

Her name was Stella Dirigentes. The Shooting Star, they had called her, the Child of the Sky. She was kind, smart, and beautiful in every way, from golden hair spun from sunlight and honeycombs, to pitch black eyes that glittered with a mischief akin to Mercury's own, hiding entire galaxies with those irises. A blanket of the night sky. She had a wingspan that stretched out to double her length, tips of her feathers flaring out to the sky like outstretched hands, worshipping both herself and her life. An impressive sight, if she had been able to use them to their full extent. A beautiful dagger was still just a dagger; it would just as likely cut you as you would hold it preciously, and cut her it did. And so she hid it, paraded it around time, helped people, if only to prove she had some worth. But then she got into trouble she couldn't help herself out of.

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Being the only swan in a village full of sparrows had its perks. For one, her colossal wingspan put them all to shame; graceful white feathers prettier and more majestic than their simple, dirty wings could ever be. She towered over them with ease, and she almost laughed when she saw that their biggest hardly reached her knees, making her a real giant amongst ants. And so, with their tiny wings and tiny bodies, with their messy brown nest hair and dull, childlike eyes, it was inevitable that they flocked to her. That they loved her. She was the pride of the town, the golden child, the one they bragged about to migrating birds. She couldn't get enough, *wouldn't* get enough.

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And then one day, on a day just like every other, a siege of migrating herons was stopped in their tracks by a little sparrow girl. Thea, for that was the sparrow's name, wove a story of elegance, of grace. Of the village's pride. She told of how the very stars sung of one of their own, a gift. The story soon spread like wildfire within the siege, a burning blaze that consumed the herons and their eager hearts. They begged and begged to see this child of the sky, this Stella Dirigentes, this Shooting Star. And who was Thea to deny them? The little sparrow girl, with her words of eloquence and a tale she had spun from her own beliefs, led the way.

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The courtyard bristled with a slight wind, the gentle breeze brushing aside dusty curls and soothing her sun-kissed face, a welcome respite from the bitter heat. Stella barely raised her eyes from her book, sprawled regally across her chair with a grace none could match. She ignored the feathers falling at her feet, turning a page in annoyance. And still they waited. With a tight smile that pulled on her muscles painfully, she finally addressed the herons, shutting her book. "It's not often we get a siege through these parts," she spoke, voice dripping with honey and forced politeness, and still, it sounded like music. One of the herons – an elder, she assumed, based on his greying hair, and wrinkled face – stepped forward, clearing his throat. "Well then," he began, speaking slowly and slurred as if speaking around his tongue. "It's not often we hear tell of a gift from the stars themselves." Something twinkled in his obsidian black eyes, something she couldn't quite place. She was flattered, yet curious. At that moment, a little girl ran from the crowd of herons with a smile that could've blinded the sun if she tried. Stella decided she didn't like her. "Stella!" she called out, speaking as if they were close friends, bounding towards her with an ineffable energy. "Yes?" One of the herons narrowed his eyes at her tone, hair slicked back and smooth in a way that brought out his cheekbones. He was almost beautiful. Not as beautiful as her, but still. The little sparrow stopped at her feet with an exclamation of joy, seemingly unaware of the tension. "I saw these people passing through, and we started talking, and one of them has the same name as me, and they were all like, 'oh, how are you?' and I said I was on my way to see you, and then they asked who you were, so I told them -"

"Why?" she interrupted, voice quiet as she straightened up in her chair. Thea frowned, tilting her head in confusion. "Why not? We've done it many times before," Thea asked, drawing over her words with an uncertainty, fidgeting with the hem of her dress. Stella narrowed her eyes, smile drawn in a tight line. "Just because you've 'done it before,' doesn't mean you can go ahead sharing my life story with everyone you meet." One of the herons, the same one as before, raised his head, wings bristling. Her eyes flicked over to him briefly, reminding herself of the audience with a thousand eyes. "You've seen me, so you can all go now," she ordered briskly, dismissing them with a wave of her hand. The elder heron frowned, throat bobbing as he rasped, "If I may- "

"We don't take orders from you." The elder snapped his head to the side, eyes narrowed as he saw who spoke. The younger heron, the *same* one, had stepped forward, chin raised defiantly. She met his eyes with a hiss. "What ever do you mean?" she questioned, tightening her grip on her dress, daring him to say it. "You can't order us around like them," he shrugged, gesturing to Thea and to the other sparrows who had gathered in the courtyard, keeping watch from behind walls and doors. Stella laughed. Just burst into laughter, covering her mouth with her hand. "The sparrows? I don't *order* them around, I love them!"

"And they love you. Perhaps a little too much," he muttered to himself, eyeing her with disdain. An idea came to his head, and he smiled wickedly. "Perhaps you could prove you don't need them. Show us how great you can be on your own," he persuaded, eyes twinkling with mischief. Stella scoffed, puffing up her wings. "Why should I prove myself to *you* of all people?" The heron grinned. "Because I don't think you can do it," he put simply. "We've been told the child of the stars can do anything, but I've yet to see her, just a vain swan in her place." Stella shot a glare at Thea, as the herons behind him

shuffled uncomfortably, the elder grabbing his elbow with a warning hiss. He shook him off, and Stella replied, "I don't need to listen to your provocations, someone with no name, who knows nothing about me or my village." The heron perked up, smiling slyly as he slinked closer, each step deliberate and slow. "I forget, I haven't introduced myself. If you can do what I ask of you, show that you truly are independent and can survive without their pampering, I'll tell you my name." Rolling her eyes at him, she scrunched up her nose as she pointed out, "why should I care about your name? I could just ask anyone here."

"Go ahead then, Stella Dirigentes."

And so she tried. Yet, no matter how hard she pushed, how many she asked, the herons turned their heads. They might not have liked what he was doing, but they weren't going to ruin his fun. She snarled.

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"So, all I have to do is bring back a piece of a cloud?" she asked, arms crossed, and eyebrows raised. She scoffed, grinning. These herons were so stupid. That would be easy! The heron, the one who she decided was not beautiful in any way possible, returned her smile, nodding his head confidently. She wanted so bad to wipe that stupid smirk off his face, and so she braced herself, wings flared out as she crouched on the ground. The moment he nodded, she was off the ground, leaping into the air gracefully. And in her moment of pride, her second of glory, she flew. She flew so high up, the people below her vanished, a murky mess that all blended together. She flew so high up, she could see past the tips of the mountain. She flew so high up, the air grew thinner. And yet, the clouds continued to stay out of reach. She huffed, struggling to breathe as her wings pushed herself up higher and higher, muscles tiring quicker than her lungs could expand.

Down below, Thea whispered to herself, "what are you doing? Just fly!" Her own wings itched like a thousand spiders crawling all over her, burrowing into her feathers, telling her something was wrong. But surely, she knew how to? Surely, she wasn't Icarus in all but name? Unable to fly when she needed it most?

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She let out a terrible scream when she fell, hands extended to the sky as if she were trying to hold on to the clouds, still trying to grab them, lest they slip through her fingers as they had done. They say that when she fell, wings flailing all around like a baby bird thrown from its nest too soon, she seemed to shine with an ephemeral glow. That in her panic, her harsh scream was torn from her lips, and to those listening down below, sounded like a symphony of noises; water trickling, wind humming, music playing. Her name was Stella Dirigentes. The Shooting Star, they had called her, although just as stars shoot across the sky, they fall. In that case, perhaps Stella Cadens was more accurate, better suited to her in some ironic tragedy where she had become the punchline. The Falling Star.

Some tried to argue it was wrong to call her that, as it wasn't stars that fell, but meteoroids. But when she hit the Earth, wings shattering and twisting at odd angles, body bent and broken in unnatural places, others argued she had become a meteorite herself. A testament to her beauty and pain. Something ethereal, alien.

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Her name was Stella Cadens. The Falling Star, we called her, the Child of the Ground. She was impulsive, defiant, and vain in every way, from blonde curls she was obsessed over, to eyes that shone with a sharp judgement, irises pitch black. She had a wingspan that stretched out to double her length, tips of her feathers flaring out to the sky like outstretched hands, worshipping both herself and her life. And yet, in the end, they weren't able to save her. Her wings were delicate, porcelain cut in an attempt to match the body, but not for use. So she paraded herself around town, pretending like she was worth something, like she was better than the sparrows. But we cannot fault her for that, for it was us sparrows who fed her ego. We love her, and we would do anything to have her back.