

Aloft Maiden
By Princess_Lil

The huge, red scaled tyrant loomed over his prey. His laugh boomed across the burning forest. He lowered his head, staring with his one remaining eye at the huntress that miraculously managed to wound him.

“Let me know your name, human so that I might commit it to memory. A lone human as powerful as you deserves to be remembered.”

He was already committing her appearance to memory. Her black hair cut into a short bob, athletic physique, hazel-brown eyes, scars apparent under her burnt, black short coat. The huntress hadn't bothered with armor, not that it would've helped her against a dragon of his might. She was unusual prey and would be easy to remember.

Nerati grunted. She struggled to stand. Her muscles were so sore from running and climbing that she didn't have much strength left. She was nowhere close to one of the traps she'd set up, though only a few remained anyways.

Most of her weapons broke on his hide, but the scars across his body were as bad as her wounds, if not worse. She had even managed to damage his wing. Crossbow bolts littered his hide, stuck in like thorns. Each one was poisoned, but the monster forced itself through the exhaustion and pain to face her.

He understood how dangerous she was. And he wouldn't let her get close enough to prove it again. She was done for. She accomplished a lot in thirty-six years at least.

“A monster doesn't need to know my name.”

The dragon laughed again. “So be it!” The dragon reared his head once more and took a deep breath. Already cinders spilled from his mouth. He aimed his head at Nerati and opened his maw.

But before he finished Nerati off, a pink blur fell from the sky, stamping his snout with a shocking amount of force. The dragon tried to stop his fire breath, but it was too late. Fire burst from its nose holes, and, in pain, the dragon threw its head about.

A woman with pink feathered wings launched herself away from the dragon and landed right behind the huntress. “Up we go,” the winged stranger said before sweeping Nerati up in a princess carry and launching herself back into the sky. She picked up speed and outpaced the dragon following them as best he could with his wounded wing.

“H-hey!” Nerati protested out of instinct. She looked up at the cheerful smile on the strange woman’s face. Animal ears – horse maybe? – stood up from the top of her head. “I need to kill that dragon, dumbass! put me back down there!”

“A beautiful maiden like yourself should never fight dragons! Why, they’re likely to try to take you as their wife.” A talisman dangled from the stranger’s neck, capturing the light of the sun in a swirling rainbow. And capturing Nerati’s eyes.

Nerati felt a strange tingling in her stomach, almost like butterflies. Why were the words “beautiful maiden” echoing in her mind? She was a tough huntress, one that could take on even the most dangerous of monsters. But... beautiful maiden...? She’d never been called that before.

It wasn’t so bad.

Nerati was completely unaware of the ever so slight changes across her body. Her skin softened. The long years of toiling with weapons was gone. Her face smoothed out, signs of aging vanishing. The long years of wear and tear on her body eased. Pains she’d gotten used to disappeared.

“You should take on easier jobs you know you can complete safely.”

Yeah, maybe that was a good idea. Nerati didn’t have a death wish or anything. Maybe she could avoid dragons for now. Maybe... “Yeah, thanks for the advice,” Nerati rolled her eyes. “So who the hell are you, and when are you going to put me down?”

“I’m Almathea! Pegasus Knight and rescuer of women in need. I take it upon myself to—”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it. Just set me down.”

“Of course, there’s a town just below us.” Alma circled the village below to come to a gentle stop for Nerati. She even helped the squirming Nerati out of her arms. “And if you need my help again, just call to the sky ‘Almathea!’” The pegasus girl winked before flapping her wings and soaring into the sky.

“Tch, like I’m some damsel in distress.”

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“You put up quite a fight,” a man in his late thirties looked down at Nerati with greed in his eyes. “Not too shabby. I’m sure that if I was alone, you might’ve even won.”

Nerati squirmed in the ropes tied around her ankles, knees, wrists, and elbows. Her arms, forced behind her back, couldn't budge an inch. The bandits, together, managed to knock her down and tie her up. "What the hell do you want with me?"

"Us? Nothin'. You're just goods. Some slaver will take care of that attitude, maybe make you into a laborer after a few lessons. You're a bit of a looker, though, maybe you'll be spared hard labor in favor of being arm candy," he laughed.

There was no way out. If she could reach one of her hidden blades...

She thought back to a few weeks prior. She grit her teeth and swallowed her pride. "Almathea!" she yelled at the top of her lungs. She'd better actually come.

"Eh? What? You calling for help now? Figured you had some pride if you could beat up two of my men," the bandit grinned. "Guess you're gonna be easy for the slaver to brea—"

A pink blur, a swift kick firmly in his side, and there Almathea was, standing right where the bandit used to be. She whistled and tilted her head. "Seems humans can fly."

Everyone else was too stunned to move. Nerati's mouth was agape. "Where did you even come from...?"

Alma smiled at Nerati and once again scooped Nerati off the ground and flew away from the bandits while they checked on their boss. "I see you've decided to bring out some of your inner beauty! I love what you've done with your hair. It's getting long!"

Nerati winced. Alma really was piling on the compliments, and it rang in her ear. Her inner beauty, huh? Alma didn't know Nerati well if she thought she was some kind, comely maiden. But still, Nerati felt a familiar feeling of butterflies in her stomach. Alma's words sank deeper – maybe she should keep trying to be beautiful...

The talisman swirled with light once more, and Nerati couldn't look away from it. It was so easy to just relax and stare. Let that rainbow wash over her once more...

As Nerati let her guard down, more blatant changes washed over Nerati, yet somehow she seemed unaware. Her muscles weakened, and she shrank a few inches. Her skin became flawless.

Her mind didn't escape the changes.

She knew she needed to take care of her appearance. To be pretty. For Alma. For everyone. Alma might recognize her beauty now, but Nerati could be so much more beautiful! Body, mind, and soul! She needed to be kind and help where she could, to make others happy.

Her heart beat harder and faster.

“And here we are.” Alma landed at a small outpost. “The people here are kind, they’ll see you safely to a city. You shouldn’t be on the road unaccompanied. Highwaymen aren’t kind to women as cute as you.”

Nerati, still staring at that pretty amulet, nodded at Alma’s suggestion. Maybe it was a bad idea to be on the road alone. Maybe she needed to put the hunting life behind her...

Nerati’s thoughts were only interrupted by Alma setting her down on her feet. She helped her stay standing before pulling out a small knife and cutting the ropes that bound Nerati. She even patted her on the head. “This is twice we’ve met, yet I don’t know your name. I’d be honored to learn it,” Alma reached down and held Nerati’s hand, thumb rubbing over the top of it.

“It’s... Nerati Sua,” Nerati blushed and looked away.

Alma let go of Nerati’s hands and flapped her wings, rising into the air once more. “Call for me if you find yourself in a dangerous situation, Nerati Sua. I’ll be there to rescue you whenever you need it.”

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“Oh no, no, no,” Nerati ran as quick as her dainty body could carry her. Her dress, ripped here and there by the forest, struggled to cling to her body. Her long, dark hair fluttered behind her.

A wolf not-so-fluttered behind her. The normally human-avoidant wolf foamed at the mouth. The poor, sickened creature couldn’t control its aggressive impulses and its hunger. A few more paces, and it would catch up and have a meal.

“Almathea!” Nerati cried out, praying her savior would come quickly. Until then, she had to run no matter how exhausted she was. The little village she’d been staying at was just a little further. Everyone was so nice to her there, they practically treated her like a princess! If Almathea didn’t come, certainly someone from the village would save her! She couldn’t go out like this!

But with a ruffle of feathers, Almathea flew up from behind the wolf and grabbed Nerati, plucking her right off the ground and into a princess carry once more. Then, with a mighty wingbeat, she soared into the sky with her precious cargo.

“Oh Almathea!” Nerati wrapped her arms around her savior and squeezed as tight as she could. It took her several seconds to realize what she was doing. “W-wait! No!” She pulled away and squirmed in Alma’s grip, though the pegasus knight refused to allow her to plummet the hundred feet to the ground and clutched on even tighter.

“Is there something wrong, Lady Sua?”

“There’s a lost child somewhere out there! I can’t just let that wolf get to her!” Tears formed in Nerati’s eyes. She couldn’t help it! She’d been so emotional lately, crying over every sad thing and feeling jubilation over small victories. And now, once again staring into the amulet that cursed her, she found her emotions only getting stronger.

The changes spread rapidly. She looked younger. A woman in her early-to-mid twenties. Her hair grew past her shoulders, her eyes widened, the hazel winning over any remaining brown. She lost most of her muscular physique. She wouldn’t even be able to try to run away from a wolf now. Her breasts heaved with every breath, slowly growing larger and straining at her dress.

Nerati did her best to hold out from crying. Her upper lip trembled. She was so cute!

Alma had stars in her eyes. “Of course I’ll look for this child! Anything to stop those tears, Lady Sua!”

“I’m not nobility,” Nerati said, wiping tears from her eyes.

“You’re a princess to me,” Alma winked. “The village is just below. Hold on tight. I’ll need to drop you off quickly.” She sped downward, and Nerati squealed in panic! Alma came to a stop with a gentle break using what must’ve been the magic that kept her aloft so easily.

She helped Nerati to her feet. “I’ll be just a moment. But you should stay in the village from now on for your safety. Someone as delicate as you should have people around in case you need help.”

She flapped her wings once more and flew away.

Everyone in the village flocked to Nerati, all of them sincerely worried about her well being.

“We’d thought we lost you too!”

“Ah, poor girl, you need a change of clothes.”

“Are you okay?”

“Who was that?”

Nerati felt cornered, but managed to start answering each question. Not long after she started, everyone looked to the sky as they heard a child squealing in delight from above. Once Alma put the young girl down, the town became more concerned with her well-being and left Nerati alone.

Nerati ran to Alma and grabbed her hand. “Alma—I mean, Almathea, how can I ever thank you? You’ve saved me three times now!”

Alma raised her hand and pet Nerati on the head. “Just be a good girl and stay out of trouble, and that’s all the thanks I need. And…” Alma looked behind her at all the villagers. “Let them look after you.”

“That hardly seems like enough! I’m sure there’s more I could—”

Alma flapped her wings and took to the sky once more.

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“Almathea!” Nerati cried.

She was backed into a corner. Cleaning the small home the village provided her was something she enjoyed. It gave her a bit of physical exercise, and she just enjoyed the order of it. But it led to something horrible! The worst thing that happened to Nerati since she got chased by wolves two days ago.

Alma stuck her head into the house and scanned the room. A rat, shrieking and trying to get away, finally saw an escape and ran past Alma. “...I saved you once again?”

“Thank you! My hero!” Nerati lept into Alma’s arms, squeezing for dear life.

“It’s clear to me even this place simply doesn’t suit you, Lady Sua. I’m going to take you to a friend’s! Someone I know will take care of you. She’s a nice elf who has raised several... delicate human daughters. You’ll like her.”

Nerati looked up at Alma and nodded. “Okay.”

That was all Alma needed to scoop Nerati into her arms and flutter her wings to fly away. This time a bit of a longer trip.

“She’s named Ms. Lovelock. She’s very pretty, blonde, lithe, you know. An elf.” Alma’s amulet dangled from her neck. Nerati’s eyes were once again locked onto the rainbow of colors. So hard to look away. Not that someone as feeble minded as her could resist even the most basic of enchantments anymore.

“You’ll be the perfect match. She loves dressing her girls up in gowns. You’ll look so pretty in a gown, won’t you? She also plays matchmaker, making sure her daughters only go to the finest men and women. That’s perfect, isn’t it? You can be under Ms. Lovelock’s watchful gaze practicing all the fine parts of etiquette until you become the perfect wife.”

Nerati's mind swelled with new ambitions. She could be the perfect wife? It made her heart stir. She could wear fancy dresses and be a noble? Be like some pretty princess?

Her hair grew longer, half-way down her back. Every knot vanished on its own, a little magic residing in it to make it impossible to tangle. It took on a silky sheen.

Nerati shrank once more. She became absolutely dainty, hardly five feet tall. Her muscles were almost nothing by this point – the muscles of a spoiled girl that had everything done for her. The muscles of a soon-to-be refined lady.

Her eyes sparkled on their own. A natural blush spread across her face along with cute little freckles. She was unrecognizable from the Nerati that Alma first met. An inner dainty maiden had been brought forth from the deepest parts of Nerati's heart. And as delicate as she was, a certain confidence appeared.

"Oh heavens," she looked up at Alma and clutched her hands together. Her cheeks burned red. "I suppose it's impolite if I ask to marry you?"

Alma circled above a noble's estate, slowly descending, taking her time. "I'm a traveling knight! Hardly a fit for you. And besides, I'm married to all the women in the world as far as I'm concerned. Each needs to be treated with all the love I can give!"

"So cheesy," Nerati giggled. "But I'll respect your desires, of course. You will visit me, won't you? If you're right, and I'm taken care of, I won't see you anymore, will I?"

"Of course I'll visit! I could never leave a beauty like you *entirely* on your own! I'll make sure Ms. Lovelock takes great care of you, and I'll make sure whoever you marry does too! And if you're ever in need, just call out–"

"Almathea!" Nerati laughed as Alma landed with a knightly grace just outside the door. She helped Nerati to her feet and knocked on the door.

"And what's this?" a tall, blonde elf poked her head out of her door. "Another one, Alma? Such a kind hearted thing to bring these wayward girls to me. And this one is so beautiful! I think I love her already."

"Hello, Ms. Lovelock," Nerati said with a small curtsy. "My name is Nerati Sua and I'm pleased to meet you. Uhm... Almathea spoke to me about what you do for girls like me, and I want to... I want to be the best wife I can be!"

Alma gently pushed Nerati toward the door. "I'll be back sooner than you think, Lady Sua! And feel free to call for me, even if the danger is more emotional."

Nerati's face turned red again. She wanted to just squeal. The petite, adorable thing only looked all the cuter flustered.

"There are ambassadors from Desthoria coming to the capitol in a month that includes the eldest princess. What do you say about aiming to catch her eye? I hear she's part dragon, so there's no way she could resist you."

"Oh... wow, yeah! I'm sure a dragoness could help protect me!" Ms. Lovelock took Nerati by the hand and led her inside to her new home.

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"You can do this," Nerati whispered to herself as she approached the delegation from Desthoria.

Her hips slightly swayed with each step. Petite, demure, kind, sweet, delicate, adorable – all words that could be used to describe Nerati. The pink gown she wore – her favorite color, of course – looked like something that a princess might wear. Ms. Lovelock helped her put her hair into a long braid and even put a flower in her hair at Nerati's request.

"Eyes set on the Desthorians?" a voice to her right suddenly said.

"Yes, there's someone I really would like to talk to. I've heard so much about her – how strong she is, how kind she can be, and how she loves to protect anything close to her. A princess... a powerful princess. I could only dream of getting her attention.

Nerati turned and looked slightly down. She froze in place. The horns, the scales on her face, the tail – this was Princess Diagora!

"Well, you have had my attention since you walked in the room. Why don't you come with me so we can really get to know each other."