

In the summer the heat rolled across the plains unrelentingly. The very water in the river grew warmer and we groomed the gryphons twice a day to remove any excess fur. They hated the heat quite as much as we did, and they relieved it by plunging into the river whenever we let them out of their spacious pen. We were kept busy filling their water trough, only to have them knock it over again and again when they were shut in between the fences, desperate to cool down. Then they would retreat to the shade of their stables.

Mayi ground herbs in water and made us cooling compounds which, when wrapped in cloth and held to our foreheads, helped to lower our temperatures. Similar herbs were rubbed onto the bottom of the gryphon's troughs, and Tomar often said that he didn't know how they had survived the past summers without her. I wondered as well. I'd never experienced quite such a violently hot summer, never having lived on the plains before. Back in Evrin, though it was no more than a day's ride away, there was abundant shade from the forest's broad-leaved trees.

Still, some nights clouds gathered and soaked the earth with rain, and I would wake in the early morning before the sun rose to a cool and airy world. One such morning I paused in front of my small square window and looked out at the gryphon pen for a few moments. All was still and peaceful as the first gryphons awoke and left the stables beneath our rooms. It reminded me of morning at home, which always seemed to be peaceful and grey. As I turned to dress, I remembered something I had not thought of for months, since I arrived here for my apprenticeship.

It was still there, lying in the bottom of my rucksack, a roughly-made necklace of coarse, heavy rope. It contained on it, in sharp contrast to the rope itself, a bright silver pendant in the shape of a leaf. It had been pressed into my hands by my younger brother before I left that one last morning. He was one of the few of my family who did not bid me farewell with disappointed, somewhat angry stares. I had stuffed the necklace into my rucksack and entirely put it out of my mind as I climbed with Mayi into her father's pony cart.

Now I fastened the necklace around my neck for the first time. It was the only reminder of home over my flannel shirt and breeches, which I had long exchanged for my old dresses. It felt rather

out of place, somehow. I straightened the necklace and glanced at my face in the mirror, to see my dark eyes staring rather reproachfully back at me. I set off down the stairs and out of the stables for the gazebo where we ate our meals. Today I was one of the first few arrivals. I greeted Tomar and Idri and sat down.

“We’ve a few more offers today,” said Tomar. I saw that he was holding a letter with a bright yellow seal.

I took a piece of fruit. The faint promise of the sunrise was brewing in the pale grey sky; this was my favorite time of the day.

“Are we taking them?” I asked.

“Well, one wants a baby,” said Tomar. “But I’m not giving up one so young as they asked for, so I sent a letter back with the pidgeon.”

I nodded. One of the first things I’d learned as an apprentice was that gryphons shouldn’t be sold until they were over a year old. I bit into the pale blue of the perinn fruit, and my mouth filled with a burst of sour-sweet.

“Then, the Birae want another full-grown,” he continued, “for simple deliveries.”

Messengers and their organizations all over the land wanted gryphons to ride. They were our most frequent customers.

“Who are we sending, then?” I asked. I took a bowl of goat milk and sipped at it.

“Attri, probably,” he replied, cutting off a slice of bread. “It’s about time we sent her off.”

I felt a brief pang of sadness as I always did when we decided to sell gryphons. Attri was a three year old brown, with dark feathers. I would miss her in our stables, but then, there would be no business if we didn’t sell the animals. Sighing softly, I took my mouth from the bowl of milk and

my eyes rested on the seal of the letter Tomar was still holding. I frowned. Somehow it looked familiar—

“Tomar!” I gasped, dropping my bowl of milk. “Who’s that letter from?”

“The royal family,” said Idri with a smile, sounding proud.

“But— haven’t we been aiming for a request from the royal stables for ages?” I said excitedly.

Mayi was walking up to the gazebo, her ever-present bag of supplies slung over her shoulder. She heard me and quickened her pace.

“What’s this about royal stables?” she said, hastening to take a chair.

“It’s not the royal stables,” said Tomar, smiling. “It’s the royal family, which is a bit of a different matter. The crown prince is in need of a gryphon, and he wants us to supply it.”

“The prince! Isn’t that even better?” I exclaimed.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” said Tomar. “He shan’t take it if it doesn’t meet his expectations. He requires a two-year-old with bright coloring and good speed, and he requires that I deliver it personally.”

I thought for a moment, picking up the bowl of milk again while I was at it.

“Illor,” I said, picturing the gryphons in my mind, “or Pira.”

“Right you are,” said Tomar. “Which do you prefer for the job?”

“You want me to decide?”

“I want your advice.”

“Then I say, we should ride them before we decide.”

The sun rose and we finished our breakfast. I forgot to ask Tomar if there was mail from home. After all, they never wrote. When Tomar offered me the job as a gryphon trainer, my family had scoffed at the very idea. When I took it, they all but disowned me.

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I could tell that Illor was eager to be flown, but he stood patiently as I brushed his gold-and-red fur and tied on his saddle. Into the saddlebags I put a flask of water, just in case. Then I gave him a pat and walked him outside. I pulled at the reins and we were off into the relentless midmorning sun.

Illor charged forward running, then extended his vast gold wings and gave them one, two, three great flaps, pulling us up into the air. The sensation of flying never quite got old; I grinned into the wind as we took off. Soon we were away from the pen, flying in the general direction of the woods from the plains.

Illor was such a joy to ride. I was sure that he was quite suited to be the prince's gryphon. I would, of course, have to test his speed. I leaned forward.

“Onward,” I whispered quickly into his ear.

He leaned forward with me and within moments he was flying at top speed, smooth and even and faster than any other means of transportation. And I knew now that I was riding a high quality gryphon, one of *the* highest quality gryphons, and I felt pride in it as much as an artist would in a great painting or a musician in a beautiful song, because I knew that I had helped to turn this gryphon into what it was for ten months. The grin that came from first taking off did not leave my face and we continued on towards the trees.

Soon we were flying over leaves and the grin fell off my face. How had I let us fly so far? We

were too far away and had been gone too long. I tried to turn Illor around. He turned at my will as I pulled the reins, but as he did, his talons caught in the tree, and he screeched briefly and flapped his wings in place. Ordinarily this would not have been a problem, but as I waited for him to untangle himself I heard a scream from the tree below. A familiar scream that sent my blood racing.

"Lyra?" I gasped, nearly toppling off of the saddle.

"Lithell?" screamed the voice again.

How was it Lyra? How was she this far from home? This was not a simple walk away from Evrin; this was likely five hours on a fast gryphon from right here.

"Why are you here?" I yelled down at Lyra. She was one of my younger sisters, only nine, and I certainly couldn't picture her walking all the way here on her own.

"I ran away," she called up, sounding rather scared.

"You ran--how? On foot?"

"No, I snuck onto Mr. Weln's cart, an' I hopped out when he turned on the fork towards the city, 'cause I was tired of home."

"Oh Lyra. Listen," I said, smiling slightly at her rashness, "we need to get you home. Hold on. Down," I said into Illor's ear.

He plunged through the canopy of trees, which were not close enough together to prevent us from landing on the ground. Here the woods were patchy and the trees were far apart. I looked up at the nearest tree to see Lyra perched near the top. The familiar sight of her small, bright face and perky red-brown curls was enough to bring tears to my eyes. I hadn't seen her in so long.

"Can you get down?" I called.

“Of course I can get down,” she said, appearing insulted. She climbed down a few feet and then jumped to the ground.

Within moments I had jumped off of Illor and was running to hug her. I spun her around and then we stopped and she stared at Illor.

“Is that one of your gryphons?” she said with wide eyes, taking a step back.

“Well, he’s not *mine*,” I said. “But we’ve bred him, and trained him, and now we’re going to sell him.”

I didn’t mention the prince. Tomar had impressed upon me the importance of keeping our clients anonymous, especially if they were important or wealthy people. Still, Lyra looked suitably impressed.

“Now, before I take you home—” I stopped for a minute. This meant that I would have to go home. I wasn’t welcome there. I swallowed hard.

Lyra looked up at me.

“Do I *have* to go home?” she said.

Suddenly, she reminded me of myself, because she had run away, and so had I, in a way. I would never regret the choice to become a gryphon trainer, but still, I had never returned home. I had run from the task of reconciling with my family.

“Yes,” I said, reaching down and squeezing her hand. “Yes, we both have to go home. It’ll be okay. But first, we need to fly back to the gryphon ranch.”

I paused and she gave me a hopeful look.

“Have you ever flown a gryphon?” I asked, smiling.

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Lyra’s arm went limp and a piece of bread tumbled down to the meadow below. I thought I saw it hit the grass in the scorching sun.

“It’s not far now,” I told her, imaging our little village beneath the tree branches, “it’s not far. Look, we can see the forest now.” The familiar sight of the tall trees gave my heart a jolt.

She nodded in response. Long distance rides were never easy, not even for me. Still, I did not let my grip on the reins slacken or my body grow limp. I had to get her home. I had to get myself home.

Finally, finally, I pointed Illor towards the ground. He was not all that tired; he shouldn’t be, as he would be the prince’s gryphon. Tomar had been more than happy for me to take him. He said that Illor needed frequent exercise now that we had decided on him as the prince’s gryphon, and a long ride was perfect for that.

We landed on the path to the village and I slowed Illor to a walk. The shade and shadow of the forest enveloped us and as I gazed along the old, familiar path, I felt a sense of peace that I had long been lacking. But I was nervous. The last words I’d spoken to either of my parents had been spoken in a fight, yelling and debating. I sighed and nudged Lyra so that she woke up as we walked through the cluster of houses and buildings we called a village.

Somehow I’d acquired tears in my eyes somewhere along the walk. I blinked them away impatiently as we walked up in front of our house. I hopped off of Illor, landing on the springy grass, and helped Lyra down. Holding on to Illor’s reins, I knocked on the door and waited for it to open.

“Oh my--oh my stars,” exclaimed my mother when she saw my face. “Lyra, baby!”

She grabbed Lyra from my arms and hugged her close, and I felt a sinking sensation in my stomach. Had she gotten to the point where she wouldn’t acknowledge my presence? I cleared

my throat slightly. Mother turned back to me and was silent for several very long moments.

“I see they’ve got you wearing men’s clothes.”

I felt my face crumple in disappointment at the harshness of her tone. Then a small figure came running out and I recognized my younger brother, Ebri, and a smile broke briefly across my face.

“The charm worked!” he said in a triumphant voice. “I knew it would! That necklace you’re wearing,” he continued before I could ask, giving me a big hug. “It’s a charm, an’ I bought it an’ I gave it to you, and it’s meant to bring you back home when you wear it.”

My mouth fell open in surprise, but it did make sense. I had put on the charm for the first time that day, and that day, for the first time at months, I had returned home.

“Well,” said Mother. She gave me another bitter stare, and I stared back with sad eyes.

“I’m never going to stop being a gryphon trainer, mum,” I said quietly. “It’s what I love.”

I turned slightly, still holding Illor’s reins, wanting nothing more than to leave and be done with this—to give up. I held back my tears by biting my lip.

But then the bitter stare mother had fixed on melted, and she set Lyra down and hugged me tight, and I knew, at long last, that things would turn out alright.
