

An Extract From:

Lord of the Changing Winds
Book One of the Griffin Mage Trilogy

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From Chapter One

The griffins came to Feierabiand with the early summer warmth, riding the wind out of the heights down to the tender green pastures of the foothills. The wind they brought with them was a hard, hot wind, with nothing of the gentle Feierabiand summer about it. It tasted of red dust and hot brass.

Kes, gathering herbs in the high pastures above the village of Minas Ford, saw them come: great bronze wings shining in the sun, tawny pelts like molten gold, sunlight striking harshly off beaks and talons. One was a hard shining white, one red as the coals at the heart of a fire. The griffins rode their wind like soaring eagles, wings outstretched and still. The sky took on a fierce metallic tone as they passed. They turned around the shoulder of the mountain and disappeared, one and then another and another, until they had all passed out of sight. Behind them, the sky softened slowly to its accustomed gentle blue.

Kes stood in hills above the high pastures, barefoot, her hair tangled, her hands full of fresh-picked angelica, and watched until the last of the griffins slid out of view. They were the most beautiful creatures she had ever seen. She almost followed them, running around the curve of the mountain's shoulder, leaving her angelica and elecampane and goldenseal to wilt in the sun; she even took a step after them before she thought better of the idea. But Tesme hated it when Kes did not come home by dusk; she hated it worse when her sister did not come home before dawn. So Kes hesitated one moment and then another, knowing that if she followed the griffins she would forget time and her sister's expectations. There would be noise and fuss, and then it would be days before Tesme once again gave reluctant leave for Kes to go up into the hills. So she stayed where she was on the mountainside, only shading her eyes with her hand as she tried to follow the griffins with her eyes and imagination around the curve of the mountain.

Griffins, she thought. *Griffins* ... She walked slowly down from the hills, crossed the stream to the highest of the pastures, and went on downhill, her eyes filled with blazing wings and sunlight. She climbed stone walls without really noticing them, one after another: high pasture to hill pasture, hill pasture down to the midlands pasture. And then the low pasture, nearest the barns and the house: the fence here was rail instead of stone. This meant Kes had no convenient flat-topped wall on which to put her basket while climbing over. She balanced it awkwardly against her hip and clambered over the fence with one hand.

Her sister, Tesme, spotted Kes as she walked past the nearest barn and hurried to meet her. The griffins, it was plain, had not come down so far as the house; Tesme's eyes held nothing of fire and splendor. They were filled instead with thoughts of heavy mares and staggering foals. And with worry. Kes saw that. It pulled her back toward the ordinary concerns of home and horse breeding.

"Kes!" said her sister. "Where have you been?" She glanced at the basket of herbs and went on quickly, "At least, I see where you've been, all right, fine, did you happen to get milk thistle while you were in the hills?"

Kes, blinking away images of shining wings, shook her head and made a questioning gesture toward the foaling stable.

"It's River," Tesme said tensely. "I think she's going to have a difficult time. I should never have bred her to that Delta stud. He was too big for her, I knew he was, but oh, I want this foal!"

Kes nodded, taking a step toward the house.

"I got your things out for you - they're in the barn - along with your shoes," Tesme added, her gaze dropping to Kes's bare feet. But her tone was more worried than tart, the foaling mare distracting her from her sister's lack of civilized manners. "You just want your ordinary kit, don't you? Don't worry about those herbs - somebody can take them to the house for you." Tesme took Kes by the shoulder and hurried her toward the barn.

In the foaling barn, Kes absently handed her basket to one of the boys and waved him off toward the house. Tesme hovered anxiously. Kes saw that she could not tell Tesme about the griffins; not now. She tried to make herself focus on the mare. Indeed, once she saw her, it became less of an effort to forget sunlit magnificence and concentrate instead on normal life. River, a stocky bay mare with bulging sides, was clearly uncomfortable. And certainly very large. She looked to have doubled her width since Kes had last looked at her, and that had only been a handful of days ago.

"Do you think she could be carrying twins?" Tesme asked apprehensively. She was actually wringing her hands.

"From the look of her, she could be carrying triplets," Meris commented, swinging through the wide barn doors. "I've been waiting for her to explode for the past month, and now look at her. Kes, glad to see you. Tesme, just how big was that stud?"

"Huge," Tesme said unhappily. "But I wanted size. River's not that small. I thought it would be a safe cross."

Kes shrugged. Usually crossing horses of different sizes worked all right, but sometimes it didn't. No one knew why. She looked at her kit, then back at the mare. "Mugwort," she suggested. "Partridge berry."

"Good idea," said Meris. "Partridge berry to calm her down and help her labor at the beginning - mugwort later, I suppose, in case we need to help the strength of her contractions. I have water boiling. Want me to make the decoctions?"

Kes nodded.

Meris was a quick-moving little sparrow of a woman, plain and sensible and good-humored, equally at home with a foaling mare or a birthing woman. Kes was far more comfortable with her than with most other people; Meris never tried to draw Kes out or make her talk; when Kes did talk, Meris never seemed surprised at what she said. Meris was willing, as so few people seemed to be, to simply let a person or an animal be what it was. No wonder Tesme had sent for Meris. Even if River had no difficulty

with her foal, just having Meris around would calm everyone's nerves. That would be good. Kes gave the older woman the packets of herbs and slipped into the stall to touch River's neck. The mare bent her neck around and snuffled down Kes's shirt. She was sweating, pawing at the stall floor nervously. Kes patted her again.

"What do you think?" Tesme asked, seeming almost as distressed as the mare. "Is she going to be all right, do you think?"

Kes shrugged. "Jos?" If they had to pull this foal, she wanted someone with the muscle to do it. Jos had been a drifter. Tesme had hired him for the season six years past, and he had just never seemed inclined to drift away again. He was very strong. And the horses liked him. Kes liked him too. He didn't talk at you all the time, or expect you to talk back.

"I'll get him," Tesme agreed, and hurried out. Kes frowned at the mare, patting her in absent reassurance. River twitched her ears back and walked in a circle, dropping her head and shifting her weight. She was thinking of lying down but was too uncomfortable to do so; Tesme, with her affinity for horses, could have made the mare lie down. Kes neither held an affinity for any animal nor possessed any other special gift - if one did not count an unusual desire to abandon shoes and sister and walk up alone into the quiet of the hills. She did not usually envy Tesme her gift, but she would have liked to be able to make River lie down. She could only coax the mare down with a touch and a murmur.

Fortunately, that was enough. Kes stepped hastily out of the way when the mare folded up her legs and collapsed awkwardly onto the straw.

"How is she?" Tesme wanted to know, finally returning with Jos. Kes gave her sister a shrug and Jos a nod. He nodded back wordlessly and came to lean on the stall gate next to her.

Foals came fast, usually. There was normally no fuss about them. If there was trouble, it was likely to be serious trouble. But it would not help, in either case, to flutter around like so many broken-winged birds and disturb the mare further. Kes watched River, timing the contractions that rippled down the mare's sides, and thought there was not yet any need to do anything but wait.

Waiting, Kes found her mind drifting toward a hard pale sky, toward the memory of harsh light striking off fierce curved beaks and golden feathers. Tesme did not notice her bemusement. But Jos said, "Kes?"

Kes blinked at him, startled. The cool dimness of the foaling barn seemed strange to her, as though the fierce sun the griffins had brought with them had somehow become more real to her than the gentle summer of Minas Ford.

"Are you well?" Jos was frowning at her, curious. Even concerned. Did she seem so distracted? Kes nodded to him and made a dismissive "it's nothing" kind of gesture. He did not seem fully convinced.

Then Tesme called Kes's name sharply, and, pulling her attention back to the mare, Kes went back to lay a hand on River's flank and judge how she was progressing.

The foal was very big. But Kes found that, after all, once the birth began, there was not much trouble about the foaling. It had its front feet in the birth canal and its nose positioned properly forward. She nodded reassuringly at her sister and at Jos.

Tesme gave back a little relieved nod of her own, but it was Jos who was the happiest. The last time a foaling had gone badly, the foal had been turned the wrong way round, both front legs hung up on the mare's pelvis. Jos had not been able to push the foal back in enough to straighten the legs; he had had to break them to get the foal out. It had been born dead, which was as well. That had been a grim job that none of them had any desire to repeat, and the memory of it was probably what had wound Tesme up in nervous worry.

This time, Kes waited until the mare was well into labor. Then she simply tied a cord around each of the foal's front hooves, and while Tesme stood at the mare's head and soothed her, she and Jos added a smooth pull to the mare's next contraction. The foal slid right out, wet and dark with birthing liquids.

"A filly!" said Meris, bending to check.

"Wonderful," Tesme said fervently. "Wonderful. Good girl, River!"

The mare tipped her ears forward at Tesme, heaved herself to her feet, turned around in the straw, and nosed the baby, which thrashed itself to its feet and tottered. Jos steadied it when it would have fallen. It was sucking strongly only minutes later.

After that, it was only natural to go to the village inn to celebrate. Tesme changed into a clean skirt and braided her hair and gave Kes a string of polished wooden beads to braid into hers. Tesme was happy. She had her foal from the Delta stud - a filly - and all was right with the world. Jos stayed at the farm, keeping an eye on the baby foal; he rarely went to the village during the day, though he visited the inn nearly every evening to listen to the news that travelers brought and to have a mug of ale and a game of pian stones with the other men.

Kes was not so happy. She would as soon have stayed at the farm with Jos and had bread and cheese quietly. But Tesme would have been unhappy if she had refused to go. She was never happy when Kes seemed too solitary. She said Kes was more like a silent, wild creature of the hills than a girl, and when she said such things, she worried. Sometimes she worried for days, and that was hard on them both. So Kes made no objection to the beads or the shoes or the visit to the inn.

They walked. The road was dry and firm at the verge, and Tesme - oddly, for a woman who raised horses - liked to walk. Kes put one properly shod foot in front of another and thought about griffins. Bronze feathers caught by the sun, tawny flanks like gold. Beaks that gleamed like metal. Her steps slowed.

"Come on," Tesme said, and impatiently, "There's nothing to be afraid of, Kes!"

Kes blinked, recalled back to the ordinary road and the empty sky. She didn't say that she was not afraid, exactly. It had been a long time since she'd tried to explain to Tesme her feelings about people, about crowds, about the hard press of their expectations. From the time she had been little, everyone else had seemed to see the world from a different slant than Kes. To understand, without even trying, unspoken codes and rules that only baffled her. Talking to people, trying to shape herself into what they expected, was not exactly frightening. But it was exhausting and confusing and, in a way, the confusion itself was frightening. But Tesme did not seem able to understand any of this. Kes had long since given up trying to explain herself to her sister.

Nor did Kes mention griffins. There seemed no place for them in Tesme's eyes. Kes tried to forget the vision of heat and beauty, to see only the ordinary countryside that surrounded them. To please her sister, she walked a little faster.

But Tesme, who had been walking quickly and impatiently with her hands shoved into the pockets of her skirt, slowed in her turn. She said, "Kes - "

Kes looked at her inquiringly. The light of the sun slid across Tesme's face, revealing the small lines that had come into her face and set themselves permanently between her eyes and at the corners of her generous mouth. Her wheaten hair, braided with a strand of polished wooden beads and tucked up in a coil, held the first strands of gray.

She looked, Kes thought, startled, like the few faint memories she had of their mother. Left at nineteen to hold their father's farm and raise her much younger sister, married twice and twice quickly widowed, Tesme had never yet showed much sign of care or worry or even the passage of time. But she showed it now. Kes looked down again, ashamed to have worried her.

"Are you all right?" Tesme asked gently. She usually seemed a little distracted when she spoke to her sister, when she spoke to anyone; she was always thinking about a dozen different things - mostly practical things, things having to do with raising horses and running the farm.

But Kes thought she was paying attention now. That was uncomfortable: Kes preferred to slip gently around the edges of everyone else's awareness - even Tesme's. Close attention made her feel exposed. Worse than exposed: at risk. As though she stood in the shadows at the edge of brilliant, dangerous light, light that would burn her to ash if it fell on her. Kes always found it difficult to speak; she never knew what anyone expected her to say. But when pinned by the glare of close attention, the uncertainty she felt was much worse. She managed, in a voice that even to her own ears sounded faltering and unpersuasive. "I - I'm all right. I'm fine."

"You seem preoccupied, somehow."

Since Tesme frequently noted aloud that her sister seemed preoccupied, even when she was paying quite close attention, Kes did not know how to answer this.

"There's something ... *Is there something wrong?*"

Kes could find no words to describe the magnificence of bronze wings in the sun. She would have tried, for Tesme. But the mere thought of trying to explain the griffins, the hard heat they had brought with them, the strange look of the sky when they crossed it in their brilliant flight ... She shook her head, mute.

Tesme frowned at her. "No one has been, well, bothering you, have they?"

For a long moment, Kes didn't understand what her sister meant. Then, taken aback, she blushed fiercely and shook her head again.

Tesme had come to a full halt. She reached out as though to touch Kes on the arm, but then her hand fell. "Some of the boys can be, well, boys. And you're so quiet. Sometimes that can encourage them. And besides the boys ..." She hesitated. Then she said, "I like Jos, and he's a wonderful help around the farm, but Kes, if he bothers you, you surely know I'll send him away immediately."

Kes said, startled, "Jos?"

"I know you wouldn't encourage him, Kes, but lately I've thought sometimes that he might be, well, watching you."

"Jos doesn't bother me," Kes said, and was startled by the vehemence of her tone. She moderated it. "I like Jos. He wouldn't ... he isn't ... and he's too old, anyway!"

"Oh, well, Kes! He's not that old, and he's not blind, and you're growing up and getting pretty, and if he notices you too much, there are other places he could get work." But Tesme looked somewhat reassured. She started walking again, if not as quickly.

Kes hurried the few steps necessary to catch up. "I like Jos," she said again. She did, she realized. His quiet, his calm, the competent way he handled the horses. The way he never pressed her to speak, or seemed to expect her to fit into some unexplained pattern of behavior she couldn't even recognize. He was comfortable to be around, as so few people were. He had been at the farm for ... nearly half her life, Kes thought. She could not imagine it without him.

"He doesn't bother me, Tesme. Really, he doesn't. Don't send him away."

"All right ..." Tesme said doubtfully, and began to walk a little more quickly. "But let me know if you change your mind."

It was easier to nod than protest again.

They walked a little farther. But then Tesme gave Kes a sideways look and added, "Now, if there's a boy you *do* like, you'd let me know, Kes, wouldn't you? I remember what I was like at your age, and shy as you are, you *are* getting to be pretty. You know you don't need to slip off silently to meet somebody, don't you? If you want to walk out with Kanne or Sef or somebody, that's different, but you would tell me, wouldn't you? There's a world of trouble for a girl who's too secretive, believe me."

Kes felt her face heat. "I don't like anyone!" she protested.

"That changes," Tesme said, her tone wry. "If it changes for you, Kes ..."

"I'll tell you. I'll tell you," Kes said hastily, hoping to sound so firmly reassuring that Tesme would let the subject die. It was true anyway. Kanne? She suppressed an urge to roll her eyes, not wanting her sister to reopen the subject - but *Kanne*? Kanne was a baby, and too interested in himself to even notice a girl. Sef was almost as bad, all but welded to the smithy where he was apprenticed. Kes couldn't imagine either of them, or any other of the village boys, ever choosing to simply walk out across the hills and listen to the wind and the silence.

"All right ..." Tesme said. She did sound somewhat reassured. "It's true you're not much like I was. On the whole, that's probably just as well." She glanced at Kes, half smiling and half worried. #

Kes had no idea what to say to this, and so said nothing.

"You're yourself, that's all," Tesme concluded at last, smiling. She patted Kes on the shoulder and lengthened her stride once more.

The inn, set by the road near the river, right at the edge of the village, was all white stone and dark wooden beams. It had a dozen pretty little tables in its wide, walled courtyard, across from its stables, which were screened from the inn by small trees and beds of flowers. Jerreid and his wife, Edlin, and their daughters ran the inn, which was widely acknowledged to be the best of all the little country inns along the western river road that ran from Niambe Lake all the way down to Terabiand. The inn was not overlarge, but it was pleasant and very clean, and every window looked out onto one flower garden or another. And the food was good.

Many ordinary folk and even nobles broke their journey in Minas Ford as they traveled from the little jewelpretty cities of the high north to the sprawling coastal town of Terabiand in the south - the Ford of the town's name had long ago been replaced by the best bridge anywhere along the river - and, as the saying went, everyone and everything passed along the coast at some time. And so a good proportion of everyone and everything traveled up from Terabiand and through Minas Ford eventually, and since Minas Ford was conveniently a long day's journey from Bered to the south and an easy day's journey from Riamne to the north, many travelers looked forward to a stay at Jerreid's pretty little inn.

Every upstairs room had a window, shutters open in this fine weather; every table, outdoors or in, was graced by a slender vase of flowers. Edlin made the vases of fine white clay, glazing them with translucent glazes in blue and pink and white. She made them to keep cut flowers, and she had the gift of making in her hands: It was common knowledge that flowers stayed fresh in one of Edlin's vases twice as long as they lasted in an old cracked mug.

Edlin also made tableware that was both pretty and very hard to break. She sold bowls and plates and platters from a shop behind the inn, leaving the running of the inn

almost entirely to her husband and their three daughters. Edlin grew the flowers herself, though, and picked them fresh every week to arrange in the vases. That was, famously, as close to the work of the inn as she would come. Jerreid, fortunately, seemed perfectly happy to leave his wife to her dishes and glazes and gardens.

"Tesme!" Jerreid said, as they came into the yard. He was a big, bluff, genial man with a talent for making his inn feel homey and all his visitors feel welcome. He'd been leaning against one of the outdoor tables, chatting with what looked like half the folk of the village - a big crowd for the middle of the day. There were no travelers present at the moment, although some would probably stop later in the day. But Chiad and his wife had torn themselves away from their farm to visit the inn, along with a dozen children and cousins and nephews. And Heste had abandoned her bakery for the moment - well, the morning bread was long out of the ovens, and perhaps she had a little time before she would start the pies and honey cakes for the evening. But Nehoen was also present, which was less usual. His big house with its sprawling lands lay well outside the village, and he did not usually come to the inn except on market day. And Caris had for some reason left her weaving to visit the inn, as well as Kanes and his apprentice Sef the smithy.

Kes looked at them all uneasily, wondering nervously whether she might guess what had drawn them all away from their ordinary business. She hoped she did not blush when she glanced at Kanne or Sef. How could Tesme possibly think - ? Was Kanne even fourteen yet? And Sef! She looked hastily away from the smith's apprentice, aware that she probably was blushing, now.

"You seem happy," Jerreid was saying to Tesme. His smile, at least, seemed ordinarily cheerful. "How is your mare? River, wasn't it? She must have done well by you, yes?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" Tesme came across the yard, leaving Kes to follow more slowly. She took Jerreid's hands in hers and smiled at him. "A filly, healthy and big, and River's fine. We're celebrating. Have you any blackberry wine left, or did you drink it all yourself?"

"We've plenty - "

"But you might want to hold off on the celebrations," said Chiad. Dark as the earth he worked, serious by nature and not given to celebrations at even the best of times, he looked at the moment even more somber than usual. He slapped the table with one broad hand for emphasis as he spoke.

"Give the woman a chance to catch her breath!" exclaimed Jerreid, shaking his head in mild disapproval. Chiad gave him a blink of incomprehension and instantly transferred his attention back to Tesme. "You've got your young foals down by the house, haven't you, Tesme? Do you know what Kanne saw this morning?" Kanne was Chiad's son, and he now sat up straight in his chair and looked important.

Kes knew. She heard it in Chiad's voice. She saw it in Kanne's eyes.

Tesme arched her eyebrows, still smiling, if a little less certainly. "If it wasn't someone underselling me with Delta-bred stock for cheap, I don't think I'll mind, whatever it was."

"You will," said Chiad, heavily, with a somber shake of his head. "Tell her, boy."

Kanne laid his hands down flat on the table and sat up even straighter, looking proud and important. "Griffins!" he said.

This had not been what Tesme expected, and she looked blank.

"Griffins!" Chiad said. He slapped the table, shaking his head again in heavy disapproval. "Of all things! Half lion, half eagle, and all killer! My barley is likely safe enough, but you'd best look after your stock, Tesme!"

Tesme still looked blank. She said after a moment, "Kanne, are you sure they weren't just eagles?"

"Now, that's what I said," Jerreid agreed, nodding.

"Sure, I'm sure," Kanne said importantly. "I am sure! I know what eagles look like, Jerreid! These weren't eagles or vultures or any bird!"

"Griffins never leave their desert," said Heste, frowning. Her attitude suggested that she had said this before, repeatedly.

"They do," said Nehoen, so patiently it was clear he'd said this before as well. "Griffins in the spring mean a hard summer." Nehoen was not sitting at the table. He had gotten to his feet when Tesme and Kes had entered the courtyard. Now he moved restlessly, leaning his hip against one of the tables and crossing his arms over his chest. He was old, nearly fifty, but he was one of the few gentlemen of the village and thus showed his age far less than a farmer or smith.

"What?" said Tesme, blinking at him.

Nehoen smiled at her. He owned all the land out on the west side of the village near the river, and he could not only read, but owned far more books than all the rest of Minas Ford put together. His grandmother had been an educated woman of the Delta, and had put great store by books and written learning. He explained now, "Griffins in the fall mean an easy winter, griffins in the spring a hard summer. They say that in Casmantium. There wouldn't be a saying about it if the griffins never left their country of fire to come into the country of earth."

"But why would they?" Tesme asked. "And why come so far? Not just so far south, either, but all the way across the mountains into Feierabiand?"

"Well, that I don't know. The mages of Casmantium keep them out of Casmantian lands - that's what their cold mages are for, isn't it? - so maybe if the griffins wanted to move, they had to cross the mountains. But why they left their own desert in the first place?" Nehoen shrugged.

"Who can guess why such creatures do anything?"

"Griffins are bad for fire," said Kanen. The smith's deep voice rumbled, and everyone hushed to listen to him. "That's what I know. They're made of fire, and fire falls from the wind their wings stir up. That's what smiths say. They're bad creatures to have about."

Smiths knew fire. Everyone was silent for a moment, thinking about that.

"Griffins," said Jerreid at last, shaking his head.

"Griffins," agreed Nehoen. He began a rough sketch on a sheet of paper somebody had given him.

Chiad's wife said, practically, as she was always practical, "Saying Kanen is right, as I think he is, then what? Fire and hard summers, maybe - and then maybe not. But it stands to reason a creature with eagle talons and lion claws will hunt."

"Surely - " Tesme began, and stopped, looking worried. "You don't think they would eat our horses, really?"

"Nellis stops wolves from eating livestock," said Chiad, laying a broad hand on his wife's hand.

She nodded to him and went on herself, "Jened stops mountain cats. Perren stops hawks from coming after chicks." Perren was a falconer as well as a farmer, and gentled hawks and falcons for the hunt. Chiad's wife added, "I can keep foxes off the hens, and my little Seb stops weasels and stoats. But I don't know who's going to stop griffins eating your foals or my sheep, if that's what they want. What we need is a cold mage. I wonder why our mages in Feierabiand never thought to train up a youngster or two in cold magic?"

"We've never needed cold magecraft before," Chiad answered his wife, but not as though he found this argument persuasive.

His wife lifted her shoulders in a scornful shrug. "Well, and we don't need ice cellars until the summer heat, or a second lot of seed grain until a wet spring rots the first sowing; that's why we plan ahead, isn't it? They should have thought ahead, up there in Tihannad - "

"Now, now." Jerreid shook his head at Chiad's wife in mild reproof. "Summer we have every year, and wet springs often enough, but if griffins have ever come across the mountains before, it was so long ago none of our fathers or grandfathers remember it. Be fair, Nellis."

"Whoever thought or didn't think, it's my horses that are going to be eaten by griffins," said Tesme, sitting down rather abruptly at the table in the chair Nehoen had abandoned.

"They wouldn't eat them," Nehoen said, patting her shoulder. "Griffins don't eat. They may look part eagle and part lion, but they're wholly creatures of fire. They hunt to kill, but they don't eat what they bring down."

"That's even worse!" Tesme exclaimed, and rubbed her forehead.

Kes watched her sister work through the idea of griffins coming down on her horses. It clearly took her a moment. She wasn't used to thinking of the danger a big predator might pose if no one in the village could speak to it or control it.

In every country there were folk with each of the three common gifts. But just as Casmantian folk were famously dark and big-boned and stocky, Casmantian makers and builders were famously the best. There were makers everywhere, but more and better makers in Casmantium; to find makers with the strongest gifts and the deepest dedication to their craft, to find builders who could construct the strongest walls and best roads and tallest palaces, one went to Casmantium.

In the same way, one could recognize Linularinan people because they commonly had hair the color of light ale and narrow, secretive eyes, but also because they were clever and loved poetry. Everyone in Linularinum could write, they said, so probably it wasn't surprising that Linularinum had the cleverest legists. There were legists in Feierabiand, at least in the cities, but if you wanted a really unbreakable contract that would do exactly what you wanted, you hired a Linularinan legist to write it for you.

But everyone knew that if you needed someone with a really *strong* affinity for a particular sort of animal, you came to Feierabiand. As Tesme held an affinity to horses, others held affinities to crows or mice or deer or dogs. In Feierabiand, every town and village and tiny hamlet had one or two people who could call wolves and mountain cats - and more important, send them away. But griffins were creatures of fire, not earth. No matter how dangerous or destructive they might prove, no one, even in Feierabiand, would be able to send the griffins back across the mountains.

Tesme was looking more and more unhappy. "Maybe you and Edlin would let us borrow the use of your lower pasture for a while?" she said to Jerreid. "Mine isn't big enough for all the horses. Will I have to move all the horses, do you think? How big are griffins? How many did you see, Kanne?"

"Dozens," the boy said. He sounded pleased about it. "Big."

Nehoen silently held out a sketch he'd drawn. It showed an animal with a savage look: a creature half feathered and half furred, with the cruel hooked beak and talons of an eagle and the haunches of a cat. Everyone crowded forward to look. Kes, peering over Kanes's shoulder, winced a little. The monster in the drawing was a crude misshapen thing, neither bird nor beast; it looked clumsy and vicious.

"Yes," said Kanne triumphantly. "Griffins!"

Kanes nodded heavily. "We need king's soldiers. That's what we need. Clean the creatures out before they settle in to stay."

Kes continued to study the drawing for a moment longer, not listening as everyone else spoke at once. It was all wrong. And what she found, though she didn't understand why it mattered to her, was that she couldn't bear to have everyone believe Nehoen's drawing showed the truth. So she silently took the paper from Nehoen's hand and picked up the piece of charcoal he had used for his drawing. Nehoen looked startled, but he let her have the charcoal. Nellis stood up, giving Kes her place at the table, and waved for Kanne to move, too.

Kes turned the paper over to the blank side and sat down. She had already forgotten her audience. She was thinking of griffins. Her eyes filled with fire and beauty. She turned the charcoal over in her fingers and set it to the paper. The creature she drew was not like the one Nehoen had sketched. She had a surer hand with the charcoal than Nehoen, but that was not the difference. The difference was that she knew what she was drawing.

The griffin flowed out of the charcoal, out of Kes's eyes. It was eagle and lion, but not mismade, not wrong, as Nehoen's griffin had been wrong. She gave this griffin the beauty she had seen. She had seen griffins flying, but the one she drew was sitting, posed neatly like a cat. It was curled around a little, its head tilted at an inquisitive angle. It was fierce, but not vicious. The feathers around its eyes gave it a keen, hard look. Its sharp-edged beak was a smooth curve, exactly right for its eagle head. The feathers flowed down its forequarters and melted smoothly into a powerfully muscled lion rear. Its wings, half opened, poured through the sketch with the clean purity of flame.

Tesme, looking over Kes's shoulder, took a slow breath and let it out.

Nehoen took the finished drawing out of Kes' hands and looked at it silently. Kes looked steadily down at the table.

"When did you see them?" Nehoen asked gently. Kes glanced up at him and looked down again. She moved her hand restlessly across the rough surface of the table. "This morning."

Tesme was staring at her. "You didn't say anything."

Kes traced the grain of the wood under her hand, running the tip of her finger around and around a small knot in the wood. "I didn't know how. To talk about them.

They ... are nothing I know words to describe."

"You - " Chiad said incredulously.

"Hush," said Nellis, laying a hand on her husband's arm. "Kes, love - "

At the gate of the inn yard, someone moved, and everyone jumped and stared. Then they stared some more. The man at the gate was a stranger. But more than a stranger, he was himself strange. He wore fine clothing, but unusual in both cut and color. Red silk, red linen, red leather - all red, a dark color like drying blood, except for low black boots and a black cloak. He did not wear a sword, though even in Feierabiand

nearly all men of good birth carried one. But this man did not carry even a knife at his belt. He held no horse, and that was surely strangest of all, for how had a gentleman come to Minas Ford if not by horse or carriage?

The man's hair was black and very thick, without a trace of gray - although it was somehow immediately clear that he was not a young man. The lines of his face were harsh and strong. His eyes were black, his gaze powerful. He had a proud look to him, as though he thought he owned all the land on which his gaze fell. His shadow, Kes saw, with a strange lack of astonishment, was not the shadow of a man. It was too large for a man's shadow, and the wrong shape, and feathered with fire. Kes glanced quickly into her sister's face, and then looked at Nehoen and Jerreid and Kanes, and realized that although everyone was startled by the stranger, no one else saw that his shadow was the shadow of a griffin.

The black-eyed stranger with the griffin's shadow did not speak. No one spoke, not even Jerreid, who liked everyone and was hard to put off. Everyone stared at the stranger, but he had attention only for Kes. And rather than speaking, he walked forward, straight to the table where she sat. He clearly assumed everyone would get out of his way, and everyone did, although Nehoen, getting abruptly to his feet, put a hand on Kes's shoulder as though he thought she might need protection.

Ignoring Nehoen, still without speaking, the man picked up the drawing Kes had made and looked at it. Then he looked at her.

Kes met his eyes, seeing without surprise that they were filled with fire. She took a breath of air that seemed stiff with heat and desert magic. She could not look away, and wondered what the man saw in her eyes.

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