

Beautiful Things

by Alex Aldred

The kestrel flew low over the valley. Lyle watched it pass, binoculars pressed hard against the bridge of his nose. It was a beautiful thing, a flurry of glinting feathers and sharp edges, casting a jagged shadow across the grasslands. He dropped the binoculars to his belt and reached a hand back over his shoulder.

The bird had stopped, hovering above the plains despite the winds tugging and tearing at it. Hovering was what kestrels had been famous for, Lyle knew. They could hold themselves still in the air, even indoors where there was no wind to buff them. It was a fascinating talent. He watched carefully, impressed by the kestrel's poise. He continued to watch as he steadied the butt of the rifle against his shoulder. It was a bespoke weapon, the metal of the barrel a gleaming white; he'd had it made at a private armoury in London, his signature engraved into the stock.

A gunshot rang out across the valley. The kestrel dropped, and Lyle sighed in quiet appreciation.

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The collector was a tall man, reedy, with a tight blazer and a shaven scalp. Lyle was not particularly fond of him; the bionics made him seem twitchy and distracted, his single eye constantly flickering this way and that. The minuscule clicks and whirrs were irritating, swarming the air like mosquitoes.

"This is – ah – the last one? You're sure?" the collector asked. Lyle nodded.

"I tracked them over the reserve myself. There was just the pair left. A mating couple."

"And the other?"

"The male. I put him down. I hope you don't mind."

"Oh, quite the contrary." The collector leaned down, his knees snapping into place, and peered into the dented brass cage. Inside, the bird rattled her wings, head tilting this way and that in confusion. "My client rather prizes exclusivity. You've received your payment?"

"Yes."

"Good. Well, I won't keep you. Although..." The collector hesitated. "That weapon of yours..."

"Not for sale. Sentimental value."

"Ah. I understand. It's rather beautiful."

Lyle considered. "Yes," he said. "Yes it is."

"Good day, Mister Lyle."

"Of course." Lyle straightened up, slinging the rifle over his back. He paused for a moment as he turned to go, to see if he could catch the collector's eye. No such luck – the man was too busy admiring his new pet. Lyle spared the kestrel a glance. She was hopping back and forth, agitated, testing the confines of her prison. He smiled. Such a beautiful thing, he thought, to be the only one of its kind.