

A Warm Welcome

Written By: Skabaard

Kassiedie had been born and raised in northern Arvandor, closer to the Ordis Mountains, and she was certainly used to the winter cold. However, she was still grumbling to herself as she made her way down the street. Even in a city as large as Southcliff, the chill in the air had driven most of the crowds indoors, and she shared the road with few apart from the occasional traveler like herself or small groups of heavily-bundled city guardsmen. The air was full of flurries of snow, and she hurried along, eager to get close to a fire somewhere.

She didn't have much further to go, though, and she heaved a sigh of relief when she saw the familiar sign proclaiming her destination: The Brass Chalice. The courtyard in front of the long, multi-storied building was empty and blanketed in a layer of white marred by footprints, and she added her own as she pushed open the door and stepped into the inn's common room. Her nostrils flared around a deep, contented breath as she dusted the snow from her shoulders and pulled back the hood of her heavy cloak to appraise the room.

She couldn't help but smile. Though only a few inches of brick and wood separated her from the ice and cold and winter, the room was thrumming with life and activity. Fires crackled in the pair of long hearths that dominated opposite walls, and there was a multitude of people seated along the bar and at tables scattered around the room, all enjoying a warm meal or a warm drink or a warm conversation. On a raised section of the floor along one of the longer walls, there was a slender doe plucking at a small harp, adding a musical undertone to the din. The dark-feathered avian who was behind the bar taking orders, preparing drinks, and seeing to the operation of his business acknowledged her entrance with a friendly wave, and she returned it with a tiny nod as she advanced into the room to get away from the door.

Kassiedie barely made it a few steps before she was accosted by a member of the staff. The tall, lithe feline that rushed over to her let out an incoherent, excited squeak before throwing arms around her and hugging her fiercely. "I was wondering when you were going to get here!" Kathryn intimated, raising her voice to be heard over the mingled conversation around them. "June's already here. She and Sage and Emma are in the corner. Have you already eaten? Go ahead and have a seat. I'll bring you something to drink while you warm up."

She laughed and tried to temper her younger sister's excitement with a fondly returned hug. "It's good to see you too Kathryn. Just don't forget to relax when you get the chance, okay?"

Kathryn beamed, the bright, blue eyes they had both inherited from their father full of unrestrained glee. It was infectious. "Don't worry. I'm almost finished for the evening. I've got plenty of relaxation planned. Now shoo. Go. Sit and take a load off. Let me take your cloak."

As if she had a choice. Her sister practically pulled her from the heavy garment and ushered her deeper into the room before dancing away to see to her business, leaving Kassiedie tugging her layered dress straight on her body and peering through the smoke-hazed air for a familiar face or two. It wasn't a lengthy search. Dragons tended to stand out from crowds, and when she spotted Emma's unique silhouette, she sashayed over to the table in the corner that her friends already occupied.

“Good evening ladies...” she hummed as she entered earshot. “Sorry I’m a little late. I had to take care of a few last-minute chores. I hope you haven’t been waiting too long.”

“It’s wasn’t a problem at all, dear.” intimated Sage, the red-haired vixen. “We’ve just been enjoying a few warm drinks. You haven’t missed out on anything. Do take a seat. You look tired.”

She smiled in acceptance and lowered herself into the proffered chair, making sure slide her tail through the hole in the back. “Thank you, but it’s not that bad. Just a long day. I’m glad I could make it.”

“I’ll say.” Juniper interjected, gesticulating with a pair of arms while the other stayed around her mug. “At this rate, you’ll have to hire a couple more people just to give us a break.” The vespine woman looked just as fatigued as Kassedie felt. As fulfilling as busy days were, she had certainly been looking forward to the opportunity to decompress.

Emma laughed, showing razored, draconic teeth as she shuffled her wings against her back. “Let me know if you need any referrals. I know quite a few people who are good with their hands.”

“From experience, I’m sure.” Sage interjected.

“Naturally,” the dragoness capitulated, “How else are you to know if they’re as good as they claim?”

With an amused smile, Kassedie let herself be drawn into the banter. After a few moments, Kathryn stopped by to deliver a mug of steaming, mulled cider and see to their needs, which were few. The music was light and gentle, and in spite of the number of people that filled the room, the atmosphere was more subdued than she was used to. She enjoyed it, sipping at her drink and simply listening to the conversation, offering only the occasional quip.

After a short while, Kathryn finished her tasks and joined them, having lost her clean, white apron, and slid into the chair between Kassedie and Sage with a heavy sigh. “At least we’ve *all* had long days then.” the vixen said with a soft chuckle, “I was worried all afternoon that I would be the only one.”

The feline stretched her long, slender legs out under the table, kneading the air with her paws, and nodded. “Not really hard, but yes. It seemed like it didn’t want to end.”

Emma took a sip from her mug with a sage nod. “Just like a winter day to cling to the inevitable. And yet here we are, survivors.”

“Well,” Sage added, “It’s not as if Southcliff is a warzone.”

“That just depends on where you go and who you talk to.”

“Fair enough...” the vixen surrendered with a wave, “But even you have to admit that it’s easier to find trouble in some places than others.”

The dragoness shrugged her acceptance, humming, “I can’t argue there, but that’s where knowing where to go and who to talk to comes in, and why I tell everyone I know to come here. It’s probably the least warlike place in Southcliff.”

“Well, I like it here,” Kathryn mumbled around the rim of her cup, “But weren’t you the one who nearly tore someone’s arms off for pulling a knife on Corvus? And who practically flattened someone’s skull on the bar for trying to kidnap Sasha?”

The dragoness pouted innocently. “Maybe, but that hardly makes it a warzone. I’m just... a little protective. I haven’t found a place yet that brews a better cup of tea. I can’t be blamed for keeping my interests secure... right?”

“I suppose not,” Sage mused, “And I suppose that we should be thankful that your interests are so... broad.”

Emma chuckled. "What can I say? I'm a dragon of the world. I don't know if I could stand just sitting up on some mountain for the rest of my life. I'd get so bored."

"The views must be to die for though." Juniper sighed wistfully. "I've always wanted to take a trip up north to see the mountains up close."

"You should." the young dragon continued. "I might not want to live there forever, but there are certainly some unique vistas to take in. And, sometimes, when you just want to be alone, there's nothing quite like the solitude... the wind across the peaks and in your wings, and all that wide open sky..."

"If only we could all be so gifted." retorted the vixen dryly.

"You guys should come with me sometime!" Emma quipped with sudden energy. "My father has a gate in the sanctum that leads straight to my mother's eyrie. We can make an afternoon out of it!"

Kathryn blanched at the mention of it, but Juniper leaned forward intently. "Count me in!"

"I don't know..." Kassedie interjected with a sardonic grin. "Weren't you just saying that we're overworked as it is? I don't know if I can last an afternoon without you."

Emma pouted playfully, and June let out a defeated sigh and crossed both sets of arms across her chest. "That's true... I suppose just feeling needed will have to be pleasure enough while we both work our fingers to the bone being incredibly talented and successful. Not to mention beautiful."

"That's just the price women such as we have to pay, dear." followed Sage, who leaned inward conspiratorially. "It's a hard, hard life, but sometimes sacrifices have to be made. For the greater good, you understand."

Kassedie rolled her eyes so hard it was almost audible, but still had to stifle a giggle into a snort that almost spilled cider down the front of her dress. The sentiment was shared, it seemed, because a wave of lighthearted laughter quickly spread around the table, briefly drowning out the garbled conversation around them. Emma picked up the conversation shortly after, offering congratulations to both her and Juniper for their "successes," some of which were even deserved. Her scales likely hid her blush, but she could feel it creep across her cheeks regardless, and she hid behind her cup to mask her embarrassed delight at the praise.

She jumped and nearly inhaled a mouthful of cider when she heard an unexpected voice behind her. "Come now, ladies. At least some credit has to be given to her friends, hmm? I know that I would have gotten nowhere without a little help."

"Hawk!" Kathryn exclaimed, throwing her arms up into the air. "What are you doing here?!"

Kassedie turned in her chair to get a better look at their visitor. Gavin looked rough. He looked tired, and his face was partly masked by a layer of stubble. He dusted a little snow from the shoulders of his coat and gave the ecstatic feline a casual shrug. "I was in the area, and I thought I'd give my favorite people a visit. The warm fires are helping though."

"Then come take a seat, dear." Sage purred. "I'm sure that Corvus will bring you something hot to take the edge off the chill."

Emma pushed a chair from the table, and Gavin slid into it with a grateful sigh. "Nonsense, Sage. You're talking like I need something other than your wonderful company to sustain me."

The vixen dismissed his wry smirk with a snort. "As if I don't hear that often enough. I can think of a few things that you'd rather have."

He raised his hands in a meek surrender and used the opportunity to pull his wide-brimmed hat off of his head and drop it next to his pack. "Fair enough, I suppose." He muttered while he raked fingers through his short, sandy blond hair. "How have all you lovely people been the past couple weeks?"

"Well enough," the dragoness admitted. "It's been pretty run of the mill, all things considered."

"It's what you consider run of the mill that most interests me, Emma," chuckled Gavin through a bemused smile. "Although I suppose perspective is everything. I'm just happy to be off the road and out of the cold. It's not the best season to go tramping around Arvandor anyway."

"Did you at least come back feeling better than you did when you left?" Kathryn probed, "I know you said you weren't sleeping well."

Gavin nodded and heaved another heavy sigh. "Yes, actually. For what it's worth. Now I just need to do a little catching up... But that's not important. What I want to know is what you've all be up to while I was away. Tell me everything."

Kathryn was more than eager to supply his question with answers enough for all of them, but the conversation eventually worked its way around the table. They traded stories and rumors, some more credible than others. Kassiedie even managed to get a word in between her sister, Juniper, and Emma. Sage seemed content to sip at her drink and listen, and Gavin seemed to be of the same mind. She watched him. He wore a smile, but it was weary, and it barely touched his eyes. He did, however, perk up when a server sashayed by and made sure everyone's drinks were full, sliding a mug of something warm in front of him in the process. He took a careful sip, and for a moment, he looked more like himself, reserved but cheerful.

As the evening deepened, her drink left her feeling warm and fuzzy, a stark change from how she'd felt on the walk to the Chalice. And she wasn't the only one, it seemed. People's voices were rising, not in anger, but just to be understood through increasingly inebriated slurs. A fit of giggles had ensnared her sister, and Kathryn leaned heavily into Sage's shoulder to recover while Gavin chuckled ruefully and stood, proclaiming that it was his time. He scooped up his belongings from the floor, slapped his hat on his head, and sauntered over to the stage, catching the lyrist's eye in the process.

The music stopped, and she and he spoke for a moment. He gestured at a sturdy leather case at his side and said something that had her blushing furiously, and she nodded and beckoned him forward. Gavin gave her a respectful bow and stepped up onto the stage, pulling his cherished viola from its case while the lyrist stowed her instrument and drew a simple, wooden flute from her pack. Though much of the inn paid it no mind, Kassiedie watched with rapt attention as the pair of musicians carefully tuned and prepared their instruments.

Music had always been something that fascinated her, and her tail curled excitedly around the leg of her chair when Gavin's bow touched the strings. It was a soft and mellow melody that first filtered between the tables, and it was joined by something equally subdued when the second half of the impromptu duet recognized it and put lips to her flute. Kassiedie could practically feel the music work its way through the room. It was something more than just noise in spite of its simplicity. It was hardly a demand, but something about it yearned for attention, and conversation slowed as heads rose from their drinks to blink at the intriguing sound.

She'd heard the song countless times. The name and words that came with the tune differed from town to town, but she doubted there was a person alive who couldn't remember

hearing it before. The version she was most familiar with told of a young noble sent on an impossible quest to win the hand of a generically fair maiden. He was relentless however, and doggedly pursued his goal only to be constantly foiled by the maiden herself, who was determined to spite her family's wishes. Of course, the frustrated noble and the stubborn maiden were bound to fall in love, and they did just that every time she had heard the song played.

Kassedie bobbed her head and hummed along as, having drawn enough attention, the song's tempo steadily increased. Their introductions made, the flute and viola began to take turns in an intricate dance, each supported by the other. It was as if each musician had practiced for weeks, and they struck the perfect harmony as they filled the inn with their song. Fresh energy spread through the room, growing as the noble became more desperate and the maiden became more annoyed by his persistence. Gavin's boot tapped out a steady, building rhythm, one that was mimicked by a dozen others around the room.

When the clapping started, it somewhat soured Kassedie's enthusiasm. Why did people so often insist on marring a lovely piece of music with off-beat noise? Still, she was in the common room of an inn, not some elegant amphitheater, and she wasn't going to begrudge a few inebriated travelers and laborers their evening of entertainment, even if some were bound to not remember much of it.

The noble had learned his lesson, and his prize was now his pride. The song slowed for but a moment, the somber admission of love before a life lived happily ever after, and then exploded into a righteous crescendo that had the flute trilling happily and Gavin sawing on his viola like he was trying to cut it in half with horse hair. It left Kassedie grinning and gaily clapping her hands regardless for her own distaste for the act. And that was just the beginning. The last note of one piece bled into the first of another, and this one carried that same manic happiness, full of life and love and excitement.

She'd never heard it before. The rhythm was familiar, but the melody entirely alien. She was certain that she had heard Gavin's entire repertoire, but he seemed continually able to surprise her. The flutist caught on quickly, however, and energized patrons leapt to their feet to push emptying tables to the edges of the room. There was a dance before she knew what was happening. Her sister let out an alarmed squeak as Sage dragged the slim feline from her chair to join a growing circle, and Emma laughed, gulped the rest of her tea, and followed.

She and Juniper shared a look for a moment before the vespine woman gave a noncommittal shrug and stood. Not wanting to be the only one at an otherwise empty table, Kassedie did the same and let herself be caught up in the throng. The amount of coordination exhibited by a bunch of half-drunk revelers spoke to how much practice they'd had, but as she pranced an intricate pattern, bouncing between partners with regular frequency, she saw anything but boredom in their eyes. They mirrored the same delight that she felt, and she let herself laugh aloud as the music left her twirling through arms and around familiar faces. Her sister looked flustered as she tried frantically to avoid tripping herself or someone else. Sage was beaming, and Emma gave her a sly wink as they briefly coupled.

Kassedie was dizzy and breathless when she took an opportunity to separate herself from the organized chaos. She dropped herself into a chair, giggling, catching her breath, and watching the familiar silhouettes of her friends and family gradually do the same. Kathryn wobbled over, clinging to Sage's arm, and Emma followed soon after with Juniper in tow. All—with the exception of her sister—were grinning like madwomen, though even Kat, after some assurances that she'd performed quite well, appeared to have enjoyed herself.

Many others, however, seemed unwilling to give up so easily, and Kassiedie understood the sentiment. There was an almost supernatural eagerness in the air, mingling with the music, and it melted away tension and stress and, with the help of some good ale, many reservations. People laughed and danced and cheered and quenched the thirst they were working up with their exertions. Everyone was enjoying themselves, and Corvus was quietly making a pile of silver behind his bar. It was a good night.

The carousing went on for a good, long while, but eventually everyone grew tired, and the music changed to match the altered mood. People collapsed back into the chairs they had vacated what felt like ages ago, went back to their drinks, and recovered to the sound of a soft, relaxing melody that trailed away, buried under layers of amused conversation. Many of the pleased patrons tossed a sliver or two of silver at the stage, enough to let Gavin scoop it into a modest palmful, but rather than separate it, he simply dumped it into his accompanist's case while she was packing away her things. Kassiedie wished she could hear the words they briefly exchanged, but it left the lyrist flushed as Gavin gathered up his own belongings and stole his way from the stage.

He paused at the bar for a moment to speak with Corvus, terminating the brief conversation with a grin and a friendly nod before sliding around the back of the room and up the stairs to the second floor. Kassiedie looked around with a thoughtful frown. She supposed that it was getting rather late. Kathryn was practically planted in Sage's lap, and the two women were taking turns whispering in the other's ear, a conversation that was becoming less and less verbal as their lips lingered over one another. And it seemed that Emma and Juniper weren't very far away from that same point, leaning close across a table to each other and trading murmured quips, all the while with one of the waspish woman's hand running dotingly along the muscled line of the dragoness's arm.

She stifled a soft chuckle brought forth by the blossom of dull pride. Her sister had certainly come far to openly display such... aggression, and she kept her smile as she exchanged quiet farewells as Kathryn, fidgeting all the way, said goodbye for the evening and pulled Sage along with her. It was with a contented sigh that she then finished her drink and stood to leave, dropping a few pieces of silver on the table for payment. She wasn't actually certain where Kathryn had put her coat, but she was sure that she could find it with a little effort.

She didn't make it that far, however, because as she was bidding her remaining friends a good evening, Emma's tail caught her leg. "Hey," wondered the dragoness, "are you going to see him before you take off?"

A shrug lifted her shoulders before she could fully answer. "I might consider it, why?"

Emma replied with her own shrug. "He just... still looks troubled. Plus, he smells odd. Surely you noticed. The way he spoke, the way he moved, something's wrong, or at least off."

Of course she'd noticed. It had been bugging her all night, though she had tried to ignore it. Gavin had never really been slow to let people know if something was wrong with him, and she hadn't wanted to presume anything. "Maybe you're right," she admitted. "I'll... I'll go talk to him."

The dragon gave her a satisfied nod. "Thanks. I *would*, but I think he'd appreciate seeing you even more."

"Besides," June interjected, "She's already promised to show me around the Sanctum Arcanum. You know, since *someone* didn't take me along when they were there."

She groaned and rolled her eyes. "Come on, you weren't even in Southcliff when I was there!"

Emma laughed and her colleague grumbled something about “excuses” before the dragoness scooped her up and practically carried her away, calling out fond farewells before leaving Kassiedie alone with her thoughts and the last few stragglers in the common room. She sighed and straightened the fabric of her dress over her front whilst picking her way over to the stairs. As she ascended, she swallowed back the little flutter of girlish nervousness that tickled at her gut. It was ridiculous, she knew, and she reminded herself that she was a responsible, grown woman as she strolled down the hall to the door at the end of a row of smaller rooms.

She didn’t give herself time to think too much before she lifted a hand and tapped on the door with a few knuckles. It was also her intent to announce herself, but before she could say anything, she heard a brusque, “Come in.” beckon to her.

Puzzled at his tone, Kassiedie pushed the door open and sidled through it, shutting it quietly behind her. The room was modest by the Chalice’s standards, with room for a respectably sized bed and a cramped desk and chair, and it was warm, clean, and well-lit by a small lamp that suffused the room with a yellowish glow. There was no light to be seen out of the diminutive window that rested in one wall.

Gavin was there, sitting at the edge of the bed. He was cradling his instrument in his lap, and appeared to be busy at it with a fine cloth, working a fragrant oil into the grain of its wood. Looking up from his work, his entire bearing shifted when he recognized his caller. His shoulders relaxed, his back straightened, and his focused frown split into a fond smile. “Oh!” he chirped with good cheer that was more his custom. “Good evening, Angel. I wasn’t expecting anyone quite so lovely to stop by this late.”

She gestured grandly to the humble accommodations. “Well, it was *quite* the journey, all the way up the stairs and down the hall, but I thought it would be improper to head home before I took my chance to say good night, especially since you’ve decided to pass through so unexpectedly, and after providing us with such fine entertainment to boot.”

He let out a disarming laugh and set aside his instrument, raking his fingers through his hair, as was his habit. “It was my pleasure my dear. I didn’t mean for it to look like I was just running off, but I very much wanted to just set my things down for a bit. Travelling in the winter tends to take it out of you.”

Rolling her shoulders in a small shrug, she took a few steps into the room to lean a hip casually against the desk. “So I’ve come to understand. You look a little rough, like you could use a few days of relaxation.”

She gazed at him along the length of her reptilian snout, and he sheepishly peeked down at himself, scratching thoughtfully at the stubble on his cheek. “Yes...” he mused before glancing back up at her, an embarrassed tint beneath his stubby whiskers. “I’m sorry for not looking as presentable as I would normally like. I just got to Southcliff, and I haven’t taken the chance to clean up.”

His self-consciousness pulled a chuckle from her, and she dismissed it with a little wave. “I don’t know about all that. I think, given a little grooming, a beard would look rather fetching on you. Dashing, even.”

With a pensive hum, he nodded and stroked his chin. “I’ll keep that in mind for the future. In the meantime, however, what can I do for you this lovely evening?”

Her tail flicked anxiously at the implications of his question, but she stilled it, pressing her already thin lips together in concentration. “You’ve done more that I could have asked for simply by being here, Gavin. I... I just wanted to see you and make sure that... make sure that

everything's actually alright. I know you said you're feeling better, but you don't really look like you are. To be honest, you look exhausted."

A rich laugh bubble up from his throat, taking her by surprise. "Well, I'd be lying if I told you I wasn't, but for the first time in a long while, it's just because it's late and I've been doing a lot of walking in the bitter cold. I'm rather looking forward to a few days of relaxation. So yes, Kassiedie, I'm feeling very well, all the better knowing that you would take the time to check in on a weary traveler. I missed you, and found myself thinking about you a great deal."

She locked her jaw to contain her girlishly exuberant grin, and only let herself speak when she was certain her voice wouldn't come out as a giddy squeal. "I'm... glad I've been so memorable. I can assure you that your friends here have been keeping you in their thoughts. We talk about you all the time. Some of it's even flattering."

He laughed again as he stood up and strolled across the room. He brushed past her, favoring her shoulder with a fond squeeze before he leaned on the sill of the room's small window, peering out into the cold winter sky. "I can only imagine," he mumbled through a rueful grin. "Sage alone could keep the rumor mill of Southcliff turning for a month."

Kassiedie's eyebrows drew downward into a pensive angle. In utter spite of his jovial attitude and assurances to the contrary, the youthful man before her appeared weary and troubled. He looked strained, bent by some great, invisible weight, and his smile slowly faded as he stared up into the blackness. There would be no moon that evening, and the stars were mostly blocked by a blanket of snow-laden clouds. There was nothing to see but the dark of the night. "Are you sure that everything's alright, Gavin?" she wondered aloud. "You've been looking so grim all evening. Did something happen while you were away? You seem different, but I can't say why."

He let out a long sigh and turned to face her, leaning back against the window. "And you, my dear, are precisely as I remembered you: kind and caring and unerringly lovely. Yes I'm tired, and maybe a little sore from the road, but now that I'm back here, home, I truly do feel much better. Just give me a day or two to get some sleep, now that I can, and you have my word that I will be back to my old self."

She glanced down at her toes, unable to help feeling a little chastised by his words, but his tone was warm and welcoming, and she let herself be drawn forward. He wrapped her up in a comforting embrace, and Kassiedie sighed softly as her head came to rest against his chest. "I'm sorry Hawk," she murmured, "I didn't mean to hound you about it. I was just worried about you. Before you left last time, you were looking... bad."

Gavin squeezed her against him before releasing her to peer down into her eyes. He was smiling again. "I was sure I would be fine, but I appreciate your concern Kass. It's nice to know that someone's at least a little invested in my well-being."

"We all are, Gavin," she reassured him, "but Sage and Kathryn have each other, and Emma always has something more pressing to worry about, so maybe I'm just more distracted when you're not around..."

"Which is more often than not..." he continued for her.

Kassiedie hesitated for a moment before giving him a tiny nod. "Yeah. A few days every few weeks is... I just miss you sometimes."

"Only sometimes?" he mused with a playful pout.

She frowned up at him and gave him a no-nonsense huff prior to softening her tone. "Yes, sometimes. I'm not some girl who's going to pine miserably away. But, on occasion, I

miss you: the sound of your voice, the calluses on your fingers when you rub my shoulders, even you just... being around, you great, charming oaf.”

As if on command, those same fingers drifted up to her shoulders and lazily rubbed at her. “I know, Angel, and I’m sorry. Perhaps I’ve been selfish, but I came to a realization a couple weeks ago, for what it’s worth.”

She surrendered her shoulders, leaning her head against his chest again and flaring her nostrils around a heavy breath. “And what could that have been?”

One of his nimble hands drooped between her shoulder blades, and it cradled her against him as he took a deep, bracing breath. “I just realized the things that are important to me, that’s all. Being alone on the road, cold and... not in the best of shape, can really put things in perspective.”

His vagueness irritated her, but she could only fixate on the direst portion of his message. “So you *were* sick? What was it? Are you okay? I *knew* something was wrong!”

He laughed, and soothed her ire with a gentle hand. “Yes, I suppose, but it’s been taken care of, and it’s nothing you have to worry about. I promise, so please don’t fret. I did enough of that myself. It did, however, convince me that I needed to change the way I live my life.”

She lifted her snout to stare quizzically upward. “Oh?”

With a nod, he gave her a quick squeeze before pushing himself off of the window, sliding free of her arms, and strolling over to the edge of the bed, where he took a seat and began unlacing his travel-worn boots. “Southcliff is my home, Kass. I may not have been born inside the walls, but I’ve lived here long enough to have the right to call it home. And yet, I spend all my time away, across Arvandor, playing an instrument worth its weight in gold for handfuls of copper. I very much enjoy it, and I’m grateful for the generosity of others, but I realized I’ve been missing something too.”

He looked up at her after sliding out of his boots and setting them aside. His expression was intense. “I miss my home, and I miss my friends. I realized that by spreading myself so thinly, I was missing out. But I’m stubborn, and this realization came later than I would have liked. I think I’m done feeling homesick for a good, long while. I’m going to stay in Southcliff this time—maybe try and do something a little more constructive with my skills.”

That... was not something Kassiedie had expected to hear him say, and it took her several heartbeats to process his words. When she did, a knot of giddy glee constricted her gut. She had to bite her tongue to keep herself from giggling. Instead, her feet carried her carefully forward, and she sat down next to him on the edge of the bed, fingers laced neatly together in her lap, if just to keep her hands from flailing in excitement. “I’m... *very* happy to hear that, but are you sure that it’s what you want? I never really expected you to want to... settle down anywhere.”

Gavin reached over, running a few fingers down her forearm, offering his hand. She took it and squeezed it tightly. “Neither did I,” he continued, “but I guess I needed to have a little sense scared into me. And I know it might still be a little selfish, but thank you, Angel. Thank you so much.”

“For what?”

“For being here.” he answered with placid certainty, looking to her with his sharp, intense eyes. “For caring. For inspiring me, motivating me. It’s hard not to sound overly dramatic when I feel like I already owe you so much just for being you.”

She blinked, a mix of emotions likely contorting her face into a mask of confusion, and he laughed, lifting his eyes to the ceiling and draping a hand over his face. “Gods... Listen to me. I’m an idiot. I should know better than to think of you like the subject of just another song.”

Her fingers squeezed his again, drawing him from his embarrassment. It pulled his eyes to hers once more. "I like your songs." Kass murmured. "I like listening to you."

"And that fills me with pride," he assured her, "but some things mean so much more. You mean so much more... to me. You're more than just a muse, and you deserve better. You're my friend, Kass. More than that, I feel. I hope. You're important to me, and I care about you. And maybe I feel guilty sometimes that I'd rather just spend a few quiet moments with you than with anyone else. Even though I don't want it to seem like I'm playing favorites with my loved ones, it's difficult sometimes to avoid getting poetic when I think of you. Gods, if you could see the things I've written."

She quickly resolved to read more in the future, but one last question pressed at her. "Do you really love me?"

He laughed at her query's apparent absurdity. "Of course I do. But it's a difficult thing to qualify, because I love a great many things. I love you and Emma, your sister and Sage, my family and this city. Perhaps I've been too reluctant to admit that I hold some of those things more dearly than others, and that each and every day my feelings change in new and intriguingly wonderful ways, especially as I spend more time with my... loved ones."

"I don't know if that's the answer I was looking for," she muttered hesitantly.

Gavin gave her a slow nod, rubbing his thumb across her knuckles as he cradled her hand. "I'd suspected as much. I hope it's not too much against your liking."

With her free hand, she reached up and cupped her palm over his cheek, bowing to the urge to just... hold him. "I think that it'll do for now. But I expect you to let me know when you decide to change it."

"You've got my word on that, Angel," he promised.

Kassiedie accepted his vow with a sharp, vertical jerk of her head, but she didn't have it in her to let him go just yet. Her hand slipped from his cheek and fell to his shoulder, and she gripped the muscle there with doting strength. It was hard and stiff, and she wondered for a moment if it really was just fatigue or nervousness that was holding him so rigid. Whatever it was, there was something that she could do about it. "I like this too, you know," she added after a thoughtful pause.

"Like what?" he mused.

Her hand slid off of his shoulder and down to his chest, where her dexterous digits began to work at the buttons that were holding his heavy coat to his torso. It was going to get in her way. While she busied herself, she elaborated. "This. Spending a little quality time with you when I have the chance. I like it too, quiet and alone and away from all the bustle. Sometimes I miss having the intimacy that I can only get with you."

He let her work her way down his chest, eventually sliding his coat off of his arms and laying it neatly aside. Beneath it he was wearing his usual vest and shirt, and she set her fingers to those in short order. Gavin watched her, leaning back on a hand to give her room while his other skirted up her body to her jaw, and then her cheek. He lifted it higher, running his fingers along the stiff, ivory spines that graced her scaly scalp, and then gave her a gentle reminder. "You don't have to miss it any more if you don't want to, Angel."

Her fingers fumbled with a button halfway down his vest, and she had to stop, looking up at him from her self-appointed task. "Right..." she answered softly, working through that realization. "Y-you're staying."

With a nod, he echoed, "I'm staying."

Sudden joy twisted her expression into a toothy grin that split her reptilian snout, and she giggled breathlessly. “You’re staying! I... I-I... I’m so used to cramming as much of you into a couple days as I can, I don’t know if I’ll be able to take my time.”

He laughed with her. “You’ll have plenty of time to practice, so I have faith you’ll figure something out.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right.” she mused, trembling with excitement. A horde of butterflies did battle in her gut, and she just wanted to laugh and prance around like some giddy child. Instead, she huffed a short breath, steadied herself, and pushed herself off of the bed and to her feet. He made to join her, but she whipped her tail around in the same motion, pressing a span of it against his chest and keeping him there, where she wanted him.

Gavin pouted up at her, and she turned to put her back to him, smirking over her shoulder as she shifted her tail up and over his shoulder, letting it drape heavily against the side of his neck. She gyrated her hips in a silent invitation, and he took it, lifting his hands to the inhuman appendage and running his fingers up along the smooth scales that covered it, following it back to its source. He turned his head, pressing his lips against a portion of her tail as his hands then swept up from it onto the small of her back and across to the breadth of her hips.

With him watching, she reached up to the nape of her neck to briefly combat the buttons that held her heavy, winter dress snug on her curvaceous frame. It loosened with each one that was drawn from its hole, and she let out a relieved sigh when she reached the last. It took an immense amount of focus to keep herself from simply tearing her dress off of her, but the wide-eyed look of anticipation Gavin was giving her filled her with the determination to make the process of disrobing as slow and tantalizing as she could.

Pulling gently, she worked at opening her dress, baring the uppermost reaches of her back. She freed her shoulders and turned the task of sliding her arms from their sleeves into as gratuitous a task as she was able, and she made sure Gavin watched every second. Most of the scales that covered her body, down her back and tail, her arms and legs, were colored a dark, rich red, like lustrous garnet, and they caught the light as more and more of them peeked into view over the sinking line of her dress while she wriggled it down her body. The rest, a stripe down her belly, the underside of her tail, and a patch atop her angular snout, carried a brighter shade of eye-catching red, one that made the blue of her eyes stand out strikingly.

She hummed and gave a light, little grunt as she pulled the dress down over her breasts, huffing at the effort it required. They were big, round, soft things that tenaciously filled whatever she chose to wear, and it was a pleasant sensation, letting the chilled air wash over their fine, sanguine scales as she adjusted her bra from her efforts. That would stay on a little longer, at least until she was finished with her dress, which, having fallen down around her waist, was now clinging resolutely to the girth of her womanly hips.

Biting thoughtfully at a lip, she used her tail to gently pull her audience’s hands from her more-than-ample curves, freeing her to hook her thumbs beneath the folds of her dress and begin pushing, rocking her hips from side to side with each little motion. Kassiedie bent at the waist, easing her tail from its own sleeve while pushing out her cushiony butt and sliding her dress down the extensive curve, making Gavin witness as her garment surrendered each inch to the magnificence of her alluring figure.

Her dress was loathe to give up its hold on her thighs, but she shifted her stance and wiggled it all the way to the floor, where she then stepped demurely from the crumpled rags, clad in only her smallclothes and her boots. Her plain, grey underwear was filled with her generous curves, straining for freedom, and she sighed, crossing her arms beneath her bust as she spun

back around, throwing out a hip and looking down at Gavin, whose mouth was half agape. “You look like you haven’t seen any of this before.” she muttered, sashaying a step forward, her tail swaying playfully through the air behind her.

Her voice seemed to be enough to pull him to awareness. “It... each occasion is an experience all its own, and you’ve never failed to grow more beautiful.”

“You’re just saying that because I’m here to hear you talking about me.”

“Well...” he admitted, “I’d think myself crazy if I were telling it to an empty room, my dear. But that still wouldn’t make it any less true.”

She looked down at her own almost-nudity and felt a little pang of self-consciousness writhe in her belly at his gaze. With an incensed sniff, she squashed it, rolling her shoulders back and throwing out her prodigious chest for him to gawk at, which he did with gusto. She knew what she was, soft and womanly, all smooth contours and supple curves. She was the counterpoint to her sister’s lithe willowiness. She was compact and carried a thin layer of fat that gave her a pleasant fullness of body, one that people sought to hold.

Continuing to revel in the moment, she finished another step forward, which put Gavin within arm’s reach. He peeked up at her, and she returned the gaze along her snout, smiling. She’d left her task unfinished, and she returned her fingers to the buttons that lined the front of his vest. They gave way easily, but she lingered there, toying with him while her crimson body hovered so, so close to him.

With a little nonverbal encouragement, the helpless man was goaded into touching her, fingertips grazing the outsides of her thighs on the way to her hips. His touch was light enough to leave her scales yearning for something more, almost effervescing with desire, and she squirmed, her tail lashing the air at her back while she pushed his vest off of his shoulders and threw it to the side with his coat.

His shirt was far simpler, and he helped her pull it up over his head, leaving him bare before her. She hummed, low and pensive, at the sight of his nude torso. He was, under his attitude and clothing, a man of dense, sinewy muscle, lean and wiry, long-limbed and deceptively strong. It made the tension he carried across his shoulders even more evident, and she tutted like a disappointed mother as she wrapped her clawed hands over them. “You need to relax, Mister Hawkins. All this strain and fatigue is going to turn you into an old man far before your time.”

“It’s a little late for that,” he replied with a wry smirk, “I was an old man ages ago.”

She dismissed it with a flick of her tail. “Then I guess we’ve got to do what we can to ease you into your new sedentary life with the rest of us mere mortals, hmm?”

The more he smiled, the more Kassiedie remembered missing it. “What do you have in mind, my dear?”

With a chuckle, she leaned forward into him, showing just how deep the cleavage between her large, heavy breasts went. The tip of her snout brushed against his hair. It tickled at her nose, and she huffed as she pressed a kiss onto his forehead. “It’s a secret.” she whispered. “But I’ll give you a hint; it involves a lot of tongue.”

“I look forward to it.” Gavin added, his voice just as soft.

She pulled back an inch, enough to let her hook a few clawed fingers under his chin and lift his head to face hers. “Good.” In the same short breath she kissed him, pushing her lips over his own before he could squeeze out any more playful banter.

She closed her eyes, dug her fingertips into his windblown hair, and *kissed* him. Her tongue was long and sinuous, and she used it to goad open his mouth. Kassiedie shivered and

invaded him, tasting his mouth and dueling briefly with his own oral organ, a pitiful, human thing that just couldn't compete. Her chest was suddenly tight, and she took deep, heavy breaths, sending her large breasts heaving inside her bra. "Gods, I missed you, Gavin." she moaned weakly. "I missed you so much! I was so worried about you and now you're back and you're here and I *want you so bad!*"

Her facade of coy innocence shattered, and it left her raw and vulnerable and absolutely *ravenous*. As if to spit in the face of the cold outside, her body caught fire. She pushed Gavin back, shoving him down onto the mattress and pounced, leaping atop him and straddling his waist. He gawked up at her, and she pulled off her bra, throwing it away. Her hands went over her breasts, squeezing the plentiful mounds as she ground her generously plump butt into his crotch. If what she felt was any indication, he was just as eager as she. "Where oh where to begin..." she panted, hissing lightly as she deftly pinched her ruddy pink teats between her clawed fingers.

The man pinned between her legs just daintily petted her thighs as they squeezed around his ribcage. "Just put me where you want me, Angel."

She laughed and squeezed him again for good measure. "You're already there, but I think I could give you a little more to work with."

"Whenever you're ready."

She longingly licked her lips, leaving the thin, reptilian lines shiny as she pensively pursed them together. She would show him just how ready she was. With little swaying motions, she wriggled her way up his body, dragging her cushiony butt along his chest the whole way. His hand helped out, pulling her up until she could lift her legs over his arms and mount his head. Kassiedie didn't bother removing her simple smallclothes; she just reached down, pulled the thin slip of cloth out of the way, and mushed her soaked womanhood against his underprepared mouth.

It would not have taken a clever man to puzzle out what to do in his situation, and Gavin was much more than simply clever. He laughed at her roughness, spread his hands across her meaty thighs, and gave her an experimental taste. He opened his mouth and pushed his tongue between her slick folds, probing at her yearning entrance. It sent a shiver up her spine, and she cradled her hefty bust in her palms, caressing herself as he lapped hungrily at her drooling slit.

His sparse beard lent an odd, tickling sensation to the experience of having herself so nimbly pleased. Kassiedie gratefully rocked her hips, grinding herself down against his face, ensuring that his tongue was always wandering over a new span of her lurid femininity. He inclined his head, guiding himself, and when he found her swollen, little clit, he toyed with it, rolling his tongue around the tiny button. Tension sunk her fingers into her breasts, squishing them lewdly as a low, salacious moan poured between her lips.

Bliss folded her forward, and a hand braced her against the mattress to keep her steady atop her mount. Gavin's eyes twinkled over her chest, nestled between her legs, and he slid his magical tongue down to continue agitating her enflamed nethers, never letting any part of her sit idle for too long. He did, however, keep a lip or his nose mushed against the tiny bead of ecstasy that was the nexus of her sex, as if he was afraid of losing it. All the while his fingers gracefully petted her smooth, scaly legs, rubbing and squeezing them and simply waiting out the inevitable release of all the lusty tension that was gathering between them.

She squeezed her eyes shut, focusing, letting out a steadying breath. Perhaps taking her attempts as a challenge, Gavin redoubled his effort, rocking his head and digging into her mercilessly. The air left her lungs in a shaky whine, but she wasn't going to be thrown off so

easily. She peeked back over her shoulder while he had his way with her nethers, spying the tent in his trousers. Chewing on her tongue and trying to keep her tail from thrashing too much, she slid the bulky appendage down and back behind her.

Like a blind serpent, it coursed down his bare chest until its tip could poke and push its way beneath the waist of his pants. Her scales glided smoothly over his warm skin until she managed to make contact with his straining shaft. Its familiar rigidity delighted her, and she returned her gaze to between her legs, giving him a thoughtful hum as more and more of her tail wriggled below his belt.

She'd found her prize, and as she gently caressed him, she kept her eyes downward, watching his expression shift and feeling him fidget between her thighs. Of course, this only seemed to make him more determined to finish his appointed task, and he roughly ravished her. She could feel all of her anxious desire drawing down to her loins, pressurizing her. She felt it building and building, given shape and strength by that sly set of lips and tongue. Her tail curled fitfully around his tense manhood. She could feel him twitching in her prehensile grip, and she could only sympathize with the feeling.

Her hand slapped down on her legs, over his, and she struggled not to curl into a little ball when, with a few firm lashes of his tongue, he pushed her over the edge. She saw stars, and she viciously clenched her teeth as her body seized. Her throat locked around her delirious cry, only squeaking past her lips as a coarse, guttural grunt.

Her fluttering womanhood collapsed inward on itself, wringing at nothing as her entire body spasmed, flexing in time with the pulsations that roared through her crotch. Her scales practically burned with the force of her release, and lines of fiery lightning danced over her form, focusing between her legs, up her spine, and over the peaks of her stiff nipples. Almost as quickly as it had grabbed his hand, her own shot back up to her chest.

She savaged herself as she rode out her release, pinching and pulling and just touching herself. Her whole body ached with sensitivity, and Gavin's attentions drew out her sparking bliss, making the fall from the height of her need a slow and languorous one. In reward, and when she was able to make her body move the way she wanted, she gave him a few languid strokes with her tail, promising with her eyes a whole lot more just as soon as she could feel her skin again.

When she was left quivering, wanting little more than to just collapse into the bed, she sucked in a bracing breath, trying to rein in her wild panting. When she had reasserted a modicum of control over herself, she lifted her legs, freeing her trapped lover and peeling the petals of her slick, florid flower from his soaked face. He'd taken quite the load. Her feminine juices were smeared over his mouth and cheeks and nose, and he licked his lips as he pulled in a lungful of fresh air. The scales around her still-dripping cleft were a mess with the stuff, and she luxuriated in the chill of the air washing over her exposed flesh while she peeled her panties off of her plush rump. "Lay down." she commanded, pulling daintily on his stiff tool with her tail.

He followed her orders and her guiding touch, backing further up onto the bed and flopping into the mattress. Her tail still coiled firmly around him, squeezing and massaging, she undid his belt and pulled down his pants, dragging it roughly over the sizable bulge their combined efforts were making in the fabric. He hissed when he finally sprang free, and she tossed the remainder of his clothes off to the side. His modest, seven-inch cock was oozing onto the scales of her tail, and she gripped him again, more tightly as she prowled over to and above him.

Unwinding her tail a loop at a time, she replaced the muscled limb with something softer and warmer. She sank him past her lips, feeling him throb against her palate, and she moved her serpentine appendage lower to writhe playfully over his firm, swollen testes. With an indulgent hum, she slowly licked at him, whirling her dexterous tongue around his crown while pushing him further and further back into her mouth. He was butting threateningly up against the entrance to her throat before she could complete her journey, and she steeled herself, taking a deep breath and bearing forward, taking him all and pressing a lingering kiss into his crotch.

She held him there for a few seconds, whipping him with her tongue while his glans pulsed in the beginnings of her neck. He let out a shuddering moan, one that pulled at her, and it took much of her focus to make her withdraw, leaving him wet and slippery with her saliva. "Much better..." she purred as she pulled away and crawled further forward, over him. He touched her along the way, rubbing along her belly, over her hips, giving her expansive butt little squeezes, but he dared not interfere as she lifted herself up on her knees, peered between them, and lined herself up.

Her view was blocked for a time by her heavy, swinging breasts, and she tutted in frustration before folding an arm over her chest and squishing them against her to free her view. He was as erect and ready as he'd ever been, a fleshy, ruddy obelisk waiting to fulfill its purpose as it strained up at her. Mercifully, she lowered herself, guiding her sopping cleft until his burning flesh could just make contact with hers.

For a time she held herself there, teasing them both with little undulations of her hips that pushed and prodded him against her. Gavin was frozen, holding tightly to her curves with a half-lidded look of lust, and she bent her arms, lowering herself to press her front down along his wiry chest. Her bust compressed against him, perky teats poking against the firmness of his muscles. She kissed him, closing her eyes and tasting herself on his lips as she gave him what they both seemed to be so desperately wanting.

She moaned into his mouth as her supple folds parted around his tip. She gradually lowered herself, sinking down onto him and lazily grinding each and every inch past her greedy netherlips. She made it a journey as she rolled her hips, spine tingling furiously as she slid herself down his shaft. Her tail, by instinct, lifted high into the air above them, getting itself well out of the way, and she whimpered as she traveled downward until his very root was hilted within her.

Pulling herself back for a breath, she tensed, clenching her walls around him as she forced her tail back down, curling it around his thigh. His head drifted back, and he let out a terse sigh, gathering his focus. It made her giggle, and she wiggled her butt in his hands, stirring him around inside her in the process. "Is something distracting you, Mister Hawkins? Should I stop and give you a minute to catch your breath?"

His eyes stayed shut, and he was clearly struggling to keep tremors out of his voice. "Not at all, my dear. Please carry on."

Laughing again, she dipped her snout down to his ear, giving it a little nibble with her sharp, predatory teeth. "Alright..." she agreed. Kassiedie released a long, hissing breath over his ear as she undulated her spine, rubbing her breasts over his chest and giving him a slow, full-body hump that drew a few inches of him free before squeezing him back in. It was the sort of movement that rocked them both, firm but not savage, something they could both experience with the entirety of their bodies, and she let him hear a little moan as she did it again.

She tangled her legs with his, twining her tail about until it tied them together. She wanted all of him, every bit of him. She clutched at his shoulders, pricking at his skin with her

little claws. She turned her head, resting her cheek on him and ensuring he could hear each little grunt of exertion that escaped her lips with each forceful rise and fall of her plush, womanly figure.

Again and again, she built a steady, escalating rhythm. In and out, in and out, she plunged him deeply into her, wrung at him with every muscle she had. She wanted him to feel in his *bones* how much she wanted him. She wanted his world to quake around him. But, she wanted it to last. She measured out his pleasure, doling it out one thrust of her soft body at a time. She slowed when his hands squeezed her thick rump or when he started to throb too fitfully against her yielding, inner walls. And yet, she couldn't help but speed up, invigorated when he murmured his little moans. It was a conflict, but a delicious one that filled her with purpose.

She was breathing hard now, and she shifted her head away so she wasn't huffing straight into his ear. His face was flushed, and he was staring hard at the backs of his eyelids. His hands started to move, wandering over her luscious contours, and before long he was helping her out, using the lean muscle lining his arms to pump himself into her with a little more strength.

That was alright. She let him guide her. She moved with him, following the lead of his arms as they dictated their continued tempo. She focused more on adding to their intertwined pleasure. She twisted her hips, grinding him around inside of her when their loins slapped wetly together. She scratched the deepest of her itches, working him back and forth over her every fold while her body rippled around him, holding him tightly and urgently.

His voice was growing heavy and coarse. His arms trembled as his hands grasped needily at her. His lungs heaved with the depth of his panting, making her own body rise and fall in time. Kassiedie whimpered limply as he took an increasingly vigorous part in their combined pleasure. His jaw set with a rough grunt, his lean frame went rigid beneath her, and her world was abruptly turned on its head.

With little more than that guttural warning, Gavin twisted his body and heaved her to the side. He rolled with her as her back pressed into the mattress, and he bore her down with a firm hand on her shoulder, the other still curled under her ripe rump. It took him less than a heartbeat find his pace once more, and he laid into her with a primal savagery that stole her breath and left her eyes rolled back in her head.

The muscles lining her spine wanted to bend her backward, thrusting her chest out to the heavens, but his weight prevented it. She only succeeded in shoving her burning breasts against his chest as he pounded her dripping cleft. He put his whole body into it, slamming his entire ample length into her as fast as his dense, spindly body could move. She shook with the force of it, her voluptuous figure bouncing eagerly to his ferocious tempo. His breath was hot on her neck, and he tempered it with the coolness of his saliva as he kissed her throat, wandering his mouth over the exposed contour.

Her hands didn't know what to do. One clutched at his back while the other grabbed a handful of bedlinens and just held on, seeking something to anchor her to reality. His remained on her, one on her backside, holding her steady while the other squeezed between them to clumsily grope at her dancing breasts. With each savage thrust, her breath caught in her throat, and she was only able to choke out an increasingly high-pitched cry with each one. Eventually, she could no longer hear herself. Her head fell back, mouth open and tongue lolling listlessly between her teeth. As limp as she felt, her body stiffened; her spine tingled threateningly. The pressure beneath her loins had done nothing but build, and she felt herself on the precipice of a cataclysmic explosion.

For a moment, she found her voice, but she could only squeeze out an ominous grunt as her teeth snapped closed and she lost all pretense of control. Her claws dug into his back, a scream boiled in the pit of her chest, trapped by her own volcanic release, and she came with a force that dashed her remaining thoughts against the jagged shards of relief that swept through her. She clamped down on him with every bit of vicelike force her body could muster. Her convulsing walls begged, pleaded with him to simply remain where he was, to let her do the work of milking him dry, but he refused. He continued to ravish her until his physique grew gravely taut, and he stunned her with the unleashed strength of his final, quivering thrust.

With a stuttering growl he unleashed himself within her, spewing into her depths. The already volcanic heat of his steely tool blossomed into a plume of gratifying warmth as he released spurt after spurt into her grasping depths. Her spasming womanhood wrested it from him, drew it away as quickly as he could deposit against her contracting folds. And yet still more came. He humped her numbly, extending his ecstasy with clumsy little jerks of his hips. Miraculously, he managed to find her lips with his own, and he tore his hand from her chest to curl it around the nape of her neck, holding her to him as he kissed her wetly.

It went on and on. He painted her insides with thick, ropey strands of his seed until he could no longer do even that. Her walls rippled of their own accord, wringing the very last dregs from him until there was nothing left to be had. Their tongues dueled, lashing against one another, and she dug her fingers into his hair to hold him where she wanted him. Her sinuous oral organ twisted like a snake into his mouth. She explored him while his sweet, hot breath fell heavily over her lips.

Her scaly hide ached, hypersensitive. Even the chilly air almost hurt as it caressed her. The weight of his body, held mostly by one of his arms, shielded her from the worst of it. His skin had collected a sheen of sweat from his exertions, and it made her polished scales shine where they touched. Her breath came sluggishly, tiredly, and while her heart was gradually slowing, it still pounded in her chest and against her eardrums.

Kassiedie didn't realize how rigid her lover's sinewy body was until, with a long, fatigued sigh, Gavin relaxed, going limp against her. She moaned helplessly as he shakily drew himself from her abused passage, and he softened her loss with another lingering kiss against her lips. His dexterous fingers, trembling, grazed over her neck and shoulder and left lines of sputtering sparks beneath her scales. She mourned his lips as he drifted away, and she sucked in a sharp gasp through clenched teeth when a wave of cold air washed over her body as he rolled himself off of her, slumping exhaustedly into the mattress next to her.

She laid there for an interminable minute, listening to herself pant, listening to him pant. She hauled a hand up and flopped it down on her soft belly, cradling the warm gift he had given her. Her body ached, yearned... for more? For another? No... she didn't know. Her scaly skin prickled as her scattered sensations righted themselves and blood rushed back into the rest of her body from her inflamed nethers. Her mouth was dry, and she worked her tongue around, smacking her lips and staring at the ceiling.

Gavin lifted his head and shot her a querying look when she suddenly let out a light, trilling giggle. To answer his unspoken question, she lifted her leg, showing him her leather-clad feet. "I forgot about my boots..." she mumbled. He laughed with her.

When she lowered her leg, she rolled onto her side and draped it across his own. She threw her arm possessively over the breadth of his chest, and laid the bulk of her tail across his abdomen. He peered over at her, a smile curling up his lips, and returned the favor, reaching across to stroke her cheek. "Thank you." she sighed.

“For what?” Gavin mused around another languid sigh.

Kassiedie shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m sure there’s something here to be grateful for, though.”

He chuckled again. “Yeah. I’m sure we could find something between the two of us to be thankful for.”

His dual meaning didn’t slip past her, and she nodded as her heart fluttered. She traced a claw over his chest, drawing lazy swirls on his muscle. “So... you’re really going to stick around...”

Long, nimble fingers slipped under her chin, and lifted her so that she couldn’t help but stare into his intense eyes. “Yes.”

She grinned and hugged him closer, shamelessly squishing her breasts against the arm that was pinned against them. “What are you going to do?”

“What do you mean?”

She gestured broadly around them. “You know. What are you going to do? With your time? I give a mean backrub; Kathryn pretends to be a simple serving girl while she’s saving up to buy the Chalice, Emma hits things really hard... What are you going to do?”

He returned his eyes to the ceiling and shrugged. “Southcliff’s a big place. There’s no shortage of inns and taverns in need of a little entertainment. But I’ve actually been thinking of starting a school, teaching people how to play.”

Her grin spread, and she confidently patted his chest. “That sounds fantastic. The world could always use a little more music. Where are you going to be staying?”

It was his turn to wave at their surroundings. “I think that this will do for now, but I don’t really know where I’m going to end up when I get things figured out.”

She chewed thoughtfully on her lip. “Well... If you ever want a change of scenery, I’ve got some extra space above the spa that you’re welcome to. It’s nothing grand or anything, but... I’ve got a bed that would hold you.”

“I’d hate to kick you out of your own bed.”

Reaching up, she caressed his jaw meaningfully. “It could hold both of us.”

He snatched up her fingers and pressed his lips into her knuckles, pausing for a breath. “Then I’ll keep your generosity in mind, Angel.”

She flushed, warmth welling up behind her cheeks. Her tail twitched anxiously, and he caught her little shiver. Reaching aside, Gavin threw a crumpled blanket over them, preserving both their naked bodies from the inescapable chill in the air. She curled up tightly around him, sharing her restocked warmth but remaining silent. She wriggled as he kissed her cheek, then her lips. She returned it slowly, not searching for anything deeper. She relaxed, contentedness soothing her gut, and sighed. Sleep took her.