

Hello!

Welcome to my free Prompt Plot 2017 holiday gift, where my lovely supporters picked the following prompts for me to craft a short story from:

Genre: Fantasy

Setting: Desert

Color: Purple

Animal: Falcon

Please do enjoy the read!

A Desert Welcome

The shifting sand seemed to cut her skin, brushing past her cheeks, sticking to her lips. Nyafee Morrikass swiped the back of her hand across her mouth, wincing at the stinging pain from the cut on her hand and cursing in every language she knew of. Two, officially. Three if she counted the conjuring word for death. Which she did, today, even though she couldn't actually say it.

Nyafee crested the sand dune and grimaced at the bright suns hanging low in the sky. Shielding her eyes, she scanned the horizon. Sand, as far as her eyes could see, never-ending brown broken only by small patches of bright-green plantlife. She couldn't see the creature. And truthfully, it had plenty of places to hide. The Yiamin Desert cut a wide swatch in this land, separating the mountainland in the north and the seafarers in the south, offering a myriad of options for hunkering down. Hiding from other people, perhaps, but the creature couldn't hide from a tracker. Couldn't hide from her.

Armed with that knowledge, Nyafee plopped down for a short rest. Sweat trickled down her forehead and neck. She slipped a flask from her belt and drank deep, the water crisp on her dry throat. Tracking during the day was a terrible idea, even in the all-white outfit she wore. How could she be hot in only a tunic and shorts, a belt and thin boots? It was unthinkable, and yet quite true. She glared at the nearly empty bright-purple flask and memories swam unbidden into her mind: village children wrapped in layers of white and brown, smiling ear to ear, handing the flask to her, thanking her for tracking down their grandmother, an elderly woman who got lost in a sandstorm. She blinked, and the memories dissipated. Purple dye was hard to make and shouldn't have been used on something as fragile as a flask, but a gift shouldn't be wasted.

A screech pierced the sky. She ducked, her muscles tensing on instinct. The Saluiasha. The flying creature that ruined her village, left it standing but battered, her people alive but wounded. And though she tried to ignore it like she had ever since she had started tracking, fear wormed its way ever tighter around her heart. Making it hard to keep moving. Making it increasingly painful to breath. Making it impossible to think clearly.

She knelt on the sand, gripping her tunic tight, eyes to the ground as the sound rippled around her, through her. Rippled the air, even. Her vision wavered, then blurred. Frightened, ever so frightened. By the mere sound the creature made from a half mile or more away, she was frightened.

Her world seemed to tilt, grow smaller, tighter around her. Why was she even out here? She wasn't an extinguisher. She couldn't kill creatures...couldn't utter the words that would end life. She wasn't even a hunter. Not by a long shot. She was a tracker, one who used her conjuring for simple tasks: finding food when it was scarce, finding ones captured by the Jigaii, finding ones lost in sandstorms. She rescued elderly grandmothers! She didn't track down fearsome creatures, a mistake of the people to the north, a mistake to all humans on this land, a mistake to nature and conjuring itself.

She didn't try to find and tag terrible creatures. Her eyes landed on the purple flask, the ones the children gave her.

She didn't face massive beasts bent on destruction. Memories of her village, her people, her family filled her mind. Of her mother, her dark skin and darker hair seeming to shimmer in the sunshine as she laughed and conjured joy, her smile infectious even if she didn't have the conjuring inside her. Even if she didn't know any of the words.

She didn't hunt things like this. Memories of her second mother now filled her, her lighter skin seeming to glint in the night, reflecting the moonlight as she conjured life from the sand, coxing it out a little at a time. They got injured when the creature attacked. Myi had a slash to her arm, and Zea, a gash across her back. Bedridden and in pain. They weren't hunters either. They didn't deserve to get hurt.

She didn't face her fears like this. And neither did the rest of her village deserve to get hurt, the huts they had so lovingly built had crashed to the sand, the firepits and food storage ruined, the people injured and scared, wondering if the creature would attack again. Wondering if they were safe.

She usually didn't track fearsome beasts under the beating heat of two suns.

But now she did. Today, she did.

Taking a deep breath, she unlatched her death-grip on her clothes and pushed her hands deep into the sand instead. She forced her muscles to relax, her breathing to slow, and her thoughts to settle. Her eyes closed on their own.

"Quisahsa," she murmured.

The word of the path. Passageways through the lands. Trails connecting everyone, everywhere, anytime. A pinpointing type of conjuring, a word only she could successfully say out of all the people in her village.

As soon as the word passed her lips a cool sensation swirled around her, like a gentle breeze on a calm evening, the air around her shifting so she could see the paths more clearly. A green path of the sand snake burrowing deeper beneath her, the blue path of clear water even deeper below that, her own violet path winding from her village to

this point. She pushed her conjuring deeper, further, wider, her word growing thin, her concentration growing lax, her mind wanting to wander away until—there.

The Saluiasha. The flying creature that ruined her village. A mistake of a creature banished to their lands. She saw it, clear as day in her mind's eye, saw the monstrosity. The massive eight wings and curling body longer than ten men prostrate head-to-foot, the hooked beak with sharpened teeth inside, the long trailing tail forked at the end, the four taloned feet. A bright-white beacon in her mind, a bright-white beacon urging her closer. The extinguisher in her village had gotten injured or he would've have been here by her side, ready to kill the creature, ready to end it, end this. Now in order for anyone else to track it, and for the extinguishers to find and kill it, she had to get closer. Close enough to tag it with her conjuring, another word of hers, a special word others could see. Close enough to touch it...if only for a heartbeat.

Opening her eyes, she tied the flask back onto her belt, pushed herself to her feet, and followed the path. Followed her word. Became a tracker once again. The creature had stopped flying, but it was still moving, circling something. Nyafee broke into a run, heading down this dune and up the next. Crossing the desert like only a tracker can. Her long hair whipped out behind her like a shadow, and her boots dug deep into the sand. Each step bringing her closer to the creature, but each step managing to push her fear down as well. For now, at least.

While she ran she thought of how this creature came to be, her anger at the ones who created it fueling her to move faster. The idiots in the north who decided conjuring was something to be toyed with, twisted. Ruined. The mountainland folks. This is what happens when conjuring fails, when it doesn't hold, doesn't take. The mountainland folk were the rulers of this land and as such they thought they could do anything. Thought they could play being gods and goddesses. Thought they could control the conjuring when really the conjuring controlled them, controlled everyone. The people of the north decided to upset the balance of life, and to their credit, they created some amazing beasts, ones that could heal any wounds or had the strength of a hundred or could control the elements. Amazing animals, truly.

But the people of the north also failed, and this creature was one of them. The Saluiasha was a combination of a salianiatia, a long sharp-edged snake native to the southern waters, and a falcon, a fast bird native to the mountainlands in the north. According to the conjuring notice, this beast was supposed to be a protector and a healer. A gentle creature, but one they could use to protect their lands against their enemies abroad. But once the conjuring took hold, this creature burst from its containments and attacked them.

The people of the north tried to control it, but it wasn't a graceful creature and it didn't do what they commanded. It didn't even seem able to cure folk. So they banished it to the deserts and forged ahead with new creations, only stopping long enough to give this creature a name before starting again. Saluiasha meant "death-bringer" in the common tongue.

The people of the north failed, and her people paid for it. Nyafee's hands clenched into fists. This creature will also pay for it.

She crested the hill and saw it for the second time in her life. The Saluiasha. The mistake. Up close it looked even more terrifying, even more deadly, even more like a nightmare come to life. All wings and sharp edges and heart-stopping screeches. Its eight wings, feathered in reds and purples and browns, ended in points sharp enough to slice through metal. Its sleek black body curled around itself as it lumbered along the sand. The four feet digging long talons deep into the ground, dragging itself along. Its narrow pointed head, with two piercing blue eyes, a hooked beak, and a large red plume on top, turned toward her. Noticing her.

Its sky blue eyes locked onto hers and in an instant she felt it, that connection, the creature's conjuring melding with hers. A new form of conjuring, a mind-connection. All her anger and fear and frustration snapped over their link, with her unable to stop it. All her memories of this creature's attack traversed their link, too. How scared she was that day. How sad. The terror in her family's eyes, the burning of her hut, her food, her home. How the creature had swooped out of the sky, once far above and suddenly close enough to touch, the dive so fast and powerful no one could even scream before it was upon them. How the creature had snatched a whole food storage hut and swooped away with it, but not before slashing out with its back talons and wings, sparking a flame and decimating their small village because of it. How her mothers were injured by its attack.

And in that moment, the creature's feelings and memories transferred to her, too. How scared it was when it was first conjured, how sad, how confused. How much pain it was in during the first moments of life and it lashed out instinctively, trying to get away. How it tried to heal but didn't know how. How it wasn't accepted in the place it was conjured, but it also didn't know where its home was. It was trying to find a home in the desert. It saw a massive sand snake curled in the food storage hut and dove down to protect the tiny people who wandered unknowingly around it. It tried to snatch only the snake but because of its size and strength and awkward design, it ended up crashing into a few things on the way. It didn't understand its design yet, it didn't understand why so many people were angry at it, and it didn't understand her fear. It was only trying to help. Only trying to protect them. Only trying to do what it was created to do.

The creature blinked, and their connection severed. Nyafee fell back from the sheer force and landed hard on the sand.

The creature was trying to help them. Did help them, for certain. Saved them, even, since a sand snake that large would've surely eaten them up in the dead of night. She'd seen it happen before, the sand snake bursting out of the ground as easily as a fish out of water, unhinging its jaw that was five men wide, and swallowing people and beasts alike alive and whole. Screaming. Terrified. Her tiny village wouldn't have been able to stop it.

The Saluiasha stopped moving and curled up on the sand instead, tucking its wings

against its back and laying its head on top of a nearby dune. It dug itself a little deeper into the sand, its long tail curling around its body, tucking under its talons. It looked almost...peaceful now. Though the whole time it kept its sky-blue eyes on her, noticing her every movement.

And she finally noticed the creature, too. It did look peaceful, and her heart broke for it. It was looking for a home because its creators had deserted it. It was scared and alone. It had saved her people, and she had wanted it dead. Had tracked it all the way here just so her people could kill it. Could “fix” the northern folks’ mistake.

But maybe that was the mistake. Maybe they didn’t need to fix this creature...maybe they needed to fix the northern folks instead. It wasn’t right, messing with nature only to throw their creations away like spoiled fruit. It wasn’t right, banishing the unwanted creatures to the desert, thinking the beasts could be dangerous and knowing there were people who lived in the desert but doing it anyway. It wasn’t right. It wasn’t right at all.

She stepped closer to the Saluiasha, her hand outstretched as if she wanted to touch it. Her hand stopped a hair’s breath away from the creature’s beak and it’s there she waited. Waited for it to make the next move. Waited to see if touching was okay. Waiting to—she didn’t wait for long. The creature pushed its beak into her hand and cooed, a gentle sound so unlike the terrifying screeches it made before. For a moment, it actually closed its eyes, and so did she. The terror she felt before faded away, the anger and sadness fading with it.

She felt a tickling on the back of her hand, like a spider crawled across it or a drop of water dripped down it, and opened her eyes just in time to see the small cut there healing. The redness faded away to her usual dark skintone and the pain vanished. So the creature did know how to heal, it just needed time to remember it. And maybe someone worth healing, too. She thought of her mothers, of their injuries, of how this creature could heal them, too, if it wanted to. It was a protector and healer, after all. A gift, too.

“Thank you,” Nyafee whispered. The creature opened its eyes and gave a short nod.

“We had a rough first meeting,” Nyafee murmured. The Saluiasha blinked, as if it could understand her. And maybe, because of the conjuring and their link, it could. “But we can always start over.”

She stepped back and dipped into a bow common to her village, one hand pressing into her right thigh. “My name is Nyafee Morrikass, and I’d like to give you a true desert welcome to my village. A home, if you’d have it. We can build you a shelter and find food suitable for your needs and in return, you could keep protecting us. And maybe heal some of my family and friends, too.”

The Saluiasha gave another nod and rose to its feet, stretching its wings and shaking the sand off its feathers. Ready to leave, it seemed. It locked eyes with Nyafee once more,

linking them together, and she sensed how it was ready to follow her home, ready to have a new home, start a new life, protect her people and protect her.

Nyafee smiled, her jaw hardening. “And when my village is rebuilt and you’re more comfortable in yourself and your abilities, why don’t we give the northern folk a bit of a desert welcome, too.”

At that the Saluiasha broke their connection, lifted its head, and screeched, louder than ever before, but this time the noise didn’t scare Nyafee. It exhilarated her instead.

 The End 

Thanks for reading *A Desert Welcome!* If you liked this short story, please check out my books, *Finding Hekate* and *Losing Hold*.