, and if he could only flap himself high enough above the rim of his nest, he might at last be quenched.

One day he achieved it. Loft! The merest of height, it was true, but surely it was not his imagining; surely he had bobbed just a fraction higher up in the air than he had bobbed the day before. And the day after that, no, it was not his imagining, he was without a doubt catching a little wind under his wingfeathers, and lifting himself up off the nest's ground. For many an attempt, however, this meant only that he would bash himself up against the inside of his nest an

inch off the floor instead of at the floor itself, but it was measurable, it was measurable, and one day if he kept at it, rising just a little higher with each passing afternoon, one day he would be able to reach the Frond.

Well, it did not turn out exactly so happily as that.

The first day he reached the nest's rim, he realized the flaw in his plan: the Frond did not, it turned out, actually drop on the nest's rim itself. It only looked like it from down below. The Frond actually dripped an inch or two short of the nest. But Pindar was a determined little pigeon, and thought if he could pitch himself upon his back and hang backwards over the edge of the nest, his mouth wide open, he might catch the elusive drip at long last.

You might note that what Pindar did not do was look about him first, and see, among a great many other things, that the nest was perched at a great height, and perhaps it was not in the best interests of a solitary flightless pigeonling to go about balancing backwards on the lips of nests. But such a thought did not occur to Pindar, as focused as he was on the Frond and as singularly determined as he was to obtain the precious water which cling to its tip. Instead, with headlong shortsighted enthusiasm, he *pipped* himself up onto the lip of the nest, and then rolled over onto his back, spread his wings for balance, and opened his beak as far as it would go. Then he closed his eyes in anticipation of that wonderful drop of water; and tipped back his head.

It was the tipping back of his head that was his undoing. That tiny shift in weight was sufficient to cause him to wobble. And then, thinking to regain his sense of balance, Pindar overcompensated with a stroke of his wings; his feet kicked up with an unwanted reflex motion, and before Pindar knew it, he had fallen out of his nest and was plummeting to his death thirty feet below.