

Occupational Hazards

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It took Ivy no more than a few seconds to pop the lock on the back door and slip silently through it. It was pitch black inside, but she had good eyes, and she had taken plenty of time to acclimate herself to the darkness of night outside. She navigated the familiar landscape of the workshop's back room, working her way to the second door. She had spent weeks scoping out the complex of the alchemist's guild, and knew what she wanted lay only another door in. She hurried over to it and started fiddling with its lock. This lock was of far better construction and it took several moments of silent effort before it gave with a satisfactory click.

Ivy hurried inside, closing the door softly behind her. She was awed by what she saw. Shelf after tall shelf stretched off into the darkness, each weighted down with countless racks holding countless vials, some large some small. Ivy's shoulders sagged. This might take longer than she had planned. This wasn't even the guild's largest workshop, and there looked to be thousands of potions sitting in the shelves in this room. She sighed heavily and started inspecting the racks on one side of the room, intent on working her way through the shelves methodically, but soon ran into another problem. Whatever system the alchemist's used to organize their storage, she could make neither fins nor fur of it.

She hissed a quiet oath and shrugged her pack off. Her client had prepared her for this eventuality, but it was frustrating nonetheless. She dug around in her bag until her hands found a smooth brass rod, perhaps six inches long. She pulled it out and swatted it against her palm, breaking the flimsy glass tube within it. She couldn't help but grin at the irony as the thick glass plate at one end of the candlerod began to glow with a gentle, white light. She had purchased it from the very alchemists she was now going to rob.

With a hand cupped around the light, keeping it away from any windows or doors she may have missed, she began to carefully inspect each rack of vials, comparing their color to a piece of paper she slid from her pocket. There seemed to be no end to the shelves, and she forced herself to take slow, even breaths as time ticked away. Her heart jumped elatedly into her throat when she found a match to her sample color. Her elation was matched by her despair when she noted that there were several racks that matched the color she needed, and they were all labeled differently.

She cursed again under her breath. She would have to take them all. Crystalline vials clicked quietly as she pulled the racks off of the shelf and started layering them in a well-padded sack that she had brought with her. There were a lot of them, and her sack was heavier than she had anticipated, but she bundled it up in her arms nonetheless, silently wondering how she was going to get out of the compound with the weighty bag. She nearly leapt out of her fur when she heard the sounds of someone moving around on the floor above her.

Definitely time to leave. She slid the candlerod back into her pack, hiding its glow as she shouldered both her bag and the potion-burdened sack and trotted over to the door, stepping softly so as to keep the potions on her back from jostling. Her triangular, canine ears perked up, straining to hear what the person upstairs was doing at the same time as they listened for any movement on the other side of the door. When she heard none, she cracked the door and peered through it. Satisfied that there was no one waiting just outside to pounce on her, she stepped through and closed it as quietly as possible behind her. Whoever it was that was awake at such

an unholy hour was coming down the stairs in the front of the workshop and there was no way Ivy could manage to lock the door back in time. She didn't like being sloppy, but better sloppy than caught.

She scurried from the building, taking care to close the door as she slipped out into the alley between two buildings. Hunched low to the ground, she rushed away from the workshop, hugging the wall of another building, praying to the gods that her presence wouldn't be discovered until she was far away. It seemed to not be her night, however, when a sharp, angry cry echoed down the alley from the building she had just vacated. Her thick, sleek fur jumped up as if it were trying to leap from the back of her neck, but she forced herself not to run, swallowing the sudden, icy rush of adrenaline that poured through her veins. Running made you more visible.

She slowed to a stop, peering around a corner. Her breath caught in her throat and she ducked back behind the building. That was unfortunate. She wasn't sure how he had gotten there before her, but there was a powerfully built otter morph standing at the gate that she had used to gain entrance to the alchemist's compound, his eyes sweeping the surrounding shadows. She turned and headed back the way she had come, taking a turn down an even narrower alley. She had hoped she would have been able to use the gate; the wall around the complex was tall, and climbing it would be difficult.

But she knew things rarely went as planned, and had prepared accordingly. Ivy had memorized a map of the compound, and she hurried to the place that would least likely to be watched by an alerted guard, a shadowy stretch of sheer wall to which her chosen path would bring her. Ivy miraculously reached the wall without incident and couldn't see anyone around, so she took a short opportunity to settle her nerves and take from her pack a short length of rope. She tied it securely to a heavy, iron grappling hook; this wasn't going to be quiet, and as soon as the metal hit the wall, time was of the essence. She spun it in her hands once, twice, and released it, holding her breath as the hook arched up and over the wall. There was a lip it should be able to grab onto; she just had to pray it landed correctly.

Her hook clattered noisily against the far side of the wall, and the glass was turned. She pulled the rope gently, and when the metal barbs caught the lip, she tested her weight on the cord. She got nothing but slack, and the grappling hook fell inward toward her from the wall, clanging even more loudly on the stone pavers. "Fuck!" she hissed, frantically throwing the hook back over the wall as she heard shouting approaching from further in the compound. This time the hook held, and she scrambled up the sturdy cord, hauling herself up the wall with frantic energy.

A voice barked at her from below, and she spared it a glance, praying not to see a crossbow pointed at her. It was the otter, sprinting along the wall toward her, shouting for her to stop. Not likely to happen, and she was a scant foot from the top of the wall when her pursuer hurled himself onto the rope. The sudden weight caused the hook to lose its hold, and she jumped for it, her fingers barely catching the lip as the otter fell to the ground. Ivy's arms burned as she struggled to haul herself atop the wall. The otter jumped to his feet and pleaded for her to come down, telling her that she didn't understand, but at the sight of more people running to the wall, she gave him a winning smile and dropped off the top of the wall.

The wall wasn't the tallest she had climbed, but she was in a hurry, and she was weighed down by Gods knew how many potion vials. She landed hard, her pawed, digitigrade feet taking the impact of her landing, but barely, and she winced at a glimpse of the pain she would be feeling in the morning. Ivy hadn't the time for that at the moment, though, and she took off, no

longer caring to keep quiet. She just tried to distance herself from the compound as quickly as possible.

Ivy was small for a dog morph, especially for a husky, but her athletic body was layered with wiry muscle, and her proportionally long legs carried her swiftly away from the site of her crime. She knew the city of Southcliff better than the back of her hand, and she knew that if she could just make it into the alleyways of the merchant's district, no one would be able to find her. And so she ran.

Her fear threatened her sense, and she kept a tight rein on it as she took seemingly random twists and turns, trying to shake any potential followers. Her lungs burned, and she was beginning to develop a frightful stitch in her side as her legs chewed up the miles between her and one of her many bolt-holes. She was close to her destination, and she was certain she had lost anyone that may have chased her from the compound, but she didn't let herself slow. She jumped, intending to vault a high fence, and she almost made it, but combined with what was likely going to be a painful injury in the morning, the sack slung over her shoulder weighed her down more than she anticipated and she clipped the fence on the way over it.

She hit the ground hard, flopping over the wall and onto her back. Ivy winced at the sound of dozens of fine glass vials shattering. "Oh fuck me backwards!" she growled. Ivy staggered to her feet. She had to continue; she wasn't safe yet. A cold, almost icy chill worked down her spine, and she stopped. "Oh no." she breathed. Adrenaline-fueled chills weren't supposed to be... wet. She yelped and threw the dripping sack across the alley, wriggling out of the straps of her pack and twisting her arms behind her. "Oh shit!" she barked, shivering as more of the fluid wicked into her clothes and fur, "Shitshitshit!" Her back was drenched, and the syrupy liquid soaked into her dark, baggy clothing with impossible zeal.

As wet as her back was, it dried quickly, disappearing through her fur and into her skin. A ball of icy dread sunk into Ivy's gut. A dose of almost any potion was no more than an ounce, she had been soaked in much more, and now it was inside her. Her client had been reluctant to tell her the effects of the potions she had been tasked to steal, but Ivy had a sinking suspicion she was about to find them out, as well as those of whatever else it was she had taken. She hoped beyond hope that the potions were mundane and not transformative, but she had a feeling that her client wouldn't have wanted them stolen if he could have walked into the guild and bought them for far less than the gold she had been promised.

She staggered over to the wall of a building and sagged against it. Her back was starting to tingle, and it was slowly spreading across her skin. The prickling, pins-and-needles sensation crept along under her fur. Ivy had never felt anything quite like it, but it certainly wasn't without its pleasure. Ivy started to wonder if anything was ever going to happen when the tingling was slowly overcome with an almost uncomfortable tightness, like her skin was being stretched out on a drying rack.

The feeling intensified, and her sensitive ears shot up as she got a dull sense of what was happening to her. She laid a curious hand on her trim stomach. She didn't believe what she felt, and she snaked her hand up under the hem of her shirt to feel what was happening under her fur. Her muscle writhed under her skin, and she felt her pulse quicken. Each toned abdominal heaved against her fingers, and Ivy whined weakly as she felt her abs swelling outward, growing thicker and harder.

Her core was suddenly more muscular than it had ever been, not tight and athletic, but hugely, powerfully built, she cried out in anguish as the perfect, athletic body she worked so hard for was swallowed by heavy slabs of dense muscle that surged to life under her skin. It wasn't

stopping at her belly, and she could feel her once baggy clothing drawing tight around her waist and shoulders. Her body grew outward, throbbing in time with the beating of her heart, and she quietly begged for it to stop. She didn't want this, as good as if felt, as impossibly erotic as it made her feel. Her body was her life; she couldn't hope to sneak around in the night if she was the size of a horse.

The seams of her shirt along her shoulders started to pop loudly anyway as she started to outgrow her clothes. "No..." she hissed at her expanding frame, "Please stop." It didn't, and her waistband was beginning to grow painfully tight. She looked down at herself. Her usually loose clothing looked like it was painted onto her fur. Her legs looked like tree trunks, and she huffed out a relieved grunt as the fabric started to split under the advance of her titanic thighs. Inch after inch, pound after pound of bulk heaved up against her skin, and the sounds of tearing cloth filled the alley. She cried hopelessly as her massive shoulders stretched wider to support the addition of cords of powerful muscle that shredded their way free of the confines of her dark grey shirt.

"Oh..." she moaned as her mind was assaulted with the flood of might that poured onto her form, "Wh-whose idea was it to make it feel... so good! Nngh!" She spun on the wall, shoving her broadening back against it as she raised her hands to her head. The slow bending of her arms was enough to make her biceps bulge against her skin, thickening and tearing free of her sleeves. She growled, fed up with the sound of her clothes shredding off of her growing body. She grabbed a fistful of her shirt and yanked it off of her chest, tossing it aside. Her modest breasts bounced, suddenly free from the constricting confines of her shirt and bra, and Ivy got an eyeful of how huge she was becoming.

Her now barreled chest heaved with each heavy breath. Veins throbbed just under the skin, feeding blood to surging muscles as she continued to grow. Her pectorals shoved her bust forward, and she could have sworn that she was also growing bustier as the process wore on. She clenched her hands into tight balls and flexed her arms across her chest, working her thick muscles. They seemed to be encouraged by her seeming eagerness, and they thickened dramatically as if fuelled by her movements. She grunted as her pants noisily gave way, and she gave them the same treatment, viciously tearing them off of her humongous legs.

She took a step forward, watching in awe as her thighs bunched and bulged, growing thicker and thicker. She clamped her hands down them as if to force them back into her legs, but they bulged joyously along with her arms at the sudden motion. She could see each muscle rolling and tensing under her fur, getting steadily larger as her skin was stretched over a body that would look muscular for a person twice her size. She had seen horse morphs that had to work furiously to get a body like hers.

Each movement made her bulk flex powerfully. It felt like she was smuggling boulders under her skin, her endlessly surging form was so hard and unyielding. Her abs were like bricks stacked over her stomach and she let out a pitiful whine as she fell forward onto her hands and knees. "Stop. Please stop." She closed her eyes, willing it to end, but she grunted loudly as she felt it... not stop, but shift.

Her body suddenly screamed at her. It was like every nerve in her body was screeching into her ears. What took Ivy by surprise was that, as uncomfortable as the sudden feeling was, it didn't hurt. It felt even better than it had before. She growled and cracked her eyes open, peering at her surroundings. Her dark, shoulder-length hair had fallen forward to obscure her vision, having somehow broken free of the leather thong that had held it in a ponytail, but what she could see didn't shock her. She could feel each new muscle as if she had had them for her entire life. She panted as she dropped to her rear, looking down at herself.

She felt taller. She must have needed a few more inches to tack more muscle to, and the potions that had hijacked her body just made themselves at home. The tingling in her skin had returned, and she suspected that there was more to happen, despite her body having mercifully stopped its absurd growth. She looked numbly at her arms, at the unflexed biceps that were the size of her old legs. She clenched her teeth, curling her arms up with as much tendon-popping force as she could muster.

"F-fuck!" she growled in an uncontrolled moan. It was nearly orgasmic, that simple exertion. She flexed again, more slowly and controlled. It built in her body as she put more effort into tensing the muscle, an electric twinge that felt like her body was screaming out in ecstasy without her. She had to stop herself from continuing; now was not the time to experiment. Ivy got a leg underneath her and fought to heave herself to her feet. Instead, she collapsed back onto the ground as the weight of her titanic new body fell onto her legs. She stifled a blissful cry, clenching her teeth fiercely around her euphoria.

Each heavenly twinge shot directly to the cleft between her legs. It felt better than any sex she had ever had. Not only that, but as she gingerly squeezed her thick bicep in a gentle hand, she felt how sensitive she had become. Her body ached to be touched nearly as much as it demanded to be tested. The throbbing in her muscles begged her to find something heavy to heft in her arms, something impossibly large to lever off of the ground with her corded legs. She knew she would cum if she did, and it would be the greatest orgasm of her life.

"This isn't happening," she reasoned to herself, "I can't be trapped here under my own body by threat of orgasm. I'm better than this. How could this have happened to me? I'm good at this. Stupid godsdamned otter, being where he shouldn't have been. What do I do now? There's got to be something I can do to get out of this. There's always a way out." She fought down her mind-numbing fear at being found there by the guards and forced her mind to think of something constructive. She sat up slowly, groaning at the twinge of pleasure that throbbed in her body. It was just an orgasm. She'd had plenty of those, usually alone; what could one more hurt?

She leaned heavily on the wall as she struggled to her padded feet. Her body was so heavy, and it was enough to make her tremble on the precipice of sweet release. Leaving her pack and the accursed sack where she had dropped them, she took a step forward, choking back a moan. Her eyes darted around at everything of their own accord, sizing everything up, gauging how easily she could lift them now. An empty handcart, a stack of crates, a barrel of rainwater. Each of them had the potential to have her screaming as she heaved her huge body up under them. She couldn't shake the desire, the need for that release, and she whined and sunk back down to her knees after traveling only a few dozen steps.

It was hopeless. Each step was torturous bliss and she would never make it to her hidey-hole before she creamed herself and collapsed onto the paving stones of the alley, paralyzed with agonizing ecstasy. She threw her back against the wall and slid down it, bracing herself for what she was sure needed to be done. Her fingers lightly touched her, tracing the curve of her vulva and teasing around her sopping womanhood. She clenched her other hand into a fist repeatedly, rhythmically, fingering her erect clit in time with the pulses of rapture that tore through her body.

Instead of down, into herself, her dainty hand drifted upward, tracing the outline of each abdominal, feeling them flex as she bucked her hips. It felt better than anything she could do to herself, and she rocked her body, tensing each muscle individually, wringing what pleasure she could out of it before she moved to a new one. Her breasts, enlarged as they were, were forgone in favor of her pecs, and she used her musculature's adamant hardness against itself as she pressed her fingers into her chest, forcing her arms in and flexing them mercilessly. Without

stopping she rolled her shoulders back, lifting her titanic arms and pushing her chest out, flexing her back with enough urgency to make her squeal deliriously.

Without any further hesitation, she hauled herself up. She was delightfully heavy, and she bounced on the balls of her feet, letting her calves take her mass again and again as she pondered her surroundings. There were plenty of options, but nothing that could provide enough resistance showed itself. The barrel must have weight hundreds of pounds, but it wasn't enough for her purposes, she could dead lift it over and over again, but she wanted this to be over now. She had better things to be doing.

She spun and faced the wall with a feral snarl. She wasn't sure what buildings this wall was connected to, but there was no way she would be able to tear it from the ground. She forced herself to take deep breaths as she reached down and tore hundred-pound pavers from the ground with the ease of tossing wads of wet paper. She bent her legs into a squat as she hooked her fingers under the wall, digging her short claws into the building's foundation. She looked at herself, at the absurdity of what she was doing, and then hauled upward.

She thanked the gods that the building didn't budge, and she threw every fiber of her tremendous new being into the desperate act of tearing the building free of the earth. Her eyes rolled back into her head and she grunted. There were no more moans in her. Veins throbbed to the surface of her muscular body as it bulged with giddy desperation. Lightning bolts of pure, mindless pleasure tore their way up and down her spine, funneling each pulsing beat of her heart directly into her loins as she came messily.

She wasn't a squirter, but she could hear the spray of musky girlcum splattering against the wall as she groaned and heaved harder. She wanted to scream, but her diaphragm was locked in her effort, and was only adding to her bliss. She felt the paving stones she had braced herself on cracking, and she sank into the ground with the force of her exertion. Her muscles burned; she was so hot, and sweat matted her fur as she forced herself to cum again and again. Stars of overwhelming release exploded behind her eyes and her superhuman endurance began to flag as she lost her silent focus and began to gasp. She put her back into the continued effort and she lost herself in it. She curled her head downward and lapped fitfully at her bulging bicep, licking the sweat from her fur as she traced a violently throbbing vein and worshiped her hard-working muscle.

"More!" she squealed, "Harder, bigger! I should have pushed you, made you get even bigger! Work for me, damn you!" Her mind couldn't qualify the agony, the torturous power she sank into the building's foundation just to have it rebound into her body and make her shudder in orgasm after back-to-back orgasm. She couldn't stop herself from letting out a rapturous howl as she felt her tendons scream for her to stop. She was going to break something, and she welcomed it. She demanded something to give her a challenge, something to make her look inadequate. The building's foundation cracked, and suddenly her hands shot up, tearing a huge chunk of solid stone out of the ground in her claws. She yelped and fell over backward, toppling to the ground and writhing in her endless bliss.

Slowly, her pleasure died down, and she was left with the satisfied ache of well-worked muscles as the tingling likewise left her, leaving her alone with her panting and whining and squirming. And then the stupidity of what she had just done crashed into her, and she jumped to her feet in a panic. She glanced down, wincing at the slick of feminine fluids that matted the fur around her crotch and the tremendous mess she had made of the alleyway. Everyone in the city must have heard that howl, and she may as well have just stuck a sign to her back that said, "Please investigate this suspicious noise."

She sprinted back the way she had come, catching up her pack in her hands and staying well clear of the puddle that the sack holding the remains of the potion vials was sitting in. Then she turned around and continued to run for her safehouse. Her new legs sped her along her way, but she prayed that the effects were temporary. The odds were in her favor; potions were rarely made to last for more than a few hours, but this felt different. It may have been a side-effect of the disastrous mixture of potions that had soaked into her skin, but it didn't feel like she would be shrinking down, which meant her life was essentially over. She couldn't go shopping for new clothes like this. Her body screamed, "I took too many potions and am most definitely a suspect in the massive potion theft that happened a while ago." She cursed her idiocy, and prayed to the gods to take mercy on her.

She could see the door of her bolt hole, and temporary sanctuary was a certainty, when she saw the door open to permit the exit of a pleasant looking cat morph with pitch black fur. Ivy skidded to a halt at his upraised hand. "Wh-what are you doing here?!" she hissed at her client, "Oh gods, you set me up. Damn it!"

He chuckled warmly and raised his hands defensively. "Hardly..." he purred, "I was just anxious to pay you the rest of what I owe and be done with our transaction. You really should take more care to hide your... residences, this one wasn't hard to find." His yellow eyes sparkled in the moonlight, and he smiled hungrily at her naked body. "I see you've been sampling your haul. Probably best to save that for the safety of your own home, hmm?" He brandished a leather pouch, jingling the coins it held for emphasis. "Hand over what I wanted and it's all yours. I'm needed elsewhere."

Taken aback, Ivy stammered, "W-well... the thing is... I may not have been able to get what you needed. There were so many potions of the same color, and I took them all to be safe, but they broke and got all over me and did... this to me." His expression lost its joviality and he slipped the pouch back into the pocket of his coat as his face hardened. "Listen!" she hurried to explain, "I can get you more! They had more. I just wasn't able to take them all. Give me a week--two at most--and I can get you what you need!"

The cat morph's ears flattened against his skull in sullen anger. "You clumsy idiot!" he hissed, "I needed those potions tonight, not next week! I came to you because I was told that you were the best! The best! I needed you to provide, you... you! Damn it!" His chest heaved furiously and he bared his claws as he appeared about to jump a husky several times his weight in a blind rage. Eventually, however, he huffed and straightened his back, smoothing his short, black hair with a calming finger as he eyed Ivy again, taking in her appearance. "So be it. If you cannot live up to your end of our bargain, I will take what I can." He curled his finger at her and hissed a string of unsettling words that hit Ivy like the fist of a god.

She toppled backward, landing heavily and cracking her head on the pavers hard enough to daze her. She struggled to sit up, and sudden, ice cold terror shot through her veins. She couldn't move. She could feel her body; she wasn't numb. She just couldn't make her humongous form move, no matter how much she wanted it to. The feline laced his fingers delicately together and watched her for a moment, giving a satisfied nod when she didn't as much as twitch.

He stepped forward to stand next to her, an empty smile on his lips. His heavy cloak rustled as he took a knee at her side. He didn't make eye contact as he let his confident hands roam over Ivy's body. She could feel his claws on her fur as he poked and prodded her, testing the firmness of her muscle and the softness of her... other parts with as much emotion as a butcher inspecting a cow soon to be slaughtered. She couldn't even talk to beg for him to stop. All she seemed to be able to do was blink and breathe.

"Yes..." he said in another satisfied purr, more to himself than her, "You'll be useful to her, I think. I may be saved after all." He lifted his hand and snapped his fingers. Two shadowy figures stepped into the back alley from a smaller, adjoining one and trotted over. She couldn't make out features, but they were both masculine, muscular shapes and clad in dark, concealing clothing. "Get her up and to the cart." the cat said urgently to them, "cover her and make sure she can't be seen. Don't bother to be gentle, she's sturdy enough."

The two figures nodded sharply and strode over to Ivy, one taking up a position behind one arm and the other behind the other. Apparently they doubted their ability to lift her clear from the ground and intended to drag her off to gods knew where. They made to heave upward when a blinding, white light exploded in the middle of the sky directly above them. The cat cried out in confusion, and the dark alley abruptly went to hell.

Ivy blinked the frightened tears from her eyes in time to see two figures burst into the alley in front of her, these two both wearing polished, silvery armor with bright blue capes and brandishing a pair of flawlessly polished swords. The two men simultaneously swore under their breaths and reached under their cloaks, whipping out matching, wicked-looking shortswords and charging the two Silver Lancers that had surprised them. Just before they clashed, Ivy went deaf, her world suddenly becoming dead silent, despite the sight of steel striking steel.

It seemed that Ivy wasn't the only one suddenly afflicted by the inability to hear as she saw the cat gesture wildly at the four combatants and shout something. The cat blinked in surprise when nothing happened, as if only then realizing that there had been no sound for several seconds. His long fingers went to his throat in confusion, and Ivy saw him speaking to no effect. His fur stood on end and his tail puffed up in frustration as he screamed silently, shaking his hands as if trying to strangle the Lancers at a distance.

He didn't even notice the third shape dropping from a rooftop behind him until it was too late to do anything about it. His cloak billowed outward as he spun just in time to catch the third Lancer's gauntleted fist in his face. His eyes rolled back and his legs limply dropped him to the ground, where Ivy's savior kicked him savagely for good measure. He turned toward Ivy, and she caught his warm brown eye wink at her through his helmets faceplate. He reached into a satchel at his side and pulled out a thin metal band. He bent down and the metal reshaped as he clasped it around the feline's wrists, he pulled out a couple more, binding the cat's ankles and using one to gag him so he could no longer speak. Only then did he pull out a small, crystalline orb, throwing it to the ground with enough force to shatter it.

Ivy's hearing rushed back to her, the sounds of fighting crashing over her. One Lancer got in a solid blow with his sword, and one of the shadowy figures clutched his side and went down. Suddenly outnumbered, the last man standing threw his sword down and lifted his hands, crying out for mercy. Ivy's savior nodded in satisfaction and turned his attention to the bulky, supine husky.

The otter from before smiled at her as he pulled off his helmet. "Hello again." he said casually, "We've got to stop meeting like this." He gestured at the unconscious feline with a thumb. "I think he just stilled you. It should wear off in a couple of minutes now that he's out like a light. One blink for yes, two for no, okay? Can you understand me?" Ivy blinked for him. "Good. Can you still feel your skin?" Another blink. "Alright, then he did just still you. You're going to be fine. Can I check to see if he did anything else to you?" Ivy blinked again, and a tear slid sullenly down her cheek.

The otter shook his head. "No, no. None of that." He took Ivy's hand, holding it in his own as he lifted her arm to where she could see it. His thick tail twitched as he smiled gently.

"You're going to be okay. We've got you, and they will die before they hurt you any more, alright? Everything is going to be okay. You have my word. Now just hold still, I don't even need to touch you to make sure you're not enspelled with anything more insidious." He kept one hand on Ivy's, laying it on his shoulder as he closed his eyes and swept his other hand vaguely down her body. A few seconds later, and it was done. "There. All done!" he said happily, "You're all good, aside from having put on a few pounds since we last met. If I might be frank, I liked you better before. Did he do this to you?" Two blinks. "Okay, so the potions, then?" Blink. "Alright. I presume you didn't do this intentionally?" Blink. "Whew. That's a relief. Okay. Listen. Whatever you've done in your past, the Silver Lance doesn't care about, so long as you're not hiding sex slaves in your basement. Will you let me help you?"

"Please." Ivy croaked, her paralysis slowly wearing off.

He grinned like he hadn't just likely saved her life. "Great! Whoa there. Don't try to get up yet, just let it wear off. You're safe right now. No need for adrenaline or fear. No one is going to hurt you, least of all these three. Trust me, after the Tribunal is done with them, they'll never want to hurt anyone ever again. Can you sit up for me?" She groaned as she did, and he helped her stay stable. "There we go. Here try this on." He fiddled inside his satchel and dragged out a lumpy bundle, which he untied and handed to her. She opened it up. It appeared to be a large, sleeveless shirt made of some dark grey fabric. He helped her throw it on over her nudity, and she sighed in relief. Nothing had ever felt so heavenly for her than the security of that single layer of sturdy cloth.

His eyes glimmered softly as he fixed her with a concerned expression. He hadn't let go of her hand, and she wasn't about to shy away from that confident, gentle grip. "My name is Calian." he said slowly, "What's yours?" She gave him her name and he smiled even wider. "That's a lovely name. Do you think you can stand for me, Ivy?" She nodded hesitantly, and he rose to stand, his hand still on hers. He braced himself and helped her haul herself to her feet. He was tall. Even with her new frame, his expressive eyes were still a couple inches higher than her own. When she stood, the shirt she had been helped into fell down to her shins, doing a wonderful job at protecting her modesty, even if it also outline her thick form hopelessly.

Calian caught her staring forlornly down at herself. "Don't worry. The Lance will set you right, free of charge. We have the best body-shapers in the world standing by to help people like you. Can you walk? Here, let me help. The others will clean up this lot. We have a wagon up the street, but I heard what he said about dumping you in one, so if you're more comfortable walking, I promise to be with you the whole way up the hill. I don't think my horse would consent to carry you as you are, let alone both of us, unfortunately."

He shamelessly threw his shoulder under her arm and took the majority of her weight onto his own broad, muscular frame as he practically carried her a few hesitant steps. It took that long for what had just transpired to come crashing into Ivy, and she sagged against him without warning, a fresh wave of frightened tears springing to her eyes. He grunted at the addition of the rest of her weight, but took it without complaint, leaning hard against a building as he held her. His armor was warm with his body heat and it was almost as good as his bare shoulder as she wept.

The awkward patting of her back and quiet, reassuring words spoke of sincerity, and it only made her shake harder as he coaxed out her fears and squashed them flat with a hammer of bold confidence. It felt like hours, but it must have only been a couple minutes before he got her walking again, this time more confidently. There was indeed a wagon in the street, the figures of her three would-be captors bound and gagged in the back of it with one Lancer sitting in the front

and the other in the back, his sword out and resting across his legs, prepared for any sign of resistance from the prisoners. Calian whistled sharply and a huge warhorse with fur the same dark brown as the otter morph's plodded dutifully up to him.

"Ivy," he announced, "this is my friend, Terra. Terra, this is Ivy." The sturdy horse gave Ivy a gentle sniff and a lick of her fingers. The horse snorted and turned, presenting a stirrup to Ivy. "Color me impressed, Ivy. It seems she likes you. Would you like to ride?"

Ivy couldn't help but smile, something she wasn't sure she had been ready to do again, but Calian's soothing voice was pushing out the terrible memories of what had almost become of her, and she carefully hoisted herself into the saddle, riding side to keep her makeshift dress from being pushed up her legs. Calian clucked to the horse, and Terra picked up a slow pace as she followed the otter's thick, bobbing tail that pushed aside his cape. They formed a train with Calian at the lead that eventually took them up Southcliff's most impressive hill to the Sanctum Arcanum.

The silver-veined white marble that made up the walls gleamed in the wan moonlight, and lights glowed in a few of the innumerable windows. Calian was greeted heartily by several of his fellows at the door, and they waved him and Ivy inside while they saw to the prisoners in the wagon. Ivy slid off of the Calian's horse before he ushered her inside through the massive doors. "Don't worry, Ivy. You're not likely to ever have to worry about seeing them again. Come with me. You must be thirsty. I think I can scrounge us up something to drink and eat. This place rarely sleeps."

Her eye's threatened to roll out of her head. She had never even dreamed of being in the building down whose halls she was now being guided. In a stunning show of efficiency, she was fed and more appropriately clothed in as much time as it took her to eat and dress behind a thick, opaque screen. Calian took her up a flight of stairs and eventually stopped in front of a simple, if sturdy door. "You can stay here for as long as you need to," he said, gesturing to the room into which he prodded her, "In the morning, I'll take you to see one of our body-shapers and they'll get you sorted out."

Ivy hardly heard him. Most of the places she had called home were smaller than the room at which she gawked, and while it wasn't opulently decorated, it didn't even have a bed in it; she could see the bed through a doorless arch that led to another room. She was reminded of the otter's presence when he laid a hand on her shoulder and squeezed it reassuringly. "Is everything alright, Ivy?"

"Y-yeah," she sobbed, trying not to cry again. "It's just... so much has happened tonight. I guess I'm still trying to process it all."

His nearly omnipresent smile returned without hesitation. "Like I said, you can take as long as you need. No one here is going to accuse you of being a freeloader when you've been through what you have, I promise." He squeezed her shoulder again and let his hand drop to his side. "Just yell for someone if you need anything. I'll be by in the morning to check on you." He gave her a crisp bow and turned to leave.

"W-wait!" she cried, "You're just going to leave me here unsupervised? Aren't you worried I'm... going to steal something, or run away? You know what I did..."

"Yes I do. And I have to admit I was surprised by how quickly you manage to cover that much ground. Are you going to rob us blind and run away?"

Her thick, heavy shoulders sagged. "No."

He shrugged. "That's enough for me. Besides, Terra let you ride her. Your heart's got to be in the right place. She could smell a crook a mile away." He nodded and made to leave once more.

"Wait!" she called again, "I... could... would you stay with me?"

He looked like she had just asked him if the sun would rise in the morning. "Of course, Ivy." he said emphatically, "Nothing would bring me greater pleasure." That open-hearted sincerity struck her again, making her smile. "If it would make you feel more comfortable, I'll stay right here all night. No one will disturb you. I promise."

She sighed in relief. "Thank you." she said from the bottom of her heart. He beamed at her, and he could feel the warmth in his smile like a physical presence in the room. She was certain that he would actually stand there motionless for hours to protect her. She doubted he would even blink. She peeled out of her clothes when she slipped into the inner chamber next to the bed, leaving her bare but for the simple white fabric of the underclothes she had been given. She couldn't remember the last time she had actually slept soundly in a real bed. She eagerly tucked herself in, throwing the sheets and a heavy blanket over her ludicrously muscular body, oddly at peace. "Calian? When does the light turn off?"

She couldn't see him where he was standing, but she was reminded of his proximity when he stuck his hand into the archway, pulled off his gauntlet, and loudly snapped his fingers, plunging both rooms into darkness as the magelight winked out and left the moon filtering through the windows as the only source of light. "Thanks..." she whispered. She sighed loudly. "Calian? Does... is the Silver Lance recruiting?"

The otter peeked his head into the room, following it with his armored body. "That depends heavily on a number of things." he said cautiously as he stepped closer and stood over her, "Why do you want to know."

"Because I'm not afraid anymore." she answered after a moment of careful thought, "I was terrified for my life what seemed like an eternity ago, and now I'm not afraid... I've never felt so safe before in my entire life. People lock their doors to keep people like me out of their homes. People are afraid of people like me. I don't want to scare people anymore. I... I want to do for people what you did for me, make them feel secure."

He chuckled. "In that case, I might be able to get the Captain to think about recruiting again. Give it a few more days of thought and talk to me again when you've calmed down from your ordeal."

He made to leave her to her sleep, but her arm darted out to latch a hand onto his armor with unexpected energy. He looked down at her curiously, a silent question hanging in his eyes. "Calian..." she whispered, "Can you... would you sleep with me? Please?"

The otter pried her hand off of his breastplate and cradled it in his. He leaned down to press his lips against the back of her hand in a chaste kiss. "Like I said, Ivy. Think about it for a few days, and then come talk to me when you've calmed down." At that he smiled at her softly and stalked out of the room to continue his silent vigil.