

## Mira's Griffin

While the entire village of Mund Cove hid in thatched huts, covering at some vague Threat, Mira climbed mountains. The ever-present smell of fish gave her the perfect excuse, for the elders didn't seem to mind risking a single adolescent for the chance to eat something else.

She hung from a cliff, one hand anchoring her to the rock and the other adjusting her collecting pouch. Salty spray collected on her arms and face. She chose her next target, a mound of grass and twigs engulfing the rock shelf that held it. Then she scrambled upward. Fingers found each tiny crack in the cliff surface. The toe of her boot kicked through pockets of moss to the hard rock beneath. She hoisted herself level to the nest and then paused to catch her breath. The cries behind her sharpened, and for only a second she wondered which screaming voice owned these eggs.

"Sorry," she told the cloud of wings at her back, "but you would not like to be cooped up in the village either." The village meant judging silence as other girls pretended not to understand her accent, smoky indoor rooms filled with voices, demands for her labor. On the cliffs, she had only herself, the strength in her own arms and the call of every horizon to climb on.

The cliffs lined the world except for a narrow passage that framed the open sea. A boat bobbed in the gap. She studied it a moment but the waves would take hours to pull it into the harbor, and the elders would know if the missing villagers had gone by sea. Her fingers stretched into the nest. They closed around a warm, smooth surface and she slipped the egg into her pouch. As long as Mira harvested enough nests, three families would spend an evening without cooking even a single fish, and the elders would send her out again. Some would go to the elders. Some to the village healer to pay for the curing of her tiny brother's fever. The rest of the eggs would go to her family, mixed with milk from her oldest sister's goats and herbs that her middle sisters had dried last summer.

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. Fading. 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 their white feathers. A beak as long as her arm caught a gull in midair. 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 her, but eventually the gulls 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 had realized what happened she was falling. Far below, sharp rocks lined the dark sand of a gritty beach. She twisted, aimed her legs at the cliff, and kicked. Her body ricocheted off, further from the cliff but still falling toward the rocks.

A force collided with her side, knocking her toward the beach. She had time only to twist her feet downward. Her legs hit water hard as concrete and she bounced back, then landed in a world of spray and cold.

Slowly the shock faded. She was lying in the shallows, with infant waves bobbing 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, but stopped.

A creature waited on the beach. Besides its twitching tail it stood motionless, staring with unreadable black eyes. For a second she thought it was a large dog. Then she saw the ears ruffle in a breeze and realized they were feathered tufts. Feathers covered every inch of it, long ones folded against its side to fuzzy down on the face and tail. All four legs rested on splayed talons.

For nearly a minute they stood unmoving, until Mira became aware of cold seawater flooding into her boots. She stepped forward. The creature did nothing. Another step. Another. She reached the edge of the waves, and when the creature still did not react she sat 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. "What are you?" she asked.

It cocked its head. She hadn't really expected a reply.

Though its back came up past her waist, she doubted it could carry even a goat. Eagles didn't carry off large prey. Just kill and eat it where it fell. Mira shuddered and eyed its curved beak, still inches from her face. She'd seen it snatch a gull out of the sky when she was harvesting its eggs...

The eggs! Mira swung her pouch in front of her and peered inside. The shells were broken, coating their wool padding in a sticky mess. She groaned. The creature peered down, and on impulse she threw the slimy, dripping contents. It grabbed them in midair and swallowed, wool and all.

"You'll eat gulls and eggs," she said. "You don't fear me. But you're not eating me either... what do you want?"

It chirped back, then raised a claw and hesitantly poked her knee. She twitched and it jerked back, still studying with that focused, unending gaze. The claw, she noticed, was attached to the wing joint, which had folded down to allow it to walk. She peered up the cliff, then back at the creature.

"You saved me, didn't you? When I fell. You deflected me from the rocks."

The creature's head suddenly whipped toward the cove. Mira whirled around. The boat she had seen earlier had shot into the quiet waters of the harbor. By the time she had turned back, the creature had launched. Wings strained, beating the air. It circled once and disappeared over the top of the cliffs. For several minutes Mira stood still, watching. What would it be like to have wings, to disappear over the horizon? Then she took a deep breath, rinsed her pouch in the sea, and returned to the cliff.

Five nests later, a distant beat reminded her of the approaching boat. The small size and lack of sail meant it hadn't come across the ocean, but it didn't look like any of the local boats. The craft was made of a single hollowed log. Its six oarsmen sat crammed against each other, almost leaning on each other's chests as they strained in rhythm. She watched a few minutes, until it aimed toward the village just visible against the opposite beach. Then, cradling her pouch now that the padding was gone, she started down the cliff.