

Resolution

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Nearly a month had passed since their outset from Southcliff before they were finally able to catch sight of their destination. Silverdale had originated as nothing more than an old, nameless military fort that had been built to watch one of the numerous passes through the heights of the Ordis Mountains that bordered the north of Arvador. That had all changed, however, when rich veins of silver were found coursing through the stone around the settlement. It had gone from a mere fort to a veritable boomtown as prospectors flooded in from the surrounding lands. Almost a century had passed since then, and while much of the rush had left the town less of a bustle than it had once been, it was still a wealthy source of the metal that fueled Arvador's economy.

As they climbed the rest of the way up the well-rutted road through the snow, Valorie had to let out a low, appreciative whistle at the way the old, carefully-maintained keep loomed over the town proper and cast an immense shadow over them as the sun dipped below the eastern mountains for the night. A thick stone wall that was separate from the older fortress enclosed much of the town, and though it was clearly a more recent construction, it still looked entirely capable of withstanding the rigors of a battle should a band of brigands set their eyes on the wagonloads of silver-flecked ore that were hauled down the mountains for processing. "Gods' Blood," she muttered under her breath at the sight of the flat, grey fortifications, "You'd think they don't want visitors..."

Dawn chuckled at her apparent trepidation. "Good thing, then, that we're welcome."

She sighed and nodded. "Yeah. It's just that this place is protected like a city thrice its size. How much of a problem do they have with bandits this far up in the cold?"

"People will go to extreme lengths for a little silver," the unicorn reminded her, "You should know that better than most. The walls and the guards we've been passing are usually enough to dissuade any thieves, though. It would probably be safer for them to smelt it up here and then transport the bullion under a more heavy guard, but it would be too expensive to cart wood or coal up this high. These people have enough trouble keeping their homes heated, let alone foundries burning."

"Yeah, I guess..." she admitted, "It just seems like their trying awfully hard to make a statement."

"An ounce of prevention, Val." Dawn quipped, "Besides, Silverdale *is* still a military posting. Not all these guardsmen are local militia. The kingdom certainly has a vested interest in the safety of these roads. Much of the silver in our pockets likely came from the mines that lace through all this rock."

"Well if the king has so much of a presence here, why are we the ones here to solve his problem?"

Dawn rolled her eyes at the exasperated acidity in her tone. It was cold, and the air was dry, and she was certainly grouchier than she had any right to be. "Because this problem of *ours* is probably beyond the scope of his abilities or those of his soldiers. The letter I was sent wasn't from any official of the kingdom, it was from a friend from the academy. If he needs my help, it will likely need a more delicate solution than swinging a sword at it."

She scoffed and elbowed Dawn in the side, trying to rein in her grumpiness. "And yet you brought me along. Swinging swords at things is a bit of a specialty of mine."

Dawn pushed back at her and snickered. "Maybe, but you have other talents that I appreciate. Besides, with our propensity for digging up trouble where there should be none, I think it's a good precaution to have someone along who knows what she's doing with the pointy end of a stick."

"Fair enough, fair enough." she said, throwing her arms up in mock surrender. They were nearly at the sturdy, wooden gates, and she stood there at Dawn's side, watching her breath mist in the icy air as the wizard informed one of the armored men at the gate of the purpose of their visit. They had apparently been expected, and they were allowed inside the walls with little fanfare.

They walked through narrow streets for a time, gradually approaching the further walled inner city before Dawn halted them, leaning toward her to whisper. "I need to speak to the governor or the magistrate. The Ordo Arcanum doesn't keep friends by operating without the knowledge of the people in charge. It's not going to be a problem, but it might take me a while to wade through the bureaucracy. If my noble guardian would be so kind as to secure a place for us to sleep, there's an inn near the old fort's gatehouse called the Barracks. It comes highly recommended."

She bowed deeply, sweeping her arm out and flourishing her cloak. "Fear not, milady. You shall have a place most comfortable to rest your weary head on your return, upon my life and honor."

Dawn snorted hard enough to nearly aspirate her tongue. "For someone who keeps turning down the Duke's knighthood, you sure are an ass."

"Ah, but my lady wizard, I am no mere ass. I am what asses aspire to be: The queen of all asses."

"I suppose I stand corrected." Dawn grumbled as she crossed her arms beneath her hefty chest, "Very well, *your majesty*. I'll just go and make sure we don't get in trouble with the law while you find someplace that can hold your *royal ass*."

She wiggled her eyebrows with a lascivious grin. "You know you love it."

Heaving a sigh full of insincere fatigue, Dawn stepped closer and wrapped her in a warm hug. "Yeah, and I love you too." Valorie returned the embrace and let herself be pulled into a quick, fond kiss. "Try not to get lost, alright? I'll be back, and I'll cook you up something special if you have a cup of tea waiting for me when I do."

"I'll consider it." she replied coyly as the wizard peeled herself off of her and sashayed up the path to the keep. She watched the other equine's shape gradually recede, strutting with supreme confidence, and she felt the familiar, disconcerting pang of instinctive loss that she got every time she had to watch Dawn's shrinking silhouette. The spell that the wizard had used to keep them both warm against the winter's unusually rigid temperatures slowly faded with distance, and as she turned to tramp in the direction that had been pointed out to her, she wrapped her thick, dark green cloak further around her and shrouded her horselike features more deeply in the folds of its hood. A warm fire and hot meal was certainly on her agenda for the near future.

As she walked down one of the larger paths that crisscrossed the town, she stole furtive glances from beneath the brim of her hood. The buildings were all well-maintained, but despite the hour of the day, there were few people out and about, and those that were looked haggard at best, afraid at the worst. She certainly could have blamed the cold and the ice for much of

people's apparently foul mood, but the expressions on the faces she saw held a sheen of nervousness that tightened her gut into a knot of anxiety to match theirs. It unsettled her, and the people she attempted to draw into conversation were either in a hurry to escape the chill in the air or seemingly off-put by the way she towered over most of them. Horses, or anyone of her stature, seemed a rarity this far into the mountains.

The Barracks seemed to live up to its namesake, and a small plaque by the door proclaimed it as exactly that, one of the first living quarters for the original military presence in the fort. It was an unappealing, rectangular building, but the light shining through the few windows and the sounds of muffled conversations seemed inviting enough, so she stooped through the entrance. The statuesque equine was pleasantly surprised that she was able to stand at her full height after she shut the doors behind her, and as she pulled down her hood and shook the snow off of her shoulders, she swept an appraising eye around the room.

The structure had clearly seen some heavy renovations in its time, and there remained little evidence that the inn had once housed a bunch of grim soldiers. Fires burning brightly in a pair of long hearths along opposing walls and several brazen chandeliers provided heat and light to the entire common room, and the aura of unease that seemed blanketed over the town seemed less pronounced in the groups of people huddled over drinks around sturdy, round tables. It was almost homey, and she sauntered over to the bar, where an impressively burly ursine man in a pale, grey apron lounged and polished a pewter mug with a surprisingly clean cloth.

As she approached him, he straightened his back, and she had to look up at him as he rumbled in a gravelly bass, "What can I help you with, stranger?"

His tone was friendly enough, and she leaned casually on the weathered wood as she answered, "Food, something to drink, and a room for two, preferably with a bed I can fit my legs into, if you don't mind."

The barkeep chuckled. "I know how that feels. Don't worry. You wouldn't happen to be with the Wizard Greyholme, would you?"

She cocked a surprised eyebrow. "I might. What makes you ask?"

He held up his hands to placate her sudden wariness. "It's just that we don't get many non-regulars this far out, is all, especially from your kind. Your stay's already been taken care of." He produced a simple, iron key, and she accepted it with a few numb blinks. "Not much of a variety this time of year, but I can promise dinner will be hot, at least."

As he lumbered off, presumably to see to his appointed tasks, she pocketed the key and pushed herself off of the bar. Finding a chair sturdy enough to hold her above-average frame, she sunk down at a table near a corner of the smoky room, trying not to draw too many stares in the process. She failed, but she was used to sidelong glances, and as long as people were more concerned with the bottoms of their cups than her, she paid them no mind. Stretching her legs out under the table, she loosened her cloak on her shoulders and let out a heavy sigh, musing at how soft she had gone, that a little inhospitable weather had left her pining for home.

Her wry introspection was only interrupted by a tired-looking feline woman dressed in muted colors, who bore with her a tray laden with a sizable bowl of rather unimpressive stew, a hunk of crusty bread, and a tankard full of what she guessed was supposed to be her drink. She brightened the cougar's evening with a piece of silver and warm thanks, and dug into her supper with gusto befitting her stature. She'd been starving all day for something more satisfying than the rations that she had brought along.

The stew was more like soup, thin and weak, but it had a few chunks of potato and what she hoped was sausage, and with the bread, which was actually quite good, it was enough to give

her stomach something to mull over while she awaited her wizard's return. She ate for a while in peace, stretching the fairly insubstantial broth as far as it would go for a few minutes, and she was only given cause to look up when a low, mellow voice spoke up in her vicinity. "Dining alone, milady?"

Stifling a surprised cough, she jerked her head in the direction of the person who she had certainly not noticed walking over to her. "Bones and Ichor!" she exclaimed, "You nearly ruined my favorite pants! Yes, yes, sorry. But if you'd like to remedy that, I certainly wouldn't mind the conversation."

With a lazy kick, she pushed a chair away from the table, and gave her guest her most winning smile. Considering how tight-lipped people around Silverdale had been so far, she wasn't going to turn away from the chance to learn a little. As if taken aback by her sudden hospitality, he only answered her with a numbed stare as he mentally recovered. It took him a couple heartbeats, but when he did, he beamed at her and dropped himself unceremoniously into the proffered seat.

She offered her hand, and he took it without the hesitation that many that were so much smaller than she possessed. His hand was worn beyond his years, and had little warmth to it, but it was freezing outside, so she forgave it. His grip was strong and confident, and she found herself grinning more broadly. By the bony horns that curled in on themselves to either side of his head and the wooly, dark grey fur that made him appear fluffier than he was, he was a ram. He was taller than most other morphs of a more normal stature, and broadly built. Though it was hard for her to tell through the thickness of his fur and his heavily-layered clothing, she suspected that there was not an insignificant amount of muscle on his stocky frame. His warm brown eyes sparkled in the firelight as he looked her up and down, and it was with enthusiasm that he spoke again. "My name's Morgan. It's refreshing to see someone who's not from around here, especially someone so lovely."

She chuckled and returned the courtesy of her name. His smile never faltered, and he motioned to her drink. "So... How is it?"

Her eyes followed his hand, and she shrugged. "I don't know. I haven't tried it yet."

"You should. It's my own recipe. Rivius buys almost all I brew, but I like having fresher perspectives."

"A brewer then?" she mused as she swirled the dark liquid around in her cup.

"More of a hobby, really. It gives me something to do when I'm not in the mines. It's expensive to have the ingredients transported up into the mountains, but it's not like there's much else to spend one's money on up here, especially in the middle of the winter. I prefer brewing to drinking."

"And the gods bless your kind, for without you, where could the rest of us hope to be?" she said as she lifted her mug to him and took a demure sip. What she tasted surprised her. She wasn't much of a beer girl, but what Morgan had managed to produce was actually delicious, a rich, dark ale, not too bitter and not *too* strong, with a hint of pleasant sweetness. "It tastes... fruity." she hummed as she went in for more.

His smile grew more enthusiastic. "There are these little berries that grow up in the mountains during the winter. Throwing a few handfuls of those into each batch really adds a regional taste, I've found."

She had to really resist the urge to lick her lips. It was like an apple and a strawberry were having sex in her mouth while floating around in a bath of already good beer. "You're not wrong,

I wouldn't mind being able to get this back in Southcliff. I know a few people who would kill to get their hands on something this delicious."

He laughed and relaxed back into his seat as Valorie indulged herself. "Not too many, I hope. I spend enough time worrying about other people's safety."

His smile slackened, and she peered thoughtfully at him over the rim of her mug. "I wouldn't imagine mining's a stressless occupation, that's for sure. I'll be honest, for a mining town, this place sure seems a little... quiet. I would have expected a bunch of drunk, rowdy miners dumping their silver into a row of kegs and ladies' underwear, but instead this whole area seems... gloomy."

"That's definitely the truth of it. No one's been in most of the mines for almost three months now, not since everything went to hells down there."

She tried to keep the way her ears perked up from being too obvious. "What happened?"

"Along a fresh excavation... the guys broke through a wall chasing after a pocket of good ore. It turned out to be some old cave network that was full of spiders and dusty old bones, a catacomb or something." Valorie took another drink and listened for as long as he would talk.

"Miners are almost as bad as sailors when it comes to superstition, and no one was willing to go down there after that. We closed it off as best we could and branched down another vein, but the foreman had to raise pay just to give them enough reason to go down there again. That's when people started disappearing. At first people thought it was just a drunkard fallen down the mountain. It happens sometimes, but then people just kept going missing, not showing, and then heading down into the mines and never coming back up. The higher-ups closed down the whole branch after that, and no one's been allowed in since. It's what they wanted, if you ask me."

Valorie drummed her fingertips on the table as she mulled over his words. "Who's they?" she wondered, "You sound like you have a few theories as to what might be happening."

He scoffed and leaned in toward her, casting his eyes to either side. "The miner's would tell you that they woke up some ancient spirit, a ghost or wight or some such nonsense. I say that none of them could tell a disturbed spirit from a restless elemental, and that they're full of it. I'm of the opinion that this is all someone trying to keep people away from those catacombs so that they can get at all that abandoned ore. I saw the walls. They practically glowed silver, veins of it as thick as your arm. Greed is a powerful motivator, especially for someone who gets paid by the pound."

Nodding thoughtfully, she quietly agreed with him. "That does seem likely. Have any of the miners been questioned?"

"Of course," he answered with a stiff affirmative, "The best magic the magistrate could afford proved each man's innocence. The guards in charge of what little investigation there's been are convinced that the first man to disappear is the man behind it."

"Why don't the guard gather a team and go there and clear them out then?" she muttered with a puzzled frown, "Murders and thievery seem like fairly appropriate motivators for the local militia to band up and hunt them down."

He nodded like she was the only sane voice in a sea of hopelessness. "That's just it! They won't! These backwater mountain-folk are too afraid that some avenging spirit will hunt them down for defiling some ancient grave to do anything about what's happening under their noses!" He heaved an exasperated sigh as he slumped back in his chair, releasing his breath into his hands as he scrubbed at his bovine muzzle. "I'm sorry," he hissed, "I've just not been having the best few weeks, and I'm... tired. I'm afraid I'm not going to be a very enthralling conversationalist."

Valorie felt the sudden urge to reach out her hand to comfort him. The poor sheep sounded broken all of a sudden, buried under the weight of stress and hopelessness, and he scratched his horn as he looked down in embarrassment, avoiding her eyes and apologizing again. "Well, if there's anything I can do to help, let me know. I promise I'll do what I can."

His gaze hardened as he took her in anew, and his sharp eyes seemed to pierce into her soul. "You would, wouldn't you?" He smiled again, an expression that, despite his earlier use of it, she had doubted could ever again touch his features. He even chuckled, albeit a little forlornly. However, he grinned even more hugely as his eyes snapped up to something behind Valorie's shoulder, and he nearly tripped over himself trying to rise from his chair.

"She would. She really would." a happy voice intoned near her ear. A hand slid over her shoulder, and she found herself giggling in response to the little bloom of excitement that filtered into her mind. She looked aside at Dawn, imposing and regal despite how melted snow dripped from her cloak, and instinctively threw an arm around the wizard's waist to draw her close. "I see you two have already gotten acquainted."

Morgan's sturdy, cloven hooves scabbled for purchase on the floorboards for a moment before he could make himself stand under his own power. "Dawn!" he cried joyously, "I'd know that aura anywhere!" He rushed to her and pulled her into a firm hug before the unicorn could react. "I'd say you haven't changed a bit, but I'd be lying."

Dawn returned his happy embrace for a brief moment before he peeled himself off of her to flick his eyes between the two equines. "I could say the same to you, Morgan, though I'd guess that your hooves are a little better suited than mine for all this rock and ice. I nearly fell twice just on the way here. I need to look into getting some proper shoes, with ice spikes or something practical."

"So you two know each other, I presume." Valorie mentioned as Dawn and the ram settled themselves into a pair of seats.

"Indeed." said the wizard fondly as Morgan flagged down the same feline waitress as before and politely requested more in the way of food and drink. "Morgan, Valorie. Valorie, Morgan. We attended the academy together for a time, and he's the one who sent me the letter asking for my help. How have you been, friend?"

He took a moment to digest that question. "I've been well, very well, better than I've been in a long, long time, up until just before I begged for your help. I was seeing... There was this... She... I'm in trouble, Dawn, more trouble than I've ever been in. It's bad."

The wizard sobered quickly and leaned forward to mirror Valorie's intense attention. "What is it? What's happened?"

He waved away the question. "We should speak in a more private location. It won't do to have people in a panic."

Valorie and Dawn both nodded grimly, and they remained mostly silent until the wizard's meal arrived, when they retired to the room that it turned out Morgan had claimed for them. It was spacious and comfortable, but the palpable tension in the air prevented her from enjoying the warmth of the space. As Dawn took a seat at a low table and ate quickly, hardly tasting the food before her and Valorie dropped her pack in the corner of the room and began pulling from it the things she liked to have on hand, namely her armor and weapons, Morgan flopped down on the foot of the lengthy bed and talked without interruption by either of his audience members.

"Gods... where to begin. I'm sorry for misleading you, Valorie, but I may not have told you the whole truth concerning what exactly was down there that's brought all this to a head. A few months ago, right before I sent you that letter, the miners stumbled on an old tunnel network.

At first we thought they were older mines, maybe Tremorian in origin, but the truth was a lot less benign than that. The first few miners that found it shot out of the mines screaming about bones and walls of silver. The mayor sent me down with some of them to see what all the fuss was. There was a *lot* of silver in that rock, but the whole place was clearly some sort of old catacomb. Parts of the walls were lined with bones, and it only got more eerie the deeper we got as we were looking around. The miners eventually spooked and took off, leaving me down there alone, which, I admit was probably for the best, because if they had seen what I had, there would have been a real panic on our hands."

He shook his head and buried his face in his hands, as if trying to unsee what he had seen. "The final chamber was lined with some ancient, glyphic language that I couldn't make out, and the room only held this huge altar in the center of it. It screamed demon, Dawn. You could feel the energy in the air, on the back of your neck, like there was something watching you, just waiting for you to screw up. I'd never seen anything like it, and I'd never been more scared." He paused, taking a deep, slow breath. "I got out of there, and got them to cordon off the whole thing while I worked day and night to seal off the tunnel we'd broken into. Before I could manage, though, the first person went missing. And then the next, and the next. At first I'd hoped that what I'd told you was true, that it was just some greedy miner trying to keep people silent and away from the hoard of silver in those tunnels, behind all those bones, but then things just kept getting worse and worse."

Valorie was transfixed. She had taken a seat across from Dawn and was staring in awe as Morgan poured his soul out. "One of the people who'd disappeared, their body turned up. It had been horribly mutilated, Dawn, like some savage animal had just torn it up, ripped it apart, but the worst thing was that the poor, innocent soul had been drained of all his blood. There was nothing left of him but a tattered husk. A few more turned up like that, never far from the cave, but then it started happening in the town. People just being murdered and exsanguinated seemingly at random, always in the middle of the night, and with no witnesses. On the magistrate's orders, I've done everything I can to keep people from panicking and doing more harm than good while I try to find out what happening, but I can't do it alone, and I wasn't lying about the superstitious nature of these people. None of the guards wants anything to do with these deaths, like if they ignore the issue it will be polite enough to just go away. I can't let this continue, Dawn, so I called on you for help as soon as I knew I was in over my head. If it is a demon, Dawn, I need the best conjuror there is. I'm glad you came, and I'm glad you brought someone big and scary, because I've never felt more small and alone. Gods' Blood, I make magelamps and enchant tunnel walls for a living! I'm not some inquisitor! I'm not even a full wizard! I can't... Dripping Ichor, I just don't know what to do anymore. It's getting so hard to just... stay sane."

The anguish in his voice was dense enough to hurt Valorie's heart just listening to it, and though she had been given a lot of information to digest all at once and she desperately wanted to make a petulant quip about how it always seemed to be demons, she instead held her tongue as Dawn rose from her chair to dip to her knees before the distraught sheep morph. "Of course we'll help you." she crooned in a tone that could only be described as matronly, "If it is a demon, we'll send it back to whatever hell it crawled out of, and if it turns out to just be some greedy sadist, I'll let my big, scary warhorse have a few strong words with him, and everything will be right as rain. I promise. Just take a breath and center yourself for me."

"Yeah!" Valorie chirped, trying desperately to raise a cheerful voice against the weight of the depression in the air, "Demons and sadists with unwholesome intentions are kind of a specialty of ours."

"Yeah..." he mirrored as he steeled himself and hid his tears behind a mask of good humor, "I guess this is pretty mundane for you both."

She snorted at the notion. "I wouldn't go *that* far. I don't know what I'd do if I had to deal with anything *mundane*, but a dark hole full of demonic vibes and dusty old bones?" She hesitated as she rose and strode across the room to sit next to him. "Yeah... I've been there one or two times, and I can't say I really cared for it. We'll help you with whatever we can, and we'll get everything straightened out."

"Thank you," said the wooly mage in a shaky whisper, "I've just had... better winters, that's all."

Dawn squeezed him in a compassionate hug and cradled his head to her shoulder. "Morgan, you idiot. Why didn't you just tell me things were this bad? I could have gotten here so much faster. I'm still working on getting teleportation down, but I *do* have people I can talk to in an emergency."

He sighed and withdrew from her arms to stand and clip lightly across the breadth of the room to lean against the windowsill. "I'm sorry Dawn. There's been kind of an escalation, and I'm still not sure I know what's wrong. Maybe I'm overreacting. I hope I am. It's just... It's really gotten to me. I'm a terrible mage; I'm supposed to be able to deal with this."

"A terrible mage..." Dawn scoffed as she hunted him back down, standing near to his side with Valorie opposite her, "Morgan, you wouldn't have been made a mage if you were going to be a terrible one, and from what I remember of our instructors telling you, the truth is quite the opposite. You're just... outside your area of expertise, but I'm here to help you, and I'm sure I can convince Val to lend a hand too."

"She can be very persuasive when she wants to be." Valorie said with a nod, "I might even be cajoled into using both hands, and then they're in for it."

Morgan huffed out a sharp breath, but after that, a small smile could be seen stretching his lips. "Thank you. I wish I had your confidence."

Dawn actually laughed. "Oh, no you don't. It gets her into far too much trouble."

"But I'm still here aren't I?" Valorie retorted with a defensive hand against her chest, "I like to think that says something about my track record."

"That you're too lucky for your own good?"

"Hey, I turned luck into a skill."

Dawn made a disgusted face at her, but wound up chuckling anyway, and Morgan just looked at them like they had lost their minds. After a heartbeat's worth of disbelieving stare, however, his eyes opened wide in wonder. "Oh..." he breathed, "It's so subtle, it's hard to see right away, but you two definitely deserve your link."

Blinking in confusion, Valorie watched Dawn swagger over to her and throw an arm around her waist, holding onto her like a prize trophy in a firm grip that gradually softened. "Yeah. The Archmage did the ceremony right after I got my stole. She's my life."

She felt a twinge of awkward discomfort as Morgan took them both in in an entirely new light. His eyes scoured her, and she felt herself heat in a rare, embarrassed blush. "Wow..." the ram said, clearly awed. "Would you just look at her? Her aura's almost brighter than yours, and it's so clear!" His previous heartache seemed to disappear in a wave of giddy excitement, and he

laughed as he threw arms around both of them. "I always knew you would find someone who could keep up with you!"

"Sure... it only took fifty years, but I managed."

Eyes shining wetly with apparent happiness, he looked up at Valorie before nervously clearing his throat and peeling himself off of the larger woman. "You're lucky."

"Like I said," Valorie said with a theatrical flip of her hair, "I turned luck into a skill."

"If only more of us could be so talented," he sighed as he seated himself back at the foot of the spacious bed, optimistic and energetic.

"The world would be a better place, for certain," Dawn commented as the wizard slowly paced the length of the room. Valorie could practically see the gears moving under the unicorn's long, auburn waves. "Before we make any sort of conclusions, I need to see this room you found. I need to see the writing and the altar, and I need to feel the cavern's aura. Can you get the mines opened up for us to check things out?" The ram nodded thoughtfully, and Valorie leaned against the wall as she watched Dawn ponder the avalanche of incomplete information with which they had been presented. "How long would it take?"

"Since the mines don't operate without me, red tape doesn't apply. A quick visit to the mayor and the foremen tonight, and I'll be able to take you down tomorrow morning."

Valorie crossed her arms beneath her chest and idly scuffed the floor with her boot. "What about the tunnels you found? Are they stable? Are we going to have to worry about the mountain falling down on top of us?"

He shook his head. "No. I don't know how old those tunnels are, but they're sturdy. Some look natural, and others hand-dug, but I've never seen stonework more well-shaped. Most of those tunnels are sturdier than the mines they pay me to upkeep. We won't have to worry about a cave-in unless a star falls onto the mountainside."

"What about the trip?" Dawn added, "How long will it take to get down there and get out?"

"It's pretty far down there. A few hours in, a few out. It would probably take most of the day, so pack a lunch."

Valorie nodded before asking about the ventilation, and then Dawn asked about the local ley flux, and it continued for several minutes, each wringing each scrap of useful information from Morgan that they could before they settled on a relatively informed plan of attack, despite it amounting to little more than go down, poke around, and then come back. While they spoke, Dawn finished her meal and Valorie took care of cleaning and oiling her armor. Before the mage left to perform his appointed task of securing the access their entire plan required, he took an interest in the unsheathed length of Valorie's sword.

She was checking the leather straps of her suit for any wear when he gingerly lifted her weapon of choice, which was nearly as long as he was tall, from where it rested atop the rest of her things. "It's beautiful," he whispered.

"I try to take care of it. It's certainly seen its fair share of use."

"Could I borrow it for the night?"

She nearly dropped one of her gauntlets as she jerked her head upward. "What? Why? You planning on skewering a bull or two for dinner?"

"I promise I'll return it better than new. I just have trouble turning down potential when I see it."

"I don't know if I could sleep at night knowing that it was-"

"You should let him have it for a night, Val." Dawn interrupted her, "He's the best enchanter I know. It couldn't be in better hands."

She held up her empty fingers. "But what about *my* hands? I've had that sword for most of my life, almost as long as I've had you!" The equine wizard opened her mouth for a rebuttal, but Valorie silenced it with a guttural groan. "*Fine...* Just be careful with it, alright?"

With practiced caution, he slid the length of polished steel into its scabbard and hoisted it onto his shoulder. "With cat's grace."

"Says the sheep."

"Alright..." He mulled it over for a moment. "With woolen softness."

"Okay, okay." she said in surrender, "You got me." He grinned and turned to leave, but she stopped him with almost an afterthought. "Hey, Morgan?" He peered back over his shoulder at her, eyebrow raised and features bordered with a tough, curling horn. "You can stop worrying. We'll get all this straightened out in no time. After that, the first round's on me."

At that, his smile grew thoughtful, and he considered her for a moment. "Who know, I might just take you up on that." He turned again, speaking over the sound of his cloven hooves clacking off of the wooden floor, "I'll be in the foreman's hold in the morning. See you then, so we can put this thing to bed."

Valorie shut the door behind him. She liked the ram. The cadence of his words was odd, almost off-putting, and he seemed too twitchy for his own good, but she thought him pleasant nonetheless. "Well, he seems nice." she mused as she plopped down onto the bed before unlacing her boots and tugging them off her feet with her stockings to wiggle her toes in the chilly air.

"He seems troubled..." Dawn murmured uncertainly.

"He seems like a man who's been desperately doing what he can despite being in over his head." It was a sentiment not unknown to Valorie, and it made her feel more connected to him than Dawn's occasional, conversational mentioning of the ram would have warranted. "Maybe we shouldn't have wasted so much time in getting here." she added as her smile drooped into a regretful grimace.

"It was just an hour—or two—here and there..." Dawn reminded her weakly, "It cost us a day at most. We still made good time."

"True, but... people were getting hurt. We could have made better time."

"That's just it! He should have said something. He said he might need help, that he found something suspicious that I needed to check out. Maybe an old cultic hidey-hole, not some murderous demon or band of throat-cutting brigands!"

Dawn simply sighed and hid her face in her palms, and Valorie stood, tossing her boots aside and crouching next to the wizard's chair to lay a comforting hand on her shoulder. "He did say there was a little bit of an escalation. Things never start off as bad as they get. Would that they did, for all of our sakes, but this isn't anything we haven't dealt with before."

Valorie caught the unicorn's cheek in her fingers as Dawn slumped back in her chair, and the exasperated wizard nuzzled against her palm. "This wasn't supposed to be complicated... or dangerous." she whined, "This was supposed to be easy! We were supposed to get away from the Sanctum for a bit, visit an old friend, relax a little, maybe clean up some old wards from some long-dead sorcerer. Just take the time to be close to each other." The corners of her eyes were wet with unshed tears, and she scrubbed them away before her attendant could manage the deed. "We're just both so busy all the time. Was it so much to ask? Was it so wrong to want a little time to breathe and... Damn me, Val, I'm such a selfish excuse for a friend"

Her face scrunched up, and Valorie had to hold her still lest the wizard slide out of the chair under the weight of her sudden self-loathing. She just smiled dotingly and curled an arm behind her shoulder while hooking the other under her knees. She stood, easily lifting the smaller equine into the air and pressing Dawn against her. "That's hardly fair." she murmured quietly as she strolled over to the bed. "It's not quite selfish just to want something happy for yourself. Besides, we're just postponing this little vacation of yours for a day or two while we get this thing sorted out. After this, we'll just throw a huge-ass party and make up for lost time, alright?"

With a stray kick, she pushed the blankets aside and lay Dawn down on the bared mattress. The unicorn's spiraling horn clicked against the headboard, and she smiled at the few blinks the wizard gave her as a heated blush slowly worked across Dawn's cheeks. She leaned deeply over her little, sorcerous love, enough to brush her lips over those that parted instinctively to meet her, and she pushed back down when the other woman made to rise. "If you wanted to have me to yourself, you could have just asked, Dawn."

As her hands fell to the buttons lining the front of the wizard's blouse, Dawn let out a breathy sigh. "I know... But I needed a *real* reason. If I did it just because I wanted you neither of us would ever get anything done!"

She chuckled as she crawled into the bed next to her little lady and continued plucking buttons from their holes. "That's true enough, but it's not like you needed to invent a reason to get my attention. Morgan's seems like a nice guy, and he needs help. After we give it to him, I promise I'm all yours." She finished with Dawn's buttons, and the wizard returned the favor with a few whispered words that opened her shirt with a single sweeping motion. With practiced ease, they bared one another chests, and each wrapped arms around the other as Valorie pulled the blanket over them, a shield from the cold that neither of them felt. Pressed against each other, they found sleep, knowing that the following day would be a busy one.

She slumbered deeply and with few discernable dreams, and she awoke to the effervescent, pleasant sensation of Dawn's lips against her own. Their owner giggled as she chased after them when they drifted away. She flailed blindly, eyes still closed, and grunted when she rolled off of the bed in pursuit, landing with a loud thump. "Good morning," a quiet voice filtered through the darkness. Taking the time to blink dumbly and shake the haze of sleep from her mind, she then disentangled her limbs and staggered to her feet, wondering how she had managed to stay in her pants through the night.

It seemed Dawn had busied herself before prodding Valorie to wakefulness, and she hummed something happy and incoherent, seemingly in much higher spirits as the hornless horse morph stumbled over to cradle the wizard in a warm embrace. "Good morning to you too, sexy." she mumbled into the unicorn's red-gold mane, "Sorry I overslept and missed you squeezing into that skirt."

"I bet you are." came the impish reply as Dawn shoved her away. "You better put something on before something important freezes off." The wizard was overemphasizing the temperature of the room. It was chilly, but manageable, and she stood at the window, back to the other equine, and ran through her morning stretches topless just to make a point. "That's not funny..." the other woman shot at her back.

"Good thing I'm not laughing" she returned with a coy grin over her shoulder. She finished with a few extra, unnecessary contortions before she turned around, theatrically working her arms in their sockets and sliding a fresh shirt of rich, maroon fabric on over her torso, leaving it unbuttoned. Dawn just watched her with a less than pleased pout while she sauntered around her and snatched up what she hoped was breakfast: most of a loaf of the same crusty bread from

dinner the night previous alongside some chunks of dried apples that she pretended tasted better than they did. The wizard had already drunk most of a pot of tea, and she frowned down at the dregs remaining in the elegant cup Dawn had brought with them. "You could have saved me a little something to drink, you know." she muttered through a mouthful.

Digging through her pack for a moment, the unicorn scoffed and straightened, carrying a roll of tough, linen cloth. "Maybe if you'd gotten up, I'd have left you a drop or two." She only snorted and grumbled as Dawn began the troublesome process of binding her sizable chest. "Such a shame..." added the wizard with a sigh.

"You say that every time."

"It's always true. Now quit wriggling."

Stifling her frustration, she forced herself to sit still while Dawn made sure that she wasn't going to bruise herself on the inside of her armor. It was annoying, but she'd rather deal with a little tenderness in her bust than have to worry about bouncing around more than was needed. After the wizard was finished, she buttoned her shirt up the front while her temporary squire moved around to her back and started running a brush through her shoulder-length hair. Dawn fussed at her while she hopped into her stockings and boots and bent to lace them up, but she eventually wound up with her golden brown locks dangling between her shoulder blades in a thick, tight braid.

Dawn swayed away to collect the next piece of her ensemble, but she reached over and caught the wizard by the waist, stopping her and reeling her back in. She pulled the warmth of her beautiful love against her, pressing their bodies together, and basked for a moment in quiet intimacy. With a trailing finger, she pushed aside a few waves of brilliant auburn that shined gold in the light of the rising sun, but their owner dodged her attempt at a kiss, instead allowing her lips to fall on the top of a short, equine muzzle. Despite her shy attempts at propriety, Dawn flushed hotly, and Valorie beamed. "You're in a good mood this morning, milady."

The unicorn's horn brushed against her cheek as Dawn surrendered with a breathy giggle and rested against her shoulder. "I'm just looking at the bright side, staying positive, shrugging off sadness and ignoring hardship. It's what you would do, right?"

"I do my best." she replied, rubbing the small of the wizard's back, "But I like for there to be a bright side. We're miles from home, about to dive into a bunch of musty, old caves and investigate a bunch of disappearances and murders. Plus it's cold enough to freeze a bull's balls off."

"What else is new?" Dawn whispered back. She was going to answer, but the woman filling her arms took advantage of her weakness and pulled her down into a long, vigorous kiss that robbed her of her breath. "Besides..." added the magically-inclined horse morph with a moment of thought that Valorie filled with surprised panting, "It's plenty warm right here."

She grinned and hugged Dawn more firmly to her chest. "There's my girl."

The wizard's eyes sparkled happily, and they lingered there for another minute as the room gradually brightened. Eventually, however, Dawn slid away from her, lengthy horse tail swishing happily. Valorie followed along, and allowed herself to be helped into the rest of her gear. Donning her armor, even with Dawn aiding her, was a task of a few minutes, but they stretched it out a little longer than that, taking care to ensure everything was in its place.

She slipped a sturdy, padded gambeson over her shirt, and Dawn tugged it straight on her shoulders while she laced it up the front. The thick, quilted jacket covered her entire torso to her upper hips, but its true purpose was just as a layer to keep anything from chafing. Atop that went her mail hauberk, the fine links of chain rustling with an almost musical quality as she draped the

coat over her body. It, like all of her armor, was fashioned from argentum, a material that, while being even more resilient than steel, was almost feather light. She could barely feel the weight of the innumerable circlets of metal on her shoulders, despite the shirt's ability to serve as a tent for someone of a smaller stature.

Dawn's delicate fingers fiddled with the sturdy, leather straps as she buckled her breast and back plates together over her chest, cocooning her trunk in a shell of silvery metal that had been polished to an almost mirrored shine. In spite of the layers beneath it, the dragonsilver plates held snugly to her shape and managed to preserve her femininity as they followed the natural curves of her body. As it should have, the armor had been hand-fitted to her form a long time ago, and though it clung to her figure, each elegant contour was designed to turn aside arrows or blades, sliding them from her rigid second skin. The suit was divine in its simplicity, but each plate flowed into its neighbors like water, and little of her body was left exposed.

A set of pauldrons shielded her shoulders and upper arms, and she cinched her gauntlets up over her forearms and hands, bending her fingers to ensure the carefully articulated joints didn't constrict her movement. To cover her hips and thighs she belted on an exquisite chain-and-plate skirt, which seemed inclined to ring like fine chimes as she busied herself. She sealed her calves and the tops of her boots away in a pair of closed greaves, and when she rose, tapping her feet on the floor to settle the sheets of metal that protected her lower legs, Dawn was already before her, holding out the breadth of her forest green cloak.

With a smile, she dipped her head and let the wizard pin the thick fabric to her shoulders with a masterfully-crafted silver brooch. As Dawn stepped away to appraise her handiwork, Valorie tucked her helmet under her arm and rapped her knuckles on her cuirass, ringing it like a muffled bell. "How do I look?" she wondered aloud as she threw out her hip and rested her free hand on the outward curve, wishing for a breeze to billow out her cloak.

Dawn glided into her arms, raising a hand to slide it up along the contour of her chest plate, stopping to rest fingers over her heart, and Valorie was suddenly, acutely aware of the weight of the locket that was nestled under her armor and between her breasts. "Like my guardian angel, like my knight in shining armor, like a hero, a hero who really should have a sword on that hip. We should go meet up with Morgan. He's probably already a mile underground, waiting for us."

She snatched up their pack before Dawn had the chance. "Then I guess we shouldn't keep him waiting any more than we have." She threw the pack atop the insignificant weight of her armor and draped her cloak over it as she gestured at the door. "Presuming milady is finished gawking?"

"Never." mumbled the wizard, "But I can walk and look at the same time. Let's away."

After Dawn threw her own thick cloak over her shoulders, Valorie extended her arm in an invitation that was graciously accepted. Striding through the inn like a warrior-queen, she collected her fair share of intrigued stares from the few people that were sobering up in the common room. She held her head high and ushered the wizard through the door and into the cold of the winter away from the hearths that had held the building warm. As one, they both pulled their hoods over their heads and started away to the north, Dawn quietly grumbling about how her horn stuck out into the frigid air.

The mines that were their destination were outside of the town's sturdy walls, but the road that ran further up into the mountains was well-traveled and left no doubt as to their path, despite how Dawn occasionally stumbled over an icy rock with hooves not meant for such terrain. She kept a steadying hand around the wizard's waist, and to keep herself from laughing at her

partner's plight she added her voice to the faint whistling of the wind between the rocks. "So... What do you think?"

Dawn glanced aside at her. "I think lots of things, Val. You'll have to be more specific for me."

She rolled her eyes. "Morgan." she elaborated, "What's his deal? I know he's your friend and all, and I feel like he's a nice guy, but he seems a little off."

Shrugging her slender shoulders, the wizard sighed. "He does seem a little... out of it, but given what's been happening, and that I haven't seen him in years, I think I can forgive a little awkwardness. I don't care what he thinks of himself, but that man's a genius when it comes to enchantments. He could have easily gone for his stole. Hells, he could have *taught* at the academy, but he never really wanted anything like that. I think he only finished his stay at the academy because we were friends. After I got my apprenticeship and went to Southcliff, I guess we kind of drifted apart for a while. You know, there for a long time, I was certain he had his sights set on my heart."

Valorie lifted a bemused eyebrow. "Need I be on my guard?"

She caught an elbow in the ribs for her sarcasm, and she grunted despite the fact that her armor shielded her from the wizard's jab. "I think not. He was made aware of my... preferences a long time ago. Although, were I so inclined, I would have snatched him up in a heartbeat. He was—is—a sweet man, and a good friend. Whoever he manages to catch will be a lucky woman indeed." Her expression grew wistful, and Valorie had to encourage her to keep walking at an acceptable speed. "I regret not keeping up with him in the past couple decades. I've just been so busy, and we're so far apart."

"Good thing we're here then, isn't it?" she mused into the thin, mountain air, "We'll just have to split a bottle of something strong when this is all over and get all caught up. I think even you can manage that. He makes a hell of an ale, I have to admit. I wonder if it's magic..."

"Oh, and here I was having forgotten what a connoisseur you were."

"Well... I *have* had a few years to refine my palate. As many as he's had to get his recipe down, I'd suppose. Hey, it's like we were meant for each other. Maybe *you're* the one who should keep an eye out. He might just win me over."

Dawn shot her a halfhearted grimace, and she chuckled and hugged the unicorn into her side. "He couldn't handle you anyway..."

At that, she let out a genuine laugh. "You're talking like *you* can."

"Just you wait." Dawn scoffed while holding her cloak more closely to her body, "I'll handle you like you've never been handled before."

"Uh-huh..." she muttered skeptically, "Just give me some warning so I save my best pants from the reckoning."

Dawn paused for a breath to dig a rock from her hoof, and it pinged off of her armor as the wizard flicked it at her. "I make no promises, Val, but I'll see what I can do. Now hurry up or we'll never get anywhere."

It took an immense effort to stop her eyes from rolling, but she bore the brunt of her wry humor with little but a grin as she walked her partner up the mountain and followed the wheel-rutted roadway into a relatively narrow defile between wings of cold, grey stone. The traffic needed to shape the hard-packed dirt and gravel must have been impressive when the mine was operational, and she stifled another impressed whistle when they turned a corner and came upon the entrance to the mine. Nestled amongst a scattering of sturdy outbuilding was a dark, cavernous hole in the side of the mountain that seemed to dive directly into the heart of the void.

That much she expected though. What took her by surprise was the figure of an armored man huddling around a small fire by the mine's mouth. By his livery, he was a town guard, and as he caught sight of the pair of equines, he waved them over. His padded armor and heavy cloak coupled with his thick fur seemed to insulate him fairly well from the cold, but he still shivered as he greeted them. "You must be the help we were expecting. Welcome to Silverdale mine, for what it's worth."

The dark-furred wolf morph extended his hand, and Valorie took it with puzzled frown. "And who might you be?"

"Malleus." he replied as he offered Dawn the same greeting, "When the mine was shut down, most of the guards were pulled away from the road up this far. I'm not even supposed to be here, but Morgan told me what you were planning to do, and I wanted to be of whatever help I could."

"Is he here?" Dawn said, peering into the darkness behind the wolf.

"Yeah." replied the guard with a nod, "He showed up just before sunrise. He's probably in the office just inside. You've gotten your clearance, so you're both good to go. I'd join you, but Morgan said that it would be best if I stayed out here."

"He's probably right." Dawn agreed, "There's no telling what exactly we might run into down there, given what's been happening here. Once we know more about what's going on, we might be able to do something about it together with the rest of the town guard."

Malleus nodded at her but didn't seem particularly comforted. "I hope you're right. The rest of the men seem content to pray this just goes away." When Valorie made to step past him into the mine, he grabbed her gauntlet with strength enough to get her attention. "Listen. Please. I lost my sister to whatever lunatic is doing this, so if you find him... Just make sure this can't happen to anyone else, okay?"

She clenched her teeth and grimly dipped her head in acquiescence to his wishes. He silently took her hand again before turning, returning to his solitary vigil as they stalked into the darkness. Dawn hissed a soft word, and a fist-sized orb of soft, blue radiance sparked to life before them, illuminating the passage ahead. To Valorie's surprise, she was almost able to stand up straight in the center of the tunnel, almost. They had only walked for a moment before they came upon a small room that seemed to be carved into the wall of the mine and found Morgan waiting for them there, leaning casually against the entrance. The ram beamed at them when they came into view, and he beckoned them over as he slipped into the office.

He added his own magelight to Dawns with a gesture and a word, and it's muted green gradually paled until a clear, white light illuminated the space. It looked to be part office and part assembly room, with one wall bearing a bank of boxes and crates while much of the rest of the space was dominated by a broad table. On it was spread half-rolled maps of the mines, which were being held down by Valorie's sword. She grinned at the sight of her weapon as unharmed as Morgan had promised it would be, and she clapped the ram on the back after she ushered Dawn into the cramped space. "I was beginning to wonder when you two would show." he said as he righted himself, "I was worried you had managed to get lost."

"Come on," Valorie shot back, "It's not that much past sunrise."

"Fair enough, I suppose." he admitted as he took Valorie's gauntleted hand in both his own, "I guess the hours have just been passing slowly for me recently. I was busy for most of the night, too excited, couldn't sleep, you know how it goes. Look, look." After greetings were exchanged, he practically dragged the shining equine forward and gestured wildly at the sword

resting on the table. "I can't believe it wasn't previously enchanted. It's like it was made to take magic; the steel's so clean and ordered. It was practically begging to channel an aura. Go ahead."

Trying to keep her eyebrow from lifting dubiously, she carefully reached out to take her weapon. She hesitated, however, when her fingers first brushed against the hilt. A warm, tingling sensation prickled across her fingertips, tangible even through her gauntlet. "What... What did you do?" she muttered.

"Nothing it wasn't able to handle. It's keyed to you now. Go on; give it a chance to get to know you." He bounced giddily on his hooves, grinning almost manically. "I wish you two could see it as I do. The lattice was so easy to construct around it. It nearly pulled the inlay from my mind. When this is over, if I can, I'd love to have a few weeks, a month or two, with it. I could bring out so much potential."

"Get to know me..." she echoed uncertainly, "Uh-huh. Sure." Valorie steeled herself and wrapped her hand around the hilt of her sword. She gasped in shock when her grip tightened on it, and were she able, she would have thrown the weapon away from her. Instead, it seemed to hold her trapped where she was as the same pleasant, effervescent heat swept through her body, beginning at her paralyzed hand and crawling up her arm to pour like needling fire through the rest of her statuesque form. "Shit!" she hissed as each follicle of her warm, brown fur threatened to stand on end. She stood there, half-bent, arm outstretched, for what seemed like an eternity, but by the handful of heartbeats that passed, was only a few seconds before she was able to move her body once more.

As quickly as it had been summoned, the disconcerting sensation dissipated with a final bristling pulse along her body, and she sucked in a sharp breath as she straightened, resting the blade's scabbard in her hands as she stared down at it. "Dripping Ichor..." Morgan whispered reverently, "I've never seen something bond that quickly before. Look at how your aura bends... and you haven't even drawn it yet!"

Even Dawn looked stunned, and Valorie nervously shifted her weight as the wizard stared at her. "Gods' Blood, is it... Did you make it...?"

The ram shook his horned head. "No... I may be good, but it would take me more than a night to spirit-bind even that sword. It's all her. Wow..."

"Okay..." Valorie said after dryly clearing her throat, "I'm definitely still here, so why don't you quite screwing with me and tell me what's wrong?"

"Nothing!" Morgan responded with a laugh, "Nothing's wrong, it's just so perfect. Can you feel anything?"

"Not really..." replied the armed and armored equine, "It's the same weight, same size. Tingled like hells for a few seconds, but that's it." She was about to pull the blade from its sheath, but something odd caught her eye. "Wait a minute. This emerald was definitely green when I gave it to you." Morgan perked up as she turned the pommel toward him, showing him the thumb-sized gemstone that was set into it. It was normal a rich, clear green, characteristic of the stone that it was, but at some point, it had taken on a bright, crystalline orange hue.

The enchanter seemed unsurprised, and he only smiled at her. "Set it down and check again."

Huffing, she returned her sword the table that she had taken it from, frowning down and peering in confusion at the ram that only pointed down at her weapon. Her jaw slowly dropped as, as soon as the hilt had left her fingers, the color began to steadily drain from the gemstone, being gradually replaced by its natural coloration, glimmering in the magelight that filled the

room. Shaky fingers lifted the sword again, and while it didn't once more shock her hand and arm, the gem quickly shifted back to its impossible orange color. "What the fuck..."

"I didn't realize that emerald was pure enough to focus an aura like that." Dawn spoke into the silence as she stepped to peer around Valorie's shoulder at the object of her intrigue.

"It's not." Morgan added. "It's her aura that's doing it. I'd be surprised if a chunk of quartz didn't shift in her hands. Her aura might not be as bright as a sorcerer's, but it's clear enough for a little focusing to go a long way. A little more and you would have made one hell of a mage, Valorie. Your children must be brilliant."

"They are..." Valorie answered numbly, on instinct. Dawn had shown her the aura that surrounded her, a long time ago, and while she recognized that specific shade of translucent, glittering orange, she never expected her to be its source without an active spell to bring it out. She took turns setting her sword down and picking it back up, watching the artfully-cut gemstone alter at her touch. It was almost like she was casting a spell, and she only stopped when Dawn giggled at her mesmerization. "Oh hush, you."

The wizard stifled her humor behind a hand as Valorie grumbled and belted her sword onto her hip, where it belonged. The weight of it, after so many years of carrying it, was an instinctive comfort, and she affectionately ran her thumb over its crossguard as she pushed it an inch from its scabbard and wrapped her opposite hand around the hilt. She turned away from her audience and drew it across her body, baring each foot of steel with a distinctive metallic ring as she pulled it from its resting place. Before its pointed tip even cleared the opening of its sheath, she could feel a difference in it. The sword was old and fashioned by the hands of a master. Its balance and heft were superb. She thought they had been perfect, but she now realized that she had been wrong.

Resting the blade in her hand, she stared it up and down with a critical eye. It looked the same, but it now felt alien, almost alive. It felt like it had been made for her hand and her hand alone, and as she tightened her grip on it, it felt like it vibrated with what was almost excitement. It felt like an extension of herself, and she could feel the pleasant heat radiating into her palm from its hilt. Valorie gawked for a few more moments before Morgan's eager grin made itself seen in her peripheral, and when she turned, speechless, to him, he motioned at it. "Focus." said the ram, "It's got a surprise for you, if you can find the key to it."

"What?" she said with a confused eyebrow.

"I bound the enchantment to you, so I couldn't just add an activation word or phrase. Sure, only you'll be able to take advantage of the sword's potential, but you also have to be the one to unlock it. With your aura though, it shouldn't be difficult. Just concentrate."

"On what?" Valorie grumbled through her exasperation. She was glad to have fallen for the one mage who didn't speak in stereotypically vague half-sentences most the time.

"You said you felt something when you picked it up. Follow that back to its source, to what connects you."

"Fine, fine..." she sighed, "but can we I walk and try it at the same time? We do have something to do, remember?"

Morgan's smile faltered, and the light of giddy excitement dimmed from his eyes. "Oh yes. I'm sorry. It's just not often I get to work with something so pristine." He turned back to the table and unrolled a large, meticulous map of what had to be the mines. "The entrance—where we are—is right here." said the ram, poking his finger into the paper. "The chambers we ran into aren't that far down, but it's a long way from here, down this shaft here. It's actually underneath a different mountain, the one to the east. It will probably take us a couple hours to get there from

here. The tunnels are going to get a little cramped before we arrive, especially for you two, so I hope you don't mind stooping."

"It wouldn't be the first time." Valorie said as Dawn studied the map briefly before rolling it up and stuffing it into the pack strapped onto the armored equine's back. "Let's get going. The sooner we put this to an end, the better, right?"

The enchanter nodded sharply before ushering them out the door. The magelight dimmed to a dull blue-green glow, and Morgan took the lead as they started down the tunnel that sloped gently into the mountain. Valorie brought up the rear, leaving Dawn sandwiched protectively between them. She didn't really expect much trouble just yet, but considering the circumstances, she kept a wary eye out behind her anyway. The floor was mostly smooth and thankfully free of the ice that had been plaguing them all winter, and though the air was cold, she'd been in far less pleasant caves so she took it with a grain of salt.

They walked in relative silence, Morgan's occasional warnings drowning out the crunch of her boots on the gravel that littered the stone beneath her. Her sword was held down and at the ready, and as she walked, she mused at how much she missed its presence, even for her short walk that morning. She could feel it in her grip, heavy and warm. It was almost as if she could sense the air moving over its lengthy blade, as if it really was connected with her. Her arm ached to give it a good swing, just to see how it would feel. Ever since she had touched it, it hadn't cooled. It remained comfortingly warm, a heat that gradually rose and fell with time, like it was breathing, alive. As unsettling as it was, she couldn't feel anything but curious. She remembered distrusting magic as much as the rest of the ignorant masses not so long ago, and now here she was, allowing herself to be intimately connected to an inanimate object.

She paused, letting out a startled, "Uh... Morgan?" when the gem set into her weapon's pommel began to glow with a faint, orange radiance. As the pair in front of her slowed to a halt, peering back at her with looks of surprise and interest, the light slowly spread upward, bleeding along the length of the blade as it brightened.

"Inanimate, perhaps..." whispered a soft, feminine voice into her ear, "but not unworthy of a little attention now and again, wouldn't you agree?"

Letting out a very uncharacteristic shriek, she released her hold on her sword's hilt and leapt back and away. As soon as it left her fingers, the light began to dwindle and die, and it fell to the rough-cut stone with a loud clatter. "What the fuck, Morgan!"

The mages in front of her stared at her like she had lost her mind, and the ram stepped forward, "What? What happened?"

Her heart was suddenly sprinting within her chest, and she took a second to gasp in a few heavy breaths. "That is *not* funny you ass! Gods' Blood, fuck!"

"What the hells are you talking about? What happened?"

"Val?" Dawn said, wrapping an arm around her shoulders as she stared in shock at both her sword and Morgan in turn, "What's wrong?"

She fought to rein in her heart rate. "Fuck, Morgan, I'm all for practical jokes, but is this *really* the time and place to fuck with me? Fucking Ichor with your horseshit voices in my head! I could have skewered Dawn! What... what the fuck?!"

The ram's puzzle frown only deepened at her justified anger, and he glanced down at the discarded sword, resting dead and silent where it had fallen. "Voices in your head...?" he muttered, more to himself than at anyone in particular, "No... That's not possible." He knelt down, hovering his hands over Valorie's weapon, and whispered a complex phrase under his breath, uttering a disbelieving, "Gods' Blood, it's not possible. Dawn. Look at this."

The unicorn peeled herself from the other equine to clop over and dip to her own knees. She chanted the same incantation, and Valorie own confusion only grew as Dawn's eyebrows threatened to climb off of her face in shock. "That... That can't be. You can't have done this, Morgan."

"I didn't. I didn't have the time or materials to do this. It... it must have been dormant in the steel before I touched it. I *knew* this was made to take an enchantment, but... look at how deep the lattice goes. I don't have the skill to even attempt something this complex. Gods' Blood..."

"Okay, okay... that's enough." Valorie snapped, "Time to fill me in on whatever shenanigans are going on. What did you do to my sword?"

"Compared to what was already done to it? Practically nothing." He reached gingerly down to lift the weapon from the gravel, but his fingers had no sooner than touched the hilt when he jerked them away with a pained grimace. "Hot! Hot... Damn." he grunted, "Here, pick it up. I don't think I can anymore."

"Fuck that! Why don't *you* tell me what the hells is-"

"Valorie..." Dawn interrupted her with a reverent breath, "You should get it off of the ground. We'll explain what we can, but right now you need to pick it back up. It might be able to answer some of your questions."

The fire went out of Valorie's petulant frustration, and she acceded to the wizard's request. Cautiously, she curled her fingers around the hilt once more and lifted it from the rock-strewn ground. The now-familiar heat pulsed against her hand, and it once more began to glimmer a faint orange that grew in intensity as she considered it. "You burn brightly, Valorie." purred the same voice that had initially shocked her, "Long have I yearned to savor your fire."

She stared down at the length of steel in her hand before looking back at the mages. If either of them heard the voice, neither of them showed it. Each only gawked expectantly at her, and she swallowed nervously. "Uh... Thanks." she said with her most diplomatic tone, "Who... What are you? Where are you?"

"I am a sword," the voice answered back, speaking as if she had asked the most foolish question possible, which she may have, "and I am in your hand. I wasn't always like this, though. I was formless, once, impure and cold, but I was remade, fashioned, forged, given fire and purpose. I was made a tool. I exist to cut and pierce, to unmake and destroy, and I was... content. Pleased even."

"Was?"

"And still would be, I imagine, but then I lay dormant for a time. You picked me up, and I was intrigued."

It was a real effort to keep her mouth moving when all she felt like doing was gaping in stunned silence. "At what; at me?"

"In part. Through you I tasted the blood of hundreds, each as sweet and hot as the last, but it was so rarely to do what I believed I was made to do. You were so... careful. You drew me, raised me in defense as often, more often than you did to slay. So much blood, but so little... death. Your skill and determination is refreshing, so I allowed the wooly one to bind you to me, that I might taste your strength for myself." As if in emphasis, the glow filling the tunnel flared immensely, causing the spellcasters nearby to shield their eyes and shy away from her. "I have not been disappointed."

"Dawn..." she croaked past the lump in her throat, "My sword is talking to me... It's definitely talking to me. Gods' Golden Blood, Morgan, what did you do?"

"Nothing I did not allow him to do. He is skilled for someone so young. I am intact, though his fire was... troubling, cold and dark."

"I just..." the ram gasped dumbly, "I just... I don't even know anymore."

"Skilled... but not bright, it seems."

"I think I might know." Dawn mumbled through her fingers as she thoughtfully cradled her chin in her hand. The wizard stepped back up to Valorie, hands out and fingers splayed apart, and hovered them over the length of searingly bright metal. She whispered softly, gently, and the glare emanating from the steel dimmed, almost as if it were awaiting a diagnosis. "It's not a spirit-bond. It's impossible. It would be obvious if it were. The link would persist. It has to be..." She actually laughed, grinning down at the sliver of glowing metal and giggling like a giddy girl. "It must have been unpleasant at first, then hammering the impurities out of you."

"It was." the voice replied, quiet and very nearly timid, but it quickly grew rigid and determined "But they strengthened me, hardened me!"

"Y-yeah..." Valorie tried to pass on, guessing that Dawn wasn't able to hear the feminine tones that sounded in the back of her mind.

The wizard nodded her horned head. "How long you must have slumbered before you were ripped from your cradle."

"Ages beyond counting..."

Dawn continued, deaf to the words Valorie could hear echoing amongst her thoughts. "Val, this is an elemental. Naturally manifested, I think, in the iron that eventually went into this blade. More than just some timid tremorsprite, I think. Dormant and defenseless, awakened and beaten into shape... It must have been torture, and I'm sorry. Do you have a name?"

It felt like her sword was vibrating in her hand, so resolutely the voice thundered through her mind. "I was called by a name eons ago, but I have long since ceased being what I was then. In my previous wielder's hands, I carried a title, simple and pure, and it has not yet ceased to be fitting. You may call me Gladia."

"Gladia?"

The words had no sooner left her mouth than the light emanating from the sword in her hands flashed once more, erupting into brilliance that made Dawn flinch away and wince shut her eyes. A warm, sunset glow lit the tunnel in every direction, glaring off of the rough, rocky walls, and the consistent heat that poured into her palm through her gauntlet peaked in an instant, searing her but bringing with it no pain. The air around the length of her weapon's blade shimmered under suddenly tangible heat, and within the span of a heartbeat, it ignited. Valorie gasped, nearly dropping it yet again as a cloak of continuous, orange flame wreathed the length of steel.

As three pairs of eyes gawked at what had happened, the glow died away to something more reasonable, until it seemed like it gave off no more light than an oversized torch. "That..." Morgan said dumbly, "That was what was supposed to happen before."

"A useful tool to aid in my mission." the blade hummed to its wielder, "And with your power, I will burn brightly enough to rival the forges of my rebirth!"

"With my power?" Valorie repeated cautiously.

The sword's tone spoke of someone explaining a fact of life to a child, doting, but wry enough for Valorie to know she was being humored. "The mage bound us. I am as I have always been, a tool. I do no more than carry the focus. I am a conduit for your strength, and though I draw upon it, you are undeniably its source, clean and crystalline, like a slumbering diamond."

She relaxed as sensations of soothing happiness pulsed up her arm, and the fire that had blinded them gradually guttered and died away. Dawn gawked at her, and Morgan had an entirely inscrutable expression covering his features. She only looked down at the steel that glimmered in the mages' phantom lights. "Is it alright... Can I sheathe you?"

Instead of a yes being audible within her mind, she received a far more meaningful affirmative in the wave of relaxed contentment that tingled against her skin. "I will rest until I am needed, and I will be your blade when the time comes, Valorie. You have only to draw me, to call to me, and your will shall be my imperative, my body the bane of your foes."

She knew before her weapon had finished speaking within her the veracity of its devotion. She could *feel* it vibrating within the sword, through whatever connection she and it now shared, and with a casual flourish, she carefully slid the blade back into its scabbard. She gazed for a moment at the translucent gem that reflected her aura, polishing it with an idle thumb, and then looked up at the pair of stunned onlookers with a shrug. "Limata's going to be angry that she has to share my brain with someone else." She mused with a relieved sigh.

"I suppose..." Dawn murmured, finally stepping close enough to wrap arms around her in a steadying embrace. "What... what did it say?"

"She, I think." Valorie corrected as she returned the wizard's comforting hug, "She said you were right, with a few more words."

"Are you okay?"

She puzzled over the question as she planted a warm kiss atop Dawn's head. She had little right to be okay. Her mind had just been invaded by an elemental spirit from another plane, and she had just had a seemingly one-sided conversation with an inanimate object, but she couldn't help but feel a sense of pleased satisfaction. Resting on her hip where it belonged, the weapon that had been her staunch ally for decades simply felt right, like it was where it needed to be. She released a pent up breath, letting the shock and startlement bleed from her shoulders, and she theatrically rolled her arms in their sockets as Dawn slipped away from her. "Yeah. I think so." She gestured at the ram, who straightened and nodded sharply. "Come on. We'll all sit around and talk about what happened over a mug or two of something stiff after we get back. For now, we should keep going. I can still swing it around."

"Yes, yes. Of course." Morgan agreed, taking another brief moment to shake himself out of his awed stupor. "I... I suppose I should have suspected something like this when it was so easy to weave a little fire into the lattice. I guess it really did want the enchantment. I... Wow... I never really expected to see something like that in my life." A huge grin broke out across his sheepish features, and a look of wonder glimmered in his eyes, reflections of the pair of magelights hovering over them, and he turned to stroll confidently down the passage, a renewed bounce in his step. "I'm glad I got the chance."

Valorie acknowledged him with an affirmative hum as she followed behind, hand never leaving the hilt of her weapon. She was still uncertain what to make of it, particularly how *natural* it felt, having such an intimate connection to something else. She was used to having Dawn's presence in her mind as a faint pressure against her thoughts, flashes of emotion and brief moments of shared sensation, rarely distracting but always comforting. It seemed to her almost adulterous to have something else sharing that space, and it twisted her intestines into nervous knots. She supposed that it had always been that way, that her sword was what it turned out to be, but having that revelation crammed down her throat at such an inopportune time was unsettling at best.

She mulled it over, chewing thoughtfully on the inside of her cheek as she clenched and relaxed her grip on the pommel of her sword. The tunnel was getting smaller and smaller, and she had to duck more and more forward to avoid scraping her scalp on the rocky, irregular roof. They had been walking for what seemed like forever in relative silence, despite it likely having been only an hour or so since they delved below the surface, and they had been walking steadily downward the whole time. "How much longer until we get there?" she grumbled idly as even Morgan began to dip his head to keep his horns from the ceiling.

"A little ways yet," the wooly mage called back to her, "But once we get to the breach and into the tunnels we found, the going will get easier. The chambers are all high-ceilinged. It's just ahead, unless it's up and moved on us, and I've yet to find passages that move by themselves."

Biting back her acidic retort, she kept her eyes on Dawn's back. She was *really* not a fan of being underground, and having less and less room to maneuver in was doing dangerously little to remedy her discomfort. She was bent nearly in half by the time Morgan called them to a halt. "Is this it?" she said, hope coloring her voice.

"Mhmm," muttered their guide. "It's right here. I screened the entrance and made it look like a part of the tunnel just in case people made it down this far. Just give me a moment." He splayed his hands out over a perfectly normal-looking section of rough-hewn stone and whispered a short string of alien syllables. Beneath his fingers, his illusion began to buckle and fade, and in just a couple seconds, a jagged gash in the rock became visible. "The site's right through here," added Morgan with an uneasy smile. "Might have to squeeze a little to get through. I'd say age before beauty, but I guess I'd lose out on both those counts. Just follow me."

Contorting a bit, the sheep managed to squirm his way through the tight opening, and miraculously, Dawn managed to stay on him, joining him on the other side. Her significantly larger and harder frame, however, gave her quite the time, and it was only with a great amount of clattering and grunting that she managed to force the bulk of her body through the crevice in the tunnel wall, emerging with a plume of stone chips on the other side. As the mage's lights drifted upward, she rose to her full height, pleased to note that her ears didn't even come close to the slab of rock that sat above her. "Thank the gods..." she said with a relieved gasp.

The area they were in was plain and nondescript, a rough passage that had been cut from the rock. She could make out the tool marks by the shadows that were left behind by the subtle imperfections in the stone. Dawn took a few steps away from the hole that they had come through, closing her eyes and muttering a few unintelligible words. Valorie felt a tingling sensation wash over her fur through her armor, and when the equine wizard opened her eyes again, they squinted curiously down the path. "I don't sense much of anything, but we might need to be closer. Is it this way?"

"Yes, yes," Morgan replied, walking carefully down the passage. "It opens up into a complex of rooms in a bit. Place is built like a labyrinth, and the deeper you get, the weirder it gets."

"What about the other way?" Valorie asked, jerking a thumb in the opposite direction, toward the other end of the tunnel. "Any idea where that leads?"

Their wooly guide shook his head. "No. When I've been down here, I've come up the same way I've come down. If I had to guess, given the direction and slope, I'd say it leads up to the surface, toward whatever is actually *supposed* to serve as an entrance to this place, but I can't say for certain. There's plenty to occupy our time this way, though. Don't you worry."

She barked a sour laugh. "As if *I* could avoid danger. Lead on."

This tunnel was broad enough for two of even Valorie's stature to walk abreast, and she took advantage of it, sticking close to Dawn's side while she swept her eyes along the irregular corridor. Streaks of silver, enormous veins of the stuff, some as thick as her wrist, lined the walls, but they only lent a more unearthly aura to the dark, dank place. Though she was mostly successful in reining in her anxiety, her thumb still played over the crossguard of her sword, idly pushing it an inch free from its scabbard only to let it slip back down, constantly checking if the blade would be easily drawn. Her nerves settled as the delicate hand of the wizard beside her slipped into hers, clasping her fingers with a firm grip. She instinctively squeezed back, letting her confidence steel Dawn for whatever might await them while simultaneously drawing strength from the simple contact. They stayed that way for several minutes, only stopping when the passage they were following came to an abrupt halt. "Here's the beginning of it." Morgan said in an almost conspiratorial whisper.

Valorie nodded and stepped cautiously to the front so she could peer into the room they had come across. Taking a few careful strides into the space, with the two mages following close behind, she gave the chamber a careful once-over. There wasn't really much to see, but that didn't stop her from visually inspecting each nook and cranny for anything out of the ordinary. The room was little more than a rough cube that had been cut out of the rock. The air was stale and heavy with the scent of mildew, and the sounds they made as they shuffled about echoed back to them from the darkness of the open passages that stood in the center of each wall, bouncing off of the sort of silence that could only be found deep underground.

She stifled the urge to draw her sword just so she could feel the comforting weight of it in her hands. "I've seen places like this before." she said softly. "Let me guess. Each path leads to a room just like this one, with three or four more doors to even more places."

Dawn looked at her curiously, and Morgan nodded. "Yes. Some of the passages I ran into were collapsed, and sometimes entire rooms were cut off, but yes. You've seen this sort of thing before? Where?"

"Back before I'd even met Dawn, I worked a job for this rich noble. He'd uncovered some ruins, and he wanted what was rumored to be inside. Place looked *exactly* like this one."

"What was inside that one?" said the unicorn with a thoughtful expression. "I don't remember reading about anything like this in your journals."

She shrugged. "That's because I didn't find anything. Just some huge-ass underground labyrinth. Place was empty except for some oversized rodents with bad attitudes. I was glad I demanded half of my payment up-front, so I at least got something out of it. That place was far to the east, though, in the foothills of the Sterling Mountains, nowhere even close to here."

"Well..." Morgan sighed, almost sad in his tone and bearing, "I can guarantee that this one isn't empty. It's almost a straight shot through the rooms to get to the one with the altar."

Valorie's armor rustled musically as she nervously shifted her weight from foot to foot. "Lead on then." she said, gesturing at the three unused openings with her free hand. "Let's get this over with."

The stocky sheep morph nodded and turned toward the darkness of one of the passages, a wall of black that seemed to dare the mage's pale, phantom lanterns to enter it. The shadow seemed almost supernatural, alive, and it appeared to very nearly absorb the light that touched it. The sphere of illumination that surrounded them didn't look to carry as far as it should have, but she shook it off, taking it as an effect of either her nerves or a trick of her concerned mind as she followed Morgan and Dawn down his preferred path. Before they left the room they had entered, Dawn pressed her palm against the rock wall that bordered the exit, and when she pulled it away,

the space her hand had occupied glowed a soft blue in the dark. "So we can find our way back out in a hurry... just in case." she explained.

Both Valorie and Morgan thought that was an excellent idea, and they forged onward in silence, each person straining their ears and eyes to catch anything unexpected. She didn't know about Dawn or the other mage, but she had been in far too many dark, dank caverns to be anything but on high alert. Most of the time, nothing happened, and her concerns proved unfounded, but the world was full of things that would leap out of a dark cave at someone: nightcloaks, rockwyrms, troglodytes, and all manner of zombies, ghouls, shadowmen, and darkstalkers. She wasn't going to take any chances with anyone's safety.

They set a comfortable, marching pace as they crept deeper into the network of interconnected chambers. Each was almost indistinguishable from the last, and as they moved ahead, Dawn left a trail of glowing markers to denote the path that they were taking. Unlike the similar tunnel network Valorie had once found herself, this one was in a much more pronounced state of disrepair. They had to carefully navigate around several obvious cave-ins, places where the ceiling had given way and filled passages and chambers with boulders the size of her body. The reminders that the rock around them wasn't necessarily the most stable did little for her nerves, but Morgan constantly told them that the rock was sturdy, and with the help of Dawn's patient, soothing glances, she trusted him. Preventing mine collapses was his job, after all, and he was likely to know far more than she. They continued on.

It was clear that their party was one of the first to set foot in the chambers; a thick layer of dust and gravel that crunched underfoot lay mostly undisturbed, marred only by where the team of investigating miners had come through prior. As they walked, Valorie could see the trail of scuffed bootprints dwindle, marking where the less courageous—or perhaps more intelligent—miners turned away to tread back the way they came. She couldn't blame them, and as they entered yet another of the cubical chambers, she saw signs of disorder in the trail on the ground. The footprints grew disorganized, and the strides longer. It was hard to tell exactly what had happened, but it was obvious that the remaining miners had fled the room in a panic. It only took a brief glance up to see why.

She gawked, and Dawn gasped in shock at the sight of the walls of bones that lined the four edges of the room. They had to walk past them to get to the center of the space, and when they did, they were surrounded by stacks and stacks of dry, age-yellowed bones. "Gods' Golden Blood!" she spat, "What the fuck is this place?"

She didn't receive an immediate answer. Dawn was too busy staring in shock at the grisly displays. The bones had been neatly stacked, layers of femurs and larger pieces were interspersed with bunches of smaller bits, ribs and vertebrae and shards of broken body parts, all lacking skin or flesh. Rings of skulls lined the room, each glaring out at them in a way that only the dead could, staring through cold, empty sockets. "It's a catacomb..." breathed the equine wizard, "But why it's here I don't know. All these bones are human, no animal morphs, and they all look ancient, hundreds of years old. I... I've never seen anything like this, not in person. Don't... Just don't touch anything, alright? The last thing we need to do is anger some lingering spirit."

Touching the walls made of bones was sure as hell at the bottom of her to-do list, and she said as much. Morgan stood to the side while Dawn closed her eyes muttering strings of words under her breath, and the sheep morph simply looked at the walls with an unsettled frown on his face. "How many rooms are like this?" Valorie asked quietly, so she wouldn't distract the wizard.

"I can't say," he said absentmindedly, not taking his eyes off of the macabre background. "A lot. I don't know how many rooms are in this whole complex, but depth-wise, we've gone

almost two-thirds of the way to the main chamber. All the ones past this point are like this. There must be thousands of people crammed down here."

"Shit..." she muttered. "Can we tell how they died?"

Opening her eyes, Dawn idly nodded, but quickly shook her head in retraction. "Perhaps, but we'd best not. I don't have the skill at divination or the finesse to probe this far back without doing more harm than good. It must have been terrible though, a plague or something equally horrifying."

Her stomach dropped. "A plague? Do you think...?"

Dawn waved her question away before she could make herself finish it. "No, no. Whatever killed these people should be long-since gone." The wizard hesitated. "Still... don't touch anything that isn't rock, alright? We'll get checked out after we get out of here, but that Morgan made it out of here in one piece weeks ago bodes well."

Their guide looked anxiously between them, but nodded slowly. "Y-yes. Yes. You're right."

Valorie walked over and clapped a firm hand onto his shoulder. "Relax." she said, something she was trying very hard to do herself, "Let's all just stay focused, do what we need to do, and get the hells out of here. Can we do that, for our combined sakes?"

He seemed to calm, at least visibly, but his fur still seemed chilled even through her glove. She was surprised he wasn't shivering. If it weren't for the layer of padding beneath her armor, or the cloak that kept her warm, she would probably have been shaking in her boots. The air around them, while stale and unmoving, was also damp and cold. Her touch appeared to give him strength though, and he nodded before taking a deep breath. "Come on." he said with renewed confidence. "It's this way."

Morgan led them from the room and into another. Dawn, hesitant to touch the bones lining each doorway, simply left one of her glowing markers on the floor in place of the wall. The next one looked much like the first, stacks upon stacks of human remains, some crumbling with age, others clean and sun-bleached, all laid out with disconcerting artistry in a dizzying array of patterns. In some of the rooms, murals of skulls assaulted their senses, and in others, lines formed of spinal vertebrae seemed to form a fanciful, dancing script that made up words in some language even Dawn didn't know. Occasionally they would come upon a natural disaster, a room where time had weathered the bones to a point they had lost their stability. Mountains of crumbling shards awaited them in those places, piles of death that they avoided stepping on with the utmost of care, particularly Valorie's hooved counterparts, who were going without the layer of leather that a pair of boots provided her.

The going became slow as they more carefully inspected the rooms through which they walked. Almost another hour passed before they managed to come upon something new. One of the rooms that they walked into was shaped differently than the others. It was larger, and was elongated, forming what looked like a massive hallway. In this chamber, the bones only lined the two long walls, and the alien script was thick in the pallid displays. At the far end of the space, another path was carved into the wall, but little else occupied the area apart from two sets of two squat, stone plinths, one pair bordering their entrance, and another pair at the exit. Valorie could only hazard a guess as to their purpose. "This is it." Morgan told them quietly, "Just ahead, through there."

Dawn acknowledged him with a silent nod, but Valorie was the first to stalk across the room, her sword hand resting warily on the hilt of her blade. Already the hairs on the back of her neck were prickling furiously, and she couldn't shake the feeling that there was something

watching her apart from the banks of skulls that formed short, triangular patterns on the walls. She ignored them as best she could and focused on the shadowy passage into the next room, which was dimly illuminated by the magelights drifting along behind her.

As they stepped into the chamber Morgan had indicated, both she and Dawn pulled in a shocked, ragged gasp at the unsettling familiarity of their surroundings. This room was shaped much like the other, an elongated rectangle, but on a grander scale. It was huge and open, like the inside of a great cathedral, with a ceiling that rose into the darkness above. "Dripping Ichor..." Valorie muttered in a disbelieving hiss.

Dawn stepped cautiously over to her to slide shaky fingers into her own, squeezing with desperate tightness. Through the connection they shared, she felt a swirl of emotions, foremost among them a sensation of icy, prickling fear. "Valorie... This place..."

"I know," she answered. The two longer walls were—like the previous room—lined with stacks of bones that rose up into the shadows, and in order to support the magnitude of the space, the plinths that had adorned the prior area had been replaced with thick, stone pillars that loomed over them to support the unseen ceiling. It seemed like every vertical surface had been etched with thin, spidery lines, amongst which were concealed line after line of the same unknown script, the walls that bordered the entrance, the pillars themselves. Even the floor was crisscrossed with a spiderweb of interlacing lines that formed an intricate pattern that was focused on the center of the huge chamber, and Valorie followed it with her eyes until they landed on an ornate, stone altar that rested in the exact middle of the room.

Dawn immediately closed her eyes, knelt down, and began whispering spells to herself. Valorie stood by her, unwilling to step any further into the unwelcoming space. All that was missing from the room from her nightmares was a little, golden statuette sitting on the altar; the bones were just an appropriate addition. "What is it?" Morgan whispered, loitering anxiously by Valorie's side. "What is this place?"

"I don't know," she replied while fingering the pommel of her sword. "But I can say that you did the right thing in calling on Dawn. This place screams 'secret demon cult', and I've seen more than my fair share of those. At least it looks like it hasn't been used for ages, so we've got that going for us. What about your missing miners? We haven't seen any of them yet. Could they have just gotten lost down here?"

"It's a possibility," muttered the mage, "This place is enormous."

"That's an understatement," said Dawn as she stood back up. "Come on. There aren't any latent spells to blow us up if we take a misstep, and I need to check out that altar."

Valorie nodded her assent and followed closely behind the wizard as she approached the center of the room. The closer she got to the altar, the more she knew without a shadow of a doubt that she wanted to be anywhere else. She wasn't sure if it was the nerves, or if it was some magic at work, but with each step, there was a faint pressure against her skin that incrementally strengthened. Grumbling something about latent energies, Dawn forged ahead, seemingly fearless, until she came within touching distance of the broad, stone altar. It, too, was covered in the alien writing, and Dawn knelt before it, squinting to see it in the magelight. Morgan joined her, and they began quietly discussing possibilities while whispering the occasional spell.

Valorie stayed close, but not too close. She walked long, looping circuits around the altar, eyeing the walls and bone-strewn floor for anything that was even more amiss than the obvious while the mages did their thing. Idly, she wondered when they were going to break for a bit to eat. And then realizing how ridiculous the thought sounded in her head, she shoved it out of her mind. Sure, she was getting a little hungry, but she really had more important things to worry

about than a little emptiness in her gut, at least until that emptiness grew into a pang, and then deepened into a hollow gnawing at her innards. Without warning, her vision blurred and swam before her, and her armor rattled as she began to shake. "G-guys..." she stammered as she turned shakily around, "Something's wrong. I-I don't feel so hot."

As she spun, the first sight to greet her was that of Dawn on her side, curled into the fetal position with her arms thrown over her stomach. She looked to be convulsing, and Morgan was hunched over her, practically shouting her name interspersed with frantic repetitions of the word, "No!"

"Dawn!" she slurred, words becoming difficult to force through her lips. The world spun unsteadily, and the twisting pain in her abdomen only increased in intensity as she took a step forward. Her footing, or her leg itself, failed her with catastrophic results, and she toppled forward, landing with the clatter of her armored form crashing to the stone floor. Stars swam in her vision, and she fought the instinct to fold herself up into a meek ball to wail until the pain went away. Instead, she dragged herself forward with her arms. Her legs had already given out.

She didn't know what was happening, or what to do, but she did what she could, scraping herself across the ground until she could close her hand over Dawn's to at least let the wizard know that she wasn't alone. She was blacking out. She had lost consciousness enough to know what was happening. The pain tearing at her sanity was making her thinking mind flee in terror, and she blinked tears from her eyes as her vision began to darken. Morgan looked over at her, horror plastered over his face, and the last thing she heard before being overwhelmed by darkness stuck with her until she could no longer process any thoughts. "Good Gods, what have I done?"

Before the last flickering afterimage could fade from the forefront of her mind, she awoke with a startled jerk in a cold, clammy sweat. Her heart was thundering against the inside of her ribcage, and she convulsed so forcefully that she nearly flew out of her bed, tangled up in her blankets as she was. As she lay and gasped, she blinked the haze of sleep from her eyes and slowly reacquainted herself with her surroundings. She was home, on the ranch, in her room. A slice of the rising sun's first rays peeked through her window, and she dragged herself off of the comfort of her mattress to stand, smacking her lips and scrubbing her eyes with balled fists. She didn't usually have such vivid nightmares, or nightmares at all, for that matter, but the familiarity of her home quickly put her at ease.

Leaning heavily on the sill of her window, she considered the birth of a new day. The ranch was already a hive of activity, of course, and she herself had a day full of hard work to look forward to. She didn't chafe at it though. She loved working with her family, and she loved life on the ranch. She loved keeping busy, even if it meant mucking stalls or stacking hay. With a deep breath, she turned away, straightening up her bed and shrugging away her unpleasant dreams before pulling off her nightclothes to begin dressing for the day. Her mother would be expecting her down for breakfast before the sun finished clearing the horizon.

She hadn't even finished pulling her outfit from the sturdy dresser at the foot of her bed before she was interrupted. Her door burst open like it had been kicked in, and she whirled around, screeching, "Hey! Whoa! I'm naked in here! Could you... knock...? Papa?"

At the sight of her father standing in the doorway, she scrabbled to cover herself, hiding her crotch and her budding breasts behind the edge of her blanket. Erik McClain was an immense, rugged bear of a man, and he loomed tall and broad in the doorway as he stared down at her. Her heart sank even as confusion welled up within her. Her father was as gentle as he was giant, and she had never seen the look of outraged fury that now contorted his weathered,

handsome features into an ugly scowl. "Gods help us." he growled down, more to himself than to her.

"Papa, what's wrong?" she said, worried. "Whatever I broke, I promise I'll fix it. Just let me get dressed. I'll make it better. Papa, please. Don't look at me like that. You're scaring me. Listen, if it's that fence, it was Avia, not me. I told her not to take that horse out that far. But... but I'll fix it anyway. Please, Papa, I-"

Without warning, her father lashed out at her, striking her across the face with the back of his hand. She cried out, spinning in a partial circle before crumpling to the ground, dazed and in pain while clutching at her cheek. She was too shocked to cry. She had never once seen Papa raise his hands to anything, not even unruly horses, and the impression of his knuckles throbbed in fitful agony. Strong hands grabbed her by the shoulders, hauling her upright, and she was brought face-to-face with her father once more. His eyes were inches from hers and filled with hateful malice. "You aren't my daughter." he seethed.

She reeled like he had struck her again. "Wh-what? Papa, what did I do!? Please! Let me fix it. I'll fix it!"

"There's no fixing *that*, you demon-touched wretch!" her father roared, standing to his full height to tower over her and point down at her body with an imperious finger.

Blinking in confusion, she looked down at herself, at her naked crotch. There, where he pointed, was an enormous, flaccid penis that dangled heavily from her loins. A bolt of terrified lightning shot down her spine, and she immediately looked up, blubbing numbly. "No! That's... That's not me! It's not mine! I'm your daughter! I want to be your daughter! Please, Papa! Please!"

"Enough!" he shouted, striking her again and throwing her once more to the floor where blood leaked from a cut on her cheek. His hand wrapped around her forearm like a band of steel, and before she could shake off her frightened confusion, he dragged her back upright only to pull her forcefully from her room and into the hallway outside. She screamed and wailed, begged and pleaded, but he would hear none of it, and as she was born roughly outside, she was paraded naked past the rest of her family. Her brothers and sisters looked down at her with scorn and unrestrained disgust. The only person to show any other emotion was her mother, who stood by the front door in tears.

Valorie called out to her, begged for help, but her mother turned away, loathing finally bubbling up past the anguish. "I bore an abomination! My child is a monster!"

She struggled valiantly against her father's steely grip, desperate please falling on her mother's deaf ears, but none of it was of any use. When she fell, Papa continued to drag her, first off of the porch and then through the dirt and dust. The other ranch hands looked on, but all of them turned away, unconcerned with matters that were none of their business. She screamed at them nonetheless, all the while fighting against her father's implacable rage, but gained nothing by it but another blow over the back of the head while she was half-carried away from their house.

Her father brought her over to one of the large poles that were sunk into the ground in their expansive yard. They were usually used as tent poles to keep the spring rains off of their outdoor meals, but she remembered twining her share of flowers around them during harvest celebrations. Papa had something else in mind, however, as he shoved her against it, and pulled both of her arms around the pillar of stout wood. With a length of coarse rope that dug into her wrists, he tied her hands together, trapping her against the pole in a forced embrace. She

struggled against her bindings, but her father knew his way around knots, and there was nothing to come of fighting against them.

She sunk down onto her knees and began to weep, calling out to her father, begging for forgiveness, for another chance as tears blinded her. The sun had only just risen, and dawn's rays bathed her filthy, naked form as her ears caught the unmistakable, telltale sound of leather slicing through the air. Her father's bullwhip cracked just to the side of her head, and she screamed with nearly mindless terror. "Papa! No! Please don't! No! Please! *Augh!*"

The anguished moan choked off into a strained gurgle as the lash of the whip tore a long strip of skin from her back, leaving behind a bloody, red line that was quickly joined by another, and then another. She arched her back, trying to flee from the source of her agony, but that only seemed to further infuriate her father even more, and he punctuated each flick of the length of pleated leather with a dire mantra. "You are *not* my daughter! You are *not* my daughter!"

Valorie could do little but scream as her back was ripped open again and again. Flecks of blood spattered over the grass, and she contorted against the pole that was doing most of the work of holding her vaguely upright. There came a point that she lacked even the energy to scream, and she just slumped forward, wheezing, her eyes half-lidded and half-conscious. Only then did the blows stop falling on her, and she forced herself to stir sluggishly, blood dripping from her mouth from where she had bitten her tongue, to look up as a dark shadow fell over her. It was her father, standing there with the axe they used to chop firewood, its blade glinting threateningly in the dim morning light. "Papa..." she moaned hoarsely, unable to keep herself from spitting blood onto his boots, "I'm sorry, Papa. I didn't want this. Please, help me Papa."

He appeared to hesitate, shaking his head almost sadly, but only did so for the briefest of moments before he raised the axe above his head. "The Gods will sort you out, Valorie." And then he brought it down on her skull with a sharp grunt.

She snapped awake with a shout and a jump fierce enough to throw her bodily from her chair. She flailed in her shock, but only managed to hit her desk with her head on the way down into a tangled heap. Her fur was slicked with a layer of icy sweat, and she could see her heartbeat through her chest. "Fucking Ichor..." she gasped, gradually righting herself and staggering back to her booted feet. She was in her office in the Sanctum, and she slumped back into her chair while her brain finished slapping itself back to consciousness. Her desk, usually neat and orderly, was a disheveled mess. She must have fallen asleep reading again. Maybe Dawn was right; maybe she *was* working too hard.

Pushing aside sheaves of notices, letters, and orders, she leaned forward to rest her elbows on the worn, wooden surface while she scrubbed the fatigue from her eyes. Dawn would give her quite the grumpy stare if she went for a drink so early in the day, but she sure as hells needed something, so she rose to her unsure feet to get some fresh air. Something she'd eaten the day before must have been less than savory to give her such vivid nightmares.

It was a chilly day, and she held her cape, emblazoned with the symbol of the Silver Lance, close to her back as she strode out into the large, open park that dominated the hollow formed by the Sanctum's tremendous walls. Filling her lungs with crisp, spring air, she walked a short circuit around the circular space, waving greetings to the Lancer's that were all running through their drills. Several ran up to her, likely for good reason, and she humored them, double-checking orders that she'd been given and making sure everything was in its place. She still winced when they called her "Captain", but there was little she could do for it. It was easier on everyone in the Lance if there was some sort of hierarchy, however loose.

Musing thoughtfully about what the hells she could have done to give herself such terrible dreams, she was caught completely off guard when the relative peace and silence of the Sanctum was shattered by a tremendous, thunderous boom. A bright flash of unsettling color flashed against her retinas, and it was joined by a massive plume of brilliant, orange fire that seared the air and washed outward in a wave of scorching heat that gnawed at everything within range. The earth beneath her boots shook with the impact, and she threw herself bodily atop the nearest Lancer, shielding the lanky feline with her much larger frame.

As soon as the sound of flames and thunder dwindled to silence, the sound of screams took its place, and she leapt back to her feet, taking off in a dead sprint toward the unsettling sounds. The grass had been charred to ash and soot, and even Salixia's willow burned, the tree writhing as if it were alive. Cresting the hill, all that greeted her were the sights and sounds of agony. Several blackened shapes were writhing bonelessly on the ground, subjected to the fury of what had happened, and a great many more were lying motionless. The scent of cooked flesh assaulted her nose, and the heat that radiated from the blasted ground was stifling. She ran down the slope anyway.

A pair of too-familiar shapes stopped her in her tracks, and she gasped as she changed directions and sprinted over. Even as horrifically burned as they were, she would never fail to recognize her children. She skidded to a halt and dropped numbly to her knees. Their bodies were entangled, one atop the other from where her son had thrown himself on top of his sister. "Virgil... Aurora..."

A weak, ragged moan was all she got in response. She shifted, wary of touching anything, lest she cause either of them any more pain than they would already be in. Their fur was crisped and cracked, most of it just burned clean of their raw, blistered hide. She could see the red of muscle, the white of tendons, through gaping rents in her son's back, and the only one that seemed to still be conscious was Aurora, and that was only because one of her eyes, the one that wasn't burned shut, was open, and glimmered wetly. Her daughter struggled to speak. "M... M-Mom..."

Valorie hovered her hand over her child's cheek, afraid to touch the horrible, oozing wounds that covered them both. "Shh..." she breathed, "It's... It's going to be okay. Dawn will be here, Daryn's coming. They'll have you both fixed up... Just stay awake. Stay with me. P-please. Please just stay right here. I'm not leaving."

"We t-tried..." Aurora struggled to spit out against her mother's stream of crooning, teary commands to shush. "Ley line pulse... overloaded the nexus. W-we tried... t-tried to contain it, but we... weren't fast enough." She was clearly struggling to breathe, but there was nothing Valorie could do. For the one of those rare moments, she was absolutely powerless. "He tried to save me, Mom... I could feel it, but..." She fought to pull in another breath, each coming weaker and more shallow than the next. "He hardly felt it, Mom. He didn't hurt." A resigned smile almost managed to flicker over her cracked, dead lips. "It's quiet... without him in my head. I'll miss... I... I-I lo-l-nnh. I love you, Mom. P-please don't... don't cry."

She couldn't stop herself. Tears streamed down her face, blinding herself to the universe. Aurora's arm lifted shakily off of the scorched dirt, rising weakly toward her, but it didn't quite make it before its strength failed. She stilled, and her single open eye slid closed as the air left her chest in a tired, tattered rattle. Valorie froze. "Aurora...?" There was no response, and her shaky hand, too late, reached down to slide fingers into those of her daughter. She ignored the way dry, cooked skin crackled in her grip. "Aurora, please. Don't... Aurora. Virgil. Wake up. You... Don't do this to me. You can't..."

She felt the agonized scream roil in her chest, but she couldn't even make herself let it out. She just sobbed and ached, her soul broken, oblivious to the maelstrom of activity whirling around her. It took four tries for the deep, anguished voice to drag her attention from the mangled bodies of her children. Hollow, haunted eyes turned upward to see what could possibly be of any interest to her anymore, and she saw Daryn, the immense golden dragon, cradling another twisted, almost unidentifiable corpse. Almost.

It was Dawn.

She awoke with a violent, screeching scream and with her hands claspings the sides of her head, balled into tight fists. She cried out until her voice was coarse and raw and she was panting, curled into a tight ball of misery. She cried so hard her stomach hurt and she was sure she would lose consciousness from lack of air. It was only through an immense mental effort that she managed to stop the distraught noises that were pouring from her chest, and only then did she managed to open her eyes against the force of her distress.

Reminding herself that it was only a nightmare to end all nightmares, she fought her way to her feet, inspecting her surroundings. Where she found herself sent frigid chills down her spine, and she immediately shoved the memory of her horror aside to make room for the very real, creeping dread that settled into the depths of her gut. She was in a roughly square chamber made up of rough, hewn blocks of dark grey stone. The ceiling vanished into the darkness above. Shadows that seemed to shift of their own accord lurked in the far corners of the room, and the only light that seemed to make it into the space was centered on a short, round pillar that appeared to be made to hold something. The rock was ancient and worn, despite being sheltered from the elements, and an aura of palpable fear pervaded the space. What made it worse was that she knew why. "It's not possible." she whispered, more to reassure herself than anything else, "This isn't possible."

"Isn't it, my little morsel?" called a voice, a rich, feminine voice that oozed sensuality like it belonged to a lover crooning into her ear, a voice that was tinged with an absolute, steely resolution, a familiar, terrifying voice. She whirled around, eye scouring the darkness, and was laughed at for her efforts, a throaty, nearly intoxicating laugh that drilled into her mind. "Come now, mortal. You knew that you would eventually wind up here, with me. Your place is by my side. It always has been."

"No!" she shouted, "We stopped you. You're gone!"

"Oh, yes. I nearly forgot why I liked you so much, plaything. Think about it, Valorie. I can't be gone. I can never be gone, not as long as there's even a tiny little sliver of... desire in the world. Even the other gods understand that much. I'm in the heart of everyone, that urge to take what you want, that base, primal instinct to dominate and... ravage. You can resist, but you mortals will never be rid of me, you least of all; isn't that right?"

"You're wrong!" Valorie growled, putting up a brave, angry face to hide her primordial horror.

More malicious laughter. "Do you really think that a little magic can remove what I gave you, that you can hide what you are, what you always will be? You and I both know that you are no fool, mortal. Do you think that you can conceal that lusty, vicious fiend behind such a paper-thin veneer of nobility? How long do you think you can last before someone figures you out? Will they still welcome you when they find out how much you truly enjoy my gift, how much you yearn for more, just a fraction of what I can further grant you?" Valorie stepped back, eyes flicking from shadow to shadow. "You can lie to them all you like, slut, but you can't hide yourself from *me*!"

That last word came out as a thundering roar, and no longer able to stifle her panic, she spun on her heels and sprinted wildly at the exit that she vividly remembered. Another mirthful, booming laugh echoed around her, and she tried to stop when flashes of searing, violet light flickered in the shadowy passage before her. In it, she saw a voluptuous silhouette, and screamed as she discovered that she couldn't stop herself. She dug in her heels, but some force pulled her onward, dragging her into the blackness, where a pair of blood-red arms reached out to embrace her.

"No!" she slurred clumsily as she shuddered awake and flopped out of her bed like a hooked fish. She smacked her muzzle on the floorboards beneath her, which stunned her into a semblance of disturbed silence. With a groan, she rubbed her head as she dragged herself to her knees so she could lean heavily on the edge of her bed. "Gods' Blood." she grumbled, raking a few fingers through her hair, "No more cider before bed for me. Fucking hells..."

Sluggishly, she squirmed back into her bed, seeking to escape the nip in the air in the pocket of warmth she had left behind when she fell off. Her strange terror faded quickly, as that from dreams often did, and she sighed as she sat up. She needed to get moving anyway. She was expected. As she shuffled across her bedroom, she ran through her itinerary for the day: meeting with client, meeting with potential client, and meeting with... a very close friend. She blushed beneath her fur as she threw open the drapes to let in the morning sunlight.

She nearly fainted when she saw how far the sun had risen. It was nearly noon. With a startled shriek, she threw herself at her wardrobe. So much for her meetings, she was going to be late for her date as it was. Cursing her laziness, she dragged a brush through her hair while bouncing into a pair of trousers and shrugging on whatever blouse was most easily reached. Her shaky hands struggled with the laces of her boots, but she relied on herself to make up time during the trip. She burst from her home and vaulted over the railing of the staircase that led to her second-story door. Landing confidently with the dull thud of impact, she tore off in the direction of the inner city.

As she ran, she hardly made any friends. She nimbly dodged around what crowd she could, leapt cleanly over others, and very nearly trampled the rest. She shouted apologies over her shoulder as she sprinted, but she dared not slow herself. She was fast. She just had to be fast enough. She could be fast enough, she thought, and she urged every ounce of speed that she could out over her more-than-athletic physique.

Valorie was too frantic to give it much thought, but she thought that she made it to the Archmage's palace-castle in record time. The winding path up the hill upon which it sat was torture to her legs, but she pushed herself through it, and gave herself only a brief second to regain control of her breathing before clearing her throat, straightening her shirt, and raising her hand to knock on the enormous, wooden doors set into the sturdy grey walls that glittered in the sun as if they were studded with gemstones.

A split-second before her knuckles could make contact with the smooth wood, the door fell away from her, opening from the inside and gliding inward on perfectly balanced hinges. Before her stood a man that would have been almost a giant were she not more than two feet taller than him. His broad shoulders filled a long, black coat, and depthless blue eyes peered hard at her for a moment from beneath a mess of short, brown hair as his lips quirked upward in a fond smile. "Valorie! A pleasure as always! Please, come in."

The Archmage ushered her through the door and into the lushly decorated entrance hall of the massive, sprawling structure. "Hey, Daryn. Listen, I'm not really here for a check-up or

anything. I'm just running a little behind schedule today. Is Dawn around? She should be expecting me."

He held up his hand, and she immediately snapped her mouth closed. He may have been friendly enough, but she couldn't help but remember that if he wanted to, he could smear her across the floor with less than a thought. He seemed bemused by her reaction, but he quickly grew serious. "Yes, Valorie. I... I actually think it would be best if you gave her a little space for the time being. She's been... rather flustered lately."

"Wh-what? What's wrong?" she spluttered, "Is there anything I can do to help?" She took half a step forward. "Let me talk to her. If there's a problem, I'll fix it. That's practically my job."

Daryn held out a hand, and she stopped dead in her tracks. "Actually, Valorie, from what I've gathered, you're the problem she's been trying to deal with. I don't know if seeing her is the best idea right now."

"What?!" she barked, having been sent reeling. "What? Wh-why? What did I do? What's wrong with me?!"

Waving down her panic, he fixed her with a sympathetic, fatherly smile. "Listen, Valorie. I don't care how you choose to live your life. It is very much not my place to judge anyone on anything outside of my own expertise, and relationships are far from that, but Dawn is of a different opinion than I."

"What the blood-soaked hells are you talking about?!" she snapped, confusion turning into hurt anger. "I'd never do anything to hurt Dawn! What the fuck did I do?! What *could* I have done?! Just... Just let me talk to her. I'll take care of it."

He hesitated for a moment, but eventually stepped aside gesturing through one of the doors at the end of the room. "Very well, Valorie. It's also not my place to stand between you, but keep this in mind." His gaze hardened, and the air seemed to stiffen with invisible tension. "That young woman is like a daughter to me, and if you hurt her I will be more than upset."

She didn't even consider the possibility. "I couldn't do that to her, Daryn, or you. I'm just going to talk to her." The Archmage nodded thoughtfully and stared at her back while she stalked away and into the mazelike passages of the Sanctum Arcanum, a concerned frown stretched over her face.

Her mind couldn't hope to come up with a reason that Dawn would be upset with her, short of perhaps not being around as much as either of them would like. No one she had ever been with made her feel like Dawn did, and she had been happier in the past few months than she ever had before. Anxiety quickened her steps, and while the huge complex was labyrinthine in shape, she had the path to the apprentice's room devoted to memory. Discontent boiled in her gut, and when she reached her target door, she hesitated. What... what could she have done?

When she knocked, it took a moment for it to be answered. "Can it wait, Master? I... I need some time, alright?"

Her breath caught in her throat. Dawn's normally light, musical voice was low and seemed... wounded. "Dawn?" she called through the wood of the door, "Dawn, it's me. Daryn told me something was wrong. Can... Can we talk? I just want to-"

Before she could finish her plea, the door jerked open. Dawn stood on the other side. She short woman's sleek, auburn hair was a disheveled mess, and her bright, amber eyes were red and inflamed. Tears stained her cheeks. "You..." the apprentice growled in a hurt hiss. "You just... You should leave... H-how... how dare you come here! How *dare* you show your smug face at my door! You... Y-you..." Voice dying, Dawn's eyes dropped from hers. "How could you?"

To see Dawn hurt caused her pain the likes of which she couldn't begin to imagine. "How could I what? Dawn, please. What... what did I do? Don't do this to me."

"Do this to *you*?! " Dawn shouted up at her, "How stupid do you think I am? Did you think that I live my whole life in this place, that I never go outside to shop or look at the sun or even get a breath of fresh air? Did you think that I wouldn't talk to anyone about you? Did you think that you could hide your agenda from me? Why..." Her face scrunched up, anguish welling up in her eyes. "What am I to you? Am I just some notch you get to carve into your bedpost?!"

Dumb shock registered on Valorie's face as her jaw dropped slack. "What? What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"Shut up!" Dawn screamed at her, rising up onto the balls of her feet for the extra inch of height. "You're awfully popular around here, Valorie! Tell me, is there anyone in Southcliff that you haven't had in your bed?! I thought that we were special! You... you made me feel special! Why did you make me care about you so much? Did you just want to see what it felt like to screw some shy mage?!" She tried to speak, but Dawn cut her off with a savage swipe of her hand. "Shut your mouth! You... I gave you everything I had. I gave you my maidenhood. I... I thought I was giving you something that meant something, but you just... I'm just another one of your adventures, aren't I? Am I just a chapter in your book? Is that all I am?"

It took almost a minute for Valorie to make her mouth move the way she wanted. "Dawn... What...? You *are* special to me. I haven't touched anyone else since we met. I... I wish I could be around more, but I... You aren't just some fling."

The wizard-in-training sobbed in reply, too wracked with anguish to immediately respond. "How many others have you said that to, Valorie? How am I supposed to trust you?"

Valorie felt numb, and she gestured weakly at herself. "I don't know how to fix this, Dawn. I... How do I fix this? What do you want me to do?"

Dawn took a step back, retreating into her room. "I want you to go away, Valorie. Go find some other idiot. It's going to take a long... long time to forget you, and seeing you every day is just going to make that harder. So just... Just go away." Her voice got very quiet at the end, and she seemed unable to look up from the floor as she shut the door in Valorie's face. She didn't slam it, but the sound of the latch falling into place was like the crack of the headsman's axe striking the block.

The smooth wood of the solid barrier in front of her slid beneath her fingertips as she rested a palm against it. "Dawn..." she whispered, understanding that no volume would get her heard. Valorie felt dead inside, and her feet carried her away before she could start frantically pounding on the door. Robotically, she shuffled back the way she had come. Daryn was nowhere to be found, having returned to his business elsewhere, and she knew, beneath the layers of anguish and confusion, that it was probably for the best. She didn't know what would happen if she had an ear to vent to at that moment.

She had made it out the front door and into the chill of the early afternoon air before the enormity of her hurt crashed into her like a giant-thrown boulder. She stopped on the edge of the snaking pathway, simply sagging and collapsing down onto her knees long before she could reach the bottom of the hill. With a limp slump, she fell over onto her side and buried her face into the immaculately manicured grass that lined the walkway. A woeful, heartbroken wail spilled from the depths of her soul, and she lacked the ability to choke it back. She was glad that so few had the courage to make the walk up the hill to the Sanctum, because no one should have been subjected to the sight of her crying herself hoarse and bawling her eyes out like a child.

Time passed, and she was unsure of how much it was. All she knew was that when she finally managed to make herself open her eyes, the sun had drastically changed position in the sky. Valorie made herself sit up, but beyond that, she didn't know what else to do. There were no words she could have used to quantify the depth of the pain she felt in the core of her chest. She felt like she had been stabbed, and that her phantom assailant was sitting before twisting the knife over and over again, seemingly with every beat of her fractured heart.

The only thing that was able to stir her from her dejected melancholy was the sensation of something light and prickly touching her shoulder. Rather than jerk in surprise, she instead just lifted her head, peering blankly at the small creature that had landed on top of her. It was no larger than a housecat, but a coat of iridescent, red scales, a pair of leathery wings, and a slender, stinger-tipped tail proclaimed it for what it was. A delicate, tapered snout rubbed affectionately against her neck, where its tiny horns scratched harmlessly at her fur, and she didn't flinch when a faint, alien sensation, as of something foreign brushing against her consciousness, signaled a tenuous connection between herself and the little dragonet. "This is not you." it said in a surprisingly deep, feminine voice that sounded in her thoughts.

"Limata..." she sniffled, "Listen, I... Can I just be alone for a bit? I... I don't know what to do."

The tiny, draconic quadruped cocked her head as if in confusion. "Yes you do." she said with supreme confidence, "You always know what to do, even if you are too stubborn to realize it, Valorie."

Sudden surprise shouldered its way to the front of her mind, replacing her agony for a moment. "Wh-what? What did you call me? You've never..."

Diminutive claws poked her through her shirt as Limata kneaded her shoulder. "Peculiar, is it not, that I would choose now of all times to use your name? Particularly because this is not you."

She scoffed. "Of course it is... Maybe she's right. Maybe I'm just some horny slut. But... I thought... I thought we could be serious. I thought I... I should have told her."

The creature perched on her shoulder bared its teeth and lashed out at her. Limata bit her square on her nose. Valorie yelped and recoiled, jerking her head backwards as Limata's needlelike teeth pierced her sensitive skin and drew a few little droplets of blood that matted into her fur. She fell backwards, and the dragonet reacted as smoothly as if she had planned it, hopping upward, flapping her wings once, and landing atop Valorie's chest to glare down at her like nothing less than an angry mother. "You *did* tell her!"

"What?" she said, a hand on her bloody nose. "What are you?"

Limata hissed loudly, silencing her with a flourish that brandished the stinger that terminated that whiplike tail. "Think, you foolish horse! You told her about your promiscuity long before now, before you first made love. It was *because* she was special that you treated her differently, that you took things slowly, that you—you of all people—were so hesitant and awkward. She had to throw herself at you for you to take her! *Remember!* Remember the future, your friends, your children. None of this is you! None of this is right!"

The little creature's voice thundering against her thoughts was giving her a headache, and she rubbed her temples, trying to ease the discomfort. "Limata... What are you doing? What are you talking about? What the hells do you know?!"

"Exactly!" snapped the dragonet with an exaggerated flick of her tail, "What do I know? How could I know anything about you, Valorie?" Limata hesitated, creeping further up Valorie's

body to put her head mere inches from the equine's eyes. "How do you know anything about me, Valorie? We haven't met yet."

An icy chill crawled up her spine to raise the hairs on the back of her neck. "N-no... I know you... You were... We... What..."

With a satisfied nod, Limata continued. "We met the day you and Dawn returned from Salaxa's temple. You nearly struck me from the air. That will be nearly two years from now, so tell me, Valorie. How do you know me?"

Valorie's eyes widened in stunned confusion. She searched her memories, examined each moment she could pull from the archives of her past, but she was certain she would easily remember coming across such an elusive creature. Dragonets were remarkable for their rarity, and yet this one's name sprang easily to the front of her mind. "Limata... what's happening?"

"How should I know? I don't know anything. I'm not even here. This is no more me than the woman in there was Dawn. Like I said, we don't meet for almost another two years. Something is wrong, Valorie." As she spoke, Valorie noticed her scales begin to dull, slowly losing their color. "All I know is that you need to find her, Valorie. She's in danger."

Like ripples on the surface of a pond, reality around her began to distort in dizzying waves. Following it, the color continued to drain from everything around her. The grass went from vibrant green to a flat, lifeless grey, as did the blue of the sky, and even the stone of the massive structure that rose up behind her lost its luster. The little monochrome creature sitting on her chest shifted as she sat up, clutching her head in her hands as a blur of images and emotions rushed through her mind. "Wh-what... Who? Oh Gods... This is... so wrong. Dawn... Where's Dawn...? The caves..."

Limata smiled at her, taking wing from her shoulder and wheeling into the air. "I don't know, stupid, but you need to get to her. She needs you. She's alone. She's afraid. Find her."

In the course of an instant, she relived her missing life inside her head, and the force of it nearly threw her back to the ground. With a heavy growl, she instead forced herself to her feet. "Son of a *bitch*!" She shouted up at the sky while the world continued to die around her. Color and life was gone, and Limata was no longer anywhere to be found. She was being toyed with, and fury took the place of every other emotion as it sparked to life in her chest. The universe that had been constructed to hold her buckled under her awareness of it, and just as the colors had seconds before, the structure of the world began to sag under the weight of her stare. The sun overhead dimmed, and the shadows around her writhed and grew, swallowing up whole sections of Southcliff and fading to deep, inky darkness.

She didn't know what to expect, but she held her ground as all of reality sagged and disappeared into blackness. The structures in the city warped and collapsed in on themselves, eventually falling flat to the ground like they were only two-dimensional constructs, figments of her imagination. The ground beneath her feet lost texture as it flattened, leveling with the blankness around it until she was standing alone on a broad, flat plain of steadily dimming grey that was marred by splotches of spreading shadow. Eventually the wan point of light that hung in the air above her winked out, and she was plunged into perfect, absolute darkness.

The only thing she could be sure of was herself and the firmness of the flat surface beneath her boots. It was unnerving enough to dull her ire for a moment, and she waved a hand in front of her face only to see nothing but the almost solid blackness that surrounded her. Worry knotted her intestines. What was she supposed to do now? If not-Limata was right, she was needed, and she could do nothing about it. She took a blind step, carefully finding her footing in

the pitch black unreality of where she was, but she had no idea where she was supposed to go. "Dawn... Dawn!" she yelled out into the darkness, silently praying for an answer of any sort.

She received one, just not the one that she was expecting. At her call, she felt another tingling touch against her thoughts, something that wasn't her, and coupled with it, she saw a dim, flickering light in the distance, a speck of color and life in the ocean of otherwise unbroken shadow that surrounded her. It was nothing more than a little nub of something that wasn't her, a slight pressure against her consciousness, but she instantly knew its source. Despite the foreignness of the presence, she knew that she would never feel fully whole without it, no matter how faint it grew, and now that she could feel it, it filled her with hot, overwhelming energy. That little bit of Dawn was full of fear and anguish, terror that bled into her thoughts and made her scream, "Dawn! I'm coming!"

Without an ounce of hesitation, she threw herself into a dead sprint in the direction of the spot of light that seemed so far away. She knew that she had never run so fast in her life, despite not being able to see where she was. She trusted the sameness of her invisible surroundings, hoping beyond hope that her foot would fall on solid ground instead of the open void of some bottomless abyss, and she ran. The sound of her heartbeat in her ears drummed her onward, and she kept her breathing even and measured as her legs and stomach began to burn. Time really had no meaning, she ran as hard as she was capable with no thought about when she would reach her destination, only the utter confidence that she would. She had to.

When she felt her connection with Dawn grow firmer, more concrete, and saw the dot of light grow into a splotch, she let out a triumphant cheer and pushed herself harder. Now that she had begun, it came upon her faster than she expected, as if she had only to pursue it to catch it. The source of light resolved itself as a poorly-defined, rectangular opening in the darkness, and it appeared like little less than a window from her world of oblivion into someplace else. The opening was large, taller than she was, and long enough to make it look like the wall of a spacious room. What it looked out on made her heaving breaths freeze in her throat as she took it in. Valorie jogged the rest of the way, slowing cautiously when she got to within an arm's length of the odd portal. Reaching out her hand, she pushed her fingers forward, despair sinking into the pit of her stomach when she felt a solid barrier, like a brick wall, standing invisibly in her path, standing between her and her mission. She could go no further, could watch, but not interfere.

The room on the other side of the window was dark, dimly lit as it was by a couple candles that guttered in their mounts high on the walls. Compared to the shadow that surrounded her, however, it was like midday, and she stared on, a word held on her lips. The walls of the room were made up of enormous stone blocks, grey and featureless, and there were very little distinguishing features within. The room, despite being at least as long as the window that edged it, seemed small and cramped, and the tiny figure hunched over on the cold ground in its center looked all too familiar.

The room looked like a dungeon cell, and Dawn was kneeling there within it, shivering. She was wearing what looked to have once been a lovely dress of rich, blue fabric, but it was dirty and torn, hanging limply on her body. Her hair was filthy and matted close to her head, and what skin was visible beneath the layer of grime that seemed to have been caked onto her was bruised and bloody, like she had been badly beaten. She was human, meek and small and helpless, and though she wasn't bound, her posture was of a woman who had been defeated wholly and utterly.

Valorie stepped the rest of the way forward. The light emanating from her view of Dawn spilled somewhat into her realm of jet blackness, but the only thing that was illuminated by it

was her. She saw her hands as she balled them into fists and hammered on the phantom wall that separated her from the other woman. "Dawn!" she shouted, "Dawn! I'm right here! I'm here! Look at me! Dawn!"

If she was heard, the nearly motionless wizard took no notice of her. She got the feeling that her view was only one-way, but she didn't know what else to do, so she pounded furiously, desperate. She could feel Dawn's fear and pain, and the fact that she was being stymied by something that she couldn't even see infuriated her. And then she heard something, a loud, metallic *clang*, and a shaft of brighter, yet still dull light spilled into the room that held Dawn. The heavy, steel door that was set into one of the walls drifted noisily inward, letting whatever illumination that was present outside filter into the wizard's prison, save for where it was blocked by a dark, threatening silhouette. "Hey there, sexy..." Dawn's guest purred in a coy, feminine whisper that was equal parts playful and full of unbridled malice.

Valorie froze. Something about that voice was disturbingly familiar, and as the shadowed figure stepped coolly into the wan light of Dawn's candles, she discovered why. Looming, a scowl over her face, before the kneeling wizard was what had plainly once been a horse morph, with rich, chocolate brown fur and golden brown hair the fell past her shoulders. Her sharp, green eyes glinted with hatred in the flickering glow, and her lips slowly pulled back into a nearly skeletal, manic grin. It was her. Valorie looked out on some bastardized copy of herself, and it shocked her enough to still her frantic beating on the hidden wall that stood in her way.

It was her, but it wasn't. That voice, the eyes, even the cocky stance, weight resting on one leg with the opposite hip thrown out, were hers, but something horrible had happened to her. Behind her eyes glimmered a pale, violet light that gave them their own radiance, and through her hair pushed a pair of dark, curving horns that swept up and back behind her skull. Beneath a suit of armor easily as black as the darkness that surrounded her, a layer of muscle even more bulky and pronounce than she already possessed twitched anxiously as not-her shifted her weight from foot to foot. "Been a while, hasn't it, Dawn?"

Dawn shook her head, not daring to look up, or even open her eyes to acknowledge the presence of the demonized version of Valorie. "No... I see you whenever I close my eyes. I remember you. I... I didn't mean for any of this to happen."

"Cute..." the imposing equine said flatly before baring her teeth in a feral snarl, "I remember too... I remember how you left me out there to be killed. Did you even know how many there were when you whisked yourself to safety without me? Do you know how many I killed just to buy you the time you needed just so you could forsake me? Do you know how hard I fought for you, only to have you stab me in the back?"

"As hard as you could." Dawn answered meekly, "Just like you always did. I... I didn't mean for this to happen. I had to go... It was the only way we could stop... this. I'm sorry."

That seemed to enrage the demon-horse, who growled and took a heavy step to wrap her fingers around Dawn's throat and haul her off of the ground to dangle feet from the floor. "You're sorry?!" she barked, slamming the wizard's back against a wall and shaking her like a child, "Do you even know what they did to me?!"

"Yes..." came the quiet, strangled reply.

The equine let out an outraged roar and threw Dawn across the room, where she crumpled to the ground in a battered heap. "Well they didn't kill me! After they were done playing with me, they just brought me back to *her*! And *she* may as well have killed me! You can't imagine how upset she was. You cannot *begin* to comprehend the depth of her anger, you traitorous runt!"

"I'm sor-"

"*Shut up!*" screamed the armored horse, throwing a kick into the huddled woman's balled-up shape. Bones audibly cracked, and Dawn was once more thrown backward into the wall to writhe weakly. Then, a look of placid, sly calm swept over her assailant. "Don't worry, Dawn. She took away all that pain, that pain that you gave me, and she filled that hole with purpose, purpose and power. I was the first she touched, after all, and she replaced everything you *ripped* out of me with something so much better, something you never could. So there's that." Dawn tried to speak, but her words were choked off again when the equine grabbed her by the throat once more to drag her up to eye-level. "Look at me, Dawn. Look at what you did to me."

The wizard tried to shake her head. "N-no... I can't."

"Like hells you can't!" snapped the towering equine, throwing Dawn against a wall and pinning her there with an arm. The wizard squirmed weakly, whimpering, but quieted when the demonic horse pushed against her in a hard, forceful kiss. Their lips met, and Dawn gagged on not-Valorie's tongue as it filled her mouth and throat mercilessly, and her eyes fluttered helplessly open. Only then did the equine pull away, smiling. "There we go. You always were a sucker for these lips."

At the first glance, Dawn had frozen. The wizard stared in horrified awe at her enormous attacker, and a fresh wave of tears washed down her cheeks as her face scrunched up in anguish. "Valorie... I'm so sorry."

The horse dropped her unceremoniously to the ground. "Yeah, that's all I really wanted. After she took me, I thought *long* and *hard* about what I wanted to do. She gave you to me, you know. You're all mine, to do with what I want. And you know what? After all the possibilities she whispered into my ear, I don't want any of them." While she spoke, she stalked a slow circuit of the room, winding up before the wizard once more. "I'm done with you, Dawn. I don't even want your body; I can have plenty of those whenever I want, so I think I'm just going to get rid of you."

When the demon-horse drew the sword that rested on her hip, a long, razored piece of black steel studded with amethysts, the Valorie who was watching the whole thing transpire lost her mind. With a choked cry she resumed her desperate pounding on the smooth, unseen barrier before her. Complete, almost mindless terror filled her as she threw her weight against it and watched nightmare-her raise the sword over Dawn's grief stricken body. She screamed and rammed the invisible wall with everything she had. Anger flashed to rage in her veins, and warred with the icy chill of dread that sought to overwhelm it. Her gut was a pit of roiling emotion, but above it all was steadfast determination, tinted with the gleam of hope, and she backed a few steps away and sprinted at the vista that was barred to her just as the creature that would never be her began to bring the sword down.

With a guttural roar, she threw herself, shoulder-first at the plane of nothingness that kept her from Dawn, and triumphant bliss ignited in her chest as she continued through it, the invisible wall shattering with the sound of a pane of glass smashing into a million pieces. At the sound, both occupants of the room started and looked over at her, and she didn't slow for anything. As her first boot hit the floor, her armor was on her, shielding her in a mirrored coat of flawless, silver plates, and as her second struck the ground, her sword was in her hand, not even having been drawn. With a defiant cry, she threw her weapon up, intercepting that of her adversary in a shower of sparks as she deflected the blow and threw it away. Then, pushing her weight into her leading foot, she entered a spin, ducking low under her opponents guarding hand

to throw the tapered point of her blade against not-her's breastplate, driving every ounce of her strength and momentum into the attack.

With the grinding screech of tearing metal, her sword sunk deeply into the monster's chest, deeply enough to erupt from the other side in a spray of blood and gore that spattered over the stone walls. With a strained grunt, she shoved, twisting her blade and pushing away the bulk of the creature. Its eyes were huge and shocked, and its legs gave out after half a step for it to crash heavily to the floor. It clawed at the wound in its chest, trying to save its skewered heart to no effect, and after only a few seconds of convulsing it stilled and gasped its last. "I don't..." she panted, spitting on the thing's corpse, "I don't fucking think so."

Leaving her sword sticking from its chest like a monument to her victory, she spun. Dawn was looking at her, eyes equally enormous and full of startled awe. She didn't even give the little wizard the chance to speak. She just dropped to her knees, her armor clattering against itself, and threw her arms, gently but securely, around her love's battered form. "Gods' Golden Blood. Please let this be the real you. Please, please, please. Please, Dawn, just be real."

Wincing at her touch, the diminutive woman lifted a hand to touch Valorie's cheek, saying her name in a wonder-filled whisper. "Valorie... This is a trick... You can't be here. She's toying with my mind again."

She rolled her eyes with enough force to make the motion nearly audible. "What?! Dawn, listen! We're both asleep or something! We need to wake up! You need to wake up! This is all just a dream!"

"I can't tell anymore..." Dawn wheezed, "I can't tell what's real and what's another of her nightmares. Just... just go away. Just let me die."

"Oh no you don't!" said Valorie with a determined set to her jaw, "I'm not going to walk away that easily this time. Come here." She looped her arms beneath Dawn's limp form and rose to her feet, cradling the wizard against her armored chest. "Come on. We need to get out of here. Wherever here is." Turning away, she carried the wizard over to the door through which Dawn's nightmare had entered only to find it locked. That wasn't about to stop her, and she held Dawn securely to her as she lashed out, slamming her booted foot against the door again and again. The door was sturdy, made of steel, but the wall wasn't, and before too much time could pass, the stone that the door's hinges were anchored to shattered and gave way. She kicked the door down and away, and stepped through the resulting portal and out into... a place.

She gasped, and Dawn whimpered and buried her face into her tattered dress. A blast of hot, arid wind swept by her, dragging her cape and tail out to her side, and she looked out over hell, or as close to a stereotypical hellscape as she could imagine. A slate-grey tower rose up behind her, Dawn's prison, and the only structure within view. The rest of the landscape was scorched, fire-blasted earth, seared of life. Pits of lashing flames belched inky, black smoke into the air, adding to a thick, impenetrable layer of hazy grey clouds that turned the skies into a blanket of roiling blackness that allowed no light through. The whole world was dim and dark and tortured, and she breathed out in a disbelieving whisper, "What happened..."

"I let them down..." Dawn said in an anguished moan, "I let them all down... Daryn, my family... I let you down, Valorie. I... I-I failed you. I tried so hard. I tried, Valorie, but I couldn't do it. I just didn't have it in me,"

Valorie immediately spun on her heels, putting her back to the ruined, unfamiliar landscape. She gently sat Dawn down on the ground at her feet, and lowered herself to her knees in front of her. With a few sharp pops, she ripped through the leather straps that held on her breastplate, and she tore her armored gauntlets off, tossing the pieces of shining argentum to the

side to clatter down the steps. "You didn't fail, Dawn." she crooned as she pulled the wizard into a hug, pressing the woman's tear-stained face into the warmth of her bosom, so that she could see nothing of the world around them. "You didn't fail anyone. Just look. Look at me. Did you fail me?" Dawn peered up at her, confusion on her face. She reached down to cup a cheek and pull her back in. "I've seen the hells Dawn. I've looked demons in the eye and laughed. Let me tell you; this, this is not the worst things could be. We're unconscious. Something's playing with our minds and out emotions. Remember Morgan, and the caves. We must still be there, sleeping on the job. Just remember for me."

"B-but..." squeaked the wizard, "Y-you... I... All this-"

"Is nothing." Valorie finished, "This is nothing. It's meaningless, meant to scare you or keep you contained or something. Nothing here is real, except for me. I'm real, and I'm here for you. I found you. If this place is supposed to be your hell, then *whoever* is doing this to us needs to try harder, because we're together, and there can be no hell for me that has you in it, Dawn. Because when you're with me, I'm in the heavens. I don't need anything else to be happy."

There was a moment of silence, broken only by the occasional gust of blast-furnace-wind that whipped her loose hair around her face, and Dawn stared up at her as if seeing her for the first time. Slowly, dull recognition inched over the wizard's expression, and tears welled up in her eyes. When her voice came, it was no longer weak and cowed. "Val, you idiot. Only the real you could say something so stupid." The tiny woman stirred against her and laughed, a light, rich, happy sound

She grinned in spite of their surroundings. "The one and only."

Leaning upward, craning her neck, she gave Valorie a quick kiss on the cheek. "You'd never let me go, would you?"

Shaking her head, she hugged her tighter. "Never ever."

Gradually, the smile faded from Dawn's face, and she redirected her gaze at the world around them. She wriggled out of her love's arms, rising to stand on her own two feet, ragged dress and all. She seemed to be no longer injured, and Valorie stood up next to her. Her eyebrows drew down, forming an angry, angular line, and she shouted up into the greasy, black skies. "This is *my* mind, and you are *not* welcome here! I am *not* your plaything! Now get the *fuck* out!"

There was a split second of silence, and then the world exploded. The ground beneath her feet bucked violently, nearly throwing Valorie from her spot, but Dawn reached out to her, bracing her with the strength of someone who was in the core of her own domain. Flashes of light flickered across the skies, and the earth cracked and split like the husk of a dying insect. It looked like nothing less than the end of the world. The wizard, however, simply looked out on it with a cold, impassive scowl, brightening enough after a moment to look up at her. "Thank you Valorie, for saving me again. But you need to get out before I wake us up. Being so deep in my mind when we open our eyes would be... unpleasant for both of us, so I've got to kick you out." The wizard reached over and squeezed her hand with calm, confident force. "See you on the other side."

Valorie didn't even have time to agree before *something* grabbed her like an enormous, invisible hand, and flung her backwards like a giant had taken a club to her torso. She yelped in surprise as, with another loud, crashing sound, blackness enveloped her once again. She felt like she was falling, and she dreaded the impact with the ground when she finally did meet it. She could no longer see anything of her own body; she felt like some formless entity that was spiraling out of control through the darkness of some interplanar void.

After what felt like an eternity of plummeting, the sensation dulled, until she felt herself stop. She floated there, suspended for a time, until she felt something tug forcefully on her night-cloaked body. It felt like something was pulling on her navel from behind, jerking her backward again and again, tugging and tugging, each time growing more and more insistent. She felt like she was being pulled toward something, and then she managed to get a sense of her orientation. She was being pulled upward, like a snagged fish, and just after she realized it, she saw a dull, pale glow illuminate the universe. The blackness gave way to grey, and then, eventually white, the brightness of which made her shield her eyes with a forearm and flinch away. She felt... She felt. Sensation prickled over her skin, and she heard a voice calling out to her.

"Alright Val." Dawn's voice softly murmured to her, "Time to finish this." The voice sounded... real, soft and warm and alive, and she followed it, practically swimming through the featureless sea of white around her until she could almost touch it. "That's it. Now just... wake up for me. Ladies first, you know."

She blinked rapidly, rubbing her eyes with the back of her hand, and out of the whiteness came into view the dull, grey ceiling of a rocky chamber. She saw veins of silver crawling through the stone, and as her sleep slowly faded, the rest of the room came into view. Groggily, she sat up and laid eyes on Dawn, back in her recently-gained body, that of a short, slender equine with strawberry-blond fur and a lengthy, spiraling horn, who was also sluggishly rising. The sight of the wizard dashed away the rest of her fatigue, and she launched herself at the other horse morph, wrapping her up in a frantically tight hug that pulled the air from Dawn's lungs in a strained wheeze.

Her tiny love recovered quickly enough to return her embrace and whisper into her quivering ears. "I should have known you would come to my rescue. You always have been my knight in shining armor."

She struggled to keep the tears from gushing forth from behind her eyes. Instead, she let out a single, ragged sob and buried her face into Dawn's lush hair, breathing deeply of the wizard's distinct, floral scent. It, and the slender, delicate hands that patted her armored back, calmed her, and she could eventually open her eyes without crying. "I knew it would underestimate you two..." came another, more masculine voice from one of the far corners of the room.

Valorie turned, helping Dawn to her feet while doing the same herself. Morgan was huddled against one of the far walls, his knees held against his chest and his head hanging tiredly. "You..." Valorie said, her voice hardening as she remembered the last thing he had said to them. "What's going on?!"

He looked up at them. His skin looked pale and drawn, and his eyes were huge and red. He looked like he, too, had been through hell, and his voice reflected that, coming out dull and flat, restrained. "I'm sorry, but there's no time. Just listen." He took a shaky breath in through his mouth, sighing it out through his nose. "I know what it is. It's a demon, and it got me. I... I should have told you. I wanted to, but it wouldn't let me. It's in my head, and it's all I can do to just talk right now, so please listen."

"You... You led us here!" Valorie shouted, advancing on the mage with a murderous look. Only Dawn's hand on her arm stopped her.

"Please... We don't have much time. Listen. When I stumbled on it the first time, I think I released it. It killed a few miners, and when I came back to investigate it... it killed me too. At first I thought it had just possessed me, or cursed me. I hoped that I could be saved, but I know better now. It killed me. My heart doesn't beat, and I get... so cold, so... hungry. I think its

domain is famine, from what it's hinted at. I wanted to believe that it made me kill the others, that it drove me to it, but it was really me. I know that now. I killed them, bathed in their blood, and it made the hunger stop hurting me, for a little while at least." He jerked sharply, convulsed so hard that Valorie could hear his teeth clicking together as he gnashed them. "Nngh... It... it hurts me. It locked me in here with you so that I would kill you, but I didn't. I did that much. You need to get out of here. You need to stop it from doing this to anyone else."

Dawn took a cautious step forward. "Just hold on... what did it do to you? I can fix it."

Morgan laughed abruptly, and the sound was low and coarse, full of delighted amusement. It made Valorie's skin prickle nervously, and it took a second for him to regain control of his voice. "No!" he finally barked at her, "I'm gone. I've been dead for weeks. I'm not possessed. It just remade me... I'm dead, Dawn. I'm sorry." Slowly, jerkily, he rose, an ugly, leering grin flitting across his face. Valorie gasped; his teeth, all of them, were razor sharp and narrowed to daggerlike points. "It wouldn't even let me send you another letter, to warn you to stay away, or bring backup." For a moment, anguish wracked his expression. "I killed her Dawn. I killed her and drank her essence like she was a mug of ale. She was my heart, she tried to help me, and I killed her like a dog. You have to stop this, so that no one else gets hurt. You have to kill me. Finish me. You have to destroy me, Dawn, so it can't use me anymore."

Valorie was bewildered, and she tightly gripped the hilt of her sword as Dawn shook her head vigorously. "That's not going to happen, Morgan. We'll fix this. We'll stop it and get you fixed."

He snarled at her and waved away her assurances with a swipe of his hand. His fingernails had sharpened to long, rending claws that raked at the air. "You can't, damnit! I can't be *fixed*! Even if you banished it, stopped it from crawling through my mind, I would still have this... hunger. I would still have to kill and feed! It murdered me and turned me into a monster, Dawn. You *have* to kill me! Gods, I'm so *hungry*!"

Tears were matting the fur around the wizard's eyes. "I can't do that Morgan. You... you were my best friend. I can't."

His shoulders went slack, and only then did he realize the weight of stress that he had been carrying. "I know, Dawn, and I'm so sorry, but you don't have a choice."

Dawn screamed as he charged them with a bloodcurdling, animalistic screech, and the wizard backpedaled, face frozen in disbelief. Valorie, however, wasn't going to let him get close. She stepped forward, knowing that she hadn't the time to draw her sword, and swung her leg out in a low, sweeping kick. Her greaved shin thudded into his midsection and threw him aside to slam into the smooth stone of the wall, and he crumpled to the ground as she whipped her blade from its scabbard, interposing herself between Dawn and the undead mage.

Morgan was gone. His eyes were blank and hollow, little, red pinpricks that reflected the anger in the feral snarl that was stretched across his gaunt muzzle. His need was visible, and was that of a starving animal. "I was starting to really like you, Morgan." she said, pulling in a steady breath, "But that's not going to happen. I'm sorry."

The only answer she received was Dawn's heart-wrenching sobs and his throaty, threatening growl, neither of which she allowed to affect her determination. Using the wall as a spring board, he hurled himself at her, and she stood her ground, knowing that if she moved, he would sail past her and onto Dawn. She raised her sword, swinging it around into a long arc that raked across his chest before she could meet his momentum with her shoulder. He thrashed and clawed at her armor, but she shrugged it off, throwing him from her and to the ground before her. The beast that had been steadily becoming her friend writhed and twisted impossibly as he rose

to his feet, but he wasn't quick enough to avoid her second strike, a quick swipe that bit into his shoulder and nearly severed his arm from his torso.

With a bestial howl, he withdrew from her, and she allowed him to, not about to move from her spot. He clutched at his wounded arm, glaring hatefully at her, and she only watched him for his next move. What she saw startled her, but she didn't allow it to unnerve her. The situation was too dire for her to allow herself to be distracted. With supernatural quickness, the rents she had sliced into him, which both oozed not blood, but viscous, black slime, closed. His injuries knitted together, leaving him whole but for the tears in his clothes and the greasy stains in his fur from his inhuman ichor. She took a deep breath and lifted her weapon into a defensive posture.

He stood there, studying her, and she did the same in return. She had reach and leverage and pretty much every other advantage on him, but that didn't mean a damn if he would shrug off everything she did to him. When the skin along her hand and forearm began to tingle warmly, she tightened her grip until her knuckles cracked around the hilt of her sword. She had actually forgotten about it. "His aura is dark, lightless." said the smooth, confident voice of the weapon in her hand, "He tastes dead and hollow. You must slay him."

"Yeah..." she hissed, "I gathered that much." With a feral snarl, he lunged at her, focusing on the point of her sword and trying to dodge around where she could swing it. Morgan was impossibly fast, and seemed capable of changing direction without having to worry about his momentum. He nearly got around her, and only a few screening swipes kept him in front of her. He was fixated on Dawn, only giving her weapon enough attention to avoid it. Valorie managed to lay open his side, cutting a ragged gash along his ribs, and while he yelped in what she hoped was pain, it didn't deter him.

Without barely enough warning, he leapt away from her, springing into the air like a macabre parody of a frog. He landed up on a wall, digging in his hooves and claws and using that as a platform off of which to jump in the opposite direction. Valorie snarled a colorful oath and ran to intercept him before he could land squarely atop the distraught wizard behind her. With a heavy thud of impact, she tackled him mid-air and bore him to the ground. He flailed against her, his claws raking along her armored form, and twisted to the point of broken bones to get away from her, past her, to Dawn. He was stronger than he had any right to be, enough to make her struggle to contain him, and she was far from in a mood to play any games. With her lips pinched down into a determined line, she threw her fist into his side, sliding him away from her across the floor, and before he could right himself, she pounced.

Bringing her sword up and around, she threw the point downward and sank it into Morgan's chest. It pierced his heart, and she put all of her weight behind the blow, pushing until the blade spitted him and forced its way into the stone beneath him. The mage let out a keening, inhuman wail that made Valorie's ears ring, and convulsed wildly, clawing at its own chest. Unlike the creature from Dawn's nightmare, however, he didn't immediately die. He screeched and raged at the object pinning him to the ground, and Valorie straightened. "You just sit right there."

Hesitant to put her back to him, she backed up slowly until she could get to Dawn. The wizard was sitting there, her tear-filled eyes staring blankly at Morgan's writhing shape. If it hadn't been for her occasional, wracking sob, she would have appeared dead. "Dawn." crooned Valorie as gently as she could, "Dawn, you need to get a hold of yourself. I could really use some help. Dawn, *he* could really use the help."

"Why...?" Dawn said numbly, her voice an emotionless monotone, "Why would this happen? How did...? Why?"

She rolled her eyes and was about to pick Dawn up from the ground to shake some sense into her when she heard a grotesque, fleshy ripping sound. With a weary scowl, she turned around, only to be greeted by the sight of Morgan tearing himself free of the object that held him pinned. He was digging his claws into the stone of the floor and simply dragging himself sideways, carelessly slicing through his entire chest cavity on the way out. Spitting out a vicious epithet, she rushed back over to him, aiming a brutal kick at his head along the way.

With impossible agility, he twisted out of the way, finishing the process of freeing himself just to make a grab at Valorie's swinging leg. His fingers skidded along her armored boot, nearly catching in the crease, and it managed to unbalance her enough to threaten her stability. Her kick went wide, and she went down hard, but she managed to bring the weight of her quarter-ton body down on her other knee, which she dropped with impeccable aim atop the creature's throat. It was hard not to be shaken by the sickening crunch of pulverized cartilage and bone, and it was harder still to see the mage's face contort with unhinged wrath at her brazen defiance.

Valorie reached for her sword, jerking it from the stone and swinging it wildly as he scrabbled away from her and—she noted with relief—away from Dawn. She gave chase, hauling herself back upright and driving him further back and away. He seemed more cautious now, and she struggled to land anything more than glancing blows on his twisted body. She watched him continue to change. His features hardened and became more coarse and feral, and his eyes were visibly luminous, glowing with a hollow, crimson light. She did all she could to keep him on the retreat, to keep herself between him and Dawn, and she only gave ground when she absolutely had to avoid a desperate swipe of his deadly, blackened fingernails.

Finally, she scored a solid hit, a swing that cut into his side and almost bisected his body. Contrary to the reaction she expected, one of shock, or even nonchalance, he screeched victoriously and lunged at her. With a wet squelch, he allowed her blade to slide further into his body, and his hands landed on her arm before she could pull away. He surprised her. The creature must have been growing stronger, because her arm was nearly torn from its socket when the skewered sheep lifted her clear off of her feet and threw her behind him to smash against the wall. Wincing as she floundered, she fought to right herself while he tore her weapon from his body with a casual jerk only to drop it and round on Dawn.

In the time it took for the gaping hole she had cut into his body to seal, she had only half-regained her footing. Much to her frustration, Dawn was still in a state of dumb shock, seemingly incapable of acknowledging the thing that was going to come barreling down on her. The creature ran a few steps, a few too many for her comfort, and as Valorie was scrambling to her feet, she pulled the heavy knife from its sheath on her belt and whipped it through the air at him. With a dull, meaty thud, it slammed into his knee, piercing cleanly through it and sticking out the opposite side. He stumbled and dropped to the ground, giving his crippled leg a confused snarl and giving Valorie time enough to race toward him, scooping her sword from the stone on the way.

He looked up to watch her barrel down on him, but managed to remove himself from her path with quickness that bordered on the supernatural. She skidded to a halt before Dawn once more, and she watched Morgan pull the dagger from his mangled knee to toss it idly away. She swung low at him, and he intercepted her attack with his arm, seeming to not at all care about the

damage she could inflict upon his body as her blade broke the bones in his forearm. He simply leapt away, glaring hatefully at her as his wound healed with the grinding pops of shifting flesh.

Valorie was in the midst of bracing herself for another assault when she finally heard Dawn speak up behind her. "Please, Morgan..." said the wizard in a low, mournful croon, "Please don't do this. You can fight it. We can find a way to fix you. Please..."

The creature's hungry gaze shifted past Valorie, to the slumped shape behind her. Her grip on the hilt of her sword tightened until the leather of her glove creaked, but she felt a plume of surprise in her when she saw his features soften, if only somewhat. He seemed to hesitate, and some of the light dimmed from his crazed eyes. His unnaturally clawed fingers clenched and relaxed time and time again, trembling furiously. She dared a glance backward over her shoulder and saw Dawn finally on her hooves. The wizard's eyes, however, were still blank, hollow things, as if they were afraid to show even a fraction of the emotion pouring through her. Valorie could feel it though, the torrent of anguish and fear and regret that wracked Dawn's mind.

She jerked back around when she saw movement. Morgan took a shaky step back and lifted his hand up to cradle his temples. He almost looked like he was going to crush his skull, but instead, his claws raked down the sides of his face, scraping past his horns and leaving ragged, gaping rents in his furred hide that quickly sealed over. He struggled to force quivering words past his gaunt, leering lips. "I-I... I c-cant..." The sound of him swallowing heavily was a deafening one. "I-if you don't end m-me, I'll k-kill y-y-you, and th-this will keep... keep happening."

Dawn's voice came out as little more than a whimper. "Morgan... Plea-"

Valorie cut her off, interposing herself between the wizard and her friend. "That's not going to happen, Morgan." she said flatly, "I'm sorry." It didn't matter who was before her; she wasn't going to let anything get anywhere near Dawn.

Unexpectedly, he smiled at her, a knowing glimmer in what was left of the expression in his eyes. "I... I know." It faded quickly, but the dregs of it lingered on his face even as it struggled to contort into a ferocious scowl. In a heartbeat, he changed again, hunching over onto himself and wrapping his arms over his stomach. A bestial growl rumbled in his chest, and when he straightened once more, he was gone. A howl of rage tearing through his lungs, he charged at her, his eyes looking past her, to Dawn. He didn't even consider her presence any longer, perhaps intentionally.

The split-seconds it took to steel her resolution for what she knew to be a dire act were always the slowest. It was as if time crawled forward at a snail's pace. She had all the time she could want for her eyes to take in the spectacle before her: his scything claws or the oversized fangs that crowded his snarling mouth. It would take him at least a second to close the distance between them, and that was all the time she needed. He wasn't even looking at her. She raised her off hand, taking up her sword in them both and swung the piece of heavy, razored steel around her body in a long, sweeping circle, dropping it to the level of Morgan's throat.

With a scream of distraught rage, she let instinct take over, allowing herself to do what she needed to do, and as the length of carefully-tended metal whipped through the air, it ignited, sending tongues of flickering orange flame writhing down its blade. The heat roiling off of it was immense, enough to be felt through her armor, but the sensation of it was a peaceful one, the calm of resolution. Her sword bit into the creature's neck, parting muscle and sinew like butter, and she barely felt the brief resistance of its spine before she severed it. The weapon swept cleanly past through flesh and bone, scorching everything along the way, and she followed through with her attack, twisting her body.

Suddenly headless, Morgan's body flopped to the stone, skidding for a few feet from its own momentum while the rest of him flew off to the side to roll to a stop in the corner of the room. She let her swing spin her around, and she cautiously lowered her sword, watching her assailant twitch in the throes of his death, waiting, half-expecting, for him to get up and being shambling at her. However, nothing along those lines happened. From its cauterized wound, the creature oozed viscous, black ichor, and it eventually stilled. She heaved a sigh of relief and lowered her weapon. The flames that wreathed it sputtered and died, and she ignored the sensations of pleased contentment that crawled up her arm, choosing to instead turn to Dawn.

The wizard's eyes were wide and stunned, and she looked up at Valorie, disbelief etched into her expression. Her lips moved as if she wanted to speak, but it was clear that her words failed her, and she stood there, her gaze flicking from Valorie to the corpse on the floor for a long moment. "He was right," she finally said, her voice a hoarse whisper.

Valorie didn't know what to say. "I'm sorry, Dawn. I-"

The unicorn raised her hand, practically pleading for silence. "I saw his aura. Something had torn it to shreds. It was eating at his soul. It was torturing him, and he was right. No one could have saved him. He had no pulse. Something was just... keeping him going. The best I could have done was... put him out of his misery." Her eyes drifted upward to stare at Valorie. "Thank you. I-I couldn't."

Her sword clattered to the ground as she dropped it and rushed over to Dawn, catching her before she could slump forward. All of the strength had drained from the wizard's body, and she did what she could to support her. Long, spiraling horn permitting, the shorter equine buried her face beneath Valorie's arm and let out a long, mournful wail that her armor did little to muffle. Awareness of just a fraction of the depth of Dawn's grief threatened to overwhelm her as it poured into the back of her mind, and she bore it as best she could, gritting her teeth and cradling the tiny woman to her chest.

As she shook, rattling, heartbroken screams erupted from Dawn's insignificant frame, and Valorie struggled to maintain her composure. She would have like just as much to fall over and curl into a ball just so she could share in the wizard's anguish, but she could afford herself that luxury, not at that moment. They were suddenly alone, underground and in the middle of what could safely be called hostile territory. Someone needed to stay conscious of their surroundings, and Dawn was far from up to that task as she was.

Her lips close to the distraught woman's ear, she crooned soothing words with the intent of placating their shared sorrow, all to mixed effect. While she rubbed Dawn's back with a steady, idle hand, she felt the cataract of vicious emotion racing through her love's mind shift, almost as if it was cycling through everything that could be felt in that moment. Sadness shifted to fear, which was gradually overtaken by guilt, all of which she reminded the little wizard that it was okay and natural to feel. However, when it percolated down to anger, it stuck. Rage that almost made Valorie gasp in shock flared to life in Dawn's slender frame. It curdled her blood in her veins, even secondhand as it was, and as the diminutive equine started to shake, she held her all the more firmly.

It took Dawn some minutes to regain control of herself, and even then, Valorie wasn't certain she had. Slowly, and with an unsettling pulling sensation on her thoughts, her perception of the wizard's consciousness dulled, as if something were laying a brick wall between their minds, and when she pulled away she was, for the first time since she could care to remember, alone with her own thoughts. The sensation was a disconcerting one, and she peered down at Dawn with a question in her eye.

The wizard's lips were pressed into a flat, emotionless line, and her voice was held at a constant pitch. "Sorry," she whispered, "I don't want to hurt you, and it's not safe to be in my head right now. I need... I need to focus. This needs to end. Before we were attacked, I felt it, the demon. We have to stop it before it hurts anyone else. I need... I need-"

"Revenge?" finished Valorie.

"Yes." Dawn hissed through clenched teeth while giving her a curt nod. "I need to burn something before I can start mourning my friend."

In spite of the wizard's guarded attitude, Valorie pulled her into a tight hug. After releasing her, she turned and stepped carefully over to the lifeless shape on the stone. With a flick a few fingers, she pulled off the brooch that held on her cloak and slid the dark green fabric from her shoulder to drape it over the body. A quick detour saw her sword back in her hands, and she checked the edge with a careful eye before sliding it back home into its scabbard. "Come on then." When she inspected the large, cubic chamber, however, she paused. There was no obvious exit, and a twinge of concern colored her voice. "Dawn, how do we get out of here?"

Before she could start combing over every inch of the blank, stone walls, Dawn walked over to a side of the room and laid a hand on the smooth rock. With a quiet phrase, the surface buckled and melted away, leaving one of the familiar hallways between rooms in its wake. "It didn't even try to mask the enchantment," she muttered.

"Maybe it thought it could make Morgan kill us before we woke up." It hurt even saying it.

"I believe that was the case, yes. He always was a stubborn one... It seems that it didn't take that into account," she said with unnerving calm while prowling into the darkness, a word strengthening the soft light that hovered over her until the length of the passage could be made out. Valorie caught up quickly and pushed Dawn behind her. If anyone was going to be first to walk into a trap, it was going to be her. The wizard didn't argue, and she strode ahead, her weapon held far out before her.

Keeping her mind was a difficult task, and Valorie relished devoting her every thought to it to avoid the bitter bile that roiled in her stomach. Demons and curses and phantom possessions and monsters... She was in her element, and they emerged into yet another of the roughly cubical chambers, a familiar one. A glowing handprint marked the floor near one of the exits, and piles of bones, intricately laid, lined the walls. The thought crossed her mind that she could just scoop Dawn up into her arms and whisk her away to safety, somewhere far away from such a horrid place, but she obliterated the idea without giving it a second of consideration. Instead, she looked toward the wizard, asking, "Can you get us back there?"

After a brief moment, the sorcerous equine nodded. "I can't sense any enchantments nearby but my own, so I should be able to follow my trail backwards. It's this way."

Gesturing, Dawn led her down a tunnel, and they were greeted on the other side by a cool blue handprint on the floor by the door. Through the dead, eerie silence they walked, nearly abreast, until they reached the long, rectangular antechamber outside the primary room. It was then that she could feel it. There was something in the still, stale air around her, a weight that pressed inward against her fur. It made her skin crawl and made her feel unclean just for experiencing it, and it compounded as they took cautious, measured steps toward the far end of the room. "Wait." Dawn muttered, and she froze where she was, not daring to move a muscle. The wizard breathed several short, alien phrases, and as the last word left her lips, Valorie felt a tingling in her furred hide that slowly enveloped her, and with it, the odd pressure dissipated.

"There." said the unicorn flatly, "Let's keep going. If it doesn't want us to go any further, then we should press on."

She certainly couldn't argue with that, and she nodded her sentiment while stalking down the length of the room. Aside from the clop of Dawn's hooves and the padding of her boots on the stone, the silence was heavy and oppressive. She'd felt its like before, many times, and she expected all hells to break loose at any moment. Surprisingly, however, it didn't. They passed through the sole other door in the room, and made their way into the main chamber with its leering, bone-covered walls and large, flat altar occupying the center of the space.

Following Dawn forward, Valorie stood protectively over the wizard as she knelt before the altar, and ran her hands over the intricate carvings that covered its surface. After only half a whispered spell, she stopped, looking up at her resolute guardian. "I need to make it manifest before we can do anything against it, but it's not going to be happy about it. Get ready for something bad."

She tightly gripped the hilt of her sword, and it responded with tingling waves of profound dedication that swept up her arm and into her chest. "We're deep underground, surrounded in centuries-old skeletons, and are about to take on some nameless entity from another plane. Yeah, I've been ready for something bad for a while now. Just do what you need to do. I've got you."

Dawn stared up at her for a moment longer. "Yeah. You do." She then returned her gaze to the altar. "Here we go."

It only took a single syllable of whatever spell she needed to cast leaving Dawn's mouth for something decidedly unnatural to happen. At the first mystical word, the ground beneath her shuddered like a giant had struck it with a hammer the size of a house. Her eyes immediately shot to the stone ceiling above her. They had little room to run if the caverns collapsed down upon them, but the walls and roof seemed untouched. Not even flakes of chipped rock or wisps of dust fell around them. The air, however, quivered as the ground shook under her boots. It threatened her balance, and she steadied herself as the wizard next to her simply raised her voice and shouted her incantation over the sudden conundrum.

As if to match Dawn's temerity, the cacophony in the air redoubled, forcing Valorie's ears to lie nearly flat against her skull as she fought the urge to recoil away from the roar that thundered around her. The world seemed to writhe around them, and with a slow groan that was audible over everything, the walls on either side of them buckled. The stone held, but the stacks and stacks of pale, yellowed bones fell inward, scattering over the floor as they fell with a great rattling crash. She winced as a cracked, human skull bounced off of the side of her boot.

Dawn didn't even flinch, however, and she finished her spell an intricate gesture directed at the altar before her. Like that, the tremendous noise died away, and the silence that replaced it was nearly as deafening. The wizard's clothing rustled as she rose back to her hooves, and Valorie had only just opened her mouth to ask what was going to happen when her question was prematurely answered. "Do you think me so easily manipulated, mortal?" boomed an immense, gravelly voice from all corners of the room.

The words carried with them an acidic malice that wouldn't be hidden by their almost amused tone. Dawn replied, her own voice as hard as steel, and just as cold and unforgiving. "Yes." Stretching out her arms over the squat, stone altar, she hissed another sharp phrase, and the air around the monolith of dark rock began to glow with an unwholesome, red light. Another sound, like that of a crack of thunder, split the air, and before Valorie could react, the altar

exploded outward. The shield of pale blue force Dawn summoned before them caught most of the shards of stone that sprayed outward, but she still felt a few pinging off of her armor.

Coughing, she waved dust away from her face in time to catch a glimpse of the smoking crater that was left where the altar had been seconds prior, and when Dawn took a step back, steadying herself, she followed. She realized that it wasn't smoke that was billowing from the blasted hole. It was something far darker, and something much more solid than it had any right to be. It crawled through the air, splitting and twining over itself as it slowly dispersed and drifted back to the ground. Quickly, it almost seemed to dissipate into the scattered bones that covered most of the floor, and Valorie was a heartbeat away from relaxing when she saw something that almost made her laugh a bitter, tired laugh. "Of course..." she sighed, "Of course."

Dawn nodded, and the bones began to stir. They rattled against one another for a split-second, and then Valorie nearly jumped when the leering skull that she had kicked away crumbled to dust with a sharp *ITALICPOP*. It only took the briefest of moments for the same thing to happen across the room. Seemingly without rhyme or reason, random bones began to crack and shiver before disintegrating into a fine powder that was swept across the room by a breeze that didn't exist. "Very well..." said the voice again as the dust swirled toward the far end of the room, "If you insist I play by your rules..."

More and more bones shattered and added their mass to the growing pile. It built up onto itself, a twisting torrent of powdered corpses, and slowly, it began to take a more defined shape. From the amorphous cloud stepped a long, bone-white leg that ended in a set of huge, gripping claws. It was covered in a thick, almost pearlescent layer of stark, white chitin, and was segmented at the joints like those of some gigantic insect. An arm followed it out, slicing through the air and flexing two long, taloned fingers offset by a thumb that was little more than a huge, curling claw. They were quickly connected by a torso that was formed from the vortex, and it finished its stride toward them with a leg that materialized just before hitting the ground with a dull thud.

The thing was at least ten feet tall, and it stretched out its weird, insectile limbs as another pair formed beneath its shoulders and its head finished becoming solid. As it finished its birth into the world, it looked down at them with a pair of huge, glassy eyes that were set into the head of some tremendous insect. Its mouth gave way into a set of twitching mouthparts, and they moved in a vile parody of lips as it spoke. "Mortals..." it growled with a voice that sounded like the screeching of nails on slate combined with a tumbling rockslide, "There is nothing quite like the hollow hopelessness of a soul resigned to a slow, wasting death, their frail bodies consuming themselves in desperation... Agony and fear and despair. You tiny creatures are so-"

The titanic, bony locust didn't get out another word before Dawn lifted her hand, palm outward, and shouted a short, angry word. Valorie felt the heat of the wrist-thick bar of scintillating, blue fire through her armor, and it connected with the creature's chest with a sharp retort. It recoiled backwards, throwing its head back in a high, keening scream as it clutched at the scorched crater in its chest, and the wizard took the opportunity to hit it again, this time in one of its flailing arms. Its thick carapace blackened and popped. Its pained outcry only increased in pitch and volume until Valorie clapped her hands down over her ears, and she was greeted with an unsettling sight as the bones that had been left untouched began to tremble where they lay scattered on the floor.

Winced and shoving aside her discomfort, she watched as chipped and cracked remains slid across the stone with low rasping noises. Arms found their sockets, and ribs connected to

their vertebrae, and when the first of many skeletons staggered to its fleshless feet, its eyeless sockets glowing with a hateful red light, she steeled herself and stepped closer to Dawn. "Plan?"

The wizard nodded and, not taking her eyes from the demon who writhed across the room, knelt down to place her hand flat on the ground. With a whispered phrase, Valorie felt the stone beneath her boots tremble again, and without any further warning, the floor beneath the nearest approaching skeleton buckled and shattered. Something simply erupted from the rock beneath it and lunged teeth-first into its legs. With a voiceless scream, the skeleton cracked and fell over, replaced by a hulking, wolf-shaped mass of snarling, grey rock. Others burst from the ground around it, and the conjured elementals immediately tore into the ranks of the hapless undead. "Kill it." Dawn hissed, rising again.

That much she could do, and Valorie leapt forward, over the shattered altar, and charged the reeling bug-demon. A skeleton tried to intercept her, but it was immediately tackled by one of Dawn's summoned allies, its skull cracking and crunching between teeth that were shards of razor-sharp stone. She continued, cleaving her way through a few more fragile dead before she could come upon her adversary. It shook off its pain in time to dodge around her first swing at its thin, bony legs, and it rapidly retreated until its back was pressed against the wall. She gave chase, following on its heels and harrying its every step, and it eventually spun and lashed out at her with a clawed foot.

Valorie sidestepped and brought her blade downward through its ankle, cleanly severing the thing's foot from its leg. It screeched at her again, stumbling backwards and flicking an arm out at her. She twisted her body to present nothing to it but the mirrored surface of her breastplate, but it only worked almost as she intended. The thing's claws scraped harmlessly over her, but the strength present in the thin, emaciated limb stunned her. The blow lifted her bodily off of the ground and threw her to the side like a toy. Her armor scraped across the stone as she skidded into the legs of a skeleton.

She wheezed as sharp, bony fingers clawed at her armored form, and the first and second rattling undead to touch her got cut apart for their troubles while she got her legs back beneath her. She likely should have expected the impossible strength, considering what she was dealing with, and she made a mental note to not get hit again. A quick glance at Dawn told her that the wizard was focused on something internal, head bowed, eyes pinched shut, and softly whispered words filtering through her lips, and while the summoned help was doing an admirable job at keeping the reanimated skeletons at bay, more and more were rising from the piles of bones that were scattered across the floor.

Taking a breath, she rounded on the demon once more. It's cold, dead eyes glittered with hate, and it hobbled backwards on its maimed foot. A string of garbled words spilled from its inhuman mouthparts, but if it was speaking any language it was one that she didn't understand or even recognize. It hissed and spluttered, and viscous, green bile oozed and dripped from its mandibles. Slender, articulated fingers clenched into fists, and the thing raised all four of its arms in what was definitely a combat stance. It gestured into the air around itself and extended and arm with an almost languid motion. It reached out, and the demon's hand disappeared into the air, simply vanishing into the aether as if to pull something from it, which is exactly what it did.

From a rent in the air that shimmered with a crimson light, the insectile creature pulled a pale, bone-white shaft, taking it up into its arms while continuing to draw it from the void. Attached to the ten-foot haft came a thick, curving blade that was almost half as long as it's shaft and was as black as the shadows that lurked in the corners of the room. With a deft spin, the demon twirled the heavy weapon up and at the ready, and the oversized scythe sliced through the

air with a threatening *whoosh*. She rolled her eyes and lifted her own weapon. Without much of a mental impulse, tongues of orange flame lashed down the blade, lingering there, seething and desperate for something to burn. "Yeah, yeah." Valorie muttered, unimpressed, "Real scary. Just try not to cut your other foot off." Scythes weren't meant for combat; they were slow and unwieldy, and she felt supremely unthreatened. That being considered, she still didn't want to get hit, because the tapered end of that long, wickedly pointed blade would impale her just as easily as a real weapon.

With a determined huff, she charged it again, this time more cautiously. It may have been hobbled, but it handled its bulk with almost unnerving grace, and it spun its weapon across her path to intercept her. She slowed just enough for it to whistle past her chest, and then as the demon was righting itself, she casually stepped forward, under its awkward reach, and swung her sword across its chest. Where the burning steel of her blade made contact with it, the demon's carapace blackened and split, and Valorie opened a long, ragged rent in the thing's torso as if its armored chitin wasn't even there.

It screamed again as thick, grey-green blood spurted from the hole in its chest, and it lashed out at her with one of its lesser arms. Being smaller than her adversary for once had its advantages, and she avoided the clumsy attack and used the momentum of her previous swing to twirl her weapon back up and into the demon's arm, severing it at the elbow. Its agonized outcries passed outside of the range of her hearing, and Valorie beamed a vicious grin as it tried to backpedal away from her. "Oh no you don't." she growled, following it. Her smile turned into a grimace of rage, and she left a deep, oozing wound across the thing's abdomen with another swipe. "I *liked* that little sheep!" Each measured swing of her sword bit into the demon like its body was made of paper, something she questioned, but she wasn't about to complain.

"The mage was a fool!" it screeched, "He thought he could resist me, but his power was mine in the end! All he had!"

Valorie snarled and dipped beneath an errant swing of an oversized, insectile claw to rake the edge of her sword down the thing's thigh. "Are you *trying* to piss me off?! You should have stayed asleep, you fucking cricket! Some missing miners are one thing. I was just doing my job. But when you hurt Morgan, you hurt Dawn, and when you hurt Dawn, you fucked with the *wrong* woman!" She finished with a coarse, outraged scream she lashed out with her empty hand in a punch that connected with the demon's midsection. Her gauntlet made contact, and with a grotesque squelch, the thing's ruined torso caved in on itself.

It keened and dropped its useless weapon, which simply evaporated into the air as it staggered backwards. It left itself open, and she swung her sword back around and lopped off its uninjured leg at the knee, leaving nothing but a smoking stump. The creature no longer had any feet on which to stand, and it toppled backwards as it tried to escape her flashing blade. As it retreated, she made it leave a trail of severed body parts. It reached out to brace itself, and she removed a finger, and then the rest of its hand. It tried to rise, and she severed the arm it was using to support itself at the shoulder. When it thrashed outward at her, she simply stepped back to avoid it before wading back into the mess of pulped flesh and alien ichor to batter it down again and again.

Valorie glanced back when she heard something heavy approaching. Around her the army of skeletons that had risen were beginning to tremble and fall apart as the force that held them together was diminishing, and two of the stone hounds bounded forward and threw themselves atop the demon's remaining limbs. With a rough, grinding, their bodies fused with the floor beneath them, forming a pair of immense, rocky bindings that held it still. "I may not be

able to kill you, demon," she hissed as she stalked up the length of its body, trailing the tip of her burning sword along its scorching, gelatinous flesh, "but I hope this hurts." She gripped the hilt of her weapon in both hands and raised it high, only to scream a harsh, defiant outcry as she angled the point and drove it downward with all of her weight and every ounce of strength her powerful body could muster. She put her blade between its huge, glossy eyes and bore it downward until the flaming steel sank into the ground with a terrible screech and fully skewered its inhuman head.

Its mouth opened and its mandibles gnashed as it retched alien blood from its impaled face while trying to scream from the body into which Dawn had forced it, but nothing short of a hoarse gurgling sound escaped it. Its body was a burned, eviscerated mess, but it still twitched and struggled weakly. With shaky fingers, Valorie released her grip on her sword to stand idly over the gruesome sight, at least until Dawn strode over. The wizard's face was pale and drawn, and she supposed that the unicorn's battle had been no less harrowing. "This plane isn't for you demon." murmured the fatigued equine while stretching out her hands over its tattered body, "Go back to whatever hell you came from, and think very hard about coming back."

Despite the tired monotone carried within Dawn's voice, the wizard's body was steeled, and she began to chant with a slow, steady rhythm. If Valorie had thought that what she had done had caused the demon pain, she realized it was only a fraction of what her partner was capable of doing to it. At the first unintelligible word, the thing pinned by its face and limbs to the ground jumped and somehow managed a scream more horrific than anything Valorie had yet heard from it. The creature's back arched until she could hear its carapace cracking under the force, and it thrashed mindlessly as Dawn's spell manifested in a mesh of pulsing, blue light.

The wizard cloaked the demon's body with a blanket of her summoned strength, and each place that Dawn's power touched the locust's form, it sparked and popped. It howled past the ichor pooling in its throat as the spell disintegrated its chitin and flesh alike. It simply ceased to be, and the more that was ripped from it, the higher and more unbearably frantic the thing's cries became. However, Valorie was unable to feel any pity for it, and she watched coldly as the unicorn banished the demon's essence in as painful a way as could be done, a sliver at a time. She only wished that she could do more apart from giving her sword a few last twists in its skull before jerking her weapon from the hole she had made with it, just as the last of their foe was ripped from reality.

As its wailing cries echoed away into the void and the last of its reanimated corpses fell apart, a dull, numbing silence fell over them both. With a wave of her hand, Dawn dismissed her elemental allies, and the rocky canine's simply melded back into the stone of the floor and walls. For a moment, nothing could be heard but their intermingled panting, Valorie's from the strain of her exertions, and the wizard from her mental efforts. "It was stronger than I first felt..." Dawn finally mumbled, staring down at the greasy black stain on the floor where it had lain. "It took everything I had to keep it contained. Sorry I couldn't help with the hard stuff."

Valorie sighed. "That's what I'm here for, Dawn. And besides, it wasn't so hard." The silence refused to be anything but oppressive, and she threw her arm around the wizard's shoulder in a comforting embrace. "It didn't even leave a scratch. Come on... I want to get out of here."

Dawn followed along with only a nod as they turned and walked away from the scene of carnage. Gladia, the spirit in her sword, flooded her with a sense of satisfied accomplishment, and she sheathed the blade, cutting it off. She was in no mood to bask in her triumph. The sorcerous equine next to her was ready to just follow their trail of markers out, but she detoured

into the room that had been their momentary prison in order to collect Morgan's remains, wrapped carefully in her cloak. She wasn't about to leave him amid all the dust and bones to simply rot away, and Dawn acknowledged her actions with a slow nod and a glimmer of thanks that hung in her eyes for a second before the blank stare of emotional distance could overcome her once more.

The walk out was a long, silent affair, the noisiest part being the soft clopping of Dawn's hooves on the stone. Throughout the other rooms, the bones showed signs of disturbance, sometimes entire banks of remains having collapsed inward on each other, and they cautiously stepped around them, not daring to risk a skeletal hand reaching up to grab at an ankle. The wizard's trail was still good, and as they squeezed themselves back into the cramped confines of the silver mine, she almost thanked the gods to be out of that terrible place.

She was nearly blinded by the light of the afternoon sun that poured down on them both from low in the sky when they walked, blinking furiously, from the shadows of the mines. They must have been underground for the better part of the whole day, although she truly didn't know how long they'd been unconscious in whatever nightmare world the demon had constructed for them. She wasn't sure if she'd ever had an appetite again, but then again, she never did right after a run in the shadows of a demon-infested cave network. "Are you okay, Dawn?" she asked. The wizard's mind was still blocked from her, and it unsettled almost as much as the lifeless form in her arms.

Dawn shook her head, unable to take her eyes from the sinking sun for more than a few seconds at a time. "No... No I'm not." The wizard wrapped her arms around herself against the icy bite in the air. Valorie had almost forgotten the time of year; it was always cold underground. "I'm supposed to be prepared for things like this. I'm a wizard... Everyone I know is supposed to die before I get a wrinkle or a grey hair, but not him. He was like me. He was as strong as me, at least, if a little rough around the edges. I would have kept in touch with him better if I'd known-"

"Stop that right there, Dawn." Valorie said with her voice low in warning. She gently laid her parcel on the ground before the mine and walked over to lay a firm hand on the unicorn's shoulder. "It's okay to be sad. I'll mourn him with you. I'll pour one out for him. But I am not going to stand here and let you feel guilty, Dawn. Do you understand me? I'm not going to do it. If you'd known? What the fuck is that supposed to mean? If you start thinking like that, I swear I'll knock you out and carry you back to Southcliff by myself, so don't even consider it."

Dawn turned toward her and glared upward. There was a dizzying mix of emotions in her eyes, the foremost stubborn anger, but that quickly dispersed and was replaced by flickering anguish mingled with cold resignation. Tears welled up in their corners, but the wizard looked down before she could lift her hand to wipe them away. "I... I know. You're right. I just... I just wish I could have done something."

"You did." she said, wrapping both her arms around Dawn's torso and pulling her in close against her breastplate. "You made sure that what happened to him can't happen to anyone else, and avenged him to boot. When I think of something else that we could have done. I'll let you know."

For a long moment, Dawn just stood there, leaning heavily against her, and Valorie stood there right back, accepting the unicorn's slight weight and petting her hair until the wizard stirred and pushed off of her. She let her go. "I'll need to make a report to the Council and the local lord, maybe even the king for something this serious. I... I need to write a few letters, and these mines definitely need to stay closed down until a more thorough sweep can be done of the caverns. I... Gods, there's so much still to do."

"Yes." Valorie agreed with a nod, "But that can wait for at least a little bit. We're getting you back to the inn so you can at least sit down for a minute or two."

Dawn's face scrunched up, and she let out a long, shaky sigh. "That would be nice." Halfway through the sentence, her voice cracked, and the rest of it came out as a choked whimper.

Valorie nodded again as she walked back over to collect their friend's body. Before she could reach it, however, a sudden gust of frigid wind stopped her, making her lean into it. The abrupt breeze pulled open a fold of her cloak, exposing Morgan's body to the wan, dimming light. What happened next pulled a shocked gasp from her chest, and brought Dawn running over to her side. Where the sun's rays touched the sheep's dark fur, it reacted violently, withering his flesh and turning it a coarse, charcoal grey. It flaked and crumbled, and in mere seconds his entire form was turned to ash and dust that was carried away by the gale.

With nothing to weigh it down, the wind's next victim was her rich, green cloak, which was swept up and off into the mountains by the fickle breeze. Valorie didn't even try to make a grab for it as it fluttered by. She wasn't sure what to make of it, and she just stood there, transfixed, until Dawn slid a hand into hers. "I'm ready to go, Val."

Squeezing the wizard's slender digits, she just turned away and started walking down the mountain. The guardsman that had seen them in was no longer at his self-appointed post, and it was yet one more long, quiet hike before the uninviting, grey walls of Silverdale could greet them. They went straight to the inn, ignoring the looks of the people loitering in the common area, and to the room that Morgan had arranged for them.

As soon as they entered the room, Dawn sank into one of the chairs that were still pushed against the wall from the previous night. Valorie carefully removed her armor, making sure that each piece was in order before removing her sword belt, drawing the blade, checking it for damage, and laying it to the side with the rest of her gear. She was done using it for a while. The wizard was just watching her, at least she thought. Dawn might have just been staring blankly at the wall behind her, a theory that was confirmed when she approached and drew the unicorn's empty gaze. She leaned down and softly kissed the other equine's forehead. "When you need me, just call for me. I would very much like a drink."

Dawn nodded, and she lingered there with a hand on the unicorn's cheek for another moment before slipping away and out of the door. It was fairly clear that Dawn wanted to be alone, even with her thoughts, and she trusted the wizard to know when it was okay to try to pull her out of the quagmire of her emotions. The common room was still a quiet, subdued place, and she took a seat in the corner of the space, in one of the few chairs that could hold her, and waited patiently until someone came to take her order, which was a simple one: their biggest full of their strongest.

She was mildly surprised that they acquiesced to her vague demands so readily, and even more so when the lumbering, ursine innkeeper made his way over to her table bearing a dark glass bottle and a sealed envelope. "This is for you." he said, clearly uncertain of how to go about speaking to her, "He said... he told me to give this to you if you came back without him. Arrangements have already been made."

She scowled at the folded letter, and then at the bear. "Arrangements for what?"

He shrugged and gestured at the letter, and Valorie rolled her eyes and dismissed him a little more harshly than he deserved. She shouted an apology as she broke the wax seal with her fingernail and opened the sheaf of paper. An unfamiliar, scrawling script covered the letter, and she read with a thoughtful frown.

I'm sorry, but this is going to be a little rushed. I have a lot of work to do tonight, and less time than I'd like to do it in. If you (Valorie or, I'm sorry, Dawn) are reading this, then this venture didn't work out in my favor. I don't know how much I would have been able to tell you. The demon is inside my head, and writing this letter is already torture. It won't let me tell you about it, but I managed to regain at least a little bit of control. I pray it will be enough.

But, I suppose, it hasn't, so let me at least explain a little. The demon has killed me. That much I know. I wouldn't let it possess me, so it killed me and did this to me. I'm dead, and I know that there is little to be hopeful for. I only hope that I can keep it together long enough for Dawn to banish it. Hopefully then I can hope to, if anything, pass on peacefully.

But, again, I guess I wasn't able to. I can't walk in the sun. The light burns my skin, and with each day I stave off the desire to kill some other innocent person, the cold, hollowness in my gut pains me more and more. If you would let me at least confess, I killed her. I've already set aside all my possession to her family, the one guard in this town with a sense of nobility. I've killed no one else. I swore I would kill no more, even if this pain alone ends me.

Since you're reading this, I hope that means that I wasn't able to. I wanted to hope for a cure, or that I could have this curse removed, but it's no curse. All I could do with the demon's banishment is free myself of its influence. What I am would remain, I'm certain. I would still hunger. Perhaps it's best that I'm no longer a danger to anyone.

I'm rambling. I'm sorry. I've just got a lot on my mind. Your sword. I've gotten a good look at it, and I think it will take well to a simple enchantment, something I can do in a night. The demon makes using magic difficult, but I've kept that much control. I hope you can use it against what did this to me, and if you had to use it against me, I hope it was quick. I'm sorry for putting you, and moreover, Dawn, through this, but what I can do is so limited, by this thing clawing at my soul.

And now I'm making excuses. No. This happened to me because I wasn't careful enough, and for no other reason. Those people, my love, are all dead because I failed, and I pray that you had the strength to set it right.

As I've said. I'm leaving all my possessions to her family, but I have to admit, you liking my little concoction brought a smile to my lips, and that isn't something that happens very often anymore. I hope that you don't find this morbid, but I've arranged with Rivius to have everything that's currently aging shipped to the Sanctum when it's ready to drink. Also, the recipe is enclosed. It's not much, but aside from what little remains of my magic, it's all I have left to give in thanks. I pray that you can drink it and remember me as I tried to be, not as it turned out I was.

This letter is full of "I hopes" but that is really all I have left. I've arranged for this letter to reach Valorie first, and I leave it up to you to decide if Dawn should read it. If you do, then Dawn, I know what you're going to think, so don't. Beating yourself up over the mistakes of others will get neither of you anywhere. If you need to beat someone up, please, this was all my fault. Do what you want to with the memory of me, just please, forgive me. I did what I could to remedy this and keep anyone else from being hurt, and one of my greatest regrets will be that I hurt you. I'm so sorry.

I don't know what will happen to me when I finally get to die for real, but if Mortis will still accept me, then I'll see you on the other side, shorty. And thank you Valorie, for what you've done for me, and even more for what you've done for Dawn. She's needed someone like you for decades.

Valorie leaned back into her chair and let the letter drop to the table. She couldn't even begin to know what to feel, and she mulled over the possibilities as she reread Morgan's message twice more. She really just felt tired, so she pocketed the letter and reached for the bottle with which it had come. The cork popped out easily, and the rich, smooth, and slightly fruity aroma of the mage's ale wafted out to greet her sinuses.

There it was, what she had been looking for. With a ragged sob, she slammed the bottle back to the table and buried her face in her hands. Tears came unbidden, and she only just managed to choke off her mournful wails into little whispering cries that were totally unbecoming of a woman of her stature. And yet, she cried anyway, and to hell with anyone who would do more than give her an odd look. She scrubbed at her eyes and matted her tears into her fur, and still there was enough to make them run down her cheeks and drip from her jaws.

Finally the cold, aching void was filled with something, something hot and raw and sublimely painful. She mollified her agony with tears and anguish. Eyes lifted to the sight of her, the eight-and-a-half-foot horse-woman who was crying like a child, and she envied their innocence. Slowly, she hunched over on herself until her head was hidden in her arms and she was nearly prostrate on the table.

For several long minutes, Valorie sat there and sobbed into her shirt, glad that no one had the temerity to approach her. She really didn't know what she would do if she were interrupted. Eventually, however, she sluggishly reasserted control over her body, straightening her spine and grinding her knuckles into her eye sockets to clean out the remnants of her tears. She didn't feel any less anguished, but now that she was free to feel it, she was infinitely more at ease. It was almost enough to bring a sheepish smile to her lips, staring at the uncorked bottle on the table.

Idly, she reached for it and poured herself a drink. It was as good as she remembered from the day before, and she finished it with ease. She was halfway to pouring herself another when she felt something familiar brush up against her thoughts. Threads of emotion, anger and sorrow and shame, filtered into her consciousness from a mind that wasn't her own, and she held off her second drink in favor of a heavy sigh. Standing, Valorie dropped a large gold coin on the table and made for the stairs, the bottle clutched in her arms and the letter weighing heavily in her pocket.

Sometimes she hated her job.