

Chapter Four

The Blacksmith

Wylinth looked down at the village below. It's streets were quiet in the predawn light, and she could just make out the figures of men and women as they began to walk out of their homes, heading off to do their daily chores. She remembered the village name—or thought she did—and was hoping that she was correct.

In the year leading up to her wedding day, her father had had her study maps of the land with every village and town they knew of so if something were to go wrong with the wedding, they could claim whatever land they needed to before Lord Trellin could. *Well, at least one thing is going my way*, she thought.

She frowned, hoping that the name of the village was Tamville, but it could have been the village Tuam just as easily. Both villages lay on the side of the Gungees river, and both had their livelihoods set in the water. Tam was further into her kingdom and Tuam lay just on the border. *Not that it matters*, she thought dryly. *Garm's staff points here, and that's where we are going to go.*

She wasn't sure how she felt about him. Other than the bit of information he had shared with her when they first met she didn't know anything else about him. She had been appalled at telling him so much of what had happened to her, but it had felt so good to confide in another person that it all just came spilling out. She cast a sideways glance at Garm and saw him looking sternly over the landscape still covered in shadows. He stood tall in his simple leather clothes, and fur coat. His beard was as regal as any kings as it stretched down to the top of his chest. If it hadn't been for his dragon, Muldrix, she would have thought he was from one of those tales she had been read to as a child, about a prince going among his people in disguise.

Muldrix was a point that concerned her. As a child, she had always been told to fear and respect the creatures. Or in short, to keep her distance from them. *And now I'm travelling with one!* She rolled her eyes at the ironic situation she was in. She had never thought in her entire life that she would end up being with a dragon. *Especially now that there are so few.*

"You sure this is the Village Tam?" Garm asked. Raising his staff, its light began to glow from its tip as he pointed towards the town.

"Yes," she said with a nod. "But even if I'm wrong we need to be careful. Lord Trellin would have started working on claiming my kingdom by now, and I don't know if the smaller villages would be his first targets."

Garm grunted and then slowly started to walk down the hill towards the village. Wylinth had to nearly run to catch up and even then she was taking two steps for every one of his.

"You're sure Muldrix will wait for us?" she checked, worried about what a dragon sighting would do to their visit in the village.

"He told me he would stay in the forest, and I believe him," Garm said, his tone suggesting she drop the topic.

Rather than irritate him more, she held her peace. She instead kept her eyes on the lookout for anything unusual apart from themselves. Thoughts about Lord Trellin sending his troops into her kingdom made her cautious of every person she saw.

"If you don't stop glaring at everyone we'll be in trouble before we can find out why the staff led us here," Garm whispered. "There's no reason to bring suspicions on us so long as we act normal."

Wylinth turned her glare at Garm. “How can you be so calm? Any one of them could be working for Lord Trellin.”

“Or none of them are. Don’t ever doubt a person’s goodness just because you don’t know them.”

“That doesn’t mean you keep your guard down,” she countered.

“Never said I did.” He gave her a wink and kept walking.

Rather than keep glaring at everyone, Wylinth cast her eyes to the road before them as she thought about what Garm had said.

How can you keep your guard up without being suspicious of everyone? Ever since her caravan was ambushed she wasn’t sure she could trust anyone again. She had avoided every home and hunter she had seen from a distance in fear that they would turn her over to Lord Trellin or just outrightly kill her. Every shadow made her jump, and her scalp would tingle every once in a while as if someone was watching her. It had been a miracle she had found and befriended Garm and Muldrix and she wondered if she could ever trust anyone else.

“Hey,” Garm said softly as he touched her shoulder, making her jump. “Relax, we’re here.”

Wylinth saw Garm’s staff was out in front of him, glowing faintly as he pointed it slightly to a house on their left. She frowned as she took it in. The home wasn’t very large, big enough for at least one person to live there, and over the doorway was a sign with a rough drawing of a hammer.

“A blacksmith?” she said, lifting an eyebrow in derision. “And what exactly would we be looking for in there?”

Garm shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly as he stepped forward. “Who knows, but why don’t we find out shall we?”

Stomping her feet in frustration, she followed behind. “You know, usually the person who is of a higher rank should take the lead.”

“Is that how they do it?” he asked, knocking on the blacksmith’s front door. “Well, when we meet someone in high standing you be sure to point them out for me will ya?”

Wylinth ground her teeth together and was about to scold him when the staff’s dim light went out and the door opened.

She was so surprised she had to bite her tongue to keep from making any noise. The man who opened the door happened to be a head shorter than she was, and his hair was in a tangled mess about his squinting face as he took the two of them in. Wylinth’s cheeks flushed with embarrassment when she saw he had nothing on but a long shirt. Blessedly it covered his nether regions enough for her not to know if he wore anything else or not.

Licking and smacking his lips he said, “What do you mean by waking me up this early? Man’s got to have enough sleep if you expect me to make anything decent for you.”

“I was wondering if we might have a word?” Garm said, taking the lead. *Again.*

“Can’t it wait till morning?” the blacksmith asked with a yawn.

“I’d rather it not,” Garm said, glancing around. “It’s a matter of great import.”

“So you say. How do I know you aren’t some mountain-men come for my scales?”

“What if I was to offer you scales instead?” Garm asked. He pulled out a small bag of scales that clinked together as he tossed it to the blacksmith.

The blacksmith caught the bag with a sneer on his face. “Do you really expect to buy my time with a few brown sca—” but his words stuck in his throat when he opened the bag. The blacksmith took on a paranoid look as he glanced around and leaning in he lowered his voice. “You ain’t on the run for murder are you?”

“Not one bit,” Garm said calmly. “However, I have more where that came from if you’re interested?”

The blacksmith looked down at the bag and then glanced around to make sure one final time that no one else in the village was watching them. “Quick, get inside. But I swear if you pull any funny business on me, I’ll take care of you both myself.”

Pulling open the door wide enough, the blacksmith let them in, with Wylinth going in first and Garm following close behind. Once they were all inside the blacksmith shut and locked the door. Holding up a finger to his lips he led the way to a back room where a forge sat cold. Wylinth took it all in as fast as she could with all the tools and instruments hanging on the walls. It was a little chilly and dark, but once the smith had the coals lit the place instantly became brighter and warmer.

“Thank you,” she said, rubbing her chilled arms.

“My pleasure,” the smith said. “Now, what do you mean by coming at the crack of dawn and waking me? And before you answer, just know that I am happy to make or build anything you may need so long as it won’t take part in any shady business you’ve got going on.”

“It’s nothing so dark as that, good sir,” Wylinth said. They had decided just before reaching the town that if the staff took them to a person they would share just enough information to find out why they were there. “You see we need someone we can trust.”

“Again, I won’t do nothing dirty,” the smith said his face growing worried. “If you need a weapon I’ll make you one, just as long as you swear it will be for protection only.”

Wylinth frowned. *Why is he going on about what kind of business we will be dealing with?* “It’s nothing like that. You see I—”

“She is Lady Wylinth,” Garm cut in.

Wylinth gave him the dirtiest look she could. This was the last bit of information she had been hoping to withhold for as long as possible. But the smith busted out laughing. He laughed and slapped his bare thigh as if he had heard some world class joke.

“Ah, you must be pulling my chains. *The Lady Wylinth*, indeed,” the smith chortled once he regained his breath. “You must be mountain-men if you haven’t heard the news.”

“What news?” Wylinth asked, her chest tightening with worry.

The smith’s smile faded as he looked from her to Garm. “You really don’t know, do ya? It has been declared a week ago that the royal family had been attacked on the road by bandits. They said that everyone had been killed, Olodrix’s light guide them, but General Mortiz has asked for people to be on the lookout for any who may have been involved with the raid.”

General Mortiz is still searching for answers, Wylinth thought as a new hope buoyed her. *Perhaps we were to hear this news so that I can find a way to get a message out to him?* Her mind started racing at how she might go about sending a message to the general.

The smith, however, squinted his eyes at them suspiciously while taking in their appearance once more. “Why would he call you the Princess? You don’t exactly fit the part. Although...” He moved closer to her, and she resisted the urge to back away, instead holding her

ground. “Although your clothes would be more convincing if they were clean and less tattered, and you do carry yourself as if you should be royalty.”

The smith put a hand to his chin, rubbing it as he eyed them both curiously. “If you are Lady Wylinth, then what service could I provide for you that you couldn’t get yourself?”

“As you have heard, I was attacked, and my family is gone. I was left out alone in the woods to die and have nothing to prove who I am other than my word. As far as what you can provide? I could use a change of clothes, the name of this village, and any news you have about the capitol Marbrenth, or on Lord Trellin of Trollox.”

The smith continued to rub his chin. Stepping forward he held out his hand to her. “Well, if that is all that you may require of me, Blacksmith Hariter, at your service my Lady. I just want it clear now that I am still not sure on your story, but something in my bones says your two are alright. Foster! Get your backside down here and give me a hand with some customers.”

“If I may,” Garm said, reaching out a hand to stop the smith from moving away. “If you have a weapon that I may purchase from you I would appreciate it. With so many things out in the wild it would be good to have more than just a hunting knife.”

“Of course, of course. I just need to get dressed and then I’d be happy to oblige,” Hariter said, glancing down at his bare legs.

The door Hariter had brought them through opened, and a boy who looked to be about twelve walked in. Gratefully he was dressed more than Hariter was, and his curly black hair hung about his pale face. “What can I do for you Master Hariter?”

“I need you to help this good Lady find some clothes out in the village while I help—” Hariter cut himself off as he turned to Garm. “What did you say your name was?”

“I didn’t, but you may call me Garm.”

“Right, I’ll be helping Garm find a suitable weapon from our collection. The sun is still coming up so be mindful of everyone as they’re waking up for the day.”

“Yes, Master Hariter,” the boy said. “If you give me a minute my lady, I will go get dressed and we can be on our way.”

“Yes, of course.” She watched him turn and walk back out the door, thinking it was peculiar since his dark curly hair did not match at all with Hariter’s reddish brown.

“He isn’t your son then?” Garm asked, shocking Wylinth with how forward he was, even if she was thinking the same thing.

“Nah,” Hariter said with the shake of his head. “Found the poor boy near six years ago. He washed up on the riverbank he did, all soaked and chilled to the bone. When I fed him it was like he had never eaten before. There’s been a few months I almost thought he’d eat me out of house and home.”

Wylinth gave an obligatory smile as Hariter laughed at his own joke. “If you’ll excuse me a moment, I better get dressed myself if I am to assist you both properly.”

Wylinth waited until the smith had walked away before rounding on Garm and hissing, “Why did you tell him who I was? Any chance at all I had of keeping my survival a secret is now gone.”

Garm lifted a confused eyebrow. “I thought you wanted people to know that the heir to Marbrenth is still alive and well?”

“I do, but I wanted it to be when I was sure of what was happening in my kingdom.” She folded her arms as she started pacing. “What if Trellin has already claimed the capitol? What if

he has already claimed this village? Everything—everyone—needs to be suspect, and I can't go showing off who I am at every stop along the way."

Garm folded his arms too thoughtfully as he began to stroke his beard. "You're really upset by this, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am," she said, turning to look at him.

She inspected him intently, wondering what new thoughts he was thinking behind those bright eyes of his. The last few days had not been easy together and she wondered if he resented her more than she already thought he did. By Olodrix's light, she wasn't sure if she was more annoyed with herself than with him at this point if she was being honest with herself.

Garm opened his mouth to say something, but Hariter returned wearing pants and a leather vest over his white shirt. "Sorry to keep you waiting. Foster will be along in a minute to help you out, Lady Wylinth."

"Thank you," she said, turning away from Garm. "While we wait would you mind showing us your weapons?"

"Why not. I do have quite a bit of a selection if I do say so myself," Hariter said as he hooked his thumbs into the front of his vest, puffing out his chest proudly.

There was a knock on the door that was so loud and sudden that it made Wylinth jump.

Hariter frowned as he looked back to the front door as he mumbled, "This is strange. Two sets of visitors in one morning? It's practically unheard of."

She knew his comment wasn't meant to worry her, but she had become weary of anything that was out of the ordinary. In the corner of her eye she saw Garm look around for the nearest thing that could be a weapon and begin sliding towards it, his grip tightening on his staff.

“Foster!” Hariter called. “Get the door boy.”

“Yes sir.”

Wylinth held her breath as she heard Foster’s footsteps along the floorboards to the front door. The loud knocking was heard again, and even Hariter was intent on listening to the conversation.

Wylinth could hear the creak of the door as Foster answered with his greetings to whoever stood just beyond it.

“Has a woman entered your home at all this morning, son?” A man asked after Foster had opened the door.

Wylinth strained her ears trying to see if she knew who the speaker was and praying that Foster would lie.

There was a pause that made her heart skip a beat in fear that she couldn’t hear what was being said, but soon Foster was speaking again. “No sir, I haven’t. It’s been a quiet morning until you came knocking.”

“And who was that we heard calling before?”

“That would be my master, Hariter, the blacksmith.”

“And why didn’t he answer the door?”

“Because he is busy at his forge, getting it warmed up for the start of the day,” Foster said without skipping a beat.

“That’s my boy,” Hariter whispered. He smiled confidently to Wylinth, and she tried to return the smile, but knew that it probably came out as more of a grimace.

The silence dragged on for a minute before Foster finally asked, “Is there something we can help you with?”

It was silent a moment longer before the man replied, “If a woman comes to your door at all that’s from out of town, you can find us at the inn here.”

“And who should I call for if I need find you?”

“If you have to ask, tell the innkeeper that you’re looking for the soldiers of Emperor Trellin.”

“Of course, sir,” Foster said, and Wylinth could hear him shutting the door as her heart sank.

“Emperor Trellin, eh?” Hariter grumbled, as Foster came in. “I guess that answers your question on finding out more news on Lord Trellin. How many were at the door?”

“Three, sir.”

“He must be in for a power grab,” said Garm with a thoughtful look to Wylinth. “The only reason to change his title would be to make it harder for anyone to dispute his claim on these lands.”

Wylinth looked desperately at Hariter and Foster. “Thank you for not saying anything about my presence here. If you could please help us... if those men find me... I don’t think they will appreciate that I’m still alive.”

“I think I’m beginning to understand, my Lady,” Hariter said, this time bowing his head slightly. “Granted this doesn’t prove your story completely, but I find it hard for someone to make up an encounter like that. You best stay in here, both of you, until we can get you out unnoticed by anyone.”

“Thank you,” she said with a breath of relief.

“Now you must understand, this limits us on some of your requests,” Hariter said.

“Neither Foster nor I can go out requesting for woman’s cloths as there isn’t a woman living in this home.”

“I understand,” she said, a bitter taste in her mouth. “I suppose what I am wearing will have to suffice.”

“Blacksmith,” Garm said with a weary glance at Wylinth. “Perhaps instead of woman’s clothes you might have something, or could buy new men’s clothes for the Lady? I know it may not be preferable but having a good travelling attire will be better for us in the end than nothing at all.”

She frowned at his suggestion, but Hariter rubbed at the space between his sideburns where his chin was bald. “I believe I can accomplish that. It is well known that I often burn my shirts and pants. Having Foster, or myself, go out for new clothes won’t be strange for anyone that knows us.”

“But even if I’m dressed in men’s clothes,” Wylinth said, looking at them both, “how are we going to get out of the city without being noticed? We came here in the early part of the day when the sun hadn’t risen yet. I doubt we’ll have that luxury again unless we were to stay overnight.”

“I understand my Lady,” Hariter said, his face saddening a little. “I know that this is no proper inn, or a place to host guests such as yourself. But I am not sure it would be wise to leave until tomorrow as you said. You have paid me a great deal of scales, and it would honor me to have you stay the nig—”

Suddenly Garm's staff began to glow at the top. It did this for a few seconds before fading away and leaving the room feeling a little darker than before.

"What, may I ask, is that?" Hariter asked, his voice a little shaky.

"That would be our next task," Garm said softly. He watched the staff for a second before holding it out. In a slow arch he spun around the room, making sure the tip of the staff was pointing out as he went. Eventually the light began to glow, but it was pointing Northwest.

"That's the way we have to go to get back to Muldrix," Wylinth said to Garm as he shifted the staff, making the light go out.

"I know." He scowled so deep it reminded her of father. "At the moment I'm more concerned if we get noticed by those guards. It would be hard to conceal that we're not from here if we had a beacon pointing that fact out."

Something shifted in the room so Wylinth glanced at the noise, only to find that Hariter was mumbling something under his breath over and over as he looked around for something. "Is everything alright, Hariter?"

"Hyrare...Hyra—what? Oh, yes, yes. I'm fine," he replied, waving a hand in her direction as he kept looking about. "Garm could you make that staff glow again?"

Wylinth and Garm looked at each other, and he shrugged. He positioned the staff, and immediately, it began to glow once more, its light reflected off of the tools and instruments hanging on the walls.

"Thank you," Hariter said. He stared at the light for a few seconds more before he returned to his search around the room, grabbing a few scrolls that were lying about and placing

them into a leather bag. “I have been waiting for this my entire life! I thought for sure that Hyrare was gone for good. It needs studying, it needs knowledge to help grow.”

“I’m sorry,” Wylinth said, her eyes shifting between Foster and Hariter, “But what exactly are you talking about?”

“No time to explain. No time,” Hariter said. He held out a hand to hold off their questions as he turned to Foster. “Boy, grab my savings and go buy men’s clothes for Lady Wylinth. I’ll pack your things and buy the food.”

“Are you coming with us?” Garm asked.

“Yes, I believe I am,” Hariter said, and there was a mad gleam in his eye that unsettled Wylinth. “There are things happening in the world, and I think there is more I can do to help you.”

Suddenly an idea flooded into her mind, and Wylinth knew that this must have been why the staff lead them here. Not to buy clothes, food, or information, but to have this blacksmith join them.

Garm stepped forward and said, “I don’t think—”

“Garm,” Wylinth said, cutting him off. “He is the one the staff was pointing to. He has to come with us.”

Garm looked at her critically and at the staff. “I don’t know. There’s already three of us, I don’t think adding two more will be a good idea.”

“But why else would the staff have brought us here?”

“Because he is a good person who would help us.”

“He is that, but I believe it’s because he is meant to come with us,” she said with as much conviction she could muster.

Garm became thoughtful over her words, and she desperately tried to think of anything to add that would persuade him.

“Well whether you want me or not, I still need to get you out of town,” Hariter broke in, dropping a pack by the door. “If there were three at our door, I can only imagine there are more all over town. If you leave with me, those in town will be less likely to question you two than if you go out alone.”

“What would our story be then?” Garm asked, still visibly upset at the idea of the blacksmith joining them. “We don’t look exactly like we’re related.”

“We can say that Master and I are going to help with a broken wagon wheel,” Foster said. “We’ve done it before and no one in town would think it odd.”

“Good boy, Foster,” Hariter said, giving him a wide grin. “He’s right of course. It’d be the best cover we could use to get you out.”

Wylinth gave Garm a triumphant smile.

Garm seemed at a loss before finally throwing a hand in the air in defeat. “Fine, you win. But before you come blacksmith, there are a few things you will need to swear to.”

Twigs and leaves crunched underneath my feet as I paced back and forth between the trees. *Where were they?* I wondered, looking over at the town still laying in the shadow of night. It hadn’t been very long since Wylinth and Garm had left, but I still felt nervous with them gone. Something about that day made my scales itch, as if something was about to happen.

Before they had left Garm had made me promise not to come for them. I decided that if I saw them in danger, then I'd go after them anyway. Once they were gone, I flew up and found a good stand of trees that would hide me while I waited. Upon landing I was instantly pleased with my choice. From my new vantage I could easily keep an eye on the village and the road until Garm and Wylinth came back. Settling down, I gazed off into the distance and I could see the sun beginning to rise. I snorted out a plume of smoke. *They better hurry, or I'm going in there after them.*

The sound of stomping feet and metal clanking startled me, and I hunkered down low in the bushes, waiting to see who, or what, was making that noise. Blessedly, my scales were still green and worked well to hide me among the new foliage of the season as I watched in the shadows.

A group of about a hundred soldiers marched along the road to the village, their armor shining in the early morning light. I remained quiet the whole time they passed by, but once they were gone, I let loose a growl. *This is not good, if those men are after Wylinth then they are both going to be in trouble.* I wanted to bolt through the woods to make sure they were okay, but I held myself back, worried about breaking my promise to Garm.

Just stay put, you don't know if they're in danger yet. Just stay where you are and wait.

But I couldn't resist. After the soldiers had moved out of sight, I slowly allowed myself to get closer and closer. Racing between clusters of trees, and keeping to the shrinking shadows, I eventually came within throwing distance of the village and had a good view of things. Satisfied I had gone far enough, I made myself comfortable, hoping that Garm would make it out alright before he would need me.

But it was annoying to wait.

My tail twitched back and forth, and I was constantly shuffling my wings, trying to placate my uneasiness and anxiety over waiting. Eventually I started to claw the dirt beneath me as my impatience grew. Unable to stop, I continued to twitch and fidget as I strained my ears for any signs or sounds that they would need me.

The minutes trickled by, and the sun continued to climb. I became more and more annoyed as I scooted further back into the trees, trying to stay in the shade and out of sight. Unfortunately, the signs of my being there were not so easily erased. The ground was marked with my handiwork, and tree branches lay scattered about from my wings and tail. As the villagers began to get up for the day in earnest, I was made painfully aware that my perfect hiding place was no longer perfect.

With the sun shining brighter I wasn't able to hide in the shadows well, and my scales began to reflect the sunlight into those dark corners I had hoped would hide me. I tried to back further in but found that I wasn't surrounded by as many trees as I had thought. I was trapped. And my only way of escaping unnoticed was gone.

"Stupid, Muldrix," I grumbled under my breath. "Why do you always get yourself into these things."

I waited for someone to notice me, but no one ever did. They were too preoccupied with their own lives to look just past the town and into the trees to see me. Deciding to make the best of my situation, I ducked into the bushes around me as I peered through the bushes to see if I could spot Garm and thought about how I could let him know I was there without getting us all into trouble. Some of the soldiers I had seen from that morning were stationed by the roadway entrance, and I wondered if that was going to be a problem.

“Excuse me, but where do you think you are going?” one of the soldiers asked a villager who had just walked up to them.

“It will be,” I growled, rolling my eyes.

“This man and woman are in need fixing their wagon down the road,” the villager replied, and my spirit flew at the sight of Garm and Wylinth waiting to pass. “I am accompanying them to help get it straightened out.”

“We didn’t pass any broken wagons,” the soldier replied.

“That’s because their wagon isn’t on the road,” the villager said. “That’s why I have to go and fix it, so they can get on the road.”

Sensing trouble, I tensed my muscles, ready to spring at a moment’s notice.

A soft hand began to gently rub my belly.

I froze, slowly turning my head until I see who it was that was touching me.

A child, about half the size of Garm, was gently petting my scales as she smiled. “You’re a pretty dragon.”

Unable to think, I nodded my head in reply.

“I like your green scales,” she said, putting both of her hands on my side now. “Can I ride you?”

My mouth hanged open, still too shocked to speak. The child, however, must have thought my silence was permission since she quickly climbed onto my back. It was an unusual sensation, having a human climb onto my back. I didn’t know what to do, except stare in disbelief at the

fearlessness this little girl had towards me. She sat between my wing joints, holding her hands out to the sides and giggling with unrestrained joy.

Clearing my throat I asked, “What are you doing?”

“Playing,” she said, giving me a smile.

“Yes, but why on me?”

“Because it’s fun.”

All I could do was stare at her in surprise. What else could I do? If I scared her away then that would draw the attention of the guards and then I’d be—

An idea sprang to life, and I seized hold of it.

“Hold on tight little one,” I said. Standing up on my legs the girl held on to a neck spike, laughing as I raised her into the air. Stepping forward, and into the sunlight, I paraded onto the road. I did everything I could to flaunt myself to the guards from stomping my feet to lightly flapping my wings.

“Yay!” the little girl cried. “Let’s fly.”

Not really wanting to endanger the human I jumped just a little off the ground and glided safely onto the road.

I had the soldiers attention now as two out of the four came chasing me.

“Should I breathe some fire too?” I asked the girl.

“Yes, please!”

Taking a deep breath, I blasted a small stream of fire at the ground before the soldiers. They danced away to avoid getting burned while calling out to the other two guards still by Garm called out for assistance. Catching Garm's eye I motioned for them to run with my head, hoping he would understand my message.

Making sure the girl was secure, I ran back towards the trees.

"The ride's over little one," I said, coming to a stop. Reaching back I gently pushed her off with my snout and she grabbed hold of the horn on my nose. Slowly I lowered her down until her feet were touching the ground. Sure she was safe, I pulled away and dashed off until I was in a space wide enough to take flight, the soldiers tailing right behind me. I made sure that all the soldiers could see me, and I even did a few passes in and over the town to make sure I got all of their attention.

Anything to keep them away from Garm and the others.

But after the fourth pass, they started shooting arrows at me and I decided it was time to go. Flying higher, I went off to find Garm and Wylinth again. I flew in a random direction until I was sure I was out of sight from the soldiers, and then headed back to the road where Garm had left me. I stayed close to the trees, hoping that they would cover my presence as I looked for my human.

"There they are," I muttered, spotting them on the road. I flapped my wings to slow my descent as I carefully landed beside them.

"Everyone alright?" I asked.

"That was brilliant, Muldrix," Wylinth said, rushing over and giving me a big hug. "You helped us escape."

I was opening my mouth to say thank you, when I saw Garm's stern face.

"I thought I told you to stay put," Garm said, his voice cold. "And what were you doing with a little girl on your back?"

"Not my fault," I answered. "First the soldiers came. I followed to make sure nothing bad would happen. Then while hiding, the little girl climbed on top of me when I was watching you." Sheepishly, I hung my head, ashamed that a little girl had snuck up on me and that I had disobeyed Garm. "I'm sorry. I won't break promise again."

"I better hope that's the case, Muldrix. I'm very disappointed in you." Garm looked grim for a few more minutes, building an awkward silence among the group before his face broke into a smile. "I still can't believe you let that little girl ride you."

Giving him a toothy smile, I leaned my head forward and he scratched just right where I like it.

"You made sure she was returned safely?" Garm asked.

I nodded, enjoying his attention too much to use words.

"I thought it was adorable," Wylinth added, coming over and scratching me in the same spot.

I was in paradise. My eyes rolled with pleasure as my lower half sagged to the ground.

They all laughed, but I didn't care. Since I had grown to be bigger than Garm it was harder for him to scratch behind my jaw on both sides, so to be getting such affection from the two of them felt more than deserved. I did notice that Wylinth was wearing new clothes, which helped improve her smell if not her looks. Then again, I thought all humans looked weird now that I had a chance to see more of them.

“Muldrix, I’d like to introduce you to Hariter, the blacksmith, and his apprentice, Foster,” said Garm, pointing to the boy and man. “They’ll be travelling with us for a time.”

The older human looked about the same age as Garm, but instead of a beard it was shaved at the chin and the hair on his head was shorter. The younger one was had shorter hair too, except he had no beard, and he was skinner. Rather than fear at my presence I could feel a sense of eagerness and excitement from both him and the man. They both smelled alright, so I bowed to them in welcome. “Hello, Hariter and Foster.”

The little boy gave me a weak wave, and the man’s face was brimming with joy. “Well, well, this is something,” the blacksmith said. “We will have much to talk about in the coming days. May I suggest we continue walking to avoid any further entanglement with Emperor Trellin’s soldiers?”

Together we all agreed and proceeded to walk down the trail, following the light from Garm’s staff as it pointed the way to our next destination.