

Resolve

Written By: Skabaard

Daryn could sense the familiar auras of Valorie and his apprentice press against his wards as they approached his freshly reconstructed home. He lifted his great, horned head and pulled himself from his meditative concentration to relay the news to Clara, who was lounging casually in a shallow pool of water where it collected briefly before continuing to burble down the artificial stream the Archmage had created.

Taking advice from Clara, Daryn had rebuilt his home to be even grander than it had been before. Once a titanic, imposing, castle-like structure, with towering walls of grey granite and intricate architecture, the Sanctum Arcanum's walls now stood tall and proud, made out of pristine, white marble, richly veined with what looked like liquid silver that gleamed in the afternoon sun. Encompassing more of the hill on which it sat than it had previously, Daryn's home now took the shape of a thick annulus, two circular, concentrically ringed walls that supported the shallowly sloping, ornate, slate roof and bounded the circumference of a lush park that dominated the crest of the hill. Nine soaring towers stretched high into the sky from the huge, ringlike building at regular intervals, making the massive structure look something like a high-reaching, stately crown that sat atop the hill that overlooked the metropolis of Southcliff.

Clara looked languidly up at him as she splashed water across her chest and abdomen, smiling and waiting for him to move. Daryn's eyes slipped down to the tight, lean muscles of Clara's stomach, which were stretched taut over the bulge of the egg that had been steadily growing in the dragoness's belly. Her growing gravidity had finally begun to take its toll on the swollen dragoness. Clara could no longer move with the speed and grace she had once been able to. As her pregnancy had advanced, Clara could most often be found lying down with her back propped up on the nearest sturdy surface, idly running her clawed hands over the egg-stretched, white scales of her underside.

Worry threatened to creep its way into Daryn's thoughts, and he roughly shoved it away. Clara had grown huge and heavy with frightening speed. Gestation periods for dragons of Clara's age and size should have been close to four months, but it had only been half that, and Clara had started saying she was nearing the time for laying. The dragoness took it in stride, however, unconcerned with the rapid development of her egg. She had continued to tell Daryn that if there were anything wrong with her egg, she would know.

Clara's confidence eased Daryn's concerns, and he didn't let himself worry. He had checked on the egg's condition himself with the most in depth spells he knew and had found nothing wrong with his growing child. Child... Daryn smiled dreamily. He was going to be a father. If there was anything to worry him, that was it. He knew next to nothing of how to raise a child, but the prospect excited him more than frightened him. Clara, as always, would be there to let him know if he was being an idiot.

He stood in a smooth, sinuous motion, stretching his tense muscles. Clara's purred as she watched him move, her half-lidded emerald eyes raking his broad, powerful body. Thick, golden scales glimmered in the muted light that filtered through the leaves of the magically tended trees above them, light that was instead absorbed by the glittering onyx stripe that ran down his front. Slabs of dense, angular muscle bunched easily under his scaly hide as he sauntered over to Clara, offering the dragoness his long, muscular tail and an outstretched hand.

"Shall we greet our guests, Beautiful?" he asked with a warm, toothy grin.

Clara heaved a heavy breath, returning Daryn's smile with a slow, lazy one of her own. "Just when I was getting comfortable..." She reached up, taking the dragon's tail in her hand and heaving herself to her feet. "I suppose so, Daryn. Dawn doesn't strike me as the type to tolerate being kept waiting." Her tail wriggled through the air behind her as she managed to get her feet under her shifted center of balance.

Daryn chuckled and reached down as Clara pressed herself into him. He scraped his wicked, jet black claws gingerly across the dragoness's rotund stomach with a light rasping sound that accompanied Clara's muffled moan. The dragoness's entire body had grown sublimely sensitive. She would be putty in his hands with the lightest touch, and Daryn had been busy experimenting, finding every sweet spot that had sent Clara into fits of mewling rapture.

She let out a barely audible hiss, filled not with menace, but constrained passion. "That's not fair, Daryn," she murmured quietly, "You know I can't-" She quieted when Daryn laid a finger under the tip of her snout. The dragon leaned down to place his lips tantalizingly close to the patch of scales just under the base of Clara's horns that hid the dragoness's sensitive aural organs.

"I know..." Daryn replied in a low whisper. "But that doesn't mean I can't." He straightened, looking down at Clara with a mirthful twinkle in his crystalline blue eyes. "Besides, I have to have what fun I can before you lose all that weight and put me to work." His hands dropped to Clara's hips and he gave her luscious curves an adoring squeeze. "Not that I mind, of course, but now's not the time for play. Let's go see what Dawn and Valorie have learned; maybe they can help our guest."

He pulled Clara along beside him, taking it easy as Clara walked slowly with him, her hips swaying even more than they normally did. They found their way to one of the doors that ringed the huge, circular park and made their way inside. The broad, lofty hallway that led them down the center of the massive ring of the Archmage's home eventually emptied out into a large open room. The ceiling stretched high above the two dragons, giving the tremendous room a cavernous, but airy, look. Two grand staircases spiraled their way up through the open air, connected to landings on each of the exposed levels. Light poured in through banks of high windows, filling the room with a warm, clear light that scintillated off of the dragons' polished scales.

They were close, and Daryn stepped over to the monumental doors. They each seemed to be made of a single, continuous piece of richly colored wood inlaid with runes of glimmering argentum, symbols of invitation and greetings in almost every language Daryn knew. The doors, almost twice as tall as Daryn, and capable of fitting four of him abreast through their massive frames, swung open smoothly and silently as he pulled.

"Welcome home, ladies," he said cheerily.

Dawn and Valorie gaped upwards at the structure that rose up before them, staring in muted shock. Daryn smiled down at them, waiting for them to recover. They didn't seem any worse for the wear of their trip; Valorie stood tall and confident as she always did, and Dawn carried herself proudly, even in her surprise.

Snapping back to reality first, Dawn's eyes drifted downward until they landed on Daryn. "Master!" she squealed happily. The ecstatic apprentice ran forward and made a flying leap into the dragon's arms. Daryn laughed and spun her around as he did when she was young. He clutched her to his chest in a fond embrace as she twined her arms around his neck. "I missed you so much, Master!" she said energetically.

Daryn scoffed as he lowered her gently back to the floor. "I'm surprised you even thought of me with Valorie there to distract you."

Hearing her name, Valorie's eyes focused on the dragon as she stepped casually forward to punch Daryn playfully in the ribs before wrapping him up in a hug of her own. "I'll have you know," she said with a friendly smile, "that she'd be lost without me."

"Yeah..." Dawn said through a dreamy sigh, "Completely lost." The apprentice abruptly uttered a loud, shocked gasp. "Good Gods, Clara, what did you let him do to you?!"

The silver dragoness sashayed over, a hand under her swollen belly. "A great many things." She said with a sly smile.

Dawn practically squeaked with excitement as she rushed to greet Clara. "Can I...?" she inquired before Clara gave her slow, gracious nod. The apprentice bounced giddily on the balls of her feet and carefully placed her hands on the scales of the dragoness's taut abdomen, feeling how round and full Clara had grown. "It's beautiful!" she whispered ardently, "I'm so happy for you! When... when will you lay?"

"Soon." Clara hummed, shooting Daryn a significant look, "Very soon." She let her eyes slip down to the apprentice whose hands were practically fondling Clara's gravid stomach. The dragoness stooped down to bundle Dawn up in a warm embrace, pressing the apprentice's slight frame into her chest. "What about your journey, Dawn? You're still in one piece, so I take it went well."

Valorie spoke up. "It went... better than I expected. There were a couple of rough spots on the way there, but they weren't anything we couldn't handle." Her chest puffed out proudly as she stepped smoothly over to lay a hand on Dawn's shoulder. She looked questioningly at the Archmage, saying, "We... The trip back was easier, all things considered, but it was... disturbing... to say the least. The world's gone crazy, Daryn. We had to step over people fucking in the streets everywhere we went. No one who could pry their crotch away from the nearest living thing was interested in anything but stuffing themselves into something, or stuffing something into themselves, or both..." She shifted her booted feet uneasily. "Not too long ago, I would have been all for some senseless screwing, the more the merrier, but now that I've seen it everywhere I'm kind of freaking out." She took a steadying breath to wrap herself once more in her veneer of confidence before she nudged Dawn with her hip. "But what really gets me is that Dawn got all the attention while we were out. No one so much as made a pass at me." She huffed indignantly, "I was really hoping I was going to get to hurt someone, but Dawn got to have all the fun."

Returning with a jab at Valorie's thigh, Dawn quipped, "Maybe it's because I'm not the eight foot tall one carrying a sword longer than most people are tall."

A thoughtful hum bubbled up through Valorie's throat. "Maybe, maybe. But my inner vanity tells me it's just that you're much prettier than I am. It's a wonder I haven't developed a complex at this rate." She squeezed the apprentice's shoulder as she returned her attention to the chuckling dragon. "Southcliff seems a bit more... restrained. I presume that's your doing."

"Naturally." Daryn replied, "The Duke has been made aware of the situation and his court wizard has been screening people as they enter. The city has been under quarantine for some time, but we've managed to keep it clean so far." He beckoned them deeper into the large room, directing them to several chairs of different sizes, including ones large enough for even the dragons to sink into.

Dawn gazed up in awe at the enormity of the room around her, asking as she took the indicated seat, "What happened here?"

The dragon smiled and steepled his viciously clawed fingers under his long, triangular snout. "Well... I needed to do some renovations. I may have taken it a little bit farther than I originally intended, but I quite like the end result."

Sputtering, Dawn continued, "Master... the energy that it would have taken to relax the spells on the old Sanctum, tear it down, erect this one, and spell it all together again would have been tremendous, it should have taken years!"

"Yes." Daryn said with a smile that showed too many dagger-like teeth, "It was an exhilarating couple days. It may have taken longer, but I haven't yet reorganized the vaults. That might actually take me years. There are a lot of things I have to be careful around down there." His tail flicked in amusement at Dawn's expression. "You should see the park. Clara provided most of the artistic direction there. It's beautiful."

"We have a park..." Dawn sighed and leaned back, pressing her fingers to her temples. "Okay then. I'll put "Explore New House" on my to-do list, but first, I've got to tell you what Valorie and I discovered on our little escapade."

Clara leaned forward attentively and Daryn nodded as he gestured for the apprentice to tell her tale. The dragon remained silent through most of the story, only asking for clarification as to what exactly Dawn had done to cure the dryad of her taint, at which point the apprentice had only shushed him and continued on. Dawn went into great detail concerning her discovery at the ancient pyramid in the jungle, and the dragon's thickly scaled eyebrows rose as she explained her euphoric realization and its implications.

Daryn's eyes narrowed seriously as he considered his apprentice's words. "Salaxa..." he mused, "That answers a few questions. But for now, I'm more interested in how you cleansed Salixia of her corruption. If anything, that act alone should have been more difficult than cleansing Valorie was, since dryads are beings of inherent magical power."

Dawn clapped her hands excitedly together. "I know, I know. I'm a genius. But I couldn't have done it without Valorie." She reached over to lay her hand delicately on the equine woman's thigh. Valorie's fingers closed around Dawn's slowly as the apprentice continued. "I'm not surprised you didn't notice it when you cleansed her. It's so subtle that I didn't fully realize what it meant until it was almost too late to do anything."

His apprentice was being intentionally cryptic, but Daryn played along. "Alright," he said curiously, "what did I miss?"

Leaning back in her chair, Dawn quickly replied, "Cast a spell on Valorie, anything simple... Make her glow or something. It doesn't really matter, but it does require an active flow of energy, so make it continuous." Valorie started to protest using her body as a testing ground, but Dawn quieted her concerns with a reminder of where she was. The equine grumbled about it, but eventually assented to Daryn's examination.

Daryn thanked her, and did as he was told, easing a gentle flow of magic across Valorie's body, causing her to glow faintly gold with a whispered word. He let his eyes close and followed Dawn's directions, carefully inspecting how his magic interacted with Valorie's vibrant aura. As he swept his mental gaze downward, he noticed something peculiar. The simple spell in which he had cloaked Valorie's powerful frame seemed to bend in on itself around her crotch. "You have got to be kidding me," he said incredulously.

"Nope, it behaves exactly like it looks like it will." Dawn said smugly. "Valorie's little "addition" and I became very acquainted over the course of our trip and I still almost missed it." She gave a victorious grin as she continued, "I'm nowhere near as powerful as you, even before you got all scaly, but I remembered the spell you used to tear the taint from Valorie's

body. I only had to change it up a little bit to get it to work the way I wanted. Valorie was in the middle of... uh..." She paused uncomfortably, and Valorie squeezed her hand reassuringly, "She was in the middle of getting closure when inspiration struck. Her, uh... dangly-bits acted like a ritual slab, focusing the power of my relatively unimpressive spell a thousand-fold or more. The only drawback is that in order to release the amplified energy, she had to "finish the job," as it were." She shifted nervously in her chair. "I presume the effect is a harmless remnant of Valorie's corruption, the method by which Salaxa expected her to spread her so called "gift." But I always did like the idea of fighting fire with fire."

The Archmage sat stunned. Slowly, a wide, toothy grin spread over his tapering, reptilian visage as his eyes bounced from Dawn to Valorie. "Dawn, you brilliant, wonderful girl," he said, his deep, sonorous voice fairly dripping with unrestrained pride, "I'll see that you get your stole for this. You've done something that even I probably wouldn't have been able to do. In fact, you may have just saved the world."

Daryn forced down his glee at his apprentice's accomplishment for a moment as he leaned back and fixed Dawn and Valorie with a more serious eye. "A couple weeks ago, we received a visitor who had an interesting story to tell." He hesitated, bringing up painful memories and gritting his teeth in controlled anger. "I shudder to think what that poor woman went through before she got here. Her mind was almost gone, wiped nearly clean by the vileness of what had been done to her. I daresay she and Valorie would be able to talk about their shared experiences were she lucid enough now to have a conversation. Before she lost control and started humping my leg like an animal," Clara hissed and Daryn looked at her for a second before wrapping his tail around her own and continuing, "she managed to tell us about her home, a city to the north called Venna, where the priestesses of Amara make their home. Tell me. If you were the Demon Lord of lust and domination, what would you target first?"

Dawn's eyebrows rose in alarm as she slowly answered, "The worshippers of the Goddess of Love... It would undermine any resistance that the world could put up and directly harm those that would be able to stop Salaxa."

The dragon nodded grimly. "From what Rhona was able to say, I have reason to believe that the High Priestess, a woman named Nissandra Sardivani, was possessed by Salaxa perhaps a couple weeks after Valorie freed it. But now we know where to go looking for it, and with what you have managed to discover, Dawn, we may even be able to put a stop to this. I tried to help Rhona, I did everything in my power to pull the corruption from her body like I did Valorie, but I couldn't manage it, even with Clara's help. But with your genius, the unmitigated magical strength of two dragons, and Valorie bravery, I know now that we can do it." He looked to the equine woman whose flicking ears betrayed her unease. "I hope, Valorie, that you understand the implications of what it is that I am going to call on you to do."

Valorie's hand clamped down on Dawn's and the equine woman gave a weak smile. "Y-yeah... Dawn and I talked about it on the way back. I'm not going to particularly enjoy it... but, fate of the world and all that. If I can help set this right in any way, I'll do whatever it takes."

"Alright then." Daryn exclaimed, rising easily to his feet. "Let's not waste any time. If you ladies would follow me, we can get this miracle working started" As he stepped out into the center of the huge chamber, the rest of them stood and followed. He led them quickly along the broad, circular hallway, eventually directing them through a large, ornate door into the ritual room.

A large window gave a sweeping view of the park that the Archmage's compound encircled. Dominating the center of the room was a thick, marble slab that rose from the floor,

waiting patiently to fulfill its purpose. "Long time, no see, old friend." Valorie said when she stepped into the room, walking over to run her hand along the smooth, stone surface. "Let me guess." she said with a sardonic smile, "Lie down and hold still?"

Daryn nodded, and the equine started to fiddle with the straps that held the gleaming Argentum armor to her body. The Archmage turned to his apprentice, kneeling to bring himself closer to her as he said confidently, "Alright, Dawn. This is all you, but we need to ramp up the power of this spell, so Clara and I are going to give you all of the energy we can muster. You just need to shape and direct it." The Archmage had to blink through the tears gathering in his eyes as he pulled Dawn into a warm, private hug. "If the Council will hear anything I have to say about it, you won't be my apprentice for much longer." He huffed a short laugh in spite of the tears dripping down his cheeks. "I want to say that I've never been more proud of you than I am right now, but the truth is that you have never once disappointed me or fallen short of my expectations. You've proven time and again that you have earned every ounce of my respect, and I would be glad to speak on your behalf when you feel ready to don your stole."

Dawn returned his embrace, whispering urgently, "Thank you Master. That... that means a lot to me."

The dragon leaned back, eying Dawn with a proud, fatherly smile. "As far as I'm concerned, Dawn, I'm not your master anymore. Call me Daryn, or Archmage if you're feeling formal."

The small woman's breath caught in her throat and Daryn let himself be pulled down back into her hug. She clung tightly around his neck as she muffled her sobs against his shoulder. "I love you Daryn." she whined through her tears. "Thank you so much for everything you've done for me."

Daryn chuckled as he peeled Dawn off of him. "I love you too Dawn." He gingerly swept the tears off of her cheeks with a careful finger and pushed aside an errant strand of her wavy, auburn hair that had fallen forward to obscure her face. "Thank you for keeping me sane all these years." He placed his hands tenderly over Dawn's shoulders, willing her to feel his complete confidence in her. "Now let's go demon hunting."

She nodded vigorously and a look of fierce determination swept over her delicate features. Her skirt swirled through the air as she turned and strode over to Valorie, who had divested herself of her armor and was sitting idly on the edge of the ritual slab. Dawn reached up with both hands, latched onto the collar of Valorie's blouse, and pulled her down so that their lips could meet. Their kiss was long and slow, and Valorie's hands went to Dawn's back to press the smaller woman into her more intimately.

Daryn cocked an eyebrow and looked over at Clara, who was smiling wryly at him. He stepped over and threw an arm over the dragoness's shoulder, twining his tail around hers reflexively as he waited for the two women to be finished with each other's mouths. Reluctantly, Dawn eventually pulled away and told Valorie to lie down and let her take care of everything. The equine did as she was told and Dawn spun to face Daryn once more.

Nodding, the dragon stepped up and set his hand on Dawn's shoulder as she prepared to channel more energy that she could possibly imagine. Daryn muttered a short phrase under his breath and linked himself and Clara. The dragoness began feeding energy into Daryn, and he blinked at the intensity of it as he tempered Clara's raw, frigid strength with his own and sent it in a thin trickle to Dawn.

When Dawn felt the gently pulsing heat bloom within her, she raised her hands, holding them outstretched over Valorie's supine form, and started to sing. Daryn carefully tracked the

progress of the spell that Dawn's beautiful voice was singing into place, eager to see his apprentice's masterpiece for himself. Dawn sang on in a haunting melody, and the Archmage watched the spell slowly take shape around Valorie's body. Daryn's chest filled with pride. Dawn may not have had the strength that he did, but if anything, she had even more finesse. The spell looked almost delicate, the way it was put together, but the threads of magic were woven together with care that made it feel indestructible.

Daryn watched as Dawn laid layer after layer of magic over Valorie's powerful frame, the equine's long ears twitching nervously. The air tightened with the familiar tension of restrained potential and Dawn's voice drifted away into silence. Her shoulders sagged, the difficult, if safe, part complete. She looked up at the Archmage for approval.

He gave her a smug smile and a silent nod. She had done a better job of it than he probably would have been able to. With the spell finished, if still leashed, Daryn took a good long look, studying its construction down to the most minute detail. It was a masterpiece, something that would have taken him weeks to preconstruct. Dawn must have been busy indeed during her walk.

"I-is that it?" Valorie said uncertainly, shattering the brooding silence. "I don't feel any different."

Dawn poked her in the ribs with a chiding finger. "There is enough energy in the air to fry you alive. Does it look like I'm done?"

Valorie grumbled, but remained still as Dawn leaned in to give the equine woman a peck on the cheek. She stretched her arms out, wringing her fingers nervously before she laid one palm lightly on Valorie's chest, just above the swell of her breasts at the beginning of the valley of her cleavage. Dawn had to stretch to reach her other hand out, resting it on the intimidating bulge of Valorie's crotch. She took a deep, steadying breath before she looked back up at Daryn and nodded briefly.

Returning her nod with one of his own, he braced himself, pulling as much strength as he dared into himself, enough to make his chest burn with untapped power. He reached out to lay his hand gently on Dawn's shoulder once more and then emptied himself into her small form. She tensed, and for a split second, worry flashed through Daryn's mind when it looked like Dawn wouldn't rid herself of the energy fast enough, that she would burn, but, with a triumphant cry, she poured the energy into the spell she had fashioned all at once.

The threads of magic Dawn had woven around Valorie flared to brilliant life, giving off a blinding light as the energy shot through Valorie's body. The tension broke as the spell was cast, ripping through the air with a violent concussion. Daryn sidestepped, interposing his bulk between the spreading shockwave and the pregnant dragoness who stood behind him. The force of the explosion crashed into Dawn, who was thrown backwards into Daryn's chest as he caught her. Time seemed to slow as the Archmage was struck with the raw strength of the spell's unleashed power. He staggered back a step, folding his wings tightly against his back so that their crimson membranes wouldn't catch the wind caused by the expanding pressure wave.

And just like that, it was over. The overwhelming radiance dimmed reluctantly and silence filled the room, punctuated only by heavy breathing. Daryn lowered Dawn lightly to the ground, but she still leaned heavily against his leg as she panted. "Well," said Daryn with a huffed laugh, "that was a bit more intense than I expected it to be."

Valorie groaned, staggering upward to sit. She clutched her head in her hand, wincing. "Holy fucking shit, I sure as hell felt that!" She shook her head to clear it. "Gods... my ears are

going to be ringing for days." She glanced over at Dawn, "Are you okay, Dawn? Did... did it work?"

Dawn pushed herself off of Daryn's leg to wobble shakily forward. She reached Valorie and threw her arms around the equine's waist for stability. "Yes, Val." Dawn replied, "It worked. You should be good to... that's funny..." Dawn reached up curiously to run her fingers across the fur of Valorie's chest. Where she had placed her hand for the spell, the fine, delicate hairs had been tinted a pure, perfect white. Standing in stark contrast with the rest of her warm, chocolate brown fur, a bright white starburst pattern had bloomed on her chest, centered above her cleavage and running down onto the upper curves of her breasts.

Valorie looked down and inspected her change, lifting her arm to prod experimentally at the marking on her chest. "Weird... It doesn't feel different." Valorie undid the top two buttons of her blouse, peeling the fabric away to peek down at the rest of her chest. "Huh... I guess it's just there, then... Wait..." She muttered suspiciously. Valorie abruptly jumped to her booted feet and started tugging her pants down over her broad hips. She shamelessly peeled off the thin, gauzy fabric that normally kept her from dangling uncomfortably and exposed herself to the room, gasping at what she saw. "Wow..." she breathed, "It's so... um... white."

Daryn cocked a thickly scaled eyebrow. The normally mottled, pink-and-black skin of Valorie's enormous, equine member looked as if it had been bleached a pale, almost-white pink, a shade barely discernable from the snow white fur that now covered her scrotum. Dawn leaned in, murmuring a brief spell to ensure that nothing had been harmed. "It's fine," she said, awed, "just a little bit lighter than it used to be." She glanced up at Valorie with an embarrassed look. "I didn't really mean for that to happen, but I didn't have any way to know how exactly the spell would react with your body. I can change it back, just let me-mmph!"

Valorie muffled Dawn's words with her mouth as she leaned down to smother the smaller woman's mouth in a heavy kiss. "Relax, Dawn." she said as she straightened. "It's fine. Besides, now when I look at it I can think of you instead of some demon." She awkwardly stuffed herself back into her clothes as she directed her attention back to the Archmage. "Don't look at me like that, Daryn. It's not as if it's anything you haven't seen before. What's next?"

With a flustered sigh, Daryn rolled his eyes as Clara laughed and moved to stand beside him, pressing affectionately into his side. "I guess we should pay a visit to our guest to see if this will actually work in practice, if you feel up to it."

The equine's ears drooped, and her fingers found Dawn's almost magnetically. "Oh, goody, just when I thought I'd never get to do it again, I get to lock myself in a room with some lust-crazed slut." Valorie strained to keep the forced smile on her face. "Point me at her so I can get this over with."

"You don't have to do this if you don't want to, Valorie." Daryn tried to assure her calmly.

The equine shot him a blank stare and held it for a moment before speaking. "Yes I do, Daryn. You've already said that there was nothing you could do to help her like you did me. This is the best bet we have, and I'm not going to jeopardize our chance to put an end to this just because I feel uncomfortable." Her look softened marginally and she stepped over to lay a hand on Daryn's arm. "Thanks for trying to make me feel better though."

The Archmage heaved a heavy sigh that sent a plume of inky black smoke roiling from his nostrils, a sign of his unease. "Alright then." he said slowly, "Follow me and we will do what we can."

Dawn and Valorie walked hand in hand behind Daryn, whose claw-tipped fingers were likewise entwined with Clara's as she stepped smoothly beside him. He felt helpless, but hopeful. He wanted desperately to not have to send Valorie into Rhona's makeshift prison, but knew that it was all that he could do. He hated it. He hated knowing what had to be done, and still having to lay the burden on the shoulders of others. Futile, pointless anger boiled in his gut as he climbed a stairwell to the second floor and ushered his friends through a door into a plush living room.

In the room were several chairs sitting around a plain, sturdy table, along with several bookshelves containing books on a great many subject. The space was warm and cozy, and Daryn gestured around him with a hand. "I've done what I can to keep her comfortable, but she has yet to leave the bedroom. I've given her food, but none of it is ever eaten. I'm not sure she needs to eat in this state." He grimaced, showing his teeth in distaste. "Every time I've been in there, she begs me to use her, or let her use me, and even that much command of language seems to be leaving her." He laid a hand on Valorie's shoulder, his intestines twisting into knots in apprehension. "Valorie..." he said softly, "Thank you for doing this, not just for me, or her, but for everyone who can still be saved. I don't know if she'll let you, but try to be gentle if you can."

Valorie nodded wordlessly and stepped toward the door in the back of the room, through which waited her fate. The equine woman paused as Dawn started to follow her. "Please, Dawn." she whispered weakly, "I don't want you to have to see this."

Contrasting with Valorie's uncertainty, Dawn's voice rang out, clear and confident, "I don't have to see this, Valorie. I'm choosing to see this because I have to be there for you." She wrapped her arm around the equine's lean, muscular waist as if trying to push her confidence into the larger woman. "You're acting like you're walking into the den of some vicious beast, but behind that door is someone who needs help, just like you did that night when you showed up. I love you, Valorie, and I know you love me. I have something very important to ask of you when this is over, but first we are going to go in there and purge the vile taint that is shrouding that poor woman's mind and warping her body against her will in a hideous mockery of everything I believe in."

Seemingly set at ease by Dawn's words, Valorie crushed the smaller woman's body into her own with an arm as she nodded in sudden, fierce determination. She strode forward, practically dragging Dawn toward the door before she threw it open and swept through it, Dawn and all. Daryn caught a glimpse of movement through the doorway before Valorie kicked the door closed. He felt a dull pulse of magic and the room suddenly became deafeningly silent as Dawn spelled a shield over the bedroom, blocking sounds from leaving. Daryn thought it dangerous to cut themselves off like that, but Dawn and Valorie had proven capable of taking care of themselves and if there ever was a time when they deserved privacy, it would be to do what it was Valorie was now so suddenly determined to do.

Daryn stared hard at the door for a minute that seemed to stretch on for eternity, willing the time to pass more quickly. He blinked when he felt Clara's body sliding up against his own. The dragoness curled her arms around his chest and purred up at him, "They go well together. You have a good reason to be proud. Dawn's changed a lot since in the time it took them to walk to the jungle and back again." She ran her hands along the slab-like muscles of his chest as she murmured, "You were right; if we had flown them, they would have missed out. Although I think you just did it to put off learning how to fly." She looked up into at him, her brilliant emerald irises glimmering with concern. "You still worry too much."

He pulled her down onto his lap as he lowered himself into the only chair in the room capable of holding his weight. He smiled at how pleasantly the swell of Clara's rear pressed into

his thighs. "Worry is an occupational hazard" he said lightheartedly, "but I'll try not to let it get the best of me." Clara hummed encouragingly when Daryn clutched her to his body with a thick arm thrown over her slender shoulders. He rested the fingers of his other hand lightly on the round curve of Clara's pregnant belly. "How long?" he questioned slowly.

Clara rested her head against Daryn's shoulder as she answered dreamily, "Not long. A day, maybe two." Her hand went to his, drawing strength from the simple, intimate contact. "I'm so excited, Daryn. We're going to be parents. A beautiful little hatchling, so vibrant and free, fluttering around these halls, can you imagine it? I can't wait. It's all I can think about."

The dragoness trembled excitedly against Daryn's body and he chuckled, a feeling of euphoric joy washing through him. "I can imagine it, yes. But surely what my mind can come up with will pale in comparison to reality. You have no idea how hard it's been to stop myself from checking to see whether it's a boy or a girl."

"I think I might have an inkling, actually." Clara retorted with a smile, "It has been growing in me for the last couple months, after all." She prodded him in the side with an ivory claw. "I just want to lay it so you can feel how heavy it is."

Tilting his head to the side with a wry smile, Daryn laughed as Clara let out a startled yelp when he heaved himself to his digitigrade feet, taking the dragoness with him in his arms. "Is that so?" he said as he nuzzled the tip of his snout into Clara's throat. "I think I can manage it." He hefted Clara up and down for a few seconds, looking as pensive as he could manage through his mirth. "Well, you barely weigh anything, so it must be such a chore for you to lug it around, what with it making up such a huge proportion of your weight and all. It must weigh... what, fifty pounds, maybe?" He checked again, "Maybe closer to sixty. Small wonder you're been moving so slowly." He dropped his voice low, growling into her neck, "I quite like you like this, so heavy and helpless, unable to stop me from doing whatever I want to you." He stroked his hand languidly up the inside of Clara's thigh, stopping just shy of the delicate scales that hid her womanhood from his teasing fingers.

Clara shuddered against him, her breath quickening until she panted urgently. Her breath was cold on the onyx scales of his chest, and she gasped as he raised his hand from her shapely legs to the curve of a white-scaled breast. "You're belly isn't the only thing that's grown." He squeezed gently, and Clara muffled a moan as she writhed wordlessly. "I guess these things aren't just for me to play with. They're so big now; they must be so full and tight, aching to be touched, emptied of their load. I've wondered for a while now what dragon milk must taste like. Let me know if you ever feel up to giving me a sip. I'll be oh, so gentle; I promise." He let his tongue fall out of his mouth to slide gingerly along the line of a tendon in her throat as she whined and clutched at his back. "Flying isn't everything I've been practicing. I'm getting quite dexterous, especially with how often you're letting me hone my skills."

She was so soft against him, but still so strong when she tensed as he brushed his thumb along her engorging nipple. Daryn could feel the dragoness's heartbeat through her scales, could see the blush of desire working its way through the icy blue membrane of her wings. She was melting against him, growing limp and placid, turning into his plaything, begging for him to continue, yearning for him to carry her back to where they could be alone.

He returned her calmly to her feet, in spite of her groans of protest. He rested the weight of his head against her horns, letting the thunderous bass of his voice vibrate down their clean, white length and into her skull. "Thank you for pulling me from the miasma of my own foul mood, Clara. I love you... as much as anything I've ever known." He traced a gleaming black claw along the delicate muscles around her wing as she huffed dejectedly against him. "Don't

worry Clara." he said soothingly, "If you would like to continue this conversation, my schedule opens up after this last meeting. Some young woman named Rhona who has terrifically bad timing."

Daryn gave Clara a firm grope as she spun and stalked to the door, throwing it open with another huff that was almost a hiss. As she let the door close behind her, she turned to eye Daryn with one sparkling emerald iris. Just before the door shut, a broad, toothy grin slipped over her features, and she gave the Archmage a meaningful wink.

The dragon smiled happily, his evening was just booked solid. He muttered a string of words under his breath and felt the familiar weight of his longcoat settle on his shoulders. Daryn idly wished that he could just put it on normally, but his wings made that an impossibility. He straightened the collar on his neck and settled back into the chair to wait for the far door to open.

And open it did. Daryn nearly jumped from his chair when the latch slid quietly open and the door floated uncertainly inward. A young, terrified-looking woman stepped cautiously into the cozy room, shutting the door behind her. Her face paled more than it already was when she locked eyes with the Archmage, but she still let herself walk slowly forward and sink into a chair across from the dragon.

Rhona was cleaner than when Daryn had last seen her. Dawn must have tidied her up before sending her out to the Archmage. She was clothed in one of the sets of clothes that Daryn had given her when she first arrived. The frightened young woman was beautiful through her fear, with long, brown hair that matched the mellow color of her large, expressive eyes. Full, soft lips and a pert nose perfectly complimented her dainty features, and long slender fingers twined together nervously as she sat under the dragon's gaze.

Daryn was doing everything in his power to make himself look less intimidating, and he let Rhona speak first. "S-sir..." she stammered.

That was no good, Daryn kept his eyes on the bridge of her nose as he said as gently as possible, "Please, call me Daryn, or Archmage if you must. I'm not old enough to be a "sir" quite yet."

She nodded, taking a slow deep breath as she chewed her words. "I'm sorry, Archmage..." Hesitation. "For what?" Daryn wondered softly.

"I should have known something was wrong right away. Her eyes were different, but I didn't want to think anything was wrong. I was the first; she used me to corrupt the rest of the sisters. If I hadn't ignored my gut, I could have gotten help. I could have stopped it. I could have..."

Daryn stopped listening. He fought back a sigh. Why did they always, always blame themselves? He sat placidly, watching her lips move, not hearing the sounds she was making. He waited for the words, the words she was inevitably going to say. They all said them eventually. Every. Single. Time. Without fail. It was my fault. Why did it always have to be someone's fault? Sometimes Daryn got tired of lifting the burden of guilt from the shoulders of others.

There they were, those four little words. "Stop." Daryn said, a bit more gruffly than he intended, "Say that again."

"It... i-it was my fault." she said, once more terrified.

Humming thoughtfully, Daryn nodded slowly. "Okay then." Daryn started, trying not to sound as well rehearsed as he was. "If you could go back, how would you stop this?" He gestured, urging an answer from the tiny woman. "What would you do differently?"

"I-I just said. I could have gotten help. I could have warned the other sisters. I could have--"

"How?"

Rhona stopped, staring at him. She started uncertainly. "I... I could have told the rest of the sisterhood-"

"How?"

She opened and closed her mouth futilely. "Listen, Rhona." Daryn said as earnestly as he dared, "as soon as you stepped into the room with that creature, what happened was bound to happen. What if you had followed your instinct? What if you had tried to leave? Would you have thought of some excuse to get away? Who would believe you even if you did manage to get away? Who would have thought that the high priestess of the Sisterhood of Amara was possessed by a demon that no one has heard of in thousands of years?" Daryn laid his hands on the table, palms up in a gesture of supplication. "What could you have done differently? Would you have ignored the summons from the head of your religion, and, if my guess is any good, someone you have feelings for? Would you have actively denied the request of someone you had no reason to distrust?" The dragon tried to keep his voice even, as he continued, "If you hadn't fallen for this demon's seduction, it would have held you down with the hands of the woman you love and raped you anyway." He leaned forward slowly, looking at her until she met his gaze, a feat not many could manage. "What could you have possibly done to stop this?"

"I don't know..." she croaked, tears hovering in her eyes.

Much better. Daryn allowed himself a warm smile as he said emphatically, "That is because this is not your fault."

Rhona covered her face with her hands and shook with quiet sobs. "I... What... Oh, Gods, Nissa."

Daryn slowly slid to his feet to circle the table and kneel behind the weeping woman. He gingerly rested his hand against her back, saying calmly, "My friends and I are going to do everything we can to stop this madness, and as long as-hnnk!"

He choked off a grunt of surprise when Rhona spun around and latched onto his neck. Well then, he had already made it to the hugging stage. That was promising. He patiently wrapped an arm around her thin shoulders and returned her embrace. "Please, Daryn." she whispered through her tears. "Please save her. She just wanted to prove that she could handle the responsibility. She wouldn't want any of this, I swear."

"I shall make it my mission." Daryn hummed against her. "You'll be back home with your loved ones before you know it. But until then, you are free to stay here for as long as you need to. Although I recommend that you use a different room. This one probably needs to be cleaned."

The tiny woman nodded against him. "Thank you." she murmured softly.

Finally someone understood. A hug and a "thanks," that's all he had ever needed.