

~ Wyrn ~ by Windstar

The usual disclaimers I suppose, two women are involved in this story, though nothing graphic this time. This is a bit of a vacation from Southern Cross for me, and I had a ball writing it with some encouragement. You might say that I have a small obsession for Dragons, and you might even be right if you did say it. So after nagging a few friends to do stories with Dragons in them, I was told that if I wanted a story so bad, I should write one. Thus was born this little ditty. This is my attempt at a short story, not so short, yeah I know. I just can't seem to get it down to a few pages for some reason. I started out trying, I swear, but then it just, well, grew on me!

As always dedicated to my one and only Angel, my love and soul. A thank you to Nic and Diva for supporting and helping me get this part to where it can be posted. Comments and constructive criticism are very welcome at: adarkbow@yahoo.com

A child, barely nine years old, stared at the whirling snow outside the window. Pouting, she turned and ran towards the old woman in the rocking chair by the fireplace.

"Grand Mama, it's still snowing!"

Grand Mama carefully set her knitting aside and patted her lap, into which the young child gladly sat.

"I know, child. We'll have to go into the market tomorrow."

"But, Grand Mama! You promised!"

There was nothing like the injured expectations of a young girl. Grand Mama was long accustomed to dealing with them though.

"What if I tell you a story?"

"Can it have dragons?"

Grand Mama smiled indulgently down at her littlest grand child. The others had gone out with their parents, but Nina had stayed behind to go with Grand Mama to the market. Knowing her little one's fascination with them, Grand Mama nodded.

"Yes, it will have dragons in it."

"Can it have a dashing hero?"

"Of a sort, my little one."

"What about a happy ending?"

"You'll just have to wait and see about that."

"Oh ok, but make sure it's a good one, Grand Mama."

The old woman smiled and drew the blankets a bit more tightly over her shoulders. Even with the fire she seemed to feel the cold more these days.

"When I was a very young girl my mother used to tell us the story of our..."

"NO!"

Black eyes looked down at her grandchild with amusement.

"No?"

"That's not how you tell that story, Grand Mama!"

"Oh, and how am I supposed to tell it?"

"You have to start with, Once upon a time. It's the rules."

"Well, your Grand Mama wouldn't want to break the rules would she? Very well. Once upon a time, there was a traveler. She came from over the Sea in the West, and had been traveling for a very long time indeed. They say that when she rode into town she came upon a great steed and everyone noticed her at once. She was different you see, having hair that was silver, even though she herself was very young. She was called Kira, and everyone wondered where she had come from, and what she wanted."

Kira irritably wiped the rain from her face, and glared at the village ahead of her. It had sounded like such a great idea at the time, wander across the lands and see what her mother had so often talked about. The strange lands, the strange people who were nothing like them, and all of the spectacular sights and sounds, while searching for help. What her mother had failed to mention was how little fun actually getting anywhere on foot was.

She'd given up cursing the rain a few hours ago. Now she just bore it with resigned determination.

"Why did mother have to pick me for this mission?"

The sky, in answer, poured more water down on her.

With a sigh of annoyance, and wondering if she could just give up on her mission right now,

Kira headed towards the village. At least it looked large enough to have an inn somewhere in it. Then she could at least get a warm bed for the night. This body of hers didn't like sleeping on the ground, and she had found herself dreaming of a warm bed for the last week.

In the rain it didn't look like much at all to her, and she scowled at what little bits she could see through the pounding rain. A lightning flash illuminated an old weather-beaten wooden building. Another and she saw the well located in the center square. A third and she found her way through the mud to the only building in the square that had a sign hanging from its front.

The sign had a picture of a swan and a golden feather pictured on it, with writing underneath which was mostly unreadable. Water cascaded down the roof and made certain that any part of clothing that had remained dry was cured of that despicable condition by the time she ducked under the waterfall.

A few new curses sprang to mind, but she held her tongue as she stepped inside of the inn.

That it was an inn she had no doubt. They had a sort of universal layout, as far as she could tell. The common room, with tables and chairs, a bar top along the far wall, and usually a roaring fire going. Smoke usually hung so low in the air that you had trouble seeing what was right in front of you, and coughing was a hazard. Then rooms up on the second story, and if you were really lucky, baths as well. She doubted she would be that lucky here though.

The inn, to her immense pleasure, was mostly empty when she entered. Only the bartenders, and a serving wench seated at the bar, were present. Both looked up as she entered, the wench returned to studying something on the bar top, and the bartender smiled; as much as the man could smile with a scar running down the right side of his face. It transformed what would have been a smile into a sort of sneer.

"Lady, welcome to the Golden Swan, what can I get you on this forsaken night?"

"Warm food would be appreciated, and a place to stay if possible?"

"We've rooms aplenty."

The serving wench never even looked up as she approached the bar top and took a seat on one of the stools. Her boots made little squishing sounds with every step she took, and she was certain she was going to leave a puddle under her.

Pushing back her hood, Kira tried to wring as much water from her hair as possible. The traveling cloak had obviously not been as waterproof as the merchant had led her to believe.

"I'll be right back with the food."

The bartender limped towards a back door in the inn, presumably towards a kitchen of sorts. She hoped the food was edible. Some wine would go well with it also. Kira'd discovered that she had a fondness for mulled wine somewhere during the past three towns she'd visited.

"Wench, fetch me some wine."

"Grand Mama!"

"What, child?"

"Kira did NOT think that Eloise was a bar wench!"

Black eyes regarded the pouting child with amusement.

"Should I go and find the book then?"

Nina sighed; the long-suffering sigh of a child who had gone through this argument before, and then shook her head.

"May I continue then, Granddaughter, or did you want to tell the story yourself?"

"Oh no, Grand Mama, you tell it so much better."

"Very well then, as you can imagine, Eloise was not too happy with being called a wench..."

Kira thought the girl was deaf for a moment. Perhaps she had said that wrong? No, shouting that out across the common room had always brought her some mulled wine before. Maybe the customs were different here though? How far had she traveled since the last village? It was so hard to try and figure out distances on foot.

"Are you talking to me?"

The incredulous voice of the girl shook Kira from her thoughts.

"Yes, some wine, wench?"

Maybe she had to phrase it like a question.

"Wench? Did you just call me a WENCH?"

Kira licked dry lips and hesitantly nodded. The girl, actually a woman now that Kira saw her close up, was staring at her with the oddest look on her face. Kira really had a hard time telling those facial expressions apart.

"Please?"

That word seemed to help a lot when she was in the markets. It unfortunately showed no effect here. The girl, woman, stood up at her full five and a half feet and glared at Kira. The girl's ears were slightly upswept she noticed, and her eyes, clear green, were slightly slanted. The face was triangular, and Kira wondered if the girl wasn't human.

"How dare you think I'm a wench!"

The slap came out of nowhere and Kira's eyes widened as the girl's palm hit her across the cheek. Stumbling backwards Kira watched the stranger with astonishment. That had been the first time that someone had ever hit her in this body, and her cheek burned with pain.

"Apologize!"

"For what?"

"For thinking I'm a bar wench!"

"You're not?"

This time Kira anticipated the slap and backed away from the now obviously furious woman.

"Of course I'm not you MORON! I'm Eloise de Montagne!"

The name meant nothing to Kira and she just stared at the woman. Who, now that Kira was paying attention, wasn't wearing anything that looked even remotely like a wench's dress. The fine cut leisure clothes were not something she automatically associated with wealth, although the ceremonial dagger the girl was wearing did catch her eye. The ruby on the pommel was worth quite a bit.

"I'm Kira, nice to meet you."

When the silence stretched onwards, Kira hazarded a guess.

"So, you're not going to get me any wine are you?"

The girl screamed in frustration and bolted out of the inn, muttering something about imbeciles. Just as Kira was wondering if she should go out into the rain after her, and strangely feeling like she should, the bartender returned. The tray of food he carried put an end to any impulse to leave.

"Oh that smells good."

"Roasted boar and bread, fresh this morning, with some homemade butter."

It tasted even better.

"Grand Mama!"

"Yes, child?"

"That's not right! Kira would never do that."

The old woman gave her granddaughter a little shove and stood up slowly when the precocious little girl got down.

"Come, we'll go make cookies. Since you can't seem to sit quiet through the story."

"But Grand Mama, I know the story. The books say that they met and were friends right away."

An old weathered hand patted fair hair as the old woman led the way towards the kitchen. A whispered word and the small globe that hung from the top of the kitchen ceiling lit the room brightly. Outside the winter storm continued to rage, flakes of white swirled about the windows.

"Now where was I?"

"The first night, Grand Mama."

"Oh yes, so it was. The innkeeper was called Tuk, and he was a very nice man, despite the horrible wounds he'd sustained during an orc raid years before. She decided to stay in the inn that night, glad for the dry beds. Since it was so stormy out, the inn was empty except for her and Tuk that night..."

Kira studied the man across from her as she sipped the mulled wine. Since there had been no other customers after the strange girl had left, he'd consented to joining her at one of the tables while she finished eating. In her decidedly brief experience here, bartenders tended to know quite a bit about what was going on around them.

"That girl, she seemed strange."

That got her a brief laugh, and a sort of twisted grin from the old soldier who took a generous drink from the mug of ale he had brought with him.

"She's a de Montagne."

Tuk seemed to assume that was all she needed in a way of explanation. Kira brushed a silver lock, which always seemed to find its way down before her eyes, behind an ear and looked at him questioningly. Tuk took pity on her obvious confusion.

"That means she's got elven blood in her."

"Elven? She's fey then?"

"Well, partly. Her family's always had elven blood in them, as far back as anyone around here can remember. That entire family has a lot of mages in it."

"Oh. I thought she was a bar wench."

Tuk's one good eye widened then he roared with laughter.

"That why she left so fast? Well damn! You must have really pissed her off good!"

"I didn't mean to, I just thought..."

"That she was a bar wench."

Tuk seemed to find that enormously amusing and he was still chuckling by the time Kira had finished her food.

"Thank you, it was perfect. These de Montagne's, where would I go to find them?"

"I like ya lass, but I don't think you want to do that if you thought Eloise was a bar wench."

"I know, but they might be what I'm searching for."

"Hmm, well, if you have to know, they live in a rather large mansion outside of town. You keep going down the road, and there's a big path on the right. Follow that up the ridge, and you'll reach their house. It's impossible to miss."

Since she had missed things that were supposedly impossible to miss before, Kira wasn't so certain about that.

"Well, thank you, Tuk. Here's for the meal and the room."

One of the very first things that Kira had learned was the relative worth of money here. Things worked a bit differently, such as the value of gold that everyone seemed so keen about. She'd also learned not to show them how much of it she was carrying around with her. Carefully she handed the bartender two copper coins.

The bed in the small room was clean enough, and the sheets were fresh. Stretching out in those sheets, full and relatively clean, she almost felt human, and that was scary.

"Can we have chocolate chip cookies?"

"I don't see why we couldn't, little one."

Nina gladly helped her grandmother with the cookie dough. Actually, Nina helped lick the bowl, the only thing better than chocolate chip cookies, in her young opinion, was chocolate chip cookie dough.

"Grand Mama?"

"Hmm?"

"What was Kira looking for?"

Nina, like all children her age in the White Woods, knew the answer. It was, however, a great way to get her grandmother talking again. A trick that was not lost on said grandmother, but she loved her granddaughter.

"A cure for what was happening to her people."

"Why couldn't her people stop it themselves?"

"You want me to tell the story or just answer your questions?"

"Oh no Grand Mama, tell the story!"

The old woman chuckled as she finished placing the sheet with dollops of cookie dough into the oven. A whispered word of power and the small fire elementals heated the oven. The smell of cooking dough quickly filled the stone kitchen.

"Well, Kira woke up the next day, and let me tell you that she was happy to have finally slept in a real bed. The adventuring tales never tell how hard and uncomfortable the ground can be. After eating a large breakfast, she decided to find out where these de Montagne's lived and pay them a visit. Maybe they could help her with her mission."

"Why do ya wanna go see them for? I'm telling you, Kira, cause you're a nice woman, but they don't like to be disturbed."

"I'm not."

Tuk paused in polishing the bar top, something he seemed rather obsessed about, at least Kira thought so.

"Not what?"

Kira finished the last of the toasted bread and honey that he'd offered her for the breakfast.

"A nice woman."

She'd said it with such honesty that Tuk blinked before shaking his head and looking away from wide curious blue eyes.

"Anyway, they don't like to be bothered."

"They'll understand, I have a mission."

"But..."

"Tuk, please, where can I find them?"

The bartender sighed and worked a bit harder on a small stain that marred his perfect oaken bar top. It was so highly polished after years of his attention that he could see his own reflection in it, and that of the strange customer. The silver hair was odd enough, but those eyes...

"They have a mansion, well, it's more like several mansions linked together, out past the northern edge of town. Follow the road out of town, and then take the first trail on your left. You won't be able to miss it."

She followed his directions, wandering down the road through the sleepy looking small village. By daylight, and without the rain, it almost looked like a decent place to live. If you went in for the four stonewalls and thatched roof kind of look that is. Unlike the night before, it was a beautiful day out, and Kira hummed to herself as she walked, loving the feel of sunlight on her skin.

The de Montagne manor was, indeed, hard to miss. The manor itself was, as Tuk had said, actually a combination of multiple large manors linked together. From her spot on the small road, Kira could see at least four different manors, each large by themselves, that had been linked together. It almost looked like they were budding off from one another.

The slim figure sitting on the stairs of the nearest building and reading a book was depressingly familiar as well. As Kira tried to decide if she really wanted to approach the building, and if there wasn't maybe some other entrance, the same green eyes she remembered from the inn looked up from the book.

"Oh no, not you again."

Kira felt her back stiffen at the tone of the other woman, but she forced her body to continue on its course towards the door.

"What do you want?"

"To speak to your family."

"Oh, and what could the family of a bar WENCH do for you?"

"Look, I'm sorry I thought you were a wench, but you were dressed like one."

"What?"

Kira licked her lips and looked longingly towards the door behind the now standing woman. She wondered if it would be rude to toss the smaller woman aside and knock on the door.

Unfortunately she was certain that the answer was yes. The blonde haired girl kept right on going oblivious to Kira's temptation.

"Now you don't like the way I look!"

"No, I mean, yes, I like the way you look, but you were dressed like a wench!"

"I will have you know that I traveled in those clothes, and no one, other than a stupid silver haired wanderer, ever confused me with a WENCH!"

That was it; Kira was not going to stand on the steps to the de Montange place, yelling at a girl about how she had been dressed the night before. So what if she'd been showing a bit more flesh than Kira thought was appropriate for humanoids? Firmly Kira reached up, took a hold of the girl, lifted her up off the steps and smoothly set her back down on the ground. With a nod of satisfaction, Kira walked up the now empty steps, leaving a spluttering girl behind her.

She'd managed to knock before the girl regained her senses.

"Why you... How dare you!"

Thankfully, the door opened before Kira had to answer that question.

"May I help you?"

It took Kira a moment to realize that she wasn't seeing anyone in the doorway. Another moment to realize that the voice had come from two feet lower than she was looking, before she spotted the gnome looking up at her expectantly. She wasn't certain what he was wearing, it was some black and white uniform that looked stiffly formal, but she didn't care at the moment. All she wanted was to escape from the girl who was well and truly on her way to a tirade behind her.

"I have a mission, and I need to speak to the head of the de Montagne's."

The girl stopped her tirade to laugh at Kira when she said that.

"You think you're going to see my grandmother? Are you out of your mind? You obviously are some sort of barbarian who's never been anywhere before. Why would she want to see you?"

The disdain in the girl's voice almost caused Kira to do something she would probably have regretted later, but before it could come to that, the gnome bowed and winked.

"Please forgive Mistress Eloise." Now Kira had a name to go with the face. "But Madame de Montange has been expecting you."

"WHAT?" came the startled squeak from Eloise, and Kira turned and flashed a victorious smile, then headed inside the house, leaving the fuming girl outside, who snatched up her discarded book and stormed off, muttering things as she did.

The urge to snicker was unavoidable, although the reproaching look from the gnome stifled it. He led her through rambling halls and rooms that were connected at odd angles. Walls were at odd angles, and ceilings dipped here and there; staircases that went nowhere, doors which opened onto nothing. Kira even saw a shaft that went through the center of the house, for no reason that she could tell.

Finally the gnome bowed her into one of the largest libraries that she had ever seen. Books covered the two story walls, and a balcony ran around the second story area. Dominating it all was a huge, arched stain glass window. It depicted a brilliant white light shooting up, or down, to the sky and illuminating the entire landscape around it. Kira's mouth went dry as she recognized the soaring mountains that surrounded that brilliant light.

"That's..."

"Yes, Kira Silvermist, those are your mountains."

An old lady, ancient to Kira's eyes, was bundled up in a blanket, snugly ensconced in one of the high-backed chairs. Kira hesitated, licking her lips, as she tried to figure out what to do.

"Sit, child, sit."

"Thank you, Madame. I've come to see you."

"I know, Kira, I've been expecting you."

"How do you know my name?"

"I know a great deal about you, Kira Silvermist. Come, sit down and have tea with me and we can talk."

The tea was excellent, and Kira had to fight against her urge to skim through the books that lined the walls. Sternly she reminded herself that she had a mission to see to.

"How do you know who I am?"

"I've been watching you ever since you left your island, Kira."

"You know what I am then?"

"Of course I do, child. Hard for you to hide that from most de Montagnes, my granddaughter not withstanding of course."

"Is she always so..."

Kira trailed off uncertainly, not certain what word she wanted.

"Abrupt? Yes. She inherited that from her mother I think. She's very good at what she does, and she knows it."

"Grand Mama, can I be a mage someday also?"

"It's not something you can become, Nina."

The scent of baking cookies was filling the kitchen and the old woman took a look inside of the oven to check on them. She didn't miss the disappointed look on her granddaughter's face though.

"That doesn't mean you can't be something just as interesting, little one."

"Like what?"

"You'll find that out in your own time, little one."

"Promise?"

"I promise, now come help me with the cookies. Your mother and brothers should be back soon."

Nina helpfully cleared a spot on the countertop for her grandmother to put the hot cookie sheet down. A whispered word and the fire elemental in the oven obediently disappeared.

"Why would Kira go to the de Montagne's though?"

"Because Nina, she had to find someone to help her people."

"Why?"

"You know very well why, now be quiet and let me tell the story."

"You'll stay here the night, child, then tomorrow you and Eloise will leave."

Kira licked her lips, more shaken than she thought she would be after what the old woman had said. Right at the moment she didn't feel like arguing with the matron of the de Montagne clan. In fact, for a humanoid, the old woman rather frightened her.

The gnome showed her back out of the library, and when Kira glanced over her shoulder, the ancient woman hadn't moved so much as a finger. The gnome ignored her other than to bring her through the odd house to a room and then left her there. It was a large room, and Kira found herself wandering about it with interest. Curiously she poked her head into the walk-in closet and grinned at all the clothing inside of it. Finally she collapsed onto the bed, and stared up at the ceiling above her. It wasn't long before she closed her eyes and sleep claimed her.

The feeling of someone combing her long silver hair brought her slowly to wakefulness. It was a nice feeling and she was loath to open her eyes and banish the last remnants of her dream. Except it wasn't a dream. Blue eyes widened as she sat upright suddenly, the brush hanging off to the side of her in mid air. An invisible hand brought it forewords again and Kira blinked as she watched the brush stroke through her hair. It took her a little bit to realize what sort of spell she was watching, but when she did, she smiled and let the ghostly hands do their work. When they had finished with her hair, a dress floated out of the walk in closet. Shrugging, Kira let the spectral hands help her into it. She'd never worn anything of the sort before, but how hard could it be?

After nearly killing herself falling down the stairs, she made her way, slowly, towards the massive dining room. The high arching ceiling above centered over a table that was the length of some trees. There were dozens of people already seated and talking, none of whom Kira recognized. As if sensing her hesitation, the gnome appeared by her side and led her towards the head of the table where an open seat appeared to be waiting for her. Passing a woman clothed in what looked to be nothing but flames that rippled up and down her body, Kira slipped into a chair, nearly tumbling to the floor as the dress caught on the arm of the chair. Once she'd settled herself, she looked across the table to find the amused look of the annoying Eloise. At the head of the table, the same stern expression as she'd displayed earlier in the afternoon, was the head of the de Montagne household. Everyone seemed to wait for the grandmother to take a simple sip of the bowl of steaming soup before her, before everyone else dug in.

"Like your dress do you, Kira?"

Having a feeling that Eloise had something to do with the torture device that she was wearing, Kira glared at the grinning woman.

"Its just great."

The biting tone seemed to be lost on the woman, who to Kira's immense annoyance began humming to herself as she started eating.

"Kira dear, eat."

Biting off a curse-- Kira had a feeling cursing at the head of the de Montagne's wouldn't go over well-- she did as bid. The food was excellent, and there was a lot of it. She even got pulled into a conversation with the man seated next to her, who was wearing a suit of plate mail armor. Why he wanted to wear that while eating, Kira had no idea, but humanoids were strange anyway, so she just decided to go along with everything.

By the time the dinner was over she was aware of a current running under the tone of everything else. There was something going on here that was unusual, well, more odd than usual she supposed. Eloise seemed to be fidgeting a lot, even for a humanoid. The conversations around the table teetered off more and more as the dinner progressed, until the last course was eaten in silence broken only by the click of silver wear on china. When the old woman at the head of the table slowly folded her napkin and placed it on the table, she wasn't certain if it was a sense of relief or anxiety that filled the room.

Silently, everyone rose as well and Kira found herself sandwiched between the man in the armor, who clanked as he walked, and a slender man carrying a bow slung over one shoulder. That he took it with him even to eat seemed perfectly normal. Eloise walked alongside the old woman, and Kira kept an eye on the two of them. She wondered what was going on, and if this was some sort of after dinner ritual in the de Montagne manor. If it was, did that mean she should go to her room? Or were guests welcomed as well?

Since no one objected to her presence, she figured she was welcomed. Actually no one said much of anything as the dozens of people who had attended dinner walked in more or less of a double line through the twisting, chaotic hallways and then through a set of double doors into a garden. The garden, Kira decided after a quick look around, perfectly echoed the house itself. It was sprawling and had an air of unkempt wilderness about it. Only the clear paths and the fountains showed signs of being tended, and even those were sometimes covered with vines and leaves. The entire entourage made their way deep into that still garden, which seemed to hold its breath. Not a single bird dared to break the silence, and Kira wondered if they feared calling attention to themselves. The old woman's ire would not be pleasant.

In the very center of the garden was a large clearing, devoid of the floors and trees which made up the rest of the garden. It was roughly circular, bordered by solid walls of cedars taller than a half giant. There was a starburst pattern made of different colored stones set into the ground. Grass grew between the cracks of the stone, and to Kira, who knew a few things about ancient structures, this place held the feeling of OLD power. The old woman made her way to the farthest point of the starburst, with Eloise coming to a stop in the very center. Kira herself looked about uncertainly until the woman clothed in flames took her hand and drew her to an empty spot.

"Eloise de Montagne, you stand here before your family in the naming ceremony to receive the

mark of a mage."

The old woman's voice carried clearly across the wide circle. Kira felt a stir of interest deep inside of her as she watched Eloise straighten and listen to the old woman's words with grave intensity. Gone was the woman who she'd seen in the inn, this was a person of power standing before her.

"Are you strong enough to bear this mark and its responsibilities, Eloise?"

"Yes, Grandmother, I am."

"Do you swear to uphold the honor of this family?"

"Yes, Grandmother, I do."

"Do you revoke the use of all black magic and the company of those who practice the dark arts?"

"Yes, Grandmother, I do."

With each word, the lines within the starburst pattern glowed brighter. At first it was nothing more than a slight hint of brightness, now though it shown bright enough to make even Kira squint.

"Receive your mark then."

There came, to Kira's ears at least, the sound of a great wind rushing upwards in the center of the starburst pattern. Warmth, such as that of a summer day's sun, bathed her skin. Dimly, she could make out Eloise, her back arched, feet hovering a few feet up off the ground as if held aloft by some invisible force, her arms spread to either side. The power flowed around her, through her, and Kira felt the same something deep inside of her that had stirred earlier, unfurl its wings and take flight. Without thinking she stepped forward, the light enveloping her. There was only the light for a perfect eternal moment. Then she felt another near her, a presence more sensed than actually felt. Then a hand wrapped around hers, fingers anchoring her to this reality, to the world beneath her feet.

Then the darkness swamped over her.

"When can I get my mage mark, Grand Mama?"

"That's your last cookie until after dinner, little one. Not until you are much older."

Nina nibbled on the cookie, making it last.

"Does it hurt?"

"At first, yes it does. But it's not really a pain of the body. It's not really pain at all. Now do you want me to go on?"

"Please, Grand Mama."

Small fingers reached for another cookie.

"Nina, don't you dare, you'll ruin your appetite for supper. Now, where was I, oh yes. The beautiful light flowed through Kira, touching her very soul. Then slender fingers touched hers and anchored her, and she knew nothing more..."

The very first thing Kira knew when she woke up was that she needed to relieve herself.

The second thing was that she wasn't home.

Feeling oddly lightheaded she carefully got her body to get up out of the warm bed and find the nearest bathroom. The running water was a pleasant surprise after the outhouses she had mostly used on her travels so far. When she returned to her room she was surprised to find the old woman waiting for her, along with a platter of food.

"What happened?"

Kira started eating immediately, feeling as if she hadn't eaten in days. The breakfast was delicious, although she probably would have eaten anything that was put in front of her.

"What do you remember?"

Swallowing, Kira shrugged, brushing a strand of silver hair out of her eyes.

"A bright light."

"That's it?"

Kira nodded, her mouth full.

"You stepped into the circle while Eloise was being given her mage mark."

Kira looked at her blankly, still eating.

"You entered the circle while Eloise was receiving her mark, it shouldn't have been possible, not even for one of your kind. Even if it was possible it should have killed you immediately, but it didn't. Why?"

The sharp question demanded an answer, and Kira licked her lips.

"I don't know?"

She offered hesitantly. Keen brown eyes studied her form the weathered face, and suddenly the old woman nodded and stood up.

"Very well, rest, you must be tired."

"Madame?"

The old woman paused by the doorway.

"Yes?"

"You never told me, will you help my family?"

"Yes, the de Montagne's will help you."

Kira felt a large weight lift from her shoulders at that; grinning she went back to eating. For the first time in a long time she felt a wisp of hope burst into existence. Oddly she was still tired and after finishing her food she curled up on the bed and once more let sleep claim her.

The next time she woke up it was dark outside once more, and this time she was not alone. Sleeping through a day in the sunlight was not a new thing for her, her kind practically lived for lounging in a clearing and enjoying the sun. Stretching, she curiously watched the figure seated nearby.

"What do you want?"

Since her previous encounters with Eloise de Montagne had not been particularly pleasant, Kira watched the other woman warily. Instead of outright hostility though, the young woman turned towards her, a puzzled expression gracing her elfin features. There was a small white starburst pattern now marking the half-elf's forehead.

Instead of answering her question Eloise asked one of her own.

"Why are you here?"

"I'm looking for help."

"No, why are you *here*."

Kira had the feeling, that she sometimes got when talking to humanoids, that there were two different conversations going on at the same time. One of which was the one that the words normally were used for, but there was a second one going on just below them, a second meaning.

It was very confusing and Kira had a hard time trying to decipher the hidden meanings.

"Because I came to this town on the road."

"And you just happened to find your way to our manor?"

There was a bit of a mocking tone in the voice now, and Kira bristled.

"No, I asked at the inn when you left in a big huff who you were. The barkeep said that you were a de Montange and that your family had power. So I came here to see if you could help, which your grandmother said she would."

Eloise snorted and stood.

"I'm not going to be stuck with you!"

The door slammed behind her, leaving Kira staring at the place where the woman had just been. Wondering what that had all been about and not having anything in the way of a clue.

She'd slept through an entire day, and she had no desire to go back to sleep again. Instead she rose, gathered some more comfortable clothing from the walk in closet, the invisible helper seemed to be on a break. Once she was dressed, tying her long silver hair behind her with a small length of blue ribbon, Kira went prowling. Well, not so much prowling, as wandering aimlessly, indulging in her curiosity and investigating the odd manor.

It was indeed not only one manor but several connected together, like they had budded off from one another. The rooms were linked together through hallways that made bizarre turns, and more than once, Kira found her self turned around and back at her starting point. Kira wondered if the hallways moved, or if she was just having more problems than usual remembering her path, odd for one who was used to remembering the twisting complexities of a cave system. Still it was with a bit of relief that she finally emerged into the dark night outside of the house. Quietly closing the door behind her, she stepped out into the moonlit night, smiling at the quietness.

Sniffing the air, Kira paused, turned slowly, and headed in the opposite direction. There was something not quite right, and she followed her instincts. Walking the long distance around the manor, Kira stopped and listened carefully.

The sound of splashing came from in the gardens, not far from where Eloise had received her mage mark. Following the sounds, Kira wandered through a hedge maze and then emerged at a small pool of water. A figure was idly swimming in a circle around the pool, floating on her back. Swallowing, Kira took another step forward, staying in the darker shadows by the hedge. A bundle of clothes were lying on the ground near her feet, and she recognized the clothes as those that Eloise had worn earlier. A pleasant shiver rippled up and down her back as she lifted her face and watched the figure swim closer.

Slender arms and legs, pale in the silvery light. Small pert breasts, and hair the color of gold; she

was a revelation to Kira. Sunrise, sunset, and moonlight wrapped together, and once more she felt something deep inside of her stir and reach out. It wasn't alone this time though a feeling of warmth touched her causing her entire body to flush and ache with awareness.

The hiss of an arrow slicing through the air broke the moment. Kira cursed the new body as she hesitated for a precious second. The arrow would have struck her, she could see the moonlight glint off of the wicked steel tip as time seemed to slow. The arrow grew in her vision and Kira was certain it was going to hit her when a pale blue shield appeared in the air a hand's breadth in front of her face. The arrow struck with a brilliant shower of sparks.

Eloise was yelling words of Power, and Kira had a very good idea of who had just saved her. There were dark shapes moving in the shadows of the hedges on the other side of the pool. Eloise hastily erected a shield in front of herself, as half a dozen arrows narrowly missed her.

With a gesture, a burst of flames streaked from her hands and exploded among the shadows. One of the shadowy figures screamed in pain, flames engulfing it, and it flailed through the hedge. There was a glint of gold, as if one of those shadows held an amulet at arm's length. Then Kira heard chanting and a wave of evil washed out over the pool of water, breaking over Eloise.

The part of Kira that had stirred, suddenly reared and engulfed her. All that she could think was that someone, something, had attacked what was hers. How dare they?

A roar echoed through the night and wings with silver scales unfurled in the maze. The roar was soon followed by screams.

"Grand Mama!"

"Yes, little one?"

"I'm big enough to hear the gory parts you know."

"No, you aren't."

"But..."

"Nina, I don't want you having nightmares all night again. Your mother would not be happy with me, again."

A long-suffering sigh, as only the young, or teenagers, could produce was her only answer to that.

Smiling, the old woman resumed her story.

"When the rest of the de Montagne's arrived, they saw Kira back in her human form. Eloise had

been stunned by the attack from the dark mage, but not really hurt. The attackers had been reduced to a dark, bloody smear across the ground, all except for the one who had burned to death. The head of the de Montagne's called both Eloise and Kira before her after things had settled down a bit. They met her in the great library, and..."

"Take a seat, both of you."

Kira ignored the strange looks that Eloise had been giving her since they'd left the gardens, and took a seat. The old woman's tone left no point for debate in the matter. Eloise had only just sat down when the urge to talk became too much.

"Grandmother, she's a dragon!"

Then flushed as both the old woman and Kira looked at her with amusement.

"You knew?"

"So would you have if you had paid any attention at all, Eloise."

The young mage ducked her head in embarrassment at the tone in the old woman's voice. Kira's smile at that died as the old woman swung that piercing gaze towards her.

"Kira, what were you doing in the gardens?"

"I was restless and wanted to go for a walk. Then..."

She trailed off, not certain how to explain what had drawn her towards the gardens or why she had gone to the pool of water where Eloise was swimming.

"Eloise, you will accompany Kira on her mission."

"WHAT? You want me to go with this... this... Dragon?"

"Eloise, you will sit down this instant!"

The young mage sat down quickly.

"She is our guest, and she helped repel an attack upon our home. We will grant her the aid she has come seeking."

Eloise bowed her head to the inevitable.

"Kira, Eloise will go with you back to your people and help them. Eloise, go get ready for your journey."

Kira stayed where she was as Eloise stomped from the room, closing the door loudly behind her.

"Kira, I must warn you, this attack was not against the de Montagne's, but aimed towards killing you."

"Why do you think that?"

"The arrow that was shot at you, its tip was covered with dragonsbane."

The silver dragon in human form swallowed at that. Dragonsbane was exceedingly rare, but it could kill an adult dragon if only a little entered the dragon's blood.

"Someone does not want your mission to succeed I think, Kira. Eloise is bound up in this somehow, you found your way to her just before the attack began. Her path is tied to yours, at least for now. Go quickly, it will be harder to track you when you're moving."

"Thank you, old one, my clan will forever be thankful for this. We'll go by the..."

"No, do not tell me, Kira, things said out loud can be overheard by those that should not know. Leave tonight if you can. Go."

Kira rose and bowed fully to the old woman. There seemed little point in saying anything else, so she turned and left the room.

Eloise was waiting for her when she finally found her way to the front of the rambling manor. She'd managed to dash up stairs to fetch her things and then back downstairs. With the end of her quest so close she could almost touch it she was glad to have an excuse to set out early. Even if it was at night and the reversion to her true form had taken a bit out of her. She could sleep later, now though they'd go back and she'd be free of this wandering. The attack was a bit of a surprise though, why would someone want to stop her mission? No one even knew what her mission was exactly, except for the old woman. How could they even have known what she was? She'd never changed form since leaving her clans islands.

The arrival of the young mage sidetracked her thoughts. Eloise was dressed in traveling clothes. Warm and tough leather leggings and jerkin, with a full-length blue traveling cloak. The hood was lined with fur and framed Eloise's face perfectly. Green eyes met pale blue and once more a longing so powerful it hurt stirred inside of Kira. Eloise seemed to feel it too, and the mage hesitated, her steps faltering. Then, seeming to force her body to respond, she tossed her head back and stalked forwards.

"Well, are we leaving or not?"

The obvious anger in the fair haired mage's voice cut through the moment.

"Are you ready?"

"Of course I'm ready. We need to get the horses though."

"Horses?"

Eloise looked at Kira as if she was a particularly dense child and slowly spoke.

"Yes, Horses, four legs? You know, to carry all of our supplies? How long is it going to take?"

"It took me four months."

"Four months!"

Kira nodded, well aware that she was just annoying the mage for no good reason now. Eloise was beyond the annoyed point though, and was sputtering as she tried to think of that.

"Four months! That means I'll be gone most of the year!"

"What? Can't you just teleport us where we have to go?"

Kira had been teasing, but to her surprise Eloise actually answered the question.

"No, I'd have had to have been to the place before to teleport there. Even then it gets more difficult the farther away you go, and even more difficult if you have someone with you. If you don't do it right you can appear inside of a solid object, like the ground, or a hundred feet up in the air."

Kira wouldn't have minded the up in the air part, but appearing inside of the ground would have been rather painful, if not immediately fatal. Trying not to get rid of the picture of one of her feet melded with a rock, Kira waited until they were outside of the house before speaking again.

"It won't take us that long to get back though."

"Oh? And why is that?"

"Forget what I am already have we?"

Kira was really starting to enjoy being able to get the surprised expression to appear on Eloise's face. It was fun to watch her blush also.

"You mean you want to..."

Kira assumed the word that Eloise has been searching for was 'fly', and nodded with a bit of a smirk.

"Unless you want to walk like I did? It was really wet and cold sometimes. I can't imagine why

you people like these bodies."

"They have their up sides."

Privately Kira agreed with that. The sense of touch for one, was amazing. Dragon bodies were not that tactile. It was hard to feel anything short of a boulder through the scales.

"Your grandmother told me not to tell anyone which way we were going."

Eloise nodded, following Kira as she headed more or less down the path towards the village.

"Someone could be listening to us."

"You're a mage, can't you stop them?"

"Only if you give me a few hours to ward the entire area."

"Oh."

"Are you going to tell me what it is that this is all about anytime soon?"

"I was, but now I think I'll wait until we get home."

Kira grinned in the darkness at the annoyed grunt behind her.

"Can I change into a dragon?"

The old woman watched the snowfall outside of the window and sent a brief prayer for the safety of her daughter. Then went back to stirring the soup she had prepared for the evening meal along with venison.

"When you're older."

"But I want to now!"

She ruffled her granddaughter's hair fondly and then added a bit more spice to the simmering soup.

"Not until you are old enough to know your body. You could get lost and never be able to change back."

Nina pouted but she didn't argue. She'd heard that answer far too often already and would hear it many times yet to come until it was time that she could change.

"What are you doing?"

Kira thought that was rather obvious so she kept on taking off her clothes. So far Eloise had not impressed her with her intelligence.

"Hold these for me."

The now naked Kira had the distinct impression that Eloise took the clothes she thrust at her only because she didn't offer her any choice. The red faced half-elf gaped at her, and then spun around, facing away from her. Laughing, Kira walked a bit further down the hard packed path. Enjoying the feel of the ground under her feet.

"Something wrong?"

"Why am I holding all your clothes?"

"Because I don't want to shred all of them."

Since Eloise didn't say anything more, Kira figured that had answered the smaller woman's questions. Glancing over her shoulder she saw that the half-elf had half-turned and was watching her. For some reason the look she was giving her thrilled Kira.

Changing forms was usually an intensely private moment for a silver dragon. Strangely Kira didn't have any problems changing in front of the beautiful mage though. Closing her eyes she spread her hands, and unlike back in the gardens, here she could take her time. Which was good since it had hurt quite a bit to rush things.

Her skin bulged along her back and she was dimly aware of Eloise's gasp. A tail was the next thing to form, and her skin became covered with silver scales. Wings blossomed from the bulges on her back and she grew in size. Her neck elongated and her face elongated as well. Within a span of a few heartbeats, where Kira's human body had stood, an adult silver dragon spread its wings and stretched. In the moonlight her scales shimmered like liquid silver.

It felt good to be able to stretch and not have to attack someone the moment she changed, and Kira reveled in the feeling of being in her body again. To her surprise she found that after months spent in her human body, a part of her missed the smaller body. That scared her more than she admitted even to herself.

"That's quite a trick."

Arching her neck she gazed down at the nearby blonde woman who showed no fear at all as she approached, Kira noted absently. Her fine hair ruffling in the slight breeze.

"Ready?"

Kira could make out the uncertain look on the mage's face.

"How does this work?"

Massive wings moved in the draconic equivalent of a shrug.

"I don't know, this is the first time I've ever tried this."

"WHAT? You want me to trust you to fly me to wherever it is we're going, and you've never carried anyone before?!"

"Umm... Yes?"

Eloise stared up at the silver dragon and then muttered something about hating fate and began climbing up her back.

"You drop me and I swear I will find a way to hurt you."

"I won't drop you."

"You better not! I can't believe I'm doing this." The last was added in a mutter, but Kira heard it clear enough. Who, for her part, rather hoped she wasn't going to drop the half-elf. It wouldn't do to have found someone to help her clan and then lose them somewhere over the ocean on the way home. Once the grumbling Eloise was settled upon her back, taking a position between two of the spines that grew along the ridge of her neck, Kira leapt into the sky.

No matter the size of the dragon, the first few moments aloft were a bit rough. It was so much easier to glide off of a high cliff face than to take off from the ground, and Kira had to struggle to gain a bit of altitude at first. Her claws dragging through the tops of the trees as she passed over them.

"If you crash I'm going to hurt you!"

Came the faint yell from her back, but by then Kira was able to gain more altitude and they were up and over the next hill.

The flight took a while, and by the end Kira was starting to feel the drain. Her wings and muscles burned, and she was dearly happy to see the islands looming up out of the sea before her. They'd been flying for the entire night, and most of the day now. Eloise, she was amused to find, had fallen asleep on her back just before they had left land behind. The mage had used some sort of spell to make certain that she didn't move from Kira's back, the silver dragon had felt the small tingle of energy as the mage had cast her spell.

Groaning, she stopped flapping and began her long glide down towards the welcome sight before

her. The cliff face, against which the waves pounded with muted crashes, the rich forests on the top, all were as familiar to her. It was the sight of home.

Her tail had gone numb a while ago, and she didn't have to look back to know the cause. What had affected her clan was starting to attack her as well. The bright silver scales were dull and brown, as if made of stone, on the last third of her tail.

"Can I go see the islands soon?"

"Maybe someday, little one. When the islands are free."

The old woman smiled kindly as her granddaughter held out her arms like wings and pretended to fly around the table. She always did get a bit hyper after eating cookies. Sadly hoping that someday her granddaughter could do just as she wished.

"Wakie, wakie."

An inarticulate groan and a muttered go away were the only responses she got. Rolling her eyes, Kira tugged on her shirt. She'd been forced to change shape to get the still sleeping Eloise off her back once they'd landed. Once more she was struck by how different this body was from her draconic one. Gently she brushed a strand of hair back from Eloise's face and was entranced by the soft feel of the blonde hair.

Sleepy green eyes opened at that and Kira bit back a curse. Sure, she wouldn't wake up when Kira changed form, and changed right in front of her, but she'd wake up at the slightest touch! Life was just not fair, although Kira wasn't certain if she was happy or not that Eloise hadn't woken up while she was changing. What Kira was really happy about was that the disease had not carried over into her human form, at least not that she could see or feel.

Hastily standing and backing away, Kira waved about them.

"We're here."

"Where is here, now that we are here that is?"

Eloise wasn't mentioning anything about her having been stroking her hair when she woke up, and Kira was just as happy not to mention it either.

"My clan's island. This is the main gathering place, we'll have to find my mother and she'll explain what help we need."

Eloise slowly stood, looking around her curiously.

"You always sleep so much?"

Kira asked as she began the walk towards the massive gathering place. It had once been a natural ravine. Centuries of work by her people had changed it into an assembly area for her clan. Perches had painstakingly been carved out of the sheer rock walls, and generations of use had smoothed the stone. Intricate carvings covered the tall, sheer cliff face rising hundreds of feet to either side. Kira would have landed in the middle, but she hadn't wanted to risk dumping Eloise on the steep descent it required. If she'd known how tightly the mage had been stuck to her back she wouldn't have worried. There seemed to be several large shapes waiting for them at the center of the speaker's area, and she hoped that her mother was among them. It was hard to tell with the sun so low on the horizon and the valley filled with shadows.

"I wasn't sleeping."

"You could have fooled me. What were you doing?"

"If you must know I was in a trance. I was trying to track down the mage who attacked us in the gardens."

"And?"

The tall walls blocked the afternoon sun, and the two stepped into shadows as they continued walking. The sheer cliff sides to either side, which could overshadow a great wyrm, dwarfed the two of them.

Eloise shrugged in answer.

"No luck, I talked to my grandmother though. She knows we're safe so far."

Kira wasn't paying much attention by then though, she was straining to see in the half darkness.

"Mother!"

She called out, picking up the pace as she went. Eloise hesitated a bit then followed her as well, muttering under her breath.

"Something's not right."

"Mother, I've brought help!"

Breaking into a run the tall, silver haired woman raced towards the large forms.

"Mother? I've brought a half-elf mage! Mother?"

There were, indeed, three dragons already assembled in the speakers circle. She recognized her

aunt, her aunt's mate, and her mother. All three of them were facing one another, wings folded and their bodies lying on the ground. Heads were still in the air, long sinuous necks holding them aloft proudly while sightless eyes regarded one another. With a cry she stepped forward and laid a hand upon the side of her mother feeling the stone that now made up her body.

"Mother?"

Eloise came up to stand next to her, looking at the unmoving statues and then touching Kira on the shoulder.

"Kira?"

She had to tug at the tall woman to get her attention.

"Kira, listen to me. You have to tell me what's going on."

Kira stared at the other woman as if she didn't recognize her, then gulped and nodded. Eloise led the unresisting dragon back down the valley away from the still and silent statues. Which, truth be told, were unnerving her a little.

"Kira, you better tell me what's going on here, or I'm not going to be able to help."

The silver haired woman sat down heavily upon a stone outcropping, still dazed.

"It started a cycle ago, some of the elders came down with a sickness that changed some of their scales to stone. We thought it was just a type of sickness we'd never run into before, until we realized that it was magical in origin. None of us knew how to fight it, and when I left nearly all of the elders and some of the children were showing signs. Four others and myself were the only adults who weren't."

Eloise nodded, she'd more or less figured most of that out already.

"Why come to the mainland and try to find help there? There are other dragon-kind out here aren't there? What about the other clans?"

Kira snorted and seemed to come out of her haze.

"You've never been to a Dragon Council meeting before. Showing weakness before any of the others would be a mistake. Even the other metallics might take advantage of us. And..."

"And you didn't want to spread the disease just in case."

Kira nodded in agreement, her gaze once more straying towards the valley, an anguished look in her blue eyes.

"Don't worry, I am a very good mage, I'm certain I can figure something out. Come on; let's see

if some of the standard spells will work on this. They probably won't but you have to start somewhere."

"I still don't understand, Grand Mama."

"What's that, little one? Careful peeling those potatoes."

Nina bit her lip in concentration; carefully peeling the potatoes for dinner while the older woman stirred the stew.

"Why couldn't the dragons use magic?"

"They could use some magics, Nina, but not what we think of as spells now."

"Why not, Grand Mama?"

"Here, put the peeled ones in this pot. Because they *were* magic, little one. That doesn't mean they can use spells, not like we do."

"I don't understand, Grand Mama."

The old woman smiled and then continued with the story, knowing she would never be able to explain it well enough for the young girl's liking.

"Eloise worked on the dragons for three days. Only stopping to eat and drink what food and water Kira brought her and sleep when she had to. There was nothing she liked better than trying to solve puzzles, and the one set before her this time was a complicated one."

An inarticulate scream of frustration brought Kira's head up from the fish she was cooking. Eloise was kicking rocks with abandon and screaming curses at everything from the sky to earth spirits. Kira listened with rapt attention, she'd only heard some of those curses in an inn full of sailors one time, but most of Eloise's seemed much more inventive.

Finally though, the half-elf ran out of curses and wearily stumbled over to collapse across the fire from the silver.

"Food?"

Eloise nodded and Kira handed her one of the broad leaves with a large section of steaming fish and vegetables on it. At least her culinary skills had improved during this trip, eating things raw in this humanoid form wasn't particularly pleasant she'd found out.

When Eloise had managed to eat as much as it looked like she was going to, Kira hesitantly posed her question.

"Any luck?"

"Luck has NOTHING to do with it!"

Kira blinked at the rather unexpected yell. Eloise ducked her head and took a deep breath.

"Sorry. It's just that I don't know what to do now. I've tried everything I could think of, and nothings worked. Don't worry, I just need some more time to figure things out."

Kira shrugged, handing over one of the traveling cups full of the clean cold water from the nearby stream.

"Time, at least, is something we have in abundance."

It was getting towards the end of the summer, and the islands were never particularly warm. By the time night had set, the temperature had dropped, and the clouds heralded a storm yet to come.

They found shelter in the valley itself, not far from the silent stone shapes. Kira was reluctant to leave the valley, and Eloise was too tired to move far. The small cavern they moved into was actually formed by an overhang from a perch carved into the side of the sheer valley walls. It was just large enough to keep the two of them and a small fire out of the rain that poured from the sky. A rumble and lightning speared the heavens as well.

"I liked feeling the rain in my draconic form."

Holding out her hands to the flames, Kira watched the rainfall, very aware of the warm length pressed up along her side. Eloise had been mostly silent during the evening so far, and Kira was worried.

"You'll figure it out, I have faith in you, you know."

A half smile was all she got in return for that effort. A while later she tried again.

"Come on, just give it a few days."

"I've never come up against something like this before, Kira. I don't know how to even approach the problem."

The frustration in the fair haired woman's voice was palpable.

"You're a mage, you can figure it out right?"

"If I had an idea of how it worked yes!"

"What would you need?"

Twisting around in the small space Eloise made a face.

"It's just that this isn't a normal spell. Its like a disease created with a spell."

"A magical disease?"

"Exactly, and I don't know how it spreads."

Kira was uncomfortably aware of how close the mage was to her, the feel of her thigh pressed up against hers. There was something important that she was supposed to remember, but she was having trouble thinking. The most pleasant feelings were spreading through her gut, a warm hot feeling. One that left her anticipating... something, she wasn't certain what, but it would be fantastic.

Eloise's eyes were a deep-green, like polished jade sparkling in the firelight, and her damp hair seemed to the color of gold. The world seemed to narrow to the elfin face so near to her. Trembling fingers brushed through the curls of blond hair, and Kira was shocked when she realized that they were her fingers. Eloise closed her eyes and leaned into the hand.

The next thing she realized warm lips were pressed against hers, and her body felt so hot. Hot and wet in surprising places. Lips brushed again against hers and then a tongue traced her lips and she gasped in surprise, shuddering as unfamiliar feelings raced through her, overwhelmingly strong.

"Hey," Eloise whispered brushing her cheek.

Kira opened her eyes, with no clear memory of closing them.

"Hey," was all she could manage as an answer.

"You ok?"

Kira swallowed unsteadily and nodded, not at all sure herself though.

Eloise seemed to be able to see the near panicked look in her eyes though and pulled back enough to grin.

"So this was your plan all along."

"What?"

"Get me pissed off at you, then lure me into this mission, and then seduce me."

"Seduce you?"

Kira gulped, shaking with fear and something else that she was just starting to understand. Eloise laughed and patted her cheek; if her laughter was a bit shaky, Kira barely noticed.

"Don't worry, dragon."

The hand froze and Eloise shouted.

"That's it!"

Kira slammed her head in the low stone overhang at the yell and yelped in pain.

"OUCH!"

"Sorry."

Eloise placed a kiss to the silver hair and Kira suddenly understood why people were offering to kiss things and make them better.

"Before I kiss you again and forget everything, why did you just yell, 'that's it'?"

Eloise smiled and wiggled her eyebrows.

"Because I figured out something."

"What?"

"Why you're not effected!"

That wasn't as good as her saying she'd figured out how to cure it, but maybe it would help.

"Why am I not then?"

"Because you're in human form."

Kira stared at her blankly. Eloise rolled her eyes and grabbed Kira's hands.

"See, human, no scales."

"Yes, and?"

Trying not to sound as annoyed as she was at the feeling of being left behind.

"You were in contact with your father when he was sick before you left right?"

Kira nodded, trying to follow the mage through her logic.

"So you should have become like everyone else, right?"

Another nod.

"But you didn't, because you were in human form most of the time."

"But it might just have been because I wasn't here."

Eloise frowned and nodded.

"Maybe, but we can check pretty quickly. All I have to do is try to change your father or any other members of your clan, into a human form."

"Can you do that? Even with them in stone?"

Eloise shrugged, obviously much happier now that she had a plan of sorts.

"I'll see tomorrow when it's stopped raining."

"That's one thing about this form, sleeping in the rain is no fun at all like this. Can't you do something about the rain? You are a mage."

Eloise laughed.

"Do you know how much energy it would take to change the weather? Not to mention that everyone with any magic sense for miles in any direction would know I was here. Besides, haven't you noticed that we're not getting rained on in here?"

Now that she mentioned it, Kira did notice that none of the rain seemed to be making its way inside of the small overhang. Indeed the stone was bone dry and the heat from the fire was enough to ward off the slight chill in the air.

"Well, I guess it's alright."

"Glad you approve."

Without any discussion or fuss they both got as comfortable as they could using their cloaks to try and cut the cold from the ground. Eloise was asleep only minutes later, and Kira was just starting to doze off when the smaller woman shifted. The mage muttered in her sleep and rolled over, snuggling close to the silver-haired woman and holding onto her as if afraid she'd disappear. Kira froze, not certain what to do, then, when Eloise continued to sleep, she mentally shrugged and closed her eyes.

"EEWWW!"

The grandmother smiled as she added vegetables to the stew.

"Grand Mama! I don't want to hear about old people kissing!"

"I guess you don't want to hear the story then."

Nina pouted, trying to figure out which was worse, missing the rest of the story, or the yucky way old people had of kissing each other. It was all kind of gross in her opinion, although she had to admit that the story of Kira and Eloise was very romantic.

"Fine, I guess you can keep going."

"Why thank you, Granddaughter."

Chuckling as she added a pinch of herbs to the pot as well.

The roar of a dragon brought Kira instantly awake. She knew the roar of each of her clan members, and that was not one of them. The sun was just rising over the horizon, and the valley floor was going to be dark for a few candle marks to come yet. It only ever got sun a few candle marks before and after the zenith of the sun. Another roar and something large swept over the valley, its passage stirring the air.

"Wha... hmph!"

Kira cupped her hand around Eloise's mouth, shushing her. There was more than one dragon out there and she didn't want them knowing that they were there yet. The mage struggled until she was awake enough to realize what was going on and then she went very still, eyes wide.

Prying Kira's hand off her mouth, the half-elf whispered, "not your clan I take it?"

"No, I don't know who they are."

"What are you doing?" she hissed, as Kira began to move around the ashes of the previous night's fire.

"I'm going to take a look."

"Get back here, there are ways to do that without getting spotted."

Kira watched curiously as Eloise drew a circle on the stone using bits of ash from the fire. She carefully made the circle as perfect as possible then whispered words of power to herself as she concentrated. The stone inside of the circle of ash seemed to change into water, rippling outwards to the edges of the drawn circle. In the very center, dimly at first and out of focus, an image appeared. Drawing sigils in the air, Eloise expanded the image and sharpened it. In the space of a few heartbeats Kira was staring at an exact image of the uninvited guests.

A human curse seemed appropriate so she used it.

"Shit."

Eloise let the scrying spell die and looked at Kira questioningly.

"Blackmoon Clan."

When Kira's answer didn't seem to mean much, she elaborated.

"Black dragons, nasty critters. Acid as a breath weapon, and always scheming, they've been enemies of my clan for a long time now."

"Why didn't you mention them?"

Eloise hissed, clearly annoyed that Kira had left out mentioning them. Kira shrugged.

"Every chromatic dragon is an enemy."

Eloise rolled her eyes.

"What do they want?"

"Probably want to smash all of my kin while they're stone," was Kira's grim answer as she shifted towards the valley, and tensed.

Eloise grabbed her arm and hissed, "what are you doing?"

"I'm going to stop them."

"What? Are you insane! Did you see how big those were?"

"They weren't that big."

"Kira, that big one was twice your size!"

"Shhhh..."

Both of them froze as another shape, more felt than seen, passed through the valley.

"Look, can you free my clan members or not?"

Eloise bit her lip then shrugged.

"Maybe, I need to get to your mother and see what I can do. It will be easier than just reversing the spell itself, changing it by changing them..."

Kira stopped listening when Eloise started going on about how she might be able to get around the spell instead of breaking it.

"Just do it."

Then she scrambled from the overhang and pelted down the valley. There was a roar behind her, but she didn't dare glance behind her to see how close the dragon attached to that roar was. Skidding around the edge of the entrance of the valley, Kira threw herself to the side as a fount of acid erupted from behind her. Drops hit her clothing and immediately ate away at her shirt.

Tumbling, she managed to skid out of the way of the worst of the breath weapon attack. The ground for hundreds of feet behind her was black though and the scent of acid was heavy in the air.

Changing form was not an easy thing at the best of times. Doing it when tumbling along the ground, a Black dragon hot on her trail, was nearly impossible. Doing it fast *hurt*. She had no time to remove her clothes and they shredded as between one running leap, and the next, she was a Silver dragon once more. With a running lunge she was up and off the ground, silver wings frantically beating the air as she struggled to gain altitude. In aerial combat, altitude was everything.

A younger Black, probably a few decades her junior, leapt into the air from on top of the cliff face nearby. The Wyrms were nearby, she knew that, but he was still in the valley behind her. The young Black was much closer though, and she desperately tried to roll away from the diving dragon. A familiar voice chanted from behind her, and the young black let out a surprised roar and kept right on falling past her. Its wings apparently bound together, to strike the ground at a bone shattering speed.

Rising up into the air she peered back into the valley, which she'd just left. Eloise was pointing up into the air, at where the young black dragon had just been. The black Wyrms had taken into the air and was obviously trying to decide if it wanted to attack Eloise or Kira. Kira didn't give the old one a chance to decide on Eloise, she roared a challenge that snapped the black's head around towards her. The Wyrms, probably the elder of the Blackmoon Clan, flapped upwards towards her, furiously roaring in answer to her challenge.

The Silver tucked her wings about her and dove towards the Black. They met in a clash of claws and snarls, snapping at one another as they tried to force the other to the ground. Her tail was

numb again she realized, dimly, as a stray claw ripped open a gash in her side. Desperately she twisted, buffeting the older Black with her wings. Each of them wrestled for position, trying to stay aloft.

Out of the corner of her eye she spotted the crumbled remains of one of her uncles, the stone obviously crushed. The sight caused a deep red rage to flow through the Silver. *How dare these chromatic dragons attack her Clan! How dare they hurt and kill the ones she loved!*

Claws grasped claws, and she folded her wings, dragging the Black down towards the ground below with her.

"What are you doing?"

He roared in draconic, his breath harsh and foul in her face. She latched onto his throat in that instant of shock, sinking teeth the size of long swords into his scales and refusing to let go. She wasn't able to crush his throat through the thick scales, but she tasted blood.

"You'll kill us both!"

At the moment Kira didn't have a problem with that plan. The ground rushed up towards them, the Black struggling, his claws raking open more and more wounds along her sides as he urgently tried to get rid of her.

"My clan will still kill yours where they rest in stone!"

Kira couldn't answer through the tight grip she had on the Wym's neck, but she could think it.

Not before I kill you.

Eloise was standing by her mother, her hands held out before her. Power crackled up and along her thin form, and she was alive with power, her blonde hair streaming out behind her. In that split second, her jaws and claws, locked onto the Black, Kira understood.

Why humans and elves, and even dwarves for that matter, did those things, which had confused her so much before. Lust for power and wealth that she understood. The love for those who were not of your clan though, the sometimes casual helping hand to a stranger in need. Each clan looked out for its own, and everyone else was considered, if not an enemy, then a potential enemy.

Those things were unfamiliar to her, and had confused her throughout her travels on the mainland. Ironic that she had to return here, to her home, to realize what it was.

There came a sudden force, like a wall of wind, slamming into the two of them just before they hit the bottom of the valley. It lifted Kira upwards, just enough to swing her up over the Black. Then the ground reached up and embraced them both, and Kira knew only darkness.

The old woman looked over at what sounded suspiciously like a snuffle from her granddaughter.

"I thought you didn't like that mushy stuff."

Her words were teasing, although kind. Nina brushed at her eyes and scowled. The young girl muttered.

"I didn't say that."

Then she spoke up.

"Finish the story, Grand Mama!"

"Kira?"

The world hurt, and so did her body. It ached in places she didn't even have names for. The darkness had been so warm and comforting, she wasn't certain if she wanted to return to the bright light. Her body seemed to have other ideas though, and she groaned as she opened her eyes.

It took her a few minutes of uncertain blinking to focus on the unfamiliar, and at the same time oddly familiar, face looking down at her.

"Ugh?"

"Nice to see you're still with us, daughter mine."

"Mother? What? But, you're... I mean, human?"

"Yes, dear."

With a tender smile she tucked a stray lock of Kira's silver hair behind an ear and got up off the side of the bed she'd been sitting on.

"We're all mostly human now, thanks to your friend Eloise. A very nice young lady I might add."

Swallowing against her dry throat, a helpful arm helped get her up into a sitting position and offered her a glass of water.

She wasn't that surprised to find out who the arm was attached to.

"Eloise, so I guess it worked?"

The half-elf looked quite pleased with herself as she nodded.

"Yup, it worked. Got all your people back here also."

"You treat her nicely now, Kira, or you'll answer to me. I'll leave her in your capable hands, Eloise, I'm going to go talk with your grandmother again."

"Yes, Mother."

Kira took another sip of water and waited for the door to the room, which she recognized as her room from the de Montagne mansion, close before talking.

"How'd we get back here?"

Eloise smiled and took the glass from her, setting it on the night table, then sat herself on the side of the bed.

"My brother, who you haven't met, opened a Gate for us. It took a while, but since the Blacks left after you landed on top of that Wurm and killed it, we weren't in danger. I got a few relatives to help me change your clan members into a human form, and voila, here we are. Most of them seem to want to start lives here."

Kira must have looked as stunned as she felt.

"Here?"

The happy grin slipped a bit and Eloise nodded.

"Yeah, we haven't found a cure. We may never find a cure, whatever the Blacks did-- and I think it was the Black Dragons who caused it by the way-- it's fiendishly clever. Hard to break the spell."

"What exactly does that mean?"

"It means that if any of you spend a lot of time in draconic form, you'll start showing signs again, and eventually turn into statues again."

"So we're stuck here? Like this?"

Eloise batted her eyelashes and leaned forward, capturing Kira's lips in a soft, gentle kiss. Her voice was surprisingly soft and she looked uncertain when she pulled back.

"Well, I'd hoped you wouldn't be too upset about the being stuck here part."

Kira licked her lips, loving the way her entire body seemed to tingle once more from that simple touch.

"I guess it won't be so bad. That is if you promise to teach me a few things."

"Teach you? Teach you what?"

A short time later Eloise laughed as Kira got the last of her clothes off her body.

"Oh, teach you *that*."

"I want to be like Kira when I grow up!"

The old woman smiled to her grandchild and made certain that everything was ready. She heard voices in the hallway now, and the rest of the family was on its way in. Many of them had the same silver streaks through their hair that Nina had. A few even had silver flecked eyes.

"Someday I'm going to find a way to break the curse, Grand Mama."

Kindly the grandmother pressed a kiss to Nina's forehead and smiled at her fondly.

"Maybe you will, now go see your mother and father, tell them it's time for dinner."

The End
