



# INHUMANE

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Zuri's miniature arrow whizzed through the clearing, defying the autumnal breeze and finally, embedded its silver arrowhead into the target.

"You did it, Zuri!" Ashiro exclaimed as he wrapped her in a tender embrace. "Six years old and already acing archery!"

"Yep!" confirmed the little one, striking a victory pose.

"I think I've got a little something to celebrate this victory," said Ashiro, making a show of hunting through the pockets of his windbreaker before scooping out a paper bag and handing it to her.

Zuri pawed through the bag eagerly, then squealed delightfully at the sight of her favourite snack—black cherries.

"Thanks, Uncle Ashi!" she said before biting into a cherry.

Ashiro found a smile tugging at the corners of his lips as he watched his niece savour her snack. He loved making her smile. So far he had never been prepared for the sheer magnitude and multitude of emotions that surged within him every time he watched the cherubic face light up.

Ashiro intuitively sensed that his niece's attention had now been diverted elsewhere. Sure enough, she cautiously placed her bag of black cherries on a log and came bouncing up to him.

"Uncle Ashi," she began eagerly, "Do you wanna see this new trick I learnt?"

"Sure, sweetie."

No further encouragement was needed. Zuri moved away from Ashiro, her jet black pigtails bouncing in the wind with each step. She stood in position now, her bright yellow woollen dress sharply contrasting her black tights. Ashiro could see the growing determination in her eyes as she unfolded her brown, beige and white falcon wings and launched herself into the air.

Ashiro expected her to halt in midair and perform a swirl or a loop-the-loop or something similarly amusing. From the looks, however, it didn't seem like Zuri had plans to halt anytime soon. In fact, after reaching a certain height, she began rapidly descending.

Caught off guard, Ashiro found his blood turning to ice. "Zuri, what are you doing?!" he cried helplessly, the incipient terror in his eyes intensifying with each passing second. Situations like this made Ashiro absolutely unable to forgive his fate which had snatched away his wings for the rest of eternity.

Each hammering heartbeat transmitted a painful blow to his soul. To Ashiro's utter relief, Zuri's wings pulled her aloft only seconds before she could plummet into the earth.

"Oh my gosh, you nearly gave me a

cardiac arrest," said Ashiro, breathlessly once Zuri had alighted. He kneeled before the tot and rested his hands on his shoulders, "Let's not attempt that again while the winds are so strong, okay? Apart from that, that was quite an amazing swoop."

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The uncle-niece duo was sprawled on the grass, enjoying the crisp freshness of the chilly autumn air. Polishing off the last of her cherries, Zuri glanced gravely at her uncle.

"Do you miss your wings, Uncle Ashi?"

"Very much," replied Ashiro, sighing wistfully.

He suddenly found himself summoning the inexpugible memory that he'd left buried deep within him. The incident that resurfaced had occurred 19 years previously when their village had been invaded by humans. The 9 year old Ashiro had gotten separated from his family while trying to escape. In the process, he had accidentally set off a tripwire, panicked and inevitably, snagged one of his wings in a metal barricade; one of many that the humans had erected. This was only followed by a further calamity, when alerted by the tripwire, a soldier shot him in the other wing.

Fortunately, Ashiro's life had been spared when his then 14 year old brother

(who was now Zuri's father) had pulled him to safety. Regrettably, however, neither of his wings had been spared. One had to be amputated while 3/4ths of the other had to be removed. What was left of it now was a feathery black stump.

"Have you ever wanted revenge?" inquired Zuri.

Ashiro only stared, visibly unsettled by his niece's diction.

"Papa says they deserve to be punished," continued Zuri, as if channeling her father's undiminished fury.

"Well sometimes Zuri, bad things happen and you have no choice but to deal with them; you have to accept them and move on. You can't always fight fire with fire."

"But Papa has a point Uncle Ashi," insisted Zuri. "He says humans are the only race destroying their own world and killing each other for no reason. Nobody else does that. Not us, not the elves, the centaurs, the merfolk and not even the ogres. Isn't that strange to you? That's why Papa says we ought to teach them a lesson."

Evening had descended by this time and the vespertine moon caught Ashiro's eye, resplendent in all its luminous glory.

He reached out and gently took his discontented niece's hand in his own and said, "Tell Papa that it's best not to hold grudges against a dying race."