

Mira's Griffin

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Chapter 1:

While the entire village of Mund Cove hid in thatched huts, cowering at an unknown threat, Mira climbed mountains. Girls, Mira had convinced the elders, were not a target. Hunters didn't come back, search parties vanished, but the girls who tended the goats always returned.

She clung from a cliff, one hand anchoring her to the rock and the other adjusting her collecting pouch. The rippling cove below filled the world, lined by deadly cliffs. Mira had told the chief that she didn't fear falling. It was almost true—cheating her fear was half the appeal.

The toe of her boot kicked through pockets of slippery moss to the hard rock beneath. She chose her next target, a nest of grass and twigs engulfing the rock shelf that held it. Her fingers closed around a warm, smooth surface and she slipped the egg into her pouch with the others she had gathered. Only one in this nest. She had to return with a full pouch, so that the chief would send her out again.

Feathers brushed her back. Mira started. The gulls hovered and dived, but they always pulled up before contact and she tried to ignore them. Now their cries were changing. She steadied her grip with one hand and then leaned to peer over her shoulder.

Something else was flying among the flock, something huge, and dark against the gulls' white

feathers. A beak as long as her arm caught a gull in midair, snapped down, and swallowed it whole. A tail, long and thin and tufted, swished through the air and brushed her shoulder.

Mira reached for a lower handhold and began scrambling down the cliff. The creature seemed more interested in the gulls than in her, but eventually the birds would scatter and she would be alone with it. Rock cut into her hand—in her haste she'd grabbed a sharp point. She shifted her weight to her other hand but her balance was off and a boot slipped.

Before she realized what had happened she was falling. Far below, sharp rocks lined the dark sand of a gritty beach. Forcing herself to remain calm, she aimed her legs at the cliff, and kicked. Her body ricocheted off, further from the rocks, but not far enough. She twisted, trying to land feet first, trying not to imagine the damage the rocks would cause.

Something warm and soft collided with her side, knocking her toward the cove. She had time only to twist her feet downward. Her legs hit water and she bounced back, then landed in a world of wet and cold. She thrashed until her head broke the surface and great gulps of air filled her lungs.

Slowly the shock faded. Infant waves bobbed across her back. She caught her breath and then wriggled each body part. Aches, stings, but everything worked, and her legs allowed her to stagger to her feet. She waded toward shore, then stopped.

A creature waited on the beach. Except its twitching tail it stood motionless, staring with unreadable black

eyes. For a second she thought it was a massive dog. Then she saw the ears ruffle in a breeze and realized they were feathered tufts. Fuzzy black down covered its face and tail, and the rest of it was covered in golden feathers. She took several seconds to recognize it as the creature from the sky—its wings had folded to become forelegs. The back legs looked more bird-like, but all four rested on splayed talons as long as her hand.

Mira and the creature stood unmoving, until she became aware of seawater flooding her boots. She would have to come within feet of the creature to reach the beach, but she'd seen it kill a gull with a single blow. Though its back stood above her waist, she doubted it could carry her off. She'd heard of eagles attacking their goats. The birds would dive-bomb their prey, then eat it where it fell. She shuddered and eyed its curved beak.

The seconds stretched to minutes and she shivered from the biting breeze. Still the creature had not moved. She took a deep breath, then stepped forward.

The creature did nothing. She took another step. Another. She reached the edge of the water, and when the creature still did not react, she perched on a rock and removed the unspun wool padding her boots.

Warm breath brushed her chin. She whirled and found herself eye to eye with the creature. She leapt back, but even as she slipped from the rock she recognized that it had not attacked, not done anything but draw near.

"What are you?" she breathed.

It cocked its head.

She hadn't expected a reply.

"You saved me, didn't you? You deflected my fall." The creature had no other reason to plow into her like that, but the thought was astounding. The creature would have had to understand gravity and how much force to change her path. It had to realize she'd be hurt if she fell on rocks, and it had to care. Mira had always shaken her head when her older sister Bodil assigned human traits to her favorite goats, but this strange bird-like creature was more aware than an animal had a right to be.

It chirped, a delicate sound for such a large creature. Mira tried to mimic it, whistling between her teeth. It reared back, startled, then chirped again, a higher note with a trill in it. Mira smiled. "I can't make that one."

It huffed, an odd breathy noise that reminded Mira of an impatient sigh. She turned to watch it, and the movement sent her pouch swinging behind her.

The pouch... the eggs! Mira swung it in front of her and peered inside. Two hours of work had exploded in a mass of shells, egg, and wool padding. She groaned and sat back on the rock. "I really needed those," she said. Half would have gone to the witch who had cured her brother's fever. Others would be for the elders, as she had promised Chief Sannrik. And, if she were lucky, a few would be left for her family. She grabbed a half-shell still dripping with yoke and threw it down the beach.

The creature leapt forward. Its beak closed around the egg, which vanished. Mira started. It looked like a bird—why would it eat eggs? The creature turned to nose her pouch again. Mira dumped the contents. The creature caught it before it fell, swallowing wool and all.

"I'm glad you don't eat people," she told it.

It cocked its head, regarding her with both beady black eyes.

"What are you anyway?" she asked. "It seems like I ought to call you something." She studied him a moment, then said, "Until I figure it out, I shall call you Freko."

It was a childish nickname better suited for a chubby toddler, but she'd always liked it, and the creature couldn't understand anyway. Freko chirped back, then raised a claw and tapped her knee. She twitched and it jerked back, then returned to studying her with that focused, unending gaze.

A vibrato cry made both turn. Though it reminded Mira of a small child, she knew that it came from one of the village goats. When the wind was just right, sounds carried from the grazing canyon, almost directly across the cove. Mira's oldest sister Bodil and a few other girls would be tending the goats, and being watched in their turn by guards to keep the Threat at bay. Mira felt a moment's unease as the creature studied the canyon mouth, but she forced it back. Freko hadn't hurt her—why would he attack her sister? An unknown creature, an unknown Threat—but the world could carry any number of unknowns.

Freko leapt. Wings unfurled, beating the air. Mira waited, heart in her throat, but she relaxed as the creature circled over the cliffs, away from the grazing canyon and out of sight. What would it be like to have wings, to disappear over the horizon? She stood still several minutes, watching the place where it had disappeared. Then she rinsed her pouch in the sea, took a new wad of

wool from a separate pocket of her pouch, and returned to the cliff.

Chapter 2:

When Mira returned to the village, her hands were worn raw but her pouch was full of carefully padded eggs. The new city wall had grown longer since the last time she'd left. Workers struggled with fat logs, harvested from high in the mountains. Useless, in Mira's opinion. Villagers had disappeared from outside the city, not inside, but when Chief Sannrik's son disappeared with the last search party, he'd made dozens of inconvenient rules.

A few stubs of chopped branches gave her handholds, and she scrambled upward. Hopefully whatever the adults were trying to keep out couldn't climb as well as she did. From the top, she peered out over the thatched huts. She had permission from the chief to climb the cliffs, but her father didn't know. He'd be at his shop now, but her younger sisters Erin and Ro might be watching. Assured that they were out of sight, she dropped back to earth on the other side.

Mira landed at the back of a small garden, where pungent herbs stood in neat rows. She reached for her pouch to make sure none of her eggs had broken, and then headed for the hard-packed road.

"Mind the plants now."

Mira tensed at the unexpected voice until she located its source. A woman sat in the doorway of the nearest

hut, motionless except for her hands which twirled a distaff. She was young for a witch-healer, not even a grandmother yet, but her herbs kept sickness at bay and her position demanded respect. Still, she valued eggs even more than the elders did—she wouldn't risk scaring Mira off.

"Out again?" the witch asked.

"Yes, and with permission."

"Then you've got my payment?"

Mira reached into her pouch and drew out three eggs, as many as she could fit in one hand. The witch tapped each with a long finger, then eyed Mira's pouch. "It will take twice that many to settle the debt."

Mira hesitated. The witch had cured Mira's little brother of fever and wouldn't help her family again until the debt was paid. But her family was in good health. She had uses for the remaining eggs, and once the debt was paid, she'd need to find a new excuse to gather them.

"I will bring the rest next time," Mira promised.

The witch studied her for several seconds before nodding. Mira turned toward the door, but the witch gestured her inside. "Have a cup of tea before you go running off."

You don't turn down a witch, Mira thought. Not even if you hate tea. Or ceilings. She sat cross-legged on a sheepskin as the woman bustled around the single room, gathering mugs and firewood. Herbs dangled from the rafters, giving the hut an exotic smell. Would the witch know what the creature was? Maybe, but something about their meeting made her want to keep it

to herself. Maybe it would return. And next time, she'd hold to the cliff no matter how startling it was.

"I could gather herbs for you too," Mira said.

"I don't feel like sharing."

Mira blinked. "Sharing what?"

"You think you're the only one who wants an excuse to explore, do you? Herbs grow in all kinds of interesting places. I'd get the eggs myself if I thought I could live through it."

Mira stared. No one ever understood her need to escape. She'd never thought the witch would understand. The woman had always been intimidating. Even Pappa, who attributed her magic to herbology and guesswork, treated her with respect.

A knock echoed through the room. Mira stood as the curtain that served as a door was pushed aside. "Mira, Asmund's daughter!"

Mira flinched. She knew the voice: Sannrik, chief of Mund Cove. What had she done wrong this time?

"Better not keep him waiting," the witch said.

Mira hurried into the sunlight.

Chief Sannrik was not alone. A stranger stood behind him, shorter, but powerfully built. Mesmerizing blue eyes stood out on his darkened, weathered face. Stranger, a raven perched on his shoulder, its head jerking around to study its surroundings.

"Spectrit!" she gasped.

The stranger grinned. "Vinlander."

Usually Mira felt out of place next to other villagers: she'd inherited her father's wispy brown hair and snub nose. Compared to the Spectrit, though, she and her

neighbors had much in common. His hair was pure black and his angled features clean-shaven. Strangest was his clothing, a vivid green robe of unknown shiny material, fastened with a dark sash. Mira knew little about the Spectrit except that they were a sea-faring people who lived far to the south. Some said that their witches could heal without herbs. Some said they used witchcraft to command the waves and control wild animals. Supposedly they'd visited before, but she'd never seen one.

Behind the two men, a small crowd waited. Most were villagers Mira recognized, but a few were Spectrit. They resembled the first, except that their eyes were a variety of bright colors, and their clothes were buckskin. Unlike the leader, who was barefoot, they wore leather boots.

Chief Sannrik stood ramrod straight in full warrior mode. That was dangerous—Mira never negotiated with the chief when he was in warrior mode. His walking stick could deliver a painful welt. "This is the girl," he said. "I sent her egg gathering this morning."

"I've got them," Mira said quickly, holding her pouch aloft. "I stayed on the west slopes, and I brought them immediately to the witch, just like you ordered..." She trailed off. Sannrik had stepped back, behind the Spectrit leader. She doubted the chief feared the man—distrusted, more likely—but he seemed content to let the Spectrit speak.

"We have questions for you," the stranger said, his accent husky but comprehensible. "We have come to hunt the *Ziz̄*."

"The what?" Mira asked.

The Spectrit whirled on the chief so fast that the raven on his shoulder flapped its wings to keep its balance. "You did not pass on our warning!"

Chief Sannrik said nothing, but his hand tightened on his stick. The Spectrit gave him a withering stare—impressive despite his lesser height—and returned to her. "No wonder you brave the cliffs. I heard your people disappear."

The Threat! Last week, the chief's son and ten other men had vanished. Search parties had never come back. Hunters, foragers, or anyone else who left the city risked disappearing. Could these *Zizi* be the cause?

"The *Zizi* are large, four-legged birds," the Spectrit went on. "They take people, carry them away into the high mountains where we dare not follow."

"*Zizi*," Chief Sannrik snorted. "We call them griffins."

They had to be talking about the creature she had seen on the beach, but it didn't look like a griffin. Mira's father wore a pendant below his tunic, etched with a winged lion he called a griffin. His country's crest, he had said, representing their ferocity in battle. But the six-limbed figure didn't much look like the eagle-like bird on the beach. And Freko hadn't attacked her.

"This man tells us you have lost many villagers," the Spectrit said. "We also have lost kin. For as long as my people remember, the *Zizi* live in these mountains. They steal away those who wander close. We accepted the loss as a result of straying. But since the Vinlanders have

come, the *Zizi* have gone farther, past the marshes and into our villages. We cannot allow it to continue."

"What will you do?" Mira asked.

The Spectrit nodded at his company, who held out their spears. Mira winced. She could too easily picture them cutting into the creature she had met.

"What have you seen from the cliffs?" he demanded.

Mira started. Her eyes flicked from the spears to the distant wall. "Gulls, mostly," she answered.

"Anything else? Large birds far away? Creatures you did not know? Anything strange?"

Still eying the spears, Mira shook her head.

"There!" Chief Sannrik said. "You've got no proof, no proof at all, that these things exist."

The two men stared at each other, and Mira held her breath, half-fearing, half-hoping to see them fight. Chief Sannrik's skills on the battlefield were as legendary as Spectrit powers. Then the stranger waved to his followers, and the group retreated from view.

"You were wise not to trust them," Chief Sannrik said. He studied her with eyes so intense that she didn't dare even think of the griffin. Mira knew from experience that lying to Sannrik was impossible. His daughter Alva claimed he'd been blessed at birth. Mira's Pappa said he was just unusually perceptive. "Whether superstition or lie, I do not know, but monsters do not haunt our cliffs. I suspect that the Spectrit are the ones attacking our people. Their old legends are a pathetic coverup."

Mira frowned. She glanced down the road but the Spectrit had disappeared. The foreigners had seemed more intriguing than dangerous.

"If the Threat is not discovered, we may abandon Mund Cove," Chief Sannrik went on.

She whirled back with a gasp.

"If we continue to lose people, we will have no choice. The Spectrit will win. And what would happen to your family in the Old Country?"

Mira grimaced. Pappa had left the Old Country for good reason. She doubted he'd be welcome back.

"So tell me. What did you see?" Chief Sannrik demanded.

"A bird," she said quickly. "I don't know what it was. Something big."

"Sea eagle," an elder said. "After the gulls."

"Cormorant," said another. "After the fish."

The men began arguing, and Mira let her muscles relax. They wouldn't need her anymore. She turned to go, but Chief Sannrik's large hand clamped down on her shoulder. "Eggs?" he asked.

She'd almost forgotten them in the excitement. She pulled her pouch strap from around her neck and handed it to the chief. He peered inside, then transferred most of them to the pouch at his belt. Only three remained when he handed it back. They wouldn't go far among Mira's family. She had already pictured her little sisters' excited faces when they received the eggs, but she didn't dare argue with Sannrik.

"I want to keep going out," Mira said.

Chief Sannrik returned her pouch. "Ask next time."

She winced inwardly. "I was hoping for a pass like the hunters. Like them, I provide..."

"Not even the hunters leave the cove these days. They fish from the closest shore." His expression hid pain, and Mira remembered that his heir had disappeared from the Threat.

"The cliffs aren't much further from the shore," Mira said, "but I can see a great deal from the heights. I might see what's really causing the Threat. You'd know for sure..." She faltered as every eye turned in her direction.

"The Threat has never targeted young girls," said an elder. "She might..."

"Too dangerous," Chief Sannrik snapped. "We've lost too many already." He regarded her carefully. "You've been known to leave the village without permission. We'll have to keep you busy."

"I wouldn't..."

"You wish for a pass," he said. "To gather eggs, or to leave the village?"

Hope raised its head in her chest. "I would do whatever task you required."

A faint smile twitched at his lip, almost unseen in his beard. "You are older than Alva, and she joined the herders some time ago."

No. Not that.

His youngest child Alva had, according to rumor, begged to join the herders for years before her father relented. Mira, now almost 15, could have gone years ago. She'd been interested once, until she learned that the girls spent most of the day gossiping among the canyon grass. Her sister Bodil had wiggled into social circles

despite their father's past. Mira wanted nothing to do with it.

"Go with your sister tomorrow. I'll tell the guards you may go with them."

Mira forced herself to smile. Then, when the chief looked away, she kicked a pebble. It bounced against an elder's boot, but he didn't even glance down.

Chief Sannrik turned to the other men. "I've had those Spectrit followed, but they will still be talking to villagers. We have to join them before their insane story spreads to the more gullible."

Not such an insane story, Mira thought. She'd seen the griffin. But it had saved her, not tried to carry her away. She didn't want to blame the Spectrit either. If they were the ones attacking people, why would they come into the midst of their enemy to warn them?

The men dispersed. As they left, they revealed another man, so short that the crowd had hidden him from view.

"Pappa!" Mira gasped.

His beard twitched, the only sign of a smile. His hair was golden, too dark for blond, too bright for brown. His arms were muscled and his hands calloused, but he lacked the overall stoutness of the other men. His well-combed beard hid his sharp chin.

"Not the result you wanted, was it?" he asked.

Mutely, Mira nodded. How much had he heard?

"Did you save any of those eggs for us?"

Mira pulled the last three eggs from her pouch and held them up. Her father smiled. "Let's get home then, and see how we can split them up."

She blinked. He began to walk, and she fell into step beside him. His pace was unhurried, his gaze following their path, nothing to suggest he was upset. At last she blurted out, "I was climbing the cliffs."

The corner of his beard twitched. "I assumed that's where you got the eggs."

"I had permission from the chief."

"I heard you bargaining with him. Half your catch to the elders, in exchange for going out."

Mira stared. She'd been surrounded by elders when she asked the chief, but Pappa wasn't an elder. He should have been in his shop. She caught his eyes twinkling. "I'm not in trouble?"

"You've been climbing since before you could walk. We've taught you how to fall. You've practiced on smaller mountains. If you believe you're ready for the nesting cliffs, I will trust you."

A warm glow spread through her. They passed his carpentry shop: deserted. Perhaps the people had rushed to watch the Spectrit. Did Mamma know about their warning? Bodil, who entered the canyons daily with the flocks, probably didn't.

"Do you think the Spectrit are attacking people?" she asked.

"Personally, no, but I don't believe it strong enough that I'd trust them without guards. I find it more likely there's a misunderstanding. It's nothing that a good honest conversation couldn't clear out—but those are rarer than you'd think."

"But Pappa, the Threat..."

His brow furrowed. "There is that."

"If people keep disappearing, they're going to abandon Mund Cove."

She waited for a reaction, but all he said was, "I heard them. That would be a challenge."

More than a challenge. Mamma had told her stories of the Old Country. Her older sister Bodil claimed to remember it, but Mira had been too young. Her younger siblings, Erin and Ro and Franz, knew nothing but their new home. "But where would we go?"

"I suppose there will be other settlements that need a carpenter." But she caught the hesitation in his voice. A moment later it was gone and he stopped and looked her full in the eye. "But I do not want you running around trying to find the Threat!"

She nodded quickly.

"You'll have to go with your sister tomorrow. There will be guards at the canyon mouth. Your uncle Calder will be one of them. If you find any danger, run to him immediately. Leave the animals. You understand?"

The Threat had taken dozens of men. Mira doubted the guards would be much hindrance, but she said, "Yes, Pappa."

"And stay..." Her heart sank. She tried to keep an obedient expression, but something must have leaked, for a moment later he finished, "Stay within earshot."

Did she hear right? His beard was twitching again. Surely he knew how far sound carried in the hills? He said nothing, but his eyes were twinkling. Hope flared. She'd have to help when the girls took the sheep and goats into the canyons, and again when they left. In the middle, while the other girls sat and talked, why couldn't

she climb mountains? And the Threat... she wouldn't directly disobey her father, but she might happen to glimpse something from the cliffs. Or meet her griffin again.

Chapter 3:

Mira peered out at a sea of sheep and goats, trying to force her swollen, bandaged ankle into her boot before anyone noticed. Driving the herd into the canyon that morning hadn't been as bad as she'd expected. The canyon widened into a natural pasture surrounded by high cliffs, and slipping into them had been easy: the other girls were just as uninterested in talking to Mira as she was to them. The only flaws in her plan were a crumbling rock that had given way under her foot, the gravelly ground that had caught her, and her swelling ankle.

"Oh, Mira."

Mira whirled around. Her older sister Bodil was walking straight at her. Her thick brown braid hung over one shoulder, so different from the blonds and redheads. Mira gave one more tug and her boot slipped over her ankle. A tiny squeak of pain escaped her before she could cover it.

"You're not fooling anyone. We all saw you up there. I'm just glad you came back in one piece." She didn't look glad about anything.

"You didn't need me while the herd grazed, did you?"

"Not particularly," Bodil admitted, "but you won't be any help going home if you're lame or killed. What if

you'd broken your neck? Or the Threat got you? What would Ro do if you disappeared? You're the only one who can understand her."

Mira's eleven-year-old sister Ro spoke with a stutter that took patience and a lot of guesswork to understand. Mira seemed to have a better knack at it than others. Most of the villagers avoided Ro. A few spoke about her as though she were an animal, as though not being able to speak limited what went on in her head.

"I'm not leaving Ro! I've got practice falling. I've got supplies." She patted her pouch, where she'd found the bandage she'd wrapped around her ankle.

A rustle of wings caught her attention. Mira whirled around, but the noise came from a raven which had just perched on a ledge of the cliff. Rolling her eyes at her own jumpiness, Mira turned back on her sister. "The Threat has always gone for big groups. They don't want just me. In fact, climbing alone is probably safer than staying here with all of you."

Bodil started but masked it quickly. "We have guards at the canyon mouth."

Mira couldn't even see the guards from the valley. They might stop Spectrit or raiders from the cove, but if anything attacked from the mountains, the guards would be hard pressed to arrive in time. And there were only two of them. The Threat had captured dozens at once.

The nearest goat bumped against Mira's hip, bawling. All of the goats were large and awkward, but Mira recognized this one by its woven collar. Kaz was Bodil's favorite. Her sister had even woven a long-stemmed

filaree into the collar, the tiny purple flower wilting in the afternoon warmth.

"So, you came back after all."

Mira groaned as two other girls approached. Like Bodil, they wandered among the flock to check for trouble, while the other girls formed bunches at each exit from the canyon. Tilda, a sturdy girl with blond braids past her belt, was in the lead. Her father had died in a battle against raiders, but her mother and brothers kept the family going. She was the oldest girl there, and everyone knew she considered herself in charge. "It's your first day and you can't even stay put. Are you as stupid as your mute sister? Did you not understand our instructions? Watch. The. Goats. Should I say it slower?"

Mira clenched her teeth. She'd have fought the girl if she thought she had any hope of winning. Come into the mountains, she thought. Come among the cliffs so I can climb circles around you.

"What about the Threat?" Alva, the chief's daughter, piped up. She was tall but scrawny, and the youngest by far. Childish blond bangs framed her face.

"She has a point," Bodil said quickly. "We were just discussing what could have happened to the missing people. Fallen to their deaths? Captured by raiders? Carried off by wild animals? You can't tell me you want to be one of them."

Mira shrugged.

Her sister gave her a shrewd look. "You're playing the hero, aren't you, trying to find them on your own?"

"Nah. I just like to climb."

All three girls stared at her. What was so odd about climbing? As a child, Mira had outstripped even the big boys gathering spring greens. Now she needed taller mountains.

"I want to find them," Alva said. "They might not be dead."

The girls fell silent, and Mira remembered that Alva's brother had vanished. She peered into the mountains. Maybe she should go searching for clues. The chief couldn't object if she brought his son home.

"Don't even think about it," Bodil said.

Mira started. "How would you know what I'm thinking?"

"Experience."

Tilda peered at Mira's foot. "You're going to cripple yourself someday."

"And then I'll be unwanted, and none of the boys will have me, and they'll all be interested in you. You're welcome."

Tilda sniffed. "That was already true."

Bodil raised a hand for quiet. Noise cut off. Mira could hear nothing over the goats shoving each other, but Bodil nodded and whispered, "They're up there again."

"Who's up where?" Mira asked.

"A couple village boys have been spying on us," Bodil answered, still whispering. "We've glimpsed them, but we can't tell who they are."

"I bet one's Hemming," Alva giggled. "We know he likes you."

Bodil pretended to ignore this but her cheeks reddened.

Mira studied the cliff that Tilda faced. "I bet I could climb up there without them seeing," she said. "I could tell you who it is."

"With your hurt foot?" Bodil asked.

Mira shrugged. "It's not that bad. And they won't notice that I'm gone—they sure aren't here to watch me."

As expected, Tilda and Alva sniggered. "Fine by me," Tilda said, "just get back here when you're done. We'll need you at sunset to help us herd." She gestured to the sun, a few hours from disappearing.

Mira nodded eagerly. As the three girls giggled together, she crept across the meadow to the nearest cliff. A trail slipped through a tiny ravine, invisible unless you were right beside it. The walls were steep enough that she could place one hand on each side and ease some of her weight off of her ankle, which throbbed despite her denial. Wisps of hair escaped her braid, and she had no free hand to hold them back.

The ravine walls shortened until she could peer out at the world above the canyon. Mountains stretched as far as she could see, covered in browns and greens with hints of snow over the tallest ones.

Something leapt from the rocks. Mira jumped back into the ravine. She caught herself on the narrow walls in time to slow her fall, but her good foot felt the full force of impact.

A griffin perched on the edge. Its foreclaws scraped against rock but the ravine was too narrow for it. Mira

stared, horrorstruck. This one was larger than the creature on the beach—surely too big to reach her. It began to wriggle into the ravine, claws scraping against the cliff. Its shoulders pushed through, then its wings.

Mira ran. Ignoring her ankle, she darted through the passage. Behind her the creature shrieked. Then she heard scrambling as it struggled to wriggle out of the rock.

A scream echoed up the ravine. Bodil! Bodil and the other girls were still down there, and the griffin was coming. Half-running, half-climbing, Mira couldn't move fast. Screams filled her world, begging her to help and mocking that she couldn't.

She reached the mouth of the ravine. The goats and sheep had stampeded and now bunched in one corner of the vale, packed so densely that one motion from any of them sent the rest into a swirl of movement. The griffin swooped in front of the herd, keeping them out of the way. A second one, with more red in its wings, made the same swooping motion in front of the opposite wall. The girls were trapped behind it, against the cliff. As Mira watched, Tilda darted forward. The griffin lurched at her, beak snapping, and she shrieked and returned to the others.

'They weren't killing. Not even the goats were harmed. What were the griffins waiting for? They hadn't seen her yet. The guards ought to have heard the screaming, yet they hadn't come. If Mira could slip around...

Mira edged along the cliff. Once an outcropping hid her from sight, she took off, boots thudding against the

trail. Her ankle sent sharp pain up her leg with each step, mocking her effort. At last she saw the two men leaning against the cliff, spears loose at their sides. "Help," she called. "The other girls... in trouble..."

The guards leapt to their feet. "What is it?"

They wouldn't believe the truth. She was panting too hard to explain anyway. Frantic voices rang down the canyon behind her, but they were distorted by bouncing echoes. "Hurry," she said. "Trouble."

The guards looked at each other, and then started down the canyon. Jogging, not running, and their spears were loose in their hands. Did the girls burst into screaming fits often that they moved so casually?

Mira stared after them. Should she follow? She might be in the way, yet she couldn't force herself to return to the village alone. She started after them, but slowly. The griffins hadn't been hurting anyone, not yet, but she'd seen the creature's scraping claws as it followed her into the ravine. These weren't the griffin that had helped her. And yet... did keeping silent about the small one mean that this attack was her fault?

Something slammed into her back. Her injured ankle gave way and she slid into the dirt. Mira held back a cry. She'd fallen often enough to know she wasn't badly hurt, but a great weight pressed down on her back and she couldn't get up.

The path here was dirt with tufts of yellowed grass, and a shadow fell across it: a large shape with a serpentine head and tufted ears. Mira squirmed, flailed, but could do nothing against the force above her. Any

second and the griffin would attack. She'd feel the sharp pain of beak or claws into her back...

Nothing.

It didn't hurt her.

The griffin wasn't even looking at her; its eagle head turned toward the commotion. Craning, Mira realized she could see into the canyon. One of the griffins was still swooping in front of the girls and guards, but the second flew overhead. It dove, then ricocheted upward with a spear in its claws. It snapped the shaft in hand, dropped the pieces on a high ridge, and returned to the fray. Without its guard, the goat herd had scattered throughout the valley, but griffin and human alike paid them no attention. The girls were still screaming, and though Mira could see little of them between the two griffins, she saw no injuries, smelled no blood. The griffins were not hunting, and the thought sent a new chill down her back. What else would a wild animal want?

They weren't wild.

She could think of no other explanation.

Something smooth touched Mira's neck, with the rough grain of wood but shifting like a snake. The pressure left her back. She scrambled to her feet. The griffin that had pinned her galloped into the fight. It was larger than the others, with white streaks on its golden breast-feathers. Mira lunged for the ravine, but something yanked her back. Gasping, she reached up to feel her neck. Her fingers found a hard band, cold, circular, unbroken. She pulled back, fighting mindless panic. A hard chain, vaguely wooden, attached to the circle around her neck. She followed it hand over hand

until she found the other end buried inside a boulder. The rock had been solid, invincible, with no attaching points for chains. She pulled with all her strength. It didn't budge. A fist-sized rock caught her eye. She grabbed it and hammered at the first link beside the rock. Wood should have splintered. This was undamaged.

Collars.

Several villagers owned dogs, great shaggy brutes that ran down rabbits, scared away raiders, and retrieved nets from the sea. In town they were held back with collars and chains, shaped like this but made of beaten iron. If dogs hadn't been able to pull free, Mira couldn't either. She collapsed with her back to the rock. Down the canyon, the fight was dying down. The huge white-streaked griffin dived into the crowd, a broken circlet in one back claw. A collar, ready to be used.

"Mira?"

Mira could have cried. Bodil was edging toward her along the cliff edge, opposite the griffins.

"I can't get free," Mira said, holding up the chain, hating the white-faced horror on her sister's face.

"Let me try."

"Don't bother!"

Bodil stopped half-way out of the shadow.

"Go up the ravine," Mira said, "the one I climbed up earlier. They won't see you in there. Get help once they're gone."

"But what if we evacuate the village? We'd leave you behind forever."

Mira shook her head. "I'll get free. You watch. I'll be home before tomorrow's sunrise."

Bodil's eyes were shining as she shook her head. "I'll get help," she promised. "Now that we know what the Threat is..."

A screech across the valley made both girls flinch. "Go!" Mira hissed.

Bodil nodded, and then began walking backward toward the cliff, eyes fixed on the griffins. They hadn't seen yet, but one might turn at any moment. Still Bodil moved slowly, arms at her sides, like she was moving through a restless flock and didn't want to startle them. She reached the shadow of the ravine. Only then did she glance back at her sister. Mira forced herself to smile and wave. Bodil rolled her eyes and then disappeared into the mountains.

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Mira's Griffin

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"For as long as my people remember, griffins steal away those who stray into their mountains. Since your people have come, the griffins have gone farther, into our villages. We cannot allow it to continue."

Fifteen-year-old Mira was one of the first to hear the native's warning, but she would rather climb mountains than hide in the confining village. Her gift of translating for her tongue-tied sister only ties her down. Then she discovers Freko, a young griffin who saves her from falling.

Mira believes that griffins are unaware humans are more than beasts, but tension is growing. Humans are fighting back, and fatalities on both sides seem inevitable. Mira and her griffin must find a way for the two sides to communicate before they destroy each other.