

Chapter 5

Scales

Why does shedding scales have to be so hard?

So far the process of shedding my scales had been fairly painless. Until now.

I was apparently in some sort of a growth spurt, according to Garm, and all of my scales were suddenly too small for me. Patches of dry skin holding onto my still lustrous green scales hung to my sides. And they itched!

Raising my back left foot I started to scratch at my side to remove some of the scales that were ready to go. *Ah, that feels better.*

Large clumps of scales fell from my side as I relieved the itch that had been plaguing me.

“Muldrix! I thought I said to wait until we had stopped for lunch?” Garm chastised.

Lowering my foot, I hung my head in shame as Wylinth came over and began to pick up the scales that had dropped to the ground.

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t help it. My side just itches so bad.”

“It’s alright. I understand,” Garm said, coming to my side to scratch behind my earhole and to rub away any of the flakes of skin that were ready to go. “I promise, as soon as we stop for lunch we’ll all join in and pull off the scales that need to go.”

I nodded in appreciation as Wylinth finished gathering the scales from the ground and then plucked them from where I had been itching them off.

“Thank you,” I said, grateful.

“I understand why you needed it. But perhaps next time you can just ask us to pull it off instead of having to scavenge on the ground?” Wylinth gave me a warm smile as she scratched the other side of my head.

“Perhaps it would help if we had Foster ride Muldrix for a bit?” Hariter, the blacksmith, said. “Then perhaps he could give the boy a rest from being on his feet, and Foster could pull off a few more scales for him?”

“Yes please,” I said, delighted at the prospect of having Foster as my permanent back scratcher until lunch.

Garm chuckled. “Go ahead, at this rate we’ll get to Carag City by tomorrow anyway.”

Which I would really appreciate, considering all the walking we had done it would be nice to take some time to rest. For the past few weeks we had followed Garm’s staff through forests and fields. I, of course, could fly whenever I wanted to give my feet a rest. Everyone else was not so lucky. They had to take multiple breaks a day to rest and had started asking me to hunt food for them. I didn’t mind the food part, but I was itching to see more of humans and to see what a city actually looked like.

I had asked Foster a few days before, and he had said they looked similar to the village he and Hariter had come from, except that they could cover an entire valley if they were big enough. It seemed exciting and I was hoping for a chance to explore some more.

Wylinth’s face fell as she looked to Garm and Hariter, as Foster climbed onto my back with their help. “Do we even know what we will be looking for in Carag? I am sure that this city has remained loyal to my family, even with the news of our deaths, they should still remain loyal to General Mortiz until he gives up the kingdom.”

“I am sure your right,” Garm said, moving on ahead of the rest of us. “But I can’t see how risking your safety will help us get in.”

“What would you have me do, wait outside of the city walls with Muldrix?”

“Hey!” I said, taking offense at her comment. “What’s that supposed to mean? Am I not going into the city too?”

Garm sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose like he normally did when things were not going his way. “I asked you, Wylinth, not to bring this up in front of him.”

“He has a right to know what will be happening tomorrow,” she said, moving closer to Garm and standing taller. “The people of Carag are very open to outsiders, and—”

“Which means that chances are high that Lord Trellin already sent soldiers here,” Garm said, cutting her off.

“We don’t know that,” Wylinth said defiantly.

“And if they are, they will probably be on the lookout for you just as they were in our village,” Hariter said, joining in on Garm’s side. “I am deeply sorry to say this, my Lady, but Garm is right. If there are soldiers there we shouldn’t have you anywhere you might be recognized.”

“Let us go in and see what things are like,” Garm said. “Once we have an idea of where we need to go, we will come back and tell you what we have found. If things look good, then yes, you can come in. If not...”

Garm let his comment hang in the air and my scales itched in annoyance. I hated when he did stuff like that and expected me to just know what he meant. Why couldn’t he just finish what he was saying so I could know too?

Wylinth rolled her eyes. "Fine! I'll stay behind with Muldrix."

Garm eyed her for a moment before moving on. "Once we know what we're looking for we'll come back for you. If it's something that we can acquire without you there, then hopefully we can just grab it and go."

Wylinth glared as she pressed her lips together. She didn't say anything more, but I could see that her mind was still working. I wasn't sure what she was thinking, so I decided to leave it be. Whatever she was planning while Garm was in town would just have to be done with me. I didn't want things to be messed up for Garm, but I was also getting tired of waiting to help.

As if he was reading my thoughts Garm pointed at me and said, "I'm sorry, Muldrix. This'll mean no more flying high since we don't want anyone from the city to see you."

I nodded my head in acceptance, now hoping that Wylinth was scheming something so that I wouldn't be completely bored tomorrow.

We kept walking after that, an awkward silence falling on us that no one seemed interested in breaking. Garm was the leader after all, and what he said went. Ever since Hariter and Foster had joined us we had all started leaning more heavily on Garm and his decisions to get us through. We had been very lucky because of him...very lucky. Some soldiers of Tollox had been travelling on the same road we had, and Garm had been able to deflect them while the rest of us had hid off in the forest until the forest was clear. Those same soldiers had come back from where they had gone and Garm was able to get us all off the path before any of them had seen us. This time though I was able to overhear their conversation and learned that they had recognized Garm and were trying to capture him, and through him the rest of us.

Again, we were very lucky.

We walked all the rest of the day until nightfall came. With the nights still a little chilly, Garm agreed to have me light a small campfire for them. Everyone watched the flames in silence as they ate the food I had hunted a day before. My insides bubbled with excitement, making it hard for me to sleep.

How can I sleep? Even if I'm not going to go into the city it'll still be a sight to see from a distance. I looked into the sky and to the stars that twinkled brightly above. Wylinth says that cities like Carag look like the night sky, just closer. I wonder if I might be able to catch a peek?

“Muldrix?” Garm said, startling me and making me feel guilty for thinking of leaving the group to see the city at night. “If you want to get some sleep now you can. I’ll pick the old scales off now, then you won’t have to worry about them tomorrow while we’re in the city.”

“Thank you,” I replied, laying my head down and enjoying the heat of the flames. I heard Garm stand up and walk over until we was beside me.

I was now so large that even when laying down my chest came up to his chin. He had to stretch his arms out to their full length just to reach my back. The effect of his work, however, felt wonderful. My tensed muscle relaxed, and I allowed myself to close my eyes as he plucked and scratched the lose scales off. I wasn’t certain, but I thought I could feel the hands of the others on my sides as well, helping to remove everything that they could. I knew that they were doing it mostly because they could trade my scales in the towns and cities we passed by, but it still felt good to have my sides cleaned.

I was jolted awake a little while later, Garm by my side and holding the staff towards the city so the usually empty space on top glowed. I glanced around to find that the fire I had made was now a deep red of dying coals, and Wylinth, Hariter, and Foster were now asleep.

“Muldrax?” Garm said, his voice no more than a whisper to avoid waking the others.

“Could you stay up and watch the camp? I need to get some sleep in before the day tomorrow.”

I nodded as I made my body become more alert. Even just having had those few hours of sleep was enough to help me feel more energized. My legs felt strong, and my head was clear as I sat back on my hunches and nodded to Garm. “Please, get as much sleep as you need. I will watch over everyone.”

He thanked me with a nod of his own, and then went back over to his place beside the fire and his makeshift bed. The light from his staff went out, plunging our camp into darkness with nothing but the dim glow of the embers to see by. Within a few minutes of getting himself comfortable Garm was asleep as the sound of his soft snores confirmed how tired he had been.

The coal and embers continued to crack and pop as I sat listening to the sounds of the night around me. Spring had been in full swing for a while now, it had started when we first met Wylinth nearly two months ago and was really going when we had Hariter and Foster join our band. Even though the days were getting warmer we still had the chilly nights. My freshly uncovered skin and scales tingled from the cold air touching them, and I was grateful to have had the fire as long as I did to warm those patches.

Looking up I watched the night sky as it rolled by. In the distance, I could make out a faint light over the treetops. I thought that was odd, considering how late in the night it already was and that the sun had set in a different direction. The light was coming out of the eastern sky, but I knew that we were still hours away from any sunlight. Glancing over to my friends I wondered if I could get away to catch a peek of what the light was to make sure we were safe, at least, that’s what I told myself I’d be doing.

I waited. Not wanting to abandon my friends to the cold night without first knowing that other creatures would leave them alone, I sat and watched the sky as the stars shimmered overhead and drifted through the night. Eventually enough time passed without sight, sound, or smell of another creature or human that I felt okay in leaving the camp for a bit. Walking a safe distance away from the others, so as to not disturb them from their sleep, I brought my wings down in powerful strokes until I was up in the air. The unusual source of light grew brighter the higher I went, and I looked down to mentally mark where our camp was in the forest before setting off to see what this strange occurrence was.

Nothing could have prepared me for the sight that was before my eyes. Lights, millions of them broke out on the land before me, flickering and twinkling in the night. I could see the buildings they were next to, or even the buildings they were in. Wylinth was right. It looked like a patch of the night sky had fallen and placed itself right here to rest.

I gazed in wonder at the sight. I, of course, had seen villages and small towns from afar before this, their lights similar to how the city of Carag looked only in the first few hours of night. Typically most of those places lost all of their lights to the night as people went to sleep. But here, at Carag? The lights shone brightly, and they called to me.

There were two towers near the center that were huge. Their lights shone the brightest in the city as they tried to display the buildings beauty in the night. Upon closer inspection I realized that the seemingly two separate buildings were actually one, connected at the base they spiraled above every other structure within the city. Slowly I let myself drift over, letting myself fly into the abyss of night with the glow and twinkle of the city below me. The towers faded into the sky; their outlines still visible against the stars. It was peaceful. I let my thoughts wonder, and soon felt as if I really in a sea of stars that I could reach out and touch if I wanted.

Something bumped into my neck, startling me out of my reverie and reminding me I shouldn't be here. I was thumped on my tail, and I looked around to see what was running into me, worried that some humans had spotted me and were trying to shoot me down.

Hm, nothing down below, I thought. It was then I began to realize I could hear small screeching from all around, sometimes accompanied by a light flapping sound. *Bats, of course.*

There must've been hundreds to find them running into me. With the lights of the city it must have been easy to find a good meal as bugs congregated near the burning flames. Smiling to myself, I changed course and headed back to where the others were asleep, hoping they hadn't noticed I was gone.

My grin faded, however, when I realized I had no idea how long I had been gone. Picking up speed I flew over roofs and trees in a blur, using the momentum of the night breeze to help push me along towards my goal. With the light of the city gone my eyes adjusted to the dark and I could see where our company had camped for the night, the embers nearly gone. Landing where I had taken off, I silently meandered over. Everyone appeared to be sleeping. Moving as gently as I could, I sniffed each person and listened to their breathing.

Foster and Hariter smelled strongly of their smith shop still, and Wylinth smelled of the lavender flowers she had found the other day. All three were breathing deep, their bodies in bliss as they slept on. But what about Garm?

Turning I gave him a sniff as well. He still smelt the same, the smells of fur and dirt mingling and almost hiding the smell of pine. He had smelled of those trees since the day he had brought me to his cabin in the woods. My heart thumped in my ears. He wasn't snoring anymore, but he could have just rolled over too. Deciding not to take my chances, I backed away without making a sound and sat where I had been when Garm had gone to sleep.

It hadn't been a moment too soon. Garm sat up, his head turning slowly around. I pretended not to notice as I kept my head pointed out into the forest.

"Muldrax?" Garm said, leaning forward in my direction. "Is everything alright?"

"Quiet as a mouse," I said, hoping he wouldn't dig any further.

"I swear I heard something."

"What did it sound like?" I asked, thinking quickly about what I could say to get him back to sleep.

"It was soft, like something had just hit the ground," Garm said. Lifting an arm he pointed in the direction I had landed. "It came from over there."

"That was just me," I said. "I thought I saw a fox and I was trying to catch it. I missed my jump and didn't get it."

Garm sat in the darkness, silent. My scales itched, and I worried he knew what had really happened. Finally he laid back down without a word. I breathed out a soft sigh. I knew he was going to ask about it again in the morning, and my gut twisted inside that I had lied to him. Part of me wished he had confronted me now, but I knew he needed the sleep, and he had a big day tomorrow finding out what was in Carag that we needed on our quest.

It can wait, I thought, trying to persuade myself to wait until morning, watching over my friends as a distraction. I can't take back what I did, but I can make up for it by doing what I was supposed to do in the first place.

The rest of the night was still, but I could not let myself relax, worrying of any sound or whisper of wind that dared make a noise.

By morning I was exhausted. My mind plagued with a guilt so strong that I was ready to be sick on the side of the road. As sun shone down I watched beyond our camp, and I could hear the others stirring and waking up, Garm among them. My mind burned with what I had done. Unable to feel comfortable among the others, I stood and moved to the other side of the road, my face turned away so I could hide my shame. I continued to sit silently alone until Garm came to stand beside me.

“It wasn’t a fox last night, was it, Muldrix?”

I hung my head in shame and shook my head. Softly I whispered, “No.”

He nodded his head and placed a gentle hand on my shoulder. “Why didn’t you tell me you had left? Why did you lie?”

“I didn’t want you to be disappointed in me,” I said apologetically. “I knew I shouldn’t have gone; I just didn’t want you to be upset that I disobeyed.”

“I’m more upset that you lied. We don’t have much time to go over this now, but when I am done in the city we will talk about what you did last night, as well as Hariter’s village when you didn’t stay away like I had asked. I’m not saying I’m not grateful for what you did there,” Garm hastily added when I opened my mouth to protest, “but it was incredibly dangerous. This is a much bigger city with more people who might be more willing to hunt you down for your scales. This will be a perfect time for you to practice stealth and dexterity when it comes to making sure no one knows you’re here. I will also need you to keep an eye out on Lady Wylinth.”

I raised my head in surprise. “Why? Don’t you trust her?”

“I trust her very much, actually,” Garm said with a smile. “I trust her to act in her own self-interests. She may listen to me because I have become the unofficial leader of our party, but I am in no way her King, nor will I pretend to be. She is headstrong, and stubborn, and for that I need you to stay behind and make sure she stays safe.”

My head slumped down, and I grunted an acknowledgment.

“I know this isn’t a proper punishment, but for now it will have to do. Keep her safe, stay hidden, and don’t come into the city after us.” He paused for a moment before adding, “Promise me you will do this.”

Grinding my teeth together I gave in to his request. “I promise.”

“Good, I will see you tonight if all goes well.”

Little did I know I would soon be wishing it had.