

Erin Albus
Reprogram

Your name is Linda. No, it's not whatever name you just said. It's Linda. Plain and simple. Ok, Linda? Good. Great.

You were born in the early morning light of August.

The date? Dates are irrelevant. If you must know, you were born during every day in the month of August. What? Did you assume you were human, Linda? You're not. You're an alien. A bird person to be more exact. Your kind invaded earth about five years ago. Bird people have risen. All Hail.

What do you mean that doesn't explain anything? It explains everything. Listen closely, Linda, and you'll hear your tale.

Your birth took about thirty days. You were quite stupid and could not figure out how to get out of your egg. Eventually, you figured out that just screaming endlessly from inside your darkened home would do nothing to getting you out of there, and so you mustered all your energy to peck at the walls of your cage. One day, the crack was larger than you left it, which made it easier to continue with your work. It took you another three days to make a hole big enough for you to flop out. Turns out crying endlessly for twenty-seven days tires you out.

When you escape, you're alone.

All of your siblings had escaped long ago—your parents had lost interest and thought you were a dud. So now you have to face the large world, newly born and alone. That's why you don't look like a bird. Why your feathers never grew in and your wings look more like arms. It's not because you're human. It's because you spent a little too long in the shell.

The first thing you decided to do with your newfound freedom was scream some more. You didn't know how to speak yet, but you wanted to communicate your situation somehow. You noticed that you had both a mouth and a beak, which was strange. You could open the beak independently of your mouth, and it kind of felt like you just opened your nasal cavity up to the world, so you chose not to do that anymore. Instead, you made noises, strange and incomprehensible.

Click, gargle, screech. That was how you went through the world. And apparently, the screech sounded like Linda, so that was the name given to you. You couldn't really fight it. You were like a pet—you just had to accept the name given to you.

Your first few steps were difficult. You had no one to guide you and show you how to move forward in life and just in general. And then was the matter of your wings. You knew, deep in your being, that you should be able to fly, but your wings had been utterly destroyed before you had even come into this world. You wept for something you could never know.

Like a loser.

Eventually, you met others of your kind. Most avoided you, but some laughed at you instead. You paid them no heed—mostly because you could not understand them. Instead, you decided to learn from them, mimicking their clicks and gargles and screeches until you had the order (and hopefully the meaning) memorized.

But don't forget you're stupid, Linda, so it took a super long time for you to learn.

Like a *super* long time.

By the tender age of one-hundred-and-five, you not only learned how to speak from listening to your fellow *bird people*, not *humans*, but also how to complain—this is the main

form of communication between your kind (bird people). You could now click, gargle, and screech in the correct order to form words. It wasn't long before you could finally have a conversation with everyone.

You remember now, Linda? No, don't say that you don't. Bird, you're so stupid

It should all be rushing back to your mind. Your days of finally getting an education, finding friends, locating your family and killing them to rectify their sins.

What? That last point doesn't seem to fit? You would never kill your family?

Were they really your family? You never met them. They left before you managed to free yourself from your egg. Can they be family if you've never known them?

Blood, you say? What about it? It is merely something flowing through your veins, the substance that keeps you alive even when you rather it not. It has no bearing on who you are or who you will eventually become. Your family never influenced you, never shaped who you are.

Maybe hearing *that* story would make you understand your past, Linda.

You were one-hundred-and-twenty when you heard of what they did. Not only had they abandoned you, they had tried to kill you by throwing your egg out of the nest to make room for better eggs! You, in your humble bird opinion, were the best egg! So what if you were too stupid to break free right away? You got out eventually... though the large crack in the side from what you now realize was them dropping you off the side of the nest sure did help.

It only took you a few months to track them down. You had never met them, but you had asked other people—*bird* people, not *human* people—that had lived in the area and they pointed

you in the right direction. They had moved to the Quaylon 9 of the Leep Moon Colony after they left you for dead.

Your people had colonized that moon several years ago (the earth would not be invaded for another fifty years), so you wouldn't need a passport to get there. Which was good because you didn't have a birth certificate because your parents tried to kill you and therefore never registered your birth.

Not that you were bitter or homicidal, though.

The trip to the moon took two years. Two years to plan and prepare. You bought a molecular destabilizer from some shifty guy on the intergalactic train; you hoped that it would make the deaths quick, painless, and hard to track.

You didn't really care about the first two points.

Quaylon 9 was a world of mountains. Your kind—bird kind—loved the mountains because they gave you room to perch and fly to your heart's content. You, having been born deformed, could not fly. You struggled to navigate the new environment, but, stupidly, you persisted.

Two more months (and your hundred-and-twenty-second birthday) passed before you reached the rocky outcrop where your family now resided. It was small, merely a toothless, jagged smile that broke open the cliff face. Your siblings must have gone their separate ways—no matter, you would make do with only your parents. At least someone would pay for what they did. What they did to you. How they left you.

Silently, you crept into their home, watching their sleeping figures with barely masked contempt. For the first time, you saw the face of your mother and father. They looked nothing

like you imagined; they were old and wrinkled, their feathers started to fall from their bodies, leaving a mosaic of mottled skin in their wake. Your mother was snoring slightly, the beak above her mouth opening and closing, giving you a view of her obstructed nasal cavity. Your father beside her slept more calmly, but you could see how his clawed feet had become gnarled with old age.

You hated them, you decided.

You don't know what woke them up—it might have been you or it could have been something else—but suddenly they were awake and staring at you with wide, frightened eyes. Your mother's beak opened and shut, a *click*, *gurgle*, and a *screech* escaping from her mouth below that.

It looked like they were trying to talk, but sleep and fear seemed to have clogged their throats, so you spoke in their place.

“Do you know who I am?” you asked quietly.

You always thought you'd yell at this final moment. Scream until your voice ran dry and your beak opened for air. But instead, you could hardly bring your voice above a whisper.

“Please don't hurt us,” your father begged. He shielded your mother with his body, a clawed hand resting gently on her hip as she shied away behind him.

“Do you know who I am?” you repeated.

Still no answer, only crying.

You wanted more than fear and silence. You wanted more than them begging for mercy at your feet. You wanted them to see you, to understand what they did. You wanted something you could never obtain. They didn't care about you—they don't even know who you are.

But still, you persisted.

“Do you know who I am?”

“No,” your mother finally whispered.

“And you never will.”

You raised the weapon in your hands and took aim, your finger squeezing the—

What do you mean you're a pacifist, Linda? You *killed* people. That's the opposite of being a pacifist! No, that was you. You were just told it was you. Bird, it's like you don't even listen. Are you back on that? That you're human? That your name isn't Linda? How many times do you have to be told that it's the truth before you believe it?

Why does it matter?

Well, for one, because you're a bird and you have some weird, *totally not valid*, thought that you are a human—which you're *not*.

And also because... Well, you know what? That'll be saved for another day. We have all the time in the world, Linda, to *ensure* you remember who you are. And to beat that ridiculous thought that you're a human out of that stupid little head of yours.

Got it?

Good.