
ENDLING
THE LAST

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Katherine Applegate



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For Michael

In nature nothing exists alone.
Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, 1962

endling
noun ~ end•ling ~ \`en(d)-ling\

1. the last living individual in a species,
   or, occasionally, a subspecies.
2. the official public ceremony at which
   a species is declared extinct; a eumony.
3. (informal) someone undertaking a
   doomed or quixotic quest.

—*Imperial Lexica Officio of Nedarra*, 3rd edition

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PART ONE

THE END BEGINS

CHAPTER 1

Endling

Long before I heard the word, I was used to being last.

I was the runt, the youngest and by-far-and-away smallest of my seven siblings, which meant I was the last to drink, the last to eat, the last to be protected.

As the lowest-ranking member of our dwindling pack, I accepted my place without resentment – much resentment, anyway.

It was, perhaps, only fair. My failings were many, or so I was often told.

I was too young to be clever, too small to be helpful.

My feet were large and clumsy. They tangled when I ran.

My coat was untidy, my manners dreadful. I once ate an entire leg of anteleer before my rightful turn.

I was curious to a fault. I wandered too far and wondered too often.

I was, in short, a disappointment at my only task in life, which was to do my best, like all dairnes, to stay quietly alive.

* * *

Those days, you'd have been as likely to pet a unicorn as you would to sight a dairne.

Our packelder, Dalyntor, white muzzled and frail, liked to speak of a time when our ancestors roamed in great bands, hundreds of dairnes at a time, across the Nedarran plains. At night they would form into family groups, gathering around to prepare wild grasses and berries, or perhaps cook the stray badger or cotchet.

But all that was long ago. Now there were just a few of us left in our part of the world, a single band of four families cowering together, meek as mouselings.

Hiding from humans, those most unpredictable of predators.

Hiding from the sun itself.

Some said there were more dairnes far away, living in mountain caves or on distant islands. Some said those sightings were the result of misguided hope. Dairnes were often mistaken for dogs. We share many physical similarities.

Dogs, however, lack opposable thumbs. They can't walk upright. They aren't able to glide from tree to tree. They can't speak to humans.

And dogs aren't – forgive me – the sharpest claws in the hunt, if you catch my meaning.

In any case, whether there were more of us or not, Dalyntor feared we would all be gone soon, slaughtered for our warm and silky fur.

Like the Carlisian seal, hunted by humans to extinction.

Or the red marlot, devastated by disease.

Or the blue-tufted ziguin, wiped out when its territory was destroyed in the Long-Ago War.

It seemed there were many ways to leave the world forever.

We didn't want to believe our days were numbered. But here is what we did know: once we'd been many, and now we were few.

My parents feared I would be the first among us to die when trouble came, and trouble, they knew, was fast approaching.

I was small. And sometimes disappointing.

But I knew I could be brave as well. I was not afraid to be the first to die.

I just did not want to be the last to live.

I did not want to be the endling.

CHAPTER 2

A Visit from Some Butterbats

The end began not so long ago, the day some butterbats came to visit.

It was early afternoon when I first heard them. I tiptoed past my sleeping family, nestled together like one great animal.

Dairnes are not night creatures by nature, but we no longer ventured out until the sun was long gone. We feared the giant cats called felivets, who hunted at night. But we feared poachers and the soldiers of the Murdano, Nedarra's ruler, even more.

Still, I was restless. And I was sure I'd heard something just outside the door: the air, moving beneath wings both delicate and powerful.

My sister Lirya yawned and opened one eye. 'I'm so hungry I could eat you, Byx,' she murmured.

'She's too scrawny to eat,' said my oldest brother, Avar.

I ignored their teasing. I was used to ignoring my siblings.

It took some effort, squeezing through the door of our latest temporary home. An abandoned mirabear hive,

it resembled a huge wasp nest that had fallen to earth. It was shaped like a honeycomb, with holes the size of large boulders, and glistened in the light like raw honey, though it was rock-hard to the touch. My father said the hive was made of volcanic ash, sulfur, and sand, mixed with sap from a bulla tree.

Dairnes used to fashion circle camps on the plains, or weave tree nests when we moved through forests. We didn't do that anymore.

There were many things we didn't do anymore. Or so Dalyntor, our teacher, the holder of our history, told us. He hinted at much more, but there were parts of the dairne story too harsh for our young ears.

Tree nests were too easy to spot, too vulnerable to arrows. Instead we moved from place to place, sheltering in caves or deep gullies, or within bramble patches in the heart of the forest. We left no evidence of our passing, no hint of nests or camps. We slept at the bases of cliffs, on remote beaches, in the deserted homes of other creatures. Our little band once spent the night in a large abandoned hunter's lodge.

That was the closest I had ever come to humans, one of the six great governing species. Those six – humans, dairnes, felivets, natites, terramants, and raptidons – had once been considered the most powerful in our land. But now all of them – even the humans – were controlled by the despotic Murdano.

I'd only encountered two of the other great governing

species. I'd scented felivets, huge, graceful felines, gliding through blackest night. (No one ever hears them.) And I'd seen raptidons, lords of the air, carving arcs through the clouds.

Never, though, had I glimpsed a natite.

Never (thankfully) a terramant swarm.

And never a human.

Still, I knew more than a few things about humans. Dalyntor had taught us pups about them, drawing stick figures on a dried playa leaf. From him, I learned that humans have two eyes, a nose, and a mouth filled with blunt teeth. I learned they stand taller than we dairnes, but not by too much. I learned a great deal about their habits, their clothing, their villages and cities, their culture, their weapons, their languages, how they measure time and distance.

And I learned, most importantly, that humans were never to be trusted, and always to be feared.

I emerged from the mirabear hive into slanting sunlight.

The sound grew nearer, and then I saw them above the hive.

Butterbats!

There were four of them, easily three tails wide and almost as long, with shimmery wings that wove rainbows out of the tree-filtered light. They must have thought there were still mirabears there, butterbats being great lovers of honey – and great thieves besides.

Despite the stiff breeze, they had no trouble hovering silently overhead like huge hummingbirds.

'Byx.' The voice was soft, part concern, part scold. I turned to see that my mother had joined me. She looked weary, her dark gold fur mussed, her tail listless.

'Butterbats, Maia!' I whispered.

She followed my gaze. 'So beautiful. They're heading north, I expect. It's migration time for them.'

'I wish I could go, too.'

'I know it's hard sometimes, this life.' She stroked my back. 'Especially for you little ones.'

'I'm not little.'

My mother nudged me with her nose. 'Not so little anymore. True enough.'

I sighed, leaning into her. She was as warm and safe as a patch of sun.

'I'm bored, Maia. I want to have fun. I want to chase my tail. I want to learn new things. I want to go on adventures and be brave.'

'No need to rush toward bravery,' she said softly. 'No rush at all.'

'The big ones call me runt. And whelp,' I moaned. 'They say I ask too many questions.' I was rather enjoying feeling so sorry for myself. 'I hate being me.'

'Byx,' my mother said, 'don't ever say that. There's only one you in the whole wide world. And I love that you ask so many questions. That's how we learn.' She paused. 'I'll tell you something. Something none of the other pups know yet.'

My ears flicked to alert.

'The adults had a meeting last night. We'll be leaving here at sundown. Heading north, just like the butterbats. Myxo will be leading us. She said we've searched in the southlands long enough.'

Myxo was our pathfinder. She had the keenest nose and the best instincts of anyone in our pack, and she'd traveled far and wide looking for more dairnes. Still, though we'd heard rumors of dairne sightings, nothing ever came of them. Our pack was down to twenty-nine members.

'This is a big move,' my mother said. 'A sort of migration of our own. We're going to search for the First Colony.'

'But Dalyntor taught us they're long gone.' I remembered our lessons about the First Colony, the original group of dairnes who migrated to Nedarra long ago. We'd had to memorize a poem – an extremely long poem – about them.

I love learning more than anyone in my family. But even I have to admit it may have been the most boring poem ever spoken:

Sing, poet, of the Ancients who dared forth—
Brave dairnes, o'er mountains treacherous and cruel,
Who crossed the frigid waters of the north
To Dairneholme, living isle and floating jewel.

That's all I recall. If Dalyntor hadn't let us draw maps while he recited it, I would have fallen fast asleep. Most of the other pups did.

'Maia?' I asked. 'Do you really think there might still be a colony in the north?'

My mother looked across the meadow to the dark, wind-fretted forest, but didn't answer. 'It's not impossible,' she said at last.

Dairnes do not lie. There would be no point, since we can always detect an untruth, not just from our own kind, but from anyone.

No other species has this ability. Dalyntor often called it 'our burdensome gift,' although I didn't understand what he meant by that.

Nonetheless, although dairnes don't lie, we do sometimes . . . hope.

'But you don't think so?' I pressed, although I could already tell her answer.

'No, my love.' It was almost a whisper. 'But perhaps I'm wrong.'

'I'm sure you're wrong. I'll bet we'll find hundreds of dairnes. Thousands, even!' I stopped myself. 'It's not wrong to hope, is it?'

'It's never wrong to hope, Byx,' said my mother. 'Unless the truth says otherwise.' She gave me another nose nudge. 'Now, it's back to bed for you. We have a long night's walk ahead of us.'

The butterbats still circled, dipping and twirling just

beyond reach. 'A few more minutes, Maia,' I pleaded. 'They're so pretty.'

'Not too long,' she said, 'and no exploring.' She turned, then hesitated. 'I love you, my pup. Don't ever forget that.'

'I love you, too, Maia.'

A long time passed before the butterbats moved on. Maybe they were amazed to have happened upon some dairnes. Or maybe they were simply enjoying the waves of warm air rising from the sun-touched hive.

As I turned back toward the entrance, something strange, something I couldn't quite place, caught my attention.

Not a sound, exactly, or a scent.

More like a hunch.

I took a few steps toward the small meadow separating me from a dark line of trees. Beyond it stretched the sea.

I consulted the scents on the whipping wind. The air was heavy with stories.

Was that treefox I smelled? Brindalet? It was hard to pin things down in the zigzag wind.

The forest called to me, silent but compelling, willing me to approach. Golden ribbons of light threaded through the trees. I'd never been there in daylight, only in the dead of night.

No, I told myself. We were forbidden to leave the pack, especially during the day, and most especially without permission.

And I didn't leave – not much, anyway.

I'd ventured to a stream fizzing with green bubbles. I'd sought the company of a friendly zebra squirrel and her babies. Yesterday I'd visited a cluster of star flowers, scented like sage and sea. It was a lovely spot for tail chasing.

I never took big risks. Never went far. But how could I possibly learn about the world if I never got to see it?

I knew I shouldn't go. But before we moved on, before we trekked to the next dark place, wouldn't it be wonderful to view the sea, just once, in daylight? I had only ever seen it by starlight.

My mother was back in our nest. I checked the freshening breeze: no danger.

Only a few minutes to cross the meadow, dropping onto all fours to run. Only a few minutes more to pass through that intimidating but enticing wall of trees.

Just a moment, I told myself. Just a glimpse of the sun, dancing on water.

A moment or two, and then I'd return, having never been missed.