

Rebirth

Written By: Skabaard

Daryn cursed into the frigid air around him as he hurried along the insubstantial path. What the bloody hells was he doing out here, climbing around the snow-capped peaks of the Ordus Mountains alone? He shook his head. Whatever the thief he was chasing had stolen, it must have been dreadfully important for the Duke of Southcliff to call in a favor owed to talk Daryn into going to get it back. The Duke would not have called on the Archmage to go chasing after a trinket. The Duke's family had been in possession of the object for years before Daryn had earned the title of Archmage and moved to Southcliff. The Duke had had no idea what it was or what it did, but that someone would have gone to all the trouble to break into Castle Southcliff's vaults to steal it, leaving the city's treasury untouched, worried Daryn.

Unknown objects of magic littered the world, and while some were as innocuous as children's toys, others had the potential to wield earthshaking power, and could be abused to disastrous effect by the wrong people. Daryn wasn't keen on taking that chance.

Long legs easily carried the Archmage's broad frame up the mountain. Dressed in only a shirt and pants over which hung a long coat, he was kept warm more by a simple spell than by the fabric covering his body. Fine, leather boots crunched in the snow as intelligent, deep blue eyes surveyed the mountain around him.

Daryn paused briefly, his eyes narrowing as he scanned his surroundings, searching for the telltale remnant that the magic in the object would have left behind. He smiled as he felt a faint aura brush against his awareness; he hadn't lost the thief's trail then.

Shivering despite himself, he moved on, following the lingering traces of magic left by the item in his quarry's possession. He wasn't actually cold, the bubble of warm air he held close to his skin made sure of that. The light flurries of snow, however, were beginning to fall more regularly, and Daryn surmised that before long a thick, fresh layer of white powder would blanket the mountaintop.

He scowled as he stared up at the sky. The thief couldn't have chosen to go robbing in the spring, could he? The end of winter's icy grasp on the region was still several weeks away, and the angry grey clouds that swirled overhead seemed determined to get their say in before the coming thaw blunted their potency.

Daryn quickened his steps. He wanted to get off the mountain before the falling snow sealed the pass behind him. He didn't look forward to being trapped here high in the mountains for the weeks it would take for the milder weather to melt free the blocked paths. He had already been chasing this idiotic thief across the face of the mountain for the better part of two days, and he could feel that he was close to catching him.

He had to slow his pace as the slope grew treacherously steep. The snow had begun to fall more heavily, and lashed around in a strong wind that whipped down the side of the mountain. That's why Daryn didn't hear him until he almost bumped into him.

Blundering through the snow, casting a worried glance over his shoulder every other step, came a worn-looking man wearing a thick grey cloak that blended well into the surrounding rock. Daryn quickly cast a thin veil over himself to mask his shape as he hunkered down into the snow, watching the man as he stumbled past him. That was when the Archmage felt the dull, throbbing energy of the item the man had stolen.

Letting the thief get a bit further back down the path, Daryn rose, dropping his veil so it would no longer obscure his vision. Just as he did so, he and the thief stopped in their tracks as they both heard something through the wind. A bestial roar, as if in challenge to some foe, echoed off the rocks around them, followed by a tremendously loud cracking sound that caused the ground to shake beneath Daryn's feet.

The shaking didn't stop, however, and had Daryn acted an instant later, he surely would have died. Sweeping his hands out in front of him, he spelled into being a wall of force, shaped into a wedge around his body. That was when a boulder the size of his torso careened down the slope and bounced harmlessly off the shield he had fashioned for himself.

In a corner of his mind, he felt a pulse of magic well up from somewhere down the hill. It must have been the thief, perhaps trying desperately save himself using his stolen goods. Daryn pushed the distraction away, focusing all of his will into maintaining the faintly shimmering wedge currently saving his life. The rock slide continued, and stones of all sizes, from pebbles to huge boulders the size of his body bounced harmlessly around him.

This continued for what seemed like forever, until flow of earth eventually slowed to a drizzle. Gravel continued to bounce down the hill, but the worst of it seemed to be over, and Daryn released his shield with a trembling breath. He had been at the edge of his endurance, holding a shield that strong for that long, and his skin was drenched in sweat.

He leaned down, hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath as the mountain wind sunk an icy chill into his bones. Daryn froze abruptly when he saw something move on the slope above him. It was faint; he wasn't even sure if he had seen anything. He strained his senses, trying to hear something past the rattle of gravel as it rolled down the hill, to see anything through the snowy, grey haze that cloaked the mountainside.

He heard a faint rustling sound, as of something scraping against the rocks on the slope above him. Daryn straightened his back, rising to his full height and opened his mouth to address whatever was watching him. Suddenly sensing some magic being worked near him, he spun to face its source and saw a stone the size of his head hurtling toward him. Instinctively, he dodged to the side, but not fast enough, and the rock struck a glancing blow to his shoulder, sending him spinning off his feet.

Having lost his footing completely, Daryn started to tumble down the rocky slope. His body bounced off of the rocks that had begun to slide down the mountain with him, cushioned only slightly by the snow and the meager shield he had managed to bring up in an effort to save himself; a shield he lost dashing his head against the mountainside, knocking him senseless.

Daryn's world spun around him, and he tried desperately slow his descent. For several endless seconds he rolled uncontrollably, until his left leg twisted under him and broke with a horrifying snap as his weight pressed down on it. Daryn's thoughts went white with agony, and he suddenly found himself lying atop a pile of rocks at the bottom of the incline he had fallen down.

He focused on the pain pouring from his leg, fighting to remain conscious as his world threatened to collapse into darkness. It was to no avail however, and as the world blackened around him, he thought he saw a shape loom over him and a voice, painfully distant, mutter, "Gods, what have I done?"

Much to Daryn's muddled surprise, he woke up. Still breathing, as far as he knew, even if it did make his chest ache terribly. He must have broken a few ribs during his fall. Everything

hurt, but not as much as he had expected. Slowly, Daryn opened bleary eyes, blinking rapidly as he adjusted to the dim light that flickered from the center of the area he was in.

After a bit more investigation, he discovered that he lay on some soft surface in a large, mostly empty room, lit by a small fire burning in a brazier in the center of the space. He was covered in a blanket of furs that kept him warm. Curious, he carefully removed what covered him and inspected his body.

He looked perfectly fine, aside from being completely naked. He should have been covered in scrapes and bruises, but the only sign that he had fallen down a mountain that remained was a splint on his still broken leg. Apparently whoever had rescued him had seen to his wounds with a bit more than bandages. He sat up slowly and probed his body with gentle fingers. He was sore everywhere, but the only injury he kept from his fall was that of his leg.

Daryn suspected that either he had been unconscious for weeks or he had been healed magically; he assumed the latter. He found it strange that whoever had healed him was able to mend his broken ribs, but his leg was still splinted and obviously in the process of healing.

He sat up, much to the protest of his pounding head and took a closer look at the room around him. It was nearly empty, containing only the high stone bench on which his bedding had been laid, the brazier, which was the room's only source of light and heat, and a table and chair in the corner, shrouded in shadows. The room itself was spacious, seemingly made for someone larger than the average human, with a huge doorway set into one wall, through which poured a shaft of thin white light. The walls appeared to be made of roughly hewn stone, tool marks visible on them where the room had been carved from the surrounding rock.

What nearly immediately caught Daryn's attention, however, was a scent he could smell over the smoke of the fire. Food. At the thought, Daryn realized that he was starving, and sitting on the oversized table, he spied a large bowl, plumes of steam rising from its contents. The only problem was that the table and its chair were so far away, and Daryn wasn't sure he would be able to walk the distance. But that wasn't about to stop him from trying.

He looked down and inspected the splint binding his leg. It was sturdy and well made, and was suitable for what he had in mind. Concentrating, he threaded a small amount of magic through the structure of the splint. He gave a thoughtful hum as he finished.

Experimentally, he placed the foot of his broken leg on the floor and gingerly tested his weight. Wincing at the expected discomfort, he was pleased to find that the splint held, Daryn's spell spreading his weight across the surface of the supporting structure.

Throwing his blanket over his shoulders, Daryn carefully hobbled over to the table in the corner of the room, lowered himself into the waiting chair, and filled his lungs with the scent of the rich, hearty stew that filled the bowl on the table. Daryn also spied a small bundle sitting on the surface. It was the remnants of his clothes, tattered, torn, and covered in blood. Daryn winced; there was a lot of red.

Pushing the thoughts of his near death aside, he pulled the bowl forward and dug in with gusto. It was delicious, and before Daryn knew it, the bowl was sadly empty. He pushed the bowl away and turned his attention to his clothes. They were torn nearly to ribbons from his trip down the mountain, but that was easily mended. After a moment, Daryn's clothes were as good as new.

With a small amount of trouble, Daryn managed to dress himself, which took the edge off of the chill pervading the room despite the fire. With a muttered word, he wrapped a layer of warmer air around himself, shielding himself from the elements. That being done, he moved to the door, intent on finding out where he was.

He stepped out of the room into a larger chamber, roughly circular, with large doors like the one he just stepped through ringing the outside. The room was dimly lit with a pale white light that filtered through one of the doorways. It appeared more finely carved than the room he had woken up in, but was sparsely furnished, containing only an oversized stone table and chair.

Daryn spun in place when he heard something approaching through one of the doors. The light pouring in through the door behind him was blocked for a time as a large figure stepped through, shaking snow off of its shoulders, and Daryn raised his eyebrows in surprise.

Scales the color of polished silver covered her lean, powerful body, growing small and fine toward her extremities. She was tall, easily several feet taller than Daryn himself, with an athletic build that exhibited strength and grace and contrasted with her voluptuous curves. Her wide, feminine hips swayed rhythmically as long, shapely legs carried her deeper into the room towards Daryn. Digitigrade feet ending in ivory clawed toes clicked against the coarse stone floor with each slow step.

A strip of pale white scales began under her chin and ran down her chest and abdomen, continuing along the underside of her long, muscular tail and tapered towards its tip, tinting the creature's underside the color of fresh winter snow. With every footfall, the pale white orbs of her large, perky breasts bounced lightly on her chest, their icy blue nipples tracing arcs through the air as she moved. The light pouring in behind her occasionally was tinted a pale blue as it passed through the translucent membranes of the large, batlike wings that were folded against her back.

Large, intelligent, and surprisingly humanlike eyes glittered a brilliant emerald green as they peered out from a predatory, reptilian visage, some unreadable expression on the creature's face. Her triangular snout was split in what would have been a warm smile, were it not for the dozens of razor sharp teeth that it revealed. A pair of long ivory horns grew from her skull and curved back over her head, accompanied by several smaller pairs that lent her an intimidating silhouette, backlit as she was.

Stopping, the dragoness took in for a moment Daryn's comparatively tiny form standing in the middle of the empty room before, with a speed and strength that made the Archmage flinch backwards, she rushed forward and wrapped both of her powerful arms around Daryn, hauling him off of the ground and crushing him into her chest in a bear hug.

"Daryn you reckless idiot!" she said, her concerned voice deep and melodious, "What were you thinking, blundering around a mountaintop in a blizzard with someone who obviously meant to do no good like that?" She drew back and fixed Daryn with a critical eye, "If I hadn't caught your scent on the wind when I did, I wouldn't have been able to stop the rockslide in time. And then the man you were chasing hit you and I saw you fall... I thought you were dead."

Daryn, his chest constricted painfully by the dragoness's embrace, managed to wheeze, "Thank you, Clara, so much, but I can't breathe."

With a sudden, "Oh!" the dragoness released Daryn, who dropped to the ground and nearly collapsed with a cry when he landed on his broken leg, only Clara's tail whipping around to brace him stopped him from winding up on the cold stone floor.

"Gods, that hurts!" Daryn panted as he clutched the dragoness's scaled tail for support and wobbled on his feet.

"Sorry! I'm so sorry!" Clara gasped, wringing her clawed hands nervously as Daryn righted himself.

Daryn gave her tail a squeeze of assurance and said, "It's all right. I'll be fine. Just give me a second." With the dragoness hovering over him, he hobbled over to the chair and sat down

to inspect his leg. After a quick spell to ensure that there had been no further damage, he sighed in relief.

"Are you okay?" Clara asked, her voice worried, "I have no real talent for healing. Human bodies are so fragile, and you were so broken when I dug you out of the snow that I wasn't sure if I could fix you."

With a warm smile, Daryn nodded. "Yes, you did a marvelous job. Although I am confused somewhat. You healed my ribs, but not my leg. What stopped you?"

The dragoness gave a huff and her tail whipped through the air in agitation. "I'm not sure," she said, frustrated, "For some reason I just couldn't focus on healing your leg. It was like something was stopping me."

Daryn gave a thoughtful hum. "I've never heard of anything like that, but I admit I don't know much about such things. Dragons don't use magic like the lesser races..."

Clara smiled at the Archmage's compliment as Daryn drifted off, lost in thought for a moment. The dragoness was about to ask if anything was wrong when Daryn snapped to reality with a shake of his head. "Right! Sorry about that," he said, "How long was I out?"

"Oh, don't worry. You just blanked out for a few seconds," Clara replied.

Daryn waved his hand. "No, no. I mean when you healed me. How long was I unconscious?"

"Oh, you were asleep for almost a whole day," Clara corrected.

"Damn..." Daryn grunted, "The passes down out of the mountain will be frozen shut for at least a few weeks until they thaw. But I suppose that means he's trapped here too," he gestured at Clara, "And he doesn't have the benefit of such lovely company. You look wonderful, as always, Clara, although I don't remember you being quite so... tall."

Her rich laughter echoed off the walls for a moment and she struck a majestic pose, "A lot can change with enough time," she said with a pleased smile, "but flattery will always take you far with dragons, kind sir." She hopped up to sit on the table, towering over Daryn even further, "Why are you chasing after that man anyway? If you don't mind me asking."

"Well," Daryn took a breath, "He took some unknown magical artifact from the vaults of Castle Southcliff, and I intend to get it back to its proper place. Its caretaker has no idea what it might be capable of." He shook his head disdainfully. "I wish I had been told of its existence before now though, I may have been able to circumvent this whole thing. I hate not knowing; it makes me feel unprepared."

He absentmindedly rubbed the splint on his broken leg, "At least I know he can throw rocks now." He looked up at the dragoness, "What about you? Last time we met was in the mountains far north of here. What brings you this far south?"

Clara let out a heavy sigh, her breath coalescing into a fine white mist that made Daryn feel cold even through his spell. "Let's just say another dragon and I got into a rather heated disagreement." Slowly, she outstretched her left wing, and Daryn gasped at what he saw. The delicate looking membrane had been torn to shreds, long, jagged rents cut into the skin of Clara's wing. Each wound was surrounded with thick, white scar tissue. It looked as if it hadn't finished healing.

Daryn's heart broke at the sight. Clara had had her flight taken from her. "Gods' Blood," the Archmage whispered, "what did he do to you?"

The dragoness brought her wing in front of her and carefully traced the old, white scars. "The cuts were just his claws. But just before I tore his own wings off and threw him off the mountain, he did... something. It stopped me from healing myself. The cuts scarred over and left

these holes that prevent me from catching the wind." Clara's voice grew quiet, "I haven't flown since that day. He had friends that chased me out of my home, and I fled south until I found this place. I've been here for a few years, and I think I'm just getting it to look homey." She lowered her head to look at Daryn, tears glimmering in her eyes, "And then you show up, here of all places. The luck of the Gods, some might say." She smiled slowly. "I'm just glad it was you. I haven't had anyone to talk to in a while."

Daryn could feel his pulse quicken and his brow knit together in sudden anger. "Well that won't do." he said with sudden vehemence. He hopped off of the chair, ignoring the pain the abrupt movement brought on and pointed to the vacant seat, "Switch places with me, I need to get a better look."

Clara looked surprised, but complied without complaint, helping Daryn up onto the table before taking the indicated seat. Daryn motioned and Clara once again extended her wing, which Daryn then took as gently as possible. The Archmage delicately probed at the wounds with his fingers, giving each scarred hole a thorough inspection.

Clara asked Daryn what he was doing, and he answered slowly, his voice distant, "What has been done to you is horrific beyond my imagination and I will not allow it to persist for one more minute. Taking a dragon's ability to fly is like taking someone's ability to think. It is an intrinsic part of your being, and there is no force in the cosmos that will stop me from seeing this made right!" The Archmage's voice grew emotional through his focus, "You are my friend and have already saved my life once. I owe you that much. Now hold still, this might get warm."

The dragoness opened her mouth to protest, but closed it again when Daryn placed his hands on both sides of one of the gaping holes in Clara's wing and closed his eyes, his face knotted in concentration. The Archmage sat motionless, his hands clasped on the wounds and whispered words Clara couldn't quite make out under his breath.

Daryn focused, and reached out with a simple spell to examine the wound in his hands in closer detail, and what he found nearly broke his concentration. A curse had been infused into the scarred flesh surrounding the rent in Clara's wing with such strength that it boggled Daryn's mind. The Archmage had never seen a spell imbued with such hate and rage in his life. It made him feel dirty for coming into contact with it.

He puzzled for a moment how to reverse what had been done. The structure of the spell was unlike anything he had ever seen, and he knew that no dispelling techniques he knew would be capable of unraveling it. Daryn was going to have to get creative. He took a calming breath and felt Clara shift next to him; he didn't come to be the Archmage for nothing.

He focused intently on the very edge of the wound, where the scar tissue just began, and felt the urge to vomit. The spell felt almost alive. It was as if it had sunk hundreds of miniature hooks into the tender skin of the dragoness's wing and clung there like a parasite. Any attempt to heal the wound in the traditional manner would only induce gruesome agony. He felt tears well up behind his eyes, Clara would have felt that when she first tried to heal herself. And then it hit him. Clara would have had no idea as to his capabilities; she trusted him to try to heal her knowing that if he made a mistake she would be reduced to a world of mind-numbing torment for hours. That thought spurred him on. He would not let her down.

The unique structure of the spell gave Daryn an idea. If he could slip a thin barrier of energy between the curse and the wound he would be able to slowly unravel the entire thing. He would just have to do it one barbed hate-spike at a time.

Steadily, he threaded a tiny amount of his own magic along one of the curse-barbs until he had completely encapsulated it in a delicate sheet. Then with agonizing slowness, he pulled,

wary of causing Clara any pain, until the barb had come completely free of the scar tissue, at which point he released the thin thread of magic holding the barb and it evaporated into nothingness.

Clara's wing shuddered in his hand. She could feel it; she could feel that it worked, that he could do it. Daryn's chest filled with excitement, and he went to work, confident that he could do it. Hundreds of barbs were pulled out of the wound, but to Daryn's dismay, each success made the next barb more stubborn, as if the spell was actively fighting him for every step of gained ground. For all Daryn knew it may have been, but he couldn't stop. If he gave up, the resistance might be redistributed, effectively resetting the spell and sinking all those barbs back into Clara's wing. It was all or nothing.

Daryn began to sweat. He could feel exhaustion taking its toll, and each barb drained him even more. His concentration was flagging, but he was not about to let himself pass out. Clara was growing restless and he couldn't blame her, he felt like he had been sitting motionless for years.

He could count the barbs that were left. Twenty, fifteen, ten, five, all the way down to one. Daryn viewed the last barb with a sort of detached awareness. Somewhere far away he sat, still, hunched over the wing of a beautiful dragoness, on the edge of unconsciousness. But here time seemed to stretch on forever; he wondered vaguely if he was dying. He supposed there was nothing for it but to forge onward.

Enveloping the barb was a process that stretched on forever, but eventually he managed it. Daryn felt dizzy. Could he feel dizzy? All he could feel was the filthy, greasy sensation of the curse rubbing against his consciousness. Resolving to finally finish this, he pulled on the barb. It didn't budge. Daryn remembered he would have been disappointed or angry at the lack of progress, but he was numb. He pulled again to no avail. What was he even doing, anyway? He was so tired.

Clara moved under his hands, and he suddenly remembered his purpose. What had been done to the dragoness, his righteous anger, his resolution to help her. It all came rushing back to him. Suddenly energized, he put everything he had into one last yank. With a victorious cry, he felt it give, and as it suddenly pulled free, all resistance vanished.

Daryn snapped back to reality, and his exhaustion crashed into him like a tidal wave. He felt himself pitching backward and heard Clara calling his name. Then darkness overwhelmed him and he lost consciousness. Again.

Daryn woke with a start, bolting into a sitting position from whatever he had been laying on and immediately regretting the decision to move so quickly as his whole body announced its protest. He let out a loud groan as he clutched his head in his hands. It felt as if he had lost a fistfight with a giant. Looking around, he found he was in the bed he had first woken up in. He survived; that was probably a good sign.

There was a scrambling sound from outside the room and Clara came running in, clawed feet tearing gouges in the stone of the floor. With a giddy and uncharacteristic squeal of delight, she effortlessly scooped Daryn off of his bed and spun him around like a child, much to the objection of Daryn's joints.

"You did it!" she cried excitedly, "Daryn, you brilliant, wonderful, genius man, you did it!" She stopped spinning and flashed her wing in front of Daryn's face, showing of a patch of healthy, blue skin where a gaping hole had been earlier.

Blinking his eyes to stop the room from spinning, Daryn croaked groggily, "I told you I would. It just might take me a little longer than I expected to finish the job"

Clara just laughed and pulled Daryn into a gentle hug as she carried him out into the main room. She deposited him in the large chair at the table in front of an equally oversized bowl of the same delicious stew he had eaten earlier. "I figured you would be hungry after all that, so eat up, there's plenty more where that came from, as long as you don't get tired of soup. It's hard to get quality ingredients this far out."

Daryn began eating as she left and returned with another chair from a different room, sitting down across the table from him. "Daryn you've given me more hope for the future than I've had in a long time. It was very undragonlike of me, giving up like I did. I don't know how to thank you for helping me."

Daryn sighed, "Why does everyone think they need to do more than just thank me. I promise, you owe me nothing. I couldn't just stand by and let you suffer. And after getting a good look at that spell, I feel even more justified. I don't yet know how he did what he did, but he hurt you more than I can imagine." He chewed angrily for a few second, then swallowed. "If he's still alive after what you did to him, I'll find him and shove his own horns so far up his ass that he'll choke on them." He paused in consideration, then stated, "If you would excuse my language."

The dragoness just blinked at Daryn for a moment, before breaking out into laughter. For several minutes, deep belly laughs echoed off of the cold stone walls as Clara clutched her slender waist in desperation. Eventually, she managed to regain her self-control and wipe the tears from her eyes. "Yes you would," she said, her voice shaky, "and I'd pay my scales to see it."

She paused, looking thoughtful for a moment, then continued, more seriously. "Daryn, sometimes I-" She stopped abruptly as her breath left her in a quick huff. There was a quiet rustling sound as her scales rippled in a wave that moved slowly down her body, from her face to the tip of her tail. She closed her eyes and squirmed in her seat as the ripple moved through her.

Daryn was about to ask if anything was wrong when her eyes suddenly snapped open and focused on the Archmage's face. "I need to check something." she said rapidly, "I'll be back in a bit." And with that she rose from her seat and rushed out what Daryn understood to be the front door into the cold mountain air. Daryn shrugged and finished eating, then settled in to mentally prepare himself for round two with Clara's curse.

When Clara returned several hours later, Daryn was sitting cross legged on the floor, head bent in concentration. Rousing himself from his meditation, he awkwardly rose to his feet. "Is everything alright?" he asked.

Her tail swishing happily through the air, the dragoness smiled and answered, "Everything is wonderful, Daryn. I just thought I sensed something, that's all. Sorry for running out like that. It turned out to be nothing."

Daryn raised an eyebrow but said nothing. "I was wondering," he mused after a short pause, "would you mind answering a few questions for me? I need to know more about how dragons work with magic. The curse on you isn't like any spell I've ever seen before, and I've seen more than my fair share."

"Well," said Clara as she pulled both of the chairs into the center of the room, taking one and gesturing for Daryn to sit as well, "Draconic magic doesn't work off of spellbooks and formulae like the magic you're used to seeing. Dragons use magic as an extension of our emotions and desires. If we want something badly enough, we have but to focus, and our thoughts take shape in the form we wish."

The Archmage gaped. "But that..." he said incredulously, "that's like brute forcing... How?!" He gestured wildly, trying to find word to articulate his confusion. "You just tell one of the fundamental forces of the universe what you want it to do and it does it? That's so... primal. Show me."

Clara voiced her confusion. "Cast a spell," Daryn reiterated, "work magic so that I can see how you do it." The Archmage paused, and then leaned back in his seat. "I'm sorry, I'm being pushy," he said with a touch of embarrassment, "I just got excited. Please, would you show me? It may help me understand what is afflicting you. Anything simple will do."

Waving Daryn's concerns away with a clawed hand, Clara replied, "Relax, Daryn. I would love to help. I think I can manage something simple for you. Just let me know when you're ready."

Daryn closed his eyes and laid a hand on the cool scales of the dragoness's thigh. Clara's tail flicked at the sudden contact, and when Daryn nodded, she began. She closed her eyes and mentally reached within herself. She brought up her desire to fly again, to help Daryn, her anger at what had been done to her, along with a few other emotions and swirled them together with the freezing cauldron of power that raged within her core. She kept her mind on something simple, a sphere of ice. Ice was always easy for her. With a mental impulse, she pushed the magic through her body and willed it into being, focusing intently on the image of a translucent orb of the purest ice.

She heard Daryn gasp and she opened her eyes. When she saw what floated gently in the air before her, she almost laughed. "Well," said Clara, voice full of mirth, "that's not what I expected, but it worked." She reached out and plucked from the air a crystalline rose, formed entirely of ice. She raised it to her nose and sniffed it jokingly. "Learn anything useful?"

The Archmage could only open and close his mouth for several seconds. "THAT was simple?!" he finally cried, "You created something as complex as a rose in only a few seconds. And out of materials that you also had to create from scratch! That ice wasn't in the room before. You didn't pull moisture out of the air, or conjure it from an elemental plane; you formed it out of nothing, from pure energy!" He waved his hands about uselessly then fell back in his chair, utterly flabbergasted.

Try as he might, Daryn couldn't get a goofy grin off of his face. "That was the most amazing thing I've ever seen," he admitted with a laugh. "What were you trying for?"

Smiling, Clara answered, "Just a ball of ice. I was trying for simple. That's something else you should know. Draconic magic can also tend to have unpredictable results. It appears my subconscious wanted a rose more than a boring circle."

Daryn laughed in agreement, then beckoned at Clara. "Here, let's see that wing again; I'm ready to give it another shot."

Assenting, Clara scooted her chair closer and presented her crippled wing to Daryn who took it in his hands. Daryn closed his eyes and began to mutter to himself under his breath, his hands closed over a wound even larger than the one he had healed earlier in the day. The dragoness sat still and marveled at the tiny human hunched over her wing. So small and fragile, but capable of miracles. She quivered as a tide of emotions rose and fell within her, pride, happiness, excitement. She was anxious to feel the wind in her wings again.

Barely a minute had passed by and Clara began to feel the familiar tingling heat emanating from her wing as Daryn worked his counterspell. Evidently he had learned something useful, because his work seemed to be progressing much faster than it had last time. When the Archmage had first performed his miracle, it had taken a full ten minutes from start to finish.

After only five minutes, Daryn gasped in a deep breath and sat back, his eyes bleary and unfocused, but still conscious and aware. Blinking rapidly, he wiped sweat off of his brow and inspected his work. Where his hands had been was a patch of fresh, icy blue membrane. With a self-satisfied chuckle, he looked up at the dragoness and said, "Good as new. And I stayed conscious this time, which is always a plus."

Daryn reached for her wing again, but Clara drew it back and folded it into place once again. "You're tired," she said, rising off of her chair. "The sun is going down and you need your rest." Daryn tried to protest, but the dragoness stopped him mid-word, "You've done enough for me for one day. We can try more tomorrow."

Sighing and accepting his fate, Daryn stood and bowed deeply to his hostess, lit only dimly by the fading sunlight filtering through the entrance. "By the lady's orders, then." He straightened and flashed the dragoness an amused smile.

Clara returned Daryn's bow with a facetious curtsy, lifting the hem of an imaginary dress. "Daryn, I-" she started, and then froze. Exactly as before, the dragoness's scales rustled and rippled down her body. She shuddered, her tail flicking through the air energetically, and she let out a breath that turned into a thin cloud of white mist. Her eyes refocused on Daryn and she continued, "Good night, Daryn." With that, she walked to the back of the room and through a door slightly larger than the others.

Shaking his head in confusion, Daryn walked back into his makeshift bedroom and spelled a little more life into the embers in the brazier. He settled in for the night, determined to do more tomorrow.

Daryn woke groggily from a deep sleep. He sat up, rubbing the grit from his eyes, and looked around. The outer room was dimly lit with pale sunlight. He must have been more tired than he realized to have slept in so late. He stretched, trying to work the stiffness out of his muscles and stood, moving out into the large central chamber.

As was becoming the norm. A large bowl of the same piping hot stew waited for him. Daryn idly wondered how Clara kept it warm in the freezing cave, but he was too hungry to begin to question his providence.

After he finished, Daryn stood and headed toward the doorway that the light was pouring through. It opened up into a wide passageway that sloped slowly upwards. It was longer than he imagined it would be, and large, flat portions of the walls had been carefully polished to reflect sunlight deeper into the cavern. Eventually, the passage took on a rougher, more natural appearance, and it opened up into the outside world.

The sight of it took his breath away. By the position of the sun, it was mid-morning, and the brilliant disk shone down upon snow-blanketed mountaintops. He could see out for miles and miles from his perch on one of the higher peaks. The mountains shrank as the range reached further south, changing from precipitous peaks to low rolling hills covered in fresh spring green that stretched into the horizon.

It was as majestic a sight as Daryn had ever seen, and for several minutes, the Archmage just reveled in it. Eventually, Daryn's gaze settled on a narrow path leading down the mountain, cut through the fresh snow. The fact that there was a trail leading to a dragon's lair still irked him. The path must have been the one Clara cut when she left and returned to her home. Daryn supposed a short walk wouldn't hurt anything.

He started down the rough path, and took a deep breath, the air was brisk, but there wasn't much wind, so Daryn's thin shell of warmth was enough to keep him comfortable. He

took it slowly, careful not to strain his leg, but the fresh air was wonderful and Daryn felt revitalized.

Daryn continued down the path for a few more minutes. He didn't want to get too far away; the trek back would be more strenuous, especially walking uphill with his hobbled leg. His breath clouded in front of him as he sighed and turned around, and then subsequently got hit in the back with a loose-packed ball of snow. Daryn spun and just managed to catch a glimpse of shining, silver scales disappearing behind a snow drift.

"Very funny, Clara." Daryn called into the snow, "But you should know it's unwise to start a fight with a wizard."

Another snowball hit him, this time in the back of the head, and he heard Clara's amused voice follow it, "Who's starting a fight? Perhaps it's an invitation?"

The Archmage gave a thoughtful hum. "Perhaps I may just accept." He called back. He stood still and slowly spun in a circle, looking for the telltale flash of silver in the midday sun. There, to his left, he saw Clara peek up and whip a snowball at him. Leaning on his good leg, he ducked to the side and dodged the ball of white powder. In the same motion, he reached out to his right, and with a relatively simple spell, hurled the drift from which she had thrown her first snowball through the air, arcing it over to land on the startled dragoness, who let out a yelp of surprise as she was suddenly buried in the frozen fluff.

Daryn couldn't stop himself from laughing as he limped over to the fresh pile of snow and let himself fall into it. He felt the mound shift under him, and Clara's head popped comically from the drift next to him. "That's not fair." she said morosely.

Daryn laughed again and flicked more powder at her. "Says the dragon that fired the first shot." he said, trying unsuccessfully to keep the mirth out of his voice. "I even warned you. That's what you get for attacking a poor cripple on the road."

Letting out a frustrated huff, the dragoness's head submerged into the snow. The was more shifting, and Clara climbed out of the top of the miniature mountains of snow head first and let herself slide on her belly down to Daryn's level. She rested her head on her arms and commented, "The sun is so warm. Soon much of this of this will melt."

The Archmage nodded, "I'm glad that we got to enjoy it while it lasted. It's not often I get to just take walks. Maybe I should get my leg broken more often." He sat up and tried to stand, before stumbling and falling back into the snow. "Okay," he admitted, "maybe just a sprained ankle."

Clara laughed at Daryn's efforts before she gracefully rose to her feet, offering the Archmage her hand, which he accepted gratefully. The dragoness shook the snow off of herself, and Daryn did the same before they both set off back in the direction of Clara's home,

Watching Daryn limp down the trail, Clara couldn't help but say, "I wish I could have done more for you. It frustrates me that something stopped me. Is there anything you can do?"

"Well," Daryn answered, "I could just heal myself, but it would be risky, at least for us lowly human wizards. If done while the patient is conscious, which I would have to be, the process can be quite distracting. Tampering with your own body can go very badly, if even a single tiny mistake is made. While body-shaping, and thus healing, is probably something I do better than anyone else alive, I'd rather not risk it." He nudged Clara's ample hip with his elbow, "Besides, then I'd have to chase some thief all over this mountain instead of spend my time helping you. I certainly know what I would rather do. And he's not going anywhere soon. The passes are still frozen shut, and if he were capable of teleporting, he would have done it before I

started chasing him. Unless he's setting the world's most convoluted trap for me, which I doubt. Although maybe if I-

Shaking her head, Clara gently guided the Archmage down the trail as he lost himself in contemplation, muttering only quietly to himself as he hobbled along. Daryn spouted technicalities that held no significance to Clara; he talked about fluxes and ley lines, rituals and incantations, which, if the dragoness were capable of understanding, she was sure would be of great interest. Instead, she just listened and enjoyed the warmth of his tiny hand in hers.

It was midafternoon by the time they reached Clara's home, and Daryn looked worse for the wear. "Perhaps I walked a bit more than I should have," he conceded to himself as he sat heavily in his seat. Clara mentioned something about food, but Daryn waved her to a stop, saying, "Don't worry about it, lunch is on me today."

Clara looked at him skeptically, "I thought you said conjuring something out of nothing is nearly impossible."

Giving his knuckles an exaggerated crack, Daryn said, "Who said I was going to pull something from nothing? There's enough material in the air and stone around us, if you can collect enough and reorganize it properly. It just takes finesse, which I have." He outstretched his arms toward the table and gave the dragoness a wink.

There was a loud rushing sound as the air in the room started to pull together, coalescing slowly in a thick cloud over the table that swirled and condensed. With a loud pop, the cloud dispersed, leaving behind a large slab of steaming beef roast on a platter formed out of the stone of the table. Daryn clapped his hands together, "Just like Mom used to make!"

Clara tilted her head to the side, "You are a shameless showoff. You know that, right?"

Flashing the dragoness his teeth, Daryn replied, "Only for friends. For everyone else, I'm a grumpy hermit who will tear the skin from your bones as soon as look at you, who delves into ancient secrets capable of ripping the world apart, who glares down at the filth of humanity from atop his shining throne and passes judgment down from on high." He snorted as he cut himself a slice of beef.

Blinking at the Archmage's sudden somber tone, the dragoness asked, "Well, are you any of those things?"

"More or less, I suppose," Daryn said, his face cracking in its familiar smile, "But that's definitely not all I am."

"Yes, I think you're also an absolutely incorrigible showoff." She placed a slice of roast in her mouth, and her face lit up, "This... this is delicious. How...?" She forwent further speech to continue eating.

Daryn smirked, "I'm not much of a chef. But magic? That I can do."

The next few minutes passed in relative silence, as nearly the entire roast, save for a small portion Daryn laid claim to, passed between Clara's ivory teeth. A long, tapering, blue tongue snaked out of her mouth to lick the juice off of her fingers with exaggerated care. "That," she said, patting the scales of her toned stomach, "was divine. I don't think I could remake that taste no matter how much I wanted it."

"Speaking of things you want," said Daryn with a gesture, "get over here, I've got a date with your wing, and she's late."

Clara sighed and dragged her chair over to where Daryn was sitting. "Do you two need some alone time? Or can I keep tagging along?"

"You'd have to ask her." Daryn answered, "She wears the pants in our relationship." He closed his fingers over a ragged hole in Clara's wing and whispered conspiratorially, "Between you and me, sometimes I think she just likes me for my hands."

The dragoness gave a disbelieving huff and swatted Daryn's side with her tail. "I don't know about that. I can think of a few more qualities that might attract a lovely young lady."

Closing his eyes, the Archmage grunted, "And what would those be, pray tell?"

Clara felt the wing under Daryn's hands tingle gently and grow warm as she answered, "If I told you that, the women of the world would tremble at your absolute power. It's best that I not."

Unable to get a silly grin off of his face, Daryn tried his best to sound disappointed, "I think absolute power would be great. You're just no fun."

"In my experience, life too rarely is." the dragoness said morosely.

Daryn just chuckled as a soft golden light spread from his fingertips across the surface of the dragoness's wing. He practically bubbled over with laughter as the light completely enveloped Clara's wing, surrounding each of the ragged holes in the membrane. The Archmage's laughter slowly subsided into uncharacteristic giggles and Clara's jaw dropped in shock at what she saw start to happen.

Almost leisurely, the warm golden light crept inward, washing over the scars ringed the wounds. Where the radiance touched the rough, white scar tissue, it rippled and changed, taking the form of fresh, pale blue skin. And like this, bit by bit, the wounds that had left the dragoness crippled for years gradually disappeared.

As the radiance dimmed, Daryn opened his eyes and looked up at the speechless dragoness. He beamed a smile of true happiness as he said earnestly, "Then in my experience, my lovely dragon, you've been doing it wrong."

With trembling fingers, Clara gently took her healed wing in her hands, roving over the flexible membrane. Daryn chuckled again at her reaction, "Also, before I force feed the monster that did that to you his own tail, I'll be sure to tell him he's a talentless lizard when it comes to spellcraft, good for nothing but brute force."

Clara could only sit there and practically fondle her new wing with trembling hands. She released a shaky breath. "H- how." said the dragoness in an ardent whisper. "I... Is it... C-can I..." She blinked at the sudden tears in her eyes.

"Yep," said Daryn casually, "You should be all set. Now go, you've been grounded long enough. I'll just- Hey! W-wait!" The Archmage's breath left him in a rush as Clara's powerful arms wrapped around him and dragged him off the ground. The dragoness carried Daryn like a child as she sprinted out of the chamber, up and into the cold evening air.

Instead of taking the trail down the mountain, the dragoness ran straight out, bounding lightly through the snow. Daryn's breath caught in his throat as the two rapidly approached a precipitous drop-off. He squirmed, and Clara only took a few seconds to adjust her grip, resting the Archmage's arms in the crooks of her elbows, before she leaped high out into the open air.

Instead of opening her wings and catching the wind, Clara tucked her arms in, holding Daryn against her breasts, and dove downward like a falling arrow. Daryn wanted to scream as the rocks a thousand feet below rapidly approached, but his throat was occupied by his hammering heart. The wind roared in his ears, and he felt more than heard Clara's joyous laughter rumbling through her chest.

Faster and faster the pair fell, until, when the rocks were only a few hundred feet from them, Clara spread her wings wide, the rushing air filling the membranes with a thunderous

boom. Clara's frightful downward velocity abruptly leveled out, and the two rocketed out into the evening sky.

The setting sun tinted the sky brilliant yellows and oranges as it faded to the black of night. Now that he was no longer falling to his death, Daryn could appreciate the magnificence of the landscape. Flapping her wings rhythmically, Clara carried both of them higher into the air. The light reflecting off of the dragoness's scales threw sparkling motes of light over the snow-capped peaks as they passed them by.

Daryn idly kicked his legs through the air as he dangled from Clara's arms and gazed out at his surroundings. They flew on in a gentle arc around the mountain Clara had claimed as her own until sun had sunk well below the horizon, familiar constellations peeking at the two from behind patchy clouds. Despite the wind billowing through his coat, Daryn's exhaustion, coupled with the cadence of the dragoness's wing beats, threatened to draw him off to sleep, and the Archmage began to sag in Clara's arms.

They were on the ground before he knew it. He barely felt Clara land lightly and carry him back into the cavern. He shifted groggily as Clara cradled him in her arms. He looked up blearily into the Dragoness's eyes, emeralds that seemed to glimmer faintly even in the dark, and mumbled, "You're going to give me a complex at this rate, carrying me everywhere. I've still got one good leg, you know."

The dragoness gently lowered Daryn into his bed, much to his feeble protest. "And I still had one good wing," whispered Clara as she nuzzled her nose into Daryn's cheek, "Yet I would have never flown again without your help. Thank you." Daryn simply grunted something unintelligible in the affirmative and almost immediately started snoring loudly.

Daryn nearly flew out of his bed when he felt something strange wash over him, a faint, pins and needles feeling that jarred him awake. He sat up quickly, his head cocked at an angle, trying to sense something in the dark. It was still night, then. The Archmage could faintly feel something unfamiliar pressing up against his senses. Almost as if on cue, whatever it was pulsed, sending the strange sensation flickering through his body. Daryn stood up abruptly. "That's odd," he muttered to himself. He certainly hadn't meant to stand.

He carefully stepped out of his room, and the feeling grew stronger. Daryn gave a start when he recognized what it was. It had to be the most subtle and complex impulse spell he had ever seen. He had taken several steps into the room before he knew what had happened. The Archmage heard quiet sounds emanating from what he knew to be Clara's room.

Releasing his self-control, Daryn's legs took a few awkward steps toward the noises. At least he knew where someone wanted him to be, but he slowed down and approached cautiously to be on the safe side. He stepped slowly through Clara's door and into the wide hallway it opened into. Around a bend in the corridor, Daryn saw a faint blue glimmer shining on the walls, and he approached it at full alert, noting that the further he went, the temperature seemed to plummet.

Eventually, the Archmage could make out words. Clara seemed to be begging to someone, her voice soft and urgent. "No, no, no... Please... not like this." she pleaded quietly, "Please yes, but not like this!"

When Daryn carefully turned the corner, the gentle urging in his thoughts turned into a jagged spike that impaled itself into his mind. The Archmage reeled, clutching his head with one hand while he leaned heavily on the wall with the other. Further! Inward! Move! It demanded. It

took everything Daryn had to remain motionless, and he cracked an eye open to see what he had gotten himself into.

The circular room was carved more smoothly than the other's Daryn had seen, and the space was tinted blue by the pale sphere of light that hung weightlessly in the center of the room. Dominating the center of the chamber, a broad, shallow depression had been carved into the floor and lined with the same thick furs that Daryn had been sleeping on for the last several days. What he saw in the large, oddly shaped bed shook his concentration enough for him to take a shaky step forward.

Lying supine atop the furs was Clara, showing for the first time any signs of modesty. One arm was pressed against her bountiful bust, hiding her nipples from view, while the other had snaked downward between her muscular thighs, leaving her hand pressed over her crotch. Her tail whipped anxiously through the air as her eyes locked onto Daryn's own. The Archmage couldn't help but think that the dragoness looked... different, somehow. But he couldn't place it, mentally attacked as he was.

"Daryn! Daryn, I'm so sorry! Please forgive me. I didn't mean for it to happen like this. I... I just lost control. I tried so hard to stop it." Clara writhed speechlessly on her bed for a few seconds before she regained her control. "Please, Daryn... Please fight it. I don't want to do this to you, but I can't control it anymore!"

The Archmage struggled to make sense out of what was happening. "Clara, listen to me." Daryn said as calmly as he could, in contrast with Clara's frantic imploring. "I'll do whatever I can to help you, but please stop whatever you're doing. It... I-it... hurts." Daryn threw everything he could at the impulse spike lodged in his mind to no avail. He just stood and shook like a leaf, fighting for control over his body.

Clara screamed at him to stop thinking about others for once and to save himself, but she suddenly stopped mid word and shuddered, a moan escaping her throat, a cloud of freezing mist coming with it. Daryn was taken aback when he realized what was different about the dragoness.

It was Clara's eyes. Normally round pupils had narrowed into predatory reptilian slits ringed by her vibrant emerald irises. The dragoness shook again and the shocked Archmage took another step into the room from what he saw. Clara bit back a gasp of pleasure as her breasts abruptly swelled larger, pushing her arm away from her body. Additionally, Daryn could have sworn her hips flared wider than they had previously.

The dragoness panted her breathing heavy as she spoke once more, "Ungh! Daryn... I can't-Ah! I can't stop it! Please... break the spell and-Nnngh... run! You have to get out before I-Ahnngh... before I... lose myself." Another wave of growth passed through her, and her voice grew more frantic, "Please, Daryn. Please."

Daryn searched frantically for a weakness in the spell that he could exploit, even the tiniest hiccup in its construction could let him unravel it. "I need time, Clara. Just relax. I know you didn't mean to do this. I can cut the spell, but it would send the feedback into your mind, and I will not hurt you like that. Just give me time to work it out."

Clara snarled in defiance. "Stop being so damned understanding you beautiful, wonderful idiot!" Her body tensed as her back arched involuntarily off her bed and a new transformation began to take place. Starting at the base of her skull and rippling in a wave down her spine, a row of thin, flexible spines sprouted and lengthened. They rapidly reached their full length, longest between her wings and dwindling in height toward the end of her tail. Springing from her back along with the spines came a thin, icy blue webbing that stretched itself between the new struts, leaving her with a rippling blue sail running down her back.

Simultaneously, a pair of fins, similar in appearance to her new sail, grew in beneath her horns, behind her jaw. Muscles attached to the struts flexed, causing the fins to flutter through the air, mimicking two tiny, diaphanous wings. "Daryn," she moaned, "I'm losing it! Just cut the spell, I've been hurt before!"

Shaking his head, Daryn somehow found the focus required to speak, "Not by me," growled the Archmage quietly, voice laced with strain, "Not ever by me."

Both hands now dipped between Clara's legs, leaving her puffy, engorged nipples exposed to the room's frigid air. "Gods damn you, Daryn!" the dragoness practically screeched, "Somehow you manage to tell me exactly what I want to hear at the WORST FUCKING TIME POSSIBLE! GAAAAH!" With a final scream that devolved into a primal roar, Clara stretched to her full length, and with one last mighty surge of growth, her whole body pulsed larger, gaining nearly a foot of height in a heartbeat.

Panting, Clara slowly shifted, taloned feet pushing her back until she was reclining against the lip of the shallow bowl she lay in. Her eyes glittered hungrily in the dim light and Daryn knew that his time had run out; it was now or never. The dragoness beckoned to the wizard with a single finger and the pressure against his consciousness doubled.

Her tail flicked lazily through the air, patient for what she knew was to come. She idly ran a hand down the length of her body, pausing to heft a single breast, massaging the nipple longingly. She ached to be touched, caressed, lusted after. The dull fire burning in her loins demanded attention, and there he was, her savior, to fulfill her every desire.

Daryn stood and shook for a few seconds more, his face screwed up in concentration, muscles tense. The dragoness frowned, thinking for a moment that she would have to go to him, but then he twitched violently, letting out a pent up breath in a sharp wheeze. Without ceremony, he slowly limped forward, his usual smile now nothing more than an emotionless line, bright eyes staring blankly ahead.

Smiling back, the dragoness made a mental note to be gentle with the injured human. There would be time for everything later; she had the rest of her life, after all. She could go slowly this once, for his sake. The wizard shed his coat, leaving it on the floor as he descended into the bed. Clara heard him say something under his breath, and felt a shield of warmth spring into being around him. Good, he would need it.

Crawling slowly up to the dragoness, who was now almost twice as tall as he, the wizard pulled himself to lie alongside her body. Touching her arm gingerly, he seemed to hesitate, as if unsure what to do. Rolling slightly to the side to free her tail from underneath her, she slid its length underneath him and gently lifted, returning to her back as she deposited him lightly on her chest.

Seeming to finally find his footing, he straddled her torso and leaned forward, squishing the dragoness's breasts between them. Forcing herself to remain patient, she let the human move slowly atop her, his warm body pressed against hers. The wizard paused with his head hovering next to the dragoness's frilled visage and fixed her with his cool blue eyes, his expression distant and unreadable. He held that position for a few moments before he lowered himself further, brushing his lips tenderly against the scales of the dragoness's neck.

Delicately, and with agonizing slowness, the human atop her trailed a line of kisses down the contour of her throat and onto her chest. She moaned softly as he ran his hands along the smooth surface of her sensitive breasts and without warning she felt the wizard's breath hot on her erect nipple. Teasingly, he worked his mouth around the sensitive bud, brushing up against it only fleetingly.

The dragoness panted ardently and quivered under the human's ministrations. She wanted so passionately for him to cease teasing her as he was, but another part of her could feel what he was doing to her. The fires of desire raging within her were steadily building in intensity, fueled by the wizard's graceful hands on her trembling body.

He tenderly kneaded the pliant flesh of the dragoness's other breast as he took the plump nub into his mouth. The creature beneath him gasped as he swirled his tongue around her cool flesh. He applied gentle suction, and the dragoness arched her back as the bud in his mouth swelled and stiffened ever further. Carefully, he nibbled gently on the tender nub, pinching it between his teeth as he simultaneously ravaged the dragoness's other nipple in with his fingers.

Pulling his head away, he let the nipple fall out of his mouth with a soft pop. The dragoness watched him with curiosity as he took her hands in his. She let herself be guided, and the wizard laid her hands on her breasts. "Sorry," said the human impassively, jarring the silence, "I'm not tall enough."

The dragoness understood what he meant when he slid over the trim muscles of her abdomen, lifting his legs over her own so that he ended up straddling only her tail. The human's arms weren't long enough to allow him to attend to her chest as well as, to the dragoness's delight, what else he seemed intent on doing with his mouth.

Doing as the wizard indicated, she let her hands play lazily over the surface of her breast, working the remnants of the human's saliva into her scales. Her throbbing body demanded that she jump the weak human atop her, that she hold him down and ravish him. She pushed the thoughts aside, reminding herself that he was special, and there would be time for that later.

Seemingly unaware that his fate hinged on the debate raging through the scaled body beneath him, the wizard continued his work. With dexterous fingers, he traced the smooth lines of the dragoness's muscles. As his hands gently roamed seemingly randomly over her thighs, hips, and midsection, the wizard's fingers drew inexorably closer to the dragoness's crotch.

The dragoness felt her heart quicken its tempo and her breathing grow shallower. She tweaked her nipples in anticipation as the human slid strong, warm, hands over her body. She felt a needy growl bubble up from her chest. He was so close; soon, she would be his, and he, hers.

Noticing the wizard's hands slowing, she focused on him as he leaned over, carefully inspecting a barely imperceptible irregularity in the pattern of the fine white scales between her legs. The dragoness quivered anxiously as she felt the human lay his small hands on either side of her hidden slit. She sucked in short, shallow breaths as the wizard lowered his head toward his hands. When the human between her legs laid a tender kiss directly on her slit, she crushed her breasts in her hands as her muscles clenched powerfully. A scream of pleasure was choked off to a rough grunt as she felt her body begin to open itself to the warm form that straddled her.

The wizard drew his head back, absentmindedly steadying himself so that the tail writhing beneath him wouldn't throw him off, and watched the result of his handiwork. With rhythmic pulsations mirroring the dragoness's hammering heart, the edges of the nearly invisible slit were slowly forced apart by a spreading pair of fleshy, ice blue lips that gradually parted to reveal the entrance to the dragoness's silky passage and engorged clitoris.

Experimentally, the wizard dipped a single finger down to tease at the throbbing hole. Even he gave a start when he felt how bone-chillingly cold it was. He jerked his hand back, trailing a thin streamer of lubricant, fluid so cold it left tiny whiffs of mist as it moved through the already frigid air. He stared at his hand and approached the situation as he would any obstacle. He tested the consistency of the fluid between his fingers.

After only a few seconds of thought and a whispered spell, the wizard hurriedly rolled up the sleeves of his shirt and began to smear the slick fluid over his hands and arms. The tiny amount he had on his fingers seeming to effortlessly spread to coat both of his arms halfway up their biceps in a glistening coat of armor against the cold. Taking care to likewise shield his face, he then licked a small amount of the slime off of his finger and worked it around in his mouth. Only then did he bend over the dragoness and started in earnest.

Lowering his face back down, he closed his eyes and slid the still swelling bud of the dragoness's clitoris into his mouth, eliciting an ardent moan from her as he massaged the turgid organ with his tongue. Simultaneously he slid the first two fingers of his hand into the dragoness. Her muscular walls rippled and contracted around the intruders, first crushingly tight, then open and inviting.

The dragoness released a shaky breath as the wizard began to pump his fingers slowly in and out of her, lips still latched onto her clit. Finally he was getting into it, but the impatient dragoness had had as much foreplay as she could tolerate in her current state. She lifted her tail, using it to gently prod the human in his back, urging him onward.

Without acknowledging her, the wizard abruptly slipped another two fingers in to join the pair he already had inside of her, and the dragoness almost screamed. Instead she just rumbled deep in her chest and prodded him again, more urgently. His tongue where it was sent lightning bolts of pleasure down her spine, but she wanted to be filled.

Perhaps finally catching on, the human pulled his fingers out of the dragoness, then, wrapping his arm around the dragoness's hips for leverage, he balled his hand into a fist and prodded at her entrance. The dragoness growled in pleasure, and now using the side of her tail, rather than the tip, she pushed the wizard bodily forward.

Using the force from the dragoness's tail, the wizard gradually stretched the walls of the waiting tunnel around his balled hand and eased his arm inside of her, also pressing his face more firmly into her crotch and redoubling his oral assault on her delicate bud.

Sucking in a deep breath through clenched teeth, the dragoness's eyes rolled back in her head as the wizard sank more and more of his arm into her depths. She let the air out in a long hiss as the human stopped when his elbow met her crotch and started to pull slowly back out. She bucked her hips involuntarily as he withdrew, drawing a long, lewd moan out of herself as her clit bounced out of his mouth and scraped against his face.

Cocking his head at an angle, he caught her back in his mouth and unceremoniously rammed his arm back inside her. She thrashed under him, nearly knocking him off balance, but he clung tenaciously to her and began to piston his arm in and out of her, slowly at first, but rapidly picking up the pace. The dragoness writhed jerkily on the furs under her, but she managed to find the control within her to reach an arm down to press his face urgently into her crotch as she braced him against a thick portion of her tail, the rest of the flexible appendage whipping uncontrollably through the air as she raced toward her climax.

She could feel it as her orgasm approached. The tightness that built in her muscles, the tingling along the delicate webbing that ran down her spine, the erratic way her vaginal walls clamped down on the wizard's arm as he thrust it in and out of her, it all screamed at her to let go, to lose herself in her passion. It all surged up within her, reaching a towering crest with her standing proudly at the top...

And she jumped.

Powerful muscles clamped down on the wizard's arm, holding it within her as they attempted to milk it with rippling contractions. The frigid, torrential power that was her draconic

birthright welled up within her, filling her with its overwhelming strength, and her muscles locked themselves, her toes curling inward as the energy exploded against the inside of her scales.

The terrible potential that laid within the energy roiled tumultuously, filling her chest with its intensity as she sucked in a tremendous breath, before releasing it in a roar so primal and unyielding that it peeled flakes of stone from the walls of the chamber. A massive plume of dense white mist shot from her throat, slamming into the ceiling with unbelievable force and reflecting off, filling the room with glacial fog.

Clara's breasts heaved as she gulped huge amounts of air, desperate to catch her breath as the haze slowly dispersed. The soft blue glow that illuminated the room was now scintillated and scattered through the hundreds of tiny icicles that now hung from the ceiling. After a few minutes, she shuddered and nearly screamed when Daryn gave a muffled groan and slowly pulled his arm out of the dragoness with a wet squelch.

Suddenly, reality crashed into her and she sat up with a start, looking down at the Archmage. A shiver ran down her spine as, with a painless popping noise, her fins and the sail running down her back withdrew back into her body and she began to shrink down to her previous proportions.

Daryn shakily pushed himself upright, a hand on his head, his face set into a grimace of pain. Bleary eyes blinked rapidly, and for the first time since he entered the room, his eyes truly focused on her, a look of exhaustion plastered on his face.

Clara's world threatened to fall apart. "Daryn, please listen." she begged him quietly, "It wasn't supposed to happen like that. I didn't mean to... Daryn? Daryn!" She gave a wordless cry as the Archmage's balance faltered and his eyes slipped closed as he collapsed sideways onto Clara's bed.

Scrambling to his side, Clara cradled Daryn in her arms. It looked as though he had just collapsed from sheer exhaustion, much as he had when he first attempted to fix her wing. She let out a more relaxed sigh, nearly choking on it when she remembered what she had done to him. She laid him gently on the bed, covering him in enough furs to keep him warm and hurried out of the room.

"You know," Daryn mumbled to himself as he stirred slowly, "If I keep waking up like this, I'm going to stop sleeping." His whole body ached, his leg throbbed dully, and his arm felt like it had been trapped between a hammer and anvil. He sat up, much to the protest of his sore muscles, identifying his surroundings as Clara's bedroom.

Getting awkwardly to his feet, he stretched, trying to work his abused body into usable condition. With a muttered spell, he cleaned himself of the leavings of last night's activities; he wanted to look presentable for the conversation to come. He stepped out of the shallow depression and stooped to pick up his coat before slipping it on and heading out of the room.

"Clara!" he called, his voice echoing off the bare stone walls, "Clara, listen. It's alright, I-what's this?" Carved into the surface of the table in the main chamber was a string of words.

"I took away your choice." The carving said, "Please find it in your heart to forgive me, for I never can."

Daryn let out a dejected sigh. "Gods damnit." he said, his voice full of exasperation, "Why does everyone always blame themselves?" He hurried out to the entrance to the cavern, looking out over the landscape. He noted that it was nearly noon, the sun peering down out of a cloudless blue sky.

"Okay, the time for playing around is over." Daryn said out into the snow. The Archmage sounded almost bored as he recited a complex spell, sighing with satisfaction when his incantation was complete. He idly reached down and loosened the splint around his leg, shaking it off of his healed limb. Straightening his coat on his shoulders, he stepped boldly out into the snow.

If Clara was in the air, he had no hope of finding her, so he kept an eye out, relying more on the dark grey fabric of his longcoat to attract the dragoness's attention from afar. He continued on for nearly two hours when he abruptly stopped, sensing something amiss. He turned off the route he had planned and started in the direction of the source of the odd feeling.

He approached an area where several large boulders, Many larger than he was, had fallen from higher up the mountain and were standing in random piles. His senses suddenly screamed at him, and he dove to the side, just as something blew a chunk the size of his head from the stone he had been standing next to.

His dive and subsequent roll into a crouch threw him into the open, and he peered into a small cluster of the massive stones, shocked at what he saw. Standing in the center of the space, looking angry and much worse for the wear, was the thief he had chased up the mountain in the first place. And behind him, seemingly bound to the largest of the stones in a method Daryn couldn't make out, was Clara, her eyes filled with worry.

The Archmage focused on the thief. "About time I found you." he said, his tone patronizing, "How about instead of drawing this out, you just return what you stole and walk away, hmm? I'm not really in the mood for any shenanigans."

The thief sneered at Daryn, "And why would I do that, I'm holding all the cards, here. How about you walk away, back to whatever cozy hole you crawled out of. And I'll take this," he brandished a short, plain, metal rod at the Archmage, "And the lizard here to sell. Dragon blood is worth its weight in gold."

Daryn grew serious, "What you're holding is a worthless hunk of metal, if you lack the knowledge to use it. A rod of reflection can be a useful tool, but there are ways to circumvent it. And the dragon happens to be very important to me. If you call her a lizard again I'm going to feed you your own intestines."

The thief chuckled, "Aw, someone worried I'll get in the way of some hot lizard action?"

Hot anger flashed to life in Daryn's chest, and he threw a spell specifically made to be able to sneak past the wards surrounding a rod of reflection... and blinked in surprise when his spell vanished when it reached its target, to no visible effect. "Wh-what?" said the Archmage incredulously.

With a harsh laugh, the thief spoke again, "Idiot. This isn't just any rod of reflection; it's THE Rod of Reflection, the first one ever made, and by far the most powerful. You've just given it exactly what it needed; I drained it binding the lizard. Now, you talk too much, let's shut you up."

Daryn paused, suddenly understanding what he had to do. He nodded, acceding the point to the thief. "Perhaps I do talk more than I should." He glanced over to Clara, who struggled in vain against her bonds. It appeared that thick bands of stone had been wrapped around her wrists and ankles, holding her to the massive boulder. "But sometimes talking can give you time to make a choice."

The thief paused for a moment, "Sorry, I don't see your point. My mind is already made up."

"My point," Daryn said, casting a knowing look at the trapped dragoness, who looked at him in confusion, "is that my choice couldn't have been taken away from me, because I had already chosen."

Clara's head snapped up, relief in her eyes, then a look of understanding washed over her features, and she quickly shook her head, practically begging Daryn not to do what he had planned.

The thief pointed the rod at the Archmage, its tip glowing a dull, sickly green. "And what choice would that be?"

Daryn smiled at Clara, then readied himself for what he knew would come. "The easiest choice I've ever made." said the Archmage casually, "I chose her!"

With a carefully worded shout, Daryn dove once more to the side, casting two spells simultaneously. One, a shield, interposed between himself and the thief, the other, a razor sharp whip of force that lashed out, cutting easily into the stone that bound one of Clara's hands, freeing it. The thief gave a wordless cry as a gleaming bolt of sickly green energy shot from the tip of the rod and hurtled toward Daryn.

The shield he had put into place saved him from an immediate, gruesome death, but as the bolt struck his shield, the force of it rocked into him, throwing the Archmage backward into a boulder with bone-crushing force. Daryn felt bones and tissue give way as his body crumpled to the ground in a ragged heap. He vaguely heard Clara screaming his name.

The thief stepped forward, looming over the Archmage's broken body. "Some choice." he said with disdain.

Daryn had felt pain before, many times, and it was the mysterious lack of pain that scared him. Everything seemed distant, and his body was sluggish to respond, every ragged breath came with agonizing slowness. But still he managed to find the energy to speak. "You blind idiot." he said, blood running from his mouth and nose, "You... know nothing."

The thief stared at Daryn incredulously, "And still you talk. Well, since time's running out for you, why don't you educate me?"

"Gladly." Daryn coughed a thick glob of blood out of his throat. "You see, I've learned a thing or two about dragons over the past few days. They are creatures of unimaginable power, but power they can only call up through the intensity of their emotions and desires. To an extent, their bodies are also morphic to this energy they can summon, but only in the most remarkable of circumstances."

"Fascinating, but once again, I don't see your point."

"I know," chuckled Daryn through the blood that kept trying to fill his throat. "But I've already called you an idiot, so there's no use reiterating." A loud cracking sound echoed off the rocks around them. "Let me just leave you with this thought, if your mind can grasp it. Last night I had to deal with an incredibly horny dragon who wanted nothing more than for me to sleep with her, and I was unconscious for who knows how long afterward. You get one who wants to tear you to bloody ribbons and who happens to be very, very, EXTREMELY upset with you right now. Have fun."

A second crack filled the clearing, and the thief spun around to see Clara, teeth clenched in rage, stepping away from the remains of her prison. He tried to take a step forward, but Daryn had managed to wrap his hand around the thief's ankle, and he stumbled and fell face first into the snow. A laugh bubbled up from Daryn through the fluid gradually filling his lungs, earning him a kick to the head from the thief as he regained his feet.

At the kick, Clara snapped, bellowing a bestial roar that vibrated the ground underfoot, and began to change. Like the night before, it started with her eyes, as her pupils pinched inward, narrowing to bloodthirsty slits. She hissed out a breath through clenched teeth and took a staggering step forward, and even Daryn could see the changes take place.

With slow, throbbing pulsations, the dragoness's slender, lithe frame thickened with muscle. Her body shuddered, her thickening tail lashing through the air as she took another step forward. With a loud, wet, popping sound, she grunted as she grew taller, her now muscular shoulders stretching wider to support the deepening slabs of muscle that spread over her body. Thick veins pushed themselves to the surface of her skin, pulsing visibly under the dragoness's shining silver scales as they fed her growth.

Tendons popped loudly when the dragoness flexed her muscles as they swelled larger, bulging and rippling as they moved. She took another step forward, new bulk shaking the ground with her heavy footfall. A growl rumbled low in her chest and she winced briefly in discomfort as several additional inches of horn pushed themselves from her skull.

As if starting a chain reaction, the rest of her horns likewise cracked and lengthened. Then, similar to the night before, starting at the base of her skull and flowing down to the end of her tail, a series of bony growths forced themselves out of her body. However, these growths were not flexible and whip-thin, they were thick and viciously sharp, pointed and downward curving, with fine serrations on their outside edge.

As the scythe-like spikes grew from her back, her thick, heavily muscled tail twitched, and from its tip grew two long, crescent shaped blades, one from each side, that whistled as they cut the air. The already intimidating ivory claws that tipped her fingers and toes changed shape, growing longer, thicker, and curving further in toward her palms.

Edging to the side, the thief took a nervous step backwards as the dragoness still growing body gradually filled the once spacious open area, showing no signs of slowing. Her eyes narrowed as they followed him, tracking him as he moved slowly across the open ground. Clara's once delicate features shifted, becoming hard and feral as her teeth showed in an angry snarl.

The dragoness suddenly stopped her advance as her growth paused. Nostrils flaring, Clara flexed her robust musculature as if straining against the confines of a set of unseen restraints. With a series of guttural grunts and a loud, meaty popping, the dragoness snorted as her muscles bulged mightily and her body gave one last massive surge of growth.

She shifted her wickedly taloned feet as her stance widened and her bladed tail whipped through the air as it reached its final length. Her body had nearly doubled in only a few seconds. Stretching her wings out above her, their huge wingspan shrouded everything in soft blue shadow as she raised her hands triumphantly over her head and bellowed to the open skies above.

Mistaking the dragoness's open stance for either weakness or distraction, the thief raised the rod in his hand, pointing the glowing green tip at her and fired a bolt similar to the one that had smashed the Archmage. The sickly green orbs of energy streaked across the open space and impacted against the dragoness's torso.

The forceful impact would have shattered any of the boulders in the dell and as the spell crashed harshly into the hard-packed muscles of Clara's abs, she was knocked back a step. Almost casually she looked down at where the energy had come into contact with her. Then seeming to remember what had transpired, her head snapped back up, her eyes locked on the frail form of the thief standing in the snow only a few long strides away.

The nearly mindless rage that had inundated her core crystallized and filled her lungs as she drew in a deep breath, focusing all of her anger on he who had brought such harm to the Archmage. With a hollow boom like a crack of thunder, a tight, narrow beam of translucent, pale blue energy fired out of her throat and hurtled toward the thief with blinding speed.

Barely fast enough, the thief managed to shield himself from the worst of the Clara's frigid attack, staggering back a step as the beam of angry blue energy reflected wildly off of a glimmering plane in front of the thief. Where the energy struck, thick sheets of ice sprang into existence as the beam flash froze the water out of the air. One of the reflected rays glanced off the shield and swiped over a boulder, which immediately cracked and split from the sudden drastic temperature change.

But harming the thief would have only been a pleasant side effect of her attack. Utilizing the thief's temporary distraction, she swept her wings backwards and leapt forward, propelling herself toward the thief with frightening speed. As she came up on him, the thief had time only to raise his eyes briefly in surprise as Clara's razor sharp claws opened four thick rents in the flesh of his chest. A scream of agony began to bubble up through his throat, but it didn't make it out before Clara wrapped her hand around the thief's torso, crushing the air out of him in a ragged wheeze.

The dragoness hauled the thief easily off the ground in one arm. Every time the thief tried to draw in a pained breath she squeezed her fingers together, taking pleasure from the sound of his ribs cracking under her clawed digits. Having dropped the rod in the snow when he was first struck, the thief just pried desperately at the hand holding him, unable to even beg for his life.

The thought that such a pathetic creature would dare to have the audacity to harm Daryn further fueled the blizzard of rage that roared within her. She struggled to stop herself from just crushing the thief into the worthless wad of flesh that he was. Instead, she wrapped her fingers around the thief's arm, relishing his weak struggles before she squeezed her fingers together with all her savage strength, powdering the thief's bones as his arm gave way under her hand, her other making sure he didn't get the air he needed to scream in him.

She gave the same treatment to the thief's other arm and both of his legs. That done, she let the hand holding him slide closed until she felt the thief's ribs snapping like twigs. Ensuring that he was satisfactorily crippled, she idly tossed the thief's broken body to the center of the little clearing. He writhed weakly on the ground, barely able to move. Clara surveyed her surroundings, and, selecting one with the appropriate dimensions, she stalked over to a nearby boulder. The huge hunk of rock was nearly half the size of the dragoness, but she paid its girth no heed. Digging her claws in to get a handhold, she grunted with effort, her muscles rippling and bulging with strain as she pulled the massive stone out of the ground. With thunderous footsteps, she carried it to the thief, who lay still, perhaps already dead, perhaps resigned to his fate, and with a tremendous roar, she slammed the boulder down atop the former thief, burying him in several tons of cold stone.

She stood there over the makeshift funeral cairn, breathing heavily from exertion as her rage slowly died down, forming a cool lump in her chest. She leaned heavily on the stone in front of her as her body began to shrink down. She gasped in pain as her horns and the row of spikes that lay down her back slowly withdrew into her body. She seemed to deflate, her muscles receding as her body returned to its slender proportions. She blinked rapidly as the uncomfortable process drew to a close. She wanted to pass out, but Daryn needed her.

As quickly as she could manage, she hurried over to Daryn side. The Archmage's body had been smashed to a bloody pulp, and he took weak, shallow breaths through the blood that

gurgled in his throat. Clara knelt beside his crumpled form, and to her surprise, the Archmage raised a hand and weakly laid it on her leg.

He sucked in a painful breath, "Hey there beautiful," he said weakly, translating his words into draconic "We've got to... Ngh... stop meeting like this." He paused for a moment, breathing in a ragged gasp. "I'm... so sorry. I didn't want to do that to you. Maybe if I weren't so... cocky... I could have done something different. I-" He coughed, spitting another glob of thick crimson into the snow, "I... Please forgive me."

Clara leaned took Daryn's hand in her own. She blinked tears out of her eyes as she softly said, "You idiot. I would tear the world apart to help you." She laid her other hand on the Archmage's chest and winced at what she felt. "Gods alive," she whispered, "How are you still breathing, let alone conscious?"

Forcing his eyes open, Daryn gave a feeble smile. "It must be such lovely company. Besides I can't feel much... past a certain point. I'm pretty sure my back's broken."

The dragoness felt panic well up within her. "Daryn... I... I-I don't know what to do." she said, her voice increasingly frantic, "You're so broken. I don't think I can fix you. Please tell me you can do something... Please. Just have one more miracle for me."

"Sorry..." said the Archmage faintly, "Miracles aren't really in my job description. But perhaps I could manage a wish, if... if you would help me."

Clara nodded briskly. "Anything, I'll do anything."

Groaning as he forced himself to take a deep breath, Daryn squeezed the dragoness's hand as he spoke. "My body is ruined. I couldn't manage to... Ugh... to draw up enough energy to light a candle right now, which is where you come in. If you would have it, I can link our minds briefly, and... guide you through the healing process." He groaned as a spasm wracked his body.

"Stop talking and do it!" Clara almost shouted at him. "Just show me what to do. I've got you."

Daryn quietly apologized for not being able to shield Clara from the pain, and suddenly Clara could feel him. It was as if a portal had opened up in her mind. It was as if her thoughts were occupying two different bodies, and Clara struggled to separate the two. And then it hit her.

A cataclysmic wave of blinding agony washed over the dragoness, pouring from Daryn's shattered frame. She was unprepared, and the shock of it sent her reeling. She could feel each of Daryn's broken bones and every patch of sundered flesh practically writhing in pain. Clara cried out, less from the actual pain than from the thought that Daryn was suffering it as well.

As the Archmage's torment rushed through her, her mind quailed, and she withdrew deep within herself. She felt a gentle mental impulse, a faint sensation, brush against her thoughts. "I should have let myself die rather than put you through this." came Daryn's voice in her head. "I'm so sorry."

Clara felt the faint sliver of the Archmage's consciousness begin to fade, and the misery raging through her began to recede as Daryn struggled to break the connection. Clara felt shock wash over her. He was going to kill himself to save her from a bit of pain. He really was an idiot if he thought she would let him get away that easily.

With lightning speed, she latched onto the Archmage's mind, pulling his physical anguish forcefully into herself. She growled as she stretched for every scrap she could dredge up, burying the pain within her in a mountain of her emotions. The happiness that Daryn had brought her time and again, tempered with her despair at the Archmage's condition. The passion she felt whenever she saw him smile, coupled with regret for her mistakes were added to the torrent within her. She remembered the desire that had burned brightly inside her the night before, and

with it, unbidden, came a sudden realization. She felt it bloom in her chest, overwhelming every other sensation. Love, pure and crystalline, poured through her veins like a river of ice, washing away all thought.

Shutting her eyes tightly against the intensity of the experience, she let instinct guide her. Reaching out, she placed both her hands on Daryn's chest and with a cry of desperation, she turned herself inside out, emptying the raging maelstrom within her into the prone form before her.

If Daryn could have breathed, he would have screamed as he felt energy more profound than any he had experienced pour into his broken body. The pain of the enormity of it dwarfed anything he had ever felt. It was as if his veins had been filled with ice that burned at his soul. The mixed sensations of the boiling blizzard, the frigid inferno that swelled within him threatened to wash him away and he struggled to maintain a grip on his senses as he was dragged along for a ride.

It started with a barely audible cracking as his crushed ribcage repaired itself and his punctured lung reinflated. His shattered spine righted itself and the crack in his skull sealed. The pain of his body slowly died away to a faint tingling as his grievous wounds were healed. The energy pouring through him, however, grew only more intense.

He cracked his eyes open, and saw Clara knelt over him, hands on his chest, her eyes squeezed tightly shut as she focused on some internal struggle. Daryn felt himself quail as the frozen firestorm burned higher, and an almost painful pressure began to build within him.

"Clara," Daryn gasped, "I'm okay. You can stop. You saved me." The dragoness didn't respond, instead her body began to shake as the force inside him redoubled its efforts to blow him apart. The tension pushed against his skin, growing distressingly tight as it filled the Archmage's being and threatened to smother him. "Clara," he said weakly, "please stop. I'm going to burn."

The Archmage groaned as the energy within him peaked, becoming white hot, the icy cold threatening to destroy him. It seared through his flesh and pushed at his skin. It pulsed violently to the beat of his fluttering heart, growing ever stronger. Tremors began to wrack Clara's huddled form. Hotter and hotter the pressure inside Daryn's chest grew, the burning heat slowly overcoming its freezing counterpart. The Archmage writhed on the ground, his body spasming in the not-quite-agony of the roiling energy filling his body.

Suddenly, Clara's eyes shot wide open as she sucked in a huge deep breath. Her hands shot off Daryn's chest as her eyes took in the Archmage's pained expression. "Gods! I-I don't know what I just did. Wh-what's happening? Daryn, say something!"

The Archmage could only give a strained grunt as a ball of heat like a miniature sun filled his chest. As the last of the tempering cool was incinerated, the energy within him abruptly exploded outwards. Daryn heard Clara gasp in shock as his body, unsuited for containing the power that raged at its core, rushed to compensate, surging larger.

Daryn's finely tailored clothes were quickly filled by his growing body, and without ceremony, the fine fabric shredded around his form, exposing it to the cold mountain air. The Archmage could feel his body scraping along the ground as he grew taller and he grabbed desperately at his surroundings, seeking an anchor as the world moved around him.

Finding Daryn's fingers in her own, Clara squeezed as the Archmage clutched desperately at her hand. He clenched his teeth as the thin layer of muscle that covered his frame deepened, sheets gradually becoming slabs as his body thickened. His muscles flexed involuntarily as they

swelled larger and his tendons popped as his shoulders widened to support his new stature. And still he grew.

Another sensation added itself to the one's already assaulting Daryn's mind as a faint discoloration began to spread over his skin. Beginning as a faint yellowing, it progressively brightened as his skin grew thick and rough. Pinching painfully, patches of his skin separated and stiffened until eventually his entire body was enveloped in a layer of shining, golden scales that brightly reflected the midday sun.

There was a horrible grinding sound in Daryn's head, and he saw as much as felt his face shift. His jaw pushed outward from his face, taking his mouth and nose with it as it elongated and tapered. A hand went to his face, investigating his stretching snout as he felt his tongue lengthen in his mouth and rub up against dozens of new, viciously sharp teeth that sprang from his expanding jaw. Finally taking in his hand, he saw his nails sharpen, growing longer and thicker and taking on a pitch black hue.

The pressure inside him did not abate as it grew more focused in several areas. Bunching painfully just at the end of his spine, he felt himself suddenly moved by something that had started to grow just above his rear. His new tail flailed wildly through the air as it grew longer and thicker with muscle. Daryn barely had time to register sensations from his new appendage before a pair of knots began to raise themselves from his back. Digging his claws effortlessly into the stone next to him, he pulled himself to a sitting position to get his growing weight off the sensitive nubs of flesh that were pushing out of him. As if suddenly freed from their captivity, two massive, batlike wings exploded from his back, air filling their crimson membranes with a dull boom.

The Archmage and Clara shared a brief, confused glance before Daryn winced again. The bones in his legs popped and reshaped, his foot growing long and the ankle changing position. The nails on his toes thickened, growing long and sharp and black as night. Daryn idly noted as his toes shifted that he would have to walk digitigrade like Clara.

But that wasn't all that had vanished. With an almost comically distant worry, Daryn noticed that his crotch was bare, its previous inhabitants seemingly retracted into his body. He mused on the possibilities for a second before he realized that he was once again able to hold a complete idea in his mind, which he cheerfully thought was most likely a good sign.

Daryn looked down his long, reptilian snout at his chest, the powerful muscles of his abdomen still swelling along with his growing body. But that wasn't his interest. With a dull, tingling itch, the scales that ran down his front slowly turned a pure, jet black, the strange sensation running from just under his chin to the end of his tail.

There was an abrupt pounding in Daryn's skull, and he put a hand to his head, missing the feeling of his hair, which must have disappeared previously. With a tremendous cracking noise that filled the dell and echoed off the boulders in the clearing, several pairs of onyx horns pushed themselves out of the Archmage's head. Two, thicker than the rest, grew longer and longer, curving back over the budding dragon's head before changing direction and curving back up. The other shiny black horns ringed his reptilian visage, giving him the appearance of wearing a jagged crown.

As his body's growth slowed, the fire within him began to recede, drawing tightly back down into his core. "Hot." he grunted between deep, gasping breaths, "It's so hot. Clara, wh-wha-nngh... It burns!"

Tighter and tighter the ball of fire within him shrank, his blood burning through his veins, filling his hearing with a dull roar. As the pure, blinding energy collapsed in on itself his chest

filled with a dull throbbing heat, not painful, but urgent and seeking some escape. Daryn sucked in an agonized breath, then gasped even deeper when the air he pulled into his lungs mingled with the power rumbling within his chest then exploded outward. He tilted his head back and tried to scream as the torrent of blazing heat seared through his throat. Instead of a scream, a deep bellowing roar thundered through the clearing as a pillar of blinding yellow-orange fire, nearly a hundred feet long erupted from his gaping maw, dwarfing even the sun in its brilliance.

Daryn coughed up plumes of smoke, blinking as the torrential energy that had been pouring through him finally receded, sinking down to the ball of fire that still sat as his core. Instead of a blazing scorching heat that threatened to burn his soul from his body, he was now filled with comforting warmth that radiated from his center as if in apology.

It felt much like the well of inner strength that the Archmage was used to calling upon when working magic without the assistance of his workspace or spellbooks. But instead of a distant pool he was forced to dredge from, the power that now sat at the center of his being still roared dully, suffusing his body and begging to be released.

Daryn let his eyes roam over his surroundings. Colors were brighter, contours were sharper, and Daryn struggled to make sense of a world seen through new eyes that peered from his new draconic visage. He looked down his triangular snout at Clara, who knelt there gaping, her hand locked onto Daryn's in a death grip.

The Archmage smiled, showing a row of glistening white fangs. "Well," he said, teeth snapping together awkwardly as he tried to get used to his new mouth, "that was certainly unexpected."

Clara shivered, her emerald eyes roving over Daryn's new body. "I don't..." She paused, opening and closing her mouth several times before continuing. "How is this even possible?"

The newly minted dragon chuckled, his voice, much deeper and reverberant than it had been, thundered in his chest. "If I had to hazard a guess, I would say it was much the same way as the largest of bonfires being started with a sufficiently hot spark." He gazed into Clara's eyes when he continued, "I suppose I have you to thank for being that spark."

Wrinkling his nose suddenly, his nostril flared as he muttered, "Gods' Blood, I can smell everything." He looked at Clara questioningly. "Is this what snow smells like?" Before she could answer he cut her off. "Gods above, is this how it always is? Everything's so... intense. Is... I... Wow."

Clara looked around as she answered, "Yes. I... I suppose you get used to it." The pair sat in the clearing together, but all of the snow within a hundred feet had been melted and small puddles of water stood still near the massive stones. She supposed it had gotten a bit hot.

Daryn's deep, sapphire blue eyes suddenly filled her vision, the striking irises demanding her attention as worry flicked over his face. "Clara what's wrong? I know this kind of thing doesn't really happen often, or ever, but I feel fine, I think. Are you okay?"

The dragoness felt tears well up in her eyes. "Daryn... I... last night. All this... It was my fault. I... Please forgive me."

Daryn looked confused, "Relax Clara, you don't see me complaining, despite how you just ruined my favorite coat, although-

Exasperated, Clara interjected, "Shut up, just shut up, Daryn. This is not a joke, I hurt you in a way that you perhaps cannot imagine, and I can't take that mistake back..." Her voice lowered to a scant whisper, "Gods, Daryn. I raped you, and you're sitting here joking."

Blinking in silence for a moment, a mask of distant anger settled over the Archmage's features, his voice growing harsh and gruff. "Let's get something straight here right now, Clara."

he said. "I am the Archmage of the Ordo Arcanum, and I will not have my actions dictated to me by anyone. You should have known better than to think a simple impulse spike, however strong it may have been, was capable of controlling my mind or body. It would take a spell of finesse and complexity beyond the capabilities of anyone alive to force me to do anything against my will."

His features softened slightly, "I told you that the choice you think you took from me had already been made. I apologize, milady, if your climax wasn't to your liking, but it's fairly difficult to pleasure a set of, quite lovely, if I might say, lady parts while simultaneously fighting off a six inch spike of anguish being driven into your skull." He huffed out a breath, a cloud of thick grey smoke billowing out of his nostrils as he did so. "I had to drag on our conversation long enough for me to get my mental defenses into place before you finished doing... whatever it was you were doing." He paused, looking pensive, then asked, "Will that happen to me? You know, with the frilly bits and slit-eyes?"

Clara stared, flabbergasted. "I... Well... Um... Y-yes, I guess. When dragon's find potential partners, we start to develop these... urges... The desire to mate and experiment, to determine compatibility." Her fingers knotted themselves together in her embarrassment. "If we ignore that primal need, we can kind of go crazy for a time. When a dragon finds that perfect partner... falls in love... they start to change inside, preparing for parenthood, mostly." She laughed weakly, glancing uncertainly up at Daryn's confused face. "I-I hope you can feel the same way about me, because I can already feel myself changing for you, Daryn. Gods, I love you so much."

There was a long, silent pause as Clara looked ashamed and stared at the ground. Breaking the quiet, Daryn spoke up, his voice full of unhidden mirth, "Oh, Clara, you amazing, wonderful creature. Of course I can feel the same way about you."

Clara's head shot up, and her voice cracked as she said, "R-really?"

Incredulously, Daryn stared at her. "Gee, let me think." He said sarcastically. "You're the kindest, most compassionate woman I've ever met. Intelligent and resourceful, you've saved my sorry ass no less than three times, twice in the last week, not that I'm keeping score. You've trusted me with your well-being, and I've trusted you with my life in turn, and not been disappointed. You are capable of wonder the likes of which I have never even imagined, and you are willing to share your world with me. Ever since I met you those many years ago, you have done nothing but fill my usually drab and bleak world with warmth and light. I have rarely been happier than when I've been with you, which is saying something, considering I had a broken leg for some of that time, and just now nearly died. You make even the most mundane of tasks enjoyable, so long as I can complete them by your side. Your very presence fills me with... such joy as I cannot begin to describe with words. There is nothing, absolutely nothing that I would rather do than face the rest of my life with you there next to me." He smirked, "And I suppose that you being the most stunningly, mind-numbingly, brilliantly beautiful creature I have ever laid eyes on doesn't hurt much either-Urgh!"

The left Daryn's lungs with a whoosh as Clara launched herself at him, knocking the Archmage to the ground with her atop him. Her arms found their way around his neck and she buried her face into his shoulder. Her long tail wrapped around one of Daryn's legs as the dragoness pressed her body desperately against his own. She shivered against him as she was wracked with anguished sobs. "Daryn... I... Oh, Daryn..."

Daryn hesitantly took Clara in his arms. "Hugs." he said as he caressed Clara's shoulders. "Hugs are good. I can do hugs." He squeezed Clara gently and marveled at how large he had

become. Crushed against his thick, muscular frame, the dragoness appeared, for the first time in his life, small and fragile.

The two lay there for several moments, Daryn reluctant to rouse the dragoness, until she eventually stirred. "Sorry," she said as she pushed herself off of the Archmage, "I just... really wanted to hear you say that." She stood slowly and offered Daryn her hand, "Come on. Let's get you on your shiny new feet."

Daryn accepted the proffered hand and with a clawed hand on the stone next to him, Clara hauled the dragon to his feet. Daryn immediately stumbled, barely digging his claws into the sturdy stone in time to stop himself from being thrown on top of Clara. He wobbled, trying to balance himself on his toes the way his new anatomy demanded.

"Relax, I've got you." Clara assured him. "Use your tail to balance, like this." Keeping a hand on his arm, she stepped back and struck a pose, trying to show him how to hold his tail at the right angle.

He flailed wildly at first, but eventually Daryn steadied his legs and released his grip on the handhold he had dug for himself. "Okay, that feels weird, but I think I'm getting used to it." He took a hesitant step, Clara following him closely as a precaution. "I'll admit, having three completely new appendages that can all move independently of each other makes it hard to focus on something as mundane as walking. I'm just going to ignore my wings for the moment." He took another large step, catching himself easily on his toes as he gained confidence.

Clara slowed and smiled as Daryn made a full circuit of the clearing and returned to her, a smile beaming from his face. The dragoness was forced to look up into Daryn's eyes; she barely came up to his broad shoulders. She tried and failed not to stare as Daryn continued to walk around, his long, flexible tail swirling through the air behind him. He was the most magnificent thing she had ever seen.

Powerful, rippling muscles and corded tendons bunched and bulged just under his scales as he moved with a fluid grace that seemed impossible for a creature of his imposing stature. His sharply angled visage, longer and more triangular than Clara's own, was lit with a child-like glee as Daryn experienced the world through eyes of deep, brilliant sapphire.

Shining, golden scales covered most of his body, reflecting the midday sun over the rocks that were scattered everywhere. In contrast, a stripe of onyx scales trailed from his chin to the tip of his tail, coloring his front a glittering, crystalline black. His wings, scarlet membranes stretched between their long finger-like struts, were held awkwardly behind him. Viciously sharp claws tipped his fingers and toes, and a dozen long black horns arched back from his skull.

Clara stood with a goofy smile on her face as she stared at the Archmage, before she realized he was standing in front of her, a puzzled expression across his features. "Are you alright?" He asked.

"What?" she said, blinking, "Y-yes, I'm fine. I was just thinking. How are you doing?"

Daryn crossed his arms and gave the dragoness a toothy grin. "Like I was born with a tail and bent-up feet. No offense." He gestured with his wings. "I think these will take a bit more effort. Work for another day, I suppose. I would like to leave this place, if that would suit you."

The dragoness nodded as Daryn stepped over, scooping the plain metal rod off of the ground. He scrunched up his face in distaste as he glanced at the huge boulder under which lay the remains of the thief. "I never even got his name." he sighed. Clara walked over next to him and took Daryn's arm in hers. He looked down at her, "I'm sorry that you had to go through that."

Flicking her tail in residual anger, Clara snorted a cloud of fine mist, "I'm not. He got off easy. If he had killed you I would have gotten REALLY upset. Now let's go."

Allowing himself to be led, Daryn followed Clara up out of the dell and back onto the rough trail that led to the dragoness's home. They walked on in silence, pausing just outside of the entrance to Clara's cave. "I... suppose that you need to go back to your duties as Archmage now." Clara wondered aloud.

Daryn nodded. "Yes. I should." He looked over at the dragoness next to him, nudging her with his elbow. "But only if you'll come with me."

She just smirked at him. "As if I would let you get away now. When do we leave?"

"Right now." Daryn answered with confidence as he wrapped his arm around Clara's narrow waist. "Hold on, this is disorienting for first timers."

Clara began to question when she felt a sudden jerking sensation pulling her off of her feet. She wound up on her back, looking up into Daryn's smiling face. She blinked as her eyes rapidly adjusted to the abrupt darkness. She was lying on a cool stone floor in a large room that smelled strongly of old paper and dust.

She sat up and looked around. Bookshelves full to bursting lined the walls of the room. There were several large tables upon which lay all manner of archaic looking devices of every description. She and Daryn sat in the middle of a large circle inscribed into the floor and inlaid with gold that glimmered dully in the faint light provided by the smokeless magelights that ringed the space.

Daryn helped the dragoness to her feet, having to stoop to avoid brushing his horns on the ceiling. "Welcome, Clara, to my sanctum in the city of Southcliff, my home and base of operations. Forgive the cramped ceilings, I'll get on that as soon as possible. But for now, there's someone I'd like you to meet, she must have sensed our arrival. I can't wait to see the look on her face."

The Archmage pulled Clara along through narrow and far too short hallways that gradually climbed toward the upper levels. Soon enough, the pair saw the afternoon sunlight through occasional windows. The passages eventually became large enough for the two dragons to stand upright. All of a sudden, in mid step, Daryn motioned Clara to a halt.

A series of light footsteps came rapidly approaching from around a nearby corner. Daryn watched in amusement as Dawn, his apprentice, rushed around the corner, carrying a large stack of books in her arms. She took one look at the pair of dragons that filled the hallway in front of her, dropped the books, and ran back the way she came.

Daryn gave Clara a wink, and took off in pursuit, long legs carrying him easily after his apprentice. Rounding the corner, he saw Dawn disappear behind the wall of another branching hallway. He sprinted after her and took this corner at full speed. He immediately knew something was wrong when he saw Dawn standing behind the corner, her hands folded under her ample chest, smiling mischievously.

The dragon couldn't stop himself in time to prevent his foot from landing on the barely visible patch of slick liquid that Dawn had summoned into existence on the smooth floor. The Archmage's momentum carried him off his feet and sent him rolling straight down the hallway to land in a heap. Daryn grunted as he unfolded himself to lie dizzily on the ground.

Dawn's form approached and stood over his head. "You know master, you really ought to expect me to be able to sense your aura, especially when you've obviously made no effort to hide it."

Laughter echoed off the stone walls of the hallway as Clara stepped into Daryn's view. "Is this who you were talking about, Daryn?" she asked with an amused chuckle. "I like her."

Daryn just grunted again in confusion. "But... I was hiding my aura. I still am... How could you sense me?"

"Well it looks like someone is just out of practice." said Dawn, brushing a lock of auburn hair from her face. "If anything, your aura is even stronger than it was when you left. Maybe you reversed the spell. Now drop the illusion and introduce me to your shiny friend."

With a mirthful smile, Clara offered her hand to Dawn as she took the initiative. "Hello," said the dragoness with exaggerated politeness, "my name is Argentapraeclaralbia. Friends of Daryn can call me Clara."

Daryn looked puzzled for a moment, when suddenly, understanding washed over the Archmage's reptilian face and he started to laugh. "Oh, I should have expected this." He choked between snickers, "I suppose I'm not thinking as clearly as I'm used to." He dropped the mental blocks he had set up to shield his aura from detection and watched Dawn's eyes shoot wide open as she reeled back against the wall.

"Gods!" she gasped. "That's not an illusion, is it? What? How are you...?"

Daryn sat up, putting himself near enough to his apprentice's eye level to look at her and try to explain. As Daryn's spoke, Dawn only opened and closed her mouth, her eyes wide with shock.

Afterward, Dawn looked between the two dragons. "So you two are... a thing?" She broke out in a fit of giggles as she elbowed Daryn's arm. "About time you found someone who was willing to put up with you. Congratulations." She looked up at Clara, "And good luck."

Daryn managed to stand while Dawn went to retrieve the books she had dropped in her mock surprise. She returned her expression serious. "Master, I need to talk to you about some things that have happened since you've been gone. It's disturbing, and the implications are even more dire, I fear."

Daryn nodded, "Alright, I'll be in my study after I help Clara get settled in."

Steadying the books in her hands, Dawn winked at him and scurried down a hallway. Daryn looked after her in confusion. She had barely been out of sight for a few seconds before he felt Clara's hands latch onto his shoulders in a steely grip and spin him around, forcing his back to the cool stone wall. "Oh... OH..." he said quietly when he saw the narrow, predatory slits of her pupils focus on his own.

"I'll show you settled in." the dragoness said aggressively as she pressed her lithe form against Daryn's body. She growled urgently into the patch of sensitive scales where his ear had once been, "Bedroom... now!"

Daryn smiled and took hold of Clara's wide hips, lifting her off the ground and spinning to press her against the wall. Not fazed, the dragoness wrapped her legs around the Archmage's waist as he muttered under heavy breaths, "As milady commands." Keeping her pressed to him with a hand on the small of her back, Daryn made his way as fast as he could in the direction of his bedroom.

Dawn might have to wait.