

The Dragon Apprentice

I heard the soft thud of the Dragon's claws on the worn stones of the town centre as I watched miserably from my window. My mother had never let me out of the house on the days the Dragon would land. The Dragon would collect the mail to be taken up to the Dragon Keeper. Most of the letters were: 'Thank you, oh, great Dragon Keeper!' or 'WE LOVE YOU DRAGON KEEPER!'. It was compulsory for every family to produce at least one letter each fortnight for the Dragon Keeper so that he felt appreciated and stayed in his role. If he ever quit, the Dragon would cease patrolling our island for enemy attacks. Mother would say "It's for your own safety, Nilsa dear, you know how your father was eaten by it, and it will eat you too if you get too close." It scared me how calmly she would say that. Our house was three blocks away from the town centre, but if I sat with my face pressed against the window and peered between the roofs, I could just see the tips of the Dragon's inky black wings.

"I wish I could see you up close," I muttered under my breath forlornly. The Dragon turned, and I could see its golden eyes staring right back at me, then it leapt into the air and was gone.

Ignoring my mother's warnings, my friend Visha and I snuck into the woods to pick flowers. Our noses led us to fragrant wildflowers in a beautiful clearing. I was picking bellflowers and Visha was leaning over the buttercups when I heard something.

"Did you hear that?" I asked Visha.

"Yes," she replied, "But it's probably just a lizard," she continued.

"Did you see that? It was a shadow. What if it's the Dragon!"

"It's way too small for it to be the Dragon," Visha said. Someone came sprinting into the clearing, crushing a bush that emitted a strong fragrance that I was sure someone could smell from Shadowcrest. He almost ran into me and dropped something long and skinny wrapped in brown cloth. For a second our eyes locked; I could see fear, he was running away from something. Then a blood-curdling roar broke out. I spotted another shadow... and *this* one did belong to the Dragon. When I looked back for the person, he and his mysterious cargo had disappeared. I heard a light thud on the grass behind me, I swivelled around only to see the demise of my father, I took in the Dragon's black scales and wings, and its golden eyes staring right back at my own, its eyes widened and it knelt?

'*My Master,*' I heard it say. Who am I kidding? A Dragon can't talk, yet I was sure that was its voice, and it was so loud. I looked at Visha.

"D- did you hear that?" I stuttered.

"Hear what?"

"It- it talked."

"Nilsa, this is no time for games."

"I'm serious!"

'*We need you; our staff was stolen, we need it returned, it is very valuable. We must fly to my cave at once, but your friend cannot come.*'

"How are you talking to me?" I asked the Dragon.

'*We communicate through our minds. All you must do is angle the thought to me.*' The Dragon got back up and stared at Visha, I decided it was best to do what it said, so I tried the mind talking thing.

"Okay, I will go with you, but I want to set up some rules first. 1) No eating me. 2) Assuming I am riding you, don't drop me. And 3) Do not in any other way try to kill me."

'*Yes Master, I can follow all of those rules.*'

"Okay, I'm going to tell my friend the plan, her name is Visha." The Dragon nodded, and I told Visha what was happening

"What, no! You – you can't!"

“Visha, I’m going. It promised not to kill me, and it keeps calling me ‘Master,’ that’s got to mean something, right?” I took a step towards the Dragon, but Visha grabbed my wrist before I could get any closer.

“You can’t go with that... that creature! It’s too dangerous! Remember how it ate your father, do you want that to happen to you?”

“I don’t need to be reminded of what happened to him,” I replied angrily.

I placed my hand on its side, and it adjusted its position so I could climb onto its back. I pulled myself up and swung my leg over its backbone, and with a little difficulty, I was on. I glanced at Visha, she glared at me, then the Dragon leapt into the air.

Other than holding on for dear life, flying was fun, I could hear the birds, and the view was magnificent, but I was kind of dizzy from the high altitude.

“Sooo, um what’s your name?” I mind spoke to the Dragon as we were flying.

‘*My name is Brina,*’ she said.

“That’s a nice name, I’m Nilsa.”

‘*I know.*’

“How?” I asked, confused.

‘*Your father has told me a lot about you. The information came from the letters your mother sent him.*’

“My father is dead because *YOU ate him,*” I retorted.

‘*I think your father should explain this.*’ And with that we landed in her cave.

The ‘cave’ was more a house in a mountainside. It was decorated with a red and white rug with a black dot in the centre. There were curtains tied to the entrance and three rooms on opposite sides of the main room, two of which had doors and the other big enough for Brina to go through. There were bookshelves lining the walls and yet another rug in front of the fire, two chairs, and a small coffee table around the hearth, one smaller chair, and one bigger rocking chair on which sat a middle aged, small man, with olive skin, black hair and blue eyes, his appearance reminded me so much of my own.

“Ah, Nilsa,” he began, “I have been looking forward to this moment for so long. Obviously I know who you are, but you don’t know who I am. I am Alastair, your father.”

“N-n-n-n-no! My father is dead! Because-” I pointed at Brina “Because she ate him!”

“Look Nilsa, your mother and I, we decided that she would tell you that fib so you wouldn’t find out you’re the daughter of the Dragon Keeper.”

“Wait, you’re the Dragon Keeper?” I asked trying unsuccessfully to hold back a laugh.

“Yes, who did you think the Dragon Keeper was?”

“I don’t know, I guess I just imagined someone... tougher?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he cried.

“Do you really want me to answer that?” I asked.

“Probably not.”

There was a deafening silence that I finally broke when I asked, “Why didn’t mother tell me that I was your daughter from the beginning?”

“Because believe it or not there are some rules Dragon Keepers must follow. Come, let me tell you,” he beckoned me to sit beside him.

“Your mother and I were forbidden to tell you because the rules are that the Dragon Apprentice, which is you, because you’re the child of the Dragon Keeper, cannot know they are the Dragon Apprentice until it’s time to start their training. Now *is* that time. In your room is The Dragonopedia. It contains all the protocols a Dragon Keeper must abide by. Read it. Learn it. You *will* need it!”

I emerged from my room to find Alastair studying a map on the coffee table. "Ah, finished reading have we?"

"Yes," I replied. Alastair got up and took the Dragonopedia from me to put it back on the shelf.

"What are you doing?"

"Just looking at the map. It's the best way to see the world other than exploring it. Because as you know Dragon Keepers cannot leave the cave unless they are desperately needed elsewhere." I could tell that was a lie. You can see all the way to the south coast and miles of water beyond that, just from the window in my room.

"But you can see so much from the windows," I said sceptically.

"Seeing it from a window is a lot different than being in it," he said with a nervous chuckle. Yeah, no chance that I'm staying in here for years, I've been refrained from the world for so long because of the Dragon and now I know that I'm safe, there is no way that I'm staying in here for the rest of my life.

"Do you have a saddle?" I asked.

"Excuse me? Did you even read the Dragonopedia? Because it says that you can't leave the cave--"

"I know what it says, but I also know that it doesn't say that rule applies to the Dragon Apprentice."

Once we flew far enough away, I began to mind-talk to Brina.

"I'll take you around the island," Brina told me.

"I wanted to talk."

'Oh, what about?'

"Alastair"

'I'm sure he's trying his best. Also, it's best if you call him 'father' when you're talking to him.'

"Thanks for the tip but I'm not talking about that aspect of him. I know he's hiding something and when we first met you said, *'our staff has been stolen'* what does that mean?"

'I didn't know your father didn't intend to tell you about it.'

"Why not?"

'I cannot say.'

"Because you don't know or because you're not allowed to?"

'I'm not allowed.'

"I felt something change, earlier today, I can't explain what, but....." I trailed off.

'When was this?'

"About half an hour before you found me."

'That would have been the staff when it was stolen.'

"What does the staff do? If I can feel when it's stolen, then it must be something important."

'The staff protects the kingdom from our enemies. It creates an invisible boundary that anyone with the blood of our enemies cannot cross.'

"Right," I said aloud. Then I saw something. "Brina, what are those ships doing on the east coast?"

'I don't know, but it looks like they're baring the Shadowcrest flag.'

"That's not good," I replied. As we flew, I saw movement through the trees, "Brina did you see that?"

'See what?'

"The movement in the trees."

'No.'

"Okay, um, just land here and then, um, stay there."

'O-okay,' this was the first time I had ever heard her unsure of something, but still she obeyed.

Once we had landed and I dismounted, Brina stayed, and I cautiously walked to the small clearing where I saw the movement and crouched behind a tree. My tree was just in between a small wooden wagon and a camouflage tent, there was a horse tied to a tree on the other side of the

clearing. Suddenly a guard walked out of the trees with a man in tow, and I realized with a jolt that it was Alastair.

I watched as Alastair was forced to the ground, with his hands tied behind his back, the guard called out something in another language, and someone inside the tent called back something that sounded like, *'I'm coming you imbecile!*'. And with a flourish of her arms, out of the tent walked Visha. She looked much taller than the last time I saw her, she looked older as well, and she was wearing a full set of Shadowcrest armour. A sly smirk crept up her face.

"Ahh, here he is, the mighty Dragon Keeper," She spoke as if the words were poison.

"You'll never get away with this, they'll notice that I'm not flying the Dragon,"

"Oh, I think your... *daughter*, will take care of that for me," she said, her voice smooth and calm.

"You see, she is... was, a very... trusting person, she's also not a very good fighter, meaning she'll be easy to defeat," she told him bluntly.

"You'll never defeat her, she'll win this-"

"Silence!" Visha swiftly grabbed her dagger from its sheath and hit Alastair with it, a crimson trail of blood started running down his cheek, "We're winning this war, and you're going to watch us do it." Visha grabbed Alastair by the shirtfront of his tunic, brought him to a wagon, chucked him in, and tied the rope around his wrists to the side of the wagon. Visha walked back into the tent with the guard following right behind.

I silently crept towards Alastair and sliced the rope with my dagger.

"What are you doing here?" Alastair whispered furiously.

"Saving you!" I whispered back, "And getting that staff," I added. I walked cautiously to the back of the tent and listened.

"What do you mean they can't get it on the boat!"

"The general said that they couldn't get the staff over the sand of the east coast and on the boat. The staff isn't going to get into the boat let alone go over to Shadowcrest."

"Then we'll just have to claim the land as our own."

"You mean as Shadowcrest land."

"Yes, as Shadowcrest land!"

"It's just you're Morinwaynian, and-"

"I'm no longer a citizen of Morinway, I have turned, I am now a citizen of Shadowcrest. Now enough chat, let's go to war."

So, the staff is on the east coast, that explains all the ships. Now Alastair was by my side.

"Come on. The staff is on the east coast, let's go get it," I grabbed his wrist and pulled him into the trees.

We mounted a concerned Brina. "Take us to the east coast, where the ships are, the staff is there," I commanded her, and we were off.

As we soared over the ships Brina let out a deafening roar. The guards scattered and I saw something glint on the ground.

"That's it, that's the staff!" Alastair exclaimed. Brina swooped down and I held onto the saddle tightly, reached out and grabbed the staff from the ground. Brina turned tightly as soon as I clasped the staff and flew swiftly back to the cave. The Shadowcrest army recovered from their shock and ran in pursuit.

We landed on the lip of the cave opening, Alastair led me to the red and white rug and pointed at the black dot in its centre. What I assumed was a dot was actually a hole in the rug and floor. Brina pulled the rug away revealing cracks spouting from the hole; they felt different, an ominous buzz was emitted by them.

“Put the staff in the hole, it will reset the boundary,” he instructed looking over his shoulder, “Hurry, they’re coming!” I rushed over to the hole and dropped it in. The cracks at once filled with a bright blue light; I saw the army of Shadowcrest being thrown back into the ocean as the boundary set itself back up.

“You did it!” Alastair exclaimed, “You found the staff and saved the whole kingdom of Morinway.”
“Yeah, I guess I did.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of THAT!” Visha screamed as she charged at me with a spear in her hands. I dodged, she changed course and charged at me again. Brina pounced on her, pinning her to the ground.

“Tell her to let me go Nilsa,” she commanded after a pause.

“What?! No!”

“This is between you and me, not your wretched Dragon,” with a begrudged sigh I snatched the sword out of the holster on Brina’s saddle.

“Let her go Brina.” I told her and she reluctantly released Visha and backed away. Visha immediately sprung to her feet, glared at me and said:

“No cheating now, this is a fight between you and me.” Then she charged. Visha thrust, I blocked,

“You’ve improved,” she declared.

“Thanks.”

I thrust; she dodged by moving behind me. I spun, she lunged, I fell over and rolled over a stone, *ouch*. At once I jumped to my feet, but Visha ran into me, knocking me to the ground right at the edge, and she sprang onto me, spear raised.

“Kill me right now then, I dare you,” I panted.

“What?” Her shock gave me enough of a gap to kick her in the stomach, which sent her flying backwards into the centre of the cave, almost taking the staff down with her, but landing on her spear. I could see the blood seeping through her clothes and dripping down her fingers and I felt a pang of sympathy for her. I stepped closer.

“Don’t take another step,” she fumed.

She got up gasping for air, but still she continued the fight. She ran at me spear angled right at my heart, I jumped out of the way, but with her momentum she kept going, she tried to stop but it was too late. Visha flailed her arms to no avail. She screamed as she fell over the edge, onto sharp rocks below. And just like that it was over, all of it. After a moment of silence, it all hit me, everything that had happened over the past two days, and I burst into tears. Alastair rushed over to me and gave me a comforting hug, I leaned into his chest.

“Thanks father,” I murmured, “Now I know it comes with sacrifices, but I think I’m cut out for this Apprentice thing after all.”