

Tiff soared high above town, peering below for anything unusual. She swerved back and forth, letting MacKenzie keep up with her. Below her, the Irish warrior flew in her raven form.

"We're looking for anything weird, right?" Tiff asked.

"First lesson. Use bird speech," MacKenzie replied, using the subtle communication of avians.

Chastised, Tiff turned her attention to the town below her. From her high vantage point, she could see everything from the mall to the reservoir to the north. She circled over Rachel's house, hoping to spot any faerie activity.

"If we do find faeries, what do we do?" Tiff asked.

"Drive the pests back to Flussora by convincing them they shouldn't be here," MacKenzie answered. Her hard tone

Tiff didn't speak again until she spotted three faeries in the older downtown area.

"There!" she screeched.

"Wait for me, then strike," MacKenzie ordered.

Tiff watched from half a mile above the trio of faeries. The small colorful sprites hid on a low rooftop, fluttering from place to place. One teal-colored faerie seemed interested in something in a side alley; the other two watched pedestrians walking on the street below. Tiff recognized one of the pair—a blue-tinted faerie with silvery moth wings—as Nettle, who she's seen in the Early Risings Cafe.

"Take the straggler. I'll handle the other two. Now!"

Tiff plumeted, talons out. She'd never struck at anything as an eagle before, but the dive became an exhilarating rush. As her shadow fell across the teal faerie, it glanced skyward with a

horrified look. A second later, Tiff's talons snapped shut on her prey.

Tiiff didn't crush the hapless faerie, but kept a firm grip on her as she rose into the sky. Below her, MacKenzie reverted to human form, a sword in her hand. Tiff avoided watching MacKenzie. Instead, she circled in the sky, waiting for MacKenzie to return.

Her captive babbled something in a high-pitched voice that had a droning sound mixed in, but Tiff couldn't understand her language. *Now what do I do with her?* Tiff wondered.

"Bringin' home a souvenir?"

"That was quick, MacKenzie."

"That it was. One fled back to Flussora."

"So what do we do with this one? I can't understand her babbling."

"Oh, she's alternatin' between cursing your entire ancestry and beggin' to be freed. I'd bet she doesn't have the gift of immortality, otherwise she'd have vanished by now." MacKenzie peered at the cityscape below. "Let's land on that office building and have a chat with your new friend."

Tiff followed MacKenzie to the downtown rooftop, where MacKenzie transformed into her human form and held out her hand. Though she dreaded what the fierce woman would do to the small sprite, Tiff released the faerie into her hand, then transformed herself.

MacKenzie conversed with their captive in its language. Tiff couldn't understand any of their words—she still hadn't mastered the ability to understand languages like the others—so she gazed at the downtown skyline from the roof.

She spotted the bank building where her stepfather used to work. Could the faeries have anything to do with Jonathan's firing?

"Tiff!" MacKenzie startled her from her mental wandering. "I need you to fly back to where we caught her. She said something about someone hurt in the alley."

Tiff pointed to the faerie still in MacKenzie's hand. "What about her?"

"I'll return her to Flussora." The fierce woman sighed as she met her gaze. "Don't worry. I won't kill her. But you'll need to handle whatever in the alley. I may get delayed."

Tiff transformed back into her eagle form and took flight. She winged her way back to the alley, and perched on the roof's edge, near where she'd first caught the faerie.

On the ground below, she spotted a man sprawled on the ground, leaning against one of the alley walls. With her sharp vision, she noticed blood seeping from the man's abdomen. He wasn't moving.

"Ohmygod!" She dropped to the ground, transforming as she approached the ground. She pulled her cell phone from her Pocket and called 911. "Hello? I found a man in an alley. It looks like he's hurt bad."

The voice on the phone responded, "Which alley, miss? What is the man's condition?"

Tiff transformed just her eyes into an eagle's, and read the street sign. "It's Chapel Street off of Hart Avenue." She returned her eyes to normal, and searched for a pulse. Fortunately, she'd learned basic first aid from her mother. "He's alive. It looks like a stab wound in the abdomen."

Two hours later, she sat in an Asian Buffet with MacKenzie, poking at food. The vision of the mugging victim refused to leave her mind, and the ordeal of giving a statement to the police compounded her anxiety. "I don't get it, MacKenzie. Why do people hurt each other over stupid things? Someone attacked that poor man for his cell phone and wallet."

"There's a bit of the demon in all of us. It's an ugly truth I've seen throughout the long

years. It shocked our little friend too—she saw the stabbing. Between that and you seizing her, the bug had worked herself up into quite a state."

"She saw the guy who did it? So she could identify... Never mind. That's a stupid idea, isn't it."

MacKenzie didn't dignify her half-question with an answer.

Tiff stirred her wonton soup for the third time. "Why can't we do anything about people like that? I mean..."

"Because, despite what people in the past thought, we're not gods. We have special talents, but we can't change human nature. We can't change the world, no matter how much we wish we could."

Tiff stared at her plate, but the sushi and spring rolls offered no answers. Tiff tried to put the mugging out of her mind. "Did the faerie say anything else? About why they're here?"

"Not much. Once we've rejoined the others, I'll tell them what she did say."

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