

drakeling

by kinsey keys

SERAPH WAS TOO HOT TO HANDLE. Earline held him anyhow.

When he was small enough to fit under one arm, he sneezed against her chest and burned straight through her mother's ceremonial cassock *and* the new shirt beneath it. She had exactly three shirts her mother hadn't worn first.

After that, she had two.

Raph felt terrible about it, or hungry. It's difficult to tell the difference with Seraph. Both feelings made him act chewy.

At seventeen winters, Earline's magicka had awoken quick as a snap, just like the books had promised it would. She'd been terrified of its coming all the same. Knowing when a thing oughta happen proved very little help once it did.

The tenderhearted old mage teaching Earline how to control her magicka kept injured animals in low stone buildings behind his house. Most would return to the wild once bone, blood, or temper allowed it.

He'd brought the safer ones into the yard for her, to see if she might have an affinity for creatures. There was a small fox with pale ears, two large hounds, and a desert cat that stared at Earline as though she'd interrupted something more important.

Seraph remained in the infirmary. He wasn't meant for these parts.

A patrol had found him near the southern edge of the Great Waste, half buried in black sand and trying to bite anything that came close enough to help. One wing had been crushed against his body. Three ribs were broken. The nearby lair was cold and empty; his mother had long since departed.

That was all anyone could tell. The old mage would nurse him healthy, and once Seraph could survive on his lonesome, he'd be released where he could seek out his own kind.

Earline had felt him through the wall. Not words, exactly. Heat, at first, followed by something like irritation. Or was it hunger?

The image of the young man changing his bandages came into her head, except the man was mostly represented by a worn left boot Seraph desperately wanted to chew.

Earline laughed.

Something struck the infirmary door. The old mage stopped speaking and turned toward the noise. Another blow shook dust from the lintel. The cat's hair stood on end; at the third crash, both hounds began to howl.

"What was that?" she asked.

"Nothing meant for you."

That seemed unreasonably personal. She sensed Seraph's agreement. The metal cuff newly fastened around Earline's wrist grew warm.

Across the yard, the door gave way.

Seraph stormed through it badly. One wing was partially bound against his side, his hind legs hadn't yet agreed upon a direction, and linen unspooled behind him. He looked less like a charging firedrake than a small bandit fleeing the scene with half the infirmary attached.

He reached Earline, bit the hem of her robes, and climbed her. The old mage put his hands on his hips.

"Well, I'll be."

Earline caught the firedrake beneath his uninjured wing before he could fall. His scales were soft along the spine and hot against her palms. The band at her wrist burned hotter. Seraph shook off the last loose strip of linen, then finally went still.

With her next breath, Earline felt another living creature somewhere behind her thoughts: dull pain, suspicion, hunger, and the absolute conviction that the old mage's left boot deserved death.

The right one appeared to have done nothing wrong.

Just then, the man from the infirmary came around the corner, gathering the discarded linen as he went. His left boot was smoking. A hole revealed toes that had barely escaped a roasting.

"Mind your feet," he told the mage with a huff.

That's when Seraph sneezed.

By the time the flames went out, Earline had quite the blister, a firedrake beneath her arm, and a reopened wing bleeding on her borrowed cassock. The old mage had to cut a piece from the hem before Seraph would let it go.

"Would it be sacrilege to make a dress of what's left?" she asked him.

Seraph slept with that bit of scrap in his mouth for months.

* * *

ELEVEN YEARS LATER, Seraph is only slightly larger than a horse.

Only is a dangerous word to apply to anything with talons, wings, and a casual relationship with structural damage, but it's the word the healers use. A firedrake his age should tower over Earline's ramshackle house.

Seraph can fold himself through the kitchen doors if someone opens both of them wide and removes the table first. He's long enough to sleep along the back wall with his tail curled around the corner, but not long enough to encircle the house as he clearly believes he does.

For years, everyone blamed the old injury. Earline never argued. His size kept him close: beneath her windows, with his head in the kitchen, following her into town on days when the roads were clear and the neighbors had secured their poultry.

It also meant he'd never been released. At first, they were waiting for his wing to strengthen. Then for his ribs to settle. Then for the exponential growth everyone promised would come.

Eventually, *waiting* became *living*.

Seraph sleeps against the house more often now. When he breathes deeply, the shutters rattle. Or they used to. He hasn't rattled them in weeks.

Earline stands beside his head with one hand pressed beneath his jaw. She pulls it away and puts it back, testing a second place nearer his throat.

He's still cool. That's not right. *How many hours in the sun—*

One copper eye opens. *Don't.*

His thought is more a shove than a word.

"I didn't say anything."

Annoyance moves through the bond. His eye closes.

“You’re supposed to be hot. That’s more or less your entire contribution to the household.”

A thin thread of smoke slips from one nostril. Earline takes this as contempt, which is encouraging. Contempt has energy.

She sits against the side of his face. His scales should warm her through her skirts; instead they’re barely warmer than the stones beneath her. The metal at her wrist is cold too.

The band has been warm for eleven years. Not noticeably. Not unless she paid attention, and she rarely did. A person doesn’t spend every hour noticing the continued presence of her own hand. She notices when it goes numb.

“I’ve work to do,” Earline announces. The thoughts always swirling just behind her own register this as a fact, but Seraph’s body remains statue-still.

Eventually, Earline gets up and goes inside.

A silver clasp waits in the little vise on her workbench. Someone has bent its tongue instead of replacing the pin, and now the whole thing must be coaxed apart without snapping.

That’s how these jobs arrive: a small repair made larger by the efforts of someone who oughta left it well enough alone.

Before she picks up the file, Earline looks back through the window. Raph is still right where she left him. She sighs.

Usually, she enjoys discovering just how wrong they got it. There’s satisfaction in fitting a thing properly when the person who made it couldn’t be bothered. This morning, though, the fine file keeps slipping past the edge she wants. She lowers her wrist to the bench and steadies it with her other hand.

One pass. Then another.

The tongue catches. She works it loose, tries again, and lifts her head when the shutters rattle.

Only the wind.

She carefully wraps the clasp in its cloth before she can spoil it and goes to fetch the healer.

* * *

THE HEALER CAN FIND NO NEW INJURY.

Earline makes her examine his wing again. Seraph submits with his head turned toward the kitchen, where there is nothing he wants to eat. She's already tried everything there twice.

"His organs are sound," the healer says. "His blood is clean. There's no infection anywhere."

"He hasn't eaten properly in six days, and all he does now is sleep."

"I can see that."

"He can't flame either."

The healer's hand stops beneath the old scar. She looks at Seraph, then at the narrow ring of metal fitted around the base of his left horn.

The healer turns to Earline. "And you?"

"I've never been able to flame."

The healer holds out her hand. After a moment, Earline gives her the one without the cuff. The woman presses a thumb into Earline's palm.

With her free hand, the healer draws a sharp-smelling sprig of green from the small drawstring pouch hanging at her neck. She lays it across Earline's palm and closes her fingers around it.

"And what am I doing, exactly?" Earline asks.

"Just hold it."

Flora magicka moves differently from metal. Softer. Earline's magicka feels like something clicking into place, metal recognizing metal, one body discovering another. The healer's works beneath Earline's skin with the slow insistence of roots through dirt.

The woman opens her eyes. "How long have you been sleeping badly?"

"I sleep."

"How long?"

Earline looks past her. Seraph has settled in the strip of sunlight beneath the window. Most afternoons, he would've worked himself into the shade by now. He must still be cold.

"I don't know," Earline admits, finally.

“How often are you eating?”

“Daily.”

The healer’s face changes.

“Most days.”

It changes again.

“I asked you to look after the firedrake, not me.”

“I’m looking at the both of you.”

Earline retrieves her hand. The sprig has left a damp crescent in her palm; she returns it to the healer, who promptly pops it into her mouth. After a moment she grimaces and asks, “When was the last time you shared his shape?”

Earline rubs the mark away with her thumb.

Taking Seraph’s shape is only one part of the bond. They don’t *have* to do it. Still, there was a time when she would touch the band, feel his agreement, and the world would turn briefly impossible. Her bones stretched. Heat poured through her. For a little while, the ground became very far away.

The first time she flew as Seraph, she vomited when she changed back. He showed her the memory for three months.

“A while.” Earline hasn’t worn his shape in nearly a year. “But I’m tired,” she shrugs. “Isn’t everybody?”

The healer looks toward her workbench, where the clasp lies wrapped beside a cold cup, then back at Earline. She doesn’t argue.

Instead, she names an old woman who lives near the Forest of Alcaemiel. “She has more experience with...*odd* bonds. More than I do, at least.”

“And if she can’t work out what’s wrong either?”

“I haven’t found what’s wrong *yet*. That isn’t the same.”

Earline would prefer an answer she could dislike more usefully.

* * *

THE NEXT MORNING, she takes Seraph to see this old woman.

Takes is generous. Seraph walks and Earline walks beside him, stopping whenever he does, studying the road with an interest it’s done very little to deserve. Earline’s heart starts to thud unevenly.

By midday, he's breathing hard. When she tries moving ahead to fake-inspect a loose stone, his nose presses between her shoulders and keeps her still until he's ready to go on.

Seraph knows she's pretending. That's the trouble with sharing a mind. There are very few dignified ways to lie.

The old woman's house has been swallowed by trees. Earline lacks the energy to be properly surprised when she realizes: this old woman isn't another healer at all. She's a hedge witch.

Charms of all shapes and sizes hang from the branches, hundreds of them turning in the wind. Earline catches sight of a loop rubbed almost through by the charm beneath it and has to stop herself reaching up to fix it.

Seraph dislikes the place immediately. So does Earline.

The old woman walks around him once, then again. He follows her with one half-lidded eye. She's not afraid of him, which earns her something, though he has yet to decide what.

She stops beside his shoulder and lays a gentle hand against his scales. His tail shifts slightly. "Don't burn me now," she says.

No promises.

Earline snorts.

The woman looks over. "He's funny?"

"He likes to think so."

The old woman holds out her other hand. Earline puts her wrist into it before she thinks to hesitate. It's the one with the cuff. Metal uppermost.

She'd made the healer wait, and she actually *knew* her. Since when did a random hedge witch get the easier welcome?

Well, it's too late to turn back now. Earline braces for the slight pressure she felt with the healer's magicka.

Seraph jerks first. Earline nearly falls a blink later.

The bond opens wider than she's ever felt it. She sees through Seraph's eyes: her bedroom window, her bed beyond it, her own body unmoving under the blankets. Beneath the image is Seraph's need for her to move. *Anything.* Turn over. Lift her head.

Then: Earline staring at a wall. Earline standing at the cliff behind the house, not close enough to fall. Close enough to think about it, though.

Earline tears her wrist free. The memories fall away, leaving the old woman's hand empty between them.

Seraph remembers. *Of course*, he bloody remembers.

The old woman doesn't reach for her. "There's more."

"I've seen enough," Earline pants.

"Stay with what *he's* feeling this time."

Earline looks at Seraph, at the scar beneath his wing. He's watching her, both eyes open now, waiting for whatever she'll do next. Earline has to *make* herself put her wrist back into the woman's hand.

Again, her bedroom window.

But this time she feels the ache in his body as he waits beneath it. Her own unhappiness reaches her through him, familiar and strange at once. Whenever Earline remains still for too long, his attention sharpens.

Something leaves him then: heat with intention inside it, passing through their shared metal to gather beneath her ribs.

The ache remains in him. Seraph gives anyway.

Earline can feel his bones groan with the effort of his giving. The old injury in his wing burns. Along the seams of his body, where growth should be happening, nothing moves.

Other memories press beneath these.

Winter. Through the window, he watches her stop work to breathe on her fingers. A little warmth passes between them. Her hand returns to a broken clasp on a dainty necklace.

It was a smaller gift then. She can feel the difference now: those little pulses of warmth, and the weary, sustained giving of these last months. His attention returning to her whenever she falls quiet. The effort beginning again.

There are years of it.

Earline pulls her hand free. Seraph shifts his weight and the effort pains them both. "He's been hurting himself," she realizes.

"Yes."

“Make him stop,” Earline whispers.

The old woman looks between them, lingering on Seraph. “He’s trying to help. He thinks you’re the injured one.”

“He was already small. He was already hurt,” Earline mutters. She touches the old scar. Seraph’s skin moves beneath her fingers, but he doesn’t pull away. “Why didn’t the healers know what he was doing all this time?”
Why didn’t I?

“Almost no one shares a mind with a firedrake.”

“That isn’t an answer.”

“It is the only one I have.”

Earline keeps her hand against his scar. She’s spent months watching him for signs of getting worse. All the while, he’s been watching her.

She hadn’t known what he was doing. She keeps coming back to that, pressing at it as though it might ease something. She *hadn’t known*.

But when she’d asked the healers to make him well, what had she pictured? Seraph eating again. Seraph rattling the shutters. His head through the kitchen doors while she worked.

Earline looks down at her hand against his scar. In every version, he still fits beneath her window.

Seraph lowers his head until she can reach up and touch his face. “I don’t want to die,” she tells him fiercely. “I *don’t*, Raph. I’m only sad sometimes.”

His head moves out of reach. The bond tightens until it hurts.

The old woman opens her empty hand wider. “I believe you.”

Earline has nothing prepared for that.

* * *

FOR TWELVE DAYS, Earline becomes extremely good at living.

She wakes early. She eats breakfast. She takes commissions and walks into town instead of postponing it until the house runs out of food. She washes her hair *before* it becomes a project. She even answers her mother’s letter.

At the workbench, she replaces the clasp’s bent pin and files the edge that’s been catching. When she draws a scrap of cloth through it, no thread

pulls loose. She opens and closes it twice more, pleased despite herself, then puts it with the finished work.

Seraph improves.

His scales warm. He eats. On the seventh day he flames at a bird and misses by a distance he refuses to discuss. Earline laughs so hard she has to sit down. He shoves his nose into her chest and nearly knocks her backward.

The band around her wrist burns warm. She holds it between her fingers long after the heat has settled.

There. She knew it. She only needed a reason.

If she can't live for herself, she can live for Seraph. She goes inside to start supper before she can find anything wrong with the idea.

On the thirteenth morning, she wakes and can't move.

Nothing's happened. No death, no letter, no disaster. Sunlight enters through the window exactly where it always does. Dust turns inside it. Someone drives a cart down the road, and Seraph sleeps outside.

The world has the nerve to be ordinary.

Get up, Earline. Her mutinous legs won't even twitch. *Get up, dammit.* Still, Earline lies there. Motionless.

Seraph stirs outside. The metal at her wrist warms.

"No." She sits up too quickly and has to grip the edge of the mattress until the room settles. "No, Raph. We are *not* doing this."

Earline dresses. Eats bread. Throws half of it up and rinses her mouth out twice. She walks into town and back, then clears her workbench.

A woman with a broken charm comes to the door; she's already had it mended once and is eager to explain just how poorly. Earline turns it beneath the light. The little loop has split beside the old repair. Someone has squeezed it closed without joining the break.

She can fix that.

For three hours she works while the woman talks. The woman keeps leaning across the bench to point at the break, and each time Earline waits until the dangling sleeve has cleared her tools.

She finishes the loop, checks that its rough edge will not catch the chain, and charges the price she named at the beginning. By the time the woman leaves, her shoulders ache from holding them still.

Outside, Seraph is lying in the yard. His fire has gone again.

“No.”

He opens his eyes.

“I did everything right.” She kneels beside his head. “I ate. I worked. I went outside. I talked to people.”

The thought through the bond is weak: *Know*.

“I really tried, Raph.”

Seraph’s eye opens wider. *Know*.

She puts both hands over her face. *It’s all my fault*. “I’m sorry.”

It takes him almost a minute to get his head into her lap. Earline shifts to help him, gathering her skirt away from his teeth. He settles with a long breath and she waits for the next one.

His thoughts come slowly now, more difficult to separate. Her body. Warmth. The wish to keep her where he can feel her. To heal her. *Stay*.

“I’m here.”

A glimmer of heat gathers in her cuff anyway. His scales cool under her hand. “Stop it.”

Seraph presses closer. Through the bond comes the ice beneath her ribs; what fear or sadness feels like from his side. His attention fixes there. She tries to draw it back to his wing, his breathing, the scales cooling under her hand.

He noses beneath her arm. Earline steadies her breathing and loosens her hands against him. Perhaps if she can sit still for a moment, give him less to worry about—

Now his attention catches on her effort. She feels him waiting for her next breath, listening to it as carefully as she’s been listening to his.

Another little burst of warmth gathers at her wrist. She can feel how much of his energy it takes.

“Raph, please.”

Stay.

“Oh, you stupid bastard.”

She presses her face against the cooling scales above his eye. Seraph just keeps trying to warm her.

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THE HEDGE WITCH SAYS THE BOND CAN BE BROKEN.

Earline already knows that. *In theory*. Death breaks it. Some injuries do. Very occasionally, two living partners separate, though nobody has ever told her much about those kind. She wishes now she'd asked what became of them afterward. Whether they could ever bear to see each other again.

"He has to agree," the old woman adds.

Seraph refuses before Earline can even turn toward him. His fury and fear strike together: the cliff behind the house, her body cooling beneath the blankets, her head under the bathwater. His nose against her shoulder, again and again and again.

"No, just listen—"

Seraph shows her the cliff edge once more.

Earline puts her hand against his nose. She can feel the slow passage of his breath against her wrist. "Seraph."

Stay.

His body warm against the house. Snow hissing to water beneath him. Earline breathing in the dark and his attention lifting toward it, waiting for the next breath before he lets himself rest.

He tries to warm her again. The band stutters with his dying heat; his scales cool beneath her palm.

Earline has been trying so hard to keep this part from him. Protecting him from her fear. Now, she stops. She lets him feel the cold under her hand, the long drag between his breaths, the absolute terror that comes whenever his chest takes too long to rise.

His attention follows hers to his chest. He waits with her for it to rise, and this time she lets him feel what happens to her while they wait.

The small recoil passes through them both. Earline almost draws back at his pain, but she keeps her hand beneath his jaw. "Can't you see, Raph?"

Stay, he repeats stubbornly, ignoring her question entirely.

She presses her forehead against his. “You don’t have to keep me warm.”

The bond tightens. For a moment, she’s seventeen again, holding a creature too hot for bare hands. Then, a flash of sky, the pull of a wing, and they’re flying as one for the very first time.

There’s Seraph chasing birds through a field, and her own delighted laughter coming back to her through him. Snow is melting around his body while she sleeps against him. At her father’s funeral, her face is buried against his neck because she doesn’t want anyone else to hear.

Seraph asleep outside her house. Seraph flaming at passing birds. Her sleeve burning. His nose beside her bed. Waiting.

She hadn’t known how much waiting there was.

Seraph tries once more to give her heat. Earline keeps her hand beneath his jaw. She has no promise to offer that will make the cliff disappear from his memory. Her forehead rests against his face; she stays, remaining there while his heat slowly ebbs.

At long last, the metal around her wrist burns.

Only the once. A hard, brutal, *Yes*.

* * *

EARLINE EXPECTS THE BREAKING TO HURT IN HER CHEST. Instead, she loses her balance while standing still.

For eleven years, another living thing has existed somewhere behind her thoughts. She reaches for him as the old woman works, and the reaching goes on after there’s nothing left to find.

Seraph stands six feet away. She can see him, but she can’t feel him. Not anymore. Suddenly, Earline feels lightheaded.

His head jerks toward her. For a moment, he stands with one forefoot lifted, watching her as though she’s moved somewhere he cannot follow.

The old woman removes the band from Earline’s wrist, then the ring from his horn. The skin beneath Earline’s is pale. She rubs it with her thumb until the woman puts the metal into her hand.

Seraph takes one step toward her and stops.

Earline closes the distance. When he lowers his head, she touches him, waiting despite herself for the pressure behind her thoughts.

Warm scales. His breath against her sleeve. No thoughts moving behind her own. She's alone. Softly, Earline begins to cry.

Seraph waits through it, then sneezes smoke into her hair.

"Asshole."

His mouth opens. It's not quite a grin. Firedrakes can't smile, but Seraph has never respected this.

Earline keeps her hand on him, until the old woman brings him something to eat.

* * *

SERAPH REMAINS WITH THE HEDGE WITCH WHILE HE RECOVERS. Earline goes home.

She nearly turns back before she reaches the road. There are practical reasons for staying, several of them excellent, and she works through each one while walking in the wrong direction to do anything about it.

When she visits a week later, new scales are coming through around his shoulders. He scratches against a tree and leaves a long pale wound in the bark. His food has become expensive. The old woman shows Earline what he's eaten that morning and asks whether he intends to leave anything alive in the forest.

Seraph noses Earline's pockets while she looks over the tally. On the way out he follows her to the gate, then braces his head against it when the old woman tries to close it.

Earline has to go back and touch his nose before he'll move. She sits with him until he sleeps. His warmth comes through her clothes, and by the time she leaves her legs are stiff from the stone.

On the second visit, there's barely room for him in the courtyard. His jaw has lengthened. His chest is deeper, and when he opens his wings Earline ducks before remembering how far above her they are.

He still wants her beside him. She stays for the afternoon, trying to find the old proportions in his altered face. Every so often her hand moves toward the place where his jaw used to be.

This time, he watches her leave. At the road she turns back, but he's already lowered himself into the sun.

The old woman takes him south when his wing is strong enough. Her letter reaches Earline afterward. They made it to the volcanic country around Arientil. He ate well. The first attempt at flight in his new body was ugly; the second carried him over the Spine.

Earline reads the part about the first attempt twice. She can almost picture it. She would've felt his indignation before she finished laughing.

She puts the letter beside her mother's.

For the first few weeks, she wakes reaching for him. Sometimes she fastens the metal around her wrist. It remains cool against her skin, unless she uses it to channel her magicka. Then she starts to feel something again. Not quite warmth, but something more akin to a tingle.

Some mornings are easier. Some aren't. Dishes stay in the basin too long; letters wait unanswered. There are days when she stands at the bottom of the stairs and decides whatever she needs upstairs can remain there until death takes them both.

When she worries about Seraph, she unfolds the old woman's letter. Nothing in it has changed since the last time she looked. She reads it anyway.

* * *

SERAPH RETURNS THE FOLLOWING SUMMER, on a day when Earline has done very little with the morning.

There's work on the bench. She's uncovered it, moved it into better light, and gone to put the kettle on. The water cooled while she stood at the window. She's considering whether to light the stove again when the shutters rattle.

Then the cups in the cupboard. Then the glass in the windows.

A shadow crosses the house and keeps crossing.

Earline reaches the yard as something vast settles into the field beyond the road. For one moment she doesn't recognize him.

Seraph stands higher than the roof. His scales have deepened to copper along his throat and blackened at the tips of his wings. Smoke curls from his nostrils. One foreleg is thicker than Earline's body.

Another firedrake lands behind him. She's larger through the chest, with red scales running like banked coals beneath the black. She watches Earline with one bright, unpleasantly intelligent eye.

Earline dislikes her immediately. Recognizing the unfairness of this does very little to help.

She breathes out his name, hardly more than a whisper: "Seraph."

His head lifts.

Nothing happens inside Earline. She knew it wouldn't, but her hand has already closed around her bare wrist.

He crosses the field. The ground moves beneath each step. When he stops in front of her, she has to tip her head back to see his face.

For eleven years, introductions were unnecessary. "Hi."

Seraph lowers his head. She holds out her hand, uncertain how far to reach, and he brings his nose the rest of the way.

He sniffs her fingers. Then her coat.

"Don't."

He bites the sleeve.

"Seraph."

He pulls.

"That's expensive!"

He pulls harder and Earline starts laughing. She catches the cloth above his teeth before he can drag her off balance.

When he releases her, there's a hole in it.

"You remember."

Seraph snorts. A small burst of flame catches the edge of her cuff and she slaps it out.

"Fucking hell, *of course* you do."

The other firedrake makes a low sound. Earline looks at her.

“Don’t encourage him.”

Seraph lowers his nose toward Earline’s left boot. She puts that foot behind the other one. These are her only pair; she can’t afford a hole. He follows it, nudging her ankle with a care that makes her throat hurt.

“You’re far too old for this.”

He turns broadside and lowers himself until his shoulder touches the ground. Earline stares.

Seraph waits.

Once, she wore his body and knew the pull of his wings as if the muscles were hers. She knew every tilt before it happened. Now his shoulder rises in front of her with each breath, and she cannot tell what he’ll do when she touches it.

“You can’t possibly think this is a good idea.”

He opens one eye.

Earline lays her palm against his neck. The warmth is steady and bearable. She lets her hand rest there, then finds the old scar beneath his wing. Bracing a foot against his folded foreleg, she reaches for the ridge above his shoulder. Seraph holds still while she finds her balance. It takes longer than either of them expected, judging by the smoke he blows into the grass.

At last she settles between the ridges of his shoulders. Below her, his mate gathers herself and launches.

Seraph follows.

There’s no warning inside Earline’s mind. His body drops beneath her, then thrusts upward so hard her teeth meet. She grabs the ridge in front of her and swears into the wind.

The ground falls away. His next wingbeat lifts her from her seat; she drops back against him, grips with her knees, and feels the strain pass through the muscles beneath her.

She begins to find the movement. A lift, a settling, the wind striking her face as his wings rise again. Her fingers hurt. She loosens one hand just enough to shift it, then holds on.

The house becomes small beneath them. The road becomes a thread. Beyond the trees, the Spine cuts across the southern horizon, and farther still a smear of smoke marks Arienthil.

His mate banks. Seraph follows, and Earline feels the turn in his shoulder a moment before she begins to slide. She leans with him. His wing fills her sight, copper along its folded edge, and then the horizon levels.

Her breath comes out in a laugh she can barely hear.

Seraph climbs again. This time she moves with him.

They fly until the light begins to leave the sky. When he returns her to the field, Earline climbs down badly and lands on both knees. She stays there for a moment, laughing and trying to get enough breath to swear at him properly.

He lowers his nose to her chest. Earline puts her arms around as much of him as she can reach.

His breathing is deep and unhurried. The warmth beneath her hands doesn't falter.

Then his mate calls from above. Seraph turns toward the sound, and Earline keeps one hand against him until she can't reach any farther. Her fingers curl against her palm. She takes a step back to give him room.

He launches. She watches them disappear south together.

Inside, the house is cool. Earline passes the workbench and picks up the kettle. There's enough water left in it. She puts it on the stove and reaches for a match. The first one snaps. The second goes out.

"Of course."

The third catches. She holds it beneath the kindling until the wood begins to smoke. One thin edge turns orange, then another.

Earline sits on the floor to watch. Her knees are pleasantly sore. When she opens her hands, the ridges of Seraph's back are still pressed into her palms.

For a moment she lets herself remember the turn, the wind catching her breath, the lift of his shoulder beneath her.

One corner of her mouth twitches. Earline holds her hands a little nearer the stove. The fire keeps burning.