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SILVERFIRE

SilverFire sat beside a still lake, staring at her reflection in the water. The water was dark and still, reflecting the sky perfectly. She was thinking deep thoughts. Deep, painful thoughts.

She stared into her almond shaped eyes that were bright with the fire that would one day fill her belly. They danced in the sunlight, reminding her of starlight on a moonless night. They were ancient eyes, despite her age, filled with the knowledge of her kin. She shifted a bit, and her silver scales shifted color in the sun. Her scales gleamed an iridescent starlight, the color of molten silver; her teeth and claws the same. Her front paws were nimble enough for the most delicate tasks, but would one day be able to crush bone and rock. She thought to herself that she was perfect. She tried to convince herself that she was perfect.

But she wasn't. She was well over a decade old and she had not received her wings. Every one of her nest-mates had received their wings and their magic, but not her.

When a Dragon reached their seventh summer, something astonishing, yet old and as reliable as time, happened. The magic that fueled flight, strength, speed, all that it meant to be Dragon, would bloom inside the hatchling, turning them into a flighted, majestic creature almost overnight. The tiny wing, a miniature imitation of its full grown counterpart, attached to their backs would grow and reach a size that could lift them into the heavens in a painful burst. From that point on, as they grew, so did their wings, and their magic.

But SilverFire's wings did not grow in her seventh summer, or her eighth, or even her ninth. Now with just two months left until her fifteenth summer, she thought she would never get her wings. "Oh, to be the only Dragon without wings!" She cried to herself. "To never be able to fly, to soar from mountain top to mountain top, to ambush my prey from the sky." Instead, she was doomed to stalk and chase her prey over rocky and hard ground. Cursed to crawl on the ground like a common lizard.

SilverFire, filled with grief, hung her head over the lake and gazed into its depths, seeing nothing, hoping that the magic might just decide to fill her at this moment. As painful as getting her wings were sure to be, she welcomed it; for without her wings and her magic, she could not hope to fly or to breathe fire. She was not a Dragon. No, she was a shell, a mistake, doomed to be alone for the rest of her life.

“Whacha doing Siv?”

A happy voice broke through her thoughts, and she looked up to see RedStar coming toward her. RedStar was a nest mate, and like a brother. An annoying, younger brother, but a brother all the same.

“Oh, just watching the water, Red.” *Did he hear me? Please, I want to be alone, go away*, thought Silver. Her voice sounded weary and tired. She hoped he would take the hint and go away.

He didn’t.

He sounded genuinely interested when he said, “Watching water, sounds like fun.” Very seriously and carefully, he sat and stared into the water, studying it like it was the most interesting thing he ever saw. It annoyed her to no end.

Silver looked up at him and rolled her eyes and could not completely suppress the sting of envy that shot through her. Even though he was a full week younger, he had gotten his wings in his seventh summer. Both of them now stretched from the base of his neck and just pass the base of his tail when folded, and were twice his length from tip to tip when stretched out in flight. They could easily lift him, with a hint of help from his magic, and carry him among the clouds. He had his magic, and his fire, although he could not breathe it for any length of time. That came with age and practice.

Silver sighed and rose, knocking loose rock and soil on the edge of the bank, disrupting her reflection and sending ripples out away from the edge, causing the mirror image of the blue sky above to bend and shift. *This is as close as I’ll ever get to that vastness*, she thought. As she turned to go, Red hopped up and joined her.

“Had enough water watching?” Red asked playfully. With the mood she was in, his continuously cheerful attitude was grating, but she shrugged it off. His was a happy nature, and always has been. Silver didn’t think anything could make him upset for long.

“Yes. Now on to trees,” said Silver, playing along. Red laughed, a sound not unlike the sound of rock hitting rock. The sound was both earthy and rolling, and comforting to Silver. She joined in despite herself. He always had this effect on her, despite any mood she was in.

The laughter died down and they walked together without speaking for a while, enjoying the day and each other’s company. After a few

minutes of walking in silence, Silver said hesitantly, "I'll meet you at the village if you want to fly ahead, Red."

Red kept on walking beside her. There was no hesitation in his voice when he said, "Yea, I know, but flying gets boring after a while."

That was a lie, and Silver knew it, but she was grateful for it all the same. Even though he was younger, he seemed to understand her better than anyone. Most males would show off at any chance thrown at them, especially around a female, but not Red. That is why, even though he sometimes rubbed her scales the wrong way, she spent the most time with him.

They walked in silence again, until they could see the huts and fires of their village. Dragons of all colors could be seen, tending a fire, playing with a hatchling, placing new rocks on the circular walls that made up the huts, or just standing around talking to other Dragons. But most prominent of all was a large golden Dragon, sitting on his haunches, his head and neck slumped as though in slumber, on the outskirts of the village.

That was Grandfather GoldenSunrise, the eldest of their village. When they were close enough to hear the voices of the many members tumbling over one another, GoldenSunrise raised his head and looked straight at Silver. She froze. How did he know she was there? Sunrise was the largest and fiercest looking Dragon of them all, yet he possessed a kind and wise soul. Despite his kindness, he was still very intimidating to her. Rising slowly, he stretched from head to snout as if he just woke. But Silver knew better. He looked at them. There was no sleepiness in the voice that boomed in Silver's ears, "Come." No one else paused, but the sound could not be ignored by Red or Silver. Then he turned and walked toward the thick forest that bordered closely the sunset side of the village.

Red nudged her shoulder with his snout, pushing her when she hesitated. "You're to follow, I think." He sounded glad that it wasn't him.

Silver nodded in agreement, and without looking back at Red once, galloped off after Sunrise, leaving her brother to walk into the village alone.

As SilverFire entered the trees, she paused to let the sounds of the forest wash over her. The birds above and the insects below sang a melody to her that seemed written just for her ears alone. They sang of joy and love, of life and living. She loved the forest. The sounds of the village could still be heard from behind, each song struggling to be heard above the other, but she tuned it all out and searched for Sunrise, but he had vanished in the deep gloom of the trees farther in.

The trees on the edge of the wood were young, leafy things; the light sweet-saps with their jagged leaves and sweet clear sap in their veins, father stonecaps who grew a host of children with little caps on their heads that fed the squirrels and other forest creatures, the white trees that shed their thin skins to be mottled in grays and whites and browns along their branches and trunk, and the ones that quaked their leaves whenever the wind tickled their branches, were some of the trees she saw now. There were paths cut through the underbrush here, some made by deer and other animals, some made by Dragon kind. These trails were unmistakable, as they were very large compared to a deer trail.

The trees aged the farther in you walked, filtering the sun so that it shone green under their branches, and the wind stilled. You could almost hear the trees speaking in solemn voices to one another in the deep places, although the bird song continued gaily, the singers not knowing the somber atmosphere of their chosen place. Of those that grew here, they were mostly old, tall pines whose needles carpeted the floor and kept the underbrush from taking over.

She walked deeper and deeper into the trees, with no sign of the gold Dragon she was seeking. Then, through the gloom, she caught a glimpse of his gleaming tail before it too, disappeared from view. She trotted deeper into the trees, following him.

The farther into the forest she traveled, the farther apart and larger the trees became. She kept catching glimpses of Sunrise's golden scales through the trees as she followed, finally sure of his destination.

At last, she reached a part of the forest where the trees were as wide as she was long and their branches made an unbroken canopy above. There, in a clearing under a pine tree as old as the Dragon before it, Grandfather GoldenSunrise sat waiting for her.

Silver walked up to him and bowed her head in submission. This was the custom when a weaker Dragon met a stronger Dragon and

did not wish for a fight. She didn't want a fight, but also it was a show of respect to an elder.

GoldenSunrise surprised her by chuckling, the sound of falling stones echoing deep in his throat, similar yet different from Red's laughter. His laughter was deeper, richer, *older*. "Little one, you need not bow to me. I am too old and have seen too many things to consider you a challenger."

Silver looked up to see him looking down at her with a tender expression, like he knew her every worry and fear. Her fear drained away at that expression, leaving behind the doubt.

"Grandfather," she said, "has any other Dragon not gotten their wings?" She had wanted to ask long before this but didn't have the courage to put the words in the air. Over the past years she had watched, waited, listened, and learned on the fringes of those wiser than her. She never before had she asked them this question. Now she waited with bated breath.

Grandfather Sunrise breathed in and slowly let it out before answering. "None that I know of Silver, but even I don't know of every Dragon throughout time." He lowered his great head until he was looking at her straight in the eye, his molten gold to her silver. "SilverFire, you are a special Dragon. You are kind and giving, beautiful and humble, fierce and gentle. You are what it means to be a Dragon." He could see her doubt written in her eyes. "I know what thoughts lay on your heart. How can I be a true Dragon without my wings? How can I be a true Dragon if I can't summon fire? Those things don't define us. They are abilities only, not essential to being. You are perfect, SilverFire, let no one, not even yourself, tell you different."

Silver looked up at the wisest Dragon in the village, grateful for his words, and she tried to believe as he did. But... she was still not able to completely banish those thoughts that were her constant dark companions. She still longed for her magic, because without it, who was she?

They stood in silence, Grandfather watching, and Silver struggling with her feelings. It was some time before Silver was able to order her thoughts enough to say, "Grandfather, I understand, but I still want to be like everyone else." Truly, she didn't think that was too much to ask. "I don't want to be special or different. I want to fly, Grandfather. I want to breathe fire." She sighed. "When will I?"

Silver saw his eye glisten, and then he blinked and it was gone. His voice was as gentle as a spring rain when he said, “No one knows, young one.” SilverFire hung her head, her last hope finally gone. He continued, “No one has figured out how our magic works, or why we usually receive it in our seventh summer” Gently, he touched her on the back of her head with his long snout, making her look up once again to the towering Dragon before her. “But one thing I do know, magic comes to all of us, eventually. You will just have to be patient.” There was nothing left to be said. Grandfather rose, motioning for Silver to take the lead. She once again dived into the gloom of the forest, taking a path much used by the older members of the village, to accommodate Grandfather’s size. The gold Dragon followed her through the trees and toward the village, never saying a word.

HUNTING

As they neared the village Silver left Grandfather GoldenSunrise on his path. She struck out on her own to go find Red. It was late in the day, with the sun halfway down in the sky. The growling in her belly told her it was time to hunt, and she thought Red might like to hunt with her. She found him play fighting with another male the same age as he on the sparring grounds, a patch of dirt clear of plant growth and packed hard from the many “battles” that had taken place over the years.

The other Dragon, who was named BlueSkyAbove, for his powder blue scales and the light, almost white splashes across his face and neck, was the one he was challenging. Even though he was the same age as Red as well as Silver, he was smaller and slender of build, with no spines at all on his back or tail, even though he had his fire and his magic. His face was small and dished, with a slender, almost feminine nose. His eyes were the only thing dark about him. They shone, not the light airy blue of his scales, but a deep, stormy blue that shifted to gray, to black, and back, depending on the light. His eyes, more than anything else about him, reminded Silver of the sky for which he was named.

Red was altogether a different Dragon. He was thick of leg and tail, and strong for a Dragon as young as he was. He had white spines of varying length all along his back, from his head to the base of his tail, with a gap at the shoulder, and a cluster of them protruding backwards at the end of his tail, pointing toward the tip. His jaw was wide and thick as well, made to bite and rip. He had no whiskers to decorate his head, as some Dragons did, but his two front fangs jutted past his lower jaw, curving slightly. He was made to fight, where the other Dragon was not.

That didn't stop Sky from trying though.

They both stood in the center of the ring, staring at each other, neither one making the first move. Then Sky, eager to fight, reared up on his hind legs and roared a challenge at Red. Red reared in mirror image and roared his challenge back.

Both Sky and Red dropped to all fours at the same time, and they closed in on one another, teeth bared, snarling. Sky reared again and came down on Red's back, avoiding the spines, trying to force him down through sheer weight alone, which was a mistake. Red whipped his head to the side and bit him on his front leg, trying to pull him

off. This didn't work, so he reared up, forcing the smaller Dragon off backward.

The two came together again, but this time Red managed to get both forelegs around Sky's neck. He threw himself to the ground, dragging the other Dragon's head with him. Because he was much stronger, he managed to pin Sky's head to the ground. Sky writhed and thrashed, trying to free his head. Finally, he let out a great breath, stopped fighting, and submitted. The fight was over, Red had beaten him.

Red held him down for a moment longer, and then let the smaller Dragon up. They both started to laugh. Mock fighting was a way for young Dragon's to improve their skills, for hunting and fighting and other things. Right now, though, none of this concerned them. Right now, they were just having fun.

Red looked up and saw Silver standing at the edge of the clearing. When she saw that they were done, she started walking toward them. He smiled, showing white teeth, and ran to greet her. Silver couldn't help it; she smiled in return.

"Hi, Silver!" His voice was breathless from exertion and excitement.

"Hi, Red." Hers was subdued, the things that Grandfather just told her at the fore front of her thoughts.

He didn't hear it though and continued in the same eager voice. "Did you catch my fight? I beat Sky!"

Silver thought he sounded boastful, and a win against Sky was nothing to be proud of, she thought, not with the size difference. She didn't say this, however. "Yea, I did. Where did you learn that new move?" She had never seen him pin the head of another Dragon.

Red smiled slyly. "One of the older Dragons taught me."

"Like you need more help. Have you even lost a fight yet?" It seemed he had been sparring against everyone and anyone since he was old enough to do so.

Red thought for a moment, "Just one, to Raven."

Silver thought this was an exaggeration, but again, Silver didn't say anything. "BlackRaven?" BlackRaven was several years older than them and was a fierce fighter. Silver wondered what made the older

Dragon consider Red a challenge, or what possessed Red to challenge him.

“Yea, that’s him. He saw me fighting one day, and I got a little cocky. He said I needed humbling. Believe me, I was humbled.” He hung his head, embarrassed and, well, humbled, like he just admitted to a great shame. It was too much for Silver. She started laughing.

Red looked up quickly, shocked at the sound. The look on his face just made her laugh harder. “Oh, that’s funny.” She managed in between fits of mirth, “It’s about time someone showed you how to lose.” She laughed again, unable to help it. Sky laughed as well. Reluctantly, Red joined in, giving an occasional chuckle.

Sky, who had been standing beside Red while they talked, walked around to stand beside them both, so that the three formed a triangle on the hot, packed dirt of the arena. He limped slightly on the leg that was bitten; otherwise the only thing to show he had lost spectacularly to Red was the dust that clung to his scales, dimming their brightness to a dull blue of a hazy day. His eyes, however, were a dark blue, and vivid with the excitement of their fight. Even though he had lost, he seemed in good spirits, especially after hearing what Silver said to Red.

“Hi, Silver. Caught our fight, did you?” This was obvious, but Silver nodded, smiling. “Thought I had him too, right there at the beginning.” He shook his head, and then looked at Red. “Beat you next time, Red. Bye, Silver!” He walked off toward the hut he shared with Red, shaking the dust from his hide, creating a cloud to accompany him.

Silver watched him walk away, still chuckling to herself. She turned back to Red to find him looking after the other Dragon as well, scowling.

“So, do you want to hunt, or do you want to stay here and beat someone else?” He turned to her and the scowl melted off his face, to be replaced by a slight smile.

Red pretended to think for a moment. “Hunt. There’s no one left to fight with. I’ve beaten them all.” He looked annoyingly smug, trying to impress her.

“You better watch it. If you get too cocky, I’ll go tell Raven you need another beating.”

Red playfully swiped at her head. She dodged him easily, and took running as fast as she could across the field, with Red right behind. They ran up the hill beside the village and stopped when they reached the top, taking in the view laid out before them. Silver had seen it a hundred times, but never tired of it.

Behind them, was the village. Beyond that was a medium sized lake, smooth as ice, the one that Silver was lost in this morning. *So much has changed, yet nothing has*, she thought to herself. This morning she had hope, as she gazed and prayed to whoever was listening. Now? Now she had no hope, resigned to live out her life the mistake she was.

Red, oblivious to her turmoil still stood beside her, smiling, scanning the area for prey.

In front of them, a river flowed aimlessly across a wide plain, covered in long, golden-brown grass. The plain continued, and stretched as far as you could see, to butt up against snow capped mountains on all sides. As far as she knew, no one had ever been to the other side, but then again, no one ever wanted to.

A forest stretched from the edge of the village to the sunset side, to butt up against the mountains on that side. The mountains encompassed the entire valley, giving the feeling of being in a giant bowl, with the brown of the plain to her right, and the green of the forest on her left.

Silver looked up at the sky. It was a beautiful light blue, with a few fluffy white clouds scattered across it. *A perfect day*, thought Silver. *If only I was up there among the clouds, instead of down here.* She sighed, the enjoyment of the moment gone, to once again be replaced by the grief that plagued her daily. Red looked at her, and his smile faltered for an instant, as though he could hear what she was thinking.

He stretched out his neck, replacing his smile. Hoping to pull her out of her glum mood he said, "Bet I catch the biggest one!" He took off down the hill. That snapped Silver out of her thoughts. Not one to be bested, she chased after him, gaining ground quickly.

They stopped their tail-tag game and talked together quickly. They decided to try their luck by the forest's edge, where the river flowed into it from the plain. It was far from the village and many deer and other animals went there to get a drink and to hide from the sun, and Dragon's farseeing eyes, in the forest's shade.

They didn't talk, so as not to let the animals know where they were, and when they got close, they both shifted into a low hunting crouch. Silver sniffed the air. Yes! The hot, woodsy, musky scent of their prey wafted toward them from the water's edge, as well as the green smell of the forest, and the cold, clear, sharp smell of the water. Silver cautiously raised her head over the grass. Where the river entered the woods, she could see a dozen or so dark shapes.

She stood still and looked harder, barely daring to breathe. There, just under the shade of the trees, stood a large buck, the leader of the herd. Silver looked over at Red. He nodded once and went to the right, while Silver went to the left, her body tensed and ready. They had hunted together so often, they knew each other's hunting styles inside and out. They almost knew what the other was thinking, almost became one when on a hunt. That's why Silver preferred hunting with Red over anyone else.

Silver edged toward the herd as quietly as possible. She knew Red was doing the same on the other side of the group. He was making his way toward the large female on the edge of the herd, she knew. She should be doing the same. Usually when they hunted, they would work together to bring down one of the largest animals, but not today.

With how bad she was feeling and Red's challenge ringing clear in her ears, she wanted to bring down the lead buck on her own. She had to prove to him as much to herself that she was capable of at least that much.

So she edged as close as possible it, but he was on the far side of the herd. She knew the chances of her getting to him were slim, but she didn't care. She needed to bring that deer down, so she would feel like she could do something, anything, on her own.

She crouched low, preparing to lunge, her body as charged as the air before a storm. The buck, having guarded his herd through the dangerous task of drinking, emerged himself to get a drink from the river. Silver tensed, ready for the right moment. The buck lowered his head, and Silver broke cover, running as fast as she could.

Red ran out as she did and went after his intended target, the second largest deer, a doe that was close to him, and between them both. He had gotten close to the deer, and was able to jump right on her back. He wrapped his legs around her chest and gripped the animal's neck in his jaws. He shook his head, and snapped the doe's neck in two like a twig. She collapsed, hardly realizing what had

happened, her life snuffed out so quickly. He dropped his kill and let out a roar of victory, scattering the rest of the herd.

This all happened in an instant, it seemed. She saw all of this at the edge of her vision. She heard his roar of victory, and could have stopped, her meal caught for her.

She didn't.

Silver ignored him and kept after the buck, who had taken cover in the trees. Half his herd followed his example and disappeared into the underbrush, the others had galloped across the plain, running blindly away from the carcass of their fallen sister.

"Silver! Siv! Come back! There's enough here for two!" Red called after her. He was confused. She should be with him, sharing in the glory of success.

But her mind was on the hunt, the bloodlust strong in her veins. Silver darted into the woods on the heels of the buck, ignoring the scrapes and scratches of the brush against her. He darted left then right, trying to zigzag and lose her. She was faster. She closed in; only a few feet separated her from the animal, her nose was full of the animal's scent, which was now tainted with the tangy smell of fear. She prepared herself to jump on him, to fill her mouth with the hot blood running thick through his veins.

Somewhere in the woods the river must have bent back on itself, because there it was unexpectedly, right in front of them. Silver could see the animal gather itself as the buck made to jump it. Suddenly, a different scent interrupted her focus, causing her to brake her concentration and out of her bloodlust. It was so different, so unexpected, here in the woods that always smelled the same. It was a warm, woodsy scent of an animal, but also that of blood, sweat, dirt, and a tangy under tone that Silver knew was fear.

She stopped abruptly, spraying dirt and leaves up in front of her. The buck reached the water's edge and leapt, trying to escape her still. He cleared the water and then some, landing hard on the other side. He went down on his front legs for an instant. He leapt back up and kept running, without ever looking back, eventually disappearing into the trees.

She ignored him, letting him escape. Silver was curious. No, more than that. She had never in her life smelled this scent before, not in the village, the plain, or the forest; a mix between a deer, wolf, and Dragon. She had to know its source.

She put her nose to the air and sniffed. There! The scent was strongest to her left, on this side of the river. She followed the fragrance that was neither Dragon nor animal, to a large tree, on the bank of the river. Nothing was out of the ordinary on this side, so she quietly circled it, barely making a sound on the fallen leaves and branches. She snaked her long neck around the tree, and gasped in shock.

The creature huddled before her was small, about half her size, pink in color, with long brown fur on its head. It also had some kind of short, thin cover, covering more than half its body, both top and bottom. It had four limbs with very short claws at the end of small fingers and even smaller ones on its bottom legs. *Those claws wouldn't be good for much*, thought Silver.

Right now, it was curled up in sleep, its knees drawn up to its stomach and its fore legs under its head. Silver walked the rest of the way around the tree to stand in front of the strange creature. She had never seen or heard of such an odd thing in her life. She took a step toward it, and her foot came down on a branch, snapping it in half. *Crack!*

The creature jerked awake at the sudden sound, and looked around. It saw Silver and jumped up, backing against the tree, its eyes wide with fear.

“Don’t be afraid,” Silver said. “I won’t hurt you.” The thing looked so defenseless that she could not help but reassure it. The creature was now standing, not on four legs, but two.

The creature froze. “You...you can talk,” it stammered.

“Of course I can talk. I am not a dumb animal.” Silver looked the creature over, up and down, trying to decide what it was. “And neither are you, apparently. Well, you are not a deer, wolf, bird, or lizard. And I’ve never seen anything walk on two legs. What are you?”

Fear still colored her voice, but her face crinkled and her eyes narrowed in thought. “I don’t know what you mean. A person, I guess,” It sounded female to Silver, although she couldn’t be sure.

“Do all persons look as funny as you?” Silver said, trying to get her to talk some more.

The thing laughed. It was a high, musical sound, nothing like Dragon laughter. If Silver had to describe it, she thought it sounded

like running water, bird song, and maybe branches squeaking in their high voices, all at once. It was a wonderful sound, she thought.

“No, just one of us is a person, Two or more are people, and we are all human, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Human. The name was not familiar with her, but at the same time, an instinct awoke. The urge to leap, to bite, to tear and kill rose up inside her. The intensity of it shocked Silver, and she fought it, which was not Dragon nature. Dragon’s were ruled by instinct, it kept them safe and alive. It took all of her strength to suppress it. *The human is half my size! She is not a threat. But why do I feel as though she is?*

The human noticed nothing of her inner turmoil. She looked at Silver with bright curiosity burning in her eyes, the fear slowly dimming. “Well, you know what I am, but I don’t know what you are. Are you some kind of a lizard?”

Silver was deeply offended. A lizard? Her? The noblest of creatures, confused with a ground-hugging reptile? *Poor, ignorant human*, Silver thought. *Good thing she said that to me. Some Dragons would challenge her just for those words.* Silver was just going to have to correct her mistake, before she made it again.

“I am no such thing. I am a Dragon, human.” Her voice was stern, correcting.

The human’s face drained of color, and a look of terror covered her face. She backed against the tree, edging away from Silver. She wanted to run, Silver could see, but her legs were shaking, and she couldn’t. “Please, don’t eat me! I’m sorry I called you a lizard. Just let me go, don’t hurt me!” She covered her face with her fore paws, the ones with the little claws at the end short, white fingers, hands and fingers bare of any protection, whether of hair or scale.

Now it was Silver’s turn to laugh. She laughed, the sound higher than Red’s, but sounding like rock and gravel all the same. This seemed to scare the human more. She stopped quickly. “Why would I eat you? You are not prey, and I am not hunting. I said I would not hurt you, and I will not. Dragons don’t go back on their word.”

The human looked confused, but no less frightened. “But we have stories of dragons. They’re fierce, ugly creatures that steal our treasures and women. They burn entire villages and eat everyone!”

Silver growled, but not at the human before her, but at the ridiculousness of what she had just said. She shrank back into the

tree a little more. “Am I ugly human?” She shook her head. “Have I eaten you?” Again she shook her head, as well as her hands and knees, which quaked, not in denial, but in fear. “Do you see me burning down the forest? No. Put such things out of your mind, for they are lies. No one in my race behaves like that. I will not eat you or hurt you, I promise.”

The human relaxed a little at her words and at the tone of her voice, which Silver tried to make comforting. She took a step toward Silver, out of the shade of the tree and into the sparse light filtering through the leaves. Silver now could get a better look at her. She was dirty and very skinny, the fur matted on her head; dark circles were under her eyes, making her look haunted. She looked down and saw red, raw looking scars that covered her arms. The human looked down, following her gaze, and crossed her arms, trying to cover the scars. She leaned up against the tree, weary, or so Silver thought.

“So, what’s your name? You do have a name, right?” Silver looked back up at her face, since her inspection of her arms was making her uncomfortable.

“Of course I have a name. My name is Maggie. What’s yours?” The human was now inspecting her, her eyes wide, the fear gone in them.

“SilverFire. But everybody just calls me Silver.”

“SilverFire, that’s so pretty a name. Does every Dragon have such a beautiful name?”

Silver was beginning to like the human more and more. “No, not everyone. There is a GreenGrass in our village, and a RussetEarth. But there is also a BlackRaven, and our village elder is named GoldenSunrise. Do you come from a village?”

The human’s face fell, and tears spilled from her eyes. She sank to the ground, and started to cry. Silver looked down at it. Startled at its reaction, but Silver was no stranger to grief. She came closer, and nudged the human with her snout. “I’m sorry. What did I say to upset you?” The human looked up at her and didn’t seem afraid that she was so close.

“No, no, it wasn’t you.” She tried to fight the tears, but they wouldn’t stop. “It’s just, well; I don’t have a village anymore. I am no longer welcome there.” She started crying again, louder and harder.

Silver didn’t know what to say. “I’m sorry.” Feeling it was the right thing to do, she lay down beside the small human, to comfort her as

best she could. The human laid her head on her, and continued to cry, the sobs racking her small frame.

After a while, she was able to stop, and sat up, hiccupping. "I'm sorry, it's just that I've haven't talked to anyone for such a long time. I miss my home, my mom most of all."

Silver turned her head and looked at this poor creature with new eyes. So that's why she was so dirty and skinny; and those scars must have been inflicted by the people she trusted most. She couldn't imagine any offense that would make an entire village turn on one person, especially not one as small as this one.

"If you can, please tell me what caused them to do this to you. What made them force you out?" She had to know, in case it was something dangerous, which Silver doubted.

The human looked at her, her eyes red and puffy from crying. She hiccupped. "I didn't do anything really. Nothing I could control, anyway." She wrung her small paws, once again afraid. "A few months ago, things started happening. Things started moving without me touching them, I could sometimes hear what people were thinking, and fires would start when I was angry or scared." She clasped her paws together to stop the shaking. "The leader of our village said I was evil, and that I had to be put to death. My mother cried and begged him to leave me alone. She told them I wasn't evil. But no one would listen. They took me out to the village center and threw stones at me, hoping to kill me."

She absentmindedly fingered one of her scars, lost in her thoughts. Silver waited for her to continue. When she did, her voice was soft, almost a whisper. "When that didn't work, I was sentenced to hang on the gallows at the next sunrise. But my mother broke into the hut where they were keeping me. She let me loose, and told me to run. I wanted her to come with me, but she said she couldn't, that she had to stay there. So she stayed, and I ran. I ran and ran, until I could not run anymore. I rested for a night in a hollow beneath a hill, and have been drifting ever since. I haven't stopped for more than a night, because I was afraid that they would find me. I found the river and followed it here. I finally felt safe and far enough away, so I rested. I've been here for three days."

Silver could not believe that all that could happen to someone so small. And that she had survived at all. "Where is this village of yours?"

“It’s across the big sea of grass, near the foot of the mountain, but on the other side.”

“It can’t be. No one crosses the plains, not to mention the mountains. You must be mistaken.”

The human got up and turned to Silver, her shoulders set and her eyes hard. “I lived there all my life, Dragon, and ran from there for many nights. I know where I came from, and where my village is.”

This one has pride like a Dragon, and just as fierce, thought Silver. She got up too and faced the tiny thing. Silver was about as tall as she was at the shoulder, adding her head and neck, she was half again as tall. But the human didn’t seem fazed. In fact, she seemed angry. “I didn’t mean to offend you, just no one has ever crossed the plains before, and I am amazed that you did. And without any help at that.” *Apparently*, thought Silver, *there is more to this human than meets the eye*.

The human’s shoulder’s relaxed and stood up straighter, proud of the praise.

“So, your village was going to kill you because you could move things... And hear people’s thoughts, and...”

“And set fires, yeah. They said I was evil... I started to believe them,” she added, in a whisper, not looking at Silver, but at the ground.

“You are no such thing! I think I may know what it is you are doing, but I need you to answer a question first.” It was so obvious, it amazed Silver that she didn’t know.

The human looked both excited and apprehensive. “Ok.”

“How old are you?”

From the look on her face, this was not the question she was expecting.

“I am... not sure. I have been on my own for so long. But I just turned seven before all this started happening.”

“I thought so. See, I think that you have magic. Dragons get magic when we turn seven, so that’s what I think you have.”

The human looked excited. Her face lit up and her eyes were bright with the prospect. “Magic? Really? We have stories about magic.

About great sorcerers that help kings and save entire kingdoms.” She paused. “But those are just stories. They’re not true.”

“Where did you hear that? From the same people that told you I was ugly?” That made the human smile and nod. “Well, Dragons have magic, every one of us. Well, except me,” she said. She looked away from the human so that she couldn’t see her misery. Small hands gripped the underside of her chin, and turned her to face the human once again.

The human looked her straight in the eye, a very brave thing to do. “Silver, you are special. Even I can see that. You may not have magic yet, but you will. When you are ready, it will come to you.”

Any lingering aversion that Silver felt toward this tiny human vanished in that instant. She knew that she would never be able to hurt it, no matter what. She felt connected, which was strange, because she only knew this creature for a matter of minutes.

The human smiled at her. “So, I have magic.” She sat back down on the ground. Silver lay down again beside her once again.

“Yes, magic. But I don’t know what kind.” The human gave her a confused look. “Well, there are all kinds of magic,” Silver explained. “Dragon magic is one kind, and yours is another. But there is magic in everything, in every creature, from the smallest bird to the largest wolf. Magic changes the seasons, and raises the sun and moon. But it can be dangerous if you don’t know how to control it, and you apparently don’t.” She hesitated a moment before she said, “We need to go to Grandfather; he’ll know what you need to learn.”

The human looked frightened again. She seemed to be frightened a lot. “You mean go home with you, to your village? Where there are other Dragons?”

“Yes. You can’t stay here. You look half starved. And that thin cover you are wearing won’t keep you very warm.”

The human looked down at herself. “You mean my clothes.” She pinched the cloth between her fingers, which was a faded color, which could have started as a dark red, or brown, or even green. It was hard to be sure. The leggings that covered it were just as faded, but more worn. There were holes in the knees, holes in the upper leg, holes in the lower leg, and raggedy edges along the bottom. Silver wondered how any of it was still intact. “They are getting worn out. I’ve had them on since I ran away. I tried to take care of them, but I

didn't have anything to repair them with. Do you have anything like this in your village?"

"Yes, we have a Nest Mother that weaves cloth for beds and to protect our eggs. We don't use it as you do, but I'm sure some clothes can be made for you." She hoped, anyway. Silver looked at her again, and thought of an obvious, but kind of embarrassing, question. "I, uh, don't mean to be rude, but I've never seen one of you before, so I don't know how you humans look different from each other. Are you a female, or a male?"

The human giggled at the question. "That's ok; I know this must be confusing for you. I am a girl, a female. And you, you're a" She trailed off suggestively.

Silver took the hint. "Female, as well." There was a silence into which neither one of them knew what to say. Finally, Silver said, "Well, since that is cleared up, I think we should get going." Silver stood gracefully, and so did Maggie, scrambling on hands and knees. She was still shaking, but Silver thought that was from cold and lack of food, not fear. "Night will be falling soon, and we have a long way to walk. Plus, Red will be waiting for me."

"Red?"

"RedStar, another Dragon. We were hunting and that's when I crossed your scent. He'll be looking for me soon, so we had better go and find him first."

Maggie nodded, looking a little scared again. There was nothing Silver could do to put her at ease. Silver started walking back toward where she had left Red with his kill. Maggie kept pace with her the entire time, but Silver could see her struggling with the effort. Silver slowed her pace, faking tiredness, so that Maggie could keep up easier. She hoped the girl would make it to the village.

When they reached the edge of the woods, however, she dropped back by her tail. Silver ignored this, and kept on walking. There would be no hiding her from Red now. Even if Silver left her here, Red would still be able to smell her. Silver didn't doubt that Red would be just as curious as Silver, and he would seek the girl out. Silver would rather him meet on her terms.

They were back by where the river entered the woods, and there drinking from the river was Red. Maggie let out a little squeak of fear, and stopped. Silver pressed on, putting herself between Red and Maggie. Red heard her and looked up.

“Finally! I was starting to get worried.” He did sound worried, to his credit. “I saved some of that doe, in case you didn’t get yours. But you were gone so long I figured you caught something...” His voice trailed off when he spotted Maggie behind Silver, eyes wide with wonder. “What is that?” He sounded breathless with shock. He walked toward them until Red stood close to Silver, with Maggie standing back past Silver’s tail.

He stretched his head out to peer at her rather than walk past Silver. Perhaps he could since Maggie’s unease and smell her fear. Silver knew she could.

Maggie held her ground, but was unable to look him directly in the eye, which was probably wise, considering that Red would probably see that as a threat. Instead she kept her eyes downcast, flicking up every now and then to watch the red Dragon. Silver watched them both, ready for whatever came next.

Silver, though wary, still tried to put them both at ease. She tried to make her voice sound easy and carefree when she said, “This is Maggie. She was made to leave her village because she has magic. Have you ever heard of such a thing?”

She didn’t succeed at either.

Red looked between Silver and Maggie, unable to take his eyes off the girl for long. “No, I haven’t, as you well know. But what is it?” He was fascinated.

Silver was starting to get annoyed with him. *You would think he didn’t have a brain in his skull to not see that he is making Maggie uncomfortable with all this staring. He doesn’t like it, why should she?* She made her voice scolding, in hopes of bringing out the more polite Dragon, the one she needed. “Not *it* Red. *Her*. She speaks, as well as you or me. And she understands, so stop acting like she can’t. And don’t stare!” His eyes snapped to her, full of humor. “You may be bigger, but not older. I will not have you acting like that.”

“Yes, *mother*.” He said sarcastically. “But no one has answered my question yet.” He again turned to Maggie, studying her.

Maggie bowed her head respectfully and said, “Like Silver said, I am Maggie. As to what I am, I am a human from beyond the mountains.”

That’s good, was all that Silver had time to think before she heard him. A growl tore through Red, and he bared his teeth at the tiny girl.

He crouched to spring, but Silver jumped in front of him, putting Maggie behind her. She reared up and roared at Red, baring her teeth in return. This was no play. She was ready to fight, if it came to that.

Seeing Silver standing there, in front of him ready to fight, shocked Red out of his momentary madness. He shook his head to clear it and straightened up, smoke trickling out of both nostrils. It tickled, and he almost laughed, the stress of the moment too much for him. He had almost savaged a creature half his size and defenseless! She was not food, she was Silver's friend. Was he a monster to kill her friends?

Silver wasn't taking any chances. She backed away from him a few steps, putting more room between Maggie and Red, still baring her teeth and snarling. Maggie had gone white as snow and almost collapsed, but Silver had pushed herself against Maggie and was keeping her upright. Silver doubted the girl could run, so the only choice was to fight.

All this happened in an instant. Red seemed to have realized what had happened. "Silver, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to." He sounded utterly confused and apologetic. "The urge, it just took over. I couldn't control it. Please, I'm sorry. Look." Then he lowered his head in submission, something he had never done, and probably never would do again to her. He was her friend, and stronger besides. But friends didn't submit to friends, unless in the ring. Silver saw the depth of his regret in that movement, and knew that he meant it. He raised his head and looked at Maggie, his fascination gone, replaced by regret and sincerity. "Little one, I am sorry. I should not have done that. You are SilverFire's friend, so you are mine also. Please, don't be afraid."

Maggie looked at Silver, and then again at Red. She was still white, her knees and hands still shook, but she took a deep breath and stepped away from Silver, standing on her own. She took one small step toward him, then another, hesitantly. Silver kept watching Red for any sign that he was going to attack her, but he seemed completely relaxed, staring at Maggie once again with open curiosity. Maggie walked slowly up to him, and raised her hand, palm flat. She then, even more slowly, placed it on his snout. He closed his eyes at the touch and inhaled deeply, taking in the scent.

"What a strange smell. Not quite Dragon, yet not that of all animal, either. Interesting," he said, almost to himself. He opened his eyes. Silver could see no traces of any anger or madness in them. She relaxed, glad that she didn't have to fight him. *Won, earlier today, I*

couldn't have hurt him for anything, now I think I would have done whatever I had to, to protect Maggie. What had that girl done to her?

Maggie lowered her hand, and smiled at Red. Red smiled in response. Maggie shrank back at the sight of his teeth. "Red, stop that." He did, but he had to fight it, Silver could tell. Silver walked over to Red, and sat down on her haunches, leaving Maggie exposed beyond them. If he was going to attack, now was his chance. He didn't move.

Since she was sure he was back to himself, Silver said, "Well, Red, what are we going to do? She can't stay here. She is starving, and she has no fur of her own to keep her warm. And she needs schooling to help her with her magic. I want to take her to Grandfather, but what to do you think?"

Red sat down beside her, relaxing. He tried not to stare at Maggie, but his eyes kept flashing back to her every few seconds. He thought for a moment. "Yes, I think that's best, Siv. But I don't think we should take her to the village. I don't know what happened a minute ago, but I have a feeling I will not be the only one to react like that."

"No, you're probably right about that. I felt the same way when I met her, but I was able to control it. I don't know if an older Dragon will do the same." Silver looked at Maggie, to see how she reacted to this. The girl was just standing beyond the two Dragons, looking from one to the other, following the conversation. She showed no signs of the fear that gripped her in the forest, only exhaustion. She fell to the ground, her legs folded up beneath her.

Red looked at Maggie. "But how will Grandfather feel? Do you think we should just show him first, or do you think that I should run ahead and tell him?"

"Maybe you should tell him about her first. If he reacts like you did, I won't be able to stop him from hurting her. That way he will be over the shock by the time I reach the village." Seeing Maggie there, hardly able to stand, Silver knew she needed to hurry. She needed food and shelter, fast.

Silver stood, and Red followed. He turned to go, but hesitated. He turned back, and went over to Maggie. "I hope you enjoy your stay here, little one." He then lowered his head, and touched her on the brow.

He turned away, and without looking back, ran three steps, unfurled his massive wings, and with two powerful downbeats,

propelled himself into the sky, buffeting them with a downdraft. Maggie's hair swirled around her face, and her eyes filled with wonder.

He rose steadily until he was several hundred feet above the river. He circled over them, and then straightened his course, heading straight for the village. Silver watched him go, and even now, with all that happened, she still couldn't stop that little nagging pain in her heart whenever she saw him fly. *One day*, she thought. *One day I will get my wings and I will fly with him.* She looked over at Maggie. The girl was still staring at the tiny red dot that was now RedStar. Her eyes were wide and her mouth was hanging open in a large O. Silver chuckled. *This must be stranger for her than it is for us.*

Silver went to Maggie and bumped her in the back to get her to stand. She did, using Silver to pull herself up. "Come on young one, let's get going. I really don't want to have to walk in the dark." She turned and walked off, letting Maggie lean on her.

They walked the distance, the girl's hand on a Dragon back, connected by flesh and heart. Together, they went to face the Sunrise.

By the time they reached the village, dusk was falling. Maggie kept stumbling because she was so tired and weak. Silver walked next to her, letting the girl use her for support. They crested the hill, and Silver saw Grandfather standing at the bottom, more storm than sunrise. He was tense, his tail twitching back and forth in agitation. Red stood beside him, but at a distance, head and tail down in submission, looking worried.

Red spotted Silver and Maggie and raised his head. He looked to Grandfather, who didn't take his eyes off the pair cresting the hill. He took a step toward them. When he wasn't stopped, he ran up to them. "I told Grandfather that you found a human, and he was real mad, Siv. I never have seen him like that." All the words tumbled out of him. "But he wants to talk to you. I'll stay with Maggie and you can go talk to him."

Silver looked at Red with a mixture of worry and mistrust. No matter how he acted now, she couldn't forget that he almost attacked them earlier. "Please, trust me Siv. I won't hurt her, and I'll make sure no one else does either." Without waiting for a response, he went to stand beside Maggie, looking around for any danger that might

approach. When Silver still hadn't moved, he said, "I would go if I were you. I don't think he'll wait much longer."

He was right about that. Smoke was now pouring in thin streams from Sunrise's nostrils and he had his eyes locked on SilverFire. Silver swallowed hard and walked toward him, eyes and head down. If she was nervous before, she was absolutely terrified now. No Dragon looked like Grandfather, and now the full force of his anger was turned towards her. She walked up to him; head still bowed, and sat a stone's throw away. She would have liked to have put more distance between them, like from here to the mountains, but that was not possible. *Might as well get this over with now*, thought Silver. Grandfather didn't greet her, just snorted, and more smoke issued forth.

His voice was a low growl. "SilverFire, what have you done? Do you wish to destroy us all? That *thing* will bring others like it and they will destroy us, as before! Is that what you want?"

It took her a second to realize what he had said. Silver was stunned. "What do you mean, 'as before'?" You mean you have seen another human before?" *And why didn't he tell anyone?*

"Yes, but I will not discuss it. That was long past, when I was young. Answer me, hatchling!" He stomped his front foot and snapped his jaws. When he did, more smoke came. Silver was worried he would accidentally let loose with fire. "Were there others? How did it find us? Did it tell you?"

"Grandfather, you don't need to worry! There are no others. This one ran away from her village. They were going to kill her! She would never go back. And besides, I don't think that she could survive the trip. She is half dead as it is." She looked back to Maggie. As if to prove her point, the girl, who was standing beside Red on the top of the hill, dropped to her knees. Red nudged her with his nose. She patted him, said something that was a low murmur, and lay down. Within seconds, soft snoring reached Sunrise and Silver. Silver looked back at Grandfather. "See? She won't last another day on her own."

Grandfather studied the small child for a long time, peering through eyes that were slits. "You say they were going to kill her. Why? Did she explain?" There was something in his voice that she didn't recognize.

And so Silver told him everything. Not just what Maggie had told her, but everything that happened in the woods, and after, hiding nothing. When she had finished, he didn't speak for a long time. It was almost dark now, and Silver wanted to get the human some food

and a warm bed, but she knew better than to interrupt Grandfather, so she was patient. Finally, he said, "Bring her to the clearing in the woods where we spoke this morning. There is much to discuss, and no one must find her until I talk with her and you, both."

Silver started to tell him that she needed food and shelter, not more woods, but Grandfather stopped her. "Please SilverFire, do not question me." Some kind of emotion was in his eyes. Wonder? Fascination? Frustration? Silver couldn't be sure. "There is more to this than you can imagine. I will bring her some cooked meat, and some nest-wrappings. That should be fine for now. Please, go and get her, and bring her to me when the moon rises." He turned and walked back to the village, but Silver thought she heard him say, "I never thought this day would come." Silver, still burning with questions, but forced to wait until moonrise, went to go wake Maggie and tell her and Red everything that Grandfather said.

The moon had risen and was directly overhead when Silver, Red, and Maggie entered the clearing. Grandfather was already there, a small fire in front of him. A small fire, when compared to him. The flames were as tall as Maggie. Next to the fire was a pile of cloth for Maggie and a basket of cooked meat. The smell wafted toward Silver and her stomach rumbled; a reminder of the meal she missed earlier. Maggie looked at her apologetically.

They were not able to get close to the fire, but they stopped close enough to let the warmth wash over them. When they stopped, Grandfather stood and walked around the fire toward them. Silver and Red both moved in front of Maggie, shielding her from him, but it wasn't like they could do much against someone like Grandfather. Both of them knew it was disrespectful, but Silver didn't care. She was going to try to protect her as best she could. Grandfather did not seem to notice the movement, but stopped ten feet from them. He peered at the girl, who had shrunk behind Silver, staring at GoldenSunrise. Grandfather spoke very slowly and carefully, so as not to frighten her more. "Hello, little one. I am Grandfather GoldenSunrise, elder of our village, along with my mate, BlackNewMoon. I am sorry that I frightened you this morning. Everything will be explained in due time." Without taking his eyes off of Maggie, he continued. "Silver, please let her get warm and fill her belly, and then I will answer all your questions."

Grandfather turned and walked to the other side of the fire, the flames barely reaching half way up his front legs. Red went around

the fire so that he was between Sunrise and Maggie and Silver. Silver sat next to Red, which put Maggie across from Sunrise on the other side of the fire. Maggie grabbed the blankets when Silver motioned toward them. She sat down on the ground, and pulled the blankets over her shoulders.

She then picked up a strip of meat, sniffed it, and took a small bite off one end. She chewed carefully, clearly not trusting the older, fiercer Dragon. However, after she tasted the food and realized that it was good, she eagerly ate more. Silver watched her, making sure that she did not choke herself, because she was eating so fast. Vaguely, she wondered how Grandfather knew to bring cooked meat.

Maggie noticed Silver watching her, and offered a piece of the meat. When she shook her head, Maggie placed the strip of meat on the ground between them. Silver lowered her head and lipped up the food. She hated the taste and texture of cooked meat, which she hadn't eaten since she left the nest hut, more than ten years ago. But she didn't want to refuse and hurt Maggie's feelings. She was rewarded by the smile that spread across her face. She turned back to the basket and finished the meal.

The entire time, Red sat watching Grandfather, never moving his eyes away from him. Grandfather ignored him and just watched Maggie and Silver, that same strange look in his eye as before. Finally, Maggie finished all the meat and she placed the basket on the ground. Then she made a sound that Silver assumed was a coughing. "Thank you, GoldenSunrise for the food. I can't remember the last time I was full." He dipped his head in response, and turned his eyes to Red at last.

"RedStar, I don't remember inviting you here. You should not have come."

Red looked him directly in the eye when he responded, "Silver wanted me here, so I came. I will not let any harm come to the child if it can be prevented, because it will hurt Silver. If you want me to leave, tell me so, otherwise I stay."

Silver thought Red had gone too far. Grandfather narrowed his eyes slightly and said, "That is a bold statement for one that barely has his fire. If this were over any other issue, I would punish you for your insolence, hatchling. But I know you are just trying to protect Silver and her friend. But be forewarned, I will not allow you to be so bold with me again, not without proper punishment." His voice left no room for argument.

Red's voice had lost the disrespectful edge when he answered. "I understand and accept, Grandfather." He took a deep breath and continued. "I mean no disrespect, but I will not take back what I said, and would say such again if I think that an elder was going to hurt her or anyone unjustly."

Silver expected Grandfather to punish him for those words, or at least for being defiant, but he did neither. He just studied Red for a long moment, and then dipped his head once. He turned his attention back to Maggie.

Maggie was still watching Grandfather, but she didn't seem as afraid as before. No, Silver thought that the girl look fascinated and awed by him. Grandfather looked over to Maggie, and she dropped her gaze. Grandfather shifted his gaze and looked at Silver. Silver lowered her head and eyes, and then he returned his gaze to Maggie. Silver shifted her weight from foot to foot impatiently.

Grandfather started speaking in a soft tone, "Young one, Silver told me your story. She also told me that you have what she thinks is magic. I would like you to explain what it is you can do."

Maggie looked up, way up, at Grandfather. "I can move things without touching them. I can sometimes hear people's thoughts. And when I get angry or scared, fires will start without anyone making them. Do you really think I have magic, Grandfather?" She sounded hopeful.

"Yes, I think you have magic. But you can't control it yet, am I correct?" Maggie nodded. "That makes you dangerous, to yourself and others. No, don't argue with me on this, Silver," for Silver had opened her mouth to do just that. "You don't understand what she is. Dragons are born with a certain degree of control in their magic, for we are creatures made of magic. Humans are not. We must teach you how to control this power, Maggie, otherwise you could destroy yourself, and anyone close to you. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I do, wise one."

Grandfather chuckled at the name then turned to Silver, who was now kneading the dirt with her claws in agitation. "Please Silver; ask your question before you explode with it," he said, sounding amused.

Silver did explode then, the words tumbling out of her so fast she wondered if he could understand them. "Grandfather, you said that you had seen other's like Maggie. I have never heard this story, nor

heard the tale from any other Dragon. What did you mean by ‘destroy us, as before?’”

Grandfather looked saddened by her words. “HMMMM, yes. There is so much you don’t understand, Silver. I can’t tell you everything, even if I wanted to.” Sunrise paused, but no one said anything. He continued, “But now is a time of change. Your young friend is proof of that. You must understand your past in order to better prepare for your future. While I can’t tell you everything, I will tell you of my past, and how I came to be here. Get comfortable, mine is a long story.”

STORIES

“I was born 1,825 years ago, far beyond the mountains that circle this valley, in a city so large it was like a mountain itself. Dragons were numerous in those times, and we lived in peace with every creature that walked the earth, the humans especially. Dragons had, over the millennia, watched the humans, acted as protectors and guardians. Some in the beginning were even hailed as gods by the humans who would catch glimpses of them in the sky.

“By the time I was hatched, humans and Dragons interacted with each other on a day-to-day basis. Some Dragons would bring a child into their den, or human parents would foster a young Dragon until it decided to join its own kind. Some Dragons chose to live among humans, learning their ways, and humans would do likewise. Cities flourished. We built our own out of rock and earth, using nature’s beauty to our benefit. The humans harvested the rock and constructed great towers and buildings, larger than the tallest tree you have ever seen. Humans walked in our streets, as we walked in theirs.

“When a Dragon reached fourteen, we had a choice. We could stay in the cities and become masters of our magic, or we could leave and search out our fortune elsewhere. We could go anywhere, do anything we wanted. I chose this path. When I could breathe fire, I left the cities and took to the skies. I wanted to go somewhere no one had been before, see something no one has seen, and do something no one had done. I was young, arrogant, and thought I could do no wrong. I flew north, far from anyone and everything I ever knew. I flew and flew, day after day, stopping only to hunt, drink, and rest, just enough until I could fly again. It grew colder and colder, until ice formed on my wings. I landed and went on foot from there. What drew me I could not tell you; I knew I had to go on, something or someone was waiting for me in this frozen wilderness.

“After about three days of walking, I saw in the distance a large mountain, larger than any I had ever seen before, rearing out of the frozen waste land I was in. Nothing surrounded it; no plant life was on it. It was white and gray, and the top was hidden in the clouds.

“‘This was why I came,’ I thought. ‘Surely this mountain no one had set foot on, no one had seen,’ I said. So I continued. I became hungry and tired, but not cold, no, for my newly formed fire kept me warm. For a week I traveled thus, and I finally reached the mountain’s roots. I started to climb. I did not know why, but something called me

toward the mountaintop. I climbed, I couldn't tell you how long, over rock and snow, digging through drifts higher than I was.

"About half way up, I found a cave in the mountainside, and I stopped to rest. I had fallen asleep but for a few hours, I judged, when a sound woke me. It did not come from outside, but inside the cave; beautiful, terrifying, mournful music filled it. I followed the sound deeper into the cave, through twists and turns and pitch black darkness. The music pulsed and grew with every step until I felt that my very bones were thrumming with it and my body was filled to bursting. It was hard to tell where the music came from. Maybe the music never was without, but came from within me.

"But that was wrong, I knew, so I continued. When I thought I would never find its source, I saw a soft white light coming from the end of a long tunnel. I followed it and I emerged into a large cavern. It was a good five minutes fly from edge to edge, I thought, and I could not even see the top. I thought it must fill the entire top portion of the mountain. A large, still pool, black in the reflected light, filled the center of the cavern, and by the pool sat a beautiful woman.

"My first feeling was one of disappointment. So, I was not the first to reach this mountain. However, the more I looked at this woman, the less human she became. Her hair flowed like water down her back, and constantly moved and rippled, although she sat still. It was shifting colors from a murky brown, to a clear blue, to a pale green, shimmering, almost clear at times, and at others, so dark it was black. Her skin at first appeared ivory and smooth, but was now a dark brown. Again, it shifted, to a red, then light brown, then ivory again. The light came from her, I could see. I knew at once that this was Mother Earth, but not how I knew it.

"I stepped closer, unable to resist the pull she had on me. It was stronger now than ever. Time seemed to stop. There was no past, no present, no future. There was only her, and her song in the entire universe. The song that she was singing was so sad; I thought she must be in great pain. She was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, or have ever seen in my long years. But she was so sad.

"I walked up to her hoping that she would notice me. But she did not. She continued singing her heartbreaking song. And she was crying great tears that rolled down her face, into her hands, down her fingers, and into the pool, making small ripples in the water. I sat down in front of her and watched for what seemed an eternity. Maybe it was, if anything that followed is any account. Finally, I could

take the sad music no longer. I had to help her. So I bent my head down to her and asked, ‘Mother, what has saddened you so? Please tell me, so I may know what I can do to help.’

“She stopped singing, but the tears continued to pour down her face. Then she looked up, and I saw her eyes. Oh, her eyes! Deep, deep pools that I thought must hold the answers to all questions, and that seen both all the joy and all the sadness in the world. They had not one color, but held all the colors upon the earth. I gasped; I could not help it. But she seemed to not notice.

“‘I cry for my children, Dragon. They are in pain, and I can do nothing to help them. But this will come to pass, rather I will it to or not.’

“I asked, ‘Who are your children?’ and in response, she leaned out over the edge of her pool. I reached my neck over the water to better my view. She reached over the surface of the water and raked her hand over the surface, creating ripples, disrupting my reflection. However, when the ripples cleared, I saw not my reflection, but a vision.

“The humans were listening and cheering to a man, one with powerful magic. The humans decided to follow him, and he found others like himself, and they banded together. They convinced all humans, through deceit and magic, to hate and turn on the Dragons. I saw humans set upon the Dragons, spilling their neighbor’s blood in the very streets of the cities that they helped each other build. Human adults broke into our houses and burnt our hatchlings in their nests. They attacked without cause or provocation. The Dragons tried to go to the leaders, to get them to stop the bloodshed. They refused.”

Grandfather hung his head and one great tear flowed from his eye. For a moment, he was so lost in grief that he was unable to continue. Finally Silver, in a timid voice, ventured to ask, “What happened next, Grandfather?”

Grandfather looked back up and blinked, coming back to the present. He looked at Silver, and then he focused his gaze on Maggie. “The humans continued to attack, and the Dragons were forced to retaliate. Blood flowed like water. Dragons were superior in strength, if not in numbers, and would have won, if not for the human sorcerers. They devised a spell, one to kill all Dragons in existence. But they forgot about Dragon magic. Our greatest spell weavers

banded together to counter the magician's spell. The silent fight lasted weeks, neither gaining on the other.

"But the humans had allied themselves with those that practiced the Dark Magics of this world, and they slowly gained the upper hand. One by one, Dragons everywhere died, until there were only a few left, scattered across the world. However, the Dragon spell weavers were not finished. They wove a spell so powerful that it not only killed the human sorcerers, but every other human with magic. It bound the magic in the human race, preventing any other human from ever obtaining magic.

"However, the effort cost them their lives. There were now very few of us left in the world. I wasn't sure of an exact amount, but it was very few, very few indeed.

"The pool cleared. I sat staring into its depths, not seeing anything. 'Was that real? Will that happen?' I looked into those eyes again. 'Yes,' she replied, 'Everything that you saw has already come to pass. I called you here so that Dragon kind may live again, and live in peace with humans. You must carry on the knowledge that I will bestow upon you, for without it the One to come will have no chance in restoring balance.'

"My head, hung over the water, was close to her. She reached toward me, and I had no time to react or think. She placed her hand upon my brow, and I received I shock so great it was like liquid fire filled every vein, every fiber of my being. I thought I must die from it. But I did not.

"As the pain faded from my limbs, I had memories that were not my own. And power. Power thrilled through my veins, shocking me, enlivening me. I was afraid, so very afraid. It was like handing a hatchling the control of a thunderstorm. Without the knowledge to control such power, I knew I was capable of destroying the very mountain I was standing in. I panicked, just for a brief instant. Then I realized I *did* have control. The knowledge was there, all in my mind, and my magic responded. It was like a thousand years had passed and I had studied day and night, learning the art of my magic. I closed my eyes, unable to comprehend it all, and I had a vision:

"I saw a young human, gifted with the power of magic. She was untrained, uneducated, and sentenced to die by others of her kind, unjustly. She was powerful, and needed by Dragon kind. I saw her staggering across a barren plain; enduring hardships that no one else could endure. I knew, deep down in my SoulFire, that I must teach and help her in any way possible.

“That is where the vision left me. I open my eyes to see Mother Earth watching me closely. She asked, ‘Do you understand what you must do, Dragon? You must remain so that this child can learn what she must do. She must set right the balance, and restore peace to the earth.’”

“I said, ‘Yes, Mother, I understand’. And then a radical change came over her. Her tears stopped, and she smiled at me. It was like a sunrise after eternal night. She nodded, still smiling. A breeze began where there was none before, carrying scents that shouldn’t have been there, deep in the mountain of that frozen wasteland. The smell of flowers and fields; of sunshine and fire, of winter’s chill, and summer’s rain. Her form started to waver, becoming fluid and moving. The light infused her body, turning her form to white smoke. I blinked. With one final caress, carrying the love of the universe, she turned to mist and faded away.”

I know not how long I sat there, marveling in what had happened, exploring the memories that were not mine, grieving for those I lost, but eventually I stood up. I turned and left down the tunnel I entered in, making my way to the cave at its entrance. When I reached the cave where I took my fateful sleep, I looked back, thinking to return to the cavern, just to be in the same place that Mother Earth herself stayed, if only for a moment more. But as I turned, my nose brushed a solid wall, covered in frost and ice that hadn’t been disturbed in years, centuries even. I used my new power to probe deeper into the rock. There were no gaps, no cracks, no voids. The cavern did not exist, at least not in a way I could access it. It would seem that Mother Earth had made the cavern just to show me the events as they unfolded.

“Accepting this, I turned, once again ready to cross that great ice sheet. But I was once again shocked. The view before me was changed. The snow was still there, but there were trees and brush where there were none before. Around me were new mountains, and I was standing on the biggest one. Again, I accepted this, the awesome power of the Earth, and tuned to the sky to take myself back to my home.

“I flew hard and long, never stopping to rest or eat. It took me half the time to reach the city as it took me to reach the mountain. But what I saw was not what I left.

“The buildings, that were once tall and proud, were eroded and crumbling. Very few were taller than I; and the ones that were, were not half again as tall as I was. Color had been bleached out of the

stones. I scratched the surface of the road. These were once colorful paving stones; now most were dust, rubble, or piles of rock. There was no one in the streets when I landed, except dirt and dust. Even the rodents and birds seemed to shun this cursed place.

“I craned my neck up and tried to see as far as I could. The view was the same everywhere I looked; the same crumbling buildings; dusty, empty streets. My heart broke for what was lost. This was one of our greatest cities, where all Dragons eventually passed through.

“I walked down a street I knew well. This was a great market place. Humans and Dragons alike sold their wares here, and did so in peace. It was now just a gap between two walls about as tall as my knee. The stones that created the walls were toppled across the road, or caved into the interior of the shops. The clay or wood roofs were gone, rotted or now dust, returned to the earth. The gardens that had once been abundant were now wild, growing out of their courtyards and into the streets and buildings. The attending fountains were now still, just stagnant black water pooling in the bottom. The guardians that watched over the fountains and gardens were now unrecognizable, only a spire of smooth stone jutting straight out of the water. With every step, my grief and anger for what happened here grew.

“I made it to the temple road, the road that ran around the entire city in a great circle, dividing the outer, more business districts, from the homes of the Dragons that had lived there, in the center.

“Here I found the first signs of battle, even after the length of time that had passed. Had I not known what the city was before, I might have missed the first sign. The temples that ran around the city were gone. Not crumbled or fallen in, gone. Not a stone nor a statue remained. The only thing that marked that buildings stood once on that proud road were bigger than normal gaps between the road and the next one. I walked on, unable to look at the empty spaces where I had lived, laughed, and asked the gods for guidance. Sacred spaces, destroyed.

“At the center of the city, the evidence of a war was obvious. If I had not seen the visions in the pool, I would have died of grief right there.

“Here, in the center of the city, there once stood a great round building, the most sacred of places, one that, from the beginning of Dragon time, had never been molested or harmed. This was the greatest of the Nest Homes in the city. It was big enough for even the largest Dragon to come and go comfortably. Once, the walls were

lined with windows to let in the light, and a spiral stair, only big enough for the smaller Dragons, curved inside its center all the way to the top. The bottom once had massive fire pits spaced evenly all around, to warm the young inhabitants. There were large stone squares, set into the floor, where the nests would be, until they hatched. Then the young were moved to a room with very short walls, where they could be watched over carefully. After they started their first lessons, they would move up the stairs to new rooms, where they would live until they left.

“Now, in place of that once great building, there was a pile of rubble as big as the building once was. I went to it and shifted a few stones, knowing what I would find, hoping that I was wrong. With a shudder realized that there bones in the rubble. Dragon bones were mixed into the rock. Most were rotted from the years, but there were some I could still make out. Worse, though were the egg fragments. These, I knew, were of Dragons that never had a chance at life. Smashed when they were still infants. There were a lot of these, just as many as the day they were destroyed. You see, Dragon eggs are harder than bone, stronger than the tooth, and will outlast the one that emerged from it. These had done just that.

“I pulled myself away from the grisly sight, blocking the images that crossed my mind’s eye with all the power I could muster. It wasn’t enough. Still blinded by those thoughts, I kept walking, wanting to do anything to keep my mind busy. I looked up, finally, and found that I was at the intersection where our greatest teachers resided. Here and there, you could still see where Dragon fire had melted the stone during battle. I kept walking, and then the scenes started to change. Here and there were buildings, still in shambles, but standing. The roofs were rebuilt and patched, and the dust cleared away. I had just passed a building with an open doorway when I heard a noise on my left. Someone was talking, too low to make out the words. I lifted my nose and sniffed the air. If humans were here, I had no desire to fight my way out. But the scent was undeniably Dragon, and male. I went to a building that once probably was someone’s home. There was a cloth covering the door, but it was pulled back, revealing a dark interior. I looked in the door, and saw footprints in the dust.

“‘Hello? Who’s there?’ A voice called from inside. ‘I may not be able to see you, but I can hear you. Be you friend or foe?’ The voice was rough and low. It sounded like it belonged to an old male Dragon.

“I stepped inside, ducking through the doorway. Before me, curled into the far corner was indeed a very old, blue Dragon. Both eyes were milky in color, which meant he was surly blind. His scales still glittered in the half light, the dark blue looking almost black. I looked down and saw that he was missing one front leg, and half of one on the back. ‘My name is GoldenSunrise, Old One,’ I told him. ‘And I am a friend to you, if you prove not to be a foe yourself.’

“He snorted, shooting smoke from both nostrils. ‘Foe? I couldn’t be a challenge to anyone, let alone another Dragon. Come, sit down beside me, and tell me what has gone on outside this ancient city.’

“So I went in and sat beside him with my back to the door. ‘I know nothing of the outside, grandfather.’ I said. ‘I have spent my days in mountain, and flew back here when I was finished. But through the magic of the Earth, I know of the events that have occurred, but not of the years that passed, though I know it was a long time. Tell me, how long has it been since the beginning of the Magicians War?’

“‘The beginning?’ he said, squinting his sightless eyes in concentration. ‘Well, that occurred over a thousand years ago. Well before your time, youngling. I had just entered my twentieth year when it started.’ He nodded, and he closed his eyes, like he was losing himself in his memories.

When he spoke again, his voice had a dreamy quality to it, as though he was speaking to me through years long passed. ‘I had settled in a cave overlooking a small town, with my mate and newly hatched chick. We were happy. We did as all Dragons did, and looked after the humans, helping them if they needed it, and they in turn helped us. Then, slowly at first, the humans started treating us with contempt. Then finally they didn’t want anything to do with me or my family. We were forbidden to enter the village again, and we didn’t. But to my sorrow, we didn’t leave either. We stayed, hoping they would change. They didn’t.

“‘The magicians worked their evil over the humans. One night, while I was out hunting for my family, the humans came to our home, and killed my mate and child. I returned with my kill, and found them, slaughtered, for no reason other than hatred. I was consumed with rage and grief and I went mad for a time. I assaulted the town, seeking revenge. But the humans were smart, and prepared. They caught me in nets made of chain and wire, and fastened them to large rocks and trees so I couldn’t move. I knew I would die that day.’ He was quiet for a while, and I waited. Finally he said, his voice returning to normal, ‘But a young Dragon was flying overhead, and

saw me. He attacked, trying to free me. He fought the humans, and sacrificed himself so that I could escape. But, while I escaped with my life, I left behind two of my limbs.’

“He shifted his weight, and I could see the scars in a diamond pattern that covered his body. The chains had cracked the scales, digging down to the soft flesh underneath. The scales couldn’t hide the damage. He might have been able to heal himself with magic, had he wanted. I suspect that he kept the scars as a reminder of the strange Dragon’s sacrifice, and of what he lost.

“But to see evidence of the human’s brutality first hand both enraged and saddened me. I had grown up with some human children and had many human teachers as I aged. To know that possibly my friends had attacked and killed Dragons was too much for me to bare.

“I asked him something, to take my mind from those thoughts. ‘Are there no other survivors, other than you?’”

“‘Yes, there are others’ he said. ‘But I am the only one that was there for the beginning, which I know of. I am old, and the rest are younger than me, born in the time of struggle, and after. I am near the end of my life. But you said that you know what happened, through magic. Tell me how that came about.’

“So I told him of what happened on the mountain, but instead of telling him about the human child, I made it sound like I was just to see that Dragon kind continued to exist. I didn’t know how he would react, and I didn’t want to cause him any more grief. And I felt that the vision was something for me alone. He listened and made no comment the entire time I spoke.

“When I was finished, he said, ‘So, you were there as well. But you did not age as me so you could endure to make sure that Dragon kind lives again. Well, may you succeed, for all of our sakes. But I can tell that you speak the truth, and mean me no harm. So I hope you will help me. Young one’, he called, seemingly to know one, ‘come out here.’

“From behind a pile of stones tottered a very young Dragon, maybe two or three. She was emerald green, and had a lively sparkle in her eye, which was the same color. She walked over to the blue Dragon, and nestled next to his chest. He put his one remaining front paw around her, protectively. It struck me that she was no bigger than his front paw, and grief threatened to overtake me again. *How could anyone kill something so precious?* But the Dragon was speaking

again, so I pulled myself back from the brink and listened. ‘EmeraldJewel’s parents were killed by humans, and we found her. She has no one, other than us. I hope you will take my place, when I must go to my final rest.’

“‘The war is still going?’ I asked him”

“‘Oh, yes,’ he replied, ‘as long as the Dragon flies and magic still exists, the Mage will not rest.’”

I was going to ask more about this Mage, but another question struck me. ‘You said *us*. I just see you. Who is the other?’

“Then from behind me a voice sounded, ‘Me.’ In walked a midnight black Dragon, the most beautiful Dragon that I had ever seen. She was about my age, or the age I was when I left this city, and my size. She was lithe and graceful, with snow white teeth and claws. Her eyes were black as well, but around the color a thin line of white was visible, encircling it. She picked up a lump of meat that she had laid down and walked over to the old one and the child, and placed it in front of them. She turned to me. ‘So, who are you?’ Her voice was like the wind, though it carried a hint of a challenge.

“Ignoring this, I replied, ‘GoldenSunrise,’ I said, ‘and I am hoping to help you and your companions, if I am welcome.’

“She replied, ‘If BlueWater trusts you, then so do I. I am BlackNewMoon. Welcome to our home, GoldenSunrise.’

“So I stayed with them, making my new home where ever they were. We were always moving, so the humans, who still hunted Dragons like one would a stag, would not find us. EmeraldJewel grew, and became lovelier by the day. And I fell in love NewMoon, and she with me. We courted each other, as is the custom of our race, and soon we were expecting our first child. Even in these dark times, I couldn’t have been happier.

“I did not forget the task set to me by the Earth herself, but as time passed and no savior showed, I began to think that maybe it wouldn’t happen. So many people had died, maybe this child had too. So instead, I lived in the present, raising Emerald like a daughter, loving my mate, looking after BlueWater, and protecting my new family.

“But BlueWater’s health was failing. I helped and healed him as much as my magic would allow. But nothing can stop the advance of time. So one day, long after we met, BlueWater said he could travel no

more. He was dying he said, and wanted to rest his body. So, we stopped by a lake, somewhere that we, that is Moon and I, knew he would like to spend his final days. Emerald had grown attached to him and looked to him like a grandfather. She would not leave his side, not even to hunt. So I stayed with them, to watch over them both. A Dragon is always more vulnerable when he is on the ground, and Emerald couldn't even summon fire. This way I could be close, to heal BlueWater as he needed it. Moon and I would alternate hunting, so that we could stay fed."

"But as time went on, Moon found it harder for her to do normal things that she used to do, because of the egg that she was going to lay. So I started to do the hunting for everyone, and would have no choice but to leave for long stretches of time.

"One time, I was too long getting back to them. Being away so long always made me anxious, but Moon needed more food now that she was going to nest in about a week. So, after tracking a large herd, and bringing down two large deer, I flew back to where Blue, Moon, and Emerald were waiting. As I got closer, I could feel that there was something wrong. I flew harder. I reached the lake around daybreak of my third day out, and I could see the remains of a large fire at the water's edge. I dropped the deer and flew faster, although I knew I was already too late.

"I landed in what had been our camp, but it was charred and trampled. Smoke tendrils still snaked up from the grass that was black and scorched from Dragon fire. I looked around, and saw a misshapen blue mound at one end of the camp. My eyes couldn't make sense of what I was seeing, although in my heart, I knew what it was. I walked toward it, and clenched my teeth at the sick feeling in my gut.

"BlueWater laid there, mouth open in a last snarl, his white eyes seeing nothing. Spears pierced him all along his body, and an ax was embedded in his neck, stuck in the bone. Red blood stained his claws and teeth, not all of it his own. His wings were pierced so much they were but bloody tatters hanging off his back, the bones broken at odd angles.

"He was between me and the water, and I stepped around him toward the shore. There, pressed as close to his body as she could get, lay Emerald, a spear through her side, and her neck almost severed from her body.

“My heart broke in that instant. I roared at the sky, letting my grief, anger, and even guilt at this senseless killing spree escape in that sound. But something was nagging at the back of my mind. I looked around, trying to find what was missing, trying to think through the fog of pain. Then it hit me. Where was BlackNewMoon? She was not here. I sniffed the air. The smell of blood almost overpowered all the other scents. But I knew her so well; I was able to pick out her scent among all the others. All of her scent was old in that camp, a day at least. I thought that maybe she got away, and my hope soared.

“I began to look around at the tracks. If she did get away, maybe I could follow her trail. I found her footprints leading away from camp, running, human footprints following them. Moon ran; she must not have been able to fly, and people followed her. I ran, following the tracks. She’s fast, I thought, maybe she got away. I held my breath, hoping to see gouges in the earth where she flew away. But what I saw instead brought me up short.

“A great struggle took place in front of me. The ground was churned and stained with blood, both hers and human. Human and Dragon prints alike overlapped each other in a large circle, and broken spears littered the ground. The ground in places was black from Dragon fire. Here and there, a charred bone could be seen.

“I studied the ground. From what I could see, the humans had caught her, and she fought back. She used fire, tooth, and claw, to try to get away. But she did not succeed. Far away from the fighting ground, the earth was scraped in a long straight line, like something was dragged away.

“I fought back a wave of grief that threatened to overcome me. So she was captured, and would surely be killed, along with our child. Something snapped within me. I wanted to go after the humans that did this, and then to just follow them both into the void beyond. But caution steadied me. I *had* to remain. I *had* to survive, no matter what, so that one day all of Dragon kind could live in peace. But I had to do something.

“I flew to the top of the nearest hill, and worked a piece of magic so vast that had I not been maddened with grief, I would not have dared tried it. I made it so that any Dragon, that was alive now or in the future, would know the danger of people. The hate would be strong, so strong in fact, no Dragon could deny it. I would make the human race rue the day they killed my mate and children. And I bound the magic in the human race, made it toxic to those that

possessed it. It would kill all those who even had a spark of magic within them.

“But changing the very fabric of nature weakened me greatly. As the magic left my body, I collapsed upon the hill, unable to even close my eyes. I thought that I must surely die there on that hilltop, and I would have been glad. Time passed. Strength began to seep back into my bones. I knew I couldn’t stay there. I had to get away from this place, before I decided to seek revenge on the humans. Somehow managed to make myself fly. I flew, and flew, and flew. I look back now, and I realize that it was only grief that sustained me, kept me going in a haze of pain. I didn’t care which direction I flew, but I thought as long as I kept moving, I could forget about what happened. That I could out fly my feelings and memories. But eventually, I had to land.”

“I had crossed over a large mountain range some time before, and entered a valley. Below me was a vast plain, and ahead, I could just see the shiny silver of a large river. I flew to that, and landed by its side. I thought this must surely be the end, for how can I go on without my mate, my life? I lay down, and waited for death.

“It must have been hours later that I opened my eyes. The sun had moved, and was setting by this time. First, groggy from exhaustion and emotion, I thought that was what woke me, the sun in my eyes. I blinked. No, I realized, it was a feeling. I thought someone was watching me. I didn’t care enough to check, and closed my eyes again. Then, I thought I heard footsteps coming toward me. But Dragon or human, I no longer cared. I just hoped that if it was human, that they would at least finish me quickly. I would not put up a fight. They stopped in front of me, and didn’t come any closer. So, overcome by curiosity, I opened one eye.

“I thought I must have died, but I didn’t care, for there in front of me was my reason for existing, my love, BlackNewMoon. I slowly sat up. She looked scratched and beat up, but happy. Very, very happy.

“I found the strength to stand, and faced her, sure that we were both beyond where the mortals walked. ‘I must be dead, or dreaming,’ I said, ‘for I thought that I would never see you again.’

“You are neither dead nor dreaming, my love. I am here, and alive. The humans were hoping to keep me captive, like a dumb beast, but I was smarter than they expected. I escaped and flew away. Something drew me here, but I knew not at the time. I’ve been here for a week, waiting for something. And then I saw you pass overhead, and

followed you. But it took me a while to find you, because I had a little hindrance with me.' She laughed when she said this, but I was too confused and tired to understand. 'Come, I will show you what I mean.'

"She led me to a small stand of reeds, not far away. She swept back the wall, and there nestled in a bed of reeds, was our egg, our child. It was perfect, a beautiful silver. Your Grandmother, SilverFire."

Grandfather looked down at Silver with a tender expression, tears gleaming in his eyes from the memories. Of course Silver knew that Sunrise was actually her blood relative, but everyone called him Grandfather, for he was the oldest and wisest in the village. But Silver had no idea that he was over eighteen-hundred years old! That was over double what normal Dragons lived, but his body had only aged eight hundred of those years.

Silver was awed at what he was telling them. Maggie, a girl prophesied by the Earth, herself; Grandfather older than any Dragon ever lived; and herself, the descendent of one appointed to guard all of Dragon kind. She looked at Grandfather in a new light. So he was to watch over them, and when Maggie showed, teach her all she needed to know about Dragons, the war, and what she needed to do to restore peace.

She looked at Maggie. The girl was sitting cross-legged on the ground, staring at the elder Dragon. She seemed to be in a state of disbelief, and not able to move. Red looked just as shocked, eyes wide, but not frozen. He looked down at Maggie, and wonder filled his eyes. She knew he was thinking the same thing she was. *This girl is going to restore peace to the world? She is barely a hatchling herself.* But Silver could see the truth of the story in Grandfather's eyes. But something occurred to her.

"Grandfather, if it was just you three, how did the village get so large?"

Grandfather blinked, bringing him out of his thoughts. He had been staring at Maggie once again. He looked at Silver and answered. "After your grandmother was hatched, six months later, Moon and I began discussing what drew her to me, and if there was any Dragons left in the world. It took me another month to design a spell to suit our needs. On the full moon after the completion of the spell, I found a hill, sat, and released my magic into the air, and let it spread throughout the world. Dragons would now be drawn over the

mountains to this valley. We hoped to gather all those that were in danger and those that had nowhere to go.”

Red looked at Grandfather. “But if others knew of humans, then how did we not hear of them until now?”

“Simple. They swore to me that they would never speak of what happened outside the valley. We decided to remain separate of the humans, because I knew if the young ones found out what had happened, some would want to venture to the other side of the mountains for curiosity, peace talks, or revenge, and we could not afford to lose even one member to the humans.”

Silver looked over to Maggie, because she looked like she was struggling to say something to Grandfather. She was opening and closing her mouth, trying to form words. Every time it looked like she had worked up the nerve to speak, she would close her eyes and quickly look back down to the ground. Silver chuckled and said, “Young one, say what you need to. He won’t bite.”

Maggie looked at Silver, “I know that, but I... I’m just not sure that I am the one you want. I mean, I don’t know magic, and up until today all I knew of Dragons was that they would eat me as soon as they saw me. None of that is true; everything I thought I knew is wrong, so how can I save something I know nothing about?”

“Do not worry about what you do or do not know,” Grandfather said gently, “I will teach you all you need to help you on your way. You will stay with us until you are ready to go on your own.” Maggie nodded, still looking unsure.

No one said anything for a long time. Finally, Grandfather stood up. Silver, Red, and Maggie did also. “It is late,” Grandfather said, “I will speak to the village. No one will harm you while you stay with us. You may stay with the hatchlings under the care of NestMother GreenGrass. She will see that you are fed and clothed well, and we will start your instruction when you are rested.”

Grandfather started to leave, but Red interrupted him. “Grandfather, I would like to have Maggie stay in my hut, at least at first. She knows nothing of other Dragons, and I would feel better if I could watch her until the other’s get used to her presence.” Silver nodded her head. She would feel better too, if Maggie stayed with Red. She could trust Red with her life, and so could trust him with Maggie’s.

Grandfather thought this over for a moment. “Yes, that might be wise, at least for now. Maggie, you will stay with RedStar, and Silver can stay also if you wish it.”

“I do, sir,” Maggie said.

“Very well. I will talk to everyone tonight, and tomorrow you shall meet the village. I will go now. Red, follow with Maggie when you see dawn break above the trees.” He nodded that he understood. “That will give me enough time to talk to everyone, and clear the area.” Then Grandfather walked out of the clearing toward the village, leaving them alone in the woods. The fire had burned down, and cast a warm glow over everything.

Silver looked up. She could tell by the stars and by the moon that dawn was still several hours off. Maggie, the excitement wearing off, was starting to nod where she sat. Silver laid down beside her. Maggie curled up next to her, laying between her shoulder and her tucked back feet. Silver was reminded of the way a young deer curls up next to its mother, for protection. Silver felt something tug at the back of her mind when these feelings surfaced, but as soon as Maggie’s breathing deepened, the feeling left. Silver dismissed it.

Red stretched and yawned, and curled up next to the fire. “Well, what will come will come. Wake me when it’s time to leave, OK, Siv?”

MEETINGS

“Red! Red, get up! Come on, we can’t go without you!” The sky was just starting to turn pink with the early morning sun.

Red slowly opened his eyes. He blinked and looked around, “Time already?” He yawned. “Well, let’s get going. I need to get to my hut and get some more sleep.” He stood up, and stretched again. “I’ll go first, shall I?” Then he turned and went in to the trees. Silver started to follow but stopped when she realized that Maggie was not with her.

“Come on. We need to get home.”

Maggie still didn’t move. She was standing there, looking down at her feet, wringing her hands. “Silver, I... I don’t know if I can go into your village. What if others react like Red did? If they’re bigger, you won’t be able to stop them, and neither will Red. And I don’t want to be a cause of conflict with your family. Can’t I just stay here?” She looked at Silver pleadingly. Silver could tell she was truly scared of the other Dragons in the village. She could understand why, after meeting Grandfather, the fiercest Dragon Silver knew, and after that story he just told Maggie. But she needed a bed and a proper meal, and the ground and a basket of beef strips sure didn’t qualify. Silver went back to the trembling girl.

“Maggie, it’s alright. No one will hurt you, Grandfather won’t allow it. Red won’t allow it. And I won’t allow it. We will keep you safe. You need proper rest and food, and we can keep a better eye on things if we don’t have to watch our backs out here. Come on, were keeping Red waiting.” Maggie looked into Silver’s eyes, seeming to look for something. She must have found it, for she nodded, strode past Silver and followed Red into the woods. Silver shrugged, wondering what that was about, and followed.

Red was waiting at the edge of the trees, Maggie at his side, when Silver arrived. “I’ll go first, and Maggie follows me, and Silver, you bring up the rear. Watch for anyone that comes up from behind. I don’t think anyone will be stupid enough to defy Grandfather, but we can’t be too careful, alright?”

Silver nodded. “What do we do if someone does come, Red?”

Red looked at Silver, conveying something to her without words. *So, we fight. I hope it doesn't come to that.* But, she was willing to do whatever it took to protect Maggie from harm, now more than ever.

Maggie was looking between the two of them, trying to understand the wordless exchange. She looked so frightened and frail that Silver hoped that she could protect her. *I have Red with me. We'll be alright.* "Let's go," she said, and she nodded the way to Red. Red started across the field that separated the village and the woods. Maggie followed him closely, and Silver brought up the rear. She swept her head from side to side, keeping an eye out for any danger. In front, Red did the same. Maggie kept looking around, looking for the same things. She was terrified, but she didn't miss a step.

They reached the edge of the village when Red stopped suddenly and growled. The sound tore out of him, fierce and hostile, and Silver realized in that moment that she *never* wanted to face him in a fight. That sound was the single most intimidating thing she had ever heard. Maggie was likewise affected. She squeaked, ran back to Silver, and hid behind her. Silver knew that Red had spotted someone, and stood in front of her protectively. She growled, hoping that the visitor was just curious, and not wanting to fight.

An echoing growl came at them from in front, and from out of the shadows stepped WhiteWater, a Dragon in his eighteenth year. He was larger than Red by a half neck at the shoulder and his scales were pure white. They were so bright and pure in color that tiny sparks of blue purple and silver shone in them when he moved. He had a stocky build, with spikes running all the way down his back, with a gap at the shoulder and the base of the tail, so that he could move without impaling himself. But it was his eyes that you noticed first. While most Dragon's eyes matched their scales, maybe slightly darker or lighter than the actual color, his were blue. Bright, crystal clear, blue.

He was crouched, ready to spring. Red mirrored him. If Water attacked first, he would be ready. "Get out of our way, Water," Red snarled.

"No, Red. I will not allow that thing to come in and kill us all in our sleep. The Old One told us everything. But I for one don't believe that we need a scrawny human to save us. Especially this human. Why, she is a mere hatchling! How can a hatching do what our greatest spell weavers could not?"

Red didn't even stop to think before answering. "That I don't know. What I do know is that Silver and Grandfather believe in her, and therefore I do too. No harm will come to her while she is in my care. So once again I say, stand aside!"

"Ha! You choose to follow a magic-less Dragon and an old fool past his prime. Maybe it is time someone put him in his place. But first, I'll teach you some manners, Red, then I'll take care of your friend and her *pet*." And then he snarled and crouched, and Red did the same. Silver backed away, pushing Maggie along behind her. She wanted to help Red, but she needed to get Maggie out of here. But, before she had gone more than two steps, a roar, louder than any before, sounded from behind her. Silver spun, expecting an attack, but instead found Grandfather, looking terrible in his anger. He ignored Silver and Maggie, and instead walked over to where WhiteWater stood, smoke trailing out of his nostrils.

"So young one, you think me a fool and unfit to lead the tribe?" Water just stared up at him, too frightened to speak. Whatever he just said, he had no intention of actually confronting Grandfather. Red slowly backed away toward Silver, trying to get out of the way of Sunrise and Water. Sunrise ignored him. "Well? Do you wish to challenge me for the leadership of this tribe? For that is the only way I will give my power over to you. If you do not, then I challenge you on the basis that you are a liar and a sneak, for you swore to me that you, along with the rest of the tribe, would remain indoors until midday to give our guest time to acclimate herself. And also, that no one would hurt her or her guards at anytime, under any circumstance. You have broken both of those oaths, and do not deserve the honor that comes with being a Dragon."

Water didn't say anything in his defense, but Silver saw his eyes narrow ever so slightly. Grandfather went on. "Unless you declare publicly what you have done here, that you were wrong, and you apologize to Silver, Red, Maggie, me, and the entire tribe, I will fight you, until one of us bests the other or until one of us is dead. I leave the choice up to you." The challenge may have sounded extreme to some, but honor and trust were capital in Dragon culture. If a Dragon lost one or both of those things, they were barely better than animals. And one did not take challenges to one's honor lightly, but Water was in the wrong. By publicly apologizing, he was saving his honor by admitting he was wrong, and others would not look down upon him for that.

Whitewater looked straight at Grandfather, and for a moment looked like he was going to accept his challenge. But even he was not

that foolish. He lowered his head in submission, and said, "I submit to your leadership, Grandfather GoldenSunrise. I was wrong to attack Red, Silver, and the human. I will tell the tribe of what I have done here. I will also apologize to Red, Silver, and the creature in the village square, at the time of your choosing."

Grandfather nodded and said, "I accept your terms, and you shall apologize today when the sun just pass the midday point in the sky. But you will call Maggie by her proper name from now on. She is one of us, and will be treated as such." Water glared at Grandfather when he said that, and Grandfather growled, deep in his chest.

At last, WhiteWater lowered his head again. "Yes, Grandfather."

"You are dismissed, WhiteWater. I don't want to see you near them again. If you attack them again, I will not be so lenient." WhiteWater turned and sulked off deeper into the village. Grandfather turned to Red, Silver, and Maggie. "I was going to have you go to Nest Mother GreenGrass first, to have Maggie measured for new clothes, but now I think that you had better go straight home, Red. I think no one else will follow WhiteWater's example, but I cannot be certain. I shall walk you there, and will have BlackRaven come help guard her."

Red looked taken aback. "Grandfather, are you sure you can trust Raven? What if he feels the same as Water does? I think we will be fine on our own." Silver could tell that he thought Grandfather considered him unfit to guard Maggie alone; but Silver secretly wanted Raven there, if only to serve as another set of eyes. But he had voiced the same concern she had. What if he did react the same as WhiteWater?

But Grandfather, instead of being mad that his judgment was being questioned for the second time in a matter of minutes, looked at Red thoughtfully. He seemed to be considering something. After what seemed like forever, he said, "BlackRaven feels the same as you or I do; that the girl must be protected at all costs. He will guard Maggie with his life, as I hope you will. Now follow me, before she falls over with exhaustion."

Grandfather went off went between two huts, to where Red lived with his roommate. When Dragons left the nest-hut, at around 3 years, they moved in with another Dragon until they decided to take a mate of their own. Silver lived on the other side of the village, with a younger Dragon, a female named OrangeFallingLeaves. Red lived with BlueSkyAbove, the one he was fighting with this afternoon. But

Grandfather had moved Sky to another hut, and Silver was going to stay with Red and Maggie until something else was decided.

Grandfather stopped outside Red's hut, and motioned for Maggie to enter. She did so, and Silver followed behind her. After looking around once, Red came in. Grandfather stuck in his head, too large to enter the doorway, and said, "I will go and get BlackRaven. You will be fine for five minutes?" He phrased it as a question. All three of them nodded. Grandfather withdrew and disappeared from view. They all three felt the air stir, as if a breeze just blew through the hut. Red walked to the door and looked out.

"I don't see anyone. But that doesn't mean there isn't anyone out there." He sat down in front of the door, guarding it.

Silver looked away and found Maggie looking around, unsure of what to do. Silver laughed. "You can sit, if you want." Silver went to a large, soft bed on one side of the hut, and laid down on it. Looking around, she saw another bed, made of heather like the one she was laying on, on the other side of the hut. The floor was just dirt, and the walls were stones stacked on one another, filled with a clay and water mortar. A fire burned in the center of the hut, contained with a circle of large stones, casting a warm glow over everything. There was no other adornment, other than a statue of Skran, the Dragon hunting god, carved by both Sky and Red, a bonding project.

Maggie looked around once more, and sat down next to Silver. Silver laid her head down, and Maggie lay back against her side. She closed her eyes, and sighed contently. *For a girl that was worried about me eating her mere hours ago, she sure seems comfortable now.*

"You know, I would have never thought in my wildest dreams that one day I would be here, laying against a Dragon, being told that I am the savior of the Dragon race." Maggie smiled as she said this, almost asleep. Silver looked over to Red.

"See him yet?"

"No, nothing. Not even a bat."

"Keep an eye out. I don't trust anyone else, and maybe not even Raven. Watch yourself, Red."

"Don't worry. I think I can take him this time," Red laughed.

"Take who? Surly you don't mean me, hatchling." Red turned to see BlackRaven walking toward them out of the dark, into the light

streaming from the hut. He was twice as tall as Red, although not even half as tall as Grandfather, and jet black. He had a long, slender snout, and a horn plate jutted backward from the crown of his head. His teeth and claws were snow white, thick as a young tree, and could cut through one with one swipe. His body was slender and flexible, with spikes running from the base of his neck to the tip of his tail, with a gap at the shoulder and base of the tail. All dragons that had spikes had these gaps, which kept a Dragon from impaling itself when it moved. His long tail had a spiked tip. His wings were large, and could easily lift him in flight.

Red jumped, startled, and stood up. "Who are you calling 'hatchling'?"

You are not that much older than me."

"Yes, but until you beat me, I will continue to call you 'hatchling', hatchling. Hello, Silver. Hello, Maggie," he said, turning to each in turn. His gaze lingered on the girl. "I am glad we finally get to meet. You are most welcome."

Maggie looked at Raven and gulped. Silver couldn't blame her for being nervous, Raven was intimidating. But she managed to say, "Thank you. I am glad you are on my side."

Raven let out a hardy laugh. "Yes, little one. Be glad I am on your side, because if I wasn't, you would have cause to worry, indeed."

Silver raised her head. "Quit scaring her, Raven. We all know you are a terrifying brute." Maggie gasped at Silver's comment, but Raven started laughing, and Red and Silver joined in.

"I'll take first watch, shall I? You two look like your dead on your feet." Red looked like he was going to argue, but Silver silenced him with a look. She was tired, and knew he was, too. Red grumbled under his breath, and walked to his bed. He turned once in a circle, and lay down.

Raven went to stand in front of the door. Without turning his attention away from the night outside he said, "It's alright, Silver. I won't let anything happen to her. Go to sleep." Silver looked over at Maggie, but the girl was already asleep. Silver laid her head down, closed her eyes, and soon she was drifting into slumber.

Shouts woke Silver, and she instantly was awake, ready for the attack. Maggie fell off the bed with a *thunk* and looked around sleepily. Red jumped up and growled, and Raven looked back at them both, eye ridges raised, wondering what they were reacting to. Now that Silver was awake, she could understand what was being said.

“A *human*, here!”

“Have you ever seen one?”

“I have!”

“No, you haven’t! No one has, except Grandfather and Grandmother.”

The voices were those of the youngest Dragons in the village, YellowFlower, PurpleSunset, and GreenLeaves. They were only a year old, and still in the nest-hut with Nest Mother GreenGrass.

“Come, on! We need to get back to the hut.” That was PurpleSunset, the cautious one of them all. She never liked to test the rules, and always was a follower.

“Sun, how many times do you think we will get a chance to see it? They’ll keep her hidden for sure.” That one was GreenLeaves. He was a brave and reckless Dragon, always getting into trouble.

YellowFlower chimed in. “No they won’t. Grandfather said that he was going to be teaching her. He can’t hide and teach her.”

“Says who,” asked GreenLeaves.

“Says Grandfather,” YellowFlower replied. Silver could see the three through the doorway, past Raven. It was daylight, and the village was awake. Besides the young Dragons, Silver could see others going about their business, purposely not looking at the hut that housed Maggie, Silver, and Red.

Red, seeing who it was that was making all the noise, went to the doorway. Maggie picked herself off the floor, and Silver climbed out of the bed. “Do you mind!? We’re sleeping in here,” shouted Red. He grumbled a long string of curses, and went to his bed. Silver shook herself from head to tail, fully awake. Maggie went to sit on the edge of Silver’s bed, and watched the young Dragons, fascinated.

They were trying to peer around Raven, who was blocking the door. All three were wearing a look of frustration, because every time one of them would get close, Raven would playfully swipe at them

with his paw, causing them to jump back. They were getting impatient, and trying in earnest to get around him now. GreenLeaves darted pass Raven and almost got through the door, but Raven caught him up in both of his paws, and tossed him in the air. GreenLeaves laughed loudly. Raven caught him and placed him on the ground. The other two ran up to Raven, wanting to be tossed too.

Red grumbled some more. "Raven, come on. I want some more sleep!"

"The sun is high in the sky, hatchling. You need to be out of bed. Well," he turned to the three small Dragons clamoring at the entrance, "get him up!"

The young ones ran in and jumped on Red, bouncing up and down on the bed. They seemed to have forgotten about Maggie for a moment.

Red was yelling, and YellowFlower had clamped both arms around his neck, preventing him from throwing her off. The sight was so funny, Silver started laughing, and Raven joined in. Maggie looked unsure of what was going on, but when Red, trying to turn and grab GreenLeaves, fell out of the bed, she started laughing.

The three froze, apparently remembering that Maggie was the one that they wanted to see. They ran up to her, but stopped short. They just stared, afraid to come any closer. Maggie stared right back, apparently afraid of making a wrong move. Then GreenLeaves approached her very slowly, snaked out his neck, and touched her on the knee. He jumped back, like he was afraid of being bitten. Maggie laughed. YellowFlower, PurpleSunset, and GreenLeaves looked at one another, and then climbed up on her. Maggie laughed harder, and everyone joined on. Silver was glad that the young ones were accepting of Maggie, and she of them. They wrestled around for a bit, but after a while Silver said, "Alright you three. That's enough." Maggie sat up, and the young Dragons jumped to the floor. They scampered off out the door still laughing.

Silver looked at Maggie and said, "That was PurpleSunset, GreenLeaves, and YellowFlower. They are the youngest Dragons in our village, only a year. They seem to like you."

Raven stood up. "Well, I think you two can handle things from here. If you need my help again, hatchling, you know where to find me." He left to go to his own hut.

“Yea, that will be the day.” Red stood up off the floor, and shook, ridding himself of loose dirt. “I need to go wash. I’ll take you two to Nest Mother GreenGrass, and then I’ll go to the lake. Come on.” He turned and went out the door. Maggie looked apprehensive.

“Go ahead. We need to get you some different clothes,” said Silver. Maggie took a deep breath and followed Red out into the sunlight. Silver shook her head at the silliness of the girl, who would wrestle with a yearling Dragon, but didn’t want to walk across the village to meet the kindest one of them all. She followed them into the bright light of day.

Silver blinked as she walked into the hut, her eyes adjusting to the shade from the brightness outdoors. They crossed the village without incident, with hardly a glance from any other Dragon, although they did see WhiteWater peering at them from the shade of a hut. Red had growled a warning, and Water turned and left. Besides that, nothing else happened.

Red left them at the doorway to Nest Mother GreenGrass’s hut, and then he left to go wash in the lake by the village. Red knew that no one would harm Maggie in the nest-hut. The nest hut was sacred and off limits to attack. That was one of the most sacred laws to Dragon kind.

Maggie followed Silver into the hut and looked around. The hut was circular and made of stone, like every other hut in the village. To one side there was a large heather bed for the hatchlings to sleep on. Across from that, on the other side, was a box lined with cloth for the eggs. When a Dragon laid an egg, it was given to the Nest Mother to hatch. When it hatched, the young Dragon was taken care of by the entire village. It took six months for an egg to be ready to lay, and when laid, it took another five to hatch. There was a nest of eggs about every year, but some years, like this one, there were no eggs laid.

The Nest Mother was tending the fire with her back to them. She was humming to herself, and looking into the pot hanging over the fire. While older Dragons ate raw meat, the young ones couldn’t digest it, so GreenGrass had to cook their meals.

“Mother,” said Silver, bowing her head. As Nest Mother, she was respected as much as Grandfather.

GreenGrass turned to Silver, and then looked Maggie up and down. She turned back to Silver before speaking. "Hello, SilverFire. It's about time you came to see me. All you young ones are the same. As soon as you leave, you never have time for the person that hatched you." GreenGrass chuckled under her breath. Maggie was standing in the doorway, behind Silver, afraid to go anywhere near the elder Dragon. "Come, young one. I won't bite. Let's see you properly."

Maggie looked to Silver to see what she should do. "Go on, Maggie. She needs to see you so she can make you new clothes." Maggie took a few small steps toward GreenGrass. Silver pushed her in the small of the back with her snout, shoving her further toward the Nest Mother. She thought Maggie was being silly. The Nest Mother was the kindest and gentlest Dragon she had ever met; she wouldn't hurt a fly. GreenGrass peered down her nose at her.

"Well, you need a few meals, and a new set of those coverings. Clothes did you call them Silver?" Silver nodded. "I think I can make those. For now take them off, and drape this over yourself." She handed her a large section of the nest coverings. "There is hot water over on that table, and a scrub brush. Go ahead and wash up. Silver and I will wait outside to give you some privacy." GreenGrass looked at Silver, waiting for her to leave. Silver looked from her to Maggie. Maggie nodded, telling her it was ok. Silver turned and left, with GreenGrass right behind her.

Silver sat outside the door, watching the others go about their daily business. She looked up at the sun. It was almost at the highest point in the sky. She wondered if Water was preparing his apology, and if Grandfather was preparing the village to hear it. It crossed her mind that they probably didn't even know what happened last night.

GreenGrass sat down beside Silver, sighing. "I have lived for 608 years, and I thought I had seen all there is to see. I have hatched and raised 46 Dragons, including two of my own. But that hatchling in there is one thing I never imagined existed. And that she is going to set right the animosity between our two races is incredible." She shook her head, as if she didn't believe what she was saying.

"I know it's unbelievable. But just think, when she does bring balance back to our races, we will be able to co-exist with humans again. According to Grandfather, we were never more prosperous than when we lived together." Silver could just imagine it. She and Maggie, walking down a street filled with people and Dragons;

human children playing with Dragon hatchlings. She imagined a paradise, where peace and prosperity reigned.

GreenGrass spoke, popping the happy bubble that Silver had wrapped herself in. "But how will she accomplish such a great feat? Who will help her?" GreenGrass sat in silence, pondering her statement.

"I'll help her." It was obvious. She wanted to help, and besides if she helped restore peace no one would think her weak because she had no magic.

GreenGrass chuckled. "You are barely older than a hatchling yourself, SilverFire. Maggie will need someone with experience; someone who would be able to fight for her and protect her. You are too young to do such things."

"I will go!" SilverFire wanted to help. She wanted to fight, to protect Maggie. The thought of her going out on her own with someone else hurt SilverFire. But what if Maggie thought the same? What if Maggie wanted someone stronger and fiercer? Someone with magic? Once again Silver was consumed by the anguish that so often was her companion.

GreenGrass looked at her. "SilverFire, it is not your decision. Grandfather will decide who will accompany Maggie on her journey. He may see you fit to go, but maybe not. You must let him decide."

SilverFire knew she was right. But what would she do if Grandfather didn't pick her to join Maggie? What if Grandfather decided Red should go with her? Would Silver be able to sit at home while her best friend went off on a grand adventure? No, she thought. I couldn't. But before she could follow this line of thought any further, a quiet cough sounded from behind her. Silver and GreenGrass turned to see Maggie standing in the doorway, her face and hair clean, with the rough blanket draped over her shoulders.

"Little one, are you done?" asked the Nest Mother.

"Yes, thank you. Now what would you like me to do?"

"Nothing. Now I will make you new clothes. After I get your measurements, I will give you some of the stew cooking on the fire. Then I think it will be time to assemble in the square."

"Wait. You mean I have to go?" Maggie looked terrified at the thought.

“Yes, the entire village must go. You are part of the village, so you must go, too.” Maggie went pale, and her eyes were wide and frightened. Obviously, Maggie didn’t think WhiteWater would keep his word not to attack again.

“Maggie,” Silver said, “Grandfather will be there. And so will Red, BlackRaven, GreenGrass, and I. And others that want to protect you. He will not be able to touch you.” GreenGrass nodded in agreement. Maggie didn’t look reassured.

“Enough talk. I shall make you new clothes, and you shall eat your fill. We can not change the way WhiteWater feels, so we shall not worry about it. Come.” GreenGrass rose and went inside, pushing Maggie in before her. Silver followed.

Maggie was standing in the very back of the assembled Dragons, as much out of the way as possible. Silver stood to one side and Red to the other. Raven stood behind them, looking around for any danger. Red was also on the alert, tense and ready for anything. Maggie was trembling she was so scared. Silver was ready to shepherd Maggie away at the slightest hint of danger.

No one seemed to be paying much mind to Maggie, although a head would turn every now and then to look at them. But as soon as Red or Raven caught them looking, they would turn quickly back around and stare at the front again.

At the front of the group stood Grandfather with his mate, BlackNewMoon. Moon was slightly smaller than GoldenSunrise, and was completely black, except for a white ring on her left flank, which looked like an eclipsed moon. She had a slender build, and looked graceful even when standing. In contrast, her mate was stocky and strong, a born fighter.

Beside them was WhiteWater, looking over everyone that was there. Most of the assembly looked confused; they didn’t know what they were called there for. Some looked enraged by the fact that WhiteWater had disobeyed, and yet others looked like they had more important things to do. Grandfather strode forward and looked over the crowd. Silence fell instantly.

“Thank you for coming so quickly. We are here today to fulfill the agreement between WhiteWater and myself. Some of you already

know what transpired last night, but for the rest of you, I shall have WhiteWater explain.”

Grandfather went back to his place, and turned to WhiteWater. All eyes turned to him, waiting for the reason they were all there.

WhiteWater took a step forward and began. “Last night, after Grandfather GoldenSunrise told us what he was bringing into the village, and we all gave word that we would remain indoors I ventured out into the night to wait for it and its guards. I confronted RedStar and SilverFire, along with the human. I intended to kill it, against GoldenSunrise’s orders, but was stopped and challenged by him. Instead of challenging Grandfather to the right to lead the tribe, I submitted by agreeing to publicly announce what I did, and apologize.” Water raised his head and looked to the back where Maggie and her group stood. “Human, RedStar, SilverFire, I apologize. I also apologize to the tribe for disobeying Grandfather GoldenSunrise, I was wrong, and I am here to announce it to fulfill my agreement.” Water lowered his head and stepped backwards. Grandfather strode forward to take his place.

“I accept that WhiteWater has fulfilled our agreement. I will no longer seek recompense from him on this matter. But if he should challenge them again, I will not be so lenient. Consider this a warning.” He turned to the rest of the crowd, addressing them. “If anyone has any concern with Maggie staying in the village, speak now, because I will not tolerate any more outbursts like this. If any one of you feels threatened by Maggie’s presence, you may choose to separate yourself from her, but if you harm her or anyone that chooses to live in peace with her, you will be exiled from the tribe. All swore an oath to me, and I will hold you to your word. Now,” he looked over everyone, meeting each eye, “does anyone have any concerns they would like addressed?”

The gathered Dragons looked at one another, waiting for anyone to say something. Whispers went through the crowd like wind through leaves. Heads turned to the back to look at Maggie and her group, before looking back to Grandfather. Soon the whispers died down and everyone turned back to the great gold Dragon. “Good. I expect no more trouble out of anyone. Now, I think that it’s time for you to meet the newest member of our tribe. Maggie dear, come up here please.”

Now everyone turned to look at her. Red looked around, judging the mood of the crowd. BlackRaven lowered his head to Silver’s ear. “Go ahead, take her up there. No one will try anything, not after that

speech.” Silver nodded and looked to Maggie. “I’ll come with you. You will be fine.”

Maggie was pale and still shaking, but she squared her shoulders, nodded, and walked forward. Silver followed close behind her, leaving Raven and Red standing in the back. The mass of Dragon’s parted to let her through, watching with wary eyes. The stillness was absolute, with not even a bird call to disrupt the silence. Then laughter broke out, and from between the legs of a rather large orange Dragon ran the hatchlings. They ran up to Maggie, jumping around her legs, playing with each other. Then a roar came from the rear of the crowd, followed by another and another. Maggie froze, looking even more terrified than before. Now the entire crowd was roaring, stomping, and rearing. Maggie started to back up, looking for a way out. Silver stopped her.

“Don’t worry. They are just welcoming you, Dragon style.” Silver was ecstatic. The Dragons would never welcome anyone like this unless they totally accepted them. She noticed that WhiteWater was the only one not cheering. He was looking betrayed as he slowly backed away into the circle of huts, disappearing behind them.

Maggie didn’t notice him; she started walking again, right up to Grandfather, looking a bit less scared than before. She stood in front of him, and bowed her head. Grandfather dipped his head in acknowledgement, and turned to the crowd, gathering Maggie up in front of him. Maggie stood there, between the massive Dragon’s front paws, looking remarkably calmer than before. She was relaxed and smiling to herself. Grandfather was looking down at her, warmth in his eyes.

Gradually the crowd quieted, looking expectantly at Maggie and Sunrise. Grandfather looked back at the Dragons assembled in front of him. “Thank you, everyone. I present Maggie, chosen by Mother Earth herself to restore Dragon-kind to harmony with the humans of the world. She will need our help; do you agree to do it?”

The crowd roared, “Yes!”

Grandfather continued, “She will need our protection, will you agree to give it?”

“Yes!”

“And will you accept her as one of us, treat her as you would one of our young ones, and teach her our ways?”

This time the yell was deafening. “Yes!”

“Then I present you the newest member of our family, Maggie DragonSister, savior of our race!”

The Dragons roared and cheered. The younger ones ran up to their new foster sister, jumping around her and grabbing her dress, wanting her to play. The older ones walked over to Maggie, introducing themselves. Maggie nodded at each one, acknowledging them. Grandfather stood by her side, giving her his support. Silver stood off to one side, giving her room, letting her acclimate herself to Dragon life. Silver was glad that Grandfather used a variation of the traditional acceptance speech used to induct a Dragon that had turned fourteen into adult life of the tribe. It made her adoption into the tribe more official. She was proud and also a little surprised that the girl was accepting things as well as she was, and that the tribe was accepting her. But she was still worried about WhiteWater and how he was feeling, but she could do nothing about that. WhiteWater would not do anything now with the full support of the village behind Maggie.

Silver smiled to herself. She was happier than she had been for a long time. She looked away from Maggie and Grandfather, trying to find Red. He was fighting his way through the crowd to the front. Raven was just standing near the back, looking uninterested in the fuss the Dragons were making over Maggie.

Red pushed his way to Silver, and sat down beside her. “Well, that went better than I thought it would. I’m glad I won’t have to guard with Raven anymore.” The contempt in his voice was unmistakable.

“Why do you hate Raven so much? Is it because he beat you that one time? I mean, he is a lot bigger than you.”

Red snorted. “Not by much. I should have been able to take him. Next time I will.” He sounded determined.

“Now, Red, don’t go challenging the only one who agreed to help us. We need him, and you know it.” Then she said, her tone completely serious, “Besides, if you lose again, I don’t think I will be able to be seen with you.”

Red turned to her, shocked, but then Silver started laughing, Red chuckled uncertainly. Of course Silver was joking; Red needed a little bit of humor to offset his sour mood. He was beginning to act too serious, with all that happened yesterday and today.

Red looked away from her, to see that the line waiting to greet Maggie was growing thin. Red turned back to Silver. "We should probably get up there. We need to find out what Grandfather wants us to do, and what Maggie wants to do." Silver nodded, rose, and started walking toward Maggie and Grandfather, with Red bringing up the rear.

The only one left now was RussetEarth, a younger brown Dragon just into his seventeenth year. He was very shy and usually was seen only with his mate, YellowBird. YellowBird had greeted Maggie already and was off talking to a group of females, laughing and joking. Unlike RussetEarth, she was very talkative and liked to be with other Dragons.

Russet bowed his head to Maggie, and said something to her. Maggie responded, laughing. Russet raised his head, nodded once, and left to retrieve YellowBird from the knot of females crowded around her.

Silver went up to Maggie. "Are you done? Or would you rather meet everyone again?"

"No, I would rather stay with you. I'm getting tired of talking."

Red walked up to Grandfather and asked, "What are we going to do about WhiteWater? We can't let him attack Maggie again. And if we let him roam, what's to stop him?"

"He will not attack again, RedStar. I have made sure that he is not able while he remains a member of this village. But that is all I am willing to do. If he chooses to go his own way, I will not stop him, nor will I hold him to any oaths he made while under my rule. I will not take away his free will or his freedom of choice."

Red seemed angered that that was all Grandfather had done. "That's not good enough! What happens when Maggie leaves? What if he decides to follow her?"

Grandfather growled, "That's enough! You go too far, RedStar." Red seemed to shrink to half his size under the angry gaze of the elder Dragon. "I will not tolerate any more of your questioning today, hatchling. I have lived too long, have seen too much, to allow any more of this ridiculousness. I think that what I have done for, and will do, for Maggie, will be enough for you. Go to your hut, RedStar, until you are called." Red lowered his head, and sulked away, muttering under his breath. Grandfather watched him go, then turned

back to the pair standing next to him. “Now, I think that Maggie needs to rest, and afterwards I shall begin her training in magic.”

“Already Grandfather? I thought that I wasn’t going to start that for a few more days.”

Grandfather looked at Maggie kindly. “Young one, as long as you don’t know how to control your magic, you are a danger to everyone in the village, including yourself. I cannot allow you to stay here any longer than necessary before teaching you at least some measure of control. SilverFire,” Silver looked up at her name, meeting his eyes. “Please take her back to the Nest Mother’s hut, get her something to eat, and bring her to the lake when she is finished.”

“Yes, Grandfather.” She paused, then asked, “Grandfather, may I please watch?” Silver looked down, embarrassed. She knew she should have her magic before learning how to use it, but since she was probably not going to get it anytime soon, she might as well learn as much as she can now. Plus, she thought that Maggie would be more relaxed with her there.

Maggie smiled with relief when Silver said this. Apparently, she was right. Grandfather peered at Silver, no doubt wondering what she would do with the training and no magic, but before he could say no, Maggie chimed in. “Please, Grandfather? I would like it if Silver came to watch. Oh, and Red, also, if he would like,” she tacked on at the end. She looked at Silver, and Silver nodded. She knew that Red would like to be there. She hoped that Grandfather would allow him to come.

Grandfather seemed to think over her statement, looking from Silver to Maggie. Then he said, “No, Silver, you can not come.”

“Grandfather, please! I know that I don’t have my magic, but I won’t get in the way, I promise!”

“No, little one. I am not worried about you, but for you. She is very unstable, and you may get hurt. After she has learned control, then you and Red may participate, but not before.”

“What about you, Grandfather? Won’t I hurt you if I lose control?”

Grandfather started laughing. “Little one, your magic is not developed enough to hurt me. Red’s magic is new and cannot protect him from a magical attack, and Silver has no magic to protect her at all. But mine will. You need not worry about me.”

Maggie nodded. Silver understood, but she wanted to be there, all the same. “Come on Maggie, we better get going. I want to make sure you have enough time to eat and get to the lake.” She got up and waited for Maggie to go first. By this time, the crowd was dispersed. Everyone went back to what they were doing before the meeting. Maggie walked toward the Nest Mother’s hut like she had lived in the village all her life. She seemed remarkably comfortable for someone that just got accepted into a Dragon clan.

Maggie went right to the hut, and stopped out front. Silver came up beside her, and said, “Nest Mother, I come with Maggie DragonSister, and would like to enter your hut.”

A green head appeared out of the door. GreenGrass said, “I welcome you, SilverFire and Maggie, please enter.” GreenGrass pulled her head back inside, and Silver followed. Maggie hesitated for a split second, and then followed Silver into the Dragon’s hut.

Inside was darker than before, but the smells stronger. The scent of cooked meat permeated the air, but also present was the smell of burnt wood, the tang of some unknown herb, and a scent that Maggie smelled this morning, which reminded her of the children in her village when they came in from a hard days playing. She looked around, and on the heather bed were the three hatchlings, all curled up and fast asleep.

GreenGrass was tending the fire, throwing the bitter smelling herb onto the fire. Suddenly Maggie was overwhelmed with exhaustion. She almost fell over right were she was standing. She grabbed Silver to keep from toppling over. “I don’t think I can do anything, Silver. I suddenly just got really sleepy.” And with that she slumped onto Silver, fast asleep.

“Oh dear. I didn’t think the Foenter would work on humans. Well, get her outside, Silver, and take this with you.” She handed Silver a bunch of purple herbs with red flowers; Wiviern, the antidote to Feonter. Silver took the herbs in her teeth, and GreenGrass placed Maggie across her back. Very carefully, Silver turned and headed back outside.

She dropped the Wiviern on the grass, and slipped out from under Maggie. The girl dropped to the grass with a soft thump, never waking. She looked so peaceful sleeping, that Silver hated to wake her. But she knew that Grandfather would not let her miss her lesson, just to sleep. So Silver picked up the Wiviern and waved it under Maggie’s nose just as GreenGrass was coming out of the hut.

“Good, she should be awake soon. Here is some of the deer I cooked for the hatchlings.” She laid a large hunk of meat wrapped in a leaf on the ground next to Silver. “If she is hungry, have her eat that, and make sure she doesn’t get up until the Foenter is gone from her system.” She turned and went back into the hut. Maggie was starting to come around, mumbling in her sleep. Silver remembered the effects of Foenter from when she was a hatchling. The herb made you incredibly tired and produced such vivid dreams that you swore that they were real. GreenGrass used the herb when the hatchlings went in at midday for their nap. It also was a magical herb, restoring spent energy to adults when they smelled it.

Maggie blinked and opened her eyes. She yawned and sat up, peering around. “What happened? How did I get out here?”

“You were affected by the plant Feonter. We burn it to help hatchlings to sleep, and to re-energize ourselves when we are tired. It will only put hatchlings to sleep. I didn’t think that it would work on a human. Here,” Silver pushed the meat toward Maggie, “eat this, and make sure you don’t get up any time soon. Feonter will make you wobbly for a while.”

Maggie opened up the rather squishy package, and started eating. Silver looked around and saw nothing out of the ordinary. Even though Grandfather said WhiteWater wouldn’t attack, she was still on her guard. Maggie was looking around also, drinking in the sights. “Silver, why weren’t you affected like me? You didn’t fall over asleep.”

“Only hatchlings are affected so strongly, and apparently humans. Adult Dragons only feel refreshed when exposed to Feonter. Like we have slept, only we haven’t. Are you feeling better?”

“Yes, I think I’m fine. When are we leaving?” Maggie seemed eager now to start her training.

“As soon as you are done eating. Grandfather is probably already there, so not too long.”

Maggie swallowed her mouthful and said, “I think I’m ready. Can we go?”

“I don’t see any reason not to. Stay here, and I will take this back to GreenGrass. Silver picked up the rest of the meat and the Wiviern and returned them to the hut. Returning to Maggie’s side she said, “I will show you the way, but you must go on your own. Grandfather doesn’t want me there.” Silver started walking away, and Maggie followed.

LESSONS

Maggie saw Grandfather sitting beside the still water, gazing into its depths. She still couldn't believe what was happening to her. A month ago, she was helping her mother with the spring planting; and now she was getting ready to learn magic control from the (she assumed) oldest Dragon alive. She was still in a kind of daze, still processing everything that had happened over the past two days. Maggie looked back over her shoulder and saw Silver standing far away, looking at her. In a way, she was glad that she wasn't allowed to come; she didn't want to make a fool of herself in front of Grandfather and Silver both. Even after all that Silver, Grandfather, and the rest said, she still wasn't sure that she had magic.

Grandfather looked up as she approached, that same look in his eyes that he had every time he looked at her. It took a while for her to convince herself that he didn't want to eat her when he looked like that. As it was, she was still terrified of the gold Dragon.

In a great voice that reminded her of thunder he said, "Welcome, young one. I am glad beyond words that you have come to our village."

He then looked up, over her shoulder. He narrowed his eyes and glared at something. Maggie turned to see Silver sulk away out of sight toward the village. She turned back to Grandfather and asked, "I don't know how you are going to teach me to control my magic, Grandfather. I told you, it only happens when I am angry or scared, and right now I am neither." *At least, not that scared*, thought Maggie.

"I have trained many a young Dragon in the art of magic, hatchling, and I think you will be no different. Magic is a part of you, just as it is a part of everything. Most humans do not have enough in them, so they don't have to learn control, but those that have more magic must learn control so they can protect themselves."

Maggie nodded, hoped that he was right, and that she did have magic. "How should we start?"

"First, sit." Maggie sat. "Now close your eyes, empty your mind, and relax."

Maggie took a deep breath, and tried to relax. But some part of her kept wanting to run. She shifted, trying to find a comfortable position. Her neck itched. A fly was buzzing in her ear. She swatted it away.

“No, little one. Pay no heed to anything but yourself. Retreat inside yourself, feel your heart beat, feel your life’s blood flowing through you. Now relax, and ignore everything outside your body.”

Maggie tried, and for a while she just felt foolish. Maybe she was doing it wrong? But then something shifted. She was aware of herself more than before. She could not only feel her heart beat, but hear it also. She could feel the steady thud, thud of her blood rushing through her veins. Her breath was so noisy; she wondered how she heard anything over it. She could also feel everything, from the rough texture of her cloths, to the soft wind in her hair, to the grass tickling her skin. But none of this was distracting. She went deeper inside herself, exploring spaces of her mind that held her most innermost secrets.

“Good. Very good.” Grandfather’s voice seemed to be coming from a long way off. “Now, remember the times when you were angry or scared, Maggie. Remember how you felt. Now remember how it felt right before the magic escaped.”

Maggie searched around her memories, and found one that stood out among the rest. It was not the first time she had used her magic, but this particular time was probably the most violent of the outbursts, and the most memorable.

She saw, through her mind’s eye, her old village. She was walking; carrying the eggs that Mother had sent her for, when suddenly, a group of six or seven boys surrounded her.

“Freak!” They screamed.

“I saw you the other day,” one of the nastier looking boys teased. “You were making the wash float around, before your tramp of a mother made you stop. You’re a freak, someone that shouldn’t even exist!”

Then they started pushing her, shoving, teasing, and taunting. Some threw rocks. Others picked up the dropped eggs and added them to the melee. She remembered how that felt, even though she had no desire to. Then she remembered a different feeling entirely. She had not noticed it that day, in the middle of the fight, but now she wondered how she didn’t. It felt like a raw energy filling her, something powerful and dangerous. She remembered it filling her until it burst out violently, knocking all the boys unconscious, and throwing her to the ground.

“Remember, Maggie.” That was Grandfather again. “Remember that feeling. Now reach for it again, and hold on to it.”

Maggie searched herself, trying to find that raw energy again. It was hard work, but in the end a slight tingling started in her toes. She grabbed that feeling with her mind, spreading it through her feet, then legs, then the rest of her body. She was tingling all over now, but it was nowhere close to what she felt on that day. So she tried to intensify it. At first, nothing happened. Then the energy increased by an eighth, then a fourth, then a half, and finally she was so filled that she thought she was going to burst. It was not just a tingling, but a full pulsating power, raw and untainted. Now she was truly afraid. What now?

As if reading her mind, Grandfather said “Don’t be frightened Maggie. Hold on to that feeling. Take control. Grab hold of your magic, don’t let it escape.”

She tried, really, really tried. But the magic kept growing. She tried to grab it, to wrestle it into submission. But it was like trying to grab a hog with greased hands. Every time she thought she had it, it would slip out of her grasp.

“Now, Maggie. Don’t let it escape.” Grandfather’s voice was urgent now.

Suddenly, she felt it spill over, and she lost control completely. The magic exploded, flooding all around her. It was a strange feeling, being aware of where her magic went, and herself, at the same time. It surprised her how forceful her magic was. She always thought magic was an unsubstantial thing, but in fact it was invisible but as forceful as the wind.

After she lost it all, she opened her eyes. “Sorry, Grandfather. I...Grandfather?” She saw him lying on the grass. It looked like he was knocked unconscious by the force of her magic. She jumped up and ran to his head. “Grandfather, are you alright?” He didn’t answer, so she ran to the lake and scooped up a handful of water. She splashed it on his face.

He blinked, coughed, and looked around. Worried, she asked, “What happened, Grandfather?”

“Something that I did not expect,” he said as he heaved himself up and shook. “Yes, that was something I never would have thought would happen. No, don’t look so worried, young one, no harm done. You just caught me off guard, that’s all. Now, do you feel strong

enough to try again?" Maggie nodded, hoping that she was. But the outburst of magic left her feeling strangely empty and weak. "Good, now sit back...Oh, what now?"

Maggie looked over her shoulder, where Grandfather was looking. She saw a group of Dragons, all glittering in the afternoon sun, running to where they were. At its head was a large midnight black Dragon, as large as Sunrise, but distinctively female. It was BlackNewMoon, Golden Sunrise's mate, worry showing in every line of her body. Her mood was mirrored by the group running behind her. "I had better go tell her what happened, or I'll never hear the end of it. Wait here please." Grandfather went to meet his mate. The rest of the group stopped and let Moon walk forward to meet Sunrise. Moon seemed at first relieved that he was fine, but then angry. Maggie could hear her voice rising and falling over the grass, smoke flowing out of her nostrils. Maggie couldn't hear exactly what was said, but she got most of it. Moon was angry at Sunrise for letting his guard down, and for underestimating Maggie's powers. Grandfather took his scolding, looking rather sheepish. Maggie thought the sight funny, seeing Grandfather, who was very intimidating, being reprimanded by another Dragon, looking like a hatchling caught in wrong doing. She suppressed a laugh.

Moon paused for a breath, and Grandfather took that chance to get a word in. Maggie couldn't hear what was said, but it made Moon laugh. She nuzzled him, and turned around, walking back to the village. The group went ahead of her, muttering amongst themselves. Grandfather stood there looking after them for a minute, then turned and came back to Maggie. She didn't think that he looked angry, which was good, considering that she was scared of him in the best of times.

He came back and sat down where he was before, looking at Maggie. "Sorry, little one. Now where was I? Oh, yes. Sit, please." Maggie sat in front of him. "Now, it seemed that you called upon too strong of a magic for the first time. You were unable to keep a proper hold on it. Start again, but this time, try picking a weaker memory, so that you may be able to keep a handle on the power. Are you ready?"

"Yes, but can I ask a question first?"

"Ask away, little one."

"Why didn't that group of Dragons fly to us instead of running? It seems that it would have been faster, if you had been in trouble."

“Right you are young one. Flying is always faster than running for a Dragon, and I assume for most animals that fly. But I laid heavy enchantments that prevent any magic from escaping into the village, to protect my people. But a side-effect of that is it keeps anyone from flying to this location, and keeps anything from flying out of it. So the only way to get here is by walking.” Maggie nodded her understanding. “Have you any more questions, dear one?”

“Yes, Grandfather, just one. What if I can’t hold on to my magic like before, and I hurt you again?”

“Don’t worry, young one, I will not let my defenses get so low again. You will not hurt me.”

“But what if I do?” Maggie was genuinely worried about the elder Dragon. She didn’t want to hurt him. *He’s family now*, thought Maggie. *I can’t do something that may hurt my family.*

When grandfather spoke, his voice was kind. “If you do hurt me, then I will know it was not on purpose, and that you could not help yourself. I will have GreenGrass tend my wounds, and if I am well enough, I will continue your education. If not, then BlackNewMoon will do so. Do you have any more questions?” Maggie shook her head. “Then let’s get back to the lesson. I want you to relax, retreat deep inside yourself, like you did before. Breathe in, and out. In. Out. Relax.”

Maggie did as she was told, sinking down into that deep space in her mind, like before. But it was much easier this time.

“Now,” Grandfather said from a long ways off, “find a memory, but not as strong. Search, and find a time when you used your magic.”

Maggie searched and found the time when she just turned seven, on her birthday, and she was mad that the other children didn’t want to play with her. Even before everyone thought her a freak, no one wanted to be around her. This was the first time she had ever used her magic, and it wasn’t very powerful. All that had happened was that she got angry, and made the door blow closed. She thought it was just the wind then, (although it was barely blowing that day) but now that she knew what magic felt like, she knew that she caused it to close. She searched for that feeling now and found it a lot easier than the last time. She held on to it, making it grow, filling her entire being with that raw, pulsing energy.

“Good, very good.” Maggie was having a hard time concentrating on that voice. She was totally lost in the magic. She felt herself slipping deeper and deeper into her magic that was the core of her being. But she didn’t know what would happen if she let herself get that far, so she pulled herself back. Now she could still feel her magic, but was aware of herself again. “Excellent, Maggie. Now draw your energy up, concentrate it into one part of your body, your hands, for example, or your eyes. Concentrate.”

Maggie did as she was told, concentrating her power behind her eyes, although she had no idea why. “Good, now open your eyes.”

It took her a minute to remember how, like when you are half asleep and are trying hard to wake up. But it was well worth the effort when she opened them. Everything was tinted purple. Not only that, but everything was glowing with the richest colors she had ever seen. The grass and trees glowed green, from the brightest jade to the deepest emerald. Dirt and rocks a brownish gray, the lake undulating blues. But what drew her attention the most was the Dragon sitting in front of her. All her fear and uncertainty disappeared when she gazed upon him. He was glowing, head to foot in the brightest, richest, loveliest gold she could imagine. And his appearance had changed, although she couldn’t be sure if the change was actual or just in her mind. He was younger, more graceful looking, in the prime of his youth. Maggie’s mouth opened in surprise. Grandfather chuckled at her response. “What you are seeing, little one, is magic in its most basic form. Everything has magic, and you can now see it. What you see is my magical self, not the being that is defined by my body. Do you have a hold on it?”

Maggie nodded her head, afraid that if she spoke she would lose control again. “Good, now I want you to concentrate your energy, and push it into the ground, empty it from your body.” Maggie drew the energy from her eyes and watched as the world returned to normal. She pulled all the magic from her limbs, and let it drain into the ground. It felt strangely warm. Suddenly, she was exhausted, not just physically, but mentally also. Her head pounded, and her eyes wanted to close. But she wrenched them open, because Grandfather was speaking again. “Later I will teach you how to have your magic at the ready, but right now all I ask is that you be able to tell when you are about to lose control and be able to rein in your magic. Do you feel that you are able to do that, young one?”

Maggie nodded again, yawning. “Yes Grandfather, I think I can. But why do I feel so tired?”

“Because you drained part of yourself, a part that you never had to function without. It will get easier, but you must be careful. It is possible to over use your magic, with dire consequences. So no experimenting, alright?”

“Yes, Grandfather.” Maggie yawned again, and Grandfather laughed, louder this time.

“Time for you to go to bed.” Grandfather looked at the sky. “It’s getting late, and Silver is probably waiting for you.”

Maggie thought she could stand, but she was just so tired, her legs wouldn’t work. “Give me a minute; I need to rest.” She lay back on the soft grass and closed her eyes. *Just a second*, she thought to herself. *I can’t stay here for more than that.* And that was the last thing she remembered thinking before sinking into unconsciousness.

MAGIC

Squeals of delighted laughter brought Maggie out of the world of dreams, and into the place between sleep and awake. She struggled to remember the dream she was having, it was almost like it was real. She remembered a man who she had never seen before, and a long, low earthen room. But before she was able to recall anymore details, the dream leeches from her mind, like water from a sieve. But before it disappeared completely, she remembered a feeling of terror and resolve...

Another peal of laughter broke through her concentration, bringing her fully awake. She opened her eyes and found that she was lying on her soft bed back in Red's hut. Neither Red nor Silver were there, and that worried her a little. *How did I get here*, she wondered to herself. She sat up and swung her legs over the edge of the bed, looking around for the source of the laughter. It didn't take her long to realize that it was coming from outside the hut. She got up and went to find who was making all the noise.

The sun was bright and hot overhead as she exited the hut. She looked up, shielding her eyes from the sun's glare, and found that it was well past the midday point. *Wow, I slept for almost a full day. I wonder why no one woke me?* She didn't get much time to ponder this fact, for just then two giggling forms, one green and one yellow, knocked her over on to her back. She laughed with the little Dragons, glad that they were not afraid of her. Excluding Silver, the three hatchlings were the only ones who she felt completely safe around. PurpleSunset didn't run to her as the others did. Maggie got the impression that this one was a very shy Dragon, like RussetEarth.

The little ones caught sight of Silver, who was walking toward Maggie. GreenLeaves and YellowFlower jumped off of Maggie and ran to Silver. She greeted the little ones, and sent them back to GreenGrass's hut. But PurpleSunset didn't leave with the others. She walked up to Maggie and lowered her head. Maggie was surprised. She couldn't believe that any Dragon would submit to her.

Without looking up, she said, "Maggie, I would like to invite you to join us tonight for supper. I know you eat cooked food, like us, and thought you would enjoy eating with us."

Maggie laughed, and PurpleSunset raised her head. "I would love to, PurpleSunset. And you don't have to be so formal with me."

Softly, she said, "Alright Maggie, if you prefer. Supper will be served at sunset. I hope you will enjoy it." She walked off in the direction the others went.

"What was that all about?" Maggie asked Silver.

Silver was trying really hard not to laugh. "I think the day's events have gotten to her. You don't know just how strange that was. Sun is *never* that serious. Careful, yes, but she loves a good joke; and she is always kidding around."

Maggie stretched. "So, what did I miss while I was out?"

"Not much. But you did scare me almost to death."

Maggie stopped mid-stretch. "What?"

Silver started laughing. Maggie weakly chuckled along with her. *What did I do? I was asleep!* "Yea," she said, "we all felt the blast of magic that you set off, and Grandmother took off running to where you guys were, yelling at everyone that she passed to follow her. I thought something bad must have happened. I tried to come too, but GreenGrass stopped me. Then, after Grandmother got back, she wouldn't tell me what happened, so I went to the village edge to wait for you. It was almost dusk when I saw Grandfather coming, carrying you across his back. I almost had a heart attack. I thought you were dead."

Silver said it in a joking way, but the look in her eye made Maggie think that Silver was being serious. She felt really bad that she had worried Silver. "I'm sorry Silver, I just fell asleep. I didn't know using magic would make me so exhausted."

"You don't have to explain, Maggie. Grandfather told me all that happened. And he said that he was really proud of you."

Maggie felt her cheeks go red. She was not used to praise, from anyone except her mother.

Maggie looked down, and saw that her dress was covered in bits of leaves and twigs. She reached up and felt her hair was in a likewise state. "Yuck, I'm a mess! That's what I get for sleeping on the ground. Where can I clean up?"

"You can bathe in the river. But that reminds me, you need to come with me first. GreenGrass has a surprise for you."

"What is it?"

“What fun would that be? Come on, catch me if you can!”

Silver took off running, and Maggie followed at full speed. Silver slowed, almost letting Maggie grab her tail. Maggie would try to catch her, and then Silver would put on another burst of speed, quickly running out of reach. Maggie ran harder. But no matter how hard she tried, she just couldn't catch her. Silver's laughter floated back to Maggie, and Maggie laughed along, enjoying their game. She felt happier than she felt in a long time.

Too soon, they reached the Nest Mother's hut, and Silver was announcing herself. Maggie reached the hut, and started to go inside, sure Silver had told GreenGrass she was coming, too. But before she could go more than one step, she heard Silver's voice, “Don't come in, Maggie! Wait just a minute.”

The surprise. Maggie had forgotten about it. What was it? Why would GreenGrass get her a surprise? Maggie waited anxiously outside, biting her nails. A bad habit, Mother told her. She looked at the nail on her first finger, the one she was biting, and remembered how Mother would grab her hand when she caught her chewing. “You know I don't like that, Maggie dear.” She could hear her like it was yesterday. Suddenly, Maggie felt tears well up in her eyes. Not for the first time, she thought, *what happened after I left? Did they find out that Mother let me loose? What did they do to her if they did?* More than anything, Maggie missed her Mother. She never went outside her village until the day Mother told her to leave.

Maggie fought the urge to cry. She would not show weakness in front of her new family. The day Silver found her, she did not mean to break down like that. But Silver had caught her off guard, and she couldn't fight the emotion that had engulfed her. Now, however, she was in control. Emotion was a weakness. That was drilled into her from the day she was born. Crying was something babies did when they were wet, not something grown people did. Anger was acceptable, and so was love, in some form. But not fear, or sadness. Emotion made people do stupid things. That's what everyone at the village said.

Maggie took a deep breath to steady herself. “Are you ready yet?” She was glad her voice betrayed nothing.

“Almost!” The excitement in Silver's voice was plain.

Maggie started tapping her toe, impatience winning out. Finally Silver shouted, “Alright! Come in!”

Maggie brushed aside the cloth covering the opening, and stepped inside.

At first she didn't understand what she was seeing. She thought that several people were standing in the hut. But as her eyes adjusted, she saw that it was actually several dresses, each held up by a Dragon sitting on her haunches. The hatchlings were stretched as far as they could, trying to keep the hems of the garments from dragging the ground. Silver was holding one up and peering around it to see Maggie's reaction. GreenGrass was holding up two, and looking pleased and expectant.

"Wow." It was all she could say. She had never seen anything like these dresses. They were long and elegant, in vibrant shades of blue, red, green, and yellow. And from across the room, they even *looked* soft.

She went to the dress that Silver was holding, and ran the fabric through her hands. It was the softest thing she ever felt, softer than a newborn kitten. The green shimmered as she moved it, glittered. It was trimmed in gold, and absolutely beautiful.

She looked up and saw Silver watching her, waiting for her reaction. She looked over at GreenGrass, who was also watching. "You made these? How? Why?"

"Well, you couldn't go wearing that thing much longer. And to tell you the truth, I enjoy a good challenge. These were something I had never made before, so I thought I would try."

"But how? I've only been here for about a day. How did you make them so fast?"

"Magic, dear one. How else?"

"Right." She kept forgetting how much magic there was in this world. *My world*, she reminded herself.

"Well, what do you think?" Silver was looking at her with a look of impatience.

"I love them, of course. How could I not? They are the most beautiful things I have ever seen. Thank you so much." She reached for the dress Silver was holding. "May I?"

"Duh, they're yours."

“Silver, don’t be rude,” GreenGrass told her. “I am glad you like them, Maggie. Feel free to take one with you when you go to wash. Right now, I need to take the hatchlings to Grandfather. It’s time for their lessons.” She handed the dresses she was holding, a sky blue one and a deep, rich red one, to Maggie. “Come along little ones.”

She took the garments they were holding (a deep, almost black, blue one; a light green one, the color of new leaves; and a light yellow one, one that reminded Maggie of fresh turned butter) and placed them on Maggie’s arm too. As they were freed, the hatchlings ran from the hut, laughing and playing. GreenGrass followed them.

“Oh, I forgot to thank the little ones,” Maggie said.

“That’s alright. They wanted to help. And I’ve never seen them actually *want* to help with anything.”

Maggie smiled. “Can we go to the river?”

“Of course, which dress do you want to take?”

Maggie looked at the dresses on her arm. “I’ll take the green one you were holding, Silver. I like that color. It reminds me of the pine trees back home. I used to climb one every day.” *Stupid emotions*, she thought, for she just felt the tears brim in her eyes. How could a *tree* do that? She was just going to have to control herself better.

“Oh, ok. If you’re sure.” Silver looked uncomfortable, like she knew how Maggie was feeling, and didn’t know what to do. “Grab that basket with the scrub brushes and washing things, then we can go.” Silver got up and left the hut. Maggie laid the rest of the dresses on the bed in the corner, and followed Silver, still admiring the dress on her arm.

It was the middle of the afternoon when Maggie returned from washing, alone. Silver had showed her where the bathing place was in the bend of the river, and then left her, giving her some privacy. She had waded into the cool, still water and scrubbed the dirt from her skin and hair. It was not as nice as the hot water she used at GreenGrass’s hut, but it was refreshing. She dripped dried on the shore, and then donned the dress that she brought from the hut. It was as light as air, and as smooth as silk. It not only looked great, but felt great as she moved.

As she made her way to the village, a tingling started on the back of her neck. She reached up to scratch it, but the feeling wouldn't go away. She felt uneasy, like she was being watched. She stopped and looked around, wondering what was going on. Suddenly, she saw movement in the trees to her left. Something was moving toward her, something big and white.

WhiteWater emerged from the trees, looking around. "I thought they would never leave you alone *human*," he sneered. "But I am glad they did. Now I don't have to kill the others, too. Just you." He lowered his head, not in submittance, but into a hunting crouch. He glared at her through hate filled eyes, and slunk closer. A growl tore through his teeth, paralyzing Maggie with fear. She tried to think, to move, but her body wouldn't respond. All the while, the Dragon paced nearer.

Maggie opened her mouth, and forced whispered sound out. But it wasn't a scream, it was a question. "Why?"

WhiteWater stopped, but remained crouched. He was just a few yards away now, and could easily pounce on her from where he was. "You are evil, Maggie. I felt it the moment Grandfather spoke your name. You must be destroyed, along with all of your kind. You hate what you don't understand, and kill your brothers and sisters. A Dragon does not. You are nothing but an animal, along with every other human." Another growl sent Maggie staggering back a few steps. But still she couldn't run.

"You hate me. Do you understand me, WhiteWater? Do you know what I think and feel?"

"*Feel?* You do not *feel*, human. How could you, when all around you suffering exists, and you do nothing? Dragons help one another; we look out for each other. Do I understand you? More than you know. I have *seen* what your kind does. I do not believe you should be allowed to exist for even one more day. I will start with you, and then purge the world of the human stench."

WhiteWater growled again, and tensed to spring. Maggie tried to close her eyes, but they were wide with fear. Another growl emerged from deep in his chest, and he locked eyes with her. Maggie saw him shift his weight to pounce....

But his feet never left the ground. For one wild moment, she thought that he had changed his mind, but then she saw him try to yank his foot from the ground. But it was stuck fast, like it was nailed there. He tried to move the other, and then another, but all four feet

were glued to the ground. Maggie backed up another step, sure that he was going to break free any second. But he continued to struggle. Maggie backed up a few more steps, and WhiteWater roared in frustration. She took a few more steps back.

She was now too far away for him to get to her in a single bound. Part of her told her to run, now, before whatever was holding him finally let go. But she couldn't bring herself to turn her back to him, so she backed up, never taking her eyes off the struggling white Dragon in front of her.

She had backed up quite a ways when she suddenly hit something very big, very rough, and very solid. A Dragon foreleg. Before she could stop herself, before she even thought about it, she had gathered her magic, and was preparing to lash out at this new invader. She was not going down without a fight. But before she had gathered her defenses, she felt a weight, like a large blanket settle over her. It choked her, smothered her senses. She couldn't breath, couldn't think...

"STOP!" The voice broke through her panic, and made her stop and think for just a fraction of a second. She realized that she was on the verge of losing control again. She reined in her power, but she fought against the blanket, trying to find a weakness. She started tearing it apart with her magic. Whoever it was trying to kill her was going to die first. "Maggie, stop! I won't hurt you! But I can't hold you any longer."

Two things happened at once. First, she recognized the voice. It was Grandfather. And second, she could feel that the blanket was indeed in danger of collapsing. Maggie immediately stopped her attack, and pulled her magic into herself, but refusing to drain it away completely.

Grandfather, feeling that Maggie stopped trying to attack him, drew back the shield that was preventing her from using her magic. She doubled up, panting, her limbs shaking with exhaustion. The exhaustion was less severe this time, because, she supposed, she didn't drain her magic into the earth.

Grandfather was panting too, but recovered very quickly. A growl tore from between his teeth, directed at WhiteWater. But when he spoke, it was to Maggie. "Go to the village. Straight there, understand? No arguments!" For Maggie had just opened her mouth to argue. She wanted to stay and help him, if she could. "NO! Go now!"

Another growl, this time it was WhiteWater. Sometime since Grandfather's arrival, WhiteWater had regained the use of his feet. He had backed up, away from the ancient Dragon, but was now standing there, furling and unfurling his wings, expanding his chest, and raising his head as high as it would go. Maggie had seen something like that before, between stallions in a pen. She also knew what was going to happen next, and wanted to get out of there before the fight broke out. She backed up, preparing to run for it. Grandfather edged away to one side, away from Maggie, drawing WhiteWater's attention away from her. It worked. Water's gaze was locked on GoldenSunrise.

"Sunrise, I challenge you to the right to lead this tribe. I submitted once, and will not do so again. You are old. You are weak. You refuse to do what is necessary to protect our people." Smoke trailed from both nostrils. He bared his teeth, exposing fangs that were longer than Maggie's forearm, and just as thick. "I challenge you," he growled again.

"I accept." The statement was simple, but layered with deeper meaning. If Grandfather lost, Maggie knew WhiteWater would take command of the tribe, and would kill her before she could get to the village. She hoped that he did not loose.

"Good." And then Water roared, reared, and charged. Grandfather did nothing, letting the other Dragon cross the distance between them. WhiteWater rammed in to him, with the sound of crashing boulders. He reached up and wrapped his forepaws around his neck, attempting to strangle him, or throw him to the ground. But Grandfather was too quick. He reached around, and engulfed Water's side in white-hot flames. Water roared in pain and anger, retreating a little ways off. Maggie was backing away, but she could not take her eyes of the pair of fighting Dragons.

Again, WhiteWater reared and charged, but this time, Sunrise met him. He clamped down on Water's neck, crushing rock-hard scales, the blood welling up between his teeth. Water roared as Grandfather shook his mighty head, trying to snap his neck, flinging blood and dirt over the watching Maggie. The blood stood out in stark contrast against WhiteWater's snow white scales, now torn open to show the skin and muscle beneath.

For a minute, Maggie thought Sunrise had Water beat, but then something shifted. Maggie felt a ripple in the magic in the air, but before she could shout a warning to Grandfather, he was blasted off his feet and flew through the air, to land heavily on his side.

Water staggered and almost collapsed. He stared at Sunrise, making sure the Dragon was down. When he did not rise, he turned his attention to Maggie. The Dragon sneered, showing ivory teeth, and growled again. "I win, *human*. Now I will take care of you!" He roared and pounced.

Instinctively, Maggie threw out her magic to meet the Dragon. She could feel the pulsating net that was her power, but, as it enveloped WhiteWater, she could feel him as well; his pulse, his breath, and the tiny flicker of light that was his own magic. He had used all of his power to knock Grandfather off his feet and had none left. Maggie clamped down with her magic, stopping the large Dragon in mid-air. She bound his wings and legs with unbreakable rope, and he fell, with a crash that shook the ground, just a few feet from her. She scrambled backward away from his snapping teeth, and fell, barely conscious, about five feet away.

Smoke trailed from both nostrils, but he did not breathe fire, because his magic was gone. He laughed as he looked at Maggie, panting on the ground, her magic and life almost gone. "I may not be able to kill you myself, but you did my job for me. I don't think you have that much longer, and then I will take care of the old one. His mate will bend to my will, or she too will fall. I will scour the tribe; rid it of those that are tainted by your filth. Then I will become the rightful leader!" He laughed again.

Maggie was trying to remain conscious, because she knew that if she succumbed, she most likely would never wake up. Yet, she was oddly peaceful, knowing she was going to die. After all that she been through, just to go to sleep, to never have to worry about anything again, seemed like the most wonderful thing in the world. But she fought the urge, that irresistible urge to sleep, and forced her eyes to remain open. She concentrated on maintaining her spell.

If I die, I will take him with me. SilverFire and the rest will be safe. But she could feel her life slipping away, and she tightened her hold on WhiteWater, choking him. He coughed and sputtered, trying to breathe.

Her vision dimmed, the blackness closing in, and covering her in a warm blanket. She thought of her mother, SilverFire, RedStar, Grandfather, PurpleSunset, GreenGrass, and all the others that were nice and kind and generous. She took comfort that at least WhiteWater couldn't hurt them.

The darkness was almost complete; the warmth was nice and peaceful. She couldn't fight anymore. She tightened her grip on the Dragon.

Let him go, little one.

The voice was gentle, yet fierce. Strong, yet mild. It reminded her of winds through the grass, of waves crashing on the shore, and of birds singing in the morning sun. Maggie thought that she could listen to the voice forever.

Now, little one. Let him go. He will not hurt anyone.

Are you sure? Maggie asked the voice.

As sure as the sun will rise tomorrow, it said simply.

Reluctantly, she released her grip on WhiteWater, and as she did so, the last of her strength left her, the blackness closed in, and Maggie DragonSister knew no more.

DREAMS

SilverFire froze as a roar split the silence; a roar of pain and anguish. Then Silver roared as pain beyond pain tore through her heart. It was like a part of her was ripped away, and instantly she knew that Maggie was hurt, badly. Across the village, BlackNewMoon roared again, ran out of her hut and spun on the spot. She closed her eyes for the briefest moment, and then took off in the direction of the river, unfurling her wings as she went. SilverFire ran after her, running faster than she thought possible.

She passed RedStar and yelled, “Come on!”

Red did not question her, but took off after her, yelling at BlackRaven, YellowBird, and anyone else that he passed. Soon more than ten Dragons were running behind her, some taking to the air to follow after NewMoon. Silver concentrated on her breathing to calm the panic that was welling inside her. Something bad, really bad, just happened, and Silver was frustrated beyond words that she couldn’t fly to Maggie’s rescue. Red kept pace beside her, watching her from the corner of his eye, as though worried that she was going to snap.

SilverFire roared again, and doubled her efforts as another burst of pain shot through her heart. Moon’s wing beats were becoming fainter, and still SilverFire ran as though her life, and Maggie’s, depended on it.

She heard the roaring of Moon and the rest before she saw them. Then as she crested a small hill, she saw all of them clustered in a line, as though they had hit an invisible wall. Moon was pacing a perfect line, in front of the crowd, and couldn’t advance.

Silver barely registered this, for on the other side lay GoldenSunrise, and beyond him Maggie and WhiteWater were locked in a battle of the minds. Maggie had sunk to her knees with her hand stretched out in front of her, as though she held the Dragon in her palm. Silver could see purple ropes binding WhiteWater, and Maggie was surrounded in a purple mist. Her arm sagged, and Water squirmed as the bonds holding loosened. Maggie clenched her fist, and WhiteWater choked.

Maggie fell backwards and caught herself with her free hand. Water continued to cough and choke as the spell tightened its hold. Then suddenly WhiteWater roared, the spell keeping Moon and the others away broke, and Maggie collapsed to move no more.

SilverFire was rooted to the spot by shock. Red had run forward to help the others; Moon and most of the others had gathered around Sunrise; Red, GreenGrass, and RussetEarth tended Maggie. BlackRaven had cornered WhiteWater.

Moon roared at the sky, and several Dragons skirted away from her. Silver could see and feel the magic pulsating through the air as the Dragons wove spells to revive Sunrise and Maggie. SilverFire wished she could do the same.

Silver started to walk forward, as though all that was happening before her was a dream. Maggie could not be dead, she just couldn't be. And Grandfather. Silver always thought he would live forever. He had already lived longer than most, and Silver never thought that the Dragon had a weakness.

She felt helpless as she walked to where Red was standing. He was bowed over Maggie's still form, his eyes closed and a look of intense concentration on his face. That look was repeated on every face in the clearing, and the whispering of spells snaked through the air.

Silver stared down at Maggie, who was consumed in both a red and green magic mist. She had fallen backwards with her legs still tucked under her and her arms splayed out at awkward angles. But her face was peaceful, more serene than Silver had ever seen it. Not until this moment did she realize just how much pain and worry Maggie carried with her.

Laughter broke the silence, and the sound was so out of place that Silver was jolted back to reality. She looked around at the scene, finally taking it all in. The sight of other Dragons surprised her. For a moment, nothing had existed except her and Maggie. Now, she saw Grandfather lying there, unmoving; everyone working spells to save Maggie and Sunrise, and Raven guarding Water, who was the one laughing.

Rage seeped into every fiber of Silver's being when she saw him. So he was the reason that Maggie and Grandfather may both be dead. She growled, loud and long, with as much hate as she could muster.

The sound jerked Red out of his concentration, and he looked around at Silver. He followed her gaze and saw WhiteWater standing behind Raven, and growled with her.

"No Red! Help me," GreenGrass yelled.

Red reluctantly turned back to Maggie. Silver could tell that he wanted to fight Water, to punish him for what he did. But while Red was needed, she was not.

She stalked over to Water, her anger growing with every step. When she reached Raven she stopped, buffeted by the force of the spell he was using to contain Water. She growled again and asked, putting as much venom into her words as she could, "What have you done, WhiteWater?"

He laughed again. "What have *I* done? Why, I have freed us from that creature's foul influence! I have freed us from that old Dragon who would have us live with the beasts! You should all be thanking me!"

This time it was Raven who growled. "You have dishonored us, WhiteWater. You swore your allegiance to Grandfather and went back on your word. You attacked without provocation, and on a defenseless hatchling! You have broken the most sacred of Dragon laws, WhiteWater, and no one will forgive you this time. We shall wait until an assembly can be called, and then you will receive your punishment. Grandmother," he called over his shoulder, "I will take WhiteWater to the village now, and wait for you there." Without waiting for an answer, he turned back to Water. "Up. Now." Water stood, still laughing with some hidden amusement. "You will walk in front of me, Water. If you attempt to run or to attack me, I will kill you." Silver was shocked by the hatred in his voice.

Water moved away, and Raven followed. Silver turned back to the two groups behind her, and went to where Red and Russet were standing. They were a little ways away from Maggie now, panting slightly at the effort the magic cost them, and staring at the group now crowded around Grandfather. It was almost double in size now, because more Dragons from the village had joined them.

"How is she?"

"Alive. That's about it. Nothing we do will revive her. But she breathes and her heart beats," replied Red.

"And Grandfather?"

At this Red did not give an answer, but Silver didn't need one. As she looked, Dragons started backing away from the golden mound, heads bowed, and tears streaming from their eyes. The magic that was so heavy in the air gradually ceased as the Dragons realized that he could not be saved. Moon did not move. She just laid her head on

her mate's body and cried her lament to the sky. Some approached her and touched her lightly with their snouts, but she did not notice. She continued to morn over him, the greatest Dragon Silver had ever known.

A tear fell from her eye.

So wise, so gentle; the world was a darker place without him.

Another tear joined the first. What would happen to Maggie? Would she ever wake?

Another tear.

And what about the prophecy? Wasn't she going to restore balance to the two races?

Another tear fell. Why didn't Grandfather's spell protect him and Maggie?

Another tear.

What would happen to WhiteWater? Who would take over leadership of the tribe?

Tears were now coming thick and fast, along with the questions swirling around her mind. Red lay his head on her shoulder, and she did the same, allowing her tears to flow over his scales, refracting the light where they landed, so that he was covered in tiny rainbows. She saw Russet get up and walk away to go find his mate.

GreenGrass picked Maggie up on a long blanket one of the Dragons had fetched from her hut. It was suspended between her and BlueSkyAbove. Maggie was still unmoving, except for the small rise and fall of her chest. Silver watched as they disappeared from view, and then followed slowly, with Red walking with her all the way.

For several days, Silver could do nothing besides sit beside Maggie in GreenGrass's hut and watch the small girl sleep. Silver supposed it was sleep, but she never stirred or woke. In fact, except for her shallow breathing, Silver would have thought the girl had died.

Grandmother returned to the village after night had fallen, or so Red had told her. They were holding the Passing Ceremony for Grandfather the following night, and Red wanted Silver to go. But she had refused to leave Maggie alone no matter how many times

GreenGrass told Silver that she would be alright for a few hours. At midnight, she could see the tower of flames that would consume his body and carry his spirit to Dunselden, a Dragon's final resting place.

Several Dragons looked in on her in the days following the ceremony, including Red, Russet, BlueSkyAbove, and BlackRaven. Raven had come to tell Silver that WhiteWater's punishment was going to be decided by the Dragon elders, and that he was being kept under guard at all times until his fate was decided. At this Silver had just nodded. Nothing that the elders did to WhiteWater would seem like justice to Silver.

So the days passed, with Silver watching over Maggie, who never moved, and random Dragons coming to see her. Finally, on the fifth day of her constant vigial, GreenGrass made her leave.

"You need sleep. And when was the last time you ate, SilverFire?" Silver didn't answer; she couldn't remember. "That's what I thought. Starving yourself will not help her. Now leave, and I don't want to see you back here until you've eaten and slept."

Red was waiting outside for Silver when she emerged. He looked her over concerned. "How are you doing?"

"How do you think, Red? I left her alone. *Left her.* I am the reason that WhiteWater attacked her. And I am the reason that Grandfather is dead." This was the conclusion that she had come to over the past days. "If I had waited for Maggie, then WhiteWater wouldn't have attacked, and Grandfather..." Tears once again flowed over her scales.

"Silver, stop. You can not blame yourself for what Water did. He would have attacked even if you were there. And Grandfather would have protected you both. But nothing can change the past; we must move forward. Now, you need to hunt. Come with me."

Red turned and went to the edge of the village, toward the place where Sunrise had told Silver, Red, and Maggie about the prophecy and about the Magicians War. It seemed so long ago.

Just as they entered the trees, Red tuned slightly left and lead Silver off the path. There, under a large tree, lay a big furry lump, a fresh buck.

"I was hoping that you would come out today, so I left my kill for you, because I knew you'd be hungry. But if you would rather catch your own, I understand."

Silver looked sideways at Red, and thought he looked a little awkward as he said this. Silver couldn't think of any reason that he should feel that way. *He just is probably worried about me.* She didn't think about how Red must be feeling. He was probably just as upset over Maggie. She was his friend, too.

"Thanks Red." He looked at her. "I really mean it. Thank you. For everything."

"Your welcome, Silver. I'll go and see if I can't scare up another deer, shall I?" He turned to walk away.

"No Red, stay. I mean, there is more than enough here for two." Red smiled, and motioned for Silver to go first. Silver smiled in return; happy that he was happy.

After the meal, they went to wash up in the river before returning to the village. Red had not spoken much as they ate, and Silver didn't want to break the silence. She was content to just sit, eat, and be with her best friend.

Not until both had emerged from the water and were relaxing by the shore, did Silver start asking her questions.

"Now that Grandfather is gone," she still had trouble believing it, "who will lead the tribe?"

"Well, that has lead to some dissention among the members. Some believe that, since he did beat him, that WhiteWater is the rightful leader of the tribe."

"NO! No, no, no! He can't! He *killed* Grandfather; he is the reason that Maggie is like she is. That can't happen." Silver hadn't even realized that she had jumped to her feet.

Red hadn't moved. "Silver, calm down. Grandmother would never let that happen." He looked calm enough, so Silver believed him. Surly if Water was taking over the tribe, Red would be more agitated. She laid back down.

"Ok, then who is?"

"Well, you didn't let me finish. Anyway, some believed that Dragon law makes Water rightful leader, since he beat the old leader in one-on-one combat. But Grandmother argued that Water had voided any chance that he had of becoming leader when he attacked Maggie, who is considered little more than a hatchling, and when he used magic in the fight."

“What? What do you mean?”

“Well, according to Dragon law, when a male challenges another male to combat, it is based on skill and strength only. Neither party is allowed to use magic to best the other, unless both agree to do otherwise. By WhiteWater’s own admission, neither of them agreed on using magic in that fight. So, he did not win fairly. All the elders agreed with Grandmother, and elected her leader until she decides to pass on the leadership to another.”

“Will she?”

“I don’t know. She is still grieving, but is acting strong for her people. She is also in charge of overseeing Water’s trial.” A hard edge crept into his voice.

“When will it start?” Silver fought to remain calm, but the red hot anger was hard to repress.

“The elders decided to wait a week to see if Maggie will regain conciseness, in order to give her version of events. If she does not wake, the witnesses that were with NewMoon will testify.”

“Two days.”

“Yes.”

“Two days until he faces justice. Where is he now?”

“He is being kept under constant guard in his hut. No one is allowed in there, Silver, so don’t even think about it.”

“I wasn’t.” That wasn’t true. She was just thinking of how she would love to go and give that waste of Dragon skin a piece of her mind. But even if she did manage to get to him what would she do? She knew what she would like to do, but she was small and magic-less; no match for Water. But it was still fun to imagine what she would like to do...

“Well, so what you want to do now?” Red’s voice jolted her out of her fantasy. The days of no sleep had finally caught up with her, and she yawned.

“Yes, bed,” he said.

“But I’m not sle...eee...epy,” she yawned.

“Liar,” laughed Red. “Come on, you need sleep.” He stood beside her. “Up you get.” Nudging her lightly with his snout, Red coaxed the half asleep Silver to stand.

She yawned again, eyes half closed. “Ok. I guess I am a little tired.”

“A little. Bah. More like half-dead.” Silver gave Red a look of deep disgust. “Oh, sorry. It just slipped; I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“I know Red. Let’s go.” Silver turned to leave, and stumbled slightly.

Red chuckled. “Come on, lean on me. I’ll get you there.”

Silver did as she was told, and Red walked her back to the village, keeping Silver upright.

Silver barely made it into her hut and laid down before she was out. Strange things, disjointed colors swirled through her unconscious mind. Nothing made any sense, just shapes, just colors.

Then suddenly the dreams changed. Everything became real. Sounds and smells assaulted Silver. The colors became clearer; she could feel the ground beneath her feet. She looked around, trying to figure out where she was. She saw Dragons of all shapes and colors, and humans walking with them. They greeted each other like friends, talking and laughing. Mixed in with all of them were creatures Silver had never seen before, and some that she had. There were wolves, bears, deer, elk, birds of all shapes and sizes, foxes, rabbits, squirrels. Then there were smaller wolf like animals, with shorter hair, that were bounding around the humans, wagging their tails. There were giant golden-yellow cats, the biggest of which had shaggy fur around its neck. As Silver watched, the cat let out a roar, almost Dragon like. There were pure white hoofed animals with horns coming out of their foreheads, large half-cat, half-eagle creatures, and some that were half men, half hoofed creatures.

It was so much to take in, but she noticed something that all the creatures were doing. They were conversing; talking to each other, and to the humans and Dragons, too. They were saying hello, commenting to each other. All seemed as intelligent as any Dragon.

What is this place? As soon as she asked the question, she knew. She was in the spirit realm, the place where all spirits are free to roam and choose their course. She looked around again, and knowledge flowed into her mind like water into dry soil. She was seeing dogs, lions, unicorns, griffins, and centaurs. Her spirit-self knew everything about

these creatures; the unicorns, meek and pure; the dogs, loyal and trustworthy; the griffins, fierce and proud; and the centaurs, wise and watchers of the stars.

As she gazed upon the menagerie of creatures before her, a glint of bright gold caught her eye. Sitting on a hill, high above where Silver now stood was a great gold Dragon, more beautiful and more terrifying than anything Silver had ever seen. And sitting before him was a girl shrouded in a purple mist. She was beautiful, and seemed both young and old at the same time. They were talking, and the girl seemed upset about something. Suddenly she turned her head. Their eyes locked across that vast distance, and in that instant Silver knew it was Maggie.

Silver woke with a jerk and fell off the bed. Shouts and roars could be heard outside her hut, along with the crackle and glow of fire. Silver jumped off the floor and ran outside.

Flames were towering high in the dark sky on the far side of the village. Dragons were running toward the fire, magic tingling in the air. They were trying to contain the flames until it could be put out. But that is not what held Silver's attention as she ran.

A ring of Dragons surrounded a black and white thrashing shape. Jets of flame and waves of magic poured from both Dragons as they fought to the death. Harsh snarls, roars, and growls emanated from both the fighters and the crowd.

BlackRaven was trying to confine WhiteWater, but Water was putting up an excellent fight. The Dragons were trying to help, to lend their magic to Raven, to contain Water themselves, but something held them at bay. No Dragon could help Raven, or hinder Water.

Then a white mist surrounded Raven and Water. But it wasn't normal mist. It was dense, impenetrable, as white as the purest snow, and no sound escaped from it. The other Dragons were forced back, pushed by the expanding mist. Various Dragons tried pushing it, parting it, and other ways of vanishing it with magic. Some tried to run through it, but could get no closer than the outer edge.

Then the mist parted, and revealed a strange sight. Raven was frozen in mid-snarl, curled around an invisible foe, unable to move. His eyes were slits, mad with hate, and his jaws were open, ready to bite and tear. But there was no opponent. Water was gone, just disappeared into the mist, leaving Raven there, alone. The Dragons

were likewise frozen, but from shock. *Where was WhiteWater?* There was no way he was able to escape with everyone watching the fight.

Like ice thawing in the sun, the tip of Raven's tail started to twitch. His eyes darted back and forth, although his head remained unmoving. His feet clinched and unclenched, grabbing unseen things. Silver felt a disturbance in the air. So did everyone else. The ones who had crept forward to help Raven ran and scrambled back. A mad dash ensued as Dragons ran away from Raven, trying to clear the area.

A violent explosion rent the air as Raven shredded the last bit of magic that bound him. Silver was thrown back by the force of his magic. She was, for the first time in her life, frightened of Raven. He snarled, roared, and looked skyward. He unfurled his massive, jet black wings and leaped into the sky. Higher and higher he climbed, until he disappeared into the night.

Slowly the other Dragons looked away, realizing that the fire still burned with hot intensity behind them. Some ran to help contain and smother the flames; others were too shocked by what had happened to really feel any since of urgency; these Dragons walked. Silver did neither. She just stood there, unable to comprehend what had just happened.

"Come away, Silver."

She jumped, startled. She didn't hear Red come up to stand beside her.

"There is nothing you can do here. Come on. He will find the traitor."

Silver felt herself turn away from the spot where the Dragons had fought. The ground was tore and bloody, although she didn't know whose blood stained the ground. She turned around. The scene behind her was no better.

Smoked choked the air and made it difficult to breathe. The flames had been extinguished, but the hut still smoldered. But not hut, *huts*. Several had been consumed in the blaze. Dragons milled about, looking at the damage, whispering to each other, as though if they spoke to loud, they might anger the fire gods more. But below all this, Silver heard a persistant sound. Crying.

"That traitor tried to destroy you and Maggie, and nearly destroyed the village in the process."

Now Silver really looked. Silver's old hut was destroyed, as well as several surrounding it. Other bore scorch marks; their roofs burned. Silver turned her head and shock tore through her once again.

GreenGrass's hut, the nest hut, was gone. Not destroyed, just gone. A black scorched circle had appeared where the hut once stood. The huts around hers were knocked on their sides, burn marks on the stone. Silver could hear the crying more clearly now, as though seeing the ruined hut had sharpened her senses. "NO! Maggie! The hatchlings!" Silver started to run forward, not knowing what she was going to do, only that she wanted, needed, to help.

Red blocked her way, cutting into Silver's blind, head long sprint. "Silver, stop! Their fine, everyone, miraculously, is fine."

She looked at him doubtfully. "Maggie?"

"The same as before. No better, no worse."

"Leaves? SunSet? Flower?"

"All fine. Silver, listen. I have never seen, or even heard of, power like I saw here today. No one has. Water has done something, perhaps even evil, to gain that power. Maybe Grandfather had it, but he never used it, never even hinted that he was able to do those things."

"What are you talking about, Red? Either speak your questions clearly or get out of my way. I am in no mood for riddles."

He looked at her oddly. "You didn't... Didn't you see it?"

"I was asleep, as you well know. You put me in your hut!"

"You slept through that?"

Now Silver was annoyed. "I was tired!" She said in her defense.

"Apparently." He shook his head, slowly, back and forth, like he couldn't believe what he was hearing. "You slept through it," he repeated.

"Yes, now get out of my way!" Silver pushed through him, and he let her go, watching her bewilderedly. Silver ignored him and tried to find Maggie. She found GreenGrass sitting on the ground trying to comfort the hatchlings, who were the ones crying. She was cut and covered in soot, but otherwise seemed unharmed. The hatchlings were likewise dirty, but were not harmed; just scared. Lying beside

them on a torn and dirty blanket was Maggie. She was scratched and covered in ash, but she still slumbered on as if nothing had happened. GreenGrass looked up and saw Silver coming toward them and nodded to her. She nodded in reply, and went straight to Maggie, sitting beside her. Her face was still peaceful, despite the long scratch that ran temple to chin and the large bruise that was blossoming over her left eye.

Red came up to her. "She's ok, Silver. Really. I don't know how, but she is actually ok."

"What about the little ones?"

"GreenGrass is taking care of them. They weren't in the hut when it went up."

"But Maggie was?"

"Yes."

"But, how...?" She trailed off.

"I don't know. No one does. We found her a little way off, thrown from the blast. All she suffered were a few scratches and bruises, and even those we think were from the other blasts. We don't know *how*, Silver."

She looked at Red, seeing the truth in his eyes. She was shocked. How could anyone survive destruction like what she saw here?

"You said WhiteWater did this?" Red nodded. "How could he?" SilverFire's worry had subsided, now she was angry. He had destroyed the nest hut, and could have killed the hatchlings when he tried to kill Maggie. Hatchlings were precious, and could never be harmed or killed.

"He didn't care. He tried to take as many Dragons with him as he could, before Raven got to him. He has turned." He said cryptically.

"What?"

"Silver, you see what he did. He tried to kill you, and he didn't care who else he harmed. And he not only destroyed the nest hut, he obliterated it. Nothing is left, not even dust and rubble. Not even Grandfather was capable of destroying matter that completely. Water must have allied himself with the Dark Magics in order to accomplish something that great."

Silver thought about this. RedStar had to be right, because what sane Dragon would break a law so precious, so rooted deep in a Dragon's instincts?

“Will Raven be able to catch him?”

“I hope so, for all our sakes. I have a feeling that he isn't done.”

Silver looked down at the sleeping girl between them and she knew he was right.

VISIONS

The darkness was complete. So quiet. So peaceful. Nothing existed. Maggie floated in the darkness, neither here or there, where ever there was. She couldn't see or feel or hear. But she could think.

Where am I?

That she could not answer. Here was nowhere, and everywhere. Here was where time meant nothing, and everything.

I must be dead. But if she was dead, then how was she able to think? As far as she knew, nothing existed after. *So I'm not dead. But then, I'm what?* She didn't have an answer for that either. She went over the recent events in her mind. *I hope Silver is safe. The voice said Water wouldn't hurt anyone.* The voice! She remembered with vivid clarity that voice. It seemed familiar, but she was sure she had never heard it before. And where was it now? It should be here.

Laughter broke through her thinking. *Remember me?* The sweet voice asked Maggie through the darkness.

Of course! I could never forget you, even if I tried. Not that I would want to.

I am glad to hear that.

Where am I?

In between. You are special, Maggie dear. I called you here so that I may help you.

With what?

Haven't you been listening to what Sunrise has been telling you? You are meant to right the balance between the dragons and the humans, between all the races. Much depends on you, little one.

But how am I supposed to do that?! I am small, insignificant. I can't change the world.

When the voice responded, it sounded angry. *Nothing is insignificant. Everything has a purpose. No matter how big or small a being is, it has a reason to be here. You are special, Maggie. Let no one tell you different.*

Maggie vaguely remembered saying the same thing to Silver the day they met. She had not known what made her say it, but it seemed appropriate at the time. *But how?* She asked.

Now, I am glad you asked. I will help, of course. I have a teacher here for you. He is most anxious to see you.

A teacher where? There is nothing here!

The voice laughed again. *There is only nothing because you expect nothing, Maggie.*

That threw her off. *What?*

Just what I said. When you died, for lack of a better word, what did you expect to find?

She didn't understand where this was going. *Nothing*, she said.

Exactly. You expected to find nothing, so nothing is what you found. You know you are not dead, but you still expect to find nothing. So you continue to find nothing. Making any since yet?

Kind of. So if I was expecting a rolling, green meadow then...

That is what you would have found, at first. That is why you could not hear me until you expected to.

What do you mean at first?

Yes, when a being dies, first it... But this does not concern you. You are not dead. So I cannot tell you.

But I want to know!

If you really want to know, then come and find me.

How?

You are trapped in your own mind, Maggie. Free yourself, and then find me. She could feel the voice getting farther away.

Wait! I don't know what you mean! She waited for a response, but none came. *Now what am I supposed to do?* She didn't know what that meant, to "free your mind". *Ok, I need to expect something. I expect to be standing in a field.*

Nothing happened.

I expect to be in a hut.

Blackness.

This isn't working! I need more help! The voice should have given me more information.

Suddenly, the voice was back. *Now little one, you need to figure this out on your own. But here is a hint. Cast all doubt from your mind. Doubt clouds your ability. You expected help, and you got it. Now I will go, and I will not return.*

Maggie believed it. But what kind of clue was that? Clear doubt from your mind? How was she supposed to do that?

Relax. Maggie told herself. *Where would you most love to be right now?* She knew the answer to that. *Home.* But that was impossible. She let her mind wander. Where had she felt safest? Somewhere that was all hers? *My rock.* When she was younger, she had loved to go and sit by a bend in the river on a large rock that sparkled in the sunshine. No one knew it was there, because it was surrounded by a thick patch of thorns on all sides. She imagined what it would look like, with the sparkles imbedded in the surface. What it would feel like, cool to the touch, even on the hottest of days. What the sounds would be, the birds singing overhead, the river gurgling merrily beside her.

The exercise worked. She was calmer and could think clearer. She thought about what the voice said, about getting nothing because she expected nothing. *What did I expect? Not this.* No, she now realized, in her heart of hearts, that she never really believed that there was nothing after death. Some deep feeling told her that there was more to this life than just that of the waking realm. *What did I expect?* The answer came readily, like it was just waiting for her to ask the right question. *A paradise.*

Suddenly, a blinding light pierced the darkness. The most beautiful, the most pure of lights lit up that vast empty space. But even though the light was strong, Maggie's eyes were stronger. In the light she saw trees, hills, rocks, and the most beautiful blue sky. The light quickly enveloped her. But not a light. A whole world. This is what her heart told her existed. Every creature imaginable existed here, and even some that she didn't imagine. Everything was pure, as if newly made, even the people.

Yes, there were people and Dragons. Talking and laughing and interacting like they were not mortal enemies. There were animals and they were talking to the people and Dragons, too!

Then everyone stopped, some in mid-stride, to look at Maggie. But not with a look of hatred or fascination or annoyance, but wonder. And pure joy.

Maggie looked around, taking in everything. *What am I supposed to do?* She was looking around for someone to ask when a man walked up. Well, not walked, trotted. And not really a man. The top half was a man, the bottom half was a horse. *Centaur*. The name just fell into Maggie's head out of nowhere. The centaur stopped right in front of Maggie, bowed his head, and placed his fist over his heart, in a gesture of respect.

"Greetings, I am Jarden. We have waited a long time for your arrival, Maggie."

Maggie was stunned. "How do you know my name?"

Jarden raised his head. "Your name is whispered by every being here that can talk, walk or fly. Though your arrival is somewhat of a surprise. Tell me, are you dead?"

This question shocked Maggie more than Jarden knowing who she was. "No! I'm not dead."

He bowed his head again. "Forgive me if I have offended. It is just that, for you to be in the Spirit Realm, you must have died."

"Well, I didn't die. Or, at least that is what the voice told me."

"Voice?" Jarden asked.

"Yea, when everything went black, a voice told me what I had to do to find this place. It told me that I wasn't dead. She said to come and find her. I thought she would be here." Maggie looked around, hoping to find the owner of the voice somewhere in the crowd. She noticed that most had gone back to what they were doing before hand, but still kept throwing looks her way. She looked back at Jarden. He was looking at her thoughtfully.

"This voice, what did it sound like?"

So Maggie tried to explain it to him. How it reminded her of waves, how fierce it seemed, and gentle at the same time. But every time she opened her mouth to try, the words just seemed unable to convey exactly what it sounded like. So all she ended up saying was, "It was beautiful. Like music."

Jarden just nodded. "I know of who you speak. She is here, but she will only come to you when you are ready. In the mean time, there is someone else who is waiting. Come." He motioned with his hand, and turned away. "Come!" And he took off at a full gallop.

Maggie stared at his retreating rump. How was she supposed to follow that? But she jogged off after him, wanting to at least keep him in her sights. Then something strange happened. Although she had not increased her speed, the world was whooshing by, like she was in a dead sprint. She was not winded in the least, and not the least bit tired. She moved her legs just a bit faster, and the world flew. Jarden was now just a few feet ahead of her now. She drew even with him.

“How am I doing this?” She sounded like she was standing still, not moving at the speed of a full grown horse.

“It is the Spirit Realm. All things are possible here.”

“What else can I do?”

“Ask him. He is the one who wished to see you.” Jarden slowed to a slow trot, looking ahead of him.

Maggie slowed when he did, and looked forward, where Jarden’s attention was focused. She stopped dead in her tracks.

A great big, glittering gold Dragon stood in front of her. He was younger than when she last seen him, more like is Magical self. She yelled with delight, and ran toward him. “Grandfather!”

Grandfather laughed deep in his chest and lowered his head so Maggie could hug him. “Hello, little one. I am glad to see you, too.”

“You know the Gold One, Maggie?” Asked Jarden.

“Yes, he was my teacher.”

“I still am, Maggie dear. Death hasn’t changed that.”

Maggie looked him in the eye. “I’m *I* dead, Grandfather?”

Grandfather touched her on the head with his snout. “No, little one. You are not dead. But I am. I am so sorry I left you Maggie. I did not mean to leave you there to fight that battle on your own.”

He sounded so sad, so sorry, that Maggie looked him in the eye again. “Sorry for what? What happened was not your fault, it was WhiteWater’s. I’m sorry that I went to the river alone. Maybe if I hadn’t, Water wouldn’t have attacked.”

“You’re wrong, Maggie. He would have found some way. The spell I placed on him was not strong enough to contain the Magic he now has.”

“What do you mean? Doesn’t he have the same magic as you?”

“No, young one. But now is not the time to trouble ourselves with such dark thoughts. Come, I’ll show you around. Then we shall begin your lessons. Again.”

Grandfather dismissed Jarden, thanking him for his help, and insuring him, after Jarden’s insistence, that he would indeed call on him again if he should require help.

“That’s one helpful little pony,” laughed Grandfather, when they were well out of ear shot of the centaur. “But never call them that, Maggie dear. Pride like a Dragon, centaurs have. Never cross one, if you wish to keep your head on your shoulders. Now, where would you like to go?”

“I don’t know. I’m not even sure where ‘here’ is.”

“Well, the simplest explanation is to say that this is a checkpoint, so to speak, between the waking realm, the realm of reality, and the eternal resting place that all spirits seek. Here, a spirit can continue on, learning, teaching, and even choose to return to the Earth in the form of another body, or as an invisible spirit. It is a place of peace, somewhere that a person, Dragon, or animal can rest and choose whatever path they may.”

“That’s not a very simple explanation, Grandfather.”

The big Dragon laughed. “It’s not. But it’s the best one I have.”

Maggie thought for a moment. “Ok, so this is in-between?”

“Yes, that is a good way to think about it.”

They had continued walking down a wide, smooth dirt road and now they had reached a group of houses all situated in a wide circle inclosing a large silver fountain. Maggie gasped at its beauty. She walked toward it, unable to stop herself, needing a better view.

It looked to be made of the purest of silvers, but where the water ran, it shimmered and rippled through all the colors of the rainbow. The fountain was made into the likeness of creatures of every shape, size, and species that she could imagine. They were all connected, made out of one single, solid piece of metal. The water was crystal

clear and sounded heavenly running over the different creatures, reminding Maggie of the stream that she used to sit by. She sat down on the rim of the fountain and listened. And the more she listened, the more she heard. Layer upon layer of sound was concealed in the water's flow. The sound of waves, the hunt song of a pack, the wind in the trees, the thunder of a spring's storm. Maggie gasped in awe. "What is it?"

"That, Maggie, is the fountain of creation." The girl jumped. She had not heard the Dragon come up to stand right behind her. "It was placed here by the God and Goddess to honor the Creator after he made the Universe."

"What?"

"The God and Goddess, Maggie. The beings, to lack a better term, which every other god came after. But even they answer to the Creator, the one who spoke the earth, sky, and everything in it, above it, and below it, into creation."

"I still don't understand, Grandfather. What do you mean, created the universe?"

"All in good time, Maggie. All in good time. Do not rush yourself, for this is one of the great wonders of this realm. Please sit and rest. Come to me when you are ready."

Grandfather walked off out of the circle of houses and sat down in a soft patch of grass. He immediately jumped back up again as a very livid rabbit jumped out of his den and started scolding the Dragon for almost sitting on his house. Grandfather apologized, telling him that he did not mean any harm, and backed up about ten feet. He studied the ground before he sat, then nodded to the rabbit. The rabbit nodded in return, and retreated to his den.

Maggie laughed to herself, and returned to gazing at the fountain, truly mesmerized by what she saw.

"I don't know about her, Feried. She is so young, and knows too little of what she must do. I have faith in her, but I don't think she has faith in herself."

"I understand, Gold One, as does everyone else in this realm. We are all pinning our hopes on her." The ash-gray rabbit that was nearly squashed by GoldenSunrise had emerged from his den to sit beside him.

“She knows so little of her own history. I had no idea that King Zelder had oppressed his people so much. Or even that he had forbade his peoples belief in the divine. She has no idea who created her world or even of the Lord and Lady, Feried! Her entire history has been reduced to myths and legends.”

“So sad. I remember the human world well, Sunrise. They’re culture was rich with belief and lore. There were temples and libraries and places of learning. Now according to you, everything is gone, and people wonder the land like herds of cattle.” The little rabbit looked up at the Dragon. “Does the girl know, Sunrise?”

“That I looked into her mind? No, she does not even know I have that ability. I was afraid it would frighten her too much. I shouldn’t have, but when I saw her on that hill with RedStar, I had to make sure that Silver was telling the truth.”

“And that Maggie didn’t deceive her.”

“That, too.”

Both creatures watched Maggie for a little while in silence. “What do we do, Sunrise?”

“We guide her, teach her, believe in her, and hope that she does the right thing.”

“I don’t understand.”

A little after mid-day found Maggie and GoldenSunrise sitting across from one another on a tall hillside overlooking one of the bigger villages in the divine realm.

“What don’t you understand, Maggie?”

“That I’m here, but not here? That this is only my spirit and this is all like a dream? But this can’t be a dream because everything seems so real. I can touch things, feel them.”

“And you can do so because you are spirit, and this realm is made of spirit, just as the world you left is made of matter, and your body is made of matter. Like can only effect like, Maggie. If you were to

exit this realm and return to earth, without a body you would not be able to affect much, if anything. And no earthly matter can exist here. You are here in spirit, but your body remains on the earth plane, waiting for you to return.”

“Okay. But I’m not dead. So how can I be a spirit?”

“Maggie, your body can exist without your soul, your essence, although everything that makes you *you* is no longer there, just your shell is. And your spirit can exist without your body, as in death. But sometimes, your body and spirit separate for a short time, like now. You body still breaths and is alive, although *you* are not actually there.”

Maggie nodded. “What about Silver? What does she think has happened to me?”

“She thinks that you are asleep, but cannot be woken. She watches over you, to make sure that you are safe; although she has neglected herself these past days.”

“*Days?* I’ve only been here a matter of hours. It’s only mid-day!”

“Maggie dear, time works differently here. What are hours here can be days on earth; or what are days here can be minutes on earth. There is no set rate in time here, and it does not behave like time on the earth plane.” He paused for a moment. “Have you ever had a dream where it seemed to last hours, but you wake up only minutes after it started?”

Maggie nodded.

“Then you have experienced the way time works here. Which means that, hopefully, when you are finished with your training here, you can return to the time shortly after you became unresponsive, maybe a couple of weeks later.”

“Weeks? What about Silver? And Red? I can’t just let them think that I’m as good as dead!”

“She will know shortly you are not dead.”

“How?”

Grandfather paused, seeming to wait for something. Then, “Look to your left.”

Maggie had no idea what he wanted her to see, or how that had anything to do with Silver. But she looked anyway.

Sitting under an arch, looking directly at her was a silver dragon. Maggie was stunned. Their eyes locked. And in that instant Maggie knew it was SilverFire.

As suddenly as she appeared, Silver vanished. Maggie jumped to her feet, wanting to believe that the image she seen was actually her friend.

“Was that really her?” Maggie knew that Grandfather would know what she was talking about.

“Yes, that was my granddaughter. Or rather, it was her dreaming self. She is so worried about you; her soul sought out and found you, even though a vast space and several planes stand between you. She is a determined soul.”

“How can I talk to her?” There was no answer. “Grandfather?” Maggie looked behind her. “Grandfather!”

The gold Dragon was sitting stock still, his eyes shut tight. He looked frozen. Then suddenly all the sounds of this strange world, the calling of birds, the running of water, the hoof beats, the shouts and songs, stopped. Froze. Maggie looked around her. Everyone had adopted the same pose, froze with their eyes shut. An unnatural chill settled over her, freezing her, locking her in place. Unbidden, her eyes closed.

She saw WhiteWater attacking BlackRaven in what was once the Dragon's village, the place she called home, but was now half destroyed. The fight scared her, but not as bad as what she saw attached to the white Dragon.

A black aura surrounded him, pulsing, growing, and feeding on the anger from him, Raven and all the other Dragons that made a circle around the fighting pair. The shadow grew and consumed Water. But instead of destroying him, it was absorbed. It flowed into him, and as it did, a white mist escaped, like it was exchanged inside the Dragon. It enclosed the two, blocking them from view. But Maggie could feel what was happening inside of the mist. It was like she was with the fighting Dragons inside the circle, and standing outside watching at the same time.

She felt the mist enter BlackRaven, chilling him, making him sluggish. She felt him try to use his magic to fight the mist's spell, but it kept creeping, freezing each limb, numbing his senses, and making it harder to move.

As the mist was freezing Raven, it seemed to be dissolving WhiteWater. But he was not fighting against it. He was controlling it, directing it to do his bidding, while he watched Raven struggle as the mist froze him. "You are on the wrong side, Iféld. You will fight, and you will lose, just as the Vonlend did the last time. Join me, and we will be gods once again." As an answer, Raven opened his man and bared his teeth, snarling at the other Dragon. Then he froze, mid-snarl, his teeth stark white against the black of his scales. Water laughed, "Foolish," and then he was gone. And so was Maggie.

She opened her eyes back in the divine realm to see Grandfather was sitting like he was frozen, still in the grips of the vision. Maggie looked around. Some of the people were waking; others still were seeing what was happening on the earth plane. The sounds slowly started again, along with the whispers of the beings talking about what they had just seen. Maggie looked back at Grandfather, who was shaking his head slowly back and forth with his eyes still shut.

"Oh, WhiteWater, what have you done? Do you know what you have allied yourself with? Do you know the consequence?" Grandfather opened his eyes and looked at Maggie. "Child, what you have just seen has changed the course of the future; yours, Silver's, the hatchlings, and everything that seeks peace and harmony on the earth. You are the only one who can stop it, to right the imbalance I set in motion. But you do have a choice."

Grandfather pointed with his snout behind Maggie. She turned around to the wonderful vista that was behind her. Everyone was back to their tasks they were doing before, but in a more subdued manner. And every once in awhile, someone would turn in her direction.

"Your choice, Maggie dear, is between here and the earth plane. You can return to the earth, with everything that entails. Love, hate, joy, grief, pain, suffering, you will experience it all. Or you can stay here, and truly be here. You may see all, do all, and be entitled to everything every spirit is."

"You mean die."

"Yes Maggie, you will die. That is the only way you can be here."

She felt the gravity of his words in her bones. She could stay here and know perfect bliss and learn everything she would ever want; or she could return to the earth.

“Silver.” The name slipped from her lips unbidden. It wasn’t a question, but Grandfather answered her anyway.

“She will witness your passing, she will grieve, but she will go on with her life. You can’t base your decision on your friendship with my granddaughter. You must do what you think is best for you. It was wrong of me to assume that you would take on this task. You must decide for yourself.”

Maggie thought about what he said. Then she turned back to him. “What do you mean the imbalance *you* set in motion?”

Grandfather sighed and hung his head. “When I used the magic Mother Earth gave me to set Dragons against humans, I tipped the scale. At that moment, there were groups of Dragons and humans in hiding, working together to stop the massacre that had persisted for centuries. The humans were seeking the help of Dragons and their natural magic to heal the earth and right past wrongs. I did not know. Distracted, I turned friend against friend, ally against ally, and restarted the Magicians War. The ‘one to come’ was already here. I did not know. How could I? I as good as killed him and all our hope.”

“But you said all humans hated Dragons. That they had already turned against one another.”

“They did, but I had not factored in time. Over time Magic fades, just like anything else in nature. The spell that the Dragons and Magicians wove over the earth had stretched, tore, and in some places, faded altogether. One thousand years was enough time to allow that to happen. That is how the One was born the last time. That is how you were born into this time. That is why SilverFire and RedStar did not kill you on sight. They were able to resist, and the rest of the tribe was easy to convince to leave you alone; except WhiteWater, but that was not because of me. That was another force, one that has tainted WhiteWater and his magic.”

“What?”

“Darkness. The force that pulls each of us just a little, and what most of us resist. WhiteWater has given himself over to that darkness, and it has made him strong.” And then he said, more to himself than to her, “I did not see it, but looking back, I think I chose not to.”

Ignoring the last comment, she asked him another question, trying to sort through what he was telling her. “Why didn’t you just undo your spell when you found out that you made a mistake?”

“I did not think that I had made a mistake until well after I set the spell. I tried to undo the spell then, but by then the magic was so engrained into the Dragons’ minds that it was impossible to remove without permanent damage. I have tried to make up for that mistake ever since. I have tried over the years to remove it as it faded, but have been unsuccessful.”

Maggie stared across the distance, seeing nothing. She thought about the implications of what Grandfather just told her. Of the choice that he made that changed the course of the future; and the choice that lay before her that would change hers. In the end though, there was no choice.

Without turning around, she said to the Dragon, “How can I leave Silver and Red and all the others to face what is coming alone? How can I let WhiteWater to do whatever it is he is up to? If I do stay here, I could choose to return later, but how am I to know if it would be in time? Time does not work the same here, right?”

“Yes, Maggie. Time here functions independently from time on earth.”

“So I might be too late to help Silver, Red and the others. So I will go back, and I accept whatever happens because of that choice.”

Sunrise bowed his head. “Then so be it. I give you this to help in the journey ahead.” He bowed his head low and placed his snout on her forehead. A blinding flash of white light seared her vision, blocking everything from view. Her veins burned with liquid fire and she collapsed in a heap in front of the Dragon. Feelings assaulted her as her senses opened up to everything and everyone. While she couldn’t see Grandfather with her eyes, she could feel him and see his magic in her mind’s eye. She could feel the grass and see the green color of the growing magic that filled it. She could feel the gray-green magic of the insects, and the bright color magic of the birds. She was connected to every living creature near her and could feel what they felt. She felt as one with everything around her. She lost track of all time as the fire filled her, consumed her, changed her.

REALITY

Nothing seemed real. All that had happened the awful night was so unbelievable, Silver thought that if she could just wake up, everything would be put right. But she never did. And devastation surrounded her on all sides as she tried to help in the recovery process.

In total six huts had been damaged or destroyed, not including the nest hut. New roofs had to be put on three, and three had to be completely rebuilt. Nothing from GreenGrass's hut was ever found, not even a pebble. It was like it never existed. The hatchlings and the Nest Mother were staying with BlackNewMoon, Maggie with Silver and the other homeless were staying with their friends until their huts were done.

And BlackRaven still had not returned.

Shortly after he took off, WhitePaleMoon, a Dragon Raven's age, suggested to Grandmother that they send out a search party for Raven, but that was quickly shot down. Including the fact that no one even knew where to begin looking, everyone remembered how none were able to help him in his fight against Water. How no one could even touch the white Dragon. But over a week later, there were whispers everywhere; of where he might be going, what he was doing, and what he would do if he caught WhiteWater. But most skirted around the subject of WhiteWater's increased abilities, and of the possibility of him allied himself with Dark Magic. That was something even the Dragon elders didn't talk about. Which left SilverFire and RedStar to ponder the possibility on their own.

"Do you think he actually did it?"

Both Dragons were sitting where the river entered the woods on the far side of the village, exactly where Red met Maggie.

"You know I do, Silver. No Dragon has that kind of power, not natural power, anyway."

"But how?"

"I don't know. Can't we talk about something else? All we talk about is that spineless traitor. I really don't want to talk about him anymore."

"We can't talk about it in the village; the older ones don't even want us to mention his name."

“Maybe they have a point. Grandmother taught me that names have power, so maybe using his name gives him more power?” He phrased it as a question.

“When did she tell you this?”

“In my magic lessons. I started then since I turned fourteen” Red looked at Silver apologetically; he didn’t like to talk about magic around her.

“Why didn’t she teach me? I’m older! Just because I don’t have any wings doesn’t mean I can’t learn!” Silver was getting angry, not really at Red, but everyone and everything. At Grandmother for skipping her. At Grandfather for leaving her. And unreasonably at Maggie, for staying in her sleeping state. The days and the compounded anger just seemed to catch up with her all at that one moment, triggered by Red’s statement. “Why didn’t you tell me?” Silver jumped to her feet, confronting Red. “Why didn’t you tell Grandmother that I should be taught, too?”

Red stood and tried to calm Silver down. “Siv, I did tell her. She said that it would just hurt more, learning about something you can’t use. And I wanted to tell you.” Silver snorted in disbelief. “Really I did. But I didn’t want you to think I was bragging or anything. Sky is in classes, too. You know he is our age.”

“Yea, and can’t fight, all I can do is sit and watch as things spiral down around me! I want to help, Red. I want to fight, to fly, to see the world from the clouds. I can’t sit here anymore just waiting for things to happen.” Suddenly, Silver felt like she was smothering, like she couldn’t breathe. She needed to run, to go somewhere, anywhere, that wasn’t here. She turned toward the trees. “I have to go.” She started to run, but Red cut her off.

“Where Silver?” Worry shone in his eyes, but Silver didn’t care. And she definitely didn’t want him with her. She didn’t want him to see her go to pieces, like she knew she would as soon as she was away.

“I need to go, Red.” She pushed her way past, and Red let her go. She bounded through the trees. “Don’t follow me!” That was the last thing he heard as the silver Dragon faded in the trees, leaving nothing behind but swaying branches in her wake.

IMPOSSIBLE

Maggie was disorientated. *What happened?* She remembered the light, the pain of fire, the flood of knowledge, and then... nothing. *Where am I?* Slowly, she remembered what happened. *I died, or almost died, and came to the divine realms. Then what? Grandfather gave me a choice. I chose to go back.* As she became more awake, she became aware of her body. She was stiff and sore. And there was a dull ache over her left eye. *I must have hit it when I fainted.* She tried to move, but her limbs were heavy. She fought to wake up.

“Grandfather.” She heard herself say the name faintly. She wanted him to explain what had just happened. But strangely, it wasn’t he who answered.

“Maggie? Maggie, are you there?” The voice was kind, gentle, full of worry, and female. Defiantly female, and not the one who brought her to these realms; the voice of the earth, sky, and heavens all rolled into one. Yet there was something familiar about the worried voice. Then she felt a small hand on hers. It was warm and scaly. Not scaly like a fish, which are slimy and scaly, but Dragon scaly. But the only Dragon she knew here was Grandfather, and his hands were not that small. And then the hand squeezed hers and she heard another voice.

“Maggie. Wake up. Please wake up.” This one was high and sounded child like. She recognized this one, too. But who... And then it hit her. GreenGrass. YellowFlower. What were they doing in the divine realms? Unless they died. Maggie fought harder to wake up, but it was like fighting her way through mud. *No! No! No!*, she thought. *They can’t be dead! I tried to protect them, to save them!*

She fought to move her head, and found that she could. She tried to speak but could only mumble, “No, no, no.”

Then she heard someone else enter the room. “Oh, my. GreenLeaves was right.” *Not Grandmother, too!* She thought. Someone grabbed and shook her shoulders. “Maggie! Awaken!” She felt a brief shock of magic through her brain, and that cleared the last of the grogginess. She opened her eyes, right into those of BlackNewMoon.

“No! You can’t have died! She said you would be safe! I’m so sorry. I tried to stop him...” Tears poured down her face, and she was unable to go on.

“Shhh, shhh, quiet little one. Everything is ok now.” Moon removed her hands from Maggie’s shoulders and gently gripped her hand.

“I’m sorry. So, so sorry,” Maggie repeated.

“Little one, you have nothing to apologize for. I am not dead, you are not dead. You are here with us, not the other way around.”

Maggie looked around and saw GreenGrass, PurpleSunSet, GreenLeaves, and YellowFlower, who was holding her other hand. “Not dead?”

Moon chuckled. “No, young one, we are not dead. But you were asleep for such a long time, we feared you had left this plane of existence. But you have returned to us, thank the Gods.”

“That’s where I was.”

“What?”

“I was there, in the realm of the Gods. The divine realms. I was there.”

“Impossible,” GreenGrass said from across the room, “she would have had to die.”

“No, I didn’t.” Maggie ignored her and was talking to Moon. “The voice said I didn’t die, that she called me there to help me.”

“What voice, Maggie?” asked Moon kindly.

Maggie tried to describe it. “It was like wind though the trees, the sound of rain, and the hunt song of a pack. It was the most beautiful, the sweetest, and the most terrifying thing I have ever heard. Does that make any sense?”

Moon appeared thoughtful. Then she turned to the Nest Mother. “GreenGrass, will you excuse us, please? I need to talk to Maggie.”

“Of course. Come on younglings.” GreenGrass shooed the little Dragons out of the door. Before she left, she turned and said, “I’ll go and find Silver and Red. I know they want to see you, Maggie dear.” Moon nodded to GreenGrass like she was talking to her instead of Maggie, and then the Nest Mother left.

Moon turned back to Maggie. “What did this voice tell you?”

So Maggie told BlackNewMoon what she could remember. And then she told her about her stay in the divine realm, about meeting Jarden the centaur, and about seeing Grandfather. At this a tear shone in the black Dragon’s eye, but she said nothing until Maggie asked her a simple question. “How long have I been asleep?”

“Just over a week.”

“A week! It seemed like such a short time...”

Moon hesitantly asked, “Maggie, what did my mate give you?”

“Huh?” Moon’s question pulled Maggie out of her thoughts.

“What did SunRise give you? You said it burned like fire, and gave you a sense of awareness. Do you know what he gave you?”

“No, I have no idea.”

Moon looked at Maggie. “Do you mind if I try to find out?”

“How?”

“By looking into your mind. I can look and try to see exactly what he gave you.”

“Can a lot of Dragons do that?”

“A fair few, but even fewer can go deep enough into a mind to piece together the feelings and images together like I can. It will not hurt; all you have to do is relax.”

“Ok, I guess.” In truth, she trusted NewMoon a lot less than SunRise, but how do you say no to someone who is ten times bigger than you?

“Lay back, Maggie, and close your eyes.”

Maggie did as she was bidden. Soon she felt a warm tendril of thought touch her mind. She could feel it touching her thoughts, working its way back to the last memory Maggie had of Grandfather. Without trying, Maggie sent a probe to NewMoon. Then suddenly Maggie could hear what she was thinking.

Strange, she has put up a block. But how? She doesn't know how to protect her mind yet.

Grandmother?

Maggie could feel her shock as the Dragon realized she was in her mind. Moon pulled contact, and hastily threw up a guard around her mind to keep Maggie out. Maggie opened her eyes.

Moon was sitting across the hut, her eyes wide in shock and smoke drifting out of both nostrils. “How did you get in my head?”

“I don’t know. The same way you got in mine, I guess.”

“You could feel me?”

“Yes.”

“Could you hear me?”

“Yes, you said I had put up a block.”

“Impossible.” Moon shook her head. The smoke stopped. “Give me your hand.”

Maggie didn’t move. She was afraid of what Moon was going to do. “Maggie, I will not hurt you. I just need your hand.”

Maggie reached out her hand to the Dragon, and NewMoon took it in hers. Maggie felt her hand grow warm and then the sensation moved up her arm. Automatically, she pushed back with her mind. The feeling retreated back down her arm, but when it got to Moon, she jerked her hand back like she had been stung.

“What’s wrong?” Maggie asked.

“I can’t believe it. I can’t believe he did this.” The look on Moon’s face scared Maggie.

“What? What happened?” Maggie swung out of the bed and approached her.

Moon looked Maggie directly in the eye. “Maggie, you have magic.”

“Yea, I knew that already.”

“No, I mean you have a lot of magic.” She took a deep breath. “GoldenSunRise’s magic.”

Maggie’s jaw dropped. “*What!?*”

“Every Dragon’s magic has a distinct feel. I would recognize his magic anywhere. Maggie, what SunRise gave you was his magic. All of it.”

“Impossible,” was all she said

Then she heard Silver scream. “Maggie!”

REUNIONS

The forest always helped her clear her head, but not today. As Silver ran from her best friend, her thoughts were heavy with anger, grief, and despair. She started to cry, and she kept running, trying to outrun all the emotion that was flooding her.

Finally as the sobs racked her body, she could run no more. She collapsed on the ground and let the grief take over. She cried and cried until no more tears came.

Only after she stopped and hiccupped herself into silence did she look around, and she couldn't believe where she was.

She was sitting under the same tree where she found Maggie. The exact same tree. Remembering that day brought fresh tears to her eyes, and she found herself talking to a girl that was not there. "Maggie, I'm so sorry. I'm sorry that I sent you to the river alone. Maybe if I was with you, none of this would have happened, and Grandfather would still be alive. Maybe if I was with you, Water would not have attacked at all. I'm so sorry that I can't do anything to protect you. I wish that I had my magic so that I could heal you or help you find your way back to us. I need you to come back."

It was strange how a girl that she knew for so little a time could change her so completely. She was connected to her, which was how she was able to feel what happened that day on the field. But now she felt nothing. Silver sat there, unable to move from the weight of the grief that pressed down on her.

She didn't know how long she sat there, but eventually she heard footsteps through the underbrush. Quick footsteps, like running.

"Silver! Silver! Come quick!" Red was yelling and calling to her.

Silver's stomach dropped to her feet. The first thought was that something happened to Maggie, and she wasn't there. *I shouldn't have left!* Silver ran from around the tree. She couldn't see him yet, so she took off in the direction of his voice and his crashing footsteps. Tears welled up in her eyes at the thought of the young girl lying dead in her hut. Silver stopped seeing the woods, and ran blindly through the brush. RedStar ran right into her. "Silver!"

Silver started sobbing. She waited for him to say it. *I'm so sorry. They did everything they could. She just never woke up.* But then Silver actually

saw him through her tears, and saw his joyous expression. "What..." The question died on her lips. She didn't dare hope.

"Silver, it's wonderful! She's awake! Maggie's awake!"

Shock once again locked her in place. "What?"

"She's awake! GreenGrass just told me. She's waiting by the river. She sent me in after you. She said that she was too old to be chasing hatchlings through the woods. But come on! We need to hurry." Red took off running.

Red talked so fast that everything was running together, making it hard to distinguish individual words. But the one thing that Silver did understand was that Maggie was awake. Silver took off running as fast she could, quickly overtaking Red. She cleared the trees and vaguely registered that GreenGrass was sitting beside the water waiting for them. She kept running until her muscles burned, and then ran some more. Soon she was within sight of the village.

"Maggie!" Silver called.

Silver ran through the village and saw a small girl stumble out of her own hut. But it was not Maggie, not as Silver remembered her.

Just as a Dragon's magic changes him when it peaks, so was Maggie changed. She still looked basically the same, but she stood straighter, taller, she held her head higher. Silver could see a purple and gold mist clinging to her skin. Silver dug in her claws and skidded to a stop, spraying dirt and rock everywhere. "Maggie?"

The girl didn't say anything. She just ran toward Silver and through her arms around her neck. "Silver! I missed you so much!" Silver could see the tears in Maggie's eyes, and fresh ones spilled from her own.

"I missed you, too," Silver said. The two embraced, crying and laughing at their reunion.

But their reunion was short lived, because at that moment BlackNewMoon walked out of Silver's hut. "Silver, I'm glad GreenGrass found you so fast. Can you and Red watch over Maggie for a while? I must discuss something with the Dragon council."

Silver looked at the Dragon in confusion. "Sure, but why does she need watching?"

“Just keep her here in your hut, and do as I say Silver!” She snapped. “And Maggie stay here, don’t talk to anyone about what we discussed until I return. Do you understand?” Maggie nodded her head. “Good. Here comes GreenGrass and RedStar. I will tell them to stay here with you, Silver.”

Silver could see Red and GreenGrass walking through the village towards them. Moon went to them, and said something to Red. Red looked at Moon, nodded, and jogged towards Silver. When Red was out of earshot, Moon started to talk to GreenGrass in earnest.

Red came up to them. “What’s going on Silver? Grandmother seemed *frightened*. And what is that smell?” He shut his mouth at the rude comment, and looked over his shoulder at the pair of Dragons.

“I have no idea.” Silver answered both questions “Maggie?”. She didn’t know what was going on with Grandmother, and she didn’t smell anything. Maggie just shook her head, but said nothing.

Suddenly Grass stiffened and looked at Maggie. She muttered something, and Moon nodded. The two started talking again.

“What was that about?” Red asked no one in particular. Silver had no idea, and apparently neither did Maggie. The two Dragons finished their conversation, and Moon started jogging to find the other Dragon elders. The Silver could tell that she was extremely nervous, and even scared, and that scared Silver. As far as she knew, Moon wasn’t scared of anything.

GreenGrass watched Moon jog out of sight, and then turned and came to where Silver and Maggie was sitting. Her smile was warm, but reserved.

“Maggie, I am so glad you’re awake. But I think all of you should stay in the hut, we don’t want to get you too excited, Maggie dear. Go on, shoo you three.” GreenGrass nudged Maggie toward the door, and then Silver. Maggie, Silver, and Red went into the hut. GreenGrass did not follow. Instead they could hear her muttering. Suddenly, all three felt the air shift as a spell was released. The air outside of the door shimmered green and then disappeared, but they could still feel the magic surrounding them.

“Why did she just put a containment spell around us?” Red’s voice was thick with worry and anxiety. “What does she think that we could do, blow the village up?” Both Red and Silver laughed at his attempt to make a joke, but Maggie stayed silent. Silver looked at the girl and saw for the first time that she was pale and scared looking. She was

looking at her hands and flexing her fingers. She looked up and saw Silver watching her and quickly dropped her hands back to her sides. But she refused to meet Silver's gaze.

"Maggie, what's going on?" Silver asked her. Maggie still refused to meet her eyes.

"Maggie?" Red sounded worried now. "What was Grandmother talking about? What did you discuss?"

"I'm really not supposed to tell anyone..."

"We're your friends, Maggie. You can tell us." Silver said.

Red added, "We won't tell anyone, Maggie. What's happened?"

Maggie seemed to be thinking it over. Then she raised both hands, palms out, in front of her like surrender. "She was talking about this."

Then Silver felt the air stir around her, and Silver scrambled back. So did Red. Both remembered how unstable Maggie was when she used her magic. But as they watched, they saw purple tendrils of magic snake up around her arms and collect at her palms. Then what they saw next shocked them both. Raising up, intertwining around the purple, were gold shimmering tendrils of magic. Both remembered whose magic that was.

"That's impossible!" Silver exclaimed.

"No, Silver." Maggie's voice changed. It sounded less like the little frightened girl that Silver knew, and sounded more like the adult that Maggie would become. The magic swirled and shimmered around her. "It is possible. Grandfather GoldenSunrise, eldest of the Dragon race, gave me his magic when I ventured into the divine realms. I have his power, and all of the control that took him centuries to achieve. I also received his memories and knowledge, so that I may be able to set right the balance between the races that has been out of sync for so long."

His wings ached and burned and his eyes stung from the cold air streaming past them. BlackRaven soared high above the ground, still

on the search for the traitor that escaped him. Raven knew that his chances were slim that he would find him, but there was still a chance, and he was not willing to give up.

Raven scanned the ground, looking for prey. He had not eaten since he began the hunt, and didn't want to take the time now. But he knew that if he didn't eat soon, he would not be able to keep up the same pace. He spotted a herd of large brown animals grazing across a large flat plain. He didn't know the name of these animals, but food was food. He dived on silent wings picking out a large enough animal to fill his empty stomach. The animals knew to look for predators on the ground, but failed to watch the sky. Raven swooped down and grabbed the beast with all four of his paws, digging his claws into it to keep it from escaping. It let out a scream of terror and pain, which scattered the rest of the herd. They started bellowing, and ran away from the Dragon.

Before the beast could suffer, Raven reached down and grasped its neck in his powerful jaws. He closed his mouth, easily snapping the spine. The sound cut off suddenly, and Raven felt the animal go limp. It was quiet large, and the fur was thick. He tore into it, eating quickly so he could get back to hunting Water as soon as he could.

As he ate, he thought about how long he had been on the chase and of about that night. *Seven days*, he thought. He had been flying longer than he thought anyone could fly. But every time he wanted to quit, he thought of Water hurling pure magic toward the nest hut, intent on destroying it and everyone inside. Raven did not know at the time that the hatchings were out of the hut, but he did know that Maggie was there. His charge, his responsibility. He was unable to stop it. He watched as the magic engulfed the hut in a bright light so strong he was unable to look at it. A blast knocked him off his feet and when he looked, the hut was gone, and a ring of destruction surrounded it.

He heard laughter and scrambled up, searching. There was WhiteWater, laughing at what he had done. Raven didn't even think about how he got out of the hut he was imprisoned in. He charged the Dragon, hurling a spell so strong it knocked him off his feet. When he recovered, he was no longer laughing. He tried to conger a spell to stop Raven, but at that moment Raven ran into his side, interrupting his concentration. The two fought. Even now Raven was still sketchy on the details, because he just acted and reacted without thinking.

Then something happened. He felt a coldness creeping up his leg, like ice. It moved farther and farther until he was fighting the cold instead of the Dragon. Then Water had said, *"You are on the wrong side, Ifénld. You will fight, and you will lose, just as the Vonlend did the last time. Join me, and we will be gods once again."*

He had called him Ifénld. He had not heard that name since he was young. It was a name for a Dragon fighter, from before the Magician's War. The name had faded from memory, except from Grandfather's mind, which is who told him. He was being groomed to be the next leader of the tribe and Grandfather had started to pass his knowledge to him. Only Moon and Sunrise had known. When Sunrise was murdered, Raven was supposed to assume leadership. But Moon and Raven both had agreed that him taking leadership would upset an already delicate emotional climate, so Moon had kept leadership and agreed to hand it to him when she deemed appropriate. Then WhiteWater had escaped, and Raven didn't have any choice but to go after him.

Yes, he had used both Ifénld and Vonlend. The two ancient words for Warrior and Council. He should not have known those words. He should not have had the power to escape his confining spells. And he defiantly should not have had the power to shift his form to mist. That was something that was thought to only be myth.

So as he ate, Raven pondered over all of this. And of what he had to do next. He had already crossed the plains and mountains, and was now searching an entirely different grassland with strange animals, like the one he was devouring.

He crunched the last bone, a femur, in two, and swallowed the pieces whole. He felt his internal clock and found that he only had two hours until sunset. Every mature Dragon had an exact internal clock, with which he could always tell exactly when the sun rose and set, and what time of day it was. Also, when a Dragon received their wings and began flying, he or she could always tell which way they were flying, no matter if they could see the sun or not.

Raven spread his wings and launched himself into the sky. He turned east. With the sun at his back, he started flying to the place he was needed, but the last place he wanted to go empty handed. It was time he returned home to his family.

As soon as he landed in the village, he knew something was wrong. Everything seemed normal, but he felt a presence here that he should

not be feeling. He closed his eyes and cast out a web of magic. Now he could feel all the sparks of the Dragons' magic, no matter how small. They all lit up light little bonfires in his mind. Intermixed with those were the gray-green fires that were the various insects that were scattered over the village, and the warm brown fires that were the animals in hiding during the dark night. He searched through all the sparks until he found the one that had alerted him.

In a new hut not too far from where he was now, a spark burned with white hot intensity. He concentrated on this one, and saw that it was tinted purple. Relief flooded him as he recognized Maggie's magic and realized that she was not dead as he had feared, and she seemed fine. But overlapping the purple was a bright gold magic, the color and intensity reminded him of Golden Sunrise. *That is impossible*, he thought, *Sunrise is dead*. But there was no denying it, this was his magic.

Raven opened his eyes and walked to the hut. Light was coming through the opening of the door, but a cloth covered it, keeping him from looking into it.

He decided that he probably should announce himself. "Maggie, its BlackRaven. May I enter your hut?" No reply came. He noised the cloth and peeked in the room.

All the light was emanating from a small fire in the center of the hut. Maggie was sitting cross legged on the side opposite him, facing the door. But she did not see him, because she had her eyes shut and looked to be in a deep trance.

Even more striking was the magic that poured off of the girl. Waves of it rolled off of her in purple and gold waves. Suddenly he realized what happened. Maggie, somehow, had absorbed the great Dragon's magic. The magic floated, swirled, and pooled all around the still girl. It seemed to have a life of its own as tendrils snaked up, curled around its self and fell back down.

Raven watched in wonder. After a while, he decided to leave the girl to whatever she was doing. But as he turned to go, she spoke to him. "Don't leave, Iféild."

He turned back to her. Her eyes were open and shone a bright purple. "How do you know that word hatchling?"

"I know because he knew. By now you must have realized whose magic this is. I have received all of Sunrise's magic, along with all of

his memories, lessons, and control. I tell you this because I will need your help, BlackRaven. Please enter.”

The magic recoiled and reentered Maggie’s body. Slowly her eyes returned to her normal brown color. She motioned with her hand for him to enter.

Slowly he came in and sat across from her. “What do you need from me?”

She looked him in the eye, something that she never had done before. When she spoke, her words were grave, heavy with age she did not possess. “Soon, I will begin a journey. I don’t know where I will go, or what will happen to me. I need someone that is strong. Someone that will be willing to sacrifice all to help the Dragon race. I know that Sunrise wanted you to take command of the Dragon tribe, and was teaching you to do so. But if you decide to accompany me, you will not be able to take up his mantle, at least not until your return.”

“Will NewMoon let you leave?”

“Regardless whether she lets me or not, I must.” She paused, sighed, then said, “No, I don’t think she will let me go, but I will go all the same.”

Raven almost laughed out loud at the thought of this little girl defying the now oldest Dragon in the village, but then he thought of the magic that she now wielded and shuttered at the thought of what she was capable of doing.

“Why do you need my help if you have all of Sunrise’s power?”

“One grain of sand may upset a perfect scale, just as one person, or Dragon, can tip the balance in a war. And this is a war, although the players in it are unseen to you. It’s not just WhiteWater, but others that would see the human race destroyed. Because I am human, I cannot allow this to happen. But because I am now Dragon, I cannot allow my brothers and sisters to be destroyed by ignorance.”

“What? What do you mean that you are part Dragon?”

Maggie laughed softly, reminding Raven of the girl he first met. “Raven, I can’t wield a Dragon’s magic without being Dragon myself. Look at me, Raven, and see the truth.”

Raven stared at Maggie, but didn't see any difference. Then he saw a gold and purple aura around her, but not in the shape he expected. Then he realized that didn't mean with his *eyes* but with his other vision, like the one he used to sense her when he entered the village. He closed his eyes and allowed his magic to pool behind his them. When he felt his vision shift to that of the magical kind, he opened them and looked at Maggie. He almost fell backwards out of the hut.

He had expected to see Maggie, at least her magical self, sitting on the floor. Instead what he saw was a great purple Dragon as solid and substantial as himself, shimmering with a purple, silver and gold mist. Instead of white ivory, her talons, spines, and teeth were a dazzling gold, brighter than Raven had ever seen. But he also saw something else. The Dragon was sitting with both front feet on the floor, and sitting in between the forepaws of the Dragon was an image of a human, much older than Maggie, draped in a purple robe. She looked young, but her brown eyes held ancient wisdom.

"Now, Dragon, you see the truth." Her voice was a strange double timbre; the low was the gravelly voice of a Dragon, and the other a higher human voice, older than Maggie. "I am both human and Dragon, a hybrid of both races. I was not so before I entered the Devine Realms, but when I chose to return and fight, I was granted the power and wisdom of a Dragon and the form of a human. And so I am tied to both races in both body and blood. If one should parish, so will I."

Raven didn't say anything as he let his vision return to normal. This girl who had just learned of Dragons had tied herself to their, and his, future. She was willing to fight, and to die, for a race of beings that she had just heard of. She was willing to die for her own people, the people who had kicked her out and tried to kill her. The selflessness of her actions helped make his decision.

"Maggie, I know not what lays in the future, yours or mine. But this I know, I will help you in any way possible. I will follow, I will learn, and I will fight if need be. NewMoon will have to find another successor, for I have another path to follow." And then BlackRaven did something that he had never done. He lowered his head and averted his eyes from Maggie's. "I submit to your authority, DragonSister. Tell me what you want me to do."

"Raise your head, brother. You need not submit to me. I am not here to dominate you, or any of my siblings. I am here to see that they are not swept away in the oncoming tide, that they live in peace together. But please, go tell BlackNewMoon of your decision. It

would not be right for her to hear it from another. In two days time, at dusk, we will begin our journey.”

Maggie bowed her head, and Raven felt that this conversation was over. He left the hut in kind of a daze, everything he just learned swirling around in his head. He was awed and humbled by a girl not even half his size! He slowly made his way to NewMoon’s hut, trying to think of a way of telling her that didn’t sound like he abandoned his tribe. As he got closer, he realized voices were drifting through the door. Raised voices.

“She is too dangerous! How can we allow her to continue living here?”

“She cannot leave. She would be a powerful weapon against us.” Raven stopped outside the door. He started to announce himself, not wanting to eavesdrop, put something stayed his tongue. He backed into the shadows so as not to be seen.

“What do we do with her? Keep her contained? Destroy her?”

“Ha! If you think you are strong enough to contain or destroy power like that, BlueBird, then by all means try. We’ll be there to collect the pieces.”

A raspy female voice, answered. “Don’t snap at me, GreenPine! I see no one else suggesting anything!”

By the Gods! The entire Dragon council is assembled! Raven didn’t know what this meant exactly, but he knew by their tone that it wasn’t good.

“I will not allow her to keep stolen power.” BlackNewMoon’s voice was murderous.

“And how do you know that the power is stolen? Were you there when she received it?” This voice was GrayMorningDew, the second oldest Dragon in the village. She was 763, and completely blind in both eyes. But because of her lack of sight, she was gifted with foresight, the ability to see into the future. While she could get visions, the meaning wasn’t always clear.

“I know my mate, and he would not allow anyone to have that power, for fear of what it could destroy. Even he was cautious of what spells he cast.”

“Knew,” said GrayMorningDew.

“What?” Moon replied.

“You *knew* your mate, NewMoon. He has passed out of this world, and into the next, where the girl claims to have met him. You do not know what happened to him in that dimension, so you can’t claim to still know his mind.”

“I can’t believe you, MorningDew! How dare you say I do not know my mate! Our souls were mated before the Goddess, our *selves* tied to each other!”

“Sit, Moon,” said a different female voice. “We know the bond between mates runs deep. Do not lecture us. Each of us has felt the bond forge between our mates, our beings melded as one. I have lost mine, so I know your grief. But that bond only ties you to him in *this* world. Other worlds are exempted from such a bond.” That was WhiteSnow, grandmother of WhitePaleMoon. She had lost her mate last summer when a lump formed in his belly. Nothing anyone could do could save him.

“Do not claim to know my grief!” NewMoon shouted. “You were not mated to yours for over eight *hundred* years!” Then, to Raven’s shock, he heard her start crying. He heard rustling. He assumed that one of the elders went to comfort her.

“No one here claims to know the depth of your wound, NewMoon, only that we understand it.” BlueBird’s voice was soft and comforting. “We are not denying that you knew your mate like yourself; only that with your link severed, you know longer know his thoughts, his reasoning. He may have given the girl his power to reasons only known to him and the Gods. But the question remains. What do we do now?”

No one spoke aloud, just muttered among themselves. Moon was still crying softly. Raven decided that he had no choice now but to go in there and give them the out they were all looking for.

He walked up to the door. “Hello. NewMoon? May I come in? I have something to say that is of interest to you and the Dragon elders.”

There was a short pause in which they whispered to each other. “You are granted audience to the council, BlackRaven,” said GrayMorningDew.

Raven entered and saw all five of the Dragon elders seated in a circle. Moon’s eyes were puffy from crying.

“What is your council, Raven?” asked GreenPine.

Raven started to speak, but BlueBird interrupted him. “Wait. How much have you heard, young Dragon?”

Raven knew he couldn’t lie to one of the most respected Dragons in the village. “All of it, Elder BlueBird. I wanted to know if you meant the girl harm.”

“And how is that any of your business, Raven?” asked GreenPine.

“Because I am pledged to her, and to her cause.”

They all gasped. “What do you mean?” asked GrayMorningDew.

“How did she bewitch you?” Demanded NewMoon.

“I am not bewitched, and I meant exactly what I said. I am pledged to her. I believe her, and I am willing to follow her in her mission. I have seen what she has become, even though you are blinded, NewMoon.”

“How dare you...!”

“None the less,” interrupted Raven, “she is blessed and powerful and willing to sacrifice herself for the good of this tribe. Something I am willing to do also.”

No one said anything for the longest time. Raven was just beginning to wonder if he should tell them about the Dragon/Woman he had saw, but then WhiteSnow spoke.

“Raven, how do you know the girl has not deceived you? As you say, she is powerful, and can lie to suit her needs.”

“I know because I have seen her magical self, and she is no longer human. I also can feel she is blessed by the gods.”

BlueBird asked, “What do you mean, is no longer human?” The other Dragons, including NewMoon, looked at him with interest now.

“A better way to put it would be to say that she is no longer *completely* human. She says that when GoldenSunrise gifted her with his magic, she was transformed into part Dragon. She said that in order to wield a Dragon’s magic, she had to be Dragon herself. But this I have seen. She is indeed, in her magical self, a Dragon; purple with gold claws. But she is also human, in the physical and magical.

She has a double, in the magical since. She is older, with a flowing purple robe, and deep knowing brown eyes.”

“Stop.” Once again Raven was interrupted, “You mean she has *two* magical bodies? One human and one Dragon?”

“Blasphemy! No one has two magical selves.” NewMoon was livid at the suggestion.

“It is not blasphemy, Moon,” replied Raven. “It is the truth. Just because it’s never been seen before does not make it wrong, just unknown.”

Moon, about to make another remark, shut her mouth.

“This we will have to discuss.” GreenPine looked around at her fellow elders. “But regardless if the girl is part Dragon or not, we still need to know what we are going to do.”

“I have the answer to that also,” said Raven, even though this comment was not directed at him.

BlueBird seemed surprised. “Oh? And what is your solution?”

“In two days, in the evening of the day, Maggie will leave the village for parts unknown, and I will accompany her.”

“You will do no such thing!” Moon jumped to her feet, enraged now. “Who will take leadership? You are the only one who has the mind, has the training! I will not allow you to go with that thief into the hands of our enemies!”

“Moon, calm yourself!” Shouted GreenPine.

Raven slightly pitched his voice higher to be heard. “Moon, I am sorry for your loss, and I forgive you, for you’re not in your normal frame of mind. But, I am not a child. I will not be told what I am allowed to do. There are, as you know, several other candidates for succession after you. And do you really think I would allow Maggie to fall into the hands of any enemy? I am not weak, I am not gullible, although you seem to think I can be taken by a lie from a child!”

“You will betray us, like WhiteWater!”

Raven didn’t raise his voice, but the cold anger in his voice silenced the room. “Never compare me to that traitor. You have pushed me far enough, Moon. I will not listen to anymore of your grief stricken accusations. If you were thinking clearly, you would see how valuable

Maggie is. But you will not get the chance. We are leaving the tribe, NewMoon. You will not stop us. You will not hinder us or our mission. This I swear. I bind your magic, NewMoon, from touching me or the girl. I hope that one day, you will see the folly in your actions tonight, and we will once again live in peace together. Goodbye... mother."

And BlackRaven, only son of BlackNewMoon and GoldenSunRise, turned away from his mother, his future, and the only family he ever knew

FEELINGS

The sun rose on a still and quiet village. By now, all of the Dragons knew that BlackRaven had abdicated from his position as leader of the tribe. That he was going with Maggie on a journey no one knew the outcome of. And that Maggie had SunRise's magic.

This last thing most thought was a downright lie. Nothing in the known history had ever happened like that. But these are new times, thought others, and new things are bound to happen.

Raven now sat guard outside of the hut Maggie was occupying. She had sat in a trance all night and Raven saw to it that no one disturbed her. This really made Silver mad.

"Come on Raven! I need to see her!"

"I'm sorry, Silver, but she said that she didn't want anyone coming in until she gave me the ok. She didn't tell me any exceptions."

Silver stamped her foot and felt, if she had any, smoke would be streaming out of her nostrils. "Nonsense! She told me to go hunt, then come back. I did just as she told me, and then *you* say that I can't see her. It's been all night! I need to talk to her." This was true, because when she got back, rumors were flying that Maggie was leaving, that she had blew up several huts in an attempt to escape, that she had transformed into a huge purple Dragon, five times bigger than Grandfather ever was and then shrunk to the size of a newborn hatchling, that Raven had attacked and over threw the Dragon council and was now dictator. When she told the last one to Raven, he had laughed and said this was ridiculous. As for the others, Silver knew that these were just an overactive imagination running wild. But Raven had confirmed one of the wild rumors. He and Maggie were indeed leaving.

This was what she wanted to talk about to Maggie. She was having no luck convincing Raven to let her go along. "Silver," he said gently while she sat there fuming. "There is no way you can go. We will travel by air mostly. Even if we were to travel on the ground, you couldn't keep up. You have no magic, Silver. You're little more than a chil..."

"Do. Not. Call. Me. A. Child. You are scarcely older than me, Raven! If this cosmic accident didn't happen, if the gods didn't turn their backs on me, I would have my wings, I would be close to receiving my magic and I would be the one helping Maggie on her

journey, not you. You would stay here and lead the tribe, and everything would be right.”

“Silver, no god has turned their back on you. For some reason, they have withheld the gift of wings to teach you something. I’m sure as soon as you learn the lesson, you will get your wings.”

“That’s fine for you. You got everything on time. You weren’t an oddity. I am. I need to do something, Raven. I need to be useful.”

Silver expected him to say something grown up and patronizing, but he just looked at her with sympathy and what he said surprised her.

“Your right. I don’t know what it is your going through. Looking back, my life has been relatively easy. But you, you are going through something that no one has gone through before.” Then he paused, “But I still can’t let you in.”

“Come oooooon, Raven!”

Raven was about to deny her access again, but a voice drifted through the door. “It’s alright, Raven. She can come in.”

Raven moved aside to let Silver pass, and she made sure to whack him with her tail as she passed for being so annoying.

Silver’s mood changed instantly when she entered the hut. Before she was angry and annoyed; now she was anxious and a little scared. But Silver walked up to Maggie and treated her as if nothing had changed.

“Hi, Maggie. About time you let me in here.”

“Sorry Silver, I really needed to meditate. I have questions that needed answers before we leave.”

Silver sat down in front of her. The fire had burned low and was smoking. The smoke was thick and sweet and smelled like burning pine, which Silver knew help carry thoughts and prayers to the other worlds.

“Yea, that’s what I needed to talk to you about.”

Maggie uncrossed her legs and stretched them. “Ok, go ahead.”

“I want to go with you. It’s not fair that you’re going and I have to stay behind.”

Maggie didn't say anything, just continued massaging a kink in her legs. Finally she said, "What is the reason you want to go, SilverFire?"

Silver opened her mouth to tell her the same thing she told Raven, then stopped. Why did she want to go? Was it really just a desire to help? Or was she trying to prove something? That she was as good as the other Dragons with magic?

Maggie was nodding her head as if she could hear her thoughts. "Exactly. I need a Dragon that is willing to sacrifice all to this cause. Someone that has no other agenda for taking this assignment. Raven is one such Dragon. Silver, you have something to prove to the others in the village. I'm sorry." She didn't say it meanly, she sounded truly sorry. But it hurt all the same.

Silver, fighting tears, said, "I'm sorry, too." Then she turned and walked out of the hut. Raven saw her come out, but didn't say anything.

Then Maggie called to Raven. "Raven, can you come in here, please?"

Raven ducked through the door cover. Maggie was up and pacing along the back wall. She seemed really upset.

"What happened, Maggie?"

"I don't think I did the right thing, Raven. My heart tells me that she would be safer here, but something else tells me that she will be needed. And soon.

Raven watched Maggie make rounds along the back wall. "And your gut? What does your gut instinct tell you?"

"That I made a terrible mistake."

"Then you must rectify it. Trust your instincts, Maggie. That is the first thing all Dragons must learn upon receiving their magic."

"I should know this. I have centuries of memories to sort through, which is enough to drive me mad. Imagine, Raven, my memories, his memories, the memories of those he read." She paused her pacing and looked at Raven, "Did you know he could read minds?" Before he could answer, she went on. "All those thoughts, tumbling around my head, all at once. Sometimes I forget who I am; I'm afraid I'm getting lost, that I won't be able to hold it together. That's another reason I'm so anxious to leave. I need peace to be able to organize all

these thoughts, and walking for an incredibly long distance seems to be just the right thing.”

“Then your right in wanting to leave. You can’t risk losing yourself.” Raven placed a forepaw in Maggie’s path to halt her endless pacing. “But, if you think, really and truly, that you made a mistake with Silver, then you must tell her, and soon. You are running out of time to make these decisions.”

Maggie nodded. “Yes, you are right. We are quickly running out of time here.” Maggie walked around his foot and headed for the door. Raven moved out of the way and made to follow her. Maggie held up her hand for him to stop. “No, Raven. I must do this alone. I did this to her, so I must fix it.”

“Ok, Maggie. But I won’t be too far away if you need me.”

“I know Raven. I won’t be long.”

Maggie walked out of the hut and took a deep breath. The air cleared her mind and settled her thoughts. Deep in her gut Maggie knew that she had made a grave mistake. Ever since getting SunRise’s powers, she started getting overwhelming feelings when doing things or talking to people. She got the first one right after she woke up and saw Silver. She knew that she had to tell Silver and Red that she had received SunRise’s powers. After seeing Grandmother’s reaction and meditating on the matter, she knew she had to leave. Then she knew that she had to get Raven to go with her. This was the first time that she went against her feelings, and now she felt literally sick. Gut instinct was an accurate description. There was a knot in her stomach that had her almost doubling over. She had to find Silver and fix this mistake. She didn’t know what made her get these feelings, but Maggie knew she should not ignore it.

She looked around for Silver, and tried to ignore the stares the Dragons were throwing her way. None of them looked like they would attack her, but they didn’t look friendly either. Maggie started walking to the outskirts of town, not returning the glares she was getting. As she reached the edge of the village, she saw a flash of silver coming from the direction of the lake where she had her first magic lesson.

Maggie changed her course and headed toward the lake. She started jogging and crested the hill to see Silver staring into the still water at her reflection. The look on her face was so devastated that Maggie started crying. *I did that. I made her look like that.* Maggie blinked hard to dry the tears. She no longer had the aversion to showing emotion

that she grew up with, but she did not think it would be a good idea to let Silver see that she was crying. She didn't want to make Silver feel any worse.

Maggie walked up behind her and, not wanting to interrupt, waited for her to turn around. When she did not, Maggie thought of an idea. Silently she extended her hand, palm down. She drew up her magic and concentrated on the spot Silver was staring at. She traced a circle in the air, concentrating on the water.

Silver's eyes widened as she saw the disturbance in the water. The water swirled in a mini whirlpool under Silver's nose. Maggie smiled, and stopped twirling her finger. She made a fist, thinking of an image, and opened her hand and projected it on the water. Silver gasped at what she saw. To herself she said, "What is that?"

Maggie walked up to stand beside Silver. "I wanted to show you this, Silver." Silver jumped slightly, but recovered quickly.

"Oh, it was you. I was hoping... Never mind." She looked back into the water. "What am I seeing?" The image was the memory Maggie had of when she had seen Silver on the hillside in the divine realms.

"I wanted to tell you, to show you, what it was that brought me back." Silver looked at her questioningly. "I had a choice, Silver. Whether I wanted to return here or stay in the divine realms and travel them as a spirit."

Silver's expression changed to one of shock. "You mean die?"

"Yes, my body would have died. And I would have stayed in the other realms until I wanted to return here. But I couldn't leave you Silver. There were many factors in my decision, but it all boiled down to you. You brought me back here. When I seen you in the divine realms, it reminded me of what was here waiting for me, and I couldn't leave you to face what is coming alone."

"What's coming, Maggie?" She looked frightened now, and not as sad.

Maggie wanted so bad to tell her. But she knew she couldn't. It would frighten her too much.

"All in good time, Silver. We have time before I have to lay that burden on your shoulders. But right now, I have something to rectify. I must beg your forgiveness, SilverFire. Before, back there in the hut,

I was going by my heart only. I know how you feel. I too was different from others of my kind. I am still an oddity; I guess you could call it. A hybrid. I felt, when I was still with my village, that I had to prove that I was as good as the rest and that I deserved a chance.” Silver held her breath, waiting for Maggie’s next words. “I think you deserve a chance, Silver. I was wrong to exclude you from going just because you feel the need to prove yourself. Everyone needs to do that, at one point or another. And besides, I think it would hurt me too much to walk away from you now. You are truly my sister now, Silver. And sisters have to stick together.”

Maggie looked over at Silver, afraid that she may have hurt her so badly nothing she could say could make up for it. But Silver had her eyes closed and a closed expression on her face. “What made you change your mind, Maggie?”

Maggie thought about it. “I don’t think I really changed my mind at all.”

Silver’s eyes snapped open and she glared at Maggie. Maggie pretended not to notice. “I think that before I was denying my decision. I was looking for any excuse to keep you out of danger, to keep you safe here. But I realize that it would have been an awful mistake to leave you here, and I had to go with my gut and not my emotions.”

Silver’s eyes misted over. “You really mean you want me to go? That you always wanted me to go?”

“Yes, always.”

Silver smiled a radiant, joyous smile that was free from all despair. Then she pounced on Maggie, pinned her to her chest, and rolled over and over in the grass with her. “I’m so happy Maggie! Come on, Maggie, let’s run!” Silver sprang up and started running across the grass. Maggie jumped up and ran after her, forgetting for just a moment that she was part Dragon. She forgot that she was the savior of the known earth. She forgot of the danger she, Raven, and now Silver, were heading blindly toward. She forgot all of that and was just Maggie once again, chasing a friend through the tall grass.

BEGINNINGS

Silver and Maggie made their way back to the village after their run. As they crested the hill by the lake Silver saw Raven laying outside the circle of huts waiting for them.

He got up and stretched, yawning. In the middle of the yawn, he sneezed. A jet of flame shot out of his nose, scorching the grass beneath his feet. He quickly stamped to put out the smoldering grass. Silver fought back a laugh. She looked over at Maggie, whose face was contorted in the effort to hold back her laughter. That look sent Silver over the edge, and she started laughing uncontrollably. Maggie lost her fight too and started laughing along with Silver.

Raven glared at the two of them as they approached. "Well, I guess you two made up."

"Yes, and to think, you wasted all that time trying to convince me not to go," said Silver.

"I was only doing what I thought I should do. But even I'm wrong every once in a while." He paused. "But not very often," he teased.

Silver narrowed her eyes at him. "Maggie," she said without turning away from the black Dragon, "are you sure you want to take someone so annoying with us?"

Before Maggie could answer, Raven said, "I could ask her the same question."

Silver started to make a smart comment, but Maggie interrupted before the bickering would escalate. "Stop, you two. I do not want to spend the entire time we're together fighting."

Both Dragons at the same time said, "We're not fighting." Silver and Raven smiled.

"Maggie, this is what siblings do. And technically, Silver and I are related."

"Yea, there's something I don't admit unless under torture," Silver said.

Raven playfully swiped at Silver's head. She easily ducked the blow and hit him on the shoulder. He let her hit him and then rubbed the top of her head. Silver pushed him off her.

Maggie watched the entire exchange with a heavy heart. She had never had any siblings to play with. She never really played with anyone her own age, never teased or taunted anyone in play. She pushed the feeling away. She had a new family now, and siblings to play with. Silver was one of them.

“I think you’re right, Raven.” Both Dragons looked at her. “I don’t know why we would want someone who is that annoying with us.”

Silver was hurt for a second, but then saw the smile on Maggie’s face. She smiled in return, and Raven started laughing. He reached over and ruffled Maggie’s hair with his rough paw. “We’ll make a real Dragon of you yet, little girl. Come on.” Maggie’s hair looked like she just came out of a wind storm. He turned and headed back to the village. “I can smell GreenGrass making some stew for the hatchlings, and you need to eat Maggie.”

“What about you two?” Maggie was trying to comb out the new knots in her hair.

“We will hunt. We must be strong for the journey ahead.”

All three sobered up at the thought of leaving. But it had to be done. “I’ll go get something to eat. You two make sure you fill up. I don’t know when we’ll be able to eat well again.”

The group stopped and just looked around, taking in as much as they could. All three looked at each other. Raven broke the silence.

“Come on, hatchling. I’ll catch you something worth eating.” He started to walk away. Silver looked at Maggie one more time and then followed Raven.

“I’m not two years old, Raven. I can catch my own dinner!” She started running to catch up.

Maggie watched the two disappear across the grass. Then she took a deep breath and turned around.

Time to see if she was still welcome in the Nest Hut.

“GreenGrass, its Maggie. May I come in?”

There was no answer from the other side, and then, “Enter.”

The smoke was thick and heavy when she entered and smelled strongly of cooked rabbit. The fire was burning in the hearth and a pot of stew hung over the flame. Maggie looked around for

GreenGrass. It didn't take her long to see her. She took an automatic step back.

She was crouched in the middle of the floor, tail twitching like a mad cat's. Her eyes were narrowed in Maggie's direction. Maggie could feel power rolling in the air, waiting for a command from its caster.

Maggie unconsciously threw up a shield of invisible magic around herself, and in doing so, her magic let her sense the feelings in the air around her. GreenGrass was angry, but more than that, she felt fear. Raw, undiluted fear. But not for herself, but for the hatchlings behind her.

"Take your meal and go." Her voice betrayed her fear.

Maggie held up her hands in front of her in surrender. "GreenGrass, there is no need to be afraid. I will not harm the hatchlings, or you. You have my word."

GreenGrass continued to glare at her. "How can I trust you?"

Maggie lowered her hands and her shield. "You trusted me before. I am the same person I was. I love the hatchlings. I couldn't hurt them any more than I could harm myself."

Maggie felt her magic calm a little. "If you thought I truly meant the hatchlings harm, you would not have let me in here. But you invited me. Somewhere, you still want to trust me."

GreenGrass's magic settled completely. There was now just a thin shield between Maggie and the Dragons. "Your right, Maggie. But how can I take that chance? You ask me to risk our children, our future, on one decision."

"But that is exactly what I am doing. I am risking everything in the hopes that I can set right the scale between the races. Would I do that if I meant to destroy your future here?"

"So you're really leaving?" Maggie nodded. She felt the shield pop out of existence. "So it is all true? The war, everything?"

Maggie nodded again. "I'm not sure what it is you've been told, but yes, the war is true. I am here to make sure neither race is wiped from existence."

GreenGrass moved sideways just a bit to allow the hatchlings to pass. They didn't run up to her like normal, but crept up. They

reminded Maggie of the dogs in the village when they got scared. She knelt and opened her arms. "Come on young ones. Do I really look that different?"

YellowFlower came up to Maggie and sniffed her. "No, you don't look any different, but you smell funny."

"Yea," said GreenLeaves. "You smell like faraway places. Things we never smelled before."

"Children, that is impossible. Maggie has gone nowhere outside the village."

"Don't discourage them, Nest Mother." Maggie looked up at her. "They speak the truth. My soul has indeed traveled to the other worlds. This is what they smell. Young ones have a magic all their own. They are able to smell, see, and hear things grown-ups do not."

The Nest Mother snorted at the idea. "You may not be able to see this magic, GreenGrass, but it is present all the same. How do you think a Dragon is able to get their wings? The magic doesn't just appear out of nowhere. It was always present, just not in a way that you were able to recognize."

Maggie reached out and scratched right at the base of YellowFlower's jaw. She leaned into the contact, content. The others came up to her wanting held.

"Then how come adult cannot feel these things?"

Instead of answering, Maggie asked her own question. "How many times when you were little did someone tell you to stop playing with your invisible friend and grow up, even though he was visible to you? How many times did someone tell you that the voices you heard singing in the wind were not there?"

GreenGrass did not answer. She seemed deep in thought. "Exactly. You were told what you seen, heard, and felt were not real, so you learned to ignore them. These children are not conditioned so. They still hear the voices, see the spirits, and smell otherworldly smells."

GreenGrass spoke slowly. "If what you say is true, Maggie, then we have a lot of reconsidering to do. The little ones must begin to learn their magic earlier, and to harness these new powers."

"This would be wise. You will need everyone, even the smallest Dragon, to help in what is to come." Maggie had no intention of the

little ones actually fighting, but she knew they would be helpful in sensing changes in the world no one else could.

“But who could we get to teach it to them? If it is as you say, then no adult will be able to guide them.”

“Talk to RedStar. I don’t think he has entirely let go of his childhood, and he may be able to get some of that ability back.”

GreenGrass walked over to the door, apparently getting ready to go find Red. It looked like she forgot that she was scared of Maggie. But before she left, she turned and asked, “Maggie, if RedStar can learn this even after he has forgotten most of it, can others relearn, also? Like myself?”

“Yes, it is possible, but it would be difficult. RedStar must just remember. You would have to unlearn and then relearn. You would have to see the world through a child’s eyes.”

The green Dragon nodded. “As long as it is possible, I will do it. It is not fair of me to ask this of the young ones and not be willing to do a little work myself.”

Maggie smiled at her. “You are wise, Nest Mother.”

“How do you think I was able to take care of all those kids?” She and Maggie both started laughing. GreenGrass left.

Maggie had started scratching the loose scales off of the hatchlings, something they enjoyed immensely, when she poked her head in. “I forgot. Help yourself to that stew, Maggie dear. It should be done. And if you could see to it that the hatchlings get fed, that would be a great help.”

“I would love to, Nest Mother.” Maggie cocked her head and used her magical hearing to find RedStar. “Oh, and I think Red is in his hut with BlueSkyAbove. I think, but I am not sure, that Sky is grilling Red on what I have become.”

“How did you know? Never mind. I guess I will have to teach that Dragon some manners. It is not nice to gossip.” GreenGrass actually left this time. Maggie could hear her muttering about rude boys as she walked away.

Silver had returned from hunting and was looking for Red. Raven flew overhead and scouted for bigger prey than the nest of rabbits Silver caught and offered again to catch something bigger. Silver declined and ate her own kill, allowing Raven to fly and find bigger prey.

Because she had found her prey quickly, it allowed her to return to the village early. Silver wanted to talk to Red. It had occurred to her that he might not know she was leaving, and she wanted to tell him personally and to say goodbye. She decided that his hut would be a good place to start.

As she approached his hut, she saw GreenGrass leaving. *What is the Nest Mother doing in Red's hut?* She thought. She ducked into the shadows not wanting to be seen. She didn't want her to try to talk her out of going with Maggie. But as GreenGrass passed Silver's hiding place, Silver noticed that she seemed distracted. She was talking to herself, muttering about un-smellable smells and unheard voices. Silver didn't understand any of it.

Silver came out of hiding as soon as she was sure that GreenGrass was out of sight. She approached Red's door and announced herself. Red's answer was hesitant. "Uh, yea. Come on in Silver."

Silver nudged aside the door covering and found Red sitting on his bed, looking deep in thought. "What's up Red? What did GreenGrass want?"

"I'm not sure. She just told me something really strange."

"More strange than what's been going on lately?" Silver laughed, expecting Red to say nothing could be stranger than recent events. But Red didn't join in the laughter. Silver stopped abruptly. "Red, seriously, what is going on?"

"It's really hard to explain, Silver. I don't even know if I can."

"How 'bout you just say it, and if I don't understand, I tell you."

He took a deep breath and blew it out through his nose. "Ok. Have you ever sensed something no one else could? Or heard or saw something adults told you wasn't there?"

"Yea, Red. It's called imagination. Everyone does it."

"But what if it was something more than that? What if it was a type of magic only children have? What if it is something we lose because we think we should?"

Silver didn't dismiss this right away, or tell him he was crazy. There must be something to it if GreenGrass was discussing it with Red. "So what did GreenGrass want to talk to you about?"

"She wants me to learn to use this magic, and to teach the hatchlings how to use it."

"How can you teach something you don't have?"

"That's just it. Maggie told GreenGrass that I to have this Magic, and that I haven't let go of my childhood yet. And I think that she might be right."

Silver nodded. All throughout their childhood, Red was always commenting on things Silver couldn't see or hear. She just dismissed him, and eventually he stopped telling her about them. Silver knew he was glad someone confirmed that he was not crazy, and that what he was saying was real.

"Are you going to do it?"

"I have to. There is no one else to teach this. And it will be nice to know that what I see is not just an over active imagination."

"I have something to tell you, too. And I'm glad you have something to do while I'm gone."

Red looked at her. "Gone? What do you mean?"

"I'm going with Maggie and Raven, Red."

"You mean you're leaving? For good?"

"No, Red. Not for good." She hoped that wasn't a lie. "I'll be back, but I need to do this. I can't let Maggie leave without me."

"That girl really changed you." It was a statement of fact, but he said it like he was resigned to it.

"Yes, I don't know how, but I am attached to her, like she is a part of me, and I'm a part of her. Do you remember the day Maggie was attacked?" She really didn't need to ask, of course he remembered. He nodded anyway. "I felt it when she was hurt, when she threw her magic, and when her spirit left her. It almost killed me." It wasn't an exaggeration. Silver actually thought in the week that followed that the pain would kill her.

“Wow.” That was all he said. Silver could tell she shocked him, and Red stared at the floor in thought. “I don’t know what that would be, Silver. I know of nothing that would connect you like that to her. Only the bond of Soul Mates should do that, but not to that extreme. It sounds as though this is something greater.”

“I don’t know either, Red. I meant to ask her about it, but she has been so worried I didn’t want to bother her. When we’re out on the road, I’ll ask her then.”

“So you’ll leave, I’ll stay here, and then what?”

Silver didn’t have to ask what he meant. “We’ll always be friends, Red. Nest mates. And I’ll come back, after we take care of whatever is going on, and Raven will become leader, and everything will be back to normal.” Silver didn’t actually believe everything she said. She had no idea how anything could return to normal. Red said as much.

“Silver, things will never be back to normal. Things are changing. I can feel it, smell it even. It is something that I have felt for a long time, even before Maggie came to us. You know how it feels right before a big storm? Something in your bones tells you to get under cover, and that is what I feel all the time.”

Silver just nodded. She didn’t feel the same, but it made sense to her with all that was happening.

“You’re not mad, Red?”

“No, Silver. I guess I always knew you would go with Maggie. Even I could see the dedication, but I had no idea that you were attached that way.”

Silver let out a sigh of relief. “Thanks, Red. We leave at nightfall. Will you come see us off?”

Red got off his bed and walked over to her. “Of course. I’m surprised you thought you had to ask.”

Silver laid her head on his shoulder, and he did the same. They stood there, wrapped in a final embrace.

PARTINGS

It was full dark by the time the party was completely assembled. It was the sixteenth day since Maggie had arrived at the village. Of course Silver, Maggie, and Raven were there, but there was also GreenGrass and the hatchlings, RussetEarth and his mate, YellowBird, and BlueSkyAbove and OrangeFallingLeaves, Silver's and Red's roommates. Red was there, and also WhitePaleMoon, the dragon that wanted to go and look for Raven. He was Raven's best friend and was greatly saddened that Raven was leaving.

Silver was not surprised that BlackNewMoon and the other elders were not there. Silver knew that Moon didn't want Maggie to leave, but she also knew that there was no way to stop her. She knew the strength of her mate's magic, and therefore Maggie's, and knew that she couldn't stand up to it.

Silver and Red were talking to each other, saying their final goodbyes. Silver was openly crying, but Red was trying to hold back the tears. He was failing.

"Please be careful, Siv. Don't do anything reckless."

Silver started to laugh through the tears. "I should tell you the same thing. Out of the two of us, which has gotten onto more trouble?"

"Right."

"I'll miss you Red."

"Me, too, Siv."

Silver laid her head on his shoulder, and he did the same. They stood there, wrapped in a final embrace.

Maggie was down on one knee over by GreenGrass, telling the hatchlings goodbye. "Be, good, okay? Make sure you eat your green plants, and work hard at your magic lessons. Red will try his best, but he won't know everything. You may know something he does not. Just go easy on him, at least until he learns."

The hatchlings were nodding, not saying anything. From above their heads, GreenGrass said, "Don't worry about them, Maggie. They will not be learning alone. I will try my best to relearn what I have lost."

Maggie stood and placed a hand on her foreleg. "I have no doubt that you will achieve what you desire. Take care, GreenGrass. You were a good teacher."

GreenGrass lowered her head and looked her in the eye. "As were you, Maggie DragonSister."

Maggie felt her eyes tear up, and she kissed the Dragon on the snout. "Goodbye."

GreenGrass blinked back her own tears and turned away. Maggie could hear the grief in her voice as she said, "Come along hatchlings. It is way past your bed time." With one last look, the hatchlings followed the Nest Mother back to the village. Maggie turned and tried to find Raven and Silver.

Raven was standing over where Maggie had left her pack, looking over the bunch of assorted Dragons, waiting for them to say goodbye. Only WhitePaleMoon and GreenGrass had spoken to Raven. The rest, he assumed, were angry that he was leaving. WhiteMoon was his best friend, but even he was having trouble holding back his anger. GreenGrass was sorry to see him leave, but was glad he was there to look out for Silver and Maggie. Russet, YellowBird, BlueSkyAbove and OrangeFallingLeaves only gave him angry glances as they talked to Maggie and Silver. The hatchlings couldn't pull themselves away from Maggie. And Red was embracing Silver, too caught up in the moment to say anything.

Suddenly, Raven felt a disturbance in the air. He could feel a powerful magical shield coming their way. He saw Maggie's head snap up and look around. She caught his eye and jogged over to him. "We are about to have company."

"Who Maggie?" Although he thought he already knew.

"BlackNewMoon," she said, "And the entire Dragon council."

"The council? What are they doing here?"

"We're about to find out."

Just then, the Dragon council came into view, Moon at the head. Silver and Red saw them, and came over to where Raven and Maggie were standing.

"What are they doing?"

Silver shook her head, "I don't know, Red, but it can't be good."

Raven nodded in agreement, but Maggie had her eyes closed. She looked like she was trying to concentrate on something. Then her eyes popped open and she strode forward toward the group.

Raven tried to stop her, “Maggie, don’t!” She ignored him, and walked right up to Moon.

Then she got down on one knee and Moon stopped in her tracks. “BlackNewMoon, mate of GoldenSunrise, I thank you for coming this evening. I know you and I have had our differences, but I am willing to put aside all that has transpired and call you friend again.” Maggie raised her head, still on one knee. “I know you just want what is best for your people. But they are my people, too and I respect your decisions.”

Moon’s voice was as cold as ice. “And yet you disobey me by leaving. And you steal the one next in line to take command!”

Maggie rose and looked Moon in the eye, her voice compassionate. “Moon, if your thinking was not clouded by grief, you would know that I must leave. I must try and fight those trying to destroy all you and I hold dear. And as for BlackRaven, he knows that this is his choice. He knows that he is free to stay here. And he also knows that he is free to return anytime he sees fit. But I will not. Not at least, until my mission is successful, or I am dead.”

Silver gasped at this revelation. She did not until this moment realize how dangerous this journey was. Raven, however, was watching Moon like a hawk and showed no surprise to what Maggie had said.

Silver could see the emotions play across Moon’s face. Anger was dominate at first, then briefly confusion, then all got lost in the pain.

She did not speak, however, so BlueBird stepped around her. “Maggie, all of us, including NewMoon, has agreed that the best thing for you to do is to leave. BlackRaven is of age, and is free to do what he wishes. But you are taking one of our little ones, and we will not abide by that.”

It took Silver a moment to realize that they were talking about her. Everyone except Raven, who was still watching Moon, was looking at her. Silver was getting angry. *Little one? I am almost full grown!* She stepped away from Red and Raven and went up to Maggie’s side. Maggie placed a hand on her shoulder in support.

Then Silver felt Maggie's hand grow warm and felt something worm its way into her thoughts.

Silver, do not show any reaction.

Maggie?! Even though she was surprised beyond words, she did as she was told.

Yes, Silver. Listen to me. Be careful of what you say. They are looking for any reason to delay or keep us here.

How do you know?

She paused. I just do.

The link was severed, and Silver had to take her at her word. Maggie did not look her way as she removed her hand.

Silver stepped ahead of Maggie and faced the Dragon Council. She bowed in submission, but quickly straightened up again and spoke. "Elders, leaders. I am not a "little one". I am just shy of my fourteenth birthday, and if I had my wings and the beginnings of my magic, I would be completing my magical training so that I may use my magic to the fullest, when I am ready. But for some reason, the universe has seen fit to withhold these gifts from me. I am not saying that I am happy about it, but I am willing to except it and do my part to help my people. As an adult, I feel that I am needed by Maggie. When she leaves, I leave. When she returns, I will return. If she falls, I will continue until I take my last breath." Silver had never made a statement so bold, but she felt that this was the best way to deal with the council; they responded to dedication and directness.

For a long time, no one said anything. Then Moon hung her head and silent tears escaped her eyes. "First my mate, then my son, and now my granddaughter. I have no one left." She continued to weep silently.

Maggie hesitantly took a step forward. When no one reacted, she continued until she was right in front of Moon. Even more slowly, Maggie reached up and laid a hand on Moon's head, which was now bent with the weight of her grief. She did not react, except to cry harder. "Moon, I can't tell you how sorry for all that you have endured. You are stronger than most to endure it all for your people. But you must endure a while longer. Your people need you to be strong. You must prepare for everything that is coming your way. I am sorry to say, but I think you will need as much preparation as possible in this short amount of time."

Moon raised her head, but continued to cry. “What do you mean?”

Maggie leaned in to whisper in her ear, and Silver was the only one close enough to hear her, besides Moon. “I would rather not speak it into the open air. I would prefer to show you, and then you may decide if you wish to share this information.”

Moon straightened suddenly. “I wish to confer with Maggie alone.” She walked away, toward the empty field. Maggie made to follow.

“Maggie, I wish to accompany you.” Raven was already walking toward her.

She held up her hand to stop him. “Raven, I can do this alone. She will not hurt me, not now.” Raven nodded, but stayed where he was. He was now positioned to Silver’s left, facing away from the gathering. Silver, now alone, was still standing facing the Dragon council, and Red was behind her. He was the only one who didn’t move.

The council alternated between watching Moon and Maggie, who were now seated out of earshot on the grass, locked in a mental dialog, and Silver, who was still standing before them. Silver grew uncomfortable standing in front of the council, so she started backing away without asking to be excused. No one reprimanded her, so she turned and almost ran back to Red. He was watching the exchange with rapt interest. Without turning to Silver he said, “She can communicate mind to mind?”

“Who? Maggie or Moon?”

“Maggie.”

“Yes, I guess. She talked to me in my mind. You knew about this?”

Red nodded and turned to look at Silver. “Yes. But it is extremely difficult to do, and keep yourself shielded at the same time. This was part of my magic training.”

Silver didn’t say anything. So much she didn’t know. How could she hope to help Maggie? But Maggie needed her, and her petty worries didn’t seem like much compared to what Maggie was getting ready to do.

The silent exchange went on for some time and everyone started getting anxious. It was well on its way to mid-night when BlackNewMoon finally straightened her neck, shaking out the stiffness. In front of her, Maggie stretched her back and stood up.

Moon stood when Maggie did. Both Dragon and girl walked to where the other Dragons stood. By this time, all that remained were Raven, Silver, Red, and the Dragon Elders. The rest had said their goodbyes and went back to their homes.

Moon and Maggie had reached the fringes of the group; Moon went to talk to the Elders, and Maggie came to stand with Raven, Silver, and Red.

“What did you tell her, Maggie?” asked Raven.

“Everything. All that I knew, seen, or heard, I shared with her. In return, she allowed me limited access of her mind. I saw the night she was netted and EmeraldJewel and BlueWater were killed. I saw the day she met Sunrise, and the skirmishes she had with people before she and Sunrise came here. It let me see our enemy in a different light.”

“How so?” Silver couldn’t understand what other light people could be cast in.

“When GoldenSunrise gave me his memories, his thoughts were flavored with grief. He was saddened that the humans he grew up with turned against his people, and the Dragon’s did likewise. But Moon was raised to hate people. All her thoughts are colored with hatred and fear. Fear for herself, for BlueWater, for Emerald. It made her outlook on the hunting of Dragon’s different from SunRise’s.”

No one said anything as they watched the Dragon Elders talk. Silver was thinking about what Maggie had said. She could now understand why Moon was so angry with Maggie. All her experiences with the human race, from the time she was born, were flooded with hate. All interactions were ones of survival; kill or be killed. So when Maggie came along, it brought back all those memories. Couple that with the fact that she still blamed Maggie for Grandfather’s death, and you got hate so thick you could practically see it in the air.

The Elders were in an intense whispered discussion, but every once in a while Silver could make out what was said.

“.... Can’t believe it.”

“This changes everything.”

“She can talk mind-to-mind?”

“Yes, she is far more advanced than we thought.”

“Moon, you must give the girl your blessing.”

“Fate of the world...”

“Can’t understand...”

The waiting was almost driving Silver mad, but it didn’t seem to affect anyone else. Red and Raven were trying to follow the little snippets of information that blew back to them on the wind. Maggie had her eyes closed again and seemed to be listening with her magic rather than her ears. Silver vaguely wondered why Raven didn’t do the same thing.

But before she could think that thought through, the Elders broke up and started coming toward Silver’s little group. Maggie opened her eyes.

Silver asked, “What were they talking about?”

“What they have been talking about ever since I told them my plans; whether to let me go or not, and whether I stole the magic from the divine realms on my journey there. Also, Silver, they want to know how to stop you from going.”

“Why would they want to stop me?”

“They think you are too young. They think that I am either tricking you or you are making me feel guilty and I am being forced to take you. Either way, they think that you will be more of a hindrance than an asset on our journey.”

Silver was outraged. “How could they? I am not a child! I can make up my own mind.”

“Easy, Silver,” Maggie interrupted her. “Moon is telling them otherwise. She now knows why I want you with me.”

“She saw it? In your mind?”

“Yes. That and so much more.”

“What exactly...”

“Later Silver. We need to see what their decision is.”

Maggie put her off again. This was getting really old. But Silver figured that Maggie had her reasons, and would tell her in her own time. When they were out on the road, she would have to tell Silver what was going on.

The Dragon Council was now coming toward them, NewMoon in the lead. Her expression was changed. She no longer looked like she was going to snap at any minute; instead she looked like she finally found something that made sense, but she didn't like it.

"Maggie, Raven, Silver, Red" NewMoon began, "I have shared what I have learned with the council. They agree, as do I, that this journey is necessary. While I don't agree with my son going, I cannot stop him. He is grown and may make his own decisions. But you, Silver," she turned to her, "you I can't allow to go. You are little more than a hatchling, and therefore cannot make this decision on your own. I would prefer that RedStar accompany you, Maggie. He at least can help."

She didn't say it harshly, but the words cut Silver like a knife. Before Maggie could intervene, and before Silver could argue, Red said "Grandmother, I can't go. Maggie has charged me with teaching the hatchlings, as you undoubtedly saw in her mind, and I must do as she has asked. I am the only one who can."

"Yes, but I also saw GreenGrass has intended to learn this magic."

"But who is to teach GreenGrass?" asked Maggie.

Moon didn't have an answer to that. As she stood there trying to think of another, GrayMorningDew spoke up. "Moon, there is no other. Red is right. He must teach the Nest Mother and the hatchlings this new magic. And there is something I have not told you."

Moon looked over at GrayMorningDew, who was standing in the back, sandwiched between BlueBird and GreenPine, her guides. "Moon, I have seen your granddaughter on this journey with the human. She must go, and you must accept this. It is something you cannot stop."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"Because it would have been easier for you to let them go on your own instead of having it forced upon you. If you try to fight this, the universe will fight against you."

No one took any prediction made my MorningDew lightly. Moon was studying her, but it was like she really wasn't seeing the Dragon. It was more like she was seeing past her or through her. She was seeing what MorningDew had saw by looking into her mind. SilverFire recognized the look that came over a Dragon now that she knew what to look for.

“So it must be.” Moon finally said. She came out of her trance and looked back at Maggie and Silver. “So I must lose both my son and granddaughter.”

“You’re not losing us, Mother. We are just leaving for a while. I will come back with Silver and Maggie.”

“I fear that it will not be so. How can you ask me to risk my only son on such a perilous journey?”

“Mother, if I stay, we will all perish. Nothing will survive.”

“How do you know,” she asked her son tearfully.

He thought for a second. “Honestly I don’t. But if I am right, how could I live with myself?”

Moon was silent for a while. “I understand, although it is hard for me for me to accept.” She turned to her son. “Please be careful. And come back to me.”

He walked up to her and placed his head on her shoulder. “I will mother. I will do as I must, and come home.”

NewMoon returned her son’s embrace. “See that you do.” He stepped away. “Silver,” she lowered her head so she could look her directly in the eye, “I do not want you to go, but I see that it is the will of the gods that you do. May they and our ancestors watch over you and protect you.”

Silver lowered her head in reply, moved beyond words. Moon’s eyes started to fill. “Maggie,” she looked away from Silver and to Maggie. Maggie came forward to stand in front of Moon. “I give you my blessing. I see now that I wished to hold on to you so I could be close to my mate once again. But he is gone, happy in the Other Realms and I must begin to move on. Watch over my blood, my family. Do what you must, but remember, you will always have a home here.”

“BlackNewMoon, I thank you for your blessing on our journey. I give you my word that I will protect them with all that I have. Seek peace, NewMoon.” Maggie turned to the council at large. “I thank you for letting me stay here. I will always remember what you did for me. You will always be my family.” Maggie bowed her head respectively to all the assembled Dragons before her. After a short pause, Moon dipped her head in reply, and the rest followed suit.

Maggie rose when the others did. “Now we must go.” She turned to Silver and Raven. “It is time.” All three turned as Red walked over to stand with NewMoon and the Council. They had only gone a few steps when a shout sounded from behind them, from the direction of the village.

“WAIT!” Everyone turned to see GreenGrass halfway to their group. There was a large lump laying in the grass at her feet. When she saw that Maggie’s group had stopped she picked up the lump in her teeth and ran to them. She dropped it in front of Maggie. “Raven, I can’t believe you forgot. I have been working on this since you told me what you wanted, and I had YellowBird set the last stitches while I was here. Well Maggie, what do you think?” GreenGrass was practically beaming.

Maggie investigated the mound. She picked up the first piece. It was all leather, with sinew stitching holding it all together. The top piece was a large double thickness piece of leather with padding between the layers. There was a loop in the center on the top edge. Two large loops with buckles for adjusting ran down connecting the left and right sides, and one piece of leather connected those two pieces. Leather ties ran down each side of the padded layer.

Maggie couldn’t make it out right away. Then she grabbed the loop on top and the back edge, so the buckled loops hung down. Now she knew what it was.

“It’s a saddle. But for what? I don’t have a horse.”

“It’s not for a horse. It’s for Raven.”

Maggie looked at Raven. “You? You asked her to make this?”

“Well, we very well can’t walk the whole way,” Raven said. “And I asked her to make something for Silver, too.” Maggie picked up the second piece. It was a large bag with loops to go over the spikes on his back. Another strap went from the bottom of a bag to the space between the loops.

“I know it’s not the most dignified way to travel, Silver, but I couldn’t think of any other way for you to ride with us, and you can’t fly on your own yet.”

“Thanks Raven. I mean it, thanks.” Silver wasn’t sure she wanted to ride in a *sack* but what choice did she have?

“Come on, Maggie, put them on him. I didn’t make them just to stare at,” said GreenGrass.

Maggie obliged, settling the saddle on his shoulders. She reached below his belly and grabbed the loose straps. She threaded them through the buckles tightening them until Raven told her to stop. At home, when she saddled the horses, she never quite knew when the cinch was tight enough, and it was nice to have a steed that could tell her when to stop.

She slipped the loops of Silver’s bag over the ivory spikes directly behind the saddle. She tightened this strap also; making sure the bag wouldn’t flop around. “Are you sure that you can carry us both?”

“Please, Maggie. What do you take me for? I could carry you and Silver for weeks, if I had to. Now, climb aboard.”

He knelt down so Maggie could scramble up on the saddle. She put on her pack and fastened a strap on the bottom of the bag across her middle, so the pack wouldn’t flap around as they flew. She climbed up Rave’s leg, using the scales as shallow foot and hand holds. It was kind of like climbing a very short, thick tree. She situated herself in the saddle. Now she understood what the leather straps that ran down both sides of the saddle were for. She placed her leg on one side and tied them together down her leg. Now it wouldn’t move, and hopefully she wouldn’t fall off. She did the same with the other leg.

“Now you, Silver.” Raven said.

Silver eyed the pouch, and then jumped. She scrambled up his back and ungracefully plopped into the bag. It was lined with fluffy down and it was a lot more comfortable than it looked. At the bottom of the bag were two loops, one in each corner, which she assumed were for her to hold on to. Silver poked her head out and gripped the edge of the bag in her claws. She felt very small and young. And very silly.

“Ok, Raven. Stand up. Let’s see how they feel.”

Raven obliged, raising himself up to full height. Maggie clutched the loop in front of her as the ground dropped away. She felt a wave of dizziness and closed her eyes to keep from becoming sick.

“Maggie, you ok?” GreenGrass asked.

“Fine, just a little scared of heights.”

Raven started laughing. “Maggie, you can’t be a Dragon and be scared of *heights*.”

“Well, I’m not completely Dragon, just part. So I am completely entitled to be scared of heights.”

“Don’t worry, Maggie. That saddle will not break, at least under normal conditions. If you deliberately cut it, or it is damaged in a fight, it may break. Be careful. You will not find another, unless you make one.”

“Huh?” Maggie thought this was a strange comment to make.

NewMoon spoke. “She is right. As far as I know, this is the only Dragon saddle ever made. No Dragon was ever saddled and ridden. Dragons may have taken humans for a ride for fun, but none was ever used as a beast of burden.”

Maggie didn’t know what to say. She started to reach down and undo the straps. Raven felt her move and spoke up, “No, Maggie. I don’t mind. And you never asked me to do this. I volunteered.”

Maggie stopped trying to undo the laces. “Thank you Raven, GreenGrass. I am eternally in your debt.”

They didn’t say anything, but both Dragons dipped their heads and backed up to stand with the council. Raven opened his wings and Maggie closed her eyes. Suddenly she felt Raven give a great lurch and her stomach dropped out. She felt a great weight pressing her down and the roar of the wind in her ears.

After what seemed like hours, Raven stopped his steep climb and leveled out, and Maggie felt the pressing weight lifted. She heard Silver gasp and say, “Wow.”

Maggie opened her eyes. Wow didn’t even cover it.

They had been transported into a completely different world. Clouds were beneath them, giving the appearance of cotton covered ground. The sky was an unbroken perfect blue. But it was the colors that really made it a wonderland.

The rising sun threw the clouds into a rainbow of colors; pinks, deep reds, and purples blended together to create a perfect picture.

Maggie echoed Silver. “Wow.”

Raven chuckled. “Yes, that was my first reaction also. Flying is a great gift, one only granted to a few.”

“Birds fly, and they’re not what I would consider a few,” Maggie replied.

“Yes, birds fly, but most can’t fly very high. Do you see many birds up here?”

Maggie looked around. He was right. There were no birds flying at this height, nothing at all. It was like just those three existed in the world.

“Yes, the birds may fly, but just the Dragons and the eagles really soar. We are a gifted race.”

Maggie waited for him to elaborate, but he remained silent. She sat back, relaxing just a bit. Being this high really didn’t scare her as much as say, being in a tall tree did. This height made everything seem false and there for much less scary.

Silver gave a great sniff and Maggie looked behind her. Silver wiped her eyes on her sack. Maggie pretended not to notice and turned back around. She knew this was going to be hard on her when she couldn’t fly.

Maggie looked around and was trying to take it all in. She may be leaving her adoptive family behind, but she was looking forward to all that lay ahead.

LEGENDS

Raven flew all through the morning, that day, and through the night. Maggie dozed off and on as he flew, letting the steady rhythm of his wings lull her into a type of trance. She never lost the feeling of the wind around her or of Raven's muscles bunching and releasing under her as she flew. But she also wove in and out of a meditative state, reflecting on recent events, and more importantly of her most recent conversation with her now guide, SunRise.

"He has oppressed your people so much, Maggie."

"I don't understand Grandfather. How has he oppressed us?"

"Think Maggie. What stories do your people tell? What do they believe in? Only what they can see, feel, and touch. None of your history remains. He saw to that when he tore down the places of learning, killing the teachers. He dispersed your people to the winds, to fend for themselves. He cares not for them only his pursuit of power. He thought he had foolishly killed all the dragons in existence, which would not allow him to maintain his ability to manufacture his elixir."

"Elixir?"

"Yes, the one that gives him immortality. As long as he drinks it every month under the full moon, he will live forever, gaining power, until the entire world is in his grasp. That is his goal. But he has found another way to stay alive, to gain even more power. And for that he needs a living dragon, a powerful one. But he does not need the entire Dragon race. He has promised this Dragon power, great power, and that is how he was able to persuade him to destroy his brothers and sisters."

Maggie was just thinking of her response to this when a jolt brought her back to the present. Raven had gone into a steep dive, heading directly toward the ground.

"Hang on!" He shouted back to the pair of them. Maggie leaned forward and grabbed the strap that went around the front of Raven, keeping her closer to the diving Dragon's neck. She risked a peek behind her to see that Silver's hands had disappeared inside the pouch, but her head still remained above the lip, watching the dive. Maggie turned to the front just as Raven cleared the clouds beneath them.

The scenery below had changed completely. No longer were they looking at grass and trees, but a great, flat, brown plain with no greenery to speak of. There were small rocks scattered around the plain, and a silvery line like a snake wound its way through it. Small black ants were milling around the line.

Raven continued his steep dive, bringing the objects closer and into focus for her. Suddenly, she was hit with fear so strong that she was unable to do anything except stare at the ground flying toward her.

The rocks she thought were so small were actually columns and boulders so big that they would have even towered over Grandfather. The small silver snake was indeed a roaring river, flowing wide and strong. And the ants, well... Maggie had no idea what they were.

They were not ants, that was for sure, because they were bigger than she. They would have come up to Raven's shoulder had they been standing side by side. They were brown in color, and looked to be thick muscled.

That was all she was able to process before Raven pinned his wings to his side and plummeted toward the ground.

Maggie wanted to scream, but fright locked her jaw and she was unable to make a sound. Maggie thought that they were going to plow right into the ground, when Raven opened his wings and, with two powerful downbeats, slowed his descent from an all out freefall to a barely controlled dive.

The herd felt the rush of air and heard the sound of his wings. Some took off running and some shied and looked around. But none looked up.

Raven, with a feral roar, fell upon a medium sized animal, scattering the herd. Maggie could feel the animal buck and thrash beneath them until Raven bent down and snapped the animal's neck. When he lifted his head, she could see the blood dripping off his muzzle.

Maggie was in shock, not just from the fall, but from what she had just witnessed. Even before Raven stopped moving, she had the laces untied. When he paused to let her down, she vaulted off his back and ran away from the bloody mess. She did not get far however, until she was violently sick.

Silver and Raven waited back by the carcass, waiting on her. They seemed to know that she didn't want anyone with her. She was glad for that, because she wanted to be alone.

Maggie wiped her mouth and stood up straight, breathing deeply through her nose. She was slowly coming out of her shock and could think again.

What did you think, he ate grass? There is no reason to act like this.

But, another part of her mind countered, I have never seen anything that fierce up close. That was it, she reasoned. She was scared out of her mind. First, the dive. She had honestly thought he had lost control and was plummeting to his, and her and Silver's, death. Then, just as her mind realized that he was in control, he had attacked that animal, and she had thought, irrationally, that he was going to hurt, or kill, her too.

Fear. Well, this was just something Maggie was going to overcome. If it could paralyze her like that when she wasn't in danger, what would happen when she was? Would she freeze like that when she or Silver were in danger? Raven, as she just observed, could take care of himself.

Maggie took another deep breath and looked down. She kicked dirt over the mess to hide it and turned to walk back to her companions.

Silver was exhilarated during the dive, and impressed that Raven was able to take down an animal that large that quickly. But it looked as though Maggie thought otherwise. She had watched Maggie hastily untie the laces that bound her to the saddle, and jumped down. She ran blindly until she was unable to run anymore, then she was sick.

Silver watched Maggie, trying to figure out what had upset her so. She couldn't think of anything, however.

Silver looked at Raven, who was watching Maggie. He turned to Silver. She shrugged her shoulders. "Do you know what's wrong?"

"I think..." he began.

"Think what?"

"I think I scared her."

“But...how?”

“I think it was the dive. You heard her. She said she was scared of heights, and I forgot. So I think I might have scared her when I dived to the ground.”

“Oh. I hope that she’s ok.”

“She will be. Next time, I’ll tell her to close her eyes. Maybe that will help.”

Silver turned back to Maggie and saw her kick dirt over the mess. Then she squared her shoulders, turned, and started walking back toward Silver and Raven.

“I’m sorry,” she said when she reached them.

“Think nothing of it, Maggie,” Raven replied. “I should have remembered that you are afraid of heights. But you’re alright?” He phrased it as a question.

“Yes, I’m fine. This is just something that I have to overcome.” She turned around, taking in the landscape. “So, do you think that this is a good place to camp?”

“As good as any. There is little wind, and if it rains, you and Silver can take shelter under my wing. Why don’t you collect some wood for a fire, and I’ll take care of this... whatever it is.”

Maggie and Silver walked away from Raven and they heard the unmistakable sound of flesh tearing. Maggie picked up the pace.

There wasn’t a lot of wood to speak of in this vast plain, but there were a few twigs and some long dead bushes that Maggie thought would burn. She piled all she could find together. It was not much.

“Maggie, do you think that this would burn?” She was holding up something that was brown and circular.

“What is it?”

“Well... I think it’s the droppings from whatever Raven just killed. But look, it’s completely sun baked and dry. I think it would burn.”

Maggie shrugged. “We might as well try. We don’t have enough wood to burn through the rest of the day and tonight.”

They gathered up whatever they could find, adding that to the pile of twigs. It was now double in size.

“Do you think that’s enough?” asked Silver.

“Hopefully. There’s not much left around here.”

They gathered up as much as they could carry and went back to Raven. They could see that he had the beast skinned and a small pile of meat sitting on top of the hide. Away from the mess he had also dug a small pit, clearing the dry brush from around it.

“Good, your back. Just pile whatever you have found beside here. What are those?” Raven had caught sight of the dry droppings.

“There’s not much wood around here, so Silver and I thought that these might burn.”

He smirked. “We’ll try it, but I don’t think that they’ll burn.”

“They will!” said Silver.

“Whatever, Siv.”

“Don’t you start calling me that. You know I hate that name.”

He smiled. “I know.” He busied himself with making a fire.

Silver “hrmfed” and walked away, muttering something about annoying Dragons that won’t leave her alone. Maggie smiled at Raven, who smiled back and resumed his work, making a pile of twigs in the center of the bare patch. He took a step back and Maggie heard a rumble inside his chest. It sounded like a far away avalanche. Maggie took several steps back to make sure she was far enough away as fire erupted from Raven’s gaping maw, bright yellow tented with orange, red, and blue.

Maggie stood there, unable to take her eyes off of the scene before her. She was amazed that fire could pass over teeth and tongue without harm to either. Her palms tingled with the urge to try and summon fire for herself. But this power, this was something that Dragons did not need to learn, it was instinctual. This was one of the things that Grandfather did not pass to her.

The display was brief, the tinder was dry and caught easily. The fire ended, leaving behind the merry crackling of the brush and dung.

“It looks like Silver was right, this stuff does burn. Great, now I have to actually tell her I was wrong. Or do I?”

“I would think so, Raven. She is going to find out when she gets back here.” Maggie paused, unsure of her next question, but she pressed on. “Raven, can you teach me to summon fire?”

Raven studied her for a while before answering. “Don’t you already know?”

Maggie took a few steps closer to Raven, whose face was now illuminated by the light of the fire, making the deep black of his scales glitter. “It seems, upon exploring the memories Grandfather gave to me, that he didn’t actually pass everything on to me.”

BlackRaven raised an eye-ridge questioningly.

Maggie answered his unspoken question. “I know I said I received everything, and I thought I had. There is just so *much* in my mind now. It took me a while to sift through it, I actually haven’t searched all there is. But while I was looking, I noticed gaps and omissions in his lessons and memories. I figure these are things that I must learn on my own.”

Raven nodded and said, “Of course I’ll teach you, Maggie. But it may be harder for you than it is for a Dragon, because we are built for this. You, on the other hand, must take certain precautions so you don’t injure yourself.”

“Like what?” Maggie asked.

“Well...” Raven began, but at that moment, Silver yelled, “Maggie! Are you coming? I can’t carry this all on my own!”

Raven chuckled. “You had better go. There will be plenty of time later for teaching.”

“I’ll hold you to that.” Maggie turned and saw Silver, now about the size of Maggie’s hand, standing far in the distance, next to a small pile that was their fuel for the fire. Maggie smiled to herself and jogged over to help.

By the time they had returned, Raven had unearthed a large flat rock and was frying some meat on it. The smell of the food made Maggie’s stomach rumble loudly.

Raven turned to Maggie and said, “Maggie, your food is almost done. Silver, I think that there is enough left for two if you would like

to share, or you can take the carcass and I will try to find something else.”

Silver deposited her bundle on the pile next to the fire and turned to Raven. “I can just share with you, if that’s ok?”

“Of course. Maggie, we’ll be over there.” He jerked his head behind them to where the majority of the animal lay. “There is a river over that way,” he motioned over to the right. “We can go wash up after everyone is finished. Did GreenGrass put a water skin in your pack?”

Maggie took of the pack she was wearing and opened the top. Inside she found a moss green bed roll, a sharp knife, which looked to be bone, several wrapped bundles of what appeared to be food rations, a water skin, and a very small bottle, the size of her palm, which, when opened, smelled like her old neighbor’s grain spirits.

She pulled out the skin and bottle, “Here’s this,” she said, holding up the water skin, “and she also put in a bed roll, knife, food, and this.” She handed the bottle to Raven, which was dwarfed in his large hand.

He sniffed it. “I don’t know. But knowing GreenGrass, it is infused with herbs and tastes awful.” He handed it back to Maggie, and she put it back in her pack.

Raven walked away from Maggie. Silver came over and said, “Are you going to be ok?”

“Yes,” she replied, “it’s not like you’re going far away.”

“Alright, just yell if you need me.”

Maggie sat and folded her legs together. “I will, Silver. Go ahead and eat, before Raven eats it all.”

Silver looked up and saw that Raven was indeed tearing into the animal with gusto. “You’re right; he’s eating so fast that he’s going to choke if he doesn’t watch it.” Maggie laughed as Silver was walking away.

Dusk was just falling when everyone had finished, washed up, and settled back down by the fire. Raven was lying with his back legs curled under him, front legs extended, looking like a large tom cat.

Silver was sitting up, staring into the fire, watching the sparks fly into the night.

Maggie returned from the wood pile and sat down beside the fire with her bundle. She placed the fuel beside her and placed a stick in the flames. "Raven, can you finish what you were saying before? What do I need to do to learn to control fire?"

Raven kneced the ground absent mindedly, crushing dirt clod and rock alike. "I have been thinking about that, Maggie. It would depend on your natural tolerance of fire." Maggie saw Silver draw her gaze from the fire and looked at Raven. "Do humans have any resistance?" Raven continued.

"No, not much. The fire will burn if we touch it for too long." To prove her point, she very quickly passed her hand through the top of the flames. "Any longer than that, however, and I would be bitten." She placed both hands on her lap. Silver turned back to the fire. "So I would have to place some kind of a shield over my skin to keep me safe."

"Yes, and also there is the problem of summoning fire. Silver, do you know how fire is summoned?"

Silver jumped with surprise. She blinked a couple times to rid her eyes of the blindness of the fire. "Um, actually, no. I haven't been taught anything about fire or magic yet."

Raven slowly nodded, "I see. So you haven't had any lessons other than your First Years?"

Silver shook her head sadly, recalling the times that she had asked, begged even, to start her lessons. All the adult Dragons thought that she should wait until she had her Magic, so she would understand the lessons taught.

"Well then," Raven said, "I guess that I shall have to teach both of you, especially you, Silver." She stared at him, shocked. "Why no one has bothered is beyond me. You will need as much knowledge as you can acquire in order to survive the tasks before you. You are with us now, and no longer just a hatchling of the village. Do you agree, Maggie?"

Maggie nodded. "Of course I agree. I think she should know as much as we can teach her."

Silver looked at Maggie, and she averted her eyes. Silver wondered if that included what Maggie had been hiding from her. Somehow, she didn't think so.

"So, I shall start with the basic anatomy of fire. A Dragon cannot breathe fire if he doesn't have any Magic at his disposal. But fire doesn't depend on Magic alone. We are each born with a fire stomach, where the fire lays in wait, waiting to be called, like the hot coals of a banked fire. We breathe in, we divert the air to this stomach, instead of the lungs. The air feeds the fire, and this is what we call with our magic. Even you Silver, even though you can't breathe it yet, have a fire stomach. Its fire just isn't large enough to be stoked into producing flame."

Raven looked around at his students, making sure that they understood. He continued. "It is elemental magic in its most basic form. The manipulation of the elements, in this case, fire."

Maggie nodded like she understood, but Silver was confused. "Wait, what do you mean 'manipulation of the elements'?" She asked him.

"You were taught that everything has magic, right Silver?" She nodded. "Well, if everything has magic, that means everything is connected, since no magic can possibly exist separate from any other. And if it's all connected, then you should be able to control or manipulate that other magic, just as you do your own. However, there is varying degrees of difficulty in controlling the elements. Fire is easy, because we are born with it. But because we are creatures of fire, water is difficult to control, because each negates the other. Earth is mildly difficult, because we are things that love air. Air is not difficult, but not as easy as fire."

"Ok, then you should be able to control the elements, right Raven?" Silver said, not convinced. Raven gave a sly grin. Suddenly, a huge gust of wind blew through their camp, throwing the dust and making the flame flicker low, almost dying. The wind howled like a hundred wolves, and Silver threw herself to the ground, covering her ears and eyes. Maggie didn't move.

"Raven, stop. There is no need to show off." Silver heard her as though she was whispering in her ear. The wind died as suddenly as it began. "I would think that someone of your age would be above such petty things," she said in her normal voice.

Silver emerged and shook the dust from her scales. Raven smiled, drawing his lips above his teeth. "It sounded as though she doubted me. I didn't think my word would suffice."

Silver ignored Raven and turned to Maggie. "How did you do that?"

"Do what, Silver?"

"Whisper like that. Like you were standing right beside me."

"Oh, that. Must have projected. Really simple, actually, didn't even realize I did it."

Silver nodded and turned away. She laid her head back down on the ground in a more dignified manner, on top of her paws. She wondered what it would be like to have so much magic that you don't even realize that your using it. She sighed.

"Don't worry, Silver," Raven said, "You'll get your magic soon enough."

"When though?" She said, more to herself than to anyone else.

"I don't know Silver," Maggie said, "I have searched through Grandfather's memories, and I have not seen another case like yours." She thought for a second, "No, you are truly unique."

Silver sighed again. She had no desire to be unique. She just wanted to be like everyone else.

"Anyway, to get back to what I was saying," Raven continued, "elemental magic has varying degrees of difficulty, with fire being the easiest, and water being the hardest. We have a natural resistance to fire; normal fire that is. Dragon fire, or a magically enhanced fire, that is a different matter."

Maggie nodded, "So I will have to find a way to enhance my resistance to fire." Then a thought occurred to her. "Wait, I don't have a fire stomach, so how do I call a flame?"

"Hmm," Raven said, "I don't know, unless there is fire near. There is always earth near us, and air surrounds us always. Water runs underground, over the land, is present in the clouds and air, but fire... Fire is something that we have to call into being. Let me think on this problem." Raven went quiet and didn't speak again.

“So,” Silver said, pulling her gaze from the still and quiet Dragon, “want to try?”

“You heard what he said; I have to find a way to protect my skin before I can control fire.”

“Yes, but that’s only if you try to touch it. Just try to control it.”

“Ok.” Maggie stretched her arms above her head and placed them in her lap, palms up. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Silver saw the purple mist that was her magic thread out from her, searching for the fire. It found the fire and jerked back, as if her magic had gotten burned. Then gently, it found the base of the flames and medaled itself with it. Now the fire burned orange, yellow, and purple. The purple flicked and shifted with the fire, looking like fire itself.

Silver glanced over at Raven, who was watching Maggie closely. She turned back to watching the fire, now crackling with more intensity than before. The flames slowly started building, climbing higher into the sky, casting sparks into the evening air. Still higher and higher it climbed, now higher than Silver. Still it climbed, so that it was even with Raven. The flames were twisting themselves into twirls and spirals, quite unnatural shapes for fire.

Maggie smiled to herself, and Silver saw the purple drawing back from the flames, and the fire shrank back to its normal size. All the purple entered Maggie, and the fire flickered down to the coals, all the wood consumed. Maggie opened her eyes, which shone briefly purple before returning to their normal color. She grinned.

“Very good, Maggie,” Raven said as Maggie added fuel to the fire. “Have you memories of elemental control?”

“No, I don’t. I just asked the fire to grow. It agreed easily.”

“Like I said, fire is one of the easiest to control. But you will want to master fire before you move on to the tougher elements.”

Silver yawned. “While this is all very interesting, I’ve been up all night and all day. I’m exhausted. And I know I’m not the only one. We should all get some sleep.” She yawned again just to prove her point.

“Your right, Silver,” Maggie said, “I am tired. Should we keep watch?”

“I’ll watch over the two of you. I am older, so I have much more stamina than you hatchlings.”

Silver settled down and got comfortable. Maggie took out her bed roll and nestled into it. “You know Raven; it’s not nice to brag. But I’ll take you up on that offer, anyway.”

Raven chuckled quietly, and filled the camp with the sound of falling stones. “I was just stating a fact young one. No offence meant.”

“None taken, but it’s still not nice to brag, no matter how you dress it up.” Maggie wiggled deeper into her bedroll, lying on her back, using her pack as a pillow. She looked up at the stars overhead and pointed with her finger to the constellation Draco. “You know, I used to think that those stars there were as close to a Dragon as I would ever come.”

Raven looked up and saw where she was pointing. “Do you know the legend to that particular cluster of stars, Maggie?”

She let her arm drop to her side. “No, I never heard of a legend connected to Draco. Stories and legends were never told in our village, and as far as I know, anywhere else. The only ones that were told are filled with horror and scary things.” She paused for a moment. “But Mother used to tell me nice stories when I went to sleep. She told me never to repeat those stories to anyone, or I would get her into trouble.”

“Well, I’ll tell you the legend of Draco, and how he came to be among the stars.”

Silver clawed at the dirt to break some hard lumps up and laid her head down on her paws. Maggie turned to her side so she could watch Raven. Raven waited for them to get comfortable and began.

“A long time ago, back when the earth was new and the sky was young, the gods still walked the earth. The animals of the earth were plentiful, and roamed freely across the land, water, and air. They lived in peace with one another, never hunting unless hungry, respecting all those that lived in harmony. All were equal, and loved each like a brother. But even in this peaceful society, evil stirred.”

“In a small village, there was hatched an egg. But it didn’t contain one Dragon. No, born from this egg were two Dragons, twin males; one black and one white.”

“Now, the egg was given to the Nest Mother when it was laid, as is custom. The mother of the Dragons gave name to the hatchlings, but they are raised by the entire village. Young are precious, and must be watched over and taught by all. The mother, during the Naming Ceremony, named the black one Darcus, and the other, Larksa. They grew through their early years without incident, and not much is known of their hatchlinghood. But when they reached the age of seven and started their magic lessons, then the trouble began.”

“Darcus and Larksa started learning how to become powerful warriors. Back then, when the gods still walked the earth, Dragons were their protectors. They walked with the gods, watching over them and making sure they came to no harm. By this time, however, there were no more wars between the gods, and the Dragons were usually just companions on their journeys, and guides. But as Larksa grew, he started to resent the gods.”

“He thought that the Dragons deserved more than just walking the gods around the earth. He thought that they should be better than the gods, for which one sacrificed more? He grew discontent.”

“So the pair grew, and as they grew, they grew apart. Darcus was content to be an Ifénld, a warrior. Larksa hungered for more. He learned all he was taught, but he needed more. When he turned fourteen, he chose to go on his own. He went to a mountain, high to the north, and there he learned Dark Magic. He didn’t return to his village.”

“Darcus grieved over his brother, for he didn’t know where he went or what happened to him. He learned and grew, and became a great warrior. His name spread through the Other Realms, of his power and devotion. So it came to be that his name reached the ear of Siaen, the goddess of spring.”

“Siaen visited the earth every year as Athor, the god of winter, prepared to leave the earth. She walked through the woods and fields, awakening the still slumbering trees and flowers, and talking to the newly emerged animals. Siaen wanted a companion, and she chose Darcus. While Siaen was preparing for her visit, Larksa felt her enter this realm, and left the mountain.”

“Darcus met Siaen at the World Bridge, where the Other Reams and earth meet. They began the journey, moving over the land, bringing spring to the earth. Larksa waited for Siaen.”

“Darcus and Siaen reached the end of the world. Having brought life to all the land, Siaen was weak, losing her hold to the goddess of

summer, Leassi, and unable to stay on the earth much longer. She prepared to journey to the Other Realms.”

“But Larksa wanted Siaen. He knew that if he could kill the goddess of spring, as she moved from the earth to the Other Realms, then the other gods would lose their hold over the earth, for all things begin with life. If he killed Siaen on the earth, she would be reborn the next spring. If she went into the Other Realms, she would become strong and again visit the earth. But if he killed her in the In-Between, no other god could again walk the earth. Larksa would control the world and all that was on it.”

“Darcus and Siaen reached the Pure Glen, where she could walk the World Bridge at midnight, but before she crossed, she turned and bid a goodbye to her guide, warrior, and now friend. As her back was to the bridge, Larksa set upon her, and bound her with ropes made from the darkest magic. Weakened as she was, she was unable to cast off her binding.”

“Darcus, seeing her in trouble, ran to her. But she was already in the In-Between, a place between the earth and her world, and he could not follow. He traced the magic back to the side of the Glen, where he felt a great evil.”

“Darcus threw a pulse of pure energy toward where the evil lay. The dark magic broke from its source, but the ropes remained binding Siaen. They were now tied to the caster’s life force. Larksa, sensing his brother’s magic, calmly walked into the glen.”

“Darcus could not believe what he was seeing. He had thought his brother dead, for he had been gone for over twenty years. But as he watched Larksa walk into the glen, he knew that this Dragon was not his brother anymore, but one that was filled with hate and evil. It choked out his magic, replacing it with a seething darkness that never rested, twisting his mind with dark thoughts. Larksa sneered, baring his teeth, and struck Darcus in the heart.”

“The magic twisted around his heart, choking it, slowly squeezing it. Darcus turned his magic inward, trying to shred the fingers around his heart. They resisted all that he did.”

“While Larksa watched his brother dying, he again established a connection to the goddess. He was slowly drawing her life force into himself, as well as crushing the life out of his brother.”

“Darcus realized Saien was going to die unless he did something. But he only had enough magic to either break the magic killing her,

or tare of the hold on his heart; he could not do both. But he could not let Saïen die. She was his charge, his friend, and a goddess.”

“Threading his life magic with the magic that he had left, he threw it all at Larksa. The dark magic binding Saïen could not stand the life magic that flowed in the attack set upon it. It broke and lashed back to Larksa. Larksa, unprepared for this, was unable to stop the magic. It latched on to nearest living thing, which was he. Larksa was attacked by his own spell. His life energy was consumed, and he fell to the ground, dead.”

“Darcus felt his own life energy flicker. He knew he had only moments left. He was content that he had protected Saïen, and she would go back to her world.”

“But Saïen, freed from the magic, stumbled to Darcus. She placed his head in her lap and stroked his head, thanking him for his sacrifice. No one, god or Dragon, had ever did as much for her. Summoning her remaining strength, she breathed in his SoulFire, the Fire that a Dragon needs to live. She turned her head toward the sky and exhaled. The fire leapt from her mouth and hurled to the night sky. As she watched, the fire condensed into stars, forming a Dragon. With a last smile, Saïen faded from the earth, joining the new flowers of spring.”

“Now as Saïen is reborn every year, Draco watches over her through her journey, keeping her from harm. He is eternal, as is she; they are partners forever. She honored his sacrifice, and we tell the story so that his memory will not fade.”

As Raven finished the story, Maggie once again looked upon the stars. She wondered if the story was true. And if it was, how did the other stars come into being? Where were the gods and goddesses now? Grandfather mentioned the Lord and Lady while she was in the Other Realms, but who were they? And what of the Creator? Who was he? There were quite a few gaps in her knowledge, she realized now. Why was Grandfather holding information from her? She needed as much information from Raven as she could get.

She listened to the noises around her and realized that Silver’s deep, regular breathing meant that she was asleep. She looked over at Raven and saw that he was facing away from the fire, looking out into the night. She quietly slipped out of her bedroll and tiptoed over to him. She sat down cross legged beside him, and looked out into the night.

“Can’t sleep?”

“No, there are too many questions going around my brain. I feel as if I’m missing something important, and I don’t know what to do.”

Raven was silent for a moment. “Is there anything I can help you with? I told you when I started this journey that I would help you with anything I could. I meant that. If you need my help, just say so.”

Maggie and Raven sat in silence for a moment, looking out across the plain. She could hear the wind lightly play through the grass, awaking it so that it whispered its secrets to those that chose to listen. The stars twinkled and occasionally one would fly across the sky, taking with it prayers from those that seen it. It was so peaceful, she wondered how there could be Dragons and people bent on destroying it. But they were out there, planning and biding their time, waiting for the opportune moment. And she was the one who was supposed to stop them. It was enough to make her want to stay on this spot, watching the stars, forever.

But as much as she wanted to, she couldn’t. Her destiny waited, along with the future of Dragons and humans alike.

So she started with the questions that she was most confused about.

“Who are the god and goddesses? What are they? And what is a Creator?”

Raven was silent, pondering her questions, deciding on how best to answer. He did so with a question of his own. “What do you mean, what is a god?”

“Just that. What is it? I have never heard of a god or goddess, or a Creator, or the Lord and Lady, or any of it. Who or what are they?”

Raven glanced down at her, to make sure she was serious. She was.

“A god is someone who watches over the earth, making sure that things are going as they should, intervening if there is a catastrophe, giving hope to those that look to him for support, and help keep things moving, like the seasons, the tides, the waxing and waning of the moon, and the journey of the sun. A goddess is the female version of this entity, the balance and mate to the male. Both must exist for life to prevail. They are eternal, helping their children, but never intervening in free will.”

He looked back to Maggie to see if she understood. She nodded, so he went on. “The Lord and Lady are the first god and goddess,

children of the Creator. The Creator made them as equals, so that they could rule in balance, one never usurping the other. They are the mother and father of all the other gods and goddesses. They are Night and Day, Sky and Earth, Heat and Cold, Life and Death. They are the balance in all things, and that is what they rule. They protect the balance of all things, so that beings may be born, live, and die, and can be reborn if they choose.”

“The Creator existed before time itself existed. This is where magic comes from. The Creator is neither male nor female, but an all powerful entity that gives the spark of life to everything. The Creator gives life, and that spark eventually returns to It. Before time existed, the Creator breathed out, and created the stars. The Creator then took the fire from the stars and molded it in Its hands, cooling it with Its breath. It cried over it, and created the water. It placed this sphere back among the stars, and this was the earth.”

“The Creator wanted to fill this new world with life. Through Its magic, It willed creatures of the water into being. The sand condensed to form the fish of the sea. Some remained small, and grew shells to protect them. Some of these grew, and became the whales and sharks. Plants grew in the soil under the water, just like on land. So became the sea.”

He paused to see if Maggie wanted to say something. Maggie was silent, so he continued. “The land also wanted creatures to nurture it, so the Creator willed some of the sea creatures to be of land and sea. But the land was still lonely, so the Creator created animals with hooves to run in the plain and animals to hunt those that ran. It also created animals with pads and paws to live in country that was hilly and rough; creatures with hands like yours or mine to climb the trees and live in the forests. The Creator gave insects to help keep the land clean, and reptiles to control the insects. And so the land came to be.”

“And now there was but one place that there was no creatures; the sky. The Creator went through the creatures and asked who wanted to be closer to the sky. Some of the lizards had always admired the sky, and wanted to be closer to it. And so he gave these creatures wings, and they became the birds. And so the sky came to be.”

“The Creator decided that It didn’t want to be the only thing that these creatures could look to. The Creator decided that each type of creature could have its own divine being, if it wished. And the Creator also decided that It would give dominion of each place in this new world over to Its children.”

“The Creator drew the life giving energy from the sun and created the Lord, and gave him dominion over the sky. Then the Creator drew the nurturing energy from the soil, and created the Lady, and gave her dominion over the earth. And so they are equals, mates for eternity, and the oldest among the gods and goddesses.”

“There are many gods and goddesses, each with his or her own dominion. They are the children of the Lord and Lady, yet separate from them, connected, yet not related, as they are not blood and flesh, but of energy, thoughts, magic, the elements, and all that makes up this world. That is who they are, and that is how they come to be.”

Maggie thought of this for a while, going over all that Raven said. “How do you know all this? Is it true?”

“These are the legends handed down from the beginning of our race. We believe that they are true, but I’m sure that the other races, like humans, have other legends that they believe are true. Is one truer than the other? Which is right? Only the Creator knows that. But It put different races and different stories here for a reason. Maybe none of them are right, maybe all of them are. Who knows?”

“But we, humans, that is, don’t have any legends or stories. Nothing about gods or goddesses or anything like that.”

“But you used to,” replied Raven.

Maggie remembered what she was thinking about that morning, about what Grandfather had told her. “Sunrise suggested as much. But how does someone wipe out an entire history?”

“I don’t know, Maggie. But Sunrise altered the fabric of Dragon nature, so it is possible. But the power involved... I would think it would kill anyone who would try.”

Maggie’s mind turned to the time when she was in the Other Realms, and she remembered the Fountain of Creation. Thinking out loud, she said, “So that is why the Lord and Lady placed the fountain in the Other Realms. They were thankful for all the life given.”

“What are you talking about?”

She looked up at the Dragon. “There is a fountain set in the center of the Other Realms, giving thanks to the Creator for the creation at the beginning of time. But it is more than just a fountain, it contains a bit of all that was created, so that all would be remembered.

Sounds, smells, sights, feelings; all are contained within the fountain and the waters that flow over it.”

“Sounds like quite a wonder.” Raven said.

“Yes, it is. ‘One of the great wonders of this realm,’ Grandfather said. He was right.”

Raven sighed and looked at the position of the moon. “Maggie, it’s rather late. Why don’t you try to sleep? We have a lot of time to discuss these things.”

She yawned, suddenly exhausted. “Yea, I think I will go to sleep. Are you sure that you can stay up? Cause I can take a turn keeping watch if you want.”

“No, I’ll be fine, Maggie. You get your rest, and I’ll wake you when it’s time to leave.”

“Alright, Raven. Goodnight,” Maggie said as she was walking away.

“Goodnight, Maggie,” he said, returning his gaze to the flat expanse of plain before him. “May the Lord and Lady watch over you,” he whispered into the night.

ENLIGHTENMENT

The days passed, blurring into one another as the Dragons and the human crossed the great plain. They would rest during the heat of the day, and fly during the early morning and late night.

Maggie learned to sleep in the saddle, allowing the beating of Raven's wings to lull her to sleep. During their stops, Raven would teach her to control her magic and harness the power of the elements.

Raven hunted once every three days, gorging himself, then slept for a few hours in the sun. After that, he seemed rested and refreshed, and Maggie had no idea how he managed it. Silver did the same thing, to an extent. She had to eat every day, but seemed to need less sleep than Maggie.

So as not to deplete her stores, Maggie had Raven light a fire and cooked a small portion of whatever he caught. They saw more of the strange large, shaggy brown animals. Maggie also spotted a herd of wild horses, with shaggy manes and tails. Silver was fascinated, and Raven wanted to catch one to see how it tasted. But Maggie remembered Jarden and asked him not to. He agreed, but sulked afterward.

For Silver, this was the best thing that had ever happened to her. For once in her life, someone was treating her like an adult, not like a hatchling. Raven was teaching her Magic, whether she had it or not. And Maggie treated her like a sister.

For Maggie, she was learning things at a rapid pace. Raven told her of the Dragon's history, making the stories come to life around the campfire. Silver also would tell some of the stories, lending her voice to that of Raven's. She was learning to control the elements, making the fire dance and move, and creating a ferocious wind where there was none before. It was nice to be accepted for who she was, and not being treated like a freak of nature she was raised to feel like.

For Raven, however, things did not feel right. Ever since WhiteWater had escaped him, he felt a growing unease in the pit of his stomach. Something was not right with the world, and he could feel it. He felt as if a storm was gathering on the horizon, and only he felt the charge in the air.

Finally, when the group had stopped for the day, Maggie looked up and noticed the mountains were getting closer. They had appeared

unmoving for so long, never seeming to get closer, that this was a shock to her and Silver. Raven was unsurprised.

“This plain is very large, and the mountains are far away. I think we have finally passed the halfway point. Now that we are closer, we need to start talking about where we are going. Up to this point, it didn’t matter.”

“Why?” asked Silver.

“Because there is only one way out of here. The mountains form an impassable ring around us, except right in front. Here, there is a break in the mountains, so thin that if you didn’t know it was there, you would miss it. That is why this place is so secure. But now that we are almost out of here, we need to have a plan.”

Silver thought about that for a minute, then said, “Then how was Maggie able to find this place?”

Maggie turned away from the mountains and said, “I just followed a feeling; a pull. I never really noticed where I was going.” She went to Raven and removed the saddle, rubbing underneath it like she used to do with the horses.

Raven stretched like a cat, yawning, and, waiting for Maggie to move, he swept an area clean with a swipe of his tail, and laid down. He shifted his wings to get more comfortable. “She was following the pull of the magic Grandfather cast. The spell works on those born with magic. It was aimed at Dragons, since humans were blocked from getting any by our spell weavers during the war. It worked on Maggie because she had magic. To keep it from fading over time, Grandfather would renew the spell on the winter solstice every year.”

“Why?” Asked Silver.

“He kept a hope that there were more Dragons in the world. And there might have been, but they were unable to make it to the valley. Or they found their own refuge and didn’t want to leave.” Raven yawned again.

“Sleep, Raven,” Maggie said, sitting cross legged beside him. She leaned against his side, idly scratching the ground in a pattern. Silver looked and saw that Maggie was drawing symbols that she did not recognize.

“What are those Maggie?” Silver asked.

She obliterated them with a swipe of her hand. “Nothing Silver. Nothing of importance, anyway.”

More secrets. I will get the answers I need. Whether she thinks I am ready or not, I need to know what I got myself into.

But as Silver opened her mouth to say so, her stomach twisted into a hard knot and the words were lost on the way to her mouth. Maybe she didn’t *want* to know what Maggie knew. For the first time, the meaning of “all of his memories” hit her. Maggie just didn’t have Grandfather’s good memories and stories, but all the bad as well. The pain and suffering he felt, the horror of thinking his mate dead. And also all the premonitions and visions he had. She recalled those days where Grandfather would come out of meditation and disappear, and he came back, looking like he just seen the slaughter of all he held dear. Maggie knew all that now, and didn’t have the benefit of time to temper the feelings and potency of the memories.

For the first time in her life, she wasn’t sure if she wanted her magic. She looked back at those that had their magic, seen the suffering and hardships that it brought on, and she was unsure she wanted that.

All of this went through her mind quickly, because Maggie was still talking. “Silver, get some sleep. I will take the first watch.” She looked to the sky, and then said seemingly to herself, “The days are getting longer. Autumn will be on us soon. We need to get through the pass before it closes with snow and ice.” Maggie looked back down to the ground, and started writing in the same strange runes, occasionally erasing a mistake. Silver curled up next to Raven, facing Maggie, watching her write, erase, and continue.

The sun was a finger width above the horizon when Maggie woke Raven and Silver. It was almost a week since she noticed the mountains were closer. They were now right in front, barely a day’s fly away; great giants watching the small group’s progress across their land.

Strapping the saddle onto his back, she climbed back onto him, lacing her legs in place. The pouch for Silver was in place and she leapt into it. She poked her head out of the top.

“Ok, Raven, ready?” Maggie asked.

“Ready as ever, Maggie.”

Raven spread his wings wide and beat down, leaping into the air. Gravity would not let go of him at first, but slowly he gained height. A great weight pressed down on Maggie, making it hard to move her arms and head. She closed her eyes so tight that lights blossomed behind her eye lids.

As Raven made it to the peak of his climb, he leveled off, and the weight lifted. Maggie knew it was safe to open her eyes, and when she did, the sights never ceased to dazzle her.

They were above the clouds. Straight ahead the mountains loomed, deep purple in the fading light. Above, the stars were just starting to twinkle into existence. The plains below were dusky, barley able to be seen, and she was unable to make out anything on them.

But the sunset is what commanded her attention. The reds and oranges shot upward, painting the sky. The clouds were rich pinks, oranges, and reds. She had seen the sunset every night since they started their journey, and it was still something that moved her spirit.

She took a deep breath, savoring the moment of peace. Silver poked her head out and looked as well, and Raven stretched his neck and roared to the sky. Silver did as well, and Maggie let out a, “Yaaaaaaa!” right before Raven pinned his wings and dived towards the ground. Maggie bent forward just in time and flattened herself to the saddle, hanging on to the straps. She tried to keep her eyes open as the wind stung and burned them; it twisted her hair and grabbed at her cloths with invisible fingers. Eventually she had to close her eyes, and she felt giddy with the sense of weightlessness. Raven opened his wings and angled out of the dive, gaining height with each wing beat. Maggie opened her eyes again. They were now flying below the clouds, closer to the plains than before.

She had become accustom to these dives over the past weeks. Raven had told her, one day as they rested, “In order to be Dragon, you must fly like one.” Maggie was determined to do just that.

Now that her initial fear of flying had passed, she found that she enjoyed it, to a point. Every time Raven decided to dive and skim the ground, she couldn’t completely banish the thought that he was going to plow into the ground and flatten them all. But he never did, and he never lost control. This made Maggie a bit more comfortable, and she tried to trust him whenever he decided to do this.

Silver seemed to love all the flying, and never showed fear when Raven pulled an aerial stunt.

They were close. Maggie estimated that they would be through the pass by sunrise. The mountains, once like distant hills, now loomed ahead, dark and uninviting. Around the bases, small trees sprouted. Farther up the slopes, they grew into pines, poplars, elms, and hickories. They were up high enough; Maggie could see where these grew further and further apart, becoming scraggly brush. Then those gave out for the snow and scree of the mountain side. The mountains were too high for people to climb over. There was only one pass, and it was right in front of them. Raven would fly through it, following the valley, to the other side. When they got there... Maggie had no idea where to go next.

The nights were getting colder the farther they flew. When they were flying, Raven was able to cover them in heat, keeping the chill away. But when they landed, the wind seemed to seek out the smallest holes in Maggie's clothes, sending shivers up her spine. Maggie tried to summon warmth to bath herself in like the Dragons, but it seemed you needed an internal heat source like fire for it to work. Maggie tried one time to raise her body temperature up; she had gotten a fever and had shivered for hours after. She didn't dare try that again.

Even though Silver didn't have her magic yet, she didn't seem affected by the cold like Maggie. Maggie assumed that this was because, even though she couldn't breathe it yet, fire still was forming in her fire stomach. This helped keep her warm. Also, Silver's scales offered her more protection than Maggie's clothes from the wind.

Maggie scanned over the vista below her, wondering what she was going to do now. She was holding back information from her traveling companions; information they needed. She was afraid to share it, however, for what she knew scared her. But if they were going to go with her, to the end of their world and back, they had to know.

Maggie looked to the valley ahead, and reached out with her mind towards Raven. It was still a strange sensation, to be aware of all the creatures, no matter how small, all around her. She felt Silver, a bright molten silver light, right behind her. Raven's mind was an even brighter light. His mind was colored like his scales, black, but not in a bad way. It was a rich color, shifting and deep. You could get lost in it, embraced in the warmth that was always present. Maggie reached toward him and touched his thoughts.

Like always, his mind was shielded. A black, impenetrable barrier blocked her from him. She gently brushed his mind with hers. He would feel it, and recognize her.

He did, and lowered his guard. Her thoughts melded with his. She struggled to keep her sense of self, since when you shared thoughts, it was more of a melding of minds. Thoughts that originated from the other person felt as your own, and vice versa. Unless you made it a point to keep yourself pulled together, it was possible to completely merge your identities.

Maggie would have preferred to speak, but Raven had told her that this was a great exercise, and it increased her mental discipline. Once she was able to only share the thoughts she wanted, she would have advanced greatly.

Yes, Maggie? Raven's inquiring thought came to her. She felt several emotions that were not her own, including curiosity, but mostly an overwhelming sense of *freedom*; that was the only way she could describe it. That feeling was always there when he flew; a sense of power. Power to go where he wanted and having the strength to do it. He did not try to hold back his feelings; it was her job to block him.

When we make it through the valley, I would like to rest for a few days. I think we need to start traveling by day, as well. Maggie struggled to put forth just her words. Unfortunately, she knew she didn't succeed. She could feel some of her memories, her feelings, and her sense of self cross into his mind.

Hmmmm.... She could feel him thinking over what she said, as well as what she didn't say. *There are things that travel in the dark that we do not want to meet on the ground. It is safer to take to the skies during these hours. But I agree; we should rest for a few days. We must decide what we are going to do next.*

His words caused her to think about what she had neglected to tell him. Immediately, she could tell that he could feel it cross their mental link, and she pulled her thoughts back, all of them, and wrapped them in a tight ball in the center of her being. No tendrils of thought or feeling escaped.

She could hear him laugh; a mental chuckle. *I will not ask what it is you are trying to hide, little one. It seemed to have caused you to finally master this lesson. Remember what it is you have done, so that you may do it again later.*

Maggie allowed one thought, and only one, to escape. It was harder than she expected. *Thank you.*

You are welcome. We all have secrets Maggie. Most do not want to share their deepest and darkest parts of themselves. Do not feel ashamed. If you wish me to know, I am sure you will tell me. And Silver also, if you feel it is right. I know you want to protect her, but she is stronger than you believe.

He withdrew, gently, so that she could think over what he said in private. She allowed her thoughts to relax. She could no longer feel Raven thoughts; he had put up his barrier again. All she could see of him was his mind-color, as well as Silver's.

Maggie came back to herself, and she realized that they had entered the valley a while ago. Herds of deer roamed the mountains, grazing on the lush grass that grew in the shelter of the valley.

Raven had hunted the day before, so Maggie didn't expect that he needed to stop to eat tonight. She had become accustomed to his hunts, and she didn't react like she did the first day they were together. Seeing his fierceness, and taking frequent trips into his mind, she learned that Raven enjoyed his hunts, but didn't inflict undue suffering on the beasts he used for food. He did not take pleasure in taking life, but accepted that it was the natural order of things. Everything ate something else.

But she also realized that he was surprisingly gentle, calm, and willing to learn. Not much upset Raven, but when he got angry, his anger rolled like an avalanche. He was unstoppable, powerful, and cold. He never did anything rash in his anger; all was thought out and calculated. Maggie fully realized now why Raven came with her. He wanted to help, but he also realized that this was the best chance he had at catching WhiteWater. Maggie was glad, once again, that Raven was on her side. She did not think she would survive long with an enemy like Raven.

They flew for hours; Raven occasionally touching her mind to inquire about this or that or to teach her something that crossed his mind. If he did decide to do a lesson, he often included Silver, who was now used to this contact. While she could not reach toward anyone to start a conversation, because magic was needed to reach toward magic, she was learning to block her thoughts and speak with her mind once entered. Raven assured her that when she got her magic, she would have already mastered the hardest parts of mind talking.

Maggie also carried on conversations with Silver, both out loud and mind to mind. They talked about everything and nothing; but never did they meld their minds together, even though Silver wanted too. Maggie had too much in her mind, and couldn't burden Silver with what she knew.

Slowly, Maggie looked to the east and could see a lightening of the sky behind the mountain. Since they entered the valley, dawn would not truly greet them until much later, after the sun had climbed over the peaks. Maggie looked back and saw Silver yawn and stretch, which made Maggie yawn as well. She sent a tendril of thought toward the Dragon. She did not guard herself as severely with Silver as she did with Raven. Silver did not try to batter through her armor as Raven did. *Are you ready to stop? I think it would be good to rest in the shelter of the valley rather than beyond it; I think we are almost out of it, anyway.*

Silver didn't respond immediately. When she did, her thoughts were laced with weariness. *Yes, I like the look of this place, and I am tired of constant traveling. Have Raven find a suitable place. He would be able to pick a better camping spot than both of us.*

Maggie agreed, and withdrew contact from Silver, letting the Dragon sit in sleepy peace. She recalled their lesson from earlier, and drew herself into a tiny ball. She imagined the ball encased in rock, nothing in and nothing out. Then she let one tiny crack form in her mental armor, letting one thought escape at a time. She reached out toward Raven and brushed against his mental armor. His, rather than a rock, felt like dragon scales.

Maggie waited until she felt Raven reach back toward her. She let her thoughts connect with him, while simultaneously protecting her mind and trying to think about what she wanted to say. The result was that her thoughts were not smooth like Raven's always was, but jerky and disjointed. *I think.... stop for day.... find good....spot...water food... warm... fire....sleep and think...*

Raven interrupted her. *I think what you are trying to tell me is that you would like to stop so that we can rest and think about what we are going to do next, am I correct?*

...Yes

And that you would like me to find a spot with plenty of food, water, and shelter so that we will be comfortable for a few days there?

I... talk... Silver and you.... Plan...

Maggie, please stop. You are doing well, but the way you are talking is making my head hurt, your thoughts are too sharp and hard. He must have felt the feeling of disappointment cross their mental link, because he continued. *Maggie, it is because I am exhausted. It is hard for me to block you even now, but I can. But the way you are talking is taking a great effort for me to understand. And because you are trying to shield yourself from me, you are putting too much force behind your thoughts. Instead of letting your thoughts cross naturally across our link, meeting me half way, you are forcing them all the way and basically forcing them into my brain...* They hurt, he finished softly.

Maggie was stunned. Not once during their travels together did Raven hint that he was as tired, let alone exhausted. She felt guilty that she forced him to this state. Quickly she responded, trying to be less forceful. She let her guard down so that she talked smoothly and fast. *I am sorry, Raven. Land as soon as you can.*

There was a pause, and then Maggie felt his answer. *Thank you.*

Maggie started to withdraw, but Raven stopped her. *Maggie?*

Yes?

You have nothing to feel guilty over. I pushed myself this far; only me. Not you, not Silver.

Maggie knew he could feel how grateful she was that he said that to her, but she still felt bad. He ignored it however, and continued, *I think that there is a little glade not far from here. It will serve for a while.* He withdrew from her mind, and angled slightly to the left. Maggie gripped the loop in front of her to keep from swaying and checked the straps on both legs. They were secure. She braced for the dive she knew was coming.

Soon she felt him angle downward. The sky slightly lit the ground before them. Maggie saw a small clearing near the foot of the mountain. He angled his wings and went into a slight dive, making for the edge just above the trees surrounding it. He started to check his speed, slowing down by back peddling with his wings. When he was close to the edge, he reared up suddenly, and Maggie lost sight of the ground. All she could see now was his massive black neck. She braced with her hands and legs as she felt his powerful muscles bunch and release as he stopped his forward motion almost completely by flapping his wings forward. He started to fall almost instantly. He combined a forward and downward stroke to stop his short freefall, and landed on his back feet gracefully. He flapped one more time, gently, and his front feet touched the ground with not the slightest jerk. He folded his jet black wings tight to his sides and

walked to the center of the clearing, kneeling for Maggie to climb down.

Quickly, Maggie undid the laces holding her in and swung off the side, landing heavily. While she no longer got saddle sores or came off so stiff that she collapsed to the ground, riding all day astride a Dragon was no comfortable way to travel.

Silver turned and climbed onto Raven's back. She walked partially down his tail, being careful that she did not impale herself on one of his spikes. When she was closer to the ground, she jumped off and immediately stretched, working out all the knots and kinks in her muscles.

Raven rose and stretched as well. Maggie went and undid all the buckles and straps and removed the saddle so that he would be comfortable. She went and retrieved Silver's bag as well, then went to the edge of the clearing to take a look around and stretch her legs.

Raven stretched out his legs and back and then stretched his tail out as far as it would go. Maggie turned and watched him. She could tell, now that she was paying attention, that he was tired. It showed in the slight hesitation of his movements and the way his limbs trembled when he put all of his weight on one. Even his wings, when folded, drooped slightly from his shoulders and his head and neck, normally arched high, was held lower.

But his voice betrayed nothing; nor did his thoughts. He had kept his fatigue from her, both when speaking and when he contacted her with his mind. She hadn't noticed the droop of his body because normally he landed, she took off his saddle, and he went straight to sleep. Very rarely did he stay up past dawn anymore.

He took a step forward and his front leg collapsed under him. He caught himself before he hit the ground. Maggie ran toward him. "It's alright. They just aren't used to bearing weight. I've been flying more than walking the past few weeks."

Maggie ignored him and went to him anyway. She placed her hands on his chest. He felt feverish and tense. She reached toward him with her mind. She encountered a rock hard black wall. He was blocking her. "Let me in, Raven." It was not a request.

Slowly, grudgingly, she felt his wall drop. She could now feel his energy and magic. This was different from mind talking in the fact that Maggie was not concentrating on just his thoughts. In fact, she was ignoring them, and trying to feel how he felt. The difference was

like talking to someone from across a room, and giving them a hug. One was personal, and one wasn't.

Maggie looked up at his face. He wasn't looking at her, but staring straight ahead. His eyes were hard.

He kept his thoughts and memories shielded, but she was not interested in digging through his mind. She concentrated on his magic and energy. What she felt shocked her. His energy was black as always, but instead of a deep, fathomless, warm color, it was flat, snaked through with gray. His SoulFire, what kept him alive, was not burning bright like it should be, but was dim. He had pushed himself way too far.

"Raven, do you realize..."

"I am fine, Maggie," he interrupted. He shifted so that she was forced to remove her hands.

"You are no such thing, Raven." Her voice was stern, scolding. "You pushed yourself way past reasonable. You could have hurt yourself, or us. What would have happened if your wings gave out in mid-flight?" He didn't answer, and she didn't need one. "Raven, you are dimming your SoulFire. You could have killed yourself."

Her statement hung in the air. Silver was quiet, watching the two of them, but Maggie could tell Silver was shaken by what Maggie said. She didn't realize either how far Raven had gone.

Maggie softened her tone. "Raven, I know you want to catch him, but he is far ahead of us. You flew hard trying to catch him, and then you left with us soon after. You are strong, but even you have limits. You will do us no good if you die in the chase."

He looked down at her. His eyes softened slightly, but still held their edge. "I am not a hatchling to be coddled, Maggie. But you are right. I was foolish. But I am not sorry for what I did."

Maggie, retort ready, bit her tongue. Now was not the time, and would only make things worse. Instead, she tried something different. "Is there anything you want me to do to help you?" Maggie thought she already knew the answer. She was right.

"No Maggie, I will be fine. I just need to rest here for a while." Maggie took a step back as he folded his legs under him. He laid his head down, curled around his body so that it was over his front feet

and near his wing. Maggie was not surprised when, within seconds, his breathing deepened and his body relaxed.

Maggie motioned to Silver to follow. They walked out of the clearing, leaving the sleeping Dragon in peace.

“Is he going to recover?”

Maggie looked at Silver and smiled. “Yes, he will, and soon. He is fit and strong. He has just done too much in too short amount of time. Don’t worry, Silver. A few days, a week maybe, and he will be as good as new.”

Silver visibly relaxed. She was worried for him, and rightly so. He was her blood, and was like an older brother.

Maggie changed the subject. “We should find water. And materials for a shelter; Raven should not have to shelter us with is wings while we are here.”

“Right.” Silver sniffed the air. “I smell water, this way.”

Silver started to pick her way through the underbrush. Maggie followed her, careful not to snag her cloths on the thorns that seemed to be everywhere. Silver’s scales protected her from them, and she pushed through first, helping to clear the way. In some spots, she held the branches for Maggie. After a few minutes, Maggie could hear a faint trickling over rock. Suddenly, her foot splashed in a small brook. Silver was standing on the other side, which was somewhat clearer of brush.

“Oh, yea... Jump,” Silver said with a smirk.

Maggie snorted. “Thanks.” She shook her foot to rid it of water and hopped over. She knelt. “It looks clean enough. Silver?”

Silver came closer and sniffed. “I don’t smell anything foul. It should be fine.”

Maggie walked up and down the stream, looking for prints of animals. They were plentiful. Maggie knelt and tasted the water. It was sweet and clear, cold from the mountain snowmelt.

“It’s fine. But we should try to find a bigger spot. It will be hard for Raven to drink from a stream this small.” Silver agreed, so one followed the stream up and the other down. It wasn’t long before Maggie could hear Silver calling her. She turned and went back the

way she came, following the stream bed in some spots to keep from fighting the underbrush.

Soon, Maggie could see Silver's gleaming scales through the leaves of the forest. She stood out like a beacon. Maggie hopped to the side of the stream she was on and went to her. In front of her the stream formed a small pool, which looked to be about elbow deep. It was so clear, Maggie could see the bottom. "This is perfect, Silver." She looked up and got her bearings. "Camp is this way," she pointed. Maggie went to below the pool and jumped across the stream, making her way back to where Raven was sleeping, following a faint game trail. Suddenly, a roar split the air, causing the birds to take flight and Maggie's heart to skip a beat. She took off at sprint, calling forth raw power to pool in her hands. She heard Silver keeping pace behind her.

Maggie broke through to the clearing and stumbled to a halt. She expected to find Raven being attacked, or worse. She was surprised, then, to find that he was alone, still lying where they left him. Spasms racked his frame, rippling under scales and across his back. His neck was stretched out in front of him stiffly, teeth clamped together.

Maggie ran to him, knowing what was happening. He had stressed his muscles too much, and had not cooled down properly before sleeping. They were cramping up, which was causing him extreme pain. When she got to his side, she started to place her hands on him. He whipped his head around and snarled, and snapped his teeth together an inch from her face. She froze.

Recognition dawned in his eyes a split second later. His self control broken, he roared again as another spasm racked his frame. "Help, please," he said through clenched teeth.

Without hesitation, Maggie placed her glowing hands on his side. She opened up the energy flow from him to her, and then concentrated. She wanted to get his muscles to relax. She decided to use heat. She imagined her energy, her magic, as fire that surged through his frame and soothed the muscles that were cramped tight. She could feel him relaxing as she worked. Finally, she located the last affected part and enveloped it with her fire energy. At last, with nothing left to do, Maggie withdrew contact. As she came back to herself, she opened her eyes and collapsed, sitting hard on her backside.

Raven turned his head so that he was looking down on her. "Are you ok?" he asked, his voice thick with concern.

Silver took a few steps toward them both. She had stayed out of the way when she saw Maggie call up her magic. She didn't want to interrupt.

Maggie reached toward Raven's head and he lowered it for her. She grasped his snout and he lifted her back to her feet. She dusted off her legs. "I'm fine. Just the sudden drain of energy caught me off guard. Are you ok, Raven?"

He extended both legs, stood, and then shook from head to the tip of his tail, like a dog ridding himself of water. "Yes, thank you," he said when he was finished, "I should have known better. After a long flight like that, I needed to slowly cool down, instead of going straight to sleep." He looked back at Maggie. "Sorry I snapped at you, Maggie... It was just that I couldn't think, with the pain. I didn't want anything touching me."

"I understand, Raven. Next time, though, please snap a little farther away. I'm still shaking." She held up her hand as evidence.

"Sorry," he said again.

Maggie took a step back, letting Raven stretch himself again, this time working out the soreness of both the extended flight and the excruciating spasms he just went through.

"It's alright, Raven. No harm done." She lifted her arm and pointed through the trees they had just exited. "If you are thirsty, there is a pool of water through there. It is living water, so it's fine." Living water was the Dragon term for water that flowed and was clean to drink. Dead water was black and stagnant, stinking of decay and not fit to drink.

"Also, Silver and I are going to collect some branches and things to make a small shelter, so you don't have to shelter us during the night. We are going to be here a while, so I figured this would be more comfortable."

Raven nodded his agreement to this. "I shouldn't drink just now. I am too hot, and don't want to get sick. I think I will just stroll through the woods and cool down. I'll visit the stream when I'm done."

"Ok, Raven, whatever you think is best. Come on, Silver." Maggie motioned to Silver with her hand to follow. Before she left, she grabbed the large hunting knife from her bag. She found it in the

bottom of the bags, wrapped in a cloth. She was glad GreenGrass thought to make her one, it came in handy.

The knife was not a simple steel knife, but made out of a Dragon's tooth, or so Raven had told her. He said that Dragons loose teeth all the time, growing new ones as the old wore out. The knife was about twelve inches long, as big around as two of her fingers, and curved slightly. The tooth was wider at the base, and tapered toward the tip, ending in a wickedly sharp point. The outside edge was sharpened with the skill of magic, and hardened with the same. Raven said treated the way it was, it would never dull or break. The hilt was just the bottom four inches wrapped in brown leather to create a grip.

Knife in hand, Dragon right ahead, she exited the clearing the opposite way of the stream.

The woods were alive with the noises of animals already busy with the day's activities. Maggie allowed herself to open up to the energy patterns around her. She could feel all of the animals near her, scurrying about with single minded determination. Nothing else mattered to these creatures; the frog was not concerned with what the mouse was doing; the mouse didn't care what the frog was doing. The frog was concerned with frog matters, the mouse with mouse matters. Unless their paths crossed, they didn't care about what happened to one another.

Maggie smiled at the simpleness of these creatures. She wished she could be like that, only caring about what happened to herself and her own kind. But she couldn't. She was a hybrid, both Dragon and human.

Maggie quit concentrating on the individual creatures, and instead focused on the forest as a whole. Colors blossomed in her mind. Bright specks and deep rivers of colors flowed through her. She took it all in, like looking at a field of flowers instead of focusing on an individual blossom.

Soon, she and Silver came upon trees that were about as big around as Maggie's wrist. "These will do, Silver. Take only a few, and space them out. I don't want to take all these trees from one area."

Maggie bent to the nearest one and swung her knife like an ax. If it hadn't been magically hardened, it would have shattered. As it was, it only took a few swings to sever the tree at the ground. Maggie started a pile between herself and Silver.

When they had enough trees of this thickness, Maggie told Silver to collect fallen branches about as tall as she was for the outside. Maggie collected small branches, about as big as her finger and as long as possible, for the roof. Then her and Silver dug up thin roots to use as rope, collecting enough to finish the chore ahead.

When this was done, they carried it all into the clearing. Raven was not there, but Maggie was not worried. If he was hurt, she would have heard him. Even if he was out of ear shot, his magic was powerful enough he could call to her, mind to mind, if he had to.

They used thin branches as support beams, tied to four trees growing in a rough square at the edge of the clearing using the roots as rope. The branches were stretched from tree to tree, forming another square parallel with the ground, with the front at head height, and the back a little lower, to allow the rain to run off.

Next, they leaned the thicker branches on three sides of the square to create a wall. While Silver held it steady, she tied a branch to the outside, sandwiching the wall between the support beam and the other. She did the same on the bottom, tying those two to the trees at the corners. This way, the wall had support, top and bottom, tied to the corner trees.

Next, she told Silver to use the rest of the thicker branches as support for the roof. They tied these in place as well. They put a half the finger width branches on the roof, and covered those with dry leaf litter. When they were sure that there was enough to keep them reasonably dry, they took the other half of the finger branches and placed them over top to hold it in place. They took the longest roots and wove it around these, lashing them to the top support branches, the ones they tied on first. They then went to the stream bed and dug up raw, sticky clay and carried it back to the shelter. This they spread on the roof as an extra layer of protection from the rain.

When Maggie set the last knot, she stepped back to admire the shelter. Silver did the same. In front of them was a three sided crude shelter, with branch walls and a leaf-and-mud roof. As simple as it was, Maggie was impressed at what they were able to build in a few hours.

When they were finished, they went to the center of the clearing and sat down to rest and wait for Raven to return. They didn't want to go to sleep until they established the watches for the rest of the day.

It was now well and truly day, the sun finally over the top of the mountains. Maggie thought to be midday, or a little before. Before they were tired of admiring the scenery, Raven returned, looking exhausted.

“We didn’t want to sleep until we established watches, Raven. I think Silver and I will take the first two, and let you sleep.”

Maggie didn’t ask Silver if this was what she wanted to do, but she didn’t think she would mind. She was right.

“Yea, Raven. You need to sleep. Maggie and I can handle the watches.”

Maggie again realized just how tired Raven was when he didn’t put up an argument. “That’s fine, but I am sleeping near you.”

Maggie had no problem with this, so she didn’t say anything. Arguing would just keep him from sleep.

Raven went to where they made their shelter and curled up beside it. Maggie watched him, to make sure he actually slept. She wasn’t able to count to ten before his breathing deepened and he was fast asleep.

Maggie moved from the center of the clearing and sat herself down on a rock on its edge. She looked down, tracing the fine patterns there. White veins ran through the gray, black speckled it in places. Where the sun hit the rock just right, the rock shone like crystal. She never tired of the wonders of nature and of the earth, even in something as simple as a rock.

Maggie stopped tracing after she realized Silver had not moved. She had hoped that Silver was tired and would leave her to the watch, and relieve her when she woke. But Maggie knew Silver was just biding her time, waiting for the right moment to ask her questions. The moment wouldn’t get any better than this.

She was right.

Maggie could hear Silver’s footsteps getting closer and closer from across the clearing. She stopped right behind Maggie, and waited.

Maggie gave it one last shot, one more opportunity for Silver to remain untroubled by what Maggie knew. “Silver, I have this watch, why don’t you go and get some sleep? I’ll wake you when I need to.”

Silver paused. Maggie could practically hear her thinking it over. *Please, Silver, accept this. It's the only gift I can give you. Remain innocent for a little while longer.* Maggie even thought she heard her turn away for a moment. But the moment passed and Silver said, "No, Maggie, you and I need to talk. I know you have been keeping things from me. I will know why."

Maggie took a deep breath to steady herself. "Silver, are you sure you want what you are asking? Once I tell it to you, you can never un-know it. What I know..." Maggie put her head in her hand and pulled the hand away, like trying to pull the memories from her mind. "What I know," she repeated, "no person or Dragon should know. The knowledge I have is vast, but also small. I can only access parts of it at a time, or the flood of information would drive me crazy. I have memories that are not mine, from a mind so different from my own that every day I must try to find myself again, or get lost in them. And when I sleep..." Maggie didn't, couldn't, finish. She returned her head to her hands. The nightmares that plagued her were worse than the thought of going crazy. What Sunrise seen and knew, what NewMoon saw, Maggie now had.

Silver slowly came to stand beside Maggie. Softly, as though not to wake the nightmares sleeping at the moment, Silver said, "Maggie, maybe you *need* to talk to someone. A nightmare only has power if you give it such. And the way they keep power is when you keep them secret. Nightmares have no power when shared in the light of day."

"I wish you were right, Silver. I really do. But these nightmares will only go away one way." Maggie raised her head, but didn't elaborate. "But maybe you are right. I have kept some things to myself for too long. Raven knows some of it, but not as much as he needs. You know nothing, which is less than you would like. I wish I could tell you both as much as you like, but I can't." Maggie sat up and dusted her palms together. She turned to Silver, who was about to protest. Maggie held up a finger, "However, I can tell you most of it. Even I don't know all there is to know. Things still come to me in flashes and pieces. I think, *I think*, they are sent from the other realm, from Sunrise and others that wish to see me succeed. Some things I can't share with anyone. But you are right, you have been in the dark too long, and that is my fault. I wished to keep you innocent of all this. No longer." Maggie finally turned to Silver, and smiled. It was not a smile of happiness, more like resignation. "Raven will be happy."

"Why?"

“Why? He has been on me from day one to tell you all this. I was the one who wanted to keep you in the dark. I thought it would keep you safe.” Maggie once again stared off into the distance. She paused, then more to herself than to Silver said, “But I was wrong. Nothing is safe anymore.”

Silver stayed silent, letting Maggie start when she was ready. The only sound in the clearing was that of the birds calling to one another, and the soft steady breathing of a Dragon in slumber. Finally, Maggie took a deep breath and began.

“Silver, what do you know of the history of Dragons and humans?”

Maggie had to know the answer to this question, even before she spoke it, but Silver answered anyway. “Nothing. Up until the day I found you, I didn’t even know humans existed.”

“Yes, but do you know why?”

Silver thought back to the day when she found Maggie and took her to Sunrise, “Sunrise said it was to keep young Dragons from becoming tempted and trying to find humans, which would only lead to trouble. Humans hated us, and would kill us on sight.”

“Sunrise had it right, up unto a point. Some humans hated Dragons, and would try to kill them. But then again, there are humans out there who hate other humans and try to kill them as well. No, the real reason is Dragons and humans are meant to reside together, in equal partnership. Back when the first Dragon was created from the fire of the earth, and the human from the clay upon it, they were meant to co-exist. Each was complete on their own, but together they made this world what is, or rather, was.”

Silver thought this over, “But what does that have to do with me not knowing what humans are?”

“Just wait a minute. I will tell you the story from the beginning.” Silver sat down next to her and waited. Maggie started again, “At the start of the Magicians war, there was a very powerful, and very twisted, mage. His true name he has buried along with where he came from, who he is descended from, essentially everything that makes him human. He would have us believe he is a god come to earth. He felt that he should rule over both man and Dragon. He locked himself away, learning dark magic that I will not speak of. He traveled to the deepest parts of the earth, learning magic from the foul creatures that lived there. One day he emerged, called himself

emperor over all the land, and put into action the plan he had been forming for years.

“He started slowly, working his dark magic in the night, poisoning the dreams of the people who lived and worked with Dragons. They started to question the reason they should live in peace and partnership with Dragons. Over the years, people wanted the Dragons to work *for* them, not *with* them. Some wanted to exile Dragons from the human cities, others wanted complete separation. Still not content, he sowed his evil seeds into the minds of man through their dreams.

“Finally, when the dam was about to burst and the people were ripe with hate, he arrived, the savior of the people. He went from city to city, telling the people that lived there that he was their only hope to rid themselves, ‘of their Dragon oppressors’.

“Naturally, the humans grasped the lifeline they saw in him. By the time he was done in a city and moved on, the humans were ready to murder their neighbors. It happened swiftly once the dam burst. Human set upon Dragons, killing them with rope and chain and steel. The Dragons of the time didn’t know what was happening, but they knew they had to act. They rose up against the humans, and slaughter ensued.”

Maggie paused for a moment, and looked at Silver. Maggie’s eyes were bright with tears. She blinked, and they spilled over, running silently down her face. Silver didn’t comment, but waited for Maggie to continue. Eventually, she did. “Silver you can’t imagine what it was like.” Maggie’s voice was rough and filled with grief for those lost, even though hundreds of years separated them. “The blood flowed in the streets like water, the bodies of the slain piled higher than the houses around them. Disease followed the slaughter, killing those that escaped the bloodbath. The Earth wept tears of blood for her children, all for the sake of one mad man’s lust for power.

“But the Dragons, untouched by the taint spread by this mage, tried to stay the killing, and fought with magic as well as tooth and claw. This self-styled emperor saw that as powerful as he was, he was not strong enough to fight all the Dragons and their magic combined. He surrounded himself with the most powerful human mages he could find. Together, with their magic combined, he started to pick off the Dragons.

“Imagine Silver, you talking to someone, and they just fall over dead, their SoulFire snuffed out like a candle flame. Once the

Dragons found out about this new battle front, they gathered their wisest teachers and most powerful magic users to fight. The humans and Dragons were locked in this battle for months, while outside war still raged, fierce and bloody. When there were only a handful of Dragons left, the Dragon Spellweavers found the answer. But in order to kill this new threat, they would have to sacrifice their own SoulFire, but they did so willingly. One by one the Spellweavers died, each taking a mage with them. Finally, seeing that all was lost, the evil mage retreated, leaving his followers to their fate. Only when all of the Spellweavers were done did he emerge again, and cast his greatest spell yet.

“He made it so humans would forget their history, their place with Dragons. The humans now looked only to him for answers; no gods, or goddesses, or even simple stories remained of his purge. He completed his work by making humans hate and fear Dragons, where there once was love and partnership. By this time, Sunrise has already called together all the remaining Dragons. Unknowingly, he helped the mage succeed in driving the wedge deeper between the two races.”

“So you see, Silver,” Maggie said, “Grandfather actually helped this emperor, and did the world no favors by taking magic from humans. He took the tools away that were needed to defeat this mage, and kept the Dragons from helping the humans that needed them.”

“But,” began Silver, ready to defend her grandfather, “He never meant to. He was trying to keep Dragons safe, away from humans.”

“But Dragons were never meant to be separate from humans. Humans and Dragons are supposed to be partners, two halves of the same whole. And he knew this, even when he casted the spell to manufacture hate between Dragons and humans. When the mage tried to turn human on Dragon, there was still some that resisted. But when Sunrise, however inadvertently, joined in his cause, that hope was extinguished.”

“What do you mean? There is no hope?” Silver couldn’t wrap her head around the fact that Grandfather, her own blood, would have helped someone like this mage, no matter if it was an accident or not.

“No, Silver, there is hope yet. The fact I exist proves there is hope, however small. But the world is in turmoil. The very fabric that makes up magic and the earth is trying to rip itself apart. Nature is trying to balance itself. More and more humans are being born with magic, more and more Dragons finding their partners in secret.

“And that would be a good thing, if the emperor didn’t know this as well. He is gathering all those with magic he can find, bending them to his will through promises, threats, spells, and visions of a better future. And Dragons. He is collecting Dragons as well.”

“Dragons? But I thought...”

“No, Sunrise assumed. He assumed that all the Dragons heeded his call and came to the valley. But they didn’t. Many hid in ancient cities, or on the highest mountains. But eventually, rumor of a winged beast terrorizing villages would reach the emperor’s ears. He would then go and find this lone Dragon and bend it to his will. If the Dragon refused, he would kill him, just to make sure he wouldn’t turn against him in the future.”

“So, this war, the war that started over a thousand years ago, is still raging?” Then Silver thought of something. “If this is the same war, it can’t be the same person. Even Dragons don’t live that long. Unless humans are longer lived than us?”

“No, you are right. Humans live only about sixty of your years, and by all the laws of nature he should have died long ago. But, somewhere along the way, he found a spell. I can only assume that he found this spell buried deep, in the darkest places of the earth, for this spell is of the darkest magic. It should have never been created, but once created, it could never be destroyed.”

“What spell could be so bad as that,” asked Silver.

“This spell gives the caster life, adding days, months, even years more than any person has the right too. Death is a natural part of life, and to cheat death, especially with the use of this spell...”

“Why?”

“Please, Silver, don’t make me tell you what he must do. It is so horrible, I can’t speak of it.”

Silver wondered what could be so bad, but she let it slide. Maggie was finally talking to her, after weeks of keeping her in the dark, and she didn’t want to do anything to ruin that. So she stayed silent, waiting for Maggie to continue.

Maggie sat in silence, while the memories that were not her own played themselves against her mind’s eye. She could see the blood and hear the screams of the women and children while they watched their lives burned before them. The memories-not-her-own were more

vivid than her own memories. Sometimes, if she wasn't careful, she would lose herself in the fire, smoke and blood that seemed a part of her now. When that happened, the only way back was to force herself to remember her life now, and those that were part of it. If she didn't, she feared she would become lost in that world, and never wake again to this one.

Maggie pulled herself back to the present and realized that Silver was waiting on her to continue. Maggie didn't know if she could. The memories that she had now were sometimes more vivid than her waking hours. When she delved too deep, it was hard for her to hold on to herself. Silver didn't understand that, neither did Raven, for that matter.

Maggie had shared more with him than she did with Silver, but she still held back. There were things that Raven couldn't know, or it might upset the balance. There were things that Silver couldn't know, or it would keep her from doing what was needed.

And Maggie... What she knew was too much.

"How do Dragons become partners?"

Maggie realized that the question was directed toward her. "I'm sorry, Silver. What did you say?"

"I said, how do Dragons become partners? I've never heard of this before."

"No, Silver, you wouldn't. This was something that Sunrise didn't want reminded of. He couldn't face the fact that he ripped apart two beings that were never supposed to exist without the other. The fact is, though, he didn't do as much damage as the Mage did. The Mage worked for years, and because of greed. Sunrise did it in one day, and through grief. But both did damage to the balance."

"But you still didn't answer my question." Silver noticed that Maggie did this, gave her information unasked for, whenever she didn't want to tell her something. But not this time.

"Your right Silver, I didn't."

Maggie was quiet for so long, Silver was sure she wasn't going to answer. She started to turn away, then Maggie spoke, softly. "I cannot tell you what you want to know, Silver." There was a pause. "But I can tell you what it is like."

Silver turned back and sat as quiet as she could. She didn't want to break the moment, and keep Maggie from telling her whatever it was she was about to.

"When a Dragon meets their human partner, there is an instant connection. Usually, the Dragon will feel an intense need to help and protect the human, and the human will want to be close to the Dragon. Neither, no matter what their upbringing or frame of mind, could ever think about hurting the other. It would be like cutting off a piece of one's self."

Here Maggie paused again, choosing her words carefully. If she told Silver too much, it could do more harm than good. "The bond doesn't happen instantly. Usually, it develops over a period of time. The Dragon and human usually want to be in each other's company, getting to know each other, even if they don't realize at the time."

"Eventually, they can hear each other's thoughts, feel what the other is feeling, and are connected on a deep level. The magic is what is bonded. The magic in the person recognizes the partner of itself in the Dragon, and bonds to it. Always, a bonded partner pair will be stronger than either a Dragon or a human not bonded. The human must have magic to become the bonded partner of a Dragon. Understand?"

"Yes, Maggie, I understand." She understood that Maggie still was keeping secrets from her. Another unanswered question, and nothing explained fully. At least that was how Silver felt. No matter what, no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't get a straight answer from Maggie.

Silver walked away from Maggie, leaving her to draw symbols in the dust.

Maggie heard Silver walk away, and despised herself for what she had to do. But she had to find out on her own, feel the connection and take the plunge herself, without Maggie telling her what to do. Maggie wasn't even supposed to know, but she did, and that's what mattered. Silver couldn't know.

Maggie once again looked down and drew symbols in the dirt, trying to piece them together. Time passed, and the day drew on. She tried to lose herself in the symbols, trying to suppress the guilt she felt for hurting Silver so. It was necessary, though. Just as it was necessary to keep Raven in the dark, as well. Maggie angrily hit the ground, erasing the symbols there. She put her head in her hands and started to cry softly, so not to wake those behind her.

Eventually, she became aware of a shadow over her. She looked at the ground, seeing its shape. “Hello, Raven,” she said.

He came closer, hardly making a sound. For a creature as large as he was, Maggie was always amazed at how quiet he was able to move. He put a leg to each side of her and sat, so she was sheltered between his strong legs. She leaned up against his chest, crossing her arms across her stomach, hoping to relieve the ache she felt there.

Raven lowered her head and turned so he could look at her. His neck was so long it wasn’t hard for him to do. “Maggie..., oh, Maggie.”

Just those three words, heavy with sympathy, broke something inside her. She fell back against him, clutching his leg as she cried. For once, she didn’t worry about who she was; she was just a girl who was overwhelmed with what she knew and what she had to do.

Raven didn’t move, didn’t say anything; he stood there, his head close to hers, offering the only comfort he could. Had she looked, she would have seen tears running from his eyes.

Raven could do nothing else, except be there for her. He felt helpless. He was supposed to watch over the hatchlings, keep them from harm. Now here he was, leading two of them into places where he couldn’t even imagine the danger. There was nothing he could do to take the pain from this little one, nothing he could do to change her fate.

His mind was seared from the pain of the things he had saw in her thoughts, even though he did his best not to delve too deeply. Her mind was like a hole filled to the brim with water. No matter how softly you touched it, the water would overflow and get you wet. Only the water was her thoughts, and she wasn’t even aware that he absorbed some of what she knew. He wished he could take away all her pain, to let her be a child once again.

But fate had decided that this child was to save the world, and punished her for it. The pain of the memories was her punishment, every day, every waking moment, and even when she slept, he suspected. But still she persisted, and didn’t resent what the universe had done to her. Her strength amazed him. And she thought him strong? He laughed to himself.

Maggie felt the rumble in his chest, and looked up into his eyes. She didn’t comment on his tears, but looked around. “Where is Silver?” Worry colored her voice.

Of course, even though she was hurting, her first thought was of her friend. It was the bond, of course. They didn't know, but he did.

"She took a walk. She looked like she needed to be alone for a while."

"Do you think that's a good idea, Raven? She doesn't even have magic to help if she gets into trouble."

"She will be fine, Maggie. She allowed me to put a trace of my magic on her. I can find her in a blink if I wanted."

Maggie nodded. She knew of this trick with magic. You placed a trace of magic on someone, and then you could find your own magic, within a certain distance. If the one the trace was placed on has magic, they will know. If they don't want to be tracked, it is simple to shed the trace.

"Thanks, Raven"

"It's no trouble, Maggie. We both care for her. I don't want anything to happen to her, any more than you do."

"Raven, I couldn't bare it if something happened to her. Raven, I didn't want this to happen. All this bond does is put her in danger. Where I go, she will want to. Whatever danger I face, she will want to be there with me."

Raven didn't know what to say, so he said nothing. He just stood there with Maggie while she poured out her heart.

Maggie's voice broke. "Keeping information from her is killing me. I don't think I can do it much longer. I wanted to answer her last question. I was going to let her turn away. But in the end, I had to tell her *something*, so I told her what the bond was like. Now, she will figure it out, and it will put her in more danger!" Again, Maggie started to cry, burying her face in his leg.

"Maggie," Raven said softly, "this is a good thing. The bond strengthens you, both of you. Even though she cannot wield it, Silver has more latent magic than any hatchling I have tutored, even when she was younger. I watched her grow, waiting for the day the magic would emerge, but it never did. But it continued to grow. Her strength grew as well. She is stronger than you think, Maggie."

"It's not her strength that worries me. It is her heart." Maggie looked up at Raven. "She is so good and pure, Raven. If she follows me in this... Raven, I will not come back from this quest. She needs a

chance at life, to grow old and be happy. That is not with me.” Her voice grew hard. “I am to die here, she will not. I will not let that happen.”

“Neither will I, Maggie. She and you will come back from this. We will return to the village, and Silver will grow, so will you. You both will grow old together, because your Dragon nature will give you life beyond a normal span of years. Being bonded also helps.”

“I know, giving extra years is another gift from the bond. I didn’t mention that to her.”

They were silent for a while. Then Raven said, “You will have to tell her eventually.”

“I know. I was hoping she would get tired of traveling and we could return her, then be on our way.”

“I know, you told me. And I told you that nothing you did, short of banishing her with magic, would get rid of her.”

“Yes, I know. I underestimated the bond. But I had hoped.”

“Maggie, if she did choose to return, could you bare it? Could you stand to be separated from her for that long? Be honest with yourself.”

Maggie was quite for a long time before she answered. “No, I could not. I would have to fight to take every step away from her.”

“Exactly.”

“But I would do it, to keep her safe.”

“And she would do the same. But she knows she can’t. In part it is because you have power and she does not, but most of it is because she has accepted you are your own person, and have your own path to follow. She has chosen to walk beside you on that path, no matter how difficult it is. You must accept this.”

Maggie sat in silence for a while, thinking over what he had said. Raven moved back a few steps. He spread his wings and, using just a touch more magic than required, lifted almost silently off the ground. He had felt Silver approaching, and thought the two of them needed to be alone. He circled overhead, keeping them in sight, but staying far enough away so not to bother them. Maggie felt Raven lift off, her hair swirling around her face in the wind from his wings. She tucked some behind her ears, and waited.

She had felt her enter the clearing, and was steeling herself for what she knew she had to do.

She stood and faced the Dragon across the clearing. Silver opened her mouth, ready to launch into what was sure to be an angry tirade. She didn't let her speak. "Silver, before you say what you came to say, please let me do something? Trust me one more time, and then you can say whatever it is you want."

Silver closed her mouth. "Fine, Maggie." Her voice was hard, edged in steel. Maggie could tell that agreeing was the last thing she wanted to do, but she did it anyway.

Maggie sighed. "Thank you, Silver." She walked toward her. When she was close, she reached her hand out. She pulled her magic into her palm, making it glow purple, edged in gold. Silver watched, her eyes narrowed.

"May I?" Maggie asked as she reached toward Silver. She nodded, and Maggie placed her hand on her head.

Silver's mind was a bright light in a dark void. The clarity and vibrancy of every thought made it simple for Maggie to hear the thoughts on the surface. While Raven's mind was fluid, deep, and steady; Silver's was clear, bright, and sharp. While Raven's thoughts were water, Silver's were ice.

What are you doing, Maggie? Even in the confines of her mind, Silver still sounded angrier than she had ever heard her before.

Silver, this is the only way for you to know the truth of the words I am going to tell you. You can feel the intent behind the words, and you will know I tell you true.

Silver paused, and Maggie could tell she was processing what she had told her, and the feelings that flowed through their mental link.

Alright, Maggie. Silver sounded less hostile, having felt the guilt, remorse, sadness, and sincerity that had crossed over their mental link.

Maggie gave a mental sigh, hoping against hope that what she was doing was the right thing.

Silver, we are bonded.

There was a pause, then, *I know, Maggie.*

Maggie was stunned. She had been so sure that she was the only one, and that Silver didn't know, hadn't been effected.

But... But... But... How? Maggie stammered.

I am a Dragon. Silver answered simply.

In response to the questioning feeling that bounded across their link, Silver explained. *It is instinct, Maggie, as so much is in my race. I have known for a while now that we share a bond. Until today, I didn't know that others before me had this feeling. But I knew that we were connected, somehow.*

Then why didn't you tell me?

I didn't know if you felt the same as me. I didn't want to tell you, and then you think that I was lying. I didn't know how to explain it so you would understand. And then when you told me that Dragons and humans were meant to be partners, well, something just clicked. I knew then that this is what this was.

Maggie gave a mental shake of her head, trying to deny it, but knowing it was true. *Silver, don't you realize? This puts a target on your back. I couldn't bare it if something happened to you because of me.*

Do you think I could bare it any less if something happened to you, and I wasn't there to help you?

It's not the same, Silver.

Silver's tone became angry, and Maggie could feel it rolling off her in waves. *How is it not?* Maggie could tell that Silver already knew the answer, and just wanted her to say it.

Yes, Silver, Maggie said, confirming her thoughts, it is because I have magic, and you don't. I can do things you can't.

Silver became even angrier. *It always comes down that! Why must I be punished for a fault in the universe? Why, just because fate, or the gods, or whatever is in control, has decided to punish me for sins not yet committed, then fine. But not from you, Maggie. I will not be punished because you have more power than me, and think that I am a child.*

I hadn't thought of it like that. I was trying to protect you, Silver. I thought that that was my responsibility, to protect you. That's what I thought the bond meant, that the strongest of the pair protected the weaker. That is what the memories have showed me.

A few of these memories floated across their link, and Maggie made no attempt to snatch them back. She had decided she was going to be open and honest.

Silver examined the memories before commenting. *Are these...?* Maggie knew what she was asking.

Yes, those are just a few of the memories that Grandfather gave to me.

I always wondered if you were telling the truth, about the memories. Now I see that you were. Silver was burning with curiosity under all the anger. She wanted to know everything. Unfortunately, Maggie couldn't tell her all she wanted to know.

Maggie sat and so did Silver, almost at the same time, reading the intention from the other across their link. Maggie removed her hand, but let the magic flow between them still, maintaining the mental bond they were sharing.

Silver could tell that Maggie was holding back, but was too interested in what she was learning to worry about what was being hidden.

They didn't say anything for a while, not in words anyway. They just flitted around each other's mind, feeling each other's feelings. They began to share each other's senses as well. Maggie was interested to learn that a Dragon's sight was much sharper than her own, and colors were enhanced as well. Maggie enjoyed Silver's delight in seeing the world filtered through eyes of magic. She wondered at all the points of light around them, and the one bright spot circling over head when Maggie linked with the life forces around her. Silver thought it was like being cast among the stars.

They sat for a while, both happier than they had been in a while. Maggie felt as if a great weight had lifted from her heart. She had found her partner in all this, someone who would understand and stand by her. And when Silver found her magic, the pair of them would be a force to be reckoned with. She could tell Silver felt the same.

Both felt Raven start to descend. Maggie withdrew her magic, and returned to the world around her. She was shocked to see that it was dark. They had been sitting for hours.

After Maggie's shock of seeing how late it was, Maggie felt an echoing emotion. She could tell that it wasn't hers, but Silver's.

“I thought you had cut off the link?” Silver had felt it, too.

“I did. I guess that because of the bond, we maintain a bit of the link, regardless.”

Silver looked up at the sky, watching Raven descend. “Interesting.”

“Yes.” Maggie said. She, too, was watching Raven. He banked and gently centered himself over the clearing. He beat his wings down, hovering over the two, and lowered himself to come to rest in front of them. He looked between the two smiling faces. His serious expression broke into a grin of his own.

“So, I guess you too have made up?”

“You could say that,” Silver said.

Raven snorted, blowing smoke over the pair. “About time, too. The tension was going to kill me.”

“You knew?” Silver asked.

“Yes. It wasn’t hard to figure out. Maggie figured it out, you figured it out. It just took both of you, talking, to figure it out together.”

Silver snorted at his answer, figuring that was enough. “It’s not like I could have explained it to you. The bond is different for every pair. It’s a lot like love; you can try to explain it, but can’t.”

Maggie understood. Silver didn’t seem convinced. “Never mind, Silver. We know now, that’s what matters.” Maggie placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Well, I think you two need to sleep now. I have searched this woods twice over with all my power and all the tricks I know. There is nothing but a few animals that don’t know the names of, and some that I do. I think we will all be safe if I cast a shield. If you help me Maggie, I think it will be strong enough.”

Silver watched as they both started to circle their small camp. She could feel the disturbance in the air, and every once in a while, she could see flashes of purple that was Maggie’s magic, or a dark void in the night, the only evidence of Raven’s magic.

“Why haven’t you two done this while we were traveling?”

Raven looked at Silver, but it was Maggie who answered. “There were several reasons, Silver. One was that we were too exposed. If

someone near meant us harm, a shield out on that plain would be like a beacon.” Both resumed walking the circle.

“And,” Raven added, “I didn’t want to spare the magic. I needed it to fly.”

“What stops this shield from being a beacon?” Silver asked.

“Well, we are splitting the work into two parts, so that one magic isn’t used. It dilutes it, makes it, not weaker, but harder to detect,” Maggie replied.

“Maggie is doing the protection part, and I am laying down elements that hide the fact that there is a shield even here.”

Maggie stopped and took a deep breath. “And can’t you feel it Silver? Raven? This wood is so serene. There is something here...” She closed her eyes and took another deep breath.

Raven copied her, and nodded. Silver tried the same thing, but felt nothing different. “Sorry, I don’t feel anything.”

“Come here, Silver. I will show you.”

Silver went over to Maggie and she put her hand on her shoulder. “Close your eyes, and don’t fight me.”

Silver nodded and did as she was told. Slowly, she felt a presence in her mind. This wasn’t like talking mind to mind, this was more like giving over control of herself. She didn’t fight, but it was against everything that her instincts were telling her. But slowly, a calm entered her mind. She was aware of all that was around her, and she could feel what Maggie was describing. There was a presence in the woods that blanketed it all with a peaceful air. It calmed all that was there, and protected those who called this place home. It was a small bubble of stillness in a stormy sky.

“Why?” Silver forced herself to speak; she was reeling from the flood of sensations in her mind.

“I am not sure, but I think it is something left over from the Magician’s war. A sanctuary of some kind, maybe something that guarded the pass into this valley.”

Maggie removed her hand and the sensations left. Silver felt empty, disconnected. She opened her eyes. The clearing remained unchanged, but Silver was now aware of just how much life was contained within this small space.

She shook her head, trying to clear it after that flood of information. It didn't work, so instead she asked Maggie a question. "So you think we will be safe here?"

Maggie was a long time in answering Silver's simple question. She turned her back to Silver and gazed out over the woods.

Maggie's voice sounded aged, tired. "No, Silver, we are safe nowhere." Silence fell in the clearing, but Maggie didn't elaborate. The silence became uncomfortable, unbreakable, as everyone thought over that ominous statement.

Finally, Raven cleared his throat, bringing them all out of their thoughts. "I think that we should all get some rest."

Raven laid down, tucking one wing next to him, and holding the other out. Maggie laid her bedroll down next to him and slipped into it.

"Do we need to keep watches?" Silver asked, still thinking about what Maggie said.

"No, Silver. No watches tonight."

Silver didn't question this. "Ok Maggie. It will be nice to sleep through the night."

Maggie only nodded as Silver laid down next to Maggie. Raven covered both of his hatchlings with his midnight black wing, giving them the only protection he could.

Maggie slipped off to sleep, comforted, and for the first time in a long time, she felt happy. She held on to the feeling, knowing it wouldn't last long.

Silver sighed, content in knowing Maggie finally had started telling her secrets. *It will be harder for her to keep things from me now*, Silver thought. She shifted her weight, getting comfortable, looking forward to sleeping without having to be woken for her turn at watch.

If only things worked out like you wanted them too.

DEATH

Silver was dreaming about being back in the nest hut. The smell of burning meat was thick in the air, and Silver was ushered out by the NestMother, who was muttering under her breath. The smoke was thicker outside of the hut than in it. *That isn't right*, thought Silver. *The air should be clear out here.* She started to cough in her dream.

She woke herself with a violent cough, and found the smell of smoke was not just in the dream. Her eyes instantly started to water and the thick taste of burning wood covered her tongue.

Maggie woke almost as soon as Silver did. Her eyes went wide as she started to cough and hack. She pounded on Raven's side, adding a thread of commanding magic to her voice when she yelled, "Raven, wake!"

Wake he did. His wing lifted as he stood fluidly, every muscle tight, his eyes shining with hatred. He growled, so deep and menacing that Silver took a step back. Maggie walked to him. Without a visible prompt, he crouched. Maggie quickly climbed on his back, settling into the hollow on his shoulder between the spikes.

She was glowing. Not faintly, not just her magic flowing into her hands. Her entire body was flooded with deep purple magic. It seeped out of every pore on her body, blanketing her in a living, swirling cloud. Except her eyes; her eyes glowed, not purple, but molten gold. They shone like fire on a dark night; like the glow of red hot embers.

Like Dragon Fire.

Silver took another step back. She was frightened. Not of the smoke and what it might mean, but of Maggie.

Maggie turned her head and looked directly into Silver's eyes. Silver started to run, to hide from those eyes, but Maggie threw her hand out to Silver.

Silver froze, not by choice. Her joints locked, her muscles froze. She tried desperately to move, to run, to do anything. Even her eyes were frozen in place.

Stay here, Silver. The voice in her head was unmistakably Maggie's, but it didn't sound like her. It was deeper, richer, older. *You will be safe.*

Safe? She was frozen in the open, a silver beacon to whatever was near.

Maggie turned away and placed a hand on Raven's neck. No words were spoken, but Raven took to the skies without a sound.

Silver had just enough time to get mad. She wondered if the spell would wear off, and when they would be back.

She didn't hear him land, but followed the black void in her frame of vision. Maggie was no longer glowing; in fact it looked as though what little light there was couldn't touch them, creating the void in the night.

Silver suddenly realized that she could move. She didn't know how long she just stood there, frozen instead with shock and fear.

Maggie's voice broke the silence as she let the magic go that was hiding her and Raven. "Get our things together, Silver. Now."

It was an order, the first and only one she had ever given Silver. But Silver didn't mind; she needed direction, someone to tell her what to do; something other than focusing on her terror.

Before she moved, however, she needed to ask. To confirm what she already knew in her heart. Silver asked in a voice so quiet she wondered how Maggie heard it, "What is it?"

One word. Just one word made the blood in Silver's veins run cold.

"WhiteWater."

Maggie's dreams were troubled, like normal. As soon as she shut her eyes, flashes of memories burned through her mind. Maggie found no peace, neither sleeping nor waking. While she was awake, she was constantly trying to wade through the information in her mind, but it was like trying to keep afloat in quick sand. The more she fought to remember her past life, her mother, her struggles, *herself*... the more she felt as if she was sinking into the pain and suffering and loneliness that was Grandfather's memories. Sometimes, it was all she could do to sit in the saddle on Raven's back and recall her own name.

Raven of course wanted to help her. He tried daily to teach her how to block those memories threatening to overtake her; how to control her thoughts and reach a place of complete calm by focusing on her breathing. He even explained how to partition her mind, locking the memories away, keeping them safe for her to explore

later. None of this worked; in fact, it seemed as though the more she tried to fight the memories, the worse they assaulted her.

She and Raven agreed early on that they would tell Silver nothing of this, not until Maggie wished it. Raven thought this was wrong; bonded partners shared everything, he said.

So during the day, Maggie smiled and talked and flew with Raven, acting as if nothing was wrong, all the while fighting to keep her sanity. Fighting to keep herself.

During the night, well... Night was a different story altogether.

Maggie hated sleeping. She hated it so much, in fact, that she stayed up with Raven during his watches most times. Maggie knew Raven suspected that the memories haunted her dreams, but even he didn't know the extent of it.

During the night, the memories over took her, leaving her to wander through battlefields, abandoned cities, massacres of Dragons and humans alike. She was forbidden to help, to intercede in anyway, but that did not keep her from seeing, feeling, hearing, and even tasting what was going on around her.

Tonight, she wandered a village. It was small, compared to most, but it was still home to those that lived there. Where children were born, where they grew and played and learned. Where couples met and fell in love and had children of their own, where they worked the fields to grow their food and attended the animals that the people depended on.

Yesterday, these people were looking forward to their future, to seeing their kids grow. Today...

Maggie choked as the smell smoke and burned flesh assaulted her. It covered her tongue, so she tasted it as well. She wondered through the smoldering ruins that once where huts, stepping over charred wood, bits of broken pottery, spears broken in half, and the bodies.

Burned and broken bodies littered the ground. Their flesh was blackened, split and cracked like the sun baked earth. They could no longer be identified as male or female; and only size told her which was adult and which where children.

Maggie stopped, looking at two hunched forms against a stone wall. One was clearly an adult, and Maggie assumed it was a woman,

the mother to the child she was sheltering in her arms, trying to protect it from the flames that engulfed them both.

Maggie started to cry.

This was wrong, so wrong. Not just the senseless slaughter, but the fact that the Dragons were turning on the humans, killing their partners and upsetting the balance.

Maggie looked again, and silently corrected herself. No, not every Dragon was trying to kill the humans. In the center of the village, where the fighting seemed to have been the heaviest, lay a Dragon about the size of Raven. The Dragon was once purple, the deep violet of sunset. Now, pieces of the color were missing, burned to black, the flesh ripped away, exposing the muscle and bone. Maggie wondered closer, unable to stop herself.

When she broke through the circle surrounding the Dragon, Maggie noticed that it wasn't alone. Next to its head sat a man. He was badly injured, missing his right leg and the foot of the left. He sat in a pool of his own blood, which stood out crimson against the paleness of his skin. Maggie wondered how he was still alive, until she noticed too that the Dragon was breathing.

The man sat, stroking the head of his partner, soothing him, comforting him in his last moments. Neither one could hold on much longer. Even as she watched, the Dragons breathing became slower and shallower. Tears began to run down the man's face as he sang a song to his partner, easing his passing. The Dragon shuddered once then was still. The man continued to stroke his head, murmuring as he did so.

Maggie looked around, sobbing silent tears. There, she could see him through the smoke, coming toward where she was.

It was another Dragon, gray as the smoke surrounding him. Maggie was not surprised to see him there. After all, this was a memory, and it wasn't Grandfathers. It must have been one that was passed to him from another. A memory of a memory. Someone had to have experienced this, sometime. A memory needed a host, someone that it happened to. And this was the owner of the memory.

The gray one passed close to Maggie. He arched his long neck down to the man, who just now registered he was there.

"Please," said the man, "can you save him? Take my SoulFire, anything.... Just save him."

Maggie cried harder at the desperation in his voice. The gray one touched the unmoving purple one with the tip of his nose. "He is gone," he said in a deep voice.

The man's hand stilled at these words. Then he said, without looking up, "Then please, help me..."

The gray Dragon looked at him for a brief second and nodded. He lowered his head so that it was level with the man's eyes. The man looked into them.

"Sleep, brother." The voice was gentle and commanding at the same time. The man's eyes rolled back in his head and he slumped against his partner, not moving, not breathing. He was dead.

The smoke was getting thicker, making Maggie cough and cry at the same time. The smoke obscured her vision. She couldn't see anything, couldn't hear anything.

Maggie was still crying and coughing. She realized that the smell had changed. Instead of burnt hair and flesh and battle, she smelled wood smoke. All at once, Maggie felt Silver stir, afraid. And Maggie woke.

The smoke was still with her, even if the tears were not. Maggie could feel someone else's magic, could feel the fear of the forest animals as they ran from a great red hot beast.

Fire.

Maggie pounded on Raven's side, threading her voice with magic that would tell him what was going on, getting him ready. "Raven, wake!"

Raven woke, instantly connecting his mind with Maggie's. He could feel the magic snaking through the air as well. Maggie placed a hand on his shoulder as a growl tore through him. It was taking all of his self-control not to take off without Maggie. Maggie called forth her magic, letting it fill her completely.

Raven crouched and Maggie climbed on his back between the spikes on his shoulder. She knew it was dangerous, but there was no time to put the saddle on. She felt Silver toward the edge of the clearing. She looked over at her and threw out her magic, encasing the silver Dragon in shadow and darkness. No one would be able to see her from the air. In fact, the spell was so strong, she doubted that someone within a foot of Silver could see her. She froze her in place

so the spell could work to its full potential. *Stay here Silver, Maggie projected into her mind. You will be safe.*

We need to go! Raven was getting impatient. But he was right, they needed to leave, now. Maggie placed her hand on his neck.

Alright, Raven. Go.

Raven didn't respond, but gathered himself and launched straight into the sky. As they climbed, Maggie shielded them both with shadow and darkness.

When they were above the tree tops, Maggie could see the fire, small but burning brightly. It was far enough away from their camp that it wasn't an immediate threat, but Maggie was more afraid of the magic laced with the fire than of the fire itself. Maggie reached out a hand in front of her.

Raven, scan the skies. I will take care of the fire.

Raven's mind was in such turmoil that Maggie wondered if he heard her, but then she felt him acknowledge her, and a net of magic spread out from the pair. Maggie concentrated on the flames, imagining a dome over the fire. She made the dome solid, trapping the fire within. Almost immediately, the fire started to dim. As Raven circled overhead, the fire dimmed and sputtered out. The magic trace went with it. She realized, as the last ember died, it was burnt in a pattern. A pattern she recognized.

Anything? She asked Raven.

No, nothing. Even the birds have cleared the air. He is not here.

Maggie didn't need to ask who "he" was.

We need to go back. We need to get Silver.

Maggie felt Raven hesitate, but only for an instant. *Yes, we need to get the hatchling.*

She felt Raven turn back to where they came from, descending quickly into the clearing. Maggie couldn't see Silver with her eyes, but she shown clearly in her mind. Maggie pulled the magic off, letting Silver be seen and be able to move. Silver stayed frozen in place.

Maggie jumped from Raven's back, removing the shield from both her and the Dragon. Still, Silver didn't move. "Get our things together, Silver. Now."

Maggie started to concentrate on the woods around her, trying to feel if there was any more magic near. Raven started toward the shield edge that encircled their camp.

Silver looked at Maggie. She whispered, so quietly that if Maggie hadn't extended her magic out, she never would have heard her.

"What is it?"

Just one question. The question Maggie didn't want to answer, but knew she had to. The answer and its implications made her blood run cold.

"WhiteWater."

Raven started walking the circle as Silver got the things together. He was still connected to Maggie, but they weren't exchanging thoughts; they were deeper than that. They were feeding off of each other's magic, reading the other's intent, reacting as one. Still, Raven kept his memories shielded. It was second nature to him. Maggie was as well. It seemed that if you gave her something to concentrate on, she mastered lessons that were difficult any other time.

Raven probed the circle along with Maggie. They cast every spell, thought, and probe that they knew. The clearing started to thrum with the power being unleashed. Raven's bones began to hum along with the magic flowing between them.

Suddenly, Maggie stopped. Raven stopped at the same time, on the opposite side of the clearing. Slowly, the magic started to abate.

"Nothing," said Raven, speaking aloud for Silver.

"Absolutely nothing," replied Maggie.

"Then why do it," he said aloud. It was rhetorical, but Maggie answered anyway.

"Fear. Revenge. Orders. Who knows?"

Quietly, from the center of the clearing, Silver whispered, "What's happened?"

"Forest fire. WhiteWater set it."

“Thankfully, it was easy to suppress. It was small, hadn’t spread much.” Maggie tried to soothe the frightened Dragon with the tone of her voice.

It didn’t work; Silver’s voice betrayed her fear when she asked her next question. “Then how do you know someone set it? Couldn’t it just be nature?”

“No.” Raven’s word was hard, cold. Sure. “The fire held a trace of his power. This is what we felt when we woke. His power, threaded through the fire. A warning for us perhaps, or a taunt.”

“Why did he leave?”

“That remains to be seen.” Raven said through clenched teeth. He was seething; from missing his prey a second time and the fact that Water came so close just to tease him. He felt powerless, weak.

Maggie walked to Raven and placed a hand as far up on his shoulder as she could, considering the height difference. Raven didn’t notice; smoke continued to spill out of his nostrils in thin streams. His limbs and wings shook with repressed emotion, aching to take flight and find the traitor. He couldn’t concentrate, couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think of anything but finding and killing Water. Only his promise to Maggie kept him grounded.

Raven slowly became aware that Maggie was talking, no shouting, in his mind, trying to get his attention.

Raven! Stop this! Now!

When Raven became aware of his surroundings again, he realized that the grass around him was scorched in a circle, the leaves on the trees near him withered. He sobered quickly, realizing just how close he was to losing control. Immediately, he reigned in his magic.

Maggie noticed. *Better?*

Better. He replied, mind to mind.

As open as he was to the energies around him, Raven could feel Silver’s fear across the clearing. He tried his best to calm himself, at least visibly, for Silver’s sake. He felt Maggie’s approval. She withdrew her hand and her mind, sending calming energy across their link before she severed it.

Raven took a deep breath trying his best to reign in his magic and self-control. He was frightening Silver, and he didn’t want to do that.

Besides, there was nothing he could do. There wasn't a trace of him left in the area; not a smell, a trail, or a trace of his magic anywhere. That was what frustrated Raven the most. How could Water disappear so completely?

He was shaken out of his thoughts when Maggie tapped him on the side, wanting him to crouch so she could put on the saddle she was holding. He obliged, almost lying down so she could sling the lightweight saddle on to his back. She slid the front strap over the spine directly in front of it. She put Silver's pouch behind the saddle, hooking it to the spines right behind it. He stood carefully so as not to dislodge the un-secure saddle.

Maggie reached under his stomach and grabbed the strap hanging there. She slid it into the buckle, tightening it to the worn spot on the strap. She took the strap that was in the center of this one and threaded it up between his front legs. The thick strap split into two right under his neck. She buckled one side of the strap to the saddle, then walked around to his other side and did the same thing. The saddle was now secure, and wouldn't be going anywhere. Maggie went to the bag and secured the straps hanging down around his stomach. The bag hung on his left side, right behind the saddle.

Although Raven didn't know much about such things, Maggie had told him his saddle was very much like a horse's saddle with a cinch and breast collar; the sack similar to saddlebags. He hoped a horse's saddle didn't itch as bad as his did.

Saddle secure, Maggie picked up her bag and waited for Raven to lie down so she could climb up. She had gotten better at this over the weeks of traveling, and it didn't take her long to secure her legs with the strapping on the saddle. She hung her bag from the spine in front of her. Silver climbed up his back leg, along his spine, and dropped into her carry sack. Maggie patted his shoulder, letting him know that they were up and secure.

He stood, readying himself to fly. Flying was second nature to a mature Dragon, much as walking or breathing. This is why he found it funny that during their first flights together Maggie always thought he was going to crash.

He opened his wings and jumped into the sky. His magic helped propel him into the air as he beat down with his wings. Straight vertical takeoffs, while far from impossible, were harder than a takeoff on open ground. Once above the trees, he resumed a more natural incline, circling over the clearing until he was high above the

tree-tops. From here, they could see where the fire had wreaked its harm, burning old growth and saplings alike. But this wasn't normal fire, it was Dragon fire. Where there were stones, they had melted and flowed like water; sand was now smooth and shiny like ice. It would take years before these spots would be green again, if they ever would be.

Raven turned his back on the devastation, angling once again between the mountains. He looked up to the distant tops. He knew he couldn't fly over them. It was taught to all young during their flying lessons that you couldn't fly too high; if you went high enough, it was hard to breathe. Eventually, if you didn't descend, you would black out and fall from the sky.

Raven, like all hatchlings with new wings, had tried to out climb his nest-mates. He did, only to awaken only scant feet from the ground. He regained his wings, angled up, only to lose control and plow into the ground. He awoke three days later, his insides itching from the healing done and his ego crushed along with his leg. His mother had set it with magic, but refused to allow anyone to heal it with magic. She said she had to learn his lesson for his recklessness. He didn't argue or complain; he endured the pain and the lesson. He hadn't tested that limit again; and he took the other warnings from his elders to heart. As he grew, he started to give hatchlings lessons, he would take them high enough for them to get dizzy, that way they knew their limit, and wouldn't feel the need to test it recklessly.

Of course, none of this had anything to do with the task at hand, but he had to think of other things; had to keep his mind busy so he wouldn't think of WhiteWater and what he was up to. If he thought about that traitorous Dragon did and what he was going to do, he found he couldn't concentrate on anything else, including what Maggie needed him to do.

He took another deep breath as he soared through the air, savoring the feeling of the wind flowing over his scales and around his wings. He idly wondered how creatures of the earth could stand being tethered to the ground. He wondered how Silver could stand it.

He felt Maggie's consciousness brush up against his mind. Now, like always, he held his mind guarded. It was a habit, one ground into every hatchling as soon as their magic could be called forth.

He lowered his shield just enough to let Maggie feed her thoughts to his mind. Thanks to the wind buffeting them, it was impossible to speak out loud and be heard.

We need to get out of this valley. Do you think you can make it before nightfall?

Raven thought for a moment before he replied. Now that they weren't mingling their magic anymore, they couldn't read each other like they did before; they could only project their thoughts mind to mind.

I think I will be able to do it. I have been flying hard for a while now, as you kindly told me earlier.

She had scolded him earlier, but she had been right. It was stupid for him to push himself that hard. What if his wings or magic *had* given out in mid-flight? All of them would have plummeted to the earth, and their deaths, and the deaths of everyone else, would have been on his soul. His soul would not have been well received in Dunselden.

I can get us to the other side, but then I will have to rest.

Raven could feel Maggie mentally nod, accepting what he was saying and agreeing with it. He could tell that she felt bad asking him to fly again when he was so exhausted, but she didn't think that there was much of a choice. He agreed with her.

Maggie kept light contact with his mind as they flew, occasionally pulling Silver in as well. He could tell that Maggie was ecstatic and terrified about having a bonded partner. Maggie couldn't bear the thought of leading Silver to her death. Now she knew how Raven felt. He thought he was doing the same to them both. Maggie and Silver were talking mind to mind about trivial things. They were trying to keep their minds off of WhiteWater and his sudden reappearance and disappearance as well. Raven found it hard to join in the conversation, his thoughts kept traveling back to WhiteWater and the questions he raised with his reappearance. Maggie and Silver, sensing his distraction, continued to talk about mundane things but didn't force him to join in. He was thankful for that; he didn't think that he could converse and concentrate on flying. He needed to concentrate all of his energy into staying aloft.

Maggie stopped talking in mid-sentence. *What's wrong?* Silver asked, speaking through their connection.

It's Raven. He has been too quiet for far too long.

Maggie reached out to Raven, willing him to drop his guard and speak to her.

Maggie, I believe I was mistaken. Even in his mind, his voice was shaky, tired, and weak. *I hate to tell you this, but I will not make it out of the valley if I do not rest.* Maggie could tell that it hurt him to admit just how weak he was.

Maggie rested her hand on his shoulder, leaning close to his neck, careful not to impale herself on the spikes in front of her. She called forth her magic, her energy, and *pushed* it into Raven, willing him to take the energy he needed.

Maggie, no. Raven fought her, trying to force her to stop. But his body was like a sponge; no matter how hard he fought, he had no control over the energy flow.

Maggie forced as much energy as she dared into Raven. She removed her hand and slumped against his neck, glad her legs were tied in. She didn't even have enough energy to hold on anymore.

Maggie! Raven was shouting at her now, his voice not as tired, but still weak. *Maggie, stay with me!*

Wake up, Maggie! Silver, who had been silent through all of this, was shouting as well. She sounded panicked.

Guys, I'm fine. I just, miscalculated, that's all. I will be fine in a while. Maggie still couldn't move, but she wasn't in any danger. She could tell that, at least.

Raven searched her mind, and finding that her SoulFire was burning brightly, withdrew. *You shouldn't have done that, Maggie.*

And why not? It's not like you haven't completely spent your energy on this trek. And Silver is too young. We need to get out of this valley, and I can't fly. All I can do is sit here. You needed energy, I had energy. It wasn't that hard of a decision.

Raven didn't have a comeback for this, because he knew she was right. So he stayed silent and sulked. Then, finally, *But you shouldn't have given me so much. That was dangerous.*

I know. That's why I said I miscalculated. But you feel fine now, don't you?

Yes, but at what cost Maggie?

A few hours' sleep is all. I will be fine, I promise.

Maggie could tell Raven wanted to argue, but she withdrew contact before he could. The truth was she was beyond tired, even if she didn't tap her SoulFire. She was dangerously close to passing out, which would just panic him and possibly make him give the energy back. She couldn't allow that. They had to get out of the valley and somewhere safe. And the only way they could do that was on the back of a Dragon.

Are you sure you are okay, Maggie? Silver sounded worried. Maggie tried to put her at ease. She was frightened enough.

Yes, Silver, I'm fine. I just need to rest. It's nothing a little time won't fix.

Silver seemed doubtful, but didn't press the issue. Instead, Silver started talking about what they were discussing before; mundane and silly things. Maggie leaned forward and rested her head on Raven's warm scales, listening to Silver's voice. She concentrated on that, keeping her thoughts from becoming a tangled mess of sadness and despair. It eased the knot in her stomach, the one that was present ever since she woke from that memory to the presence of smoke and fear. She drifted off into an uneasy sleep.

Her dreams were dark and tangled. She saw people and Dragons long dead looking at her with haunted, empty eyes. They drifted in and out of gray smoke, their eyes black voids, accusing her. Or so she thought. She heard crying and the screaming of many voices. She woke with a jerk.

Maggie was still strapped in the saddle on the back of Raven. By the position of the sun, Maggie could tell she had been asleep for a while. The screaming didn't stop upon waking, though it did change. She looked down and saw that they were being shadowed by a large flock of crows, who were raising quite the racket, screaming at the trio flying low. It seemed as though they didn't like the Dragon skimming so close to their nests. Raven was barely clearing the treetops. Maggie opened her mind up to talk to Raven, to see why they were flying so low.

A low hum entered her magical hearing. Concentrating on this, she fought to make it clearer. She laughed out loud when she finally could hear clearly.

The crows were cursing the Dragon, warning the interloper away from their trees. *They have a wide and colorful vocabulary, for crows.*

Maggie! Raven's voice sounded surprised. I didn't know you were awake! I felt you stir, but I thought you were just moving in your sleep. He paused. The hatchling has been worried.

You were too, don't deny it! Silver sounded annoyed. You said yourself, if she didn't wake by the time we landed, you were going to have to try and heal her, no matter how tired.

Raven!

Well, Maggie dear, you do seem to be important. I couldn't just let you slip away without trying to do something.

Maggie was trying to think of a retort when a large crow called Raven a perticularly colorful name as he tried to bank toward a clearing Maggie could now see. She laughed aloud.

Care to share in the joke?

It's the crows. They... Can't you hear them?

Of course we can hear them. They are screaming up a storm, said Silver.

No, I mean yes, there is that, but they are calling us some names I have never even heard before, even among the drunks in our village.

What do you mean, Maggie? Raven sounded curious.

It's as plain as day, Raven.

When Raven didn't say anything, Maggie asked, *Can't you hear them? They are speaking as well as you or I.*

It just sounds like crow noise to me, Raven said. *You mean to say they are using words?*

Maggie took a minute to answer. *It's not like they are using words, exactly. Its more like I am translating what they are thinking into my language.*

Raven was almost clear of the trees now, and the flock dropped back, but not without darting in to nip the tail of the trespasser. Raven flicked his tail in annoyance, scattering them. They gave up the chase, instead choosing to land in the trees at the edge of a large platue, now taunting the Dragon to come back and fight.

That is a useful skill. But I can not do it. Dragons rarely speak to non-Dragons. It is not a skill that is encouraged.

“Maybe it should be,” Maggie said aloud, not expecting Raven to be able to hear her.

“What?” Silver shouted over the wind. Raven was slowing down, preparing to land.

Maggie shook her head. Silver let it drop.

Raven found a landing spot in a bend in a wide and lazy river. When he had settled, Maggie undid the laces that bound her and dropped to the ground. Her legs collapsed under her, causing her to break her fall with her hands.

“Maggie! Are you alright?” Silver was almost to the ground, having walked along Raven's tail.

Raven looked back around and saw her on the ground. She immediately felt his magic try to reach her, to pick her up or heal her.

She scrambled to her feet, brushing off her knees and palms. “Guys, I'm fine. Really. My legs just went to sleep, is all.”

Silver eyed her, perhaps trying to see a lie written on her face. Raven withdrew his magic, although reluctantly.

“Come on, Raven. You must want this thing off as bad as I wanted out of it.”

He didn't answer, but he did stretch to give her better access to the buckles and straps. Once the saddle was off and taken care of, Raven stretched head to tail. “You know, I don't know how your horses stand it. From your descriptions, your horse's saddles are much worse than mine, what with their hot thick padding and ridged centers.”

Maggie had laid down on the grass, staring up at the sky. “Our horses don't have a choice in the matter. It's either saddles, or wagons, or a plow. If they don't work, they die.”

Raven stopped stretching and looked at her. Silver did the same.

“So, they are slaves?”

“What?” She sat up and looked at the Dragons, confused. “No, they are animals.”

“Animals can be slaves, just as much as people can.” Raven was using his teacher voice, the voice that he used when Maggie wasn't grasping a lesson or being particularly stubborn.

“Animals can not be slaves.” Maggie was too tired to get into a debate right now, but the Dragons had that look in their eye. The one that said they were not going to be ignored.

“So what you are saying is, because they are different, you can rule them.” Raven said.

“No, I don't think that.”

“Or maybe,” said Silver “because they are not as smart or can't speak as you do, they are not worthy of your respect?”

“I never said that,” Maggie didn't know what had prickled them so, but she knew it was no use arguing. Especially since she didn't know what to say.

“Maggie,” Raven's voice sounded patient as he looked down on her with eyes as old as his race, “animals were not put here just to serve. They are our guides and companions. We learn from them, and they from us. True, most bend willingly to the will of man, or Dragon, realizing that they will benefit from helping us. But no creature is a slave. Each belongs to itself.”

Lecture done, Raven went to walk and cool himself down before he returned. Maggie started pulling out their gear, thinking on what he had said. Silver was silent.

“I didn't mean anything by it,” Maggie said after a while.

“I know you didn't. He is just sensitive.”

“Why?”

Silver shrugged while she was digging the fire pit. Maggie was at a loss. She couldn't figure out what had set him off.

Raven came back just as Maggie was placing the last of the wood in a pile by the fire ring. He laid down by the ring, tucking his wings in close and folding his forepaws under him like a tom cat.

“Silver?”

She looked up from her work, snapping the larger branches Maggie couldn't break, in two. “Yeah, Raven?”

“Do you want to do the hunting for us?”

“What?” Silver stood, branches forgotten. He had never asked her to do the hunting before.

“I think you can handle it. Come here.”

Silver approached the Dragon, and he dipped his head. Maggie briefly saw a flash of his magic engulf Silver.

“There, now I can track you.”

Silver could barely suppress her excitement as she ran to the woods. Maggie went back to stacking branches.

“Maggie, come here.”

She did as she was told, seeing no way to refuse. He gathered her up and tucked her close. She could feel the beat of his heart and the heat of his fire stomach. His breath was noisy as he breathed slowly. She tensed, waiting for him to start lecturing or to scold her.

When he didn't say anything, she started to relax. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, listening to his heart, his life. She was keenly aware of just how *big* he was. He could kill her on beat of his heart, but she felt as safe as a babe curled up next to him.

Finally, he broke the silence. “Child, I am not mad. How could I be, when you have never been taught different? But this is a lesson you must come to understand, or I fear you will lose sight of what you fight for.”

Maggie had nothing to say that wouldn't make her sound even more childish, so she remained silent.

Seeming to change the subject, he asked “So, you can understand the crows? Any other animal?”

Maggie thought for a moment, then said “No, but I have not tried it with any other.”

Raven sighed. “I encourage you to master this lesson, but it is not something I will insist upon. I believe you will benefit from it greatly if you choose to hear what those creatures that share the earth with you have to say.”

Maggie settled into the crook of his arm, sitting up against his chest and drank in the warmth. Sometimes, on their journey, when it had been too wet to start a fire, Silver and Maggie had curled up next to Raven, protected from the rain by his great wings. Under this shelter, they were as snug and dry as if they were laying in bed. The rain had hissed and spat when it struck his hide, and the Dragon had remained mostly dry.

When asked how he did such a thing, Raven said that he simply extended the heat he carried with him in his fire stomach, causing the rain to dissipate from his hide. Silver had found this fascinating, Maggie was simply envious she could not do the same.

LIVING

She went down the tunnel. It was dim at first, and then it turned to pitch black. All that she could see was the pinpoint of light far ahead of her, no bigger than her thumb nail.

Something compelled her to keep walking, no matter what. She continued, growing tired. Her feet felt like she was walking through sand, her feet slipping just a little when she moved forward. As she continued, her feet became heavier, the ground thicker. She couldn't lift her feet without huge effort, and each step that propelled her forward became shorter and more strained.

She wanted to stop, but if she did, she knew she was lost. The darkness was a substantial thing, pressing down on her from all sides, trying to cover her. The thing was, she was not scared of the darkness. In it was peace, and rest, and soothing energy. The light at the end, though far away, radiated anger and hardship and suffering, but still she struggled onward. She wanted to stop, but she knew she shouldn't. Something was waiting for her in the light, something important.

Soon, she heard whispers, coming from all sides. She tried to pinpoint a source, but it was impossible; the voices came from the darkness. They all were talking at the same time, but she was able to make each one out. If she hadn't had the experience with mind-speaking and touching, she would have been overwhelmed and had to stop.

Some warned her of what was ahead. They told of the trials she had faced, the hardships, of the nights sleeping in the cold, and the suffering she must go through still. Others told her to stop, to rest, to give in. They offered the peace of the darkness. All she had to do was stop.

But those voices were but one part. The others were soft, encouraging. They told her she was almost done, just a little longer. They said that if she kept going, all would be saved. They spoke softly, gently, encouraging.

Suddenly, both sets of voices stopped, and a voice shattered through the darkness, into every fiber of her being, her soul.

Choose.

That one word stopped everything. The darkness didn't go away, but it was held at bay; the pressure stopped trying to enclose her. Her sense of urgency and indecision went away, and she was able to stop for the first time since entering the darkness.

Choose? She thought. *To go on or stay?* She knew that if she just stood there, choosing to stay, she would know peace like she had never known it. She could finally rest, casting aside her worries and struggles. She could finally be *done*.

On the other hand, if she went on she knew that there would be struggling, hardship, suffering, and death. But there were people depending on her. But if she didn't go on, her family would destroy each other. Eventually the land would suffer, and the world would become a bleak and terrible place, where her people would know only war and blood and hunger.

The choice was up to her.

She was angry. Why did it have to be all on her? She didn't ask for this, to be the fulcrum on which the future pivoted. She was tired and overworked; all she wanted to do was to rest. But to rest here was to never return. She knew she had to go on, no matter the cost to herself.

The first step was the hardest. Her foot seemed to have become one with the floor. When she looked down, the darkness had melded with her feet, fusing them to the ground. Mentally, she pushed at the darkness. When it did not respond, she pushed harder, forcing all her energy and strength into a beam of energy directed to the black that encased her foot. It shattered.

She tumbled forward, losing her balance for a moment at being suddenly freed. She never stopped, however, to regain her footing. She continued down the tunnel, first at a stumble, then a jog, then finally a run.

As soon as her foot was freed, and she took that first step, the darkness began pressing, more inviting than before. She ran harder, her feet propelling her faster than they ever had on earth.

The light was finally starting to get bigger. Where before it was only the size of her thumb nail, it was now the size of her hand. Slowly, it grew bigger. Now the size of a dog; now the size of a horse. Soon it was the size of a Dragon, then it became bigger still. But as the light became bigger, the harder the darkness pressed, and

the more inviting it became. She fought, straining her will to its absolute limits. She *was* going to make it, no matter how hard it was.

She was so close now. The light flared, enveloping her. She felt hot, then cold.

Slowly, she realized she was not running anymore. Something cold and hard pressed against her back. Agony coursed through her body, searing her mind. She felt disconnected and confused. While in the darkness she had thoughts and emotions, but the only thing she had felt was a pressure on her mind. She hadn't felt anything in her body.

Finally, something clicked, and her mind completely settled into her physical form. She could feel the ground beneath her back, her legs and arms outstretched oddly. Her left leg was defiantly broke, as was a few of her ribs, she was sure. Her head pounded. Slowly, she opened her eyes.

The sky above was covered with the branches of tall strong trees. Right above her, however, there was a path of broken branches that marked her path down. She groaned and shifted her arms. They, at least, seemed to be mostly intact.

She pushed herself into a sitting position, and gritted her teeth against the wave of pain and dizziness that passed over her. She kept her eyes locked straight ahead as the world settled into its proper place. She raised a hand to the back of her throbbing head, and it came away sticky and black in the darkness. She smelled it, then to make sure, tasted it. It was blood, but old and not flowing.

She took a breath as deep as her ribs would allow, and looked down. Her right leg was straight out in front of her, and looked fine. Her left however was bent at a strange angle. She didn't see any blood, and that was a good thing. She didn't think she could fix a bone that had come through the skin. She instinctively sent a thought probe down her leg and into the bone. She was shocked when all she could feel was a shadow of herself. That was when she realized just how tired and in trouble she actually was. She should have no trouble sensing herself.

But there it was; a vague shadow where the pulsing energy of her leg should be. She took another shallow breath and did the same for her ribs. Nothing felt out of place, just wrong. *They must just be cracked, not displaced.* That was good. Cracked she could heal. As long as she didn't do anything stupid, like breathe, they ought to stay together. But she knew that she needed to heal those first, before she moved too much or in the wrong way.

Ignoring the pain in her leg, she reached out both hands in front of her, opening up the pathways to the energy around her and closing her eyes. The energies were fuzzy and indistinct, where usually she could pick out the tiniest flow of energy with sharp clarity. She hoped that just was because she was tired. She felt funny, like she was not completely attached to herself.

She drew energy up from her core and pulled a strand, directing it to her ribs, sinking it deep into the bone.

Three ribs were cracked on one side, two on the other. Each shallow breath was a burst of agony through her. She sank the energy into the cells of bone, duplicating them exactly. She took her time, making sure each cell was an exact copy before placing it to knit the bone together. If she hurried and made a mistake, the distorted cell could multiply and make her sick. She placed what cells she need to on the five ribs, and then zapped them with the healing green-brown energy to speed the process of healing. They would continue to make copies of themselves until the bone was back to the way it was. It would only take a few hours to heal completely, where it would normally take at least two turns of the moon to heal on its own.

She pulled more energy and did the same to her leg. She watched from the safety of her mind as the cells duplicated and repaired themselves. She felt as though she was disconnected from her body, and that was not right. Normally when she healed something, she felt an oneness that couldn't be described, and this included when she healed herself. When she healed herself, she felt as though she was looking at an open book, everything laid out for her to see. But even though this was not normal, she couldn't make herself care.

Even though she wasn't herself, she knew she needed help. Her magic was all but drained, and she couldn't survive out here bloody and hurt. Closing her eyes once again, she connected with the birds and beasts, searching their minds for the closest village. Normally she would have asked directly, but she was in a hurry and couldn't wait until she found someone.

She sifted through the minds of the animals around her, and images flooded her mind. A small game trail close to where she was now; a long walk; new smells, those of dog and human and horse; then a small village, no bigger than ten huts clustered on the bank of a small stream. She could also feel the fear the animals had of these men, and she was glad. It would keep them safe.

She opened her eyes and looked above her though the branches. She needed to get to the village, and soon. She was stranded in the middle of the wood, with no way of knowing where she was or which direction she should go in. She looked up, and through a small gap in the branches, she saw a faint black spot wink out the stars overhead. Her mind immediately reached out to it, calling Raven down to get her. A split second later, however, she remembered that Raven was dead, and could not save her.

She broke down into sobs, crying over her lost friends. It was her fault Raven died, and she didn't know what had become of Silver. When Maggie had reached toward WhiteWater, she had felt a draining like she didn't know was possible. Her life-fire was ripped from her, wrenching her soul from her body. How she lived, she didn't know. She should be dead. She was dead...

She took a deep breath, forcing herself to stop crying. She couldn't feel sorry for herself, not now. She needed to get to this village, she had to stop WhiteWater.

She stood and her head swam. She knew she over reached herself; she could feel her SoulFire flicker. Her vision dimmed and she felt her knees buckled. Blackness swallowed her even before she hit the ground. But even in the darkness, she couldn't escape the pale Dragon, as he fought and clawed his way through her dreams.

She couldn't find her eyelids to open them, nor her limbs to move them. No matter how hard she tried, she just couldn't wake.

Get up

The voice was in her head, and outside it too. She tried to stir, she couldn't.

Rise now, or sleep forever Maggie! The voice was urgent, insistent. She felt something against her arm, scratching her.

She finally was able to open her eyes. When she did, she knew she needed to wake up. She had a feeling that there was something very wrong.

She looked at her arm, where four fresh scratches oozed blood. She turned just in time to see a large brown rabbit hop out of the clearing. She didn't know for sure, but she thought that this was the one who was speaking to her in her mind.

That reminded her and focused her cloudy thoughts. She closed her eyes and concentrated on the back of her skull. The bone was intact, of that she was certain, but it was below the bone that she wanted to look at.

Yes, there it was; a black, cloudy patch that was infecting her brain, causing her mind to be muddy. She focused white energy and mentally blew the bruise away, like one would a cobweb. Using direct energy, like a beam, was never a good idea on the brain. The brain moved in too fast of a pattern, and if you disrupted that pattern, you risked hurting the patient you were trying to help.

As soon as the last of the black faded, she felt much better. She knew it was the bruise causing her to lose focus and feel strange. And if that rabbit had not woken her, there was a chance that the bad would have spread, and she would have never woken up. But that last bit of healing completely drained her. It felt like her first day with Grandfather, when he had her empty herself of her magic. She felt hollow, empty, and exhausted. But no matter how tired she was, she had to get to the village.

She looked to the sky and saw the sun had risen sometime while she was unconscious. It was sometime past midday, she thought.

She struggled to her knees and then pushed herself to her feet. She looked around, getting her bearings of where she should head. As she stood there, memories once again flooded her mind. Tears pricked the corners of her eyes and she bit down on her tongue to keep from crying. She took a deep breath to steady herself, and plunged into the trees to once again find her own kind.

The path was easy to find and follow. It was harder to exit from the trees to approach the village. She remembered what happened last time she was with her own kind, and that they had tried to kill her.

She heard the sounds of the village before she saw it; the rise and fall of voices, the laughter of children, the occasional bark of a dog. All of it was so strange, and yet so familiar.

She cleared the trees and stood at the edge of the fields, bare of crops. The village was not far away, and she could see smoke curling into the sky. The men worked oxen in the field, clearing them and making them ready for winter. Eventually, one of the men looked up at the right time and seen Maggie standing there. He stopped his ox and said something to the person nearest him, pointing to her.

Maggie, knowing she was discovered, walked away from the trees and toward them. Several ran towards her while one ran back to the village.

The man in front of the group was large, dark skinned, and muscular. He was wearing pants that were of no discernible color, and sturdy brown leather boots. By his body language, she could tell he was on the defensive,

“Whoa! Hey, now stranger. Just stop there...” His voice trailed off as he finally came close enough to see Maggie. She looked down. She was covered in mud, dust, blood, and other things she picked up from the floor of the forest. Various cuts and bruises covered every visible part of her body. The blood had trickled down from her head to splash on her shoulders, and her hair was still matted with it.

His body language instantly changed as he registered what he was seeing. A child covered in blood, looking as though she had fought and clawed her way here. Which she actually had.

She stopped and waited, swaying on the spot. She had tapped her SoulFire to heal herself the last time, and she was exhausted. She looked up at the man and met his eyes. The worry and compassion she found there broke her. She started sobbing, and her knees buckled.

The man rushed to her and caught her before she was able to hit the ground. He gathered her up in his arms, jogging toward the village.

“Go and get Ilaina!” His voice was rough and deep. She heard someone respond and then sprinting footsteps.

She heard several people fall in beside the man carrying her. “What happened, Kiddar?” one said.

“Is she alright?” said another.

She tried to answer, but she was unable to talk through her tears. Her breath hitched and her ribs started to complain again.

The sounds started to change the closer they got to the village, as well as the smells. She heard women talking together, the yelling of children at play, the clacking of wood on wood, and memories flooded her once again. It was so much like her old village that she expected her mother to come running up and take Maggie in her

arms. But her mother was dead, as well as everyone else she loved. The emotions swept over her again, and she cried even harder.

“Shhh, it will be ok, little one,” the man soothed her.

The clacking of bones and the tinkling of bells announced the arrival of a different person. “What happened, Kiddar? Is she hurt?” The voice was a woman’s voice, high and musical.

“I don’t know,” replied the man holding her, Kiddar. “She walked out of the woods like this. It looks like she’s been through it, Ilaina.”

“Yes, it does.” Maggie felt a hand on her forehead. It was rough and callused, but gentle. “She’s burning up. Quick, bring her.” Maggie opened her eyes. She couldn’t see much through her tears. The woman removed her hand and turned, trotting away. Kiddar followed at the same pace. She led him to a structure in the center of the village. She swept back the curtain in front of the door, and held it aside for Kiddar to enter. He did, having to stoop a little to keep from hitting his head on the doorframe.

Inside was light and airy, with a small fire burning in the hearth. Quickly, though, the light was put out as Ilaina closed all the curtains. She walked over to the hearth and added wood to make it blaze.

“Put her here, Kiddar. I need to sweat the fever out.” Kiddar laid Maggie next to the fire, on a pallet made of straw and cloth. Ilaina tucked blankets around her. Soon Maggie was sweating and shivering worse than ever. Ilaina went to her head and lifted it off the pallet. “Here, sweetie, drink. It will help.”

Maggie sipped. The drink was hot and sweetened with honey. It made her head swim and the room spin. Soon she was fighting off sleep. She gave in, and drifted off into a dreamless sleep.

When she woke, she felt better. Her shivering had stopped and she could breathe easier. She turned and looked and saw that the fire had burned low. She tried to move and moaned. She was sore from head to toe.

She heard rustling behind her then the tinkling of bells and the clacking of bone and wood, announcing the arrival of Ilaina. The woman entered her vision, silhouetted against the fire. She knelt down beside Maggie and felt her forehead again.

“Good, your fever is still down. Do you feel like sitting up?” Maggie nodded her head. Ilaina reached for her and helped her sit up.

For a moment the room spun as the blood rushed from her head. When everything settled into its proper place, she looked around briefly. She was in a simple one room house with a dirt floor and a low roof. There were many windows, but at the moment, they were covered, keeping the sun out.

Ilaina left her for a moment, and then returned bearing a wooden cup. "Here, sweetie, try this. If you can keep it down, you can try some soup." She handed Maggie the cup, and Maggie tried a sip. It was heavy with the taste of various herbs and honey. At first she coughed and sputtered as the drink burned her throat. "Easy, there, young one. Go slow."

Her stomach rebelled and she had to fight to keep it down. Her stomach settled and she tried another sip. This time her stomach didn't turn and she was able to drink the rest without trouble.

"How are you feeling?"

"Bet..." she cleared her throat. "Better. Thank you."

Ilaina waved her hand in dismissal. "It's what I do, young one. But what happened? Did someone do this to you?"

Maggie was made uneasy by her question. She couldn't tell her what was going on. Something on her face must have given her feelings away, because Ilaina quickly said, "If you don't want to talk about it now, that's fine. Just know you are safe here. We all want to protect you. If someone did this to you, you can tell me."

Maggie wanted to tell her. She was being so nice and trustful; Maggie wanted to repay her with the truth. But she couldn't. Not only would Ilaina not believe her, once the village or wherever she was found out about her magic, they would probably kill her, or try. This time, they would fine her a lot harder to kill.

Trying to buy time, Maggie stared into the dregs of her cup. She desperately wanted an answer to appear there, but she knew it wouldn't. It was up to her, just like everything else.

"I just... woke up like this. In the woods. I... don't remember what happened before." Most of this was true, except she did remember what happened before she woke up. Vividly.

"Well," Ilaina said, putting a comforting hand on her shoulder, "if you do remember, you can tell me. Kiddar and his hunters will make sure it doesn't happen again." Maggie could tell by the tone of her

voice, Ilaina was convinced Maggie was beaten by someone she knew. From her insistence, Maggie assumed this was not the first time someone came to her bruised and bloody.

There was nothing Maggie could do to alleviate her suspicions. She would believe what she wanted too, even if Maggie told her the truth. She wouldn't believe her, and would probably think that it was the hallucinations of a fevered and damaged mind. The truth; that she flew into a battle on a midnight black Dragon, BlackRaven, while a white Dragon with blue eyes, named WhiteWater, fought them with power that he possessed only because he allied himself with those that practice dark magic. Then, when the black Dragon knew he was going to be killed, threw Maggie from his back so that she had a chance to live, and threw all his power, including his SoulFire, at the white one.

Maggie felt a tear trickle down her cheek, unbidden. She swiped at it with the back of her hand. Ilaina pretended not to notice, except to grip her shoulder a little tighter.

"I'm fine." Maggie worked to make her voice steady. "It's just that I'm hurting real bad." This was also the truth, and a much safer topic. Maggie felt as though she had been ran over by a stampede. And as a healer, Maggie knew Ilaina couldn't ignore it.

"Here, I will get you something." She took the cup from her hand and went to a shelf. She poured some tea in the cup, added a few drops of a pale liquid she pulled off the shelf, and then added a little more tea. She brought the cup back to Maggie.

"Here, dear, drink all this. It's not too warm, so you can drink it fast. It will help with the pain and also let you rest."

Maggie took the cup from her hand and gulped the tea. The liquid made it bitter and hard to swallow, but she managed.

"Thank you," Maggie said. And she was, very thankful. Being here and seeing this woman just reminded her of what she came back for. If she hadn't, this woman and countless others would have died. They might still, if Maggie didn't stop Zelder and his minions.

The drink started to take effect, making her head swim. The good thing was, the pain was gone. Either that, or she just didn't care about it so much anymore, it was hard to be sure.

"I'm real lucky," Maggie said, without thinking, "that the trees were thick. Otherwise, I would have ended up flat."

Ilaina's head whipped around and her eyes found Maggie's. "What did you say?"

Maggie bit her tongue. The drink was making her forget her wits, as well as her pain. "Nothing." Maggie was thinking fast. "I just remembered a dream, I guess. You said I had a fever?" Her words were becoming thick and her mind fuzzy. She tried to think through it. Her life depended on it.

Ilaina nodded. "Yes, it broke during the night. I imagine that it came from the stress your body was under."

Maggie nodded. "Well, my dreams are funny when I have a fever. They seem real. I must have dreamed I was falling through trees and braking branches."

The healer smiled. "That is a common complaint among children. When they are sick and with fever, they sometimes think their dreams are true. It's alright, sweet heart. You are safe here. Sleep."

Maggie, unable to resist any longer, lay back down on the bed. She was asleep before her head hit the pillow.

PARTNERS

Silver snarled, fierce and hostile. It made the hair on Maggie's neck and arms stand on end, and sent a chill down her back. She took an involuntary step back. Silver bared her teeth, which were as big around as Maggie's wrist and as long as her forearm.

"Silver, listen and hear my voice." Maggie called up the energy that was her magic, letting it flow and collect in her hands. As always, the power was a deep purple, and was laced through with fine threads of gold.

Silver stopped and blinked. She lowered her head, snaking it back and forth like a stallion might when challenging another.

She spoke; her words were thick with hatred and layered with the hurt of someone that has been disappointed too many times to count. "I will not fall for your tricks, *human*." She made the word a curse. "I know she is dead, and you cannot trick me into thinking otherwise. She died in my arms, I felt her Life Fire leave her; her spirit fled this realm." Silver snarled again.

"Silver, listen to me." She growled. "*Listen!*" The last word she threaded with her power and her will, trying to force Silver to pause.

Amazingly, Silver stopped growling, smoke trailing out of both nostrils. She shook her head, eyes closed, like she was trying to clear her ears of water.

"That stung." The statement was so unexpected, a giggle threatened to escape Maggie. She held it back, however, afraid that anything she did would set her off and cause her to attack.

Silver stopped shaking her head and stared at Maggie with one large, liquid silver eye. She looked her up and down, without ever moving her head. Maggie was amazed on how big she had gotten. Unbidden, her eyes moved to Silver's large jaws, realizing that she could easily dispatch her with one bite. She pulled her eyes back to Silver's.

"Silver, listen. You must know me. You must recognize me. Please, search your heart. You know the truth." Maggie held out her hand, palm pulsing with her power. Silver gathered her power as well, surrounding herself in it. The color was of molten silver, so pure and powerful, Maggie gasped. Silver collected it around herself, keeping it at the ready; she would be ready for an attack. Tentatively, a thread of

power snaked its way out, reaching for the globe of power in Maggie's hand. Maggie did nothing to discourage her.

She waited for what she seemed like hours until Silver's magic was near enough to touch hers. Still, she made no move to go to Silver. If she forced it upon Silver, Maggie knew she might try to fight her, and that would not help either of them.

The tendril of magic stopped an inch from Maggie's palm. She held her breath, hoping against hope that Silver would just reach out, just have faith one more time.

Then, like a diver plunging into black water, Silver drove the magic into her hand, touching their essences.

Maggie watched as Silver's pupil dilated to a slit as a ripple of shock coursed through her body. Maggie locked her knees and refused to collapse. The silver coursed through the purple and gold, swirling and twisting, forming fantastic patterns.

Slowly, like the breaking of day, the wall shielding Silver's mind fell. Maggie quickly lowered hers, wanting to speak without words; to mingle their beings together.

Maggie? Came Silver's voice, questioningly. Maggie could feel the confusion, hurt, mistrust, and, strangely, guilt, through their mental link.

Maggie sighed, mentally, glad that Silver had given her a chance. *Yes, Silver. It is me.* Maggie moved and went to her, placing a hand on Silver's brow. *My friend, my partner, I am glad you are here.*

Silver blinked, *How is this possible? You died. I felt the life leave your body. There was nothing there.* She closed her eyes as agony swept through her; Maggie almost collapsed with the potency of it. The memory was as fresh and clear as the day it was created. For a brief moment, Maggie was looking down on her bloodied body, cradled in Silver's arms. Then the moment passed, and Maggie was once again looking into the eye of a Dragon.

Maggie blinked; so did Silver. Silver sighed, and one great tear rolled from her eye. *Oh, Maggie. I missed you.*

So did I.

Even though they were using words, it was the emotions, intentions behind the words, and the other unintentional thoughts behind those thoughts meant to hear. Once fully immersed, there was no way to

protect yourself from the one you were speaking with. Your mind, your very soul was laid bare for inspection.

So even though she didn't want to, Maggie shared with Silver what actually happened that day. She showed her that she had to deceive her, to make her think Maggie dead. She had to

“No! No! No,” screamed SilverFire, as she watched Maggie being carried away in the monster's claws. She tried in vain to run after her, flapping the pitifully small wings on her back, but to no avail. The monsters flew away into the oncoming night, getting smaller and smaller, until they were only tiny black pinpricks in the sky.

Silver turned her head to the sky and roared her lament. First BlackRaven and now Maggie! How was she supposed to go on alone? She needed Maggie to restore the peace to the world. She was nothing, a Dragon without magic, a worthless creature doomed to failure.

She cried and cried well into the night, letting all the sorrow over the past months have its way with her. But eventually the crying

stopped and she looked skyward. The stars were just starting to twinkle into existence, and the moon was a large round disk. She thought to the last words she heard Grandfather say to her, *'I know that you will protect her.'* Suddenly she knew she had to find Maggie. She had to go on, even it took weeks, months, or even years to find her. She knew the likelihood of finding her was slim, but she had to try. She got up and started walking in the direction she saw the monsters fly in.

A new energy filled her as she walked. A determination, a purpose. She *was* going to find Maggie. She *was* going to rescue her. She plodded on. For once in her life she didn't wish she had her magic, because that thought was driven from her mind by her desire to see Maggie.

The tingling started in her left fore foot. She shook it, trying to rid herself of the feeling. All it did was rise up her leg, intensifying. She looked down. *Not now!* She shook her leg again, but the feeling kept raising. Now it was a burning, like fire licking up her leg. It reached her shoulder and spread down her back and up her neck. She arched her back, the fire eating away at her. The pain was incredible. Her legs collapsed underneath her, and she lay on the ground, unable to move. The fire moved through her, filling her up, in every limb and every fiber. *Oh, Maggie! I'm so sorry, I can't find you.*

She gave in, let the fire rage through her, and gave herself over to the blackness of unconsciousness.

Four thoughts swam through Maggie's head at the same time. First, that she was very cold and damp. Second, that she lay unbound on something cold, third was that she was sore from head to foot. And fourth, she no longer felt any magic. None. None at all. She expanded her conciseness to include her surroundings. There was nothing there, neither bird nor bug; no energies at all. That was really strange. She could not think of any place that didn't have at least insect life. She couldn't feel anything, except the cold surface that she was laying on, and the pain that filled her.

She slowly found the energy to lift her eyelids, and wished she hadn't. She was in a small, low ceiling cave. It was dark, damp, and very cold. The cold wasn't just external, but internal as well. Something was inside her, griping her in cold, keeping her from using her magic.

But neither her surroundings nor the bone-chilling cold was as bad as what she saw keeping guard outside the mouth of the cave.

The creature sitting there with its back to her was about as big as her, with bumpy, knobby, dirty brown skin. A black liquid oozed from each bump, giving off a horrendous odor. The stench reminded her remotely of the cow she found long dead, bogged down in mud on the hottest day of the year. But worse. A hundred times worse.

The creature lifted its head, which was perched on a rather long and skinny neck, and looked around. The black, beady eyes swiveled in sockets without lids, taking in everything. It sniffed the air, and then opened its mouth to reveal long, pointed fangs that curled from both the top and bottom up over the outside of the jaw. Green colored saliva dripped from the point of each tooth. Maggie knew that that venom could kill her in a matter of minutes, because she knew what sat in front of her, a Di-gon, the dark cousin of the Dragon.

Just as smart and cunning as their more docile cousins, the Di-gon reveled in death in destruction. A Di-gon was mostly seen in the aftermath of battles. But not feasting on the dead. No, the Di-gon was the bringer of death herself, killing the injured and leaving the bodies to the crows.

A true terror, the memories that were not her own showed her that the Di-gons frequently attacked villages and raided flocks and herds. They were hated by humans, and given their simmilateries to Dragons, the Ten used them as the basis for starting the mass war against Dragons that would sweep the globe.

The Di-gons were almost exterminated, but a few managed to retreat to the mountains, and only emerged to hunt and breed. The few sightings of them were quickly dismissed as over active imagination. They kept a low profile, for the humans were not the only enemies of the Di-gon, but the Dragons as well.

The Dragons hunted the Di-gons because they attacked and killed without cause, and raided the Dragon's nesting sites. And before the war, when Dragons and humans were friends, they fought the deadly Di-gons beside the humans.

The Di-gon turned and looked at Maggie, and opened its mouth wide. "So, awake finally. We've been waiting, little human. Oh, yes, waiting a long time."

Its voice slid off its tongue like poison, and it fixed one black eye on her like a falcon locked on its pray. Maggie reached for her magic, trying to protect herself.

“No, no, no little one. You may not use your power here. This place, this tomb, takes away all magic, even mine.”

“Tomb.” Maggie repeated. “So I am to die here.”

“I do not know. I speak of those that came before me; who have entered and never left. I don’t know what he has in store for you.”

“Who?”

“My master. The one who I serve.”

The king was given a proficy that he will give life to the one who will be his downfall. He once spared Maggie’s mother while she was pregnate. The king collects those he finds with magic and offers money for anyone turning them in. he is also collecting Dragons. As time goes on, the bond between a Dragon and its human gets stronger. Dragons are ment to be bonded to humans. King promised both races one would be above the other, but in reality he just wants to rule over both.

After Raven goes to sleep, Maggie tells silver everything. Also they descuss the bond between them. Silver starts to think during her watch. She no longer feels sorry for herself and starts to learn magic and other things. When Raven gets up, he takes watch and silver sleeps. He flies overhead and also sits and watches the woods. They spend about three days there, then raven and Maggie go hunting. They come back and silver is gone. She returns and they are angry with her. They leave. While traveling, raven gets Maggie used to arial battle.

Eventually they make it to the lake where emerald and blue died. Maggie says that the earth still greaves for them. Dragons and humans are supposed to be partners, if one dies they both die. Magic ties them together. Nature is trying to right itself, which is why more people are being born with magic. Sun destroyed this balance when he created the spell to keep dragons and humans apart. The king collects those he finds and offers money for anyone turning them in.

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They find a village that was razed and Maggie has raven go after the men. She kills all of them. This alerts the king to them. He sends WhiteWater after them. Maggie and Raven leave silver on the ground and battle him. Raven knows he is going to die, he throws Maggie off. She falls through the trees. (Insert maggies chapter here) Raven flies farther, drawing water off. Water kills him and leaves him for the carron crows.

Silver sees her fall and feels her die. She starts to go after her. (Insert NO NO NO mini chapter, rewrite). She wakes and finds mother nature, gets a gift. Silver wishes she were bigger and stronger so she can fight. Mother grants that wish.

Maggie stays with the village and gets to know her own kind again.

Silver flies to find raven. She does and takes the saddle and packs and burns him. She starts to practice her magic and harries the soliders that she finds.

A group of soldiers destroy the village where Maggie is staying. She fights. Silver flies to the village to take care of it (Insert Silver snarled fierce and hostile mini chapter here). They search for a safe place for the people and dragons that want to live in harmony. Maggie takes the healer, blacksmith and others that servived the battle to the city. They find an acient dragon city and lay spells around it so that only they and the ones they touch can enter.

Both decide to return to the village and gather the Dragons. On their way, those that are fleeing the rath of the king they tell to make their way to the city. They return to the village to find that war has even made its way there. Red is in charge. They gather them and take them to the city. Dragons start finding their partners once they leave. They gather an army in the city.

Meanwhile the king is gathering his army made of dragons and humans. Most are enslaved, some want power, others hate magic... None are bonded partners. Those in the city and the kings army meet in battle, good wins. Dragons become partners again, and the earth quits trying to destroy itself. At the end, Maggie dies. Red is silvers soul mate(?). Dragons help the humans rebuild. The memories of dragons and gods return to humans once the king is dead. They move back to the cities and prosper.

