

THE MOON LILY
A Story from the Citadel Archives
by Tyler Tillerson

Taly hoped he didn't see her staring as she quickly ducked her head and purposefully stared at the leather skin in her hands. From so far off, it was unlikely the hunter had taken note of her gaze. Then again, with eyes as strong and keen as his...

Get it together, Taly! He'll never take you seriously if you act like a kit.

Taly grimaced at her trembling hands and willed her heartbeat to slow. She took a deep breath then exhaled quietly, hopeful the other partners were too engrossed in their work to notice her, too. She then set to working the skin, destined to be a vest for warmth. The season had changed and, with it, the temperature, too. Sphinx are equipped with fur and wings, but they make poor protection come winter in the mountains.

Taly shifted uncomfortably and folded her wings tighter, her mind still scolding her heart for staring in the first place. As was typical, fall brought many changes in preparation for another snow-covered winter. The hunters focused on bigger and more dangerous game, the mates worked to ensure their hovels were warm enough for their kits, and the partners began chasing one another in hopes of sharing a bed with someone they actually *liked* for the winter.

With wings so big, I bet he doesn't get cold as easily. Could even keep me war...
STOP. Not doing myself any favors.

Taly had never paid much attention to the affections of partners. To be fair, if any had expressed interest she couldn't remember. Unlike her sister, Taly was every bit the runt of her community. Small wings, small paws...and, well, small everywhere else, too. Despite being mature in age, she hardly looked it. The mates told her she would be glad for such youthful looks and to be patient. Her sister, though, ruthlessly teased her. For better or worse, her nickname for Taly had caught on in the community.

"Can I borrow your knife, Beam?"
Taly forced a smile and replied, "Sure. Here you go."

Beam for 'moon beam', courtesy of an observation by her sister that Taly was so thin she could fit entirely within a moonbeam passing through the thick canopy of the forest. At first, the name hadn't bothered her. For one thing, *Moon Beam* sounded rather pretty. Especially when *he* had said it last fall. Except that *wasn't* the name. It was just Beam.

She just had to go and CORRECT him. Six above...
Calm down or you'll mess this vest up, too.

"You ok, Beam?"

Taly grimaced and eyed her sister with annoyance. Alya looked back and awaited an answer.

"Yeah."
"Sure? You look pretty..."

THE MOON LILY
A Story from the Citadel Archives
by Tyler Tillerson

Stop right there and I'd maybe forgive you. Hmph.

"...mad?"

"Huh. Dunno why" Taly answered with disinterest.

Alya said, "Yeah, me neither. Is it Ronu?"

Taly tensed at his name. Moreso because her sister had spoken it. She half wondered if the whole thing had come about *because* Alya liked Ronu, too. There were plenty of *other* partners to choose from. Ronu was hardly the strongest or quickest. He wasn't even the most handsome. Well, to most, anyways.

She's just chasing him because she figured out I like him, too.

Alya added, "Well, *that* look says it all."

"Worrying about Ronu again?" chimed in another with a hint of amusement.

Gods. Here we go...

Alya answered, "Yup. Beam's all worked up about *something*, but won't say."

"Well, what did he say, Beam?"

Another answered, "Can't have said anything if you didn't *ask* first, you know?"

"Ha! Look at her! C'mon, Beam, you've *got* to talk to him first!"

Taly grit her teeth and set the leather down forcefully. She eyed Alya with anger, but her sister only cocked an eyebrow in response.

"What?" she asked innocently.

"You *know* what, Alya" Taly replied stiffly.

She then set the leather down and stalked off, the others gossiping about what Taly could have meant by her words. Alya, though, shrugged it off and loudly declared her sister's temper was simply showing itself. Again.

Gods...why her? Or HIM?! The quicker they haul off and, and MATE, the quicker I can move on. Six above, this is killing me. Oh, stop being so dramatic! It's just one hunter.

Plenty of others, literally. Zyan's Teeth, there's only five of us and TEN of them. It's not like I'm out of options or anything.

Until I am. Nobody else has talked to me. Not really. Not like he does.

Taly hurried towards her family hovel and ducked in, hopeful nobody else had seen her storm off. Especially not Ronu. Within, she willed her anger under control and tried to clear her mind. Yet the memory of last fall wouldn't give up.

Hey, Moon Beam! How's it going?

THE MOON LILY
A Story from the Citadel Archives
by Tyler Tillerson

Oh! H-hi, Ronu! Um, it's going well. Yeah!
I know those antlers! Culled them myself. Glad to see you're the one working them.
Y-you are?
Absolutely! You make the best handles around. Perfectly smooth but still full of character. We all love your work. Even the chief swapped out his old knife for one of yours.
Oh, um, thank you. Really. I –
Hey Ronu! What's up?
The sky, Alya! Just talking to Moon Beam about her –
MOON beam?! Nah, it's just BEAM. Ha!
Oh, er, ok? Sorry about that, Taly.
What? No, no, it's um, it's ok. I don't mind, um...
Come on Ronu, I've got a gift for you over by the lodge!
Oh, really? Ok! Take it easy, uh, Beam!
Y-yeah, sure, bye Ronu.

An audible crack brought Taly back to the hovel. Glancing down, she saw she had gripped the handle of her own knife so hard it had fractured. The young sphinx sighed and her wings drooped low. She didn't stand a chance of winning Ronu's heart. Not if the competition was her sister. Alya was opposite of Taly in every way. Full in body, outgoing, confident...she was a prime pick for anyone aspiring to be a chieftain someday.

"Lunala, light my way. What do I even *do* about this?" she whispered to no one.

Taly sat in silence, her anger washed away by deep loneliness and self-pity. The Goddess of Light, Lunala, didn't provide an answer to her prayer. Not that she ever did. Taly placed great faith in the Six, but not in how much they might care about someone like her. She'd seen panteran shamans channel powers that could only come from the gods and goddesses. The Six and their power were plenty real.

Hmph. Could use some of that power now.

The sphinx tossed her chipped knife onto a table and sighed loudly. She couldn't hole up there all day, much as she wanted to. The chief's mate would be hounding her if she didn't do her share and, besides, *nobody* liked a slacker. Least of all a hunter that worked as hard as Ronu. If there *was* one thing Ronu was good at, it was working hard. Such a trait had earned him Taly's interest long before such things were supposed to be important. It wasn't until he had complimented *her* work that she'd realized how deep that interest ran.

Too deep. Gods...help me.
Get over yourself, Taly! If not the leathers, go help Elder Nell.
She'll at least calm me down.

Taly nodded to nobody then took a deep breath and exhaled loudly. She turned around, put on her best smile, and stepped from the hovel with a firm paw forward.

THE MOON LILY
A Story from the Citadel Archives
by Tyler Tillerson

“Woah! Easy there, Beam. You ok?”

Right into Ronu.

“R-r-ronu! I’m so s-sorry!” Taly stammered.

He held her by the shoulders and chuckled. His broad smile and bright eyes had her stomach turning with fear and excitement. He’d not touched her before and now, why, they were practically chest to chest!

“S’ok, Beam. I was looking for you, actually.”

“What!? I-I-I mean, oh? Um, what’s up?”

Ronu released her shoulders but remained close as he eyed her questioningly. His eyes wandered from hers to her paws, then her wings and tail, before returning to her tightly folded arms.

Is he looking at my...?

“You ok? You seem a little...”

“Mad? Sorry, um, no, I’m...I’m ok.”

“I was going to say *tense*.”

“Oh, ha, yeah...I mean, *no*...I’m ok! Really.”

Ronu eyed her with apparent skepticism. Internally, Taly profusely prayed he’d drop it and get on with whatever it was he wanted. Except that thought *also* terrified her.

“Really, Taly, are you alright?” he asked with sincerity.

Gods above, he’s so kind...GET IT TOGETHER TALY!

“Y-yes, Ronu. Um, thanks f-for asking. What did you need?”

*Please say me. GODS, NO! STOP! Just, just act natural and relax.
Probably wants another knife handle.*

“N-need? Erm, nothing, actually” Ronu replied meekly, “I was just, uh, looking for you.”

“Oh. Erm, w-why?”

“Well, Alya mentioned you, um, you didn’t care for the rabbit skins I brought last week. Figured I’d ask what you’re looking for?”

I’m going to kill her. She didn’t say Ronu caught those!

“OH! Uh, um...I didn’t mean, that is, they weren’t *that* bad...uh...”

THE MOON LILY
A Story from the Citadel Archives
by Tyler Tillerson

“She said something about being too thin? She couldn’t remember, but, um...anyways, the chief said something, too, but wouldn’t *tell* me what was wrong. You know how he gets.”

“Ha-ha, yeah, um...”

*I’m going to kill her! Just answer the question! I don’t want to hurt his feelings!
Six, what do I say?*

“So, um, what did I do wrong?” Ronu asked sheepishly.

“Nothing! I mean, they were, um...they *were* thin. Too young, really. For what we were making, I mean. They’re great for stuffing blankets and such, but...”

“So, fatter then? Older?”

“Y-yeah. That’s all. I’m sorry, Ronu. I didn’t know *you* had...”

“S’ok, Beam. Just wanted to make sure I didn’t mess up and make it harder on you.”

*Damn. Now I’ve really done it. Elder Nell always says I shouldn’t complain aloud.
Damn. Damn, damn, DAMN! Look at him!? He’s so, so...*

“Not at all, Ronu! I know how hard you, um, how hard you try. It’s ok, really. I...I’m sorry...”

“Stop right there, Beam. This was my apology to *you*!” he cut in with a grin, “Ease up. I can’t be better if you don’t tell me, right?”

“R-right. Yeah.”

Ronu stepped back and Taly’s heart sank. Poor words and all, his proximity had still been exhilarating. Ronu folded his own arms across a bare chest and she cast her eyes down. She prayed her cheeks didn’t look as red as they felt.

“I can’t promise the best, but I’ll get it right, Beam. You can count on that!”

She smiled and nodded at him, unsure of what else to say. Ronu nodded back and then stood to leave. As he did, he eyed Taly a final time and his brow creased in worry.

“Really now, you ok, Taly?”

Taly kept forcing her smile as she replied in mock cheer, “Y-yeah! I’m great.”

“Ok, well, take it easy, Beam.”

“You, too, Ronu.”

Her heart fluttered when he nodded and gave a wink before trotting off. She’d have stared longer if not for the sinking feeling when she heard Alya call his name. It sank ever lower when her sister trotted up to the hunter and hitched an arm into his without so much a care in the world.

I don’t stand a chance.

Taly bit down her sadness and turned to go in search of Elder Nell. Despite its size, the community only had two elders: the chieftain’s aunt and Elder Nell, his mother. This fact alone endeared Taly to Elder Nell, for the elder often disagreed with *her* sister, Elder Myri, frequently.

THE MOON LILY
A Story from the Citadel Archives
by Tyler Tillerson

Unlike Taly and Alya, though, both elders had been strikingly beautiful females in their prime. As far as Taly was concerned, the elders were *still* beautiful.

Nell would say I am, too. Unlike Myri. No wonder Alya likes HER more...hmpf.

“Oh, such a frown you have, dear! And a back bent low, too! A strong eagle won’t prefer such a branch for his nest.”

Taly rolled her eyes at the elder but then managed a weak smile.

“Hi, Elder Nell.”

“Up, up with those lips! Lift those arms and wings, too! Can’t be calling you *Beam* if you aren’t smiling, darling!”

“Very funny.”

“Yet you do not laugh” the elder replied sagely, “A hunter can only follow a trail for so long, dear. Eventually he must *see* and *hear* his prey, or he’ll give up.”

Taly moaned, “That’s all well and good if it were *my* trail we’re talking about, Elder. Can we talk about something *else*, please?”

Elder Nell’s chuckle was more a raspy growl, but her warm smile always made it hard for Taly to stay upset for long. She was outside her hovel carefully threading dyed leather strands into a thick cord likely destined to become one of her coveted talismans. Sphinxes don’t have shamans like panterans, instead relying on their own sense of faith to commune with the Six.

“Who is this one for?” Taly asked, changing the topic as she motioned to the Elder’s work.

“Mmm, I do not know. Could be for *you*.”

“Me? I don’t need a talisman.”

“Oh, but you *want* the protection of another, hmm?”

Taly grimaced as the elder cackled at her expense. Nell pat the ground beside her and Taly sighed before crumbling to a laying position beside her. Once more her wings folded as tight as her crossed arms.

So much for coming over here...

“I saw you two visiting. What did he say?” Elder Nell asked innocently.

Taly groaned and replied with frustration, “Alya told him I had complained about his rabbits and...and he was asking me why.”

“Mhm. I told you so.”

Taly scowled at the elder, but Nell only cocked an eyebrow and shrugged with disinterest.

“I suppose you’d have listened to Myri if she’d said so.”

“*Nell...*” Taly moaned.

“What? It’s true. Myri told you to change the colors you wear and you did.”

THE MOON LILY
A Story from the Citadel Archives
by Tyler Tillerson

And then everyone asked why, I got uncomfortable, and ended up changing back.

“I changed back, didn’t I?” Taly countered.

“Indeed. Not for my sake...” Elder Nell replied with amusement.

Taly blushed. How the elder kept catching her in the same conversation was beyond her.

“Of course, if you’d asked *me*...I could have told you Ronu likes when you wear blue. And, lo! So do you. How convenient. No changes needed at all, as if the Six built you exactly as you should be.”

“You’re really not going to let that go, are you?”

“Keep your end of our promise and I might.”

*I’ll not complain about my sister if you don’t complain about yours.
Hmph. At least I’m not alone in breaking THAT promise.*

“Fair...” Taly grumbled.

“Hardly, but you know that, dear.”

“He likes her more.”

“Says who?”

“She just...just grabbed him by the arm and went off. And he went with her! And besides, Alya is *beautiful*. Of course he likes her.”

“Well of course. Ronu likes *several* of you. Who says he likes Alya *more*?”

“Me!” Taly shot back with ire.

“Oh, well, then it’s probably true! You’ve always had a good sense for these things.”

Taly huffed, rolled her eyes, then shut them tightly. She wanted to *scream*. Being in love shouldn’t have been so stressful. Chasing partners was normal, and losing them, too. It was just life. She knew that. Had watched Alya go through two potential partners that summer! She had no idea if Ronu was actually *the male* for her.

*Or if I’m the female for him. Probably not...I dunno...
Gods, but I want him so. Why him? Why her!?*

She flinched at the elder’s touch and looked to see Nell watching her with apparent worry.

“Your heart really is a mess, isn’t it?”

Taly mumbled, “Yes.”

“Mmm. It is hard, to feel such passions and be unable to share them.”

“Yes” she whispered, a single tear rolling down her cheek.

“Speak into it. Tell me, Taly. Tell me why you hurt?” the elder cooed.

“It isn’t fair, Nell. I love him. I...Alya could have *anyone*. She’s just doing it to get at me. Just like with *Beam*.”

THE MOON LILY
A Story from the Citadel Archives
by Tyler Tillerson

“Perhaps. There are many times I thought Myri was getting between me and Farlo, when in fact she was trying to learn ways I could catch his eye.”

Farlo, the chieftain’s father and Nell’s mate, had died years ago. To an outsider at the funeral rites, one might have thought Myri had been his mate with how loudly she had wailed. Rumors had abounded that Myri and Nell had fought bitterly over Farlo’s heart, but it wasn’t until he died the truth was settled.

“Would that my sister had told me so, so much pain could have been avoided. Of course, would that I had listened to her more...she might have thought her words more valuable to me.”

Elder Nell smiled sadly.

“Farlo found it all very funny. Males won’t hesitate to toy with your heart if they think it won’t break it. Such is their nature, blind to risk but hearts as large – and hot – as Raka’s sun. Myri loved him as much as I did, but differently. Had the Six given us a brother, it would have been him. Instead he was a mate to one of us, and a dear, dear friend to the other.”

*Ronu’s heart is certainly as big as the sun. His hands were warm, earlier, too.
Gods, I’m a mess.*

“Are you really set on him, Taly? Truly?”

Taly grimaced and then mumbled, “Yes.”

“You say yes but frown so?”

“May as well have my heart set on the moon.”

“Can see it but can’t reach it, hmm...” the elder intoned.

Taly nodded sadly and the elder gently pat her shoulder.

“Ronu.”

The young sphinx looked at the elder as she spoke his name aloud. The elder merely gazed back at her. Then she said it again.

“Ronu.”

“Why are you saying his name?”

“Interesting. Nothing is happening” the elder mumbled to herself, before adding, “You try.”

“Saying his name?”

“Yes.”

“Erm...why?”

“*Just do it*” the elder gently scolded.

“Oh, um...R-ronu.”

“Like you mean it, Taly.”

“How do you...*mean* a name?” Taly retorted.

“*Taly.*”

THE MOON LILY
A Story from the Citadel Archives
by Tyler Tillerson

“Ok, ok...Ronu.”

“With more force.”

“Ronu.”

“Hmm...better. Not louder, just more...impassioned. As if you were trying to get his attention.”

Taly huffed and rolled her eyes. She *was* trying to get his attention. It occurred to her the elder might be trying to trick her. Nell had done such a thing before. Taly glanced about, worried Ronu might actually hear her saying his name, randomly and aloud. The elder laughed and said he was not nearby.

“I believe he went with Alya to the stream.”

Taly’s stomach did a somersault at the thought of her sister bathing the hunter.

*Get a grip. It’s fall! They aren’t bathing. Probably just collecting firewood, or fishing, or...
Spending time together.*

“Ronu” Taly said with sincerity and force.

“Strange. That was quite good, but, hmm...”

“Why are we doing this?” Taly asked with exasperation.

“You hear his name, speak it even, yet do not smile.”

“I’m not exactly in a good mood, Elder.”

“Ah...that may be it. You think on Alya. This would poison the charm.”

“Charm?”

“Mhm. So, clear your mind of Alya...of any others...and only think upon Ronu.”

“What charm?”

“*Focus* Taly.”

The partner eyed the elder with suspicion and curiosity but then nodded in resignation. She’d prayed for help, asked for that power, and if the elder were willing to try something who was Taly to turn it away? She *did* want him, after all.

*Focus on that, then. Him. Well, that’s easy. Isn’t it? What exactly DO I focus on about him?
Those wings. Gods they’re gorgeous, and so soft. Or soft looking. Alya said they were soft.
How would she know? How else? Gods, no, that isn’t helping...Ronu.
Ronu, Ronu, Ronu...RONU...Zyan’s Wolves, this is hard. Why am I doing this again?
Because of Ronu.
Ronu.*

Nell said nothing as Taly tried to focus her mind on the hunter. It was strangely difficult. How many hours had she spent fantasizing about him? Now, she could hardly imagine what he *looked* like. Alya no longer troubled her. Rather, the emptiness of trying to understand Ronu did. She knew so much about him, yet so little of it had anything to do with *her*. She knew Ronu through others. She didn’t doubt he was every bit the kind and gentle male everyone knew him to be.

THE MOON LILY
A Story from the Citadel Archives
by Tyler Tillerson

*I just wish I knew him that way. I want him to be gentle and kind to me.
But he has? He asked if I was alright earlier. He could tell something was wrong.
I should have said so. No, he'd think me a kit...or not. Maybe, maybe he'd understand?
Like it even. I mean, I know I'd like if he said I was on his mind.
He did say that.
Oh, Six, I want him. I want him to want me! Ronu. MY Ronu.
Ronu and his Moon Beam.*

“Ah, there it is. Now I can help.”
“Huh?”

Taly opened her eyes, barely aware of her foolish grin fading. Nell's own grin remained.

“Spit it out. What did you last think?”

Ronu and his Moon Beam.

Taly blushed brightly and shook her head. The elder laughed once more but then winked and nodded. She then took hold of Taly's hands and grew serious.

“It is not often I invoke Myri's wisdom, but in this instance I think she would approve. There is a way to ensure Ronu finds you. To ensure he *sees* you.”
Taly grimaced and asked fretfully, “Telling him I like him?”
Elder Nell snorted and said, “Well, yes, that's one way...if you think you have it in you to do so. Arrows fly best when shot straight.”

Taly's look of terror was enough to tell Nell the answer. The elder shrugged and then massaged Taly's hands as she continued her idea.

“As I said, it will ensure that Ronu sees you, truly. *However...*” the elder paused, then sternly continued, “It will *not* guarantee his love for you. It may even turn it away. This is a gamble, Taly, a way to shift the odds. Not in your favor, but in *Ronu's* favor.”
“I...I don't understand. What is it?”
“You have a heart for Ronu, dear. You need not be convinced of this. Ronu? Does he have a heart *for you*?”
“I...I dunno?”
“This will help him see if he does.”
“Ok, that's good...um...what is...”
“It will also help him see if he does not.”

The elder's words hung like death over Taly. The notion of Ronu deciding he *didn't* like her was almost too much to bear.

THE MOON LILY
A Story from the Citadel Archives
by Tyler Tillerson

“As I said, it shifts the odds in *his* favor. It enables him to see, clearly. If his heart is for you...he will see this and, well, you know how hunters are once they *see* their prey” the elder said with a wry smile.

Taly meekly grinned and quietly replied, “Yes. I...I would like that.”

Nell remarked coldly, “He might also clearly see you aren’t worthy to hunt. A rabbit too thin.”

Taly felt her heart crack at these words. Nell nodded knowingly then released Taly’s hands.

“It is your decision, for it is *you* that takes this gamble. It will not hurt Ronu, he won’t even know it happened, but it could very well *slay* you. Of course, there are plenty others to seek after so it’s not the end of the world. You wouldn’t want to be with someone that doesn’t want you.”

Unless it’s Ronu. It would be the end of MY world.

Gods, get a grip, Taly. It’s a real risk. If Ronu sees me now...would I be enough?

Or should I wait? Maybe, maybe try harder first and THEN do whatever it is Elder Nell has in mind? That might be a safer gamble...Alya.

Taly grimaced at the thought of her sister. Alya might be trying to help, but Taly doubted it. Not after all she’d done in front of her. She didn’t think her sister hated her or was intentionally cruel. Only that if Alya *could* get under Taly’s skin, she would. She’d always been that way. She’d probably get Ronu hung on her for the winter, just to mess with Taly, then leave him come spring like she had the other two over the summer. She really *did* have the pick of them all.

And if Ronu gets a taste for her, even if rejected, he’ll never want me.

I cannot wait. Either I get brave or I get smart. That’s what Nell would say.

Well, I’m certainly not getting brave anytime soon!

“Ok. What do I do?” she said with determination.

“Ask Ronu for a Moon Lily.”

“A Moon Lily?”

“Yes. It’s a *very* rare flower that grows higher up in the mountains. It’s not easy to obtain, but Ronu has years enough to find it. What matters is that *Ronu* picks it, and that he picks it *for you*.”

“Erm...o-ok. Why? How, um, how does this...?”

“The flowers grow where Lunala cried when she saw how lonely Boldu was, huddling in his stony earth, alone in the Great Dark. They have great power when used in a talisman, including this one. The flower will be tied to Ronu’s spirit when he picks it, but it matters that *you* ask him for it as it attunes his spirit towards *yours*.”

I like the sound of that. Our spirits, together...Six, focus Taly!

“This is what allows him to see *you* best. He will see others, too, such as Alya. But *you* will be the easiest to see. As I said, this doesn’t mean he’ll *like* what he sees – let alone love – but that is the risk you take. Go to him and ask him for a Moon Lily. When he returns it to you, come to me and I will make your talisman.”

THE MOON LILY
A Story from the Citadel Archives
by Tyler Tillerson

Taly nodded understanding then furrowed her brow in worry.

“Will this seem like an, um, an odd request? I’ve *never* heard of a moon lily. Or anyone asking for one? What do I say if he doesn’t kn...”

“He will know it. Myri sometimes asks for them, too.”

“Won’t he think it strange *I’m* asking for it?”

Elder Nell sighed with exasperation and said, “Do you always drop rocks before your paws to stumble on?”

Taly grimaced at the rebuke and tacitly apologized. The elder was right. She was overthinking this. Why wouldn’t she? This was Ronu! *Her* Ronu...or, well, she hoped anyway.

“Even if he finds it strange, it’s Ronu. He lives to serve others, you know that.”

“He does, doesn’t he?” Taly said with a hint of admiration.

“If he asks why you need it, tell him.”

“*WHAT!?*”

The elder cackled and then winked.

“Well, don’t need a talisman if he knows right then and there!” she hooted.

“Nell! *Gods above...*”

“Really now, if he asks, tell him you’re working on a ritual of blessing with me.”

“He’ll ask me for *who*. Ronu’s curiosity is as long as the sky is tall!” Taly countered.

“And you’ll have to have the nerve to tell him it’s a secret!” Nell shot back, before adding wryly,

“Or not? Like I said...you could also just *tell him* you love him and see where it goes.”

Taly shook her head vehemently. The thought of just *spilling* her affection for him only terrified her. He’d undoubtedly think her a fool. Better that he saw her and, hopefully, chose to come for her. She hoped. She really, *really* hoped he came for her after this.

“It doesn’t happen often, but fish sometime jump right into the basket. I’ve yet to hear a hunter complain when a lovely doe jumps right into his arms.”

“I’m hardly a lovely doe” Taly mumbled.

“Oh, but you *are* Taly” Nell said with gentle scolding, “You are so very, very beautiful, my dear. Arms and legs so slender, paws so petite but strong. Your fur is fine and thin, not long and prone to tangles like *this* mess on me...”

Nell motioned to the fur along her feline back and scowled. True enough, it had several tangles in it. One even had a few pine needles trapped in it.

“But I’m so *small*” Taly groaned, hugging herself while she looked at Nell’s ample bosom.

She then surveyed the community, finding every other partner in sight, and wished she looked as they did. Be it more heft above her waist, or just more girth to her hips or length to her wings,

THE MOON LILY
A Story from the Citadel Archives
by Tyler Tillerson

everyone looked better than her. She frowned as Nell quietly tutted beside her and rested a weathered forepaw atop Taly's.

"Your feathers are as fine as silk from the cities. Your hair is as radiant as Raka's setting sun, your fur the color of autumn's leaves...none look as beautiful as you do in this season. Are you sure you want Ronu? There are others who see you, Taly. I'm sure of it."

Others? Like wh...no.

"I love him, Nell" she said with a thin smile, before grimacing and adding, "I just don't have the courage to say so. I...I dunno...I just don't."

"Then have the courage to give him sight, and pray he sees you as I do."

"Nobody sees me like *you* do, Nell" Taly replied warmly.

The partner leaned into the elder and embraced her. Nell sighed with contentment and hugged Taly fiercely. It was true. Why the elder saw such beauty in her, Taly didn't know. But every now and then, she almost believed the old sphinx. Only on nights when she was alone by the stream, looking at herself. When there was nobody else to compare to. Nights like the one after Ronu called her Moon Beam.

"Go on! Best find him so he knows to look for it tomorrow" Nell said with intent.

"Thank you, Nell. Really."

"You can thank me – and Myri – after. I still have to convince her to help me!"

"What?!"

"Oh, pfft! Don't worry. *You* get the flower. I'll handle Myri. Besides, you and I both know she's tired of seeing you all alone!"

Taly rolled her eyes then nodded. The other elder was indeed vocal about Taly's status as a timid partner. If only she were kinder and more helpful about it. Taly set off towards the stream, her heart pounding with excitement and dread. Excitement that she might *finally* be getting a chance at being with Ronu. Dread that she was going to stumble on him already with Alya.

The stream wasn't far from the community and she heard Alya's laughter before she saw them. Taly braced herself for the worst, but breathed a sigh of relief when she saw Alya was laughing not at – or with – Ronu, but another male: Tharm.

Well...that's not surprising. Where is Ronu?

If Alya was the darling of the male partners, beautiful, full of body, and skilled in the ways a potential chieftain might desire, Tharm was her as a male. The son of their chieftain was undoubtedly the strongest in their community and perhaps the most skilled hunter, too. He looked the part of chief's son, too. To quote Elder Myri, Tharm's muscles were large enough to build a hovel on.

And a family if you ask Elder Nell. He really is something.

THE MOON LILY
A Story from the Citadel Archives
by Tyler Tillerson

Just not for me. Alya loves teasing him, though.

And teasing she was, even as Taly kept her distance and searched the stream for Ronu. Her sister was twirling about Tharm, his favorite quiver in her hands as he tried to wrest it from her. He could easily pin her down if he wanted to – Tharm was as fast as lightning – but he only mocked anger between laughs as he chased her. Taly paused to watch the pair frolic and felt a familiar sense of jealousy. Not for her sister, necessarily, but for her experience. Taly managed a small smile as she tried to imagine playing keep-away with Ronu.

He'd probably just laugh then ask nicely. Six know, I'd just give it back to him if he did that. I'd do anything he asked of me. Hmph. He'd probably do anything I asked of him. He's so nice.

“Hey Taly! What brings you over here?”

Taly froze in fear at his voice behind her. The smile ran away, then she winced and it ran right back to her face, forced and crooked as she whirled around and tried to appear calm.

“Hi R-Ronu! Erm, I was...uh...I was looking for *you*, actually!” she said entirely too fast.

Bare chested and huffing, from what she didn't know, Ronu grinned at her but waited for her to explain further. She visibly gulped, willing her mind off the sweat dripping on his brow and arms as he put hands to furry hips and sat. His wings sagged, as if tired, and a peculiar and passionate thought raced like a rabbit across her mind.

Those wings look like they need a good massage...
MOON LILY. ASK. FOCUS.

“Er, um, I was wanting to ask you something. *F-for* something.”

“Sure thing, Beam. What do you need?”

You. Mieko's Tears...Six, help me!

Taly blurted out, “A moon lily.”

The sudden change in Ronu's posture didn't go unnoticed by Taly. His wings stiffened, as did his relaxed forelegs as he leaned back on his haunches. What's more, Ronu's eyes widened with obvious surprise.

“O-oh!” he managed to stammer out, “Uh, right. Sure! I can, I can find one of those. Wh-when do you need it?”

Taly tried to stifle her curiosity at his sudden change in disposition, willing her mind – and heart – to focus on the task. Ronu continued to seem a little odd, which made it surprisingly easier for Taly to get her words out.

THE MOON LILY
A Story from the Citadel Archives
by Tyler Tillerson

“Preferably as soon as possible, please.”

“Ok. Sure. Yeah, I can do that. I’ll, um, I’ll get it tomorrow while I’m out. Yeah?”

Taly smiled, this time genuine and with barely contained excitement, and said, “Great! Thank you so much, Ronu.”

“S-sure thing, Bea...T-Taly. Sorry.”

Taly cocked an eyebrow as Ronu forced a smile then nervously kicked at his side. He glanced past her towards the stream when he heard Alya scream. The hunter had captured his prey. Taly looked just in time to see Tharm encircle Alya with his great wings and none-too-quietly growl at her that she was in *big* trouble.

“Well *they* seem to be having a good time” Ronu quipped.

Taly blushed at what he implied, but didn’t know why. Perhaps it was because she wished it were the two of them playing in the cold water. Ronu looked a little hot as it were.

*Focus. I’ve asked him. Just need to, um...what? Make conversation?
Tell him I love him? Gods.*

“Y-yeah. Alya, um...Alya’s a tease when she wants to be.”

“Ha. That’s very true. Something about her and nicking things...had my bow the other day. Liked to have *never* gotten it back!”

Taly felt her heart tumble at this news. If her sister was even half as playful with Ronu as she was with Tharm...

Stop. I’m doing what I can. It’s going to be ok! Or not.

“Of course, you’re a bit of tease, too.”

Taly felt her heart heave. Then it was racing so fast she thought it might burst. Why in the world did Ronu think she was a *tease*!? She had *never* teased him. Certainly never played with him or, or done the things partners usually did to get each other’s attention.

“I-I-I am?” she stammered, afraid to look back at him.

“Can be” he said, before rising and walking past her towards the stream.

He paused between her and the stream and distinctively looked at her. His stare was both unsettling and exhilarating. He gave a goofy grin and snorted.

“I need to wash off. Been chasing kits through the bushes again.”

“Oh, um, ok. Well...uh...enjoy!” Taly replied meekly, not sure what else to say.

Ronu waited for a moment, as if expecting her to say more, then snorted again. His grin remained as he bid her farewell.

THE MOON LILY
A Story from the Citadel Archives
by Tyler Tillerson

“See you tomorrow, Taly. I’ll find your flower.”

“Th-thanks, Ronu. Really.”

“Thank me tomorrow when I bring it.”

He said it with a hint of...something. Taly wasn’t certain. Amusement? Annoyance? Whatever it was, it only further piqued her interest. Either the elder wasn’t telling her something...or Ronu wasn’t. Regardless, she watched as the hunter turned and trotted towards the stream. It took a moment to register she’d best leave, too. Much as she wanted to watch him – as she had before – she didn’t want to take any risks this time. Her heart pounded as she returned to the community. And for the rest of the evening until she went to sleep.

The next day, every minute felt an hour long. She’d awoken early enough to catch sight of the hunters setting out. They had seemed unusually loud, jovial, and joking. Tharm’s booming voice had earned him the ire of Elder Myri shouting from her hovel to quiet down. Taly had watched as they prepared to take flight. A great deal of the joking seemed to center on Ronu. Taly wasn’t sure why, but she didn’t care.

He was smiling a lot, and Ronu’s smile was the most handsome she’d ever known. Like watching him at the stream other times, she’d watched him take flight in the morning before, too. Sometimes he was quiet and dour, tired from a hunt that had run long the day before. Other times he was all business, swift and efficient as he checked his bow and filled his quiver. This morning was the Ronu she longed for most: happy and excited to set out.

With the beating of great wings and a shared song to the God of the Wilds, Zyan, the hunters took flight. Tharm led them, as he always had since coming of age, as they circled the community once then proceeded east to the hunting grounds. Except Ronu. Taly stepped from her hovel for a better look as she watched him peel off from the group and head north. Far in the distance stretched the icy teeth of the Northern Range. Somewhere among them was a flower born from the tear of a goddess.

Six keep him. Be safe, Ronu.

Taly felt her throat catch a little. She rarely fretted for the hunter, knowing he was more than capable of taking care of himself. Yet today was different. A deep worry gripped her as she watched Ronu fly, alone, towards the mountain tops. He went now to a place that was inherently dangerous, all so she could have a *chance* at him seeing her. If he got hurt...

Please be safe, Ronu. Gods...today will be long.

And long it was. Alya prodded her sister several times, asking if she were well, but Taly only dismissed her. Not until Alya took hold of Taly’s hand did she see her sister’s sincerity.

“You seem unwell, sis. *Really*. Please tell me. I don’t like it when you look this way!”

“I’m...there’s just a lot on my mind, Alya. I’m sorry.”

THE MOON LILY
A Story from the Citadel Archives
by Tyler Tillerson

The pair sat with the others, working leather, but they remained quiet as they listened to Alya speak to her sister.

“Well, tell me about it? What’s up?”

“I’d rather not” Taly said quietly.

“Here?”

Taly blushed as every other worker – many of them also partners – stopped and looked expectantly at Alya, then Taly. An old frustration rose up and she was of a mind to storm off again. Yet she’d done that yesterday, only to find Alya spending time with Ronu. Taly tried to focus her thoughts but simply could not. She worried for Ronu’s safety, for what he might see with the Moon Lily ritual, and for what she’d do if he *didn’t* like what he saw.

She worried most for his safety, though. More and more, her request felt not so much foolish as selfish and dangerous. Tharm had been nearly killed by a bear last year in the mountains. Alya gently prodded Taly. She grimaced and then nodded silently. Her older sister suddenly set down her tools and leather then stood. With a forepaw she gently poked her sister’s side and bid her to follow.

“Come on” Alya said, “let’s go for a walk.”

“Alya...I’m fine. I...”

“Well, I’m not! So, walk with me? I’ve a lot on my mind, too. I’ve tied four threads wrong in a row, now. No sense working when I can’t think straight.”

“Why are you...?”

“*Come on*, Taly.”

Alya stepped away, pausing only to wait for Taly to catch up, then led her sister to the edge of the community. She didn’t speak, her eyes forward while Taly’s searched the sky, hoping to see Ronu return early. Eventually they arrived at the stream. Alya guided Taly right to where she and Tharm had been playing the day before, then sat at the stream’s edge. It was only then that Taly saw how troubled her sister was.

“What’s wrong, Alya?”

“Tharm.”

If Taly was slow to give answers in regarding anything related to love, Alya was not. Her sister never hesitated to ask Taly about the males and her opinions of them. Taly had chalked this up to her sister just being a *normal* female. Now she wondered if it was something more.

“Is something wrong?”

“No. I’m trying to figure out if it’s *right*.”

“You seemed really happy yesterday. Here.”

“You were watching us? That’s a bit creepy, Taly.”

“*No*, I was looking for...”

THE MOON LILY
A Story from the Citadel Archives
by Tyler Tillerson

Taly caught herself, but Alya only smirked.

“Ronu.”

“So what’s up with Tharm?” Taly replied quickly, hoping to keep the focus on her sister.

“Nothing. He...well, you saw, I guess. He, um, he hugged me. It wasn’t playful. He...”

Alya blushed deeply then shrugged. She mumbled through her explanation.

“You know me, Taly. I liked Frel and Daris this summer, but...but they just wanted to *bed* me. They didn’t actually like *me*, you know? Tharm...Gods, I dunno. I can’t tell if he just knows *exactly* what to do to...to...”

“Curl your wing tips?” Taly teased.

“*Yeah*. Or if he’s...if he’s *really* that interested. In me. In who I am. Shit, Taly, you’ve always been honest with me? You know half of them chase me because of *these!*”

Taly chuckled as Alya grabbed her chest and rolled her eyes.

“I know you don’t spend a lot of time around *any* of them, but...but you listen. To everyone. You always have had a better sense of, of everyone. I guess...I guess what I’m trying to figure out is, is if Tharm is *good*. Good for *me*. Because, he s-said I was good f-for him. Yesterday.”

Taly’s eyes widened in shock as Alya bit her lip, smiled meekly, then gulped and shrugged.

“Nobody’s ever said that to me before” she whispered, “but that doesn’t mean he, um, he *means* it. This is *Tharm* we’re talking about. He could just, just *look* at some of us and we’d say *yes*.”

“I wouldn’t” Taly quipped, “but I’m *weird*.”

“You know what you’re worth, Taly. You know you’re beautiful in your own way.”

The compliment touched Taly and, for a moment, she felt a sincere love for her sister. Such a feeling was rare, but not surprising. Taly *did* love Alya, after all. Seeing her struggle with Tharm was a little surprising, but also exciting. That excitement shifted to worry at Alya’s next words.

“Ronu is a good male. He...I could see a life with him.”

“He is a good male.”

“You’d say the *best*, Taly.”

Taly mumbled, “I would, yes.”

“What about Tharm?”

Alya looked at her sister with pleading eyes and Taly’s fear temporarily abated. She gathered her thoughts on the chieftain’s son, took a deep breath, then told her sister what she believed.

“Tharm has a temper, just like his father, but he’s quick to apologize and quicker still to make things right. He could have *any* female he wants, and yet he’s spent the last five winters alone.

THE MOON LILY
A Story from the Citadel Archives
by Tyler Tillerson

He's traveled to other communities, where he could have a chieftain's daughter, or even a shaman, but he's always come back home to us."

Taly paused, smirked, then shrugged.

"He's always come back home to *you*. I've seen Tharm return with a bundle of flowers only three times. Once for Elder Nell, once for Elder Myri..."

Alya blushed scarlet and quietly mumbled, "Once for me. Just a few weeks ago. The last he could find, he said."

"If Tharm wanted you for his bed...I think it's safe to say he'd already have you in it."

Alya chuckled and replied, "Fair. I'd probably say yes...I mean, *look at him*."

"And if Tharm thought you were more than your looks, he'd say so."

"Yeah...he did, didn't he?"

"He'd mean it, too."

Alya looked at her sister and smiled. Taly was surprised when her older sister rushed her to hug her fiercely. When she let go, tears bespeckled Alya's cheeks as she tried to hastily wipe them away. Then she rapidly pat her chest and sighed.

"Gods...I'm a mess! I dunno what to even *do* with him! I mean, I know what I *want* to do...but...Six above! I've never felt like *this*."

Taly laughed and said, "You could just tell him you love him."

"Mieko's Tears! I'd probably *die* halfway through saying it!"

"Really?" Taly asked, shocked at her sister's fearful admission.

"Taly, *c'mon*, you know I pick on you for Ronu because I *know* how hard it is to actually say it!"

Taly's eyes opened with surprise as Alya laughed at her sister.

"I mean, really now, if it were *that* easy...we'd have kits by now!" Alya joked.

Taly snorted and then grumbled, "F-fair, I guess."

"Tell you what..."

Alya suddenly grew serious and took Taly's hands into hers. She stared her sister down as she took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, then nodded to herself.

"I'll tell Tharm if you'll tell Ronu. Tonight, ok?"

"*Wh-what!*? I, Alya...I dunno..."

"Taly you *love* him, I can see it! We *all* see it. Ronu might be the only one who *doesn't* see it, poor, blessed fool he can be. He's so damn *nice* I think he forgets he can be *romantic*, too!"

That...is a good description of him.

"Tonight, ok? We'll do this together."

"Um...like, *together* together?" Taly retorted.

"NO...Gods above, c'mon Taly, *really*. I need this and, let's be honest, you do, too."

THE MOON LILY
A Story from the Citadel Archives
by Tyler Tillerson

Taly bit her lip to the point it hurt. Yet Alya's pleading eyes coupled with what she offered was hard to pass on. Elder Nell *had* said she should just *tell* him. And now her greatest fear wasn't even real!

*Yeah, but Alya's got a guaranteed happy ending. Tharm has already said what he sees.
That doesn't mean Ronu will...
Just do it. Better he say it to my face than watch him choose someone else.*

"O-ok. Tonight" Taly said hesitantly, before nodding firmly and repeating, "Tonight."
"Tonight!" Alya said enthusiastically.

Then her sister descended into giggling and Taly couldn't help but giggle along with her. Dread still lined the walls of her heart, but a giddiness pounded against it that she'd not felt before. At the very least, she was happy for her sister. Arm in arm and chuckling like kits sharing a secret, they returned to the community. If the morning hours had passed slower than the seasons, the afternoon turned to evening far before Taly was ready.

As was typical of any day of hunting, Tharm and his comrades didn't return until nearly dusk. Taly's heart welled with fear and excitement at the sound of great wings beating overhead as the chief's son characteristically dove through the trees, swooping by his father and eliciting a growl of annoyance. The partners laughed as Tharm banked hard and swirled about the center of the community, his flashy display of control as he landed drawing praise and admiration. And a few passionate sighs.

The rest of the hunters landed behind him, though most preferred the safer – and slower – method of just gliding down to the center of the community. Taly watched her sister lightly bound from one forepaw to another, fear and elation radiating from her as she watched Tharm. She glanced at Taly, grinned like a fool, and then dashed off. Tharm saw her coming and smiled brightly, holding up a catch of five rabbits. His eyes widened with surprise when she threw her arms wide and rushed him.

Well, she's just diving right in. Gods, how am I going to even DO this?!
Maybe that should be it. Just...just rush him and, and...he'll think I've gone crazy.
I have, haven't I? Six, what do I even say?

Alya hit Tharm so hard he stumbled backwards. Gasps of surprise and questions immediately arose, but their laughter easily covered it all. Alya managed to bumble through her words, short and simple. Tharm listened, his eyes aglow with joy as he heard them.

"I love you, Th-tharm. You're g-g-good for me, too."

Taly cringed as Alya started to cry, but Tharm only laughed more and hugged her tightly before lifting her clear off the ground. So great was his strength, he held Alya aloft on his two hindlegs

THE MOON LILY
A Story from the Citadel Archives
by Tyler Tillerson

and wrapped his wings around her. A passionate kiss had Taly's fellow partners swooning. Even Taly felt her heart swell with want as Tharm slowly lowered her sister, their lips never parting.

*I want that. Gods, I want that with him. Ronu.
Ronu...where is Ronu?*

As if reading Taly's mind, one of the other hunters asked the same question aloud.

"He should have beaten us back? Right?"

Tharm glanced up from Alya, his grin fading to a look of concern. Gone was the lover and, in its place, the Chieftain's son. He gently pet Alya's arms, then began questioning the other hunters. None had seen Ronu since the morning. A quick talk with his father confirmed Ronu had not returned earlier that day. Taly's heart beat faster with worry as she tried to listen to these conversations. It nearly stopped when, suddenly, all eyes turned on her.

"Taly?" the chieftain asked sternly, "Is it true?"
"M-my chief?" she stammered, unsure of the question.
"You asked him for a Moon Lily?"

*Six. B-b-but Elder Nell said...
Answer him! Ronu may need help!*

"Yes my chief. I d-did. Is, is he ok?"
"The quest for Lunala's tears is often dangerous, but rarely takes more than a half day. He should have returned by now."

The chieftain's stern gaze broke into worry as he turned to Tharm and bid his son to gather his two best trackers. His next words chilled Taly.

"Search for feathers among the crags, blood among the tree-line. Wolves will have taken him below, a bear higher up. Be swift as Zyan's Wolves."
Tharm replied, "Yes father. Daris, Berlo, on me!"

The three hunters hurled themselves skyward. They only paused as Tharm hovered, looking down at Alya with a concerned smile, before streaking northward. Taly watched them go, her hands shaking as she clasped herself.

This is my fault. Gods above, I...I did this.

"Taly?"

The chief drew near to her and she felt her heart pound with anxiety.

"I'm s-so sorry, my ch-chief. I...I didn't..."

THE MOON LILY
A Story from the Citadel Archives
by Tyler Tillerson

A heavy hand rested on her shoulder, but the chieftain smiled calmly at her.

“When has Ronu *ever* failed to come home?” he asked with gentle firmness.

“N-n-never, my chief” she whimpered, great tears forming in her eyes.

“Indeed. And when has he *ever* failed to serve?”

“N-never.”

“I love my son, love who he is, and would not change him. Tharm will be a fine chieftain some day. Ronu...Ronu could be the sort of chieftain *I* would follow. He is as dependable as Raka’s Sun, as solid as Boldu’s earth. Mark my words, Taly. *My son won’t find Ronu.*”

Her heart *did* stop at those words, yet her brow creased in confusion as he chuckled.

“Ronu will find *him*.”

At these words, a great cheer went up behind the chieftain. Tharm, not gone but for moments, had already returned. Beside him was Ronu, panting with exhaustion as he heavily landed. He had but his bow and quiver. Taly’s heart leapt into her throat and she began to cry. The chieftain stepped aside, and she began to rush past him when he spoke.

“He will find you, too, if you let him.”

It was as if her paws had become stuck in mud, the wisdom striking her. All of this had been her fault. He was home, safe, but at what cost? He looked tired beyond anything she’d seen before. Had he searched the mountains for so long because he couldn’t find it? Ronu managed a hoarse chuckle among his fellow hunters before his eyes settled on Taly. A grim look came over his face as he visibly gulped then slowly trudged towards her and the chieftain.

“My chief” he said quietly.

“Ronu. You had us worried.”

“Aye. I’m sorry. Um...it didn’t go as planned, sir.”

“Indeed. These things rarely do. Well...I’m glad you’re home, safe. Rest easy.”

The chieftain patted Ronu’s shoulder heartily, glanced at Taly with a smirk, then strolled off. Taly caught sight of Alya again in Tharm’s arms. Then she met Ronu’s gaze, briefly. Yet the hunter seemed off. He glanced at his forepaws and shifted uncomfortably then sighed loudly.

“I...I couldn’t find one, Taly. I tried, but, um...”

Taly’s heart broke in two. Not for the talisman, but the sheer humility of the male before her. This was Ronu, the one she loved, so dedicated to others he forgot to care for himself. Taly’s lips quivered as she stammered out an apology.

“I-it’s my fault, Ronu. I...I shouldn’t have even asked in the first place.”

THE MOON LILY
A Story from the Citadel Archives
by Tyler Tillerson

Ronu's brow furrowed in concern as he looked at her.

"You...you don't want it anymore?" he asked.

"No."

"Oh. Um..."

Ronu shifted nervously and Taly saw he looked even more defeated.

Wrong words. Then say the right ones!
I...give me strength, Lunala. I don't want to be alone.

"Ronu?"

"Hmm?"

He glanced at her, his eyes filled with worry and defeat.

"I'd rather just have you."

Ronu's eyebrows shot up as Taly pressed close to him and forced her hands into his, limp at his side. She managed a meek smile, though she still felt on the verge of tears.

"I was so worried" she mumbled, "so worried about you."

"Oh, well...I mean...I'm ok, Beam...erm...I mean..."

"I just want *you*, Ronu" she repeated.

She leaned into his chest and hugged him fiercely. He tensed, briefly, then relaxed. He even strangely snorted in amusement. She asked why.

"Had me worried there, for a moment. Not wanting the flower" he whispered.

Wait. Does that mean...

She leaned back suddenly, stared at him hard, but he only grinned back at her.

"I see you, Taly" he whispered, "and I *love* what I see."

She was of a mind to be furious with him. Moreso with Elder Nell. She glanced at the chieftain and saw him chuckling with his mother, before winking at Taly knowingly. Tharm held Alya in a tight hug, but he watched Taly. He, too, grinned before winking.

"You knew" she said, dumbfounded.

"Yeah."

"Why did you take so long to come back?! Just to, to scare me?" she asked, her voice heated.

"No. I...I wasn't sure if, if I was g-good enough for you" he stammered.

"*WHAT!?*" she shouted, drawing more gazes, "What in the world would make you think *that?!?*"

THE MOON LILY
A Story from the Citadel Archives
by Tyler Tillerson

“I dunno!” Ronu exclaimed defensively, “I...I just figured you’d like someone else, or, or...”
“Ronu, I *love* you!” she said forcefully, “Of course you’re enough for me!”

She said it loud enough the entire community went quiet at her declaration. Then there was laughter from the hunters. Ronu blushed with obvious embarrassment. Taly, though, softened her indignation. She hated when he was embarrassed. She knew that feeling all too well.

“Hey, hey look at me?” she whispered.

“S-sorry, Beam...T-Taly...I...”

“*Moon Beam*, please” she said with a wry smile.

“Huh?”

“Moon Beam. That’s what *you* called me” she said, smirking a little.

Ronu cracked a foolish grin, then suddenly pressed his lips to hers. It felt like lightning bathed in sunshine, stunning and warm. She could only sigh as he slowly parted from her. Taly’s eyes fluttered open and, breathlessly, she smiled. Then giggled. Ronu smiled back, winked, and hugged her tightly. He whispered into her ear, and everything was suddenly *right*.

“I love you, *my* Moon Beam. *My* Taly.”

And so the Moon Lily allowed Ronu to see, as it had many hunters before him. And, if elders have their way – and they usually do – many more timid females would seek out this flower, too. Because a hunter never complains when a lovely doe jumps into his arms, and eagles know a nest is made of small branches as much as big ones. Most important of all, though, is that the names we call others have power.

And names spoken in love have the greatest power of all: the power to *see* and *be seen*.
Just as Lunala saw Boldu, cowering in the Great Dark, alone.
And, in love, wept at what she saw.