

ARLO'S TOWER

by

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## ABSTRACT

This novella focuses on the relationship between Arlo, a half-human half-dragon boy, and his human father Harland. Harland's love for Arlo manifests in ways that stunt his growth as a person, a fact that Arlo has trouble accepting. The entirety of the narrative is set in a tower that Arlo could leave at any time—if it weren't for his love for his father. This story focuses on Arlo's acceptance of how destructively his father loves him and what he should do going forward.

The novella poses various questions about the parent-child relationship and what is owed to the parent by the child. It aims to give an understanding of both perspectives and foster empathy.

*Arlo's Tower*

Snow drifted slowly in from the window, collecting on the stone windowsill and the floor around it. I sat across the room, huddled by the dying furnace with a heavy blanket wrapped around my shoulders. The warmth seemed to rush outside, as if it thought it could melt away the winter. Its failure left my body wracked with soft shivers.

Corvus walked up to me with his skinny stick legs and nudged my blanket with his beak. “*Co-old? Co-old?*” He asked, his voice a mixture of his gravelly caw and my own soft tone which he was mimicking.

“Yes, I am cold, buddy. You too?” Opening my blanket, I allowed him a path to my lap, which he promptly took. He ruffled his feathers before settling atop the crook of my knee, and I pulled the blanket closer around us, careful to make sure his beak could still peek out.

Looking around the room, the desire to continue my embroidery hit, but my fingers felt too cold to be able to hold a needle. Besides, the last time I tried to embroider my claws poked a giant hole in the fabric. The hoop still sat strewn across my table, fraying fabric stretching across the chasm as if it could bridge itself back together. I had been too upset to remove the fabric from the hoop after I ripped it. A little over half of the bouquet of flowers was finished. The flowers were made with French knots, the stitch I found most difficult.

I looked at Corvus, his eyes closed, and ran my dark claw across his head softly. It scared me sometimes, how easily my claws could be used to hurt.

Locks clicked downstairs, and the front door opened. Father was back. I could hear as he hit his boots against the doorframe, knocking off the snow. Another lock opening. Heavy footsteps as he climbed the stairs. Corvus stiffened at the sound. Gently, I picked him up and placed him to the side before rising to open the door.

As soon as I did, Father reached the last step. “Arlo, hope you weren’t too cold up here. Brought you some more wood,” he said, his arms filled with chopped firewood.

“Not at all.”

Father moved inside, squatting next to the furnace to start adding more fuel to the embers. He cut a glance over at Corvus.

“Good evening, crow,” he said. Corvus’s feathers ruffled. Sighing, Father turned back to the furnace.

My weight shifted back and forth between my feet, words bubbling up and then dissipating before they could leave the tip of my tongue. Father talked about the patients he had seen that day, the ailments they carried, whether magic or mixtures were required for treatment, but my focus was on my throat. I tried to take deep breaths of air to expand the suddenly tight area.

Finally, a spark of courage flared. I held onto it as I waited for my chance to talk. As soon as it came, the words poured out of my mouth, sounding weak and flimsy like smoke.

“Why can’t I cut the wood, Father?”

He stilled, the fire poker in his hand frozen in the flames.

“It’s just, you’re getting older, and it’s taking you longer and longer to chop it all. I’m strong, it wouldn’t take long for me at all. And you could focus on other things, like your herbs, or…” I trailed off, the courage in my chest now doused.

“Son, you know I’d love to have you outside working with me. But that isn’t something we can risk.” He stood, walking towards me. “If someone sees you, they’ll come in here and kill you.” His old, weathered hand touched my cheek, his fingertips tracing where my temples turned into horns.

“I would never hurt anyone. Why would they want to kill me?”

“Because they’ll look at you and see something new. Newness is horrifying, especially when it has claws. They’d want to live, and they wouldn’t know if you’d let them or not. But you have me. You’ll always have me.”

I looked down at my feet as the silence stretched into an uncomfortably taut tension.

“What do dragons look like, Father?”

“You want to hear about them again?” I nodded. “All right.” He sighs, lowering himself into an old rocking chair. I sewed together the pillow on the seat myself many years ago. Grabbing my blanket, I bundled it against myself once again as I took a seat on the floor in front of him. Corvus blinked his eyes open and walked over to reclaim his spot in my lap as Father began to weave the tale he’s woven for me a thousand times.

The sun lazily lowers itself into the horizon as Father tells me of the giant, scaly creatures. They have horns, a tail, and claws like mine, but they use them to snatch away livestock and children from villages. If peckish enough, they’re known to stomp through the village, their huge feet crashing and fiery breath turning every building to rubble and ash, their huge maws searching for human bodies to fill the chasm in their stomachs.

By the time the first stars are being hung in the sky, my chest feels numb and empty. He rises from the chair slowly, allowing his knees to crack back into place. No magic can stop him from aging. I rose as well, walking over to grab a candle. Placing it in the holder, I exhaled slowly, pursing my lips to direct the air. A small flame wisped out from my lips and ignited the wick.

Father took the candle from me, his other hand reaching up towards my face. I knew what he was looking at. The candlelight illuminated my face, and in it he saw himself. His jet-black hair, his warm brown eyes.

“You are so special, Arlo,” he whispered. “You are my everything.”

A boulder sat low in my stomach, and I reached my own hand up, guiding him away from my cheek. “You are my everything, Father.”

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Father always says my birth was a miracle. The way he tells it, it seems like it was. As a kid, he had a bright future ahead of him. He was skilled at healing magic, and he wanted to go off to find a sage to apprentice under. He spent years dreaming and planning. What route would he take? Where would he be likely to find a worthy master? He told me he already had a rucksack packed when his father was killed.

It was bad luck. My grandfather cut down trees and sold lumber for a living. But one tree falling in an unexpected direction was all it took to end his life. Countless trees before had always fallen in exactly the way he expected. But one. The superstitious people in the village whispered that it was retribution from the spirits of the forest. Father says it was horrible, horrible luck.

His mother didn't handle it well. She gradually stopped going outside. She said she could feel the stares, the judgment, the pity. Fear and grief tied her to the house. Then to her room. Then to her bed. Then it released her back into the earth.

Both of his parents were buried within the same year. By the time they were gone, his rucksack had gathered a thin layer of dust. He brushed it off and left. I don't think he knew where he was going anymore. His dream to become an apprentice had been buried in the same grave as his parents. When he left the village, he was searching for something else.

He searched for that intangible something for years. Sometimes he would settle for a while and heal who he could, but he always came back to the road. He says when he found that cave, he didn't realize his search was over. It was raining heavily that night, and my father sought shelter there. He walked deeper and deeper in, lighting himself a torch when the moonlight no longer illuminated the walls.

He saw her first. Blood had pooled out from her long, thick neck and dried on the stone floor. He says she must've been magnificent in life. Emerald scales, claws that shone like obsidian. If it weren't for the sword that still stuck out of her, it would look like she was deep in a peaceful slumber.

Father says that dragon hunting wasn't too uncommon a profession. They liked to watch the dragon until they returned to their lair, where they'd wait for them to fall asleep and strike. Then the horde of treasures the dragon protected would be theirs for the taking. They said that the gold was a gift for the righteousness of killing the demons that skulked about the earth.

When Father turned to go back to the front of the cave, away from the somber horror, he saw her clutch of eggs. Two had been smashed completely, but one was still partially intact. He crouched down, his fingers trailing over the milky bits of eggshell.

His healing magic only worked on humans. He tried once as a boy to heal the limp of his best friend's dog, but nothing had happened. It was the same every other time he put his hands to fur, feathers, or scales. But he tried again, anyway.

He cradled the fractured egg in his hands and pushed the magic inside. Picking up the broken pieces, he fit them back into the egg like a puzzle. When the edges fused together, making the egg whole again, he felt like that was a moment that would change his life.



He stayed in the cave with the egg for weeks, setting up camp closer to the mouth to hide away from the stench of death. The egg would hatch, and he would be there for it.

When it did hatch, the claws that poked the shell open weren't attached to scales but to skin. What broke out of the shell was a creature that had a soft downy fuzz of black hair on a head that would've been human if it weren't for the small emerald horns poking of its temples. The magic had twisted inside the egg, merging dragon with man. When I opened my eyes, it was the same brown as my father's, and he said his life finally had purpose.

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*"Arlo-oh. Ar-loh."*

"Yes, Corvus, I know. Just give me a moment," I said, pulling the thread taut behind the fabric before poking through it again.

*"Meanie. Meanie! Meanie!"* He cawed, his volume rising exponentially with each repetition of the word. I huffed, setting down the hoop and looking over at him. His face was innocent, his black little eyes sparkling.

"I'll go get the bath ready," I told him, causing him to flap his wings and walk in circles, cawing happily. "Yeah, yeah."

I walked over to the door, opening it and beginning down the steps. Fifteen and I reached the washroom. Looking down, I paused. If I walked fifteen more steps, there was another door. One I wasn't allowed to pass. Father locked it for my safety.

Pushing the washroom door open, I walked past the large basin I bathed in and grabbed a small one, one I specifically asked Father for to bathe Corvus in. Grabbing it and a pitcher or water, I returned to my room.

“Corvus? Bath time is almost ready,” I called out, setting the pitcher by the furnace to warm the water. “Corvus?” Glancing around the room, all I saw was a small stack of books, hoops with fabric stretched over them leaning against the wall, and my bed. No little crow.

I let out a breath. Corvus did what he wanted when he wanted, flying out into the world to do who knows what. He’s done that ever since I first met him five winters ago. Suppose he decided that was more exciting than bath time today. I just hoped he brought me back something. He sometimes did. I had filled a small jar with shiny things he’s gifted me. We shared a penchant for things that sparkled and glimmered.

Loud caws sounded from out the window, and I bundled my cloak further against me as I walked towards it, making sure my tail wasn’t dragging against the floor so none of the gathered snow would chill it. “Corvus?” I called out.

White blanketed the open clearing that surrounded the tower, and past it was a forest that gathered the snowflakes and icicles on their branches like jewelry. Black shadows raced through the trees, singing out in unmelodic caws. A whole murder of crows danced, jangling the icicles with their beaks.

My arms rested against the snow-covered window as I leaned out, watching the birds while a gentle wind chilled my face. They twisted in the air before diving back down again, moving and flapping and singing. It was choreographed chaos. Freedom. The crows began to settle, perching on the icy branches. I spotted Corvus, his feathers a richer blue-black than the others. He nuzzled his beak against another’s, before curling his neck around them in an embrace.

I exhaled, my breath turning into a cloud in the frigid air. Tingles warmed my chest as I watched the soft exchange.

It was a while that I stayed like that, watching the birds. Eventually Corvus noticed me watching and flapped his way back to the tower, perching on the window and causing a small bit of snow to tumble into my room.

He squawked at me, tilting his head. “Who were they?”

“*Family*,” he replied in his scratchy voice.

“Oh. Who was that crow you touched beaks with? You seemed close.”

“*Father*.”

I stilled, looking at the bird curiously.

“*Love to dance. Love, love. Love Father, love fa-family. Love Arlo.*” Corvus spun on the windowsill, causing another flurry of snow to fall around him. I reached out and ran my hand down his back, smiling.

“I love you too, Corvus.” He cawed happily in response before he took flight again, returning to the dance. “Hey, what about your bath?” I yelled out at him, but he ignored me. He dove and spun and cawed with the other birds, and I couldn’t find it in me to be upset. I watched them dance, imagining that I, too, had wings and was dancing among them.

The wind had picked up now, whipping my face raw and red. A crow veered off course from the wind, but after some vigorous flapping rejoined the choreography. Dangling icicles collided, adding a persistent chime.

Some of the crows left the dance, sitting on branches close to the trunk to avoid the ever-growing wind. Corvus remained enraptured with his movements, seemingly unaware of the dance growing smaller. Snowflakes ran past my nose, diving with force towards the ground.

Unease settled into a bile coating the back of my throat. Rushing wind was now berating my ears, hiding the tinkling of the ice. “*Corvus!*” I shouted, but I could almost see the enraged air tackle my words back to the snow.

A sudden and hard gust hit, and I pulled myself fully back into the tower, wrapping my cloak around me like a shield.

A sharp “*Caw!*” cut through the gale. When I looked out the window, there were no more crows dancing. They huddled together on icy branches. But Corvus wasn’t among them. I pushed my torso outside the window once again, squinting against the flurries and the force of the wind. The left. Nothing. The right. Nothing. The other crows had begun to caw relentlessly, and it melded with the rush of the air creating noise, noise, noise.

Down. A blue-black crow was motionless as he lay in the white void. A choked sort of sound came from somewhere. From me. The other crows bellowed into the dusk. *Screech. Yelp. Caw.* Again and again and again and my only friend was being covered by snow—

A crow landed on my windowsill. His feathers were ruffled from the wind, and his landing was unsteady. He screeched into my face, and when I did nothing, he began a persistent pattern of screaming, screaming, screaming, just like the other crows.

I stumbled back, rushing to the door. I threw it open and rushed down thirty steps. My hand touched the doorknob of the final door in the stairwell. The door Father told me not to pass. My breath was coming in quick pants, my lungs never fully expanding. I can’t. I can’t. My hands shook against the cool metal of the knob.

But the crows’ horrid rhapsody was louder than the blood rushing through my ears. I turned the knob and pushed. The door didn’t give; Father did always lock it. I turned the knob

again and this time pushed my shoulder into the dark oak wood, which came crashing open beneath me.

I toppled into my father's room. My eyes absorbed books, scrolls, drying herbs, glass bottles both empty and filled as I rushed to the front door. I reached for the knob and pushed—locked. I readied my shoulder to pound the door again, but fear slithered down my spine. I might be able to explain away one broken lock, but never two.

I spun, my eyes finding a shuttered window. The wind rattled against it, and when I undid the latch, the shutters flew open, a frosty deluge punching me in the face. I clambered out the window and fell face-first into the snow. I tried to push myself up, but the snow was so deep, so much deeper than I'd imagined. Crawling and pushing and stumbling, I made my way into an uneasy trudge towards the black smudge in the snow.

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I had been outside the tower only once before. I was young, maybe four. I had to push a chair to the window and climb on top of it to see outside back then. It had been spring. The open clearing that surrounded the tower was a lush green, and the forest just past that was brimming with new life, new growth. Vines had started crawling up the sides of the stone brick walls. I remember I almost fell out the window trying to get a good look at them.

From the window, I couldn't see the front door, but I always knew when Father returned home. I could hear it. The locks clicked and Father's footsteps began up the stairs, but he stopped and turned around. He yelled up to me something about dropping something, that he'd be back in a minute, *just wait, Arlo*.

And I did. Until tapping my feet on the floor no longer entertained me, which was about five minutes. I walked to the stairwell, peeking down. I was still scared of it back then. There were no windows giving light in the small, rounding path. There were sconces on the wall, but

sometimes the flames would go out before Father came back to relight them. I didn't know I could make my own fire until maybe a year or two later. I used to relieve myself in empty water pitchers in my room when the sconces went out; the few steps down to the washroom seemed like stepping down into the hands of death.

So I stared down the shadowy hallway and gulped with trepidation. But there was nothing left for me to do in my room, and the boredom overtook the fear. I descended the steps quickly, opening the door and then slamming it shut, trapping the imaginary shadow monsters within.

Father's room wasn't of much interest to me back then. I looked up at his bed that was littered with books, scrolls, and apple cores and his walls which were adorned with pasted on drawings of plants and immediately felt bored. I sidestepped stacks and stacks of books I couldn't yet read and walked outside.

The first thing I noticed was the sound my feet made. Inside the tower, my shoes made a soft *clack* against the stone. But outside, I could only hear a faint crunch of grass blades beneath me. I smiled, jumping up and down and listening to the sounds. I ran, somersaulting into the earth and relishing the itch of the grass against my skin. I was about to make my way towards the forest—I wanted to know if bark felt as scratchy as it looked—when Father returned.

He held a basket of fruit in the crook of his elbow and was brushing dirt off an old book when he saw me. "*Arlo!*" He screamed, throwing his things to the ground and running.

"Father! Did you know that grass is really itchy? I was rolling arou—" he cut me off with a tight hug. I could feel his body shake. "Father?" He drew a shuddering breath, pushing me back towards the tower.

“Wait!” I exclaimed, “I wanted to go see the forest!” But he ignored me, walking us back towards the circular gray tower that stretched up towards the fluffy spring clouds.

When he pushed me inside, I was taken back by how much darker everything inside seemed. Father always kept his windows shuttered closed, so only slivers of sunlight came through. It was enough for me to see by earlier, but now the room seemed as dark as the stairwell. The sound of the lock clicked behind me. “Father, what’s going on?” He ushered me into the creepy stairwell and locked the door behind us, his little brass key slipping back into his robe after he was finished.

I ran up the stairs when I realized we weren’t going back outside, and Father followed me into my room.

He stood there by my door, his body quivering like a leaf in the wind.

“Father?”

He looked at me with damp eyes. “Arlo, I—” He cut himself off with a sob, his weathered hands coming up to hide his face. I walked over to him and then guided him down into a chair as he wept. His body rose and shook like a full body stutter. I rubbed his back as he hunched over, crying into his palms. We stayed like that a while before he could compose himself enough to speak.

“How did you get outside, son?” he asked, an edge of worry and anger in his voice.

“When you went back outside earlier you didn’t lock the doors.”

He was silent. At that moment, there was nothing outside of the tower. Curiosity about the texture of tree bark was forgotten.

“I’m sorry,” I offered.

“You’re all I have, Arlo. My parents aren’t here anymore. Do you understand? You’re all I have. If something had happened to you...” He shuddered, choking down a sob that threatened to break free. “I know. I know staying in this tower is hard. But you have to stay inside. To keep yourself safe.” Tears rolled silently down his cheeks. “I’ll bring you whatever you want. Anything. I’ll plant a whole garden and bring it up here for you to touch if that’s what you want, Arlo. I just... I can’t lose you.” He looked at me with those warm, brown eyes filled with fear. “Promise me you won’t go outside again. Please.”

The joy I had felt earlier was smothered by this new emotion that hatched in my stomach. It felt oppressive and heavy, enveloping me so I forgot what all emotions before and after were like. There was only this moment, this feeling. I sniffled, raising my tiny, clawed fist to wipe away the tear threatening to fall.

“I promise.”

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I stood over Corvus, snow already collecting on top of his feathers.

“Corvus? Wake up, please. Please wake up.” I rubbed a finger delicately over his head as my tears blurred his image. Is he hurt? Lifting him gently, I extended one of his wings to check for wounds.

“*Caw!*” he screeched, flapping violently. I yelped and released my grip. He fluttered back down onto the snow before turning his head to preen some of his feathers.

“Corvus? Are you okay?” I asked, crouching in front of him.

“*O-kay.*” He lifted both his wings as if to show me that he was, in fact, okay.

“What happened?” My body fell backwards as relief hit like a punch to the gut. My butt was now wet.

“*Corvus fly, dance, dance in the sky. Big wi-ind, hit tree, hit tree! Nap time!*”



“You... were just knocked unconscious?” He nodded his little head. I took a full breath, exhaling away all the worry before I reached out, wrapping the sweet bird in a gentle hug. “I thought you were going to die!” He blinked. “Come on, we have to go back inside—”

Corvus cut me off with a loud *caw*. We stared at each other for a moment.

“*Sno-ow-man?*”

I had seen children make snowmen in books before. The illustrations showed them with ruddy cheeks and huge smiles. In one of the books I had drawn dragon horns on one of the children’s heads and pretended that I was with them, making that snowman and smiling.

The sun *was* still high in the sky, so Father wouldn’t get home until later...

“Maybe... Maybe we can stay out here for a bit. Just long enough to make *one* snowman, though, okay?” Corvus cawed and ruffled his feathers, sending all the remaining snow clinging to him back to the ground.

It was cold outside. The tower was cold, too, but actually being outside, unprotected from the sharp bite of the air, brought on an unprecedented level of freezing. The frigid wind usually creeping in from the window is now surrounding me, chilling me to my bones. It was horrible. It was great.

I let the rest of my body fall into the snow. It was wet and miserable and soft. I flapped my arms up and down, then stood up to see the shape I made. “Corvus! Look! I saw people do that in a book once.”

Me and Corvus spent the next few hours in the snow. My teeth chattered the whole time, and my body felt soaked, but it was amazing. We managed to make a snowman that went all the way up to my waist. I poked my finger into the snow on his face to draw a smile. Finally, the sun inched low enough in the sky that I knew I had to go inside.

“Corvus. Corvus, Father’s gonna be home soon, I need to get inside.”

Corvus was sitting on top of the snowman, repeating to himself, “*Hat. Hat. Corvus hat.*”

“You’re a great hat, buddy, but I have to go in now, and the snowman can’t stay.” Corvus stopped his strange little hat chant and stared at me. “I... I can’t let Father see it.” Corvus tilted his beak down before he flew off of the snowman’s head. I pushed the snowman to the ground, dispersing him back among the blanket of snow coating the earth.

Then I noticed something off in my periphery. It was an indentation. I walked closer, Corvus hopping along behind me. There were large footprints in the snow. Three long toes ending in sharp points, a fourth toe pointing towards the back. It was birdlike, similar to Corvus’s feet. But the indents of the claws... I looked down at my own talons.

“Corvus... Do you think these are dragon prints?”

He cocked his head to the side. “*Duh-no. Nev-ah see drag-on.*”

I followed the prints. They walked out of the forest, into the open clearing surrounding the tower. But then they stopped.

“What?” I looked around, but the rest of the snow was undisturbed. The tracks just stopped. “Weird.” The sun was only getting lower, so even though I would’ve liked to look around for more signs of the maybe-dragon, I trudged back to the tower, swishing my tail behind me to hide my footprints.

I struggled to climb back in the window, the unsteady ground making it difficult. Eventually I tumbled inside, and Corvus flew in gracefully, landing on my prone figure as if to mock me.

“Funny. Get off.” He did, hopping off to the side as I stood. Snow had followed me in, and I didn’t have time to try and shovel it back outside, but I hastily knocked my wet shoes against the stone to get some snow off.

We made our way upstairs, and I realized my hands were still shaking—no, shivering—from my romp in the snow. My clothes were soaked with frigid snow-water. I took dry clothes out of the trunk sitting at the end of my bed, changing swiftly and wrapping a cloak around my shoulders.

Then I heard a door open. My muscles tensed. He’s home. Boots knocking snow off against stone. Footsteps. But there was no second clicking of a lock. Instead, there was a pregnant pause before footsteps resumed up the stairs.

I sat on the bed, flexing and closing my palms as I struggled to deepen my breaths. It was okay. He wouldn’t be upset. He wouldn’t. I had to go outside to save *Corvus*. *But you didn’t have to stay*. My breath caught, and Father opened the door. His graying black hair was pulled back from his face into a low tail, and it accentuated the lines of worry that creased his sagging face. “What happened? Why is the second lock broken, Arlo?” His voice held the edge of anger, but the sharper uncurrent of fear.

“I’m sorry, Father. I was going to the washroom and lost my footing. When I stumbled down the stairs, I hit the door and the lock broke. Please don’t be mad.”

He looked at me for a beat before responding, “Did you go into my room?”

“I’m not allowed in your room.” *Corvus* watched us silently, his head turning back and forth between us.

“Come back later, Corvus, I need to talk to my son,” He shoed Corvus towards the window with his hands until the bird was forced to fly back outside. I was glad the wind had calmed down now.

I snuggled the cloak that hung across my shoulders further around myself and grabbed onto my arm. Hidden from his gaze, my hand dug small punctures into my skin. The sharp pain helped ground me.

“Of course I’m not mad, Arlo. Are you all right?” Father inquired.

“Yes, I’m fine. I’m strong, you know. Stronger than doors, at least.” I hazarded a smile his way, and he returned it. The tension in my body eased a bit.

“That’s good, then.” He sighed.

He looked so old at that moment, heavy brown cloak draped over bony, hunched shoulders. He walked back towards the doorway, and I noticed then that he had brought today’s dinner. He had set the basket on the floor when he rushed in, and I could smell it now. Buttery biscuits and chicken. “Thank you for dinner.”

He smiled at me as he lifted up the basket, walking towards the furnace. “I saw Hector again today.”

I stood, walking over to a squat cabinet that sat next to it. “At the clinic?”

“Mhmm.” He grabbed the chicken and looked at me. I retrieved a pan from the cabinet and held it out. He dropped the chicken in as he continued, “I told him this would happen if he was outside all day. I told him, ‘Hector, you’re going to be back in here sooner rather than later if you don’t keep yourself out of the snow.’”

How could he keep himself out of the snow when the snow is so fun?

I opened the grate on the small furnace and hovered the pan over the flame. The chicken was already cooked and seasoned, but since we live so far from the village we always have to reheat our food before we can eat it. I haven't figured out how to use my breath to do it, yet; it always ends up burnt. "So his joints were bothering him, then?" I asked.

"Of course. He came to me asking for something to help. I gave him some herbs to help relieve the pain, but I told him, 'Hector, you need to keep warm if you really want the pain to ease up.' Just like I said last time." He walked over to the paltry wooden table set by my bed and lowered into a chair.

"What did he say to that?"

"He said, 'Oh, but I thought you said I needed to keep my joints moving!' and I said, 'Yes, in a place that's warm. Like your house!'" He shook his head.

I watched the flames lick over the sides of the pan, thinking of rolling around outside in the same cold that bothers Hector's joints. Shame sloshed around in my empty stomach. "I bet he didn't like that," I said as I slid out the pan. The table was already set with two plates and utensils; I didn't have anywhere good to store them so the table was almost always set. Father set a biscuit on each plate as I grabbed the knife and cut the chicken into two.

"He sure didn't, but that's life." I sat down, grabbing a fork and cutting off a small piece of chicken. I loved the taste, but ever since Father told me where chicken comes from I always feel guilty eating it. But I feel guilty not eating it, too, so I just relish biting into the juicy flesh and try to ignore that when this animal was alive it probably looked similar to Corvus.

The conversation stilled as we ate.

“Somehow my window downstairs got opened,” Father said, wiping biscuit flakes off his face. I had to swallow hard to force the chicken down as he said that. I hadn’t relatched the window.

“There was a storm earlier, so I’m not surprised. You didn’t hear all the wind in town?” My voice felt unnaturally high as I spoke. I hated lying, but I hated the thought of disappointing my father even more.

He grabbed a napkin and wiped his hands. “Did you go in my room, Arlo?”

“No, I’m not allowed in there. I may have fallen in your room for a second when I broke the door, but I walked out right away!” My hands grasped the linen of my pants tightly.

“You know you never have to lie to me.” His voice was soft, but I could hear what it would sound like in my mind if I were to tell him the truth. Strained. Hoarse. Scared and angry and sad. I saw his face in my mind the last time I left the tower, the tears streaking down his cheeks and the terror contorting his features.

“I know, Father. I really didn’t go into your room.” I couldn’t look at him when I said it, my eyes lowering down to stare at my plate.

“Okay, son.” He picked up his utensils and began to cut at his chicken. “I’ll see if someone in town has the materials to fix the lock.”

---

The next afternoon greeted us with biting weather. Father had given me a million blankets over the years to try and help with the harsh winters, but even with five around my shoulders as I sat in front of the furnace, I still shivered. It was almost as cold as actually being outside; the only solace was that at least as I was totally dry. Corvus was tucked into my lap, and he tried to burrow closer to the blankets.

“Why don’t I start heating up a bath?” I asked. Corvus responded by flapping his wings in excitement. I walked down to the washroom, carrying Corvus gently in my hands.

The washroom was dull. There was a narrow rectangular window towards the ceiling. It was too high to look out of, but it allowed the contents of the room to be visible without having to light a candle. Under the window was a door that led to the small cubby containing the garderobe. Next to it sat a thin but long mirror, tall enough to catch my entire body’s reflection if I stooped a bit. Another small furnace sat in the corner. Usually, it would cast a small glow around it, but the flames inside were eating up the last splinters of wood it had.

The centerpiece of the room was the big stone basin that served as a bath. The whole bathing situation had been gifted to me from Father. When I was little, the bath was a wooden basin, and the water needed to be carried up the stairs to fill it. Whenever I got better at breathing fire, I asked Father for a stone bath so that I could heat the water myself. I also asked for a water pump to be installed. I had read about them in books and desperately wanted to be able to take a bath whenever I wanted, without having to ask Father to bring up water from the well outside.

He rejected me at first, but after a week of sulking he acquiesced, only requiring that I swore to be silent when he had people come to install the new bath. He left me a stockpile of food, water, and firewood, then set off to a distant village. He said he didn’t want any of the nearby villagers knowing where he lived, that the risk was lower if he paid extra for a craftsman to go out of his way to come a farther distance.

After two weeks, I heard commotion outside. Peeking my head out the window, I saw a huge cart being pulled by a big, beautiful animal. Father later told me it was a horse. But I was more intrigued by the woman who held the horse’s reins. It was the first time I had seen another person besides Father; it was my first time seeing a woman, even. She was middle aged, with

folds near her eyes that hinted at a life spent smiling. Her graying hair had been cut into a short, manageable length that just reached her chin. Muscles flexed beneath age spotted skin, and I found myself thinking that she must give amazing hugs.

She jumped off the cart, offering a hand to help my father step down. I could hear them talking, but they were too far away for me to discern their words. The woman started unloading things from her cart, and Father looked up at me. His eyes widened pointedly, and I took the hint, crouching so I was completely out of sight.

I sat at the door, my ear pressed firmly against it while the woman worked. She rolled the stone basin up the stairs, which sounded like giant, angry footsteps. She hammered away at the stone to make way for the new water pump, which sounded like a huge woodpecker suddenly developed a taste for stone towers instead of trees. I couldn't hear them very well through the door, and the sounds of the tools didn't help much either. But I could make out mirthful laughter.

She left soon after, cart empty and face bright. I couldn't imagine her wanting to hurt me.

But then Father came upstairs and asked if I wanted to see my new bath. He led me down and I beamed at the huge stone basin. He showed me how to work the water pump, which I happily did. When the bath was full, he told me to heat it up. I glanced at him first, but then took a big breath. The flames *whooshed* as they ignited. They wrapped around the stone bath, the stone floor, and I exhaled all the breath in my belly into that fire until I heaved. Where the fire met the stone had become blackened, but Father assured me it was fine. He said to just clean it every so often and avoid touching it after a bath, so I wouldn't immediately get dirty again.

Father slipped off his robe and stepped into the bath, smiling at me. He told me the temperature was perfect. After hurriedly undressing, I lifted my hands, and he hoisted me into



the tub. The water was perfect. He grinned and splashed me, and I fell into a fit of giggles as we splashed and splashed and splashed.

“*O-kay?*” Corvus asked, guiding me away from my memories.

I nodded at him and prepared the bath—big one for me, small one for Corvus. When I undressed, I paused for a moment in front of the mirror. I was strong, but I had never developed muscles like the woman who built the bath had. My skin was pale, translucent atop my green-hued veins. I turned a bit, pushing my hair to fall over my shoulder. The skin by my shoulder blades was twisted, like paper that had just started to burn. Father had a smooth back. I once asked him why mine was different, if it was because I was part dragon, and he said that it was simply a birthmark that could happen to any human. I sighed, letting my hair cover the gnarled skin again.

---

Fixing the lock was a slower process than either of us anticipated. Father spent a week just going around asking people ‘How do I fix a lock? No, no, I can do it myself, I just need to know how. Well where do I get that?’ until he had a strong idea of what to do and what he needed.

I was shuffling through the stack of wooden embroidery hoops leaning against my wall when Father came home. He fell into the rocking chair and let out a tired breath.

“Well, Mitchel says he can get me the things I need for the lock, but it’ll take a while. He’s gotta send his boy up to Ghora with an order list, then the boy’s gotta ride all the way back. It’ll be at least two weeks before I can even *start* fiddling with the lock.”

Ghora was where the bath woman came from. The big town. I wondered what it was like.

“That’s a shame,” I replied, finding the hoop I was looking for. I grabbed some muslin and stretched it over the hoop as Father waxed on about the inconvenience of living where we did.

“What color are dragons?” I finished stretching the muslin over the hoop and twisted the knob to fasten it tight. A box of colorful embroidery thread sat at my feet. “I want to embroider a dragon.”

“Hmm. Well, they can be just about any color, I think. The only dragon I ever saw was green, though.” I absently touched my tail, a meaty thing covered in deep green scales.

“I’ll do green, then,” I said, picking some threads that were a close color match to my tail. “Hey, Father, can dragons disappear?”

He stopped rocking in his chair. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, meant—can they do magic?” I said, my fingers trembling as I tried to thread the needle.

“No, son, only humans are capable of magic. And only some humans, you have to be born with an aptitude for it. Although, some might say breathing fire is a kind of magic, too.” He smiled widely at me and winked.

“No, I read a book that says there are humans who can breathe fire too. They do it at celebrations in the East. For entertainment.” Father’s face fell a bit. “So dragons can’t use magic? They couldn’t suddenly disappear?”

“What is this about?” I stilled for a moment before pushing the needle through the fabric.

“Nothing.”

“Arlo.” His voice lowered into a threatening pitch, and I felt my throat close. “What is this about?”

“I... I thought I saw a dragon’s footprints in the snow. From the window. Um, but the footsteps just stopped, like they vanished.” There was a pause. Father stared at me, then his face lit up again.

“Oh! Dragons are excellent jumpers. I’m sure it jumped into the trees.”

I frowned. There hadn’t been anything off about the trees to indicate that. No broken branches, no claw marks on the bark. Besides, the forest was pretty far away from where the footprints stopped. If they had jumped on the tower, I would’ve felt it. There weren’t any claw marks on the stone outside, either.

“Oh. I didn’t know that. Maybe you can ask Mitchel’s boy to see if Ghora has any books on dragons, too.”

“Mmm. I’ll ask, but don’t get your hopes up.”

I continued to stitch, making an outline with the thread of a big creature with horns and talons and a big green meaty tail. Maybe I should grab some red thread and make fire, too.

“Okay, I won’t.”

---

When I was tall enough to look out the window without standing on a chair, watching the birds became one of my favorite pastimes. It was around that time, as well, that Father brought me my first embroidery materials. I had been asking him to bring me something to do, and so he returned one day with a basket full of muslin, wooden hoops, thread, and needles.

I remember trying to calm my disappointed expression. “Thank you, Father. But, um... how do I do this?” How do I embroider, yes, but I was also asking how I was supposed to perform such a delicate task with sharp black claws jutting out from my fingertips.

“Carefully. I think that stitching will help you learn how to be considerate of your—” He stopped, coughing before unloading the basket. I noticed then a small metal cup at the bottom of the basket.

“What’s this?” I grabbed the object, running my hand along the small pitted grooves in the cold, shiny metal.

“A thimble.” Father took my hand and held it. “You put it on your finger to protect it from getting jabbed with the needle.” He then took the thimble and tried to put it on my index finger. It balanced on my claw, nowhere near the soft pad of my fingertip. I bent my finger, and the thimble clattered to the floor.

“Well. Usually, anyways.” Father taught me what he knew, which was little. How to thread a needle, which was difficult with the claws, then twisting the thread between my fingers to create a knot. How to do a basic stitch. How to stretch the fabric across the hoop. Then Father said that the rest I’d have to figure out on my own. Years later he was able to find me some books about stitchwork, but my early work was trial and error.

One day I had pulled the rocking chair by the window, letting the autumn breeze waft in while I tried to stitch a leaf pattern. My threads sat on the windowsill with the useless thimble. Sometimes the light would catch it and make it glint, so I liked keeping it around despite its impracticability.

My hands shook as the needle came closer to the fabric. It was clenched between my fingertips, but my claws still extended out into dangerous points. I pushed the needle through the rough muslin, and my other hand grabbed the other side and pulled the thread taut. Then I realized my claw had punctured a hole through the middle of the piece.

I cried out in frustration, huffing smoke through my nose as I threw the hoop across the room. “I’ll never get this.”

“*Never get this,*” a gruff voice repeated. I stumbled out of the chair, looking towards the windowsill. A small crow perched there. His feathers rustled at my sudden movements, but he stilled when I did. He poked his beak at the thimble.

“Please don’t touch that,” I pleaded quietly. He continued poking at it until it fell over and began to roll towards the edge of the window. “Hey!” I jumped up to try to retrieve it, but the bird was faster.

“*Hey!*” he repeated, his gravelly voice creating an awkward imitation of my high pitched one. He grabbed the thimble in his claws just before it fell, then flew away.

“Wait! That’s mine!” But it was too late. The crow had flown back into the tangle of auburn leaves.

I thought that would be the last of the bird, but a week later a loud *caw* woke me. Warm sunlight streamed in as I walked to the window. The blue-black bird stood once more on the windowsill, but this time his feet tapped as if in excitement. Next to them was a glittering metal circle with small designs etched into it. I smiled so wide it felt like my cheeks would rip from all the stretching.

“Is this for me?” The bird nodded, and I took the gift in my hands, feeling the divots and dimensions of the design. “What is it?”

“*Coin! Coin!*” He said, flapping his wings.

“Thank you!” I rushed around the room trying to find a good place to display it. “I asked Father for a book about birds after you came last time. You’re a crow, aren’t you?” I paused to look at him after this, but he just tilted his head at me. “From the family Corvidae, *Corvus*

genus.” He blinked. “Well, anyways, the book said you like shiny things. I do, too. That’s why you took my thimble, huh?” He responded with a loud *caw*, bobbing his head. I finally decided to place the coin on my bedpost so that I could look at it every time I went to bed.

“So I guess this was a gift exchange, huh? My thimble for your coin? Does that make us friends?” The crow cocked his head at me. “Oh, friends are when we spend time together and give each other gifts, like the coin.” I reached under my bed and pulled out a small storybook, flipping to a page where two colorful girls presented each other with glimmering necklaces. “Like this, see?”

The crow hopped off the windowsill and walked towards me, tilting his head over the book. “*Friends?*”

“Yes! Can we be friends?” The crow pecked at the necklaces on the page before looking at me.

“*Yes! Friends!*”

The next day, Father came into my room for breakfast. He carried a tray of fruit, but almost dropped it when he opened the door to see me with a crow on my head and a blanket around my arms.

“Father! Look at this trick we’re working on! One, two, three—” Me and Corvus lifted our wings at the same time, his made of feathers and mine crafted from my old woolen blanket. We flapped together as I spun and raced across the room.

“Arlo, stop.” Father said, using his stern voice. I immediately halted. Corvus flapped a few more times before he realized the performance was over.

“What is this?” He set the tray of fruit down on the table.

“We were flying around the world.” I said, sitting down. My stomach was suddenly churning, and I had no desire to eat the cranberries and pears in front of me.

“Your friend may be able to do that, but you know that you can’t, Arlo.” He slumped down into the chair, wringing his hand through his hair.

“But maybe when I’m older I’ll get more dragon powers, and I can! And his name is Corvus.” Corvus hopped onto the table and accentuated my comment with a sharp *caw*.

“Dragons can’t fly, Arlo.” Father looked down his nose at Corvus. “Nice to meet you, Corvus.”

“*Nice to me— Nice to— meet you!*” Corvus grabbed a cranberry with his beak and shuffled it down his gullet.

Father sighed, pressing his fingers in between his eyes. “You need to eat, too, Arlo.”

I huffed, standing up. “No!”

“No?” He glared as Corvus pecked sadly at a pear.

“No!” I flourished with the blanket and began to run around the room again. “I’m going to fly to the other side of the world!”

“No, you’re not. You’re going to sit and eat your breakfast.” His voice was raising, but I was angry too. My face was red with it.

“No! I’m going to see a desert, an ocean, and a giant mountain! And I’ll fly up to the tippy-top of it!” I was jumping and thrashing and spinning, livid with a hot anger that I didn’t understand.

Father growled as he shoved himself up, the chair screeching against the stone floor. He marched over to me and grabbed the blanket, trying to rip it off of me. “No, Arlo, you’re not! You never will!”

My vision blurred with tears, and I grabbed Father's hand to wrench it off of my makeshift wings. He let go, but with a yelp of pain. He clutched his hand to his chest, his back curving over to protect it.

"Father?" I asked, the blanket slipping to the ground. He released the hand that cradled the other, and it was red as cranberries.

"I thought you could control yourself better than this." Long gashes oozed blood from his hand and panic ignited inside me. "I can't believe you would harm your own father."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to!" I ran up to him, but he turned away. My throat was burning with the desire to let out a horrid, pathetic sob. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry—"

"Stop that! Stop it!" He began to wrap some of my spare muslin fabric around his hand.

"I'm sorry." Tears poured down my cheeks in rivulets. Father finished wrapping his hand, and then he left, slamming the door behind him. I crumpled to the cool floor, my body wracked with stifled weeps. I rocked myself back and forth, repeating "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," until my voice was hoarse.

Corvus had hidden under the bed during the commotion, and I watched him shake. I wished I could comfort him. I wished he could comfort me. Corvus tried to avoid Father after that day.

---

I couldn't focus on my embroidery. I was filling in the dragon with green, my hands going through the motions of pushing and pulling the thread, but my mind was elsewhere. After Father left earlier, my mind started to churn about thoughts of the dragon prints I found in the snow.



Honestly, I was quite upset that a dragon had been so close to me, yet I hadn't seen it. I've never even seen a drawing of a dragon. The dragon I was stitching was simply my estimation of what one *would* look like, based solely on my own draconic traits and Father's stories.

But I tried not to dwell on the fact that I missed out on seeing them. Thinking about it too much would probably make me cry. Instead, I tried to puzzle out the mystery of the footprints. Father had proven my leading theory of the dragon using magic to teleport away wrong, so I was at a loss. I didn't believe that the dragon had simply jumped away, but I couldn't think of another plausible explanation.

I let out a deep sigh, making Corvus look up at me from his spot on the bed. "How do you think the dragon managed to disappear, buddy?" Corvus blinked at me. "Yeah, I'm not sure either."

*"Father br-bring Arlo dragon book."*

"I doubt he actually finds one for me. I've asked him for a book on dragons for forever and he's never been able to find one. They're super rare." I tapped the needle on the side of the hoop absently as I spoke.

*"No-oh? Corvus see dragon books before."*

I sat up straight, looking at him. "What? You've seen a picture of a dragon then? What do they look like? Do they look like this? Was I right?" I held up my embroidery piece for him to look at.

*"Duh-no. No see picture."* I set my hoop back down.

"Oh. So how did you know it was a book on dragons?"

*"Said so."*

“Who did?” We looked at each other in silence for a moment. He tilted his head at me. “Wait, Corvus, you can read?” He nodded his little head. “What! Why didn’t you tell me? How did you learn how to read?”

*“Thought Ar-low knew. Fri-end taught me.”*

“I taught you?”

“*No-oh.*” We looked at each other again, my eyes searching his. He returned my gaze with a blank stare.

“You have *other* friends? Human ones?” Corvus nodded, ruffling his feathers as he settled deeper into the covers on my bed. I never really asked him about what he did when he wasn’t in the tower with me, but I just always assumed he hung out with the other crows all the time and looked for shiny trinkets. I never imagined he had other human friends. Well, not like I’m fully human, though.

I shook off my shock, returning back to the matter at hand. “Okay, we’ll talk about your adventures later. You said you’ve seen a book on dragons before? Where?”

*“Books-suh. In town.”* He preened at his fathers.

“Books? Multiple? In town? This town?” Corvus leveled me with an annoyed gaze. I slumped back in my chair.

Father told me that books on dragons were rare. He said that no one in town had any. Why would he lie?

---

After I accidentally cut Father, I didn’t see him for days. I could hear him downstairs, and he would open the door to the stairwell and leave me food, but he didn’t come to see me. I just sat there in my room, too morose to stitch or to play.

I was in bed, and Corvus hopped on top of me. He gently poked at me with his beak. “I’m sorry, I don’t want to play right now.” Father must hate me. I hurt him, I hurt him so he must hate me. He’s only feeding me out of obligation, but maybe he’ll soon realize that I don’t deserve food. I turned my head into my pillow so that Corvus couldn’t see me cry.

“*Sa-ad? Father make Arlo sad?*” He crooned, settling into a seat on top of me.

“No, it’s my fault. He didn’t do anything wrong.” The broken words were murmured against the pillow. I clutched it tighter.

“*Arlo bad?*” He nudged the blanket with his beak, an invitation to look at him. I did, wiping at the dried tears on my face.

“Yes, Corvus. Arlo bad.” I caressed his soft face with the knuckle of my finger, making sure my claws were pointing towards my palm and not him.

Then I heard the lock click downstairs. I didn’t move, thinking he was just going to leave food and then shut the door again. But then I heard his footsteps coming up the stairs. Corvus heard it, too, because he immediately scampered under the bed.

Father walked in carrying a tray of fruit in his hands. He smiled at me and set it down on the table. Cranberries and pears.

“Good morning, Arlo.” He said, taking a seat.

I blinked. “Good morning, Father.” He motioned for me to come sit, so I rose from the bed tentatively and took my seat across from him. He grabbed a pear and bit into it. My shoulders were clenched, rising up to meet my ears.

“Nina’s baby is finally here,” he said in between bites.

“That’s good.” I wished Corvus was still next to me.

“Mhmm. Aren’t you hungry, son?” I grabbed a cranberry and popped it into my mouth. “It’s a girl, just like they were hoping for. I helped her deliver the other night.” The other night, when Father hadn’t come home, I had stayed up and stretched as far as I could out the window to see if he’d come back. I sobbed until my throat was raw. I thought he finally abandoned me.

“What’s the baby’s name?”

“Gianna. Nina’s grandmother’s name.” Father went to grab another pear, and I saw his hand. Smooth. No healing wound, no beginnings of a scar.

“Father, your hand—I thought...” I reached out and grabbed his hand, scrutinizing the skin. Unblemished except for age.

“Arlo, I may not be able to use my magic to heal shattered bones anymore, but I can handle a small scratch.” My shoulders relaxed, and I took in a full breath. He was okay. I didn’t hurt him. The rest of the meal was just like it always was. He told me about his patients, and when I made jokes, he laughed.

After he left, Corvus fluttered out from beneath the bed. “Corvus! Did you hear that? Father’s okay!” I crouched next to him and beamed.

The crow looked less than enthused.

“*Father heal... he-al hand. Why yell Ar-low? Why no ju-just heal hand? Why make Arlo cry?*” He looked up at me with obsidian eyes.

I slouched back. “Because... because I did something bad.”

“*Accident.*”

“It doesn’t matter. I hurt him. He was right to be upset!” I crossed my arms and stuck out my bottom lip.

Corvus blinked at me. He opened his beak like he was going to say more, but decided against it and just nestled his head against me.

*“Oh-kay.”*

---

Father’s lie had crawled into the crevices of my brain. Every thought fell back to it. When I finally thought I had gotten past it, it creeped out from the shadows and held me in a vice.

It was midday when I turned to Corvus and asked, “Do you think Father has any books on dragons in his room?” He turned his beak to me. “I mean, I remember that there were a *bunch* of books in there, right?” Corvus nodded his head.

*“Ri-ight. Right.”*

“So maybe, you know... No, no, I’m not allowed down there.” Corvus blinked slowly at me. “I’m sure it’s for a good reason, and not because he has dragon books down there that he doesn’t want me to see for some reason. Yes. Definitely. I’ll just wait and hope that Father does find a dragon book for me in Ghora. Yeah.”

I crept down the stairs, the sconces casting churning tendrils of light through the air. Corvus hopped down the steps behind me, fluffing up his feathers cautiously. Fifteen steps. Fifteen more. My hand curled around the cool brass knob.

“This is a bad idea, Corvus,” I whispered, even though it had been my idea. He didn’t respond, he was staring at the door handle and shuffling his feet back and forth impatiently. I took a deep breath in, let it out in a small plume of smoke, and turned the handle.

His room was dark. Sunlight struggled to creep in through the crack in the window shutters, illuminating nothing but dust in the air. I stepped into the room, which smelled of dried

plants and incense. My eyes struggled to focus as I stumbled towards the window, undoing the latch and opening it just enough so the room was lit.

It looked similar to how I remembered it as a kid. Drawings of plants and anatomy pasted onto the wall, stacks of books on the floor. His bed was unmade, and what seemed to be breadcrumbs were nestled into the folds of the sheets. An imposing desk stood across from the bed, littered with curling pieces of parchment, various plants, and half-filled vials. A branch was hung above the desk, and various herbs were strung from it to dry. Father told me something about drying herbs, once. You always have to hang them upside down so the medicine is pulled out of the stem and into the leaves and blooms.

Corvus stepped into the room cautiously, making sure his small talons didn't step on any of the parchment strewn across the floor.

“Corvus, if you see any drawings that kind of look like me or see a book that says ‘dragon’ on it, tell me, okay?” He looked over at me and tilted his head a bit. “Horns, horns,” I held my hands up to the curving protrusions on my head to emphasize, “Look for drawings of things with horns like mine.” This time his eyes glittered and he nodded, hopping off.

I began searching as well, careful to keep my tail tucked close to my body so it didn't knock anything over. I leaned over to read the titles on a stack of books. They were mainly reference books on gardening, herbs, and the human body. There were a few references on magic, but they were at the bottom of the stack and covered in a thin layer of dust. I pulled out the one at the very bottom, careful not to topple the whole tower. I flipped open the pages to discover it held biographies of famous magic healers. There were people who could cure blindness, erase disease, even grow back lost limbs. There was a small ache that appeared in my

chest then. Father was so talented in his youth. If he had gone to seek out a master, would he have been able to do these things, too?

Sighing, I placed the book back at the bottom of the stack. Moving to his desk, I found notes on patients and diagrams circling areas where pain was complained about. There was also a box, which I opened to reveal small slivers of paper. But when I examined further, I realized they weren't written in father's handwriting.

*Dr. Harland,*

*Thank you so much for treating my husband. Ever since he began taking your medicine, he's been able to move better. He used to struggle to get out of bed, but now he can even go with me to the market again. Thank you so much for all you've done for us.*

The rest of the papers had similar contents. Each was written by a different hand, but they each thanked Dr. Harland for helping them. The letters became older, the paper more fragile and yellowed, the deeper down in the box you went. I smiled, then replaced all the letters and closed the box. It was weird to see someone refer to him by his name and not 'Father'.

We continued searching for a while, but found nothing about dragons. I peeked out the window to see the sun creeping lower on the horizon. Corvus was flapping above me to examine the pictures pasted higher up on the walls. I turned back inside, and Corvus landed on the bed, shaking his head at me.

*"Stra-ange,"* he rasps.

"No, maybe not. Maybe books on dragons are hard to come by." Corvus blinked at me in response. The sun continued his downward crawl, and the light in the room shifted. Corvus suddenly began to caw, hurriedly flapping over to a tall stack of books. "What? What is it?" I turned, seeing something glint in the light.

Rushing over, I gently picked up Corvus and moved him out of the way to get a proper view. Towards the bottom of a stack, mostly hidden from view, was a book with the word *Dragons* written on the spine in gold.

“*Mine! Mine!*” Corvus flapped his wings in anger.

“Corvus, no, this is what we were looking for! It’s about dragons!” Corvus settled down a bit at that, but still tried to crowd around me to stare at the gold accents. I gently removed it from the stack, turning it to look at the cover. It was simple, just the title embossed onto it, but my heart was racing. Corvus cawed again, so I responded, “Okay, okay, I’m opening it.”

And I did. The pages fell open in a graceful arc, revealing drawings and watercolor pictures. The creature was lithe, lean and strong muscles visible under endless rows of scales. It had a tail that looked like mine. Long black talons like mine. Reaching, curling horns like mine. And wings. Wings that stretched out like a cloud, wings with sunlight peeking through the thin skin of them, wings, wings, wings.

I looked back to the stack of books. The one that had been above this one read *Amputation*. The scars on my back suddenly felt strange, wrong. I hurriedly replaced the book, closed the window shutters, and grabbed Corvus. My breath was coming out in fast, shallow puffs of smoke as I rushed up the stairwell, slamming the door to Father’s room behind me. *He wouldn’t. He wouldn’t have done that.*

I reached my room and set Corvus down before rushing to the windowsill. I smothered my face in the snow collected there. *He didn’t.* The cold seeped into me, trying desperately to ground me. *That would’ve been cruel.* The snow was rapidly melting around my cheeks, turning into a wet slush. *I could’ve been able to fly.*



I raised my head, panting. Corvus pecked at my leg. “He didn’t. He wouldn’t do that, right, buddy? They’re just birthmarks, like he said.” He blinked at me before nuzzling his beak against my calf.

“*Sor-Sorry, Ar-low.*”

“No, there isn’t anything to apologize for. They’re birthmarks! They’re just birthmarks!” I could feel my voice raising, and I hated it, I felt fire stirring in my chest, and I *hated* it, I—

I turned my head back to the window, letting the... the *anger* ignite out of me. I screamed. I screamed with every ounce of breath I had. Fire plumed out of my mouth, enraged tendrils arching towards the sky, the ground, everything. My face was burning up, and the sudden brightness from the fire made my eyes water. But I kept screaming until all the oxygen left my body and I had to stop, slouching against the windowsill as I gasped for air.

All of the snow around the tower had melted. The windowsill was now just wet stone, and there was a wide circle on the ground where brown grass peeked up. The fire inside was gone, leaving only emptiness. Tears welled up, falling down to join the melted snow on the window. I stood there crying as Corvus watched me, occasionally nuzzling my leg for support.

*I could’ve been able to fly.*

---

I realized later what books were above the *Amputation* one. In the moment, I had been so focused on that word, what it could mean in conjunction with the marks on my back, that I didn’t register everything above it. They were parenting books. Books on how to care for infants, how to teach your toddler, how to talk to your teenager. The entire stack was full of books on how to best raise a child. How to best raise *me*.

The sun had set now, the snow already collecting on the windowsill again. I sat with my back against the wall, my hands hugging my knees to my chest. Corvus pecked at me, trying to

get me to unfurl from my position, but I felt like I might fall apart if I didn't keep holding myself.

"I don't understand," I murmured. "He loves me. Doesn't he?" I paused for a moment. "You wouldn't do that to someone you love." The tears came back again, and my shoulders heaved. "It hurts, Corvus. It hurts."

The lock clicks downstairs. My breath gets caught in my throat. *Thump, thump*. He knocks the snow off his boots. I wipe my face, trying to hide the tears. The second door opens. I stand up, force myself to breathe. He's walking up the steps. I sit in front of the furnace, watching Corvus totter under my bed as Father opens the door.

"I brought a real treat for you today, Arlo!" He says with a smile. I stare at his crow's feet for a moment before I look down to his basket, which today holds buttery croissants.

"Wow! Thank you, Father." I try to imbue life into my voice, but Father's smile falters and I know I failed. I should be excited. I want to be. The baker almost never has croissants; she says they're too complicated to bake. But I just feel... heavy.

"Arlo? What's wrong?" He sets the basket down on the small dining table and walks towards me. Different emotions battle each other in my chest. Anger, fear, guilt, love. They swirl and crystallize into sharp edges, cutting away at me. I choke out a sob, trying to hold it back, but the tears come again.

Father struggles down to the floor to sit next to me, putting his weathered hands around me and pulling me into a hug. I can feel his fingertip resting above where the mark, the scar, is. I throw my arms around him. I want to curl my hands into his jacket, want to hug him as hard as I can, but I'll hurt him if I do. He strokes my back until the sobs recede.

"What's wrong, son?"

I sniffle against his shoulder. “I just had a hard day. Can you tell what dragons look like again?”

Father sighs, releasing me. He starts to stand, but falls a bit, so I help him to his feet. He sits down in the rocking chair. “Of course.” He tells me the story he’s told a hundred times, of tails and talons, of horns and heat. *Maybe this time, he’ll say dragons did have wings*, I think. But he doesn’t. It’s the same as it always is.

“Why did you never seek out a sage? To teach you about healing magic.”

“You just want me to rehash old tales all day, do you?” He chortles a bit and shakes his head, but I know he isn’t annoyed. He tells me these stories over and over even when I don’t ask him to. “My father died right before I was going to set out. I had to stay and be with my mother.”

“But she died soon after that.”

“Yes, she did.”

“Why didn’t you look for a sage then?” He rocked back in his chair.

“It wasn’t important anymore. You are my life’s purpose, Arlo. I didn’t need to seek anything out after I found you, not even a sage.”

I looked down at my hands. I had cut myself. Blood was pooling from where my talon had punctured the skin. I wiped the blood off onto my pants.

“Why were you so upset earlier, son?”

“I told you, I just had a bad day.” Corvus’s eyes glint from under the bed, and Father glances at him, his eyebrows furrowing for a split second.

“Why? You can always talk to me.”

“I know, Father. I just want to be alone for a bit, if that’s okay.”

He sighs, huffing out a breath as he stands. “All right.” He walks to the door, but before he leaves he looks over his shoulder at me. His gaze meets mine, and I look away. The door clicks shut.

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The next few days, Father began to notice something was off. I had trouble looking him in the eye. I’d start crying seemingly at random. But what probably tipped him off the most was that I wouldn’t tell him what was wrong.

Father had always been my confidant. My closest friend, until Corvus flew along. Until recently, there had never been secrets between us. Well, on my side anyway.

“*Sa-ad?*” Corvus asked.

I waited a moment to respond. I heard Father open the door to the stairwell. But he only walked up fifteen steps, opening the door to the washroom.

“How could I not be, buddy? He... he lied to me. He might’ve *mutilated* me.” A knot formed in my throat at the admission. Corvus turned blurry as I fought back tears. He nudged me with his beak.

“*Bad ma—man.*”

I wiped at my watering eyes, “No, he’s not a bad man.”

“*Why no-ot?*” Corvus blinked up at me.

I opened my mouth, but my throat closed up. Why wasn’t he a bad man? Why am I defending him? I don’t know if he cut off my wings for a good reason, or just because he... because he didn’t want me to leave.

“I don’t know.” My face fell into my shaking hands. “I don’t know. Maybe he is, I don’t know.”

The door opened. Father's cheeks were ruddy, his brows pushing down into angry lines. Corvus fluttered behind me as the breath left my body.

“What is this?” He asked.

I rushed to wipe away my tears, contorting my face into a facsimile of a smile. “Nothing, we were just talking—”

“About how *bad* I am?”

“No, it wasn't like that!” My voice was so fragile, I almost didn't recognize it as me when I spoke.

“I was wondering what made you start lying to me. I suppose it should've been obvious.” He released a humorless laugh. “I knew since the first moment that thing flew in here it was a bad influence. You were never disrespectful until it did.”

I thought back to when Corvus first met Father. The first time I defied him, choosing to keep flying in my makeshift wings instead of sitting next to him.

“I have tried so hard, Arlo. Everything I do is for your sake. But this is how you truly feel? You talk behind my back about how bad I am? How do you think that makes me feel?”

Apologies tumble out my lips, but he cuts me off before they can reach him.

“I never should have let you keep that damn bird.” He stalked towards me, and I pushed myself away, away, away until my back hit the frigid stone under the window. Corvus looked at me, his black eyes steeling in resolve, then he stepped in front of me, stretching out his wings and letting out a defiant *caw*.

But Father kept coming even as Corvus flapped his wings and screamed his heart out. His hand shot out, snatching Corvus by the neck.

“No!” I tried to clamor forward, but Father was out of reach. Fear sluiced through my veins like a paralytic. I just stared at Corvus’s black, bugging eyes.

“This thing is the reason you’ve been distant? You’re listening to what a dumb animal tells you over your own father?” He shook Corvus’s struggling body as he spoke. Sobs wrecked my body, and my lungs were so small that no matter how much I tried to breathe I couldn’t get enough air. “Get up.” When I didn’t move, he yelled even louder, “Get *up!*”

I rose to my feet. “Come here.” I walked towards him. His free hand shot out and grabbed one of mine, bringing it to touch Corvus’s soft feathers. His hand closed around mine, trying to push my claws into Corvus. I resisted, my fingers freezing before they could puncture him.

“Father, what are you doing?” His leathery hand struggled against me.

“This is for your own sake, Arlo. You need to be strong enough to cut poisons like this out of your life. This filthy thing filled your head with lies to separate you from me. I love you, Arlo! I’m doing this because I love you!”

Father’s other hand pushed into mine. A shrieking *caw* rang in my ears. Something warm began to coat my hands and drip to the floor. I looked down. Corvus looked at me with his small, black eyes. My claws were buried in his frail body.

I screamed, ripping my hand away. Corvus fell to the ground, hitting it with a sickening *wet thump*.

“I am the *only* one who will always have your best interests at heart,” Father said. I collapsed, my body shivering. “I’m protecting you, son.” Corvus’s eyes were closed now. “Everything I have done is to protect you.” Blood was pooling around him.

“I don’t understand,” I murmur, my body starting to rock back and forth in a futile attempt at soothing me. “I don’t understand.”

Father releases a harsh huff of a sigh before crouching next to me. “Stop this nonsense. This is no reason to get so worked up. It’s a bird.”

My eyes clamp shut, squeezing with the effort of trying to hold in my tears. Father pulls me in for a hug. His body is warm, like the blood on my hands.

I feel sick. I want to lean into his arms and squeeze him back, but he just—no, I just killed—

Father took my face in his weathered hands, pulling my gaze from the broken corvid to him. “This is for the best.”

I feel the words *Yes, Father*, try to push forth from my lips out of habit, but I trap them behind my teeth. This isn’t for the best. It can’t be. Can it?

My lungs feel small, and my breaths escape from me in short hurried bursts. I try to draw in big gulps of air, but it still feels like I’m suffocating.

“Calm down. I’ll take the bird outside. You don’t have to worry about it anymore, son.” He rose, and my vision was blurry from the tears and I couldn’t breathe and my whole body was shaking, shaking, shaking.

He reached for Corvus’s body.

“Don’t touch him.” The words came out meekly.

“It’s fine, I’m just getting rid of it so you don’t have to look at it anymore—”

“I said DON’T!” The last word was punctuated with a plume of flame leaving my mouth. Father pulled his hand back, his eyes widening for a moment before returning to steel.

“Fine. Get rid of it yourself.” He left, slamming the door behind him.

---

I was forced to scrub my best friend’s blood off the floor that night.

His corpse stared at me as I did.

By the time the sun began to color the sky pink, my eyes were red and my throat was raw from the endless weeping. Eventually, I was too tired to cry. There were no more tears left. Instead, there was an empty chasm that my emotions jumped into, leaving me numb. Everything was still and silent as the morning rays cast into the room.

“I’m sorry, Corvus. I’m so sorry,” I whispered. “I should’ve pulled my hand away.” Restless waves of despair churned deep in my chest. “I shouldn’t have let this happen.” I reached out and stroked his feathers with the knuckle of my finger, my claw pointing in towards my palm. It was so familiar, but so different. His soft feathers were now slick with blood. His black eyes, usually filled with mirth and mischief, were dull.

It was my fault. Or no, maybe it wasn’t. The thought felt treacherous and slimy. A sharp pain curled behind my eyebrows as I tried to delve deeper into the line of thinking. Was I right?

Another tear fell down my cheek. I wanted Father to be right. I wanted it to be true that everything he did really was to protect me. I wanted every awful thing he’d done to have been done for my sake.

But it felt like they weren’t.

I shoved the snow from my windowsill into a pile on the floor and wrapped Corvus in muslin before setting him on top of the small white hill. I didn’t know what I’d do with him yet. I just knew that I couldn’t burn him into ash.

Then I walked down the stairs and knocked on Father’s door, my weight shifting between my feet.

He opened the door a crack, just enough so I couldn’t see inside.

“Can you come up? I don’t want to be alone right now,” I muttered.



He grunted an assent and soon we were in my room; Father sat in his rocking chair and me on the floor by the furnace. I busied my hands with my embroidery piece. I was adding a crow flying next to the dragon.

We sat in silence for a while, my hands going through the motions of stitching as my mind was focused on the fact that Corvus's corpse still remained in the corner.

"Are you done being mad yet?" Father finally asked.

"No. I'm sorry, I'm not." The needle shook as it pulled the black thread through the fabric.

"Why did you lie to me, Father?" The monotonous creaking of the rocking chair stopped. I didn't dare pull my eyes from the embroidery hoop.

"I have never lied to you, son."

"You said books on dragons were rare. Corvus told me they're not."

"You can't take a crow's word for truth, boy. It's just an animal; what does it know?" I swallowed a lump that formed in my throat as he muttered something under his breath.

"Then where'd you get a book on dragons?"

"I knew you lied to me. You know not to go in my room."

"Why? Is it because you didn't want me to see that book? I've been asking you for a book on dragons my whole life, and this whole time you had one right underneath my room. You lied too."

"I thought this disrespect would end once that bird was gone." His voice raised, and I felt tears well up in my eyes. I wouldn't let them fall. Not again.

"Why did you cut off my wings?"

“For your own safety! Imagine what could’ve happened to you if you had flown off and someone found you? You’d be dead, Arlo.”

Dead like Corvus.

My body shuddered, heat warming in my chest. “So what exactly is the plan, then? I’m supposed to live out my whole life here in this tower?”

“Look at me when you’re speaking, son.” His voice was as frigid as the snow. Fear was trying to constrict itself around me, but I focused on the heat slowly building inside me as I turned to face him.

“What is the plan, Father?”

His eyes narrowed, seemingly surprised that I wasn’t backing down.

“Of course you won’t stay here forever. One day we’ll move from this place.”

Will we? Because this is the first time he’s ever mentioned something like that.

“Even if we did, will I ever be able to be around other people? Dragons?”

Father was silent. He looked away, his finger coming up to stroke his chin as he thought. It was answer enough.

The crow was finished. I removed the muslin from the hoop, staring at the scene. Black thread flew above the green, both flying off to somewhere I’ll never see. A horrible pressure pushed against my stomach, and I let out a sob.

“Arlo?”

The realization was quick. It struck like a hard punch, leaving me breathless. Lonely. Afraid. I was going to have to leave. I was going to have to be alone. Staying wouldn’t be fair to Corvus. To myself.

I’d rather go out there and face being hunted than live like this.

Father's hand found my shoulder, and I pulled him into a hug. He patted my back as the tears I swore wouldn't fall drenched my cheeks.

"What's wrong, son?" His voice was so kind now. So different from just a few moments ago.

"I'm sorry," I said, pushing him back into his rocking chair. Before he could say anything I shoved the muslin into his mouth, the thread of the dragon catching against his teeth.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, but you'll talk me out of it if I don't, I'm sorry."

I ripped one of the blankets on the floor and bound him to the chair with it. He struggled against me, and I remembered how weak he was. How frail.

Father didn't do all of this to protect me. It was to protect himself, by keeping me at his side so he wasn't alone, so he had control over something. Corvus knew that, maybe from the beginning. It was why he was dead.

Because he got me to admit, that just maybe, my father was a bad man.

I fought against blurry vision as I gathered my things. Clothes, blankets, toothbrush, and a comb. When I reached for the jar that held all the glimmering trinkets Corvus had gifted me over the years, I had to stop to compose myself before placing it gently in Father's old rucksack.

I hesitated before I descended the stairs, turning to walk over to Corvus's body. I gently picked him up, cradling his small, broken frame. Then I went down, opening the door to Father's room.

Setting the rucksack down, I went to the front door. My free hand curled around the chilled knob, and I hesitated for a moment before opening it, a part of my mind screaming *no, you aren't supposed to do that*. But I did, opening the door and stepping out into the frigid air.

It was quiet. I supposed it had always been quiet, but now it seemed oppressive. It felt like even a thought would be too loud at that moment. I trudged through the wet snow, gritting my teeth as I felt it touch my woefully unprotected tail.

Burying Corvus didn't feel real. The numbness in my fingertips from digging in the snow felt muted, like I was just taking this body for a ride instead of owning it. I dug until I reached frozen earth, and I blew flames until it was soft enough to continue digging. I unwrapped the muslin from him. And I placed my best friend, my only friend, in that hole in the dirt.

A crow flew down from the treetops, landing delicately along the edges of Corvus's makeshift grave. Then another. And another, until a whole murder surrounded us. Most stared down at the lifeless bird, but one crow held my gaze. Shame forced me to look away.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean for this to—I didn't..."

Cacophonous crow song began to fill the air, drowning out the sounds of my sobs. The crow that stared at me nuzzled against my hand.

*It's okay.*

When the song died down, I dug into the pockets of my cloak, pulling out an old, weathered coin.

"This was the first gift he ever gave me," I explained to the somber audience before I placed it on his still chest.

"Thank you, Corvus. Thank you for being my friend. Thank you for..." I choked back a sob. "Thank you for making me realize the truth. I love you, buddy."

And I tucked the little bird into the ground until I could no longer see his lifeless black eyes. The rest of the crows flew away, and I was alone.

I moved to the old stump that Father cut wood at. The ax was stuck in the bark, but a quick jerk pulled it free. A few logs were scattered around the stump, and I set one up on the stump. *Thwack*. I saw my father grinning as he brought me back a present. *Thwack*. I saw myself curled in his lap as he read me a story. *Thwack*. I saw an infant with small, leathery wings and a man with a scalpel. The infant morphed, changing into a small crow whose cries echoed as the man with the scalpel came closer and closer to his wings—*thwack*. I gathered the cut logs and returned to the tower.

Father looked up at me from where he was bound in his chair. His eyes were red and puffy, still wet from his own tears. He watched me imploringly as I slowly put the logs in the furnace, poking at them until they began to catch.

“I told you. I can chop wood way faster than you can, Father.” He didn’t even try to respond against the fabric gagging him; the only sound was the crackle of the fire. “I wanted to let you know that I’m leaving.” Sparing a glance over to him, I saw his eyes squeeze shut, but not before a tear escaped them. “And that I understand why you did everything that you did. I don’t forgive you for it, but I... I understand.” I didn’t know if that fact made everything better or worse.

“I know that you think everything you did was for me, but it wasn’t. Do you understand?” I turned towards him, bringing my hand up to his cheek. He leaned into it, his frame softly shaking. “I’m sorry that I can’t let you say goodbye. If I took the muslin out of your mouth, I know you’d talk me into staying somehow and I just...” My breath stuttered. “I just can’t do that. I’ll send someone to come untie you soon. I don’t know how I’m gonna do that yet, but I won’t let you rot away in this chair so don’t worry. There’s a bunch of wood in the furnace,

so you won't get cold. I wish I could untie you so you could eat, but I can't let you follow me, so just bear with it a bit longer."

Father opened his eyes, and the same honeyed brown as my own stared back at me.

Swallowing back my tears, I threw my arms around him.

"I love you, Father."

And I did. But I also hated him. Both were true.

Then I rose, turning to grab my rucksack. I walked out into the world. My chest ached, and I had no idea where I was going or what I was going to do, but things were going to be okay.

The blanket of snow on the earth was thinner.

Spring was just around the corner.