

Outset

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It was with great reluctance that Valorie stirred from her slumber, sweet dreams fading slowly into vague consciousness. Grumbling under her breath, the groggy equine rubbed her eyes and sat up, stretching wide her arms as she did so. She had slept hard, and her body was slow in ridding itself of the sluggishness that sleep brought on. Valorie smiled, remembering the previous night, and Dawn's soft form pressed into her as she slumbered.

Hearing movement, Valorie's ears perked up and swiveled to the source of the sound. "About time you started moving." Dawn quipped jovially. "I was beginning to think I was going to have to set a fire under you to get you to stop snoring."

Valorie opened bleary eyes, blinking rapidly to adjust to the clear, morning light that shone in through the large window of Dawn's bedroom. Valorie noted with some dismay that Dawn's nudity had not survived the night. The apprentice was standing at the foot of the bed, resting a hand on a post and ogling the equine, a glint of mischief glimmering in her large, amber eyes. As usual, Valorie's breathing caught at the sight. Even dressed as simply as she was, Dawn still put on an awe-inspiring display.

Long, auburn hair shining gold in the morning sun cascaded in waves past her shoulders, framing a delicate, youthful face, with full lips and a pert nose. Poorly hidden behind the pale blue fabric of Dawn's blouse were her ample breasts, large for her slender frame, but still full and perky. Hugging the contours of her svelte form, Dawn's blouse was tucked into a loose, calf-length, dark grey skirt that tried and failed to conceal the generous curves of her plush hips.

Dawn fidgeted momentarily under Valorie's amorous stare before she sighed, sturdy traveling boots clicking lightly on the floor as she moved to the bedside, favoring the equine with a peck on the cheek. The apprentice smiled warmly. "I could wear a shroud, and that look would still make me feel like an exhibitionist." She prodded Valorie in the side with a slender finger. "Now come on, we've got places to be, and Daryn wants to see you when you're dressed."

"Alright, alright..." Valorie surrendered, "I, uh... don't suppose you've got anything for me to..." She dropped the sheets she held to her chest, exposing Dawn to the sight of her dusky pink nipples and a sheepish grin.

With a smirk of her own, Dawn grabbed the edge of the sheet and tossed it the rest of the way off of the equine's body. She leaned in, her lips teasingly close to Valorie's own as she murmured, "Wardrobe, left side." She trailed a thin finger along the muscle of Valorie's arm as she stepped away toward the door. "I've got to finish our preparations," she said quickly, "but don't keep Daryn waiting too long, or he might come up here and actually set a fire under you."

As Dawn let the door slip closed behind her, Valorie took a deep breath, letting her lungs fill with hopeful energy, and bounded lightly out of the bed onto her feet. The high ceiling of the room let her raise her arms far above her head in a full-body stretch that quickly eased the remnants of her sleep out of her well-rested muscles. Bouncing happily on the balls of her feet, Valorie's long legs carried her to the simple wardrobe that sat passively on the other side of the room.

She pulled out a set of clothes that could not have possibly been meant for Dawn from between the apprentice's flashy garments. Valorie smiled; Dawn certainly had an eye for color. The hue of the shirt that Valorie held in her hands was only a shade darker blue than that which Dawn was wearing, rich and bright. What drew her eye most though, was the gauzy fabric of the

underclothes that Dawn intended for her to wear. It was light and filmy, and would do little to preserve Valorie's dignity, but it stretched easily, and seemed durable enough to suit its purpose.

The bra and panties that Valorie stretched with some difficulty over her bountiful assets clung tightly to her chocolate brown fur, securing anything that would swing awkwardly without feeling constricting. Valorie let out a pleased sigh; it was actually quite comfortable. The shirt went on much more readily, and Valorie laughed aloud. Dawn seemed to know Valorie's body better than she did; the fine cloth hugged her curves exquisitely, although the neckline plunged a bit more deeply than Valorie was accustomed to.

After slipping on a pair of warm, grey socks, Valorie looked questioningly at the thick, black trousers that she held. "This is never going to work..." she mumbled to herself. Still, she slowly slipped into the well-made, but simple pants. They were roomier in the crotch than Valorie expected, but the sheer mass of her flaccid member still made an intimidating bulge in the fabric. She sighed. Valorie supposed there was no hiding something of that size, anyway, no matter how loose a skirt she wore. Like the rest of the clothes Dawn had made for her, the pants were wrapped tightly around the swell of Valorie's firm, muscular ass and long, densely muscled legs. Valorie smiled for a moment with pride at how much Dawn seemed to want to see every line of her body when she moved.

Even Valorie's boots had been repaired, and she slipped into them, lacing them quickly before standing and tying her long, golden brown hair back in a low ponytail with a length of ribbon Dawn had given her. She hurriedly scrubbed her face with water from a basin that stood near the door, and swept out into the hallway, wishing Dawn had told her where Daryn was waiting for her. This thought was soon lost, however, when she ran face-first into the glittering white scales of a dragon's chest.

It felt to Valorie like running into a brick wall for all the dragon recoiled, a pleasantly smooth and yielding wall, but a wall nonetheless. She pinwheeled her arms as she was knocked backwards, nearly falling back into the room she had just left. A strong hand latched onto hers, however, and she was pulled gently back upright.

The dragon's brilliant emerald irises fixed her with a concerned expression. "Sorry, sorry!" she rushed to say, her voice deep and melodious, "I wasn't expecting you to barge out of the room like that!"

"Wh-what?!" Valorie gasped as she recovered from her surprise. "How... Wait. Why were you just standing...? What are you doing, spying, listening to me dress?"

The dragon bristled at the accusation, but quickly deflated, looking embarrassed. "N-no... I just wanted to talk to you... about what I did last night."

Valorie blinked, momentarily confused, "Listen... um, Miss...?"

"Call me Clara."

Valorie nodded. "Listen Clara," she began slowly, uncertain of how to continue, "It's... I understand. I wasn't really thinking very clearly at the time, and I'm not the most eloquent under any circumstances." She laughed and gave Clara a friendly clap on the shoulder, "Hells, I needed someone to beat some sense into me. I was going to thank you the next time I saw you."

Clara's shoulders sagged with relief. "I... Thank you." she practically giggled with sudden happiness. The dragoness leaned forward and enveloped Valorie in a sincere hug. "But I'm still sorry. I shouldn't have gotten as upset as I did." She bounced giddily on her toes, lifting Valorie easily into the air in her elation. "Oh, I'm so glad you're not angry! Daryn spoke so kindly of you, and I didn't want to burn a bridge before I could cross it."

"Well," came Valorie's muffled reply, "I don't know how dragons do it, but shoving someone's face into your tits usually makes friends with mixed results."

The dragoness grinned, showing dozens of dagger-like teeth as she pressed Valorie a bit more intimately into her chest. "Yes, well, if they are to your liking, perhaps I might arrange something more for you to sink your teeth into, hmm?" Valorie jerked and sputtered in her arms and Clara dropped the equine in surprise. "What's wrong?" the dragon asked, "I know I may look intimidating to you, but I promise I can be gentle."

"Nothing, nothing!" Valorie replied, trying to gather her suddenly scattered thoughts. "It's just that... I guess I assumed that you and the Archmage were already, um... together."

At this, Clara let out a boisterous laugh, "Of course we are! I can feel my love for him burn in every fiber of my being. I couldn't imagine doing anything without him, but he likes you, and you're very beautiful. I just thought that if you were interested, you might like to join us some time." She nudged Valorie in the side with a sly wink. "He's very good, I assure you."

It looked like Valorie's face couldn't decide on what look to take, but it eventually settled on one of utter shock. "Th-thank you... for the offer," she choked out, her voice quiet with disbelief, "but I feel like Dawn might protest if I screwed around with her teacher."

Her hand on her chin, Clara hummed thoughtfully. "Perhaps, and Daryn has already voiced his reluctance for his apprentice." The dragoness shrugged innocently. "No matter, let me know if you change your mind. I'd love to have you with us."

"I... will, thanks." Valorie stammered, still trying to regain her mental footing. "Have you, by any chance, talked to Daryn about this? I feel like he'd want to know if you were making plans for him."

Shining silver scales rustled as Clara shifted her weight from foot to foot nervously. "Do you think so? I wanted to surprise him, but I don't suppose talking to him about it will really hurt anything." The dragoness prodded Valorie down the hall with her tail. "Speaking of talking to him, he's waiting for you in the armory when you're ready."

Valorie looked confused. "Armory?" Valorie mouthed incredulously. "This place has an armory? Where has Daryn been hiding that from me?" Clara gave her the location, pointing down the hallway the dragoness's tail was ushering her. "Alright, I'm going, I'm going." She headed down the hall, looking back when Clara called her name.

The dragoness gave Valorie a friendly wave. "Thank you, Valorie," she said sincerely. "for being a friend to him. He may not show it often, but he values his loved ones more than the world itself."

Valorie returned the smile with a casual shrug. "It's not my fault that people can't tell he's a great man when they see him." She started walking again, waving back to Clara as she said in return, "Maybe they'll understand after we save the world, but that might just be wishful thinking."

Clara's laughter receded slowly as Valorie went off to find Daryn. The Archmage was going to have his hands full when Clara broached that particular topic with him, but he could deal with that when he came to it. Valorie had other things on her mind. She didn't bother knocking when she reached the large, ornate wooden door that Clara had indicated to her, walking in to gape, open-mouthed at what she saw.

The room was a large one, with a spacious ceiling well lit with glimmering magelights. Arranged in neat rows around the room were stands heavy with suits of armor and racks of weapons, both masterwork and mundane. Valorie had never before seen such an esoteric collection before. Some of the suits of armor didn't even look to be made for humanoid creatures,

and Valorie could only wonder as to the uses of many of the tools she saw scattered around the room.

In one of the few rooms that could contain his standing bulk, Daryn was leaning lightly against one wall, his head bowed in thought. When Valorie entered the room, he looked up at her and greeted her with a broad, toothy grin. "About time!" he cried with mock impatience, "I thought that everything was going to rust away before you got here!" His shameless grin betraying his mirth, he stepped lightly forward and pulled Valorie into a gentle hug.

The huge dragon's shimmering golden scales were warm through Valorie's clothes and she punched him lightly in the ribs as he pulled away. "Maybe if you didn't live in a labyrinth fit for a minotaur I could have made it here sooner." she replied with a sardonic smile. "I can't believe you kept this place from me."

A plume of thin, grey smoke drifted up from Daryn's nostrils as he snorted. "Oh, please. There's hardly anything interesting in this room, but I may have dusted off a surprise for you." He moved to a high stone workbench on which sat a canvas covered lump. "I had to make a few adjustments to the fit, but I think that you'll like it."

Valorie gaped at what she saw when the Archmage pulled the canvas away with a flourish. Polished to an almost mirror sheen, a nearly full suit of armor lay splayed out on the surface of the table. "Argentum." Daryn said in response to Valorie's wordless question, "Dragonsilver, harder than steel, but a fraction as heavy. This suit has been collecting dust in various collections for centuries." He beckoned Valorie closer with a clawed hand. "I feel like the smith who poured his soul into this would want it to see some use every now and then, don't you?"

Holding her breath in awe, Valorie ran her hand along the elegant lines of the ornate, silver plates of the armor. "It's... beautiful." she murmured reverently. "Will it actually fit?"

The walls echoed with Daryn's rich laughter for a moment before he answered. "Provided you haven't been letting Dawn stuff you senseless, I think I have managed." He lifted a thick plate of the shining metal off the table. "Now let's get you suited up, Dawn will have my hide if she has to wait any longer."

With surprising dexterity, the dragon began the process of buckling each individual plate of the exquisite armor onto Valorie's body. Without the padding that normally went under armor that looked so heavy, Valorie was unsure that she would be comfortable. But as more and more of the delicate looking silver was strapped to her body over a fine chain shirt, she realized that would not be a problem. The flawless argentum was nearly weightless and hugged Valorie like a second skin.

As he worked, Daryn hummed a deep, mellifluous tune that drifted into silence when Valorie gave voice to a few thoughts that had been bugging her. "I wasn't really in any condition to question it last night," she mused aloud, "but the last time I saw you, you weren't half again my height and covered in scales."

The dragon's fingers shook as he chuckled. "Very observant of you." he said with feigned dryness.

"What happened?"

The Archmage paused. "I'm not certain, really." he said after a moment of thought. "I haven't really had much time to think about it, but I promise to get back to you as soon as I figure it out... if I ever figure it out. But I guess I'm a dragon now, thanks to the other lovely, silver-clad lady you may remember." He sighed. "Honestly, Valorie, I'm just trying to stop my world from

spiraling out of control. All this is happening, and I can barely focus through the dragonfire that burns in my chest."

His fingers faltered momentarily on one of the thick leather straps as he let out a shaky breath. He only stopped for a second before he perked back up. "Bah!" he cried in exasperation. "Listen to me complain. I must need a nap like the old man I am." He tightened the strap with a firm tug and spun Valorie around to look her in the eye. "What do I know?" he asked Valorie with a smile. "I've got it good... And you, my dear, look absolutely stunning."

The dragon gestured to a mirror Valorie hadn't noticed, and when the equine stepped in front of it, her jaw dropped. "Gods' Blood," she stammered breathlessly, "I look like... like a..."

"Like an avenging angel?" Daryn interjected. "A paragon of strength and determination? An exemplar of beauty and grace?"

Valorie thought about it and drank in her appearance. The shining metal that covered her body seemed like it was molded to her form, and she bore its slight mass effortlessly. It was as if the suit had been forged to perfectly conform to her shape, the elegant lines of the armor tracing her curves delicately. Valorie pulled on a pair of light gauntlets and rapped her knuckles on the breastplate that covered her torso. It rang like the striking of a fine chime.

The plates that covered her body seemed plain at first glance, smooth and unornamented. But as Valorie examined herself in the mirror, the absolute perfection of the suit she wore made itself evident. Fully assembled, the suit looked almost liquid, flowing over and around Valorie's body. The balletic lines of the pauldrons that covered Valorie's shoulders poured into the mirror-like breastplate that so exquisitely accentuated Valorie's ample figure. Hanging from her waist to her knees was a chain-and-plate skirt so fine it seemed to dance like water around Valorie's thighs. Protecting her calves, a pair of closed greaves flawlessly showed the shape of the muscle that lay beneath them.

Valorie danced from foot to foot in wonder. "I was going to say I looked like a walking mirror," she said, shocked into silent awe. "But I can see where you could get 'avenging angel,' yeah."

There was a rasping click as Daryn snapped his fingers. "Ah!" he exclaimed, "I knew I was forgetting something." Taking one last thing off of the workbench, he swirled the familiar, forest-green fabric of Valorie cloak around her shoulders, fastening it with the ornate silver clasp he had given Valorie more than a year ago. "Perfect. Now, I don't know about what kind of weapon you would prefer, but I'm sure I have something in here that will suit you. I just pray that you won't have to use it."

Valorie mumbled her agreement as she began to examine the myriad racks of weapons, occasionally picking one up and hefting it in her hands, testing its weight and balance. She eventually settled on a sword obviously meant to be wielded in both hands by someone of normal stature, but it appeared almost perfect in Valorie's confident fingers. She gave the thick blade a few test swings, spinning the length of steel through the air with practiced ease before slamming it back into its simple scabbard. "I like it," she grinned, fingering an emerald the size of her thumb set into its pommel.

"Then it's yours," came Daryn's impressed reply. "Now let's get you going before the world finishes ending, shall we?"

With a nod, Valorie followed Daryn out of the large chamber and through the annoyingly labyrinthine halls of the Archmage's home. But eventually, the dragon navigated them to the spacious foyer, host to the huge door that marked the entrance to the complex. Clara and Dawn

were already there, the dragoness leaning casually against a wall while the apprentice impatiently paced the length of the room.

When Valorie stepped fully into the room, Dawn froze in her tracks. "Bones and Ichor..." the young woman muttered under her breath. "Valorie... You look like a goddess made flesh." She stepped forward slowly as Valorie shrugged, blushing furiously at the compliment. Dawn crossed the distance between them and wrapped a slender arm around Valorie's waist. "And the armor doesn't look bad either, I suppose" the apprentice cajoled.

"I'm glad you approve of my wardrobe." Valorie said with lighthearted sarcasm. "I'd hate for our colors to clash while we're slogging through the muck of the jungle."

Looking innocently up at Valorie, Dawn gave her a sly grin. "I wouldn't mind cleaning mud off of you." She playfully poked the equine in the ribs. "You've proven enough times that you can hardly manage bathing by yourself."

Valorie snorted derisively. "Maybe if you would let me wash myself without interrupting me every other time, I could get something done. I assure you, I am completely capable of taking care of myself."

Tracing a finger along the curve of Valorie's hip, Dawn let her lips plump in a forlorn pout. "Aw, don't be that way, Val." she pleaded, "There's plenty of you to go around. Surely you can share some with me."

With a chuckle, Valorie leaned heavily into Dawn, forcing the apprentice back a step. The equine trapped Dawn against her body with an arm and gave the apprentice's slender frame an affectionate squeeze. "I can think of a couple things I could let you have, but you have to promise to be gentle with them."

"As if I'm ever anything but?" Dawn mused as she twined her fingers through the thick, silky hair of Valorie's tail.

The two women were so absorbed in each other that they both jumped when Daryn finally spoke. "Gods' Blood, you two." he said with an exasperated sigh, "At least wait until you get out the door before you tear each other's clothes off, okay?" His voice softened when he noticed their embarrassment. "As if I could stop you."

The dragon joined Clara at the side of the room while Dawn lifted a heavy looking pack from a table, hoisting it onto her shoulder. It only sat there for a second before Valorie snatched it off of the apprentice's back. "Oh no you don't." she scolded, "I'll take that."

Dawn's pout deepened into a scowl. "Oh come on, I can carry something!"

A girlish giggle followed Dawn's surprised yelp as Valorie scooped her easily off the ground. "Hush, you." Valorie muttered as she pressed her lips against the apprentice's cheek. "If you keep complaining, you won't even be carrying yourself. Now-whoah!"

Daryn's chuckle rumbled deep in his chest as he stepped forward, dragging Clara off of the wall and sweeping Valorie off of her feet. Clara laughed as she felt herself pressed into Daryn's chest and the cool silver of Valorie's armor with Dawn sandwiched between them. The dragon's chuckle deepened into a jovial laugh as he pushed open the heavy wooden door with his tail, carrying the three easily in his arms into the cool spring morning.

Taking a deep breath of the crisp air, Daryn gently lowered the contents of his arms to the ground. "And people say I talk too much." he groaned with good humor, "At this rate my scales will rust and fall off by the time you make it out of the city." He eased himself gently to a knee to bring the large disks of his brilliant sapphire eyes closer to the two women before they set off. "If there is anything I can be said to despise, its goodbyes, so would you two please get out of here?"

He crushed Dawn and Valorie to his chest with one final hug as he whispered, "I must have the luck of the Gods to have met women of such magnificence."

He stood and stepped back, pointing a clawed finger at his apprentice. "Don't even think about crying, Dawn. The sooner you're out of here, the sooner you can be back and we can finish saving the world, as usual."

Valorie clapped Dawn on the back, nearly knocking the smaller woman over as she grinned at the dragon. "Relax!" she cried cheerfully. "If I made it all the way here from the jungle last time, I think we can manage it together." She flourished her cloak through the air as she gave an exaggerated bow. "We'll see you in a month or two, depending on how distracted Dawn gets on the way."

After saying her own farewell, Dawn turned to follow Valorie down the path that led down into the city of Southcliff. Daryn eyed them suspiciously for a moment, eventually calling down at them, "Take your time! It's not as if we're in a hurry or anything!"

Valorie answered him with a casual wave from the bottom of the hill, and Daryn watched for a long moment as his sharp eyes monitored their progress through the city; the rays of the morning sun glinting off of the armor Valorie wore made it easy to pick out the tall equine from the crowds. Ultimately, even that was not enough, and the Archmage lost track of them.

He took another deep breath to calm his nerves, leaning lightly into Clara as she slid up to him. "Valorie is right, Daryn." she said softly, "You are too worried. They both have a right to be confident. Dawn is clever and resourceful, and Valorie is determined to keep her safe."

The wind left the dragon's lungs in a tired sigh. "I know, I know." he said, his voice weak with emotion. "I just... hate to see people walking away."

"But when they return," Clara retorted, "they will do so stronger, having grown and learned about themselves and each other."

Daryn stared blankly into the distance, overlooking Southcliff as the city slowly roused itself to wakefulness, the dull roar of thousands of people beginning to go about their business gradually drifting up to the pair of dragons. To Clara's worry, the Archmage's eyes glimmered wetly, and a single crystalline tear hung suspended from one of the spikes that lined his jaw. It fell, almost casually, as Daryn whispered in a voice almost too quiet to hear, "I just... hope they come back."