

Feathers and Flight – Adeline, Year 7, VIC

Soft, fluffy clouds like a chick's feathers drifted across the skies. The tweet of Spot Feather brought Swift Feather's focus back to the nest.

"No luck?" Spot Feather asked sympathetically.

"Nothing," Swift Feather sighed, her blue feathers fluttering with her unhappiness.

Spot Feather gave her white belly feathers a nuzzle. "You'll get it someday," he reassured her. "I took heaps of time!"

Swift Feather shook her head. "Not as much time as me. If I can't Fly my spirit, what kind of bird am I? My mother is the leader. Next horizon, I have to leave the nest..."

Spot Feather's argument disintegrated into feathers in the wind as Swift Feather sunk deeper into despair.

Crown Feather, the leader of Sun Flock, descended into the nest with bugs and berries in her sharp talons and beak. The rest of Sun Flock leapt to feast.

Swift Feather looked at her brothers, Night Feather and Moon Feather. She had been born under a Blue Jay Moon, a very auspicious omen... but it meant nothing if she couldn't Fly, she reflected. Night Feather had picked it up on his fourth horizon, and Moon Feather three after.

Crown Feather leapt onto the edge of the nest. "Sun Flock, as you all know, next horizon three of our Flock will leave the nest."

The new chicks gazed at Night Feather and Moon Feather in envy. Of course, they would be excited, Swift Feather thought. *They* haven't had trouble with their spirit.

"Tonight," chirped Crown Feather, "The three will join us for their Final Forage. As the sun rises, so will they. Tonight, the Last Horizon!"

Crown Feather began the cheering, and soon the whole of Sun Flock was following along. Swift Feather felt herself sinking into her feathers. She was a poor forager, and she couldn't see herself catching anything but embarrassment.

"Come on, Swift Feather!" twittered Night Feather. "It's our Final Forage!"

Swift Feather followed with reluctance. She wasn't keen on foraging with her brothers, since they would beat her in any contest. But she couldn't miss her Final Forage either. Flapping her wings, she fluttered down to the forest floor to begin the Forage.

Later...

The sun was beginning to rise. Swift Feather fluttered back into the nest, with a branch of berries and nuts in her beak. Soon, she would leave... forever. Swift Feather dropped her measly catch into the nest - Crest Feather and Moon Feather were already back, and Crown

Feather was swooping down with Night Feather behind her. Swift Feather took up the traditional perch on the side of the nest; as much as she wanted to stay, she could never show it. Crown Feather stood in the centre of the nest.

“Tonight,” she began, speaking in the traditional words, “we say goodbye to three Fledgelings. They have reached their Last Horizon and will leave us today. Goodbye, Moon Feather! Goodbye, Swift Feather! Goodbye, Night Feather!”

Throwing back her head, she let out a squeaking call. The rest of Sun Flock joined in, tipping their heads to the sky. *Squee! Squee!*

Swift Feather ruffled her wings, getting ready to fly. After what seemed like a million horizons - or was it only one - Crown Feather gave the signal.

“Fly, and bring honour to Sun Flock! After you take flight, you will be Fledgelings no longer!” Swift Feather took a deep breath and leapt into the shining sunrise.

She was finally free.

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Swift Feather spiralled off into the distance, conscious of the gazes of Sun Flock following her. She hoped desperately that they weren't watching her - Moon Feather and Night Feather deserved much more attention - as she ducked into the trees below, skimming across the canopy. The tradition of Sun Flock was to fly and not look back. Swift Feather found herself wishing as she flew that she had looked more closely at her Flock, imprinting them into her memories. Her mother's kind blue face was already fading.

Swift Feather looked down - she had flown far. Beneath her was a sandy clearing, with a stream and trees. She thought that it might be a good place to live. She swooped down into the clearing, bending her feathered head to drink from the river. It was a good spot, she reflected. She could get used to this!

A black bird flew down toward her. It was so much bigger than her - a crow. “H-hi,” stuttered Swift Feather.

“**Leave this place,**” the crow told her.

“But... I've been travelling for ages,” Swift Feather told him. “Can't I stay?”

“**This is my place. You are not welcome here.**”

“Please?” pleaded Swift Feather. “I need somewhere to stay.”

“**Not here.**”

Swift Feather frowned - she couldn't fight.

“Alright, I'll leave,” she told the crow. “Bye.”

“Do not come back,” the black bird told her, before swooping away. Swift Feather sighed before taking to the skies.

The wind whistled under her wings as she soared through the trees. She didn’t know where she was going, but she knew that the crow wouldn’t tolerate her in its territory. She just kept flying.

Finally, her wings weren’t strong enough to hold her up. She dipped down under the treeline, her sky-blue wings against her chest as she soared down to the ground. She needed to find somewhere to stop for the night. She spotted a tree hollow and swooped inside. Swift Feather closed her eyes and settled down to sleep.

When she woke up in the morning, she couldn’t remember where she was for a second. Then the memory of her Last Horizon struck her. Swift Feather walked out of the hollow. She spread her wings, the raging air filled them with wind and she took flight. She wasn’t sure which way she was going, but she knew she had to keep flying.

It was dusk when Swift Feather finally stopped flying. She settled down in the branches of a tree. She promised herself that in the morning, she’d try to Fly her spirit again.

Swift Feather opened her eyes, immediately recalling her personal promise from the night before. She flew up to the tallest part of the tree, preparing for the ancient ritual. She spread her wings - not to fly, but to absorb the light breeze - and closed her eyes. She needed to let her spirit lift away to the sky. Picturing a mountain, she imagined flying to the highest peak, and seeing everything. It was always the same mountain in her vision, and the same result... whenever she tried, she would open her eyes and nothing would have happened. But this time, she told herself, it would be different. This time, she would do it. This time, it would work.

Swift Feather breathed in deeply, preparing herself for the moment when she would open her eyes. She was aware of the wind ruffling her feathers and flowing gently around her body. Gently, she opened her eyes...

Nothing.

Swift Feather had been expecting that, but it was still a crushing disappointment. She sighed, but even though she was disheartened she hadn’t given up. She knew that if she couldn’t Fly, she would never be able to start her own Flock. She shook off the lingering feelings of disappointment and flew off.

The sun was setting as Swift Feather dipped down. There was a mountain up ahead, with high, shining peaks and harsh sunlight glinting off the white covering. Swift Feather didn’t know where to land any more, but she knew she’d have to stop soon. Her wings couldn’t take this much strain any longer. She landed, talons extended into the snow. Her wings were frozen to her sleek blue body as she dipped down and burrowed into the snow.

When she next opened her eyes, the numbing cold was all that she could feel. Her wings were frozen to her feathers, and her eyes were so cold little jolts of pain shot through them whenever she tried to move. She tried to croak out a word, but her beak wouldn’t move. She

wondered if she was dying. As she felt her consciousness slip away, she saw a scene forming in her mind.

“Are you sure we were right to send her away?” asked Crown Feather.

“It was the only way,” Spot Feather reassured her. “She had no future here.”

Night Feather fluttered down. “I agree. She was useless.”

Swift Feather felt a pang of betrayal stabbing through her feathers.

Or was it cold icicles in her chest?

She suddenly knew with cold clarity that she was dying.

She felt the faces of her Flock flutter in and out around her.

She was sorry that she hadn’t made her family proud.

Frozen.

Cold.

Ice.

Black.

Nothing.

She had Flown her spirit.

It had cost her everything.

Her consciousness.

Her sanity.

Her life.