

A STRANGE SYMBOL

Satreih was focused on his prey, a deer with huge horns. If he were to be stabbed by them, it would seriously hurt, like being stabbed by a spear. Not that he had ever been stabbed by a spear, but he knew it would hurt. Satreih nocked an arrow and aimed it at the deer. He pulled back on the bowstring and let the arrow fly. It hit its mark. He smiled in triumph. Rasnir's lessons had been well learned.

He made his way over to the fallen deer, but stopped suddenly when he heard a snake hiss. He looked past the deer's corpse, and he felt the blood drain out of his face. A somewhat small, two-headed cobra was staring straight at him. It had focused, angry, red eyes. The deer had fallen on it, but the weight didn't kill it. It just made the snake angry. The snake slithered out from underneath the corpse. Satreih nocked another arrow. The snake lunged, barely missing his feet. He tripped, and fell off of the small hill that he and the snake were on. The slope of the hill was covered in thorns. They continued to pull at his jacket and pants.

Satreih landed at the foot of the hill. He had an abundance of small cuts, and he was a little dazed. He looked up at the devil snake, smiling. It wouldn't be able to make its way down the hill; there were too many thorns. He said a few taunting words to the snake, for his own amusement. It tried to get to him, hissing again in frustration. The two-headed cobra turned around and started to head to its home.

Satreih laid there for a few minutes, trying to catch his breath. *What a freaky cobra!* He sat up, and looked around. He was in a clearing. Everything about the forest here was the same, except in the middle of the clearing there was a small mound of dirt with a stone placed on top of it. *I'll ask Father about this later.* Then he saw something strange. At first he thought it was gold, but he quickly proved himself wrong. Gold was not perfectly round. This odd thing was. It was just colored gold. Satreih cautiously walked up to it, his bow held out in front of him for protection. It didn't look dangerous, but he had learned his lesson time and time again.

Satreih warily watched this thing for nearly ten minutes. After the time was up, Satreih was convinced that it wasn't going to hurt him. He picked the thing up and his curiosity spiked a little higher. He heard sounds coming from it. He dropped it in surprise. *There's something inside this thing!* Hitting the ground, however, didn't seem to hurt it. Instead, it seemed to help it.

It started to shake. There was a blinding light spewing from the top, which had cracked a little. The light got so bright that Satreih had to cover his eyes. There was a splitting sound. Satreih felt parts of the stone hit him. The light stopped. Everything seemed normal. Satreih cautiously removed his arms from his face. He blinked once, then twice. The thing was gone; its remains were scattered throughout the clearing. He realized that the thing had been an egg. Standing in its place, blinking in the sunlight, was a golden baby dragon.

The dragon squeaked and walked up to him. It had sharp ridges snaking down its back. The dragon had bright green eyes. It was a little wobbly, and it plopped down on his feet, instantly going to sleep.

It's so cute! But, what should I do with it? I'm already attached to the dragon. Hey, my injuries from the fall are completely gone! Satreih picked up the baby dragon, who was already fast asleep, and put it into one of his coat pockets. The pocket was

plenty big enough. *I have to hide any clues that the dragon was here. I wonder what I'll tell Rasnir.* Satreih picked up all of the eggshell pieces, which became very fragile now that the dragon was not using them. He crumbled up all of the pieces and made them even more miniscule. He tossed the golden dust into the nearby river.

Satreih climbed up the hill that he had fallen from, using his bow to knock the thorns out of the way. The thorns seemed somewhat magical. They seemed to shiver whenever they were hit, and shrank back down like well-trained puppies.

Satreih remembered the two-headed cobra that had attacked him earlier. *I hope it went away. I don't want it attacking me or the baby dragon.* When he got to the top of the hill, he saw the corpse of the deer that he had slain. There were already flies on it. *Good, no snake.* Satreih knocked the flies out of the way with his bow. They fell down, dead. He wiped the fly guts off of the deer. He picked up the deer's corpse and carried it back to the cave that he lived in with Rasnir.

Satreih was very close to the cave. He could feel the spray from the waterfall that guarded it. The waterfall was spring-fed. The water was crystal clear and crashed into the deep lake a hundred feet below. During the summer, the water was gorgeous. He loved to swim in it during that time.

The only way to get to the cave was to swim. Without thinking, Satreih placed the deer's corpse on the surface of the water, holding it up. He put the still sleeping dragon on top of it. It was nearing winter. Shivering somewhat, Satreih held his arms over the baby dragon, protecting it from the water of the waterfall. He pushed the deer's corpse through the waterfall, and was soon on the other side. He replaced the baby dragon in his pocket.

The cave was enormous, in both width and length. Anyone who entered had to walk a mile to get to the end of it. Satreih and Rasnir lived at the very end of the cave. The cave itself was beautiful. There were unique structures of stalactites and stalagmites. The rushing water above slowly eroded the rock. The water dripped down the stalactites and formed a small pool. They could hear the steady sound of it dripping. The sound was soothing at night. There was enough light throughout the cave to see. The lighting was always the same, a small gloom. Just enough to see, but not too bright to have trouble trying to sleep.

Satreih finally made it to the back of the cave, with water droplets still dripping off of him, and found his father building a fire. Next to him there was a single squirrel.

Without looking up, Rasnir asked, "Catch anything good?" He knew he shouldn't have bothered asking. His nose had already told him. The scent was making his mouth water. He was slightly curious about a charcoal-like scent, but the smell of the deer was overpowering.

"Yup."

Rasnir glanced up to see what his son had brought. "Oh, you show-off. You know that it's getting close to winter. The prey's harder to find."

"I didn't have a problem."

"I see that. Good job. My lessons were well learned, I guess."

"Yeah, they were. Here you go." Satreih plopped the deer's body down next to his father. "I want to tell you something."

Satreih told his father about shooting the deer with an arrow first try, the devil two-headed cobra, his fall down the small hill with all the thorns, and finding the small mound of dirt with a stone on top. Satreih left out the part with the egg and the dragon. He didn't know what his father would think of that.

Rasnir thought, *It's time to tell him.* "That mound of dirt with the stone on top is the grave—of your mother. She was killed by the Spies of Mosiania. They smell of corpses. I found her body after she was attacked. By the time I got there, she was dead. She was holding you; you were a baby. I took you and buried her. Your mother, Chikara, came to me in a dream and asked me to care for you. I am not your father by blood. I don't know who is, or if he is still alive."

Satreih looked at the ground, thinking. He had always thought Rasnir was his father.

Rasnir let him think for a while, then asked with a raised eyebrow, "If you fell down that hill with all the thorns, why aren't you cut?"

Satreih had forgotten about that. He looked up quickly. "Um...I'm an elf. Remember, it took me a couple of hours to get back. I guess elves heal a lot faster than men do." It was mostly the truth. He was grateful that Rasnir bought the small lie.

Satreih felt the dragon squirm in his pocket and heard it squeak softly. He winced, thinking Rasnir would have heard it, dreading his keen hearing. His father didn't notice; he was too intent on eating his cooked deer's leg, hungrily gobbling it up.

Satreih breathed a sigh of relief. He got up and said, "I'm going to go outside to get some fresh air."

As soon as he was outside, he took the baby dragon out. It squeaked again, and nipped at Satreih's fingers, a move that clearly showed that it was hungry. It was nearing dusk. He knew that was around the time dragons hunt.

Satreih climbed a tree, placing the baby dragon on the highest branch. He told it, "Stay here. I'll get you some food." Satreih climbed down, and the dragon stayed. As he walked away, he felt the dragon's eyes follow him.

A half hour later, Satreih heard a voice that seemed a little unsure of itself.

I'd like a rabbit, please.

It took him a while to recognize the voice, but then realized that it was the dragon's. There was a hint of power to the voice. Satreih used the same mind-speech back and asked, *Are you sure? A rabbit is bigger than you.*

The dragon said defensively, *Just because I am little doesn't mean I can't eat my food!*

Okay, if you want a rabbit, you'll get one. It might take me a little while to find one, since rabbits are in their burrows and it is getting close to winter.

I don't mind. I'll wait here.

Oh, hey, I need to give you a name. Hmmmm, how about Gorddeon?

Uhh...no.

Hastlefast?

No.

Jannicoleo?

No.

Oh wait... you're a girl, aren't you?

Yes, I am, thank you.

Satreih paused, thinking. *Okay, if that's the case, how about Chikara?*

Ooh, I like that.

Chikara it is, then. Oh, hey, I found your rabbit. Satreih had just found a burrow with a nice, fat rabbit inside. It was fast asleep. Satreih shot it with an arrow. He started to carry the dead rabbit out of the burrow, but then he spotted a snake out of the corner of his eye. It was the same two-headed cobra. *Ugh! What is it with this snake?* Satreih didn't mean to use mind-speech, but Chikara heard him anyway.

I'll get it.

The snake coiled up, ready to attack Satreih again. A curious thing happened. The snake shot him a surprised look, and started to writhe in pain on the ground. There was a sickening snap. The writhing instantly stopped.

Chikara spoke to him again with a hint of amusement in her voice. *Still don't think I can eat a rabbit?*

It—might have been a coincidence. The snake could have had a heart attack or something.

No, you fool. That was me.

I know. I'm just teasing you. Thanks for killing the snake!

No problem. Hey, what are those weird people doing going into your cave?

What!?

Chikara's voice was suddenly cut off. Satreih didn't hear any more mind-speech from her. Fearing that something bad had happened, he quickly made his way back to the cave.

The trees that were around the lake were burned and destroyed, including the one that the baby dragon was in. Satreih called out to the dragon, "Chikara!"

Over here.

Chikara was crouching under a fallen log, shivering with fear. Satreih moved the log and picked her up, stroking her to calm her down.

"What happened?"

These cloaked figures approached the waterfall and went inside. They smelled of corpses. They dragged a man out of the cave. I tried to kill the cloaked figures with my mind-powers, but I can only kill things my size or smaller. Besides, even if I could kill bigger things, they were too powerful for me.

"Cloaked figures that smelled of corpses?"

Yeah. Why do you ask?

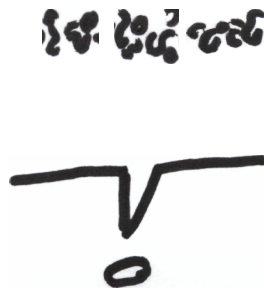
"My father said that there are some insanely evil people by that description. I hope he's all right!"

Fighting his fear, Satreih placed the baby dragon back on the ground. She seemed calmer now than she had a few minutes ago. Satreih said, "Stay here and eat your rabbit. I'll be right back."

Chikara nodded. She watched her new friend go underneath the waterfall and started to devour her tasty meal.

Satreih held his bow at his side. The cave that had been his home for sixteen years seemed less inviting than it had a few hours ago. Some of the stalactites and stalagmites that had been growing for generations were broken. Satreih looked at a broken stalagmite and saw that a skull had been carved into it with unrecognizable magic.

After a while, Satreih made it to the back of the cave. "Father!" he called out. The only answer was the howling of the wind. The logs that Rasnir had used to build the fire to cook the food were scattered everywhere. There was a pool of blood on the floor. Satreih saw a small piece of paper on the ground. He picked it up. It didn't make any sense whatsoever. It looked like it was drawn hastily, and some things were cut off.



Satreih walked out of the cave with the small piece of paper in his hand. He started to walk toward the dragon, but he didn't need to. Chikara stretched her wings. She glided and landed on his shoulder. She was already the size of a small cat.

Satreih showed her the symbol and asked, "Can you translate it?" He didn't bother asking Chikara if she could read or not. Even though she was not even a day old, she could already speak fluently, kill freaky, two-headed cobras with mind-powers, and fly.

Chikara stared at the symbol for a while, and mind-spoke, *No. We need to find somebody who can. Do you know of anyone?*

"Father did say there was a witch who is pretty good at translating things. But he wasn't sure. He read about her in a book. Even if she is real, she lives in Rasiamoramisa. That place is all the way on the other side of the Sakki Desert and the Yuzr Ocean. Rasiamoramisa is owned by the dwarfs." Satreih added softly, "There is some hatred between dwarfs and elves. Even if we do make it there, I doubt that they will let me see the witch."

If what you said is true, that distance is far too long to walk. We should wait three days. By then I will be big enough to carry you through the air. We will deal with the dwarfs when it is time.

It was a long three days' wait. Satreih was impatient and anxious, knowing that Rasnir could already be dead. Satreih was smart enough to know that he would need a lot of arrows if he were going to make this trip. He made more by taking the Laxuivies bark off a tree. That type of bark was very dangerous. If anyone just leaned on it, the parts of

their skin that touched it would immediately bleed. When Satreih took it off, his hands bled. He laid the bark on the ground and used a sharp rock to carve it into little points. Satreih cut off some tree branches and fashioned them into arrow-sized staffs. He then tied the deadly points onto the homemade staffs with vines. He used the feathers of an eagle for the feathers of his arrows. After two days had passed, Satreih had made a total of two hundred arrows. His quiver could not hold any more than that. After he was done, Chikara leaned up against him and his hands immediately stopped bleeding.

Chikara could no longer perch on his shoulder. She was as tall as Satreih. She could already hunt for herself. Hunting for her was easy; she used her mind-powers to track prey from a distance and had already killed a good-sized boar. Chikara was a half hour's flight from it, but she easily found it. At night she leaned up against Satreih, trying to keep him warm while he was making his arrows. Snow had fallen. Satreih never slept.

Finally, it was time to leave. All the preparations had been made. Satreih was excited. He had never ridden a dragon before. He was also a little anxious because he didn't know if Rasnir was all right, and because he had never left his forest and didn't know what to expect.

Chikara allowed him to jump on her back. He sat on the crest, between two ridges. Satreih held on tightly to the ridge in front of him. Even though it was sharp, he wasn't cut. Chikara stretched her wings and leapt into the air. It was the best ride Satreih could imagine. The wind was constantly in his face, and he enjoyed watching the ground far below him, watching it slip away so fast. At first, Satreih got altitude sickness, but then quickly got used to it. He was grateful that he wore his coat. Chikara and Satreih soon left the forest far behind them.

Ahead of them, Satreih saw a village. Since the wind was raging, he used mind-speech to talk to Chikara. *We should stop at that village and ask for directions. You should hide though; people might get scared when they see you.*

"Ahh!" Satreih grabbed the ridge in front of him harder to prevent himself from falling off. It didn't take him too long to figure out that Chikara was laughing at him. *What's so funny?* He demanded.

I thought men never asked for directions!

I'm an elf.

Same thing. As she stopped laughing, Chikara landed on a plain close enough to the village so that Satreih could walk, but far enough away so the people wouldn't see her. *I'll wait here.*

Soon Satreih arrived at the village. It was an entirely new experience. When he lived in the forest with Rasnir, they were completely isolated. They had to fend for themselves. But here, the village was very busy. People were rushing about, determined to get something accomplished. There were people at the side of the street selling foods that Satreih had never seen before. Some people were doing grueling work in the fields on the outskirts of the village. They didn't look very happy. Others were herding cows.

Someone cried from behind him, "Look out!"

Satreih dove to the side just as a wagon pulled by horses barreled through where he had been standing.

The man driving the wagon looked back and said, "Watch out, sir. The street gets busy." The wagon disappeared around the corner.

Satreih moved to the side of the street and joined the other people. He whispered under his breath, "I'm way out of my league here." He walked around, looking for someone who could give him directions to Rasiamoramisa, but everyone was too busy.

A delicious smell reached his nostrils. His mouth watered and his stomach grumbled. Satreih hadn't eaten at all in three days. He had been too busy making his arrows. Satreih looked in the direction of the smell. A food stand was selling very juicy meat. Satreih walked over to it and read the sign. *So, he thought, this meat is Calsi. Twenty vedis? What the...?*

He asked the seller politely, "Can I have some Calsi, please?"

The person selling the meat grunted and said, "Only if you have twenty vedis."

"What's a vedi?"

The vendor looked at Satreih strangely. He shook his head and started waving at other people to come over to buy his food, completely ignoring Satreih.

Disappointed, Satreih walked away.

Chikara asked, *Any luck yet?*

No. Everyone is too busy. Hmmm...do you know what a vedi is?

You ask me as if I should know the answer to that.

Oh. I guess I'll keep looking.

A woman waved in Satreih's direction. Satreih turned around to face her. The woman blew past him as if he weren't even there. Confused, Satreih watched her as she fell into a man's arms. Satreih had thought that the woman was waving to him. Even though he was some distance away from them, he could easily hear what they were saying.

"You're back from the desert! How are the Hasinis?"

"Not good. Their clan is dying. They were hit with a deadly plague. I didn't see Prince Kaskin, or his parents for that matter. An upper level scout has been left in charge. I gave the goods to him instead."

"You could have helped them! You're a doctor!" The woman asked softly, "How many are left?"

Her husband said sadly, "Only around fifty." He added, "I hate saying this, but no one should approach the Hasinis for a while. They're suspicious of outsiders, thinking that we would bring in another disease that would finish them off. My old friend, Mithal, tried to attack me."

Something distracted Satreih from the conversation. A gruff looking old man was inside a cottage, beckoning to Satreih from a window. The cottage was run down, and the windows were grimy. The old man had a long and scraggly beard. His eyes were shrunken. Not knowing any better, Satreih entered the cottage.

The old man asked, "I've never seen you around in this village before. You have no idea how much you stand out. What are you doing here?"

Satreih answered, "I'm just looking for directions to Rasiamoramisa. Do you know how to get there?"

The old man snorted. "Of course I do. But, if you were smart, you would turn right back home." He looked at his guest for a moment, and then said, "I see you have no other intention but to go to Rasiamoramisa. Your face tells me."

The old man walked into another room. Satreih stayed where he was. He could hear the old man looking for something.

The old man returned, carrying a map in his hands. “The orange dots indicate the dangerous areas. Do not go there.”

Satreih thought, *Great. Orange dots all the way around Rasiamoramisa.*