

A Second Try

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Wakefulness came readily to Emma as the dawn's first golden rays spilled over her bed. Her eyelids slid open, revealing brilliant irises the color of polished amethysts, and the ceiling of her room quickly came into focus as she blinked the haze of sleep from her eyes. The dragoness's jaw popped under the explosive force of a morning yawn, and a tense, if well-rested, groan whispered through her lips as she stretched, throwing her long limbs out over her mattress.

She sluggishly pushed herself up to a sit and then, using her thick, muscular tail to brace herself against the bedframe, levered herself onto her clawed, digitigrade feet. Taking the opportunity to work the nocturnal stiffness out of her arms and legs, she sauntered over to the wall opposite her bed. The view afforded her by her window was as breathtaking in the morning as it was at noon, and she leaned heavily on the wood of her desk as she watched the sun crawling its way free of the western horizon.

She greeted it with a smile as she let herself slump lazily down into her chair and pulled from a drawer a stiff-bristled brush. Before she went through the arduous process of pulling on the clothing that would serve to cover most of her sturdy, overlapping scales from view, she started the day by dragging the brush over her hide in tight, firm circles, scouring it clean of anything that would mar their shining, metallic perfection.

The scales covering the majority of her form, from the lean, shapely contours of her legs to the robust, muscular strength in her arms, were a dull bronze that glimmered in the light from the rising sun. They covered the entirety of her back, from the sinewy power that lined her expansive, coal-membraned wings and sweeping down the flexible appendage that was attached to her just above the firm curves of her well-formed rear. From the tip of her chin and flowing down her neck and chest, all the way to the terminus of her tail, however, her scales were a brilliant blue that glittered like flawlessly cut sapphire.

As the young dragoness preened herself, her sharp eyes inspected her scaly armor, looking down the length of a tapering, reptilian snout that was full of twin rows of dangerously sharp teeth. The activities of the previous days had been strenuous, and she was starving. The first mission of the morning was definitely going to be wandering down to the kitchens to scrounge up a meal that could have fed four or five people her size. Dragon's didn't have to eat often, but when they did, the possessed notorious appetites, and she was still a growing girl at that.

Of course, she would always be a growing girl. She wouldn't stop growing for a millennium, at least. Who knew how large she would end up being? As it was, she stood halfway between six and seven feet tall, larger than average for a dragon of her age, according to her parents. Her rapid development was a matter of no small pride for her, and she more than relished any compliments directed at her because of it.

The curves of her bountiful chest rose and fell as she let out a wistful sigh and rasped her scales clean, making sure she shined from her toes to her head. The brush whispered over the contours of her thick, onyx horns, and she put her sharp, black claws to them, scraping them and feeling for any unforeseen texture. The bony growth sprouted directly from her skull, and curled back and around her head like those of a ram, lending her a suitably intimidating visage. The two

largest horns were joined by other sets, smaller and more modest, that sprang up around them, giving her a spiny crown that protected her head and the back of her neck from harm.

She stopped, intrigued, when she felt something different amidst her spiky features. There was a lump sitting directly in the middle of the thicket of horns that grew from her head, above her eyes, high in the center of her forehead. Her eyes crossed in a vain attempt to see it, and as she felt the frown stretch over her lips. Excitement ignited in her stomach and, keeping one hand on it, she dropped the brush and scrabbled almost blindly for the little mirror sitting on her desk.

Lifting it such that it had an angle on the middle of her head, she peered upward at the conspicuous nodule that had sprung from her skull seemingly in the middle of the night. Her stomach fell at what she saw. She nearly dropped the mirror from trembling fingers. There, sitting placidly under her shaking claws, was the beginning of another horn, a little black nub that had pushed itself free of her scales what seemed like overnight. "Yes!" she said in a victorious cry that she was sure could have been heard clear across the Sanctum, "I knew it! I *knew it!*"

She leapt from her chair, giggling in a giddy singsong as she tossed the mirror and brush to her bed. Short arcs of elation-driven electricity sparked over her scales, and her wings threatened the countless paintings that were hanging on her walls as they flutter with glee. The dragoness couldn't tear her fingers away from the newborn horn, and she wished she had a bigger mirror so she could immortalize the wondrous occasion. Horns were good; horns marked change.

When she had been born, the dragoness had only possessed two, the ones that now curled around her head had been but just two rough bumps that had allowed her to break free of her egg. But over the years more had sprung up, inching inward across her head and outward behind her jaws. The prime horn was special. It was twinless, needing no mate to preserve her symmetry, and was important.

Her wobbling legs dropped her to the edge of her bed. She didn't know why, but it made her feel different, and she couldn't help but feel a sense of overwhelming, pleased pride at her unexpected development. She had to spend a long moment just breathing rhythmically before she could calm herself enough to stand again under her own power. It wouldn't do to walk around electrocuting everyone she talked to.

After she had spent a few seconds reining in her electric enthusiasm, Emma huffed a breath out through her nose and reached over to take up her things. Busying her hands, she made sure everything was in its place before she took measured steps over to a low dresser that rested against the wall next to her bookshelf. It took some doing, but she eventually managed to drag the sturdy black fabric of her form-hugging pants past the dangerous talons that capped her toes and up onto her full hips.

Her shirt was, as always, infinitely more problematic. Because of how her wings attached to her upper back, it was impossible to just slip on a shirt. She eyeballed a dressier, backless blouse that had been given to her that would have been delightfully easy to just step into, but the uniforms of the other lancers all covered the majority of their bodies, and she wanted to match more than she wanted to be lazy. Instead, she pulled her standard shirt, the same inky black as her pants, onto her torso and, using her tail as much as her hands, she secured the innumerable buttons down her back that held the offensive cloth to her body.

She rolled her shoulders and flexed the powerful muscles that lined her limbs, making sure that she wouldn't rip anything if she had a sudden need to contort herself. Her contours, while strong and unyielding, were smooth, and while far from petite, looked at home on her tall

frame. Her feminine curves rounded her out, hiding much of the strength that lurked beneath her scales, and she made sure to move with grace befitting a dancer. The stares the motion drew pleased her on an almost instinctive level.

Seeing that, while tight, her clothes weren't on the brink of exploding off of her just yet, Emma relaxed, her tail flitting around in its sleeve. She idly fingered the new horn crowning her features as she strolled, humming a cheerful, out-of-key tune, to a peg by the door so she could grab her satchel and slide it over her shoulder. Looking her room over one last time, she whispered a fond goodbye to her things, favoring the lush flower in a pot on her desk, and swept through her door into the hall.

She grunted as she almost immediately ran face-first into something much bigger than her. Whoever it was had far more momentum, and the dragoness was bowled over backwards, sliding for a stretch on her wings. "Oh shit!" Valorie yelped, "Sorry, squirt. I wasn't looking where I was going."

Emma blinked up at the statuesque equine as a hand hauled her back to her claws. "Val? What are you still doing here? Aren't you and Dawn supposed to be leaving today?"

Valorie took off back down the hall at a brisk walk, and the dragoness had to jog to keep up. "Yeah, yeah. I just needed to grab a few last-minute things. Dawn's still at my place, *hopefully* getting ready. But I'll probably have to drag her out of bed anyway. It's getting cold out there. Before long, there's going to be snow on the ground. What about you, shorty? Don't you have somewhere to be?"

"The others still have to get ready too, you know. Plus, they have to get their horses ready, so I think I have time to get something to eat, which I *was* going to do before I was so rudely interrupted."

Valorie raised her hands defensively. "Hey, I already said I was sorry. Besides, maybe if *someone* would open their door like a normal person, I would have been able to stop from running you over. What's got you so excited?"

She dug her claws into the smooth stone floor, pulling the imposing horse morph to a halt. "Look! It came in! So soon!"

The equine blinked and recoiled as Emma shoved her head under Valorie's nose. "Whoa there, tiny. You're going to put someone's eye-Oh! What's that? You've got another lump on your head." She mused with an impish grin. "You lose a fight?"

The dragoness threw her head back as she heaved a flustered sigh. "Oh, shut up! It's a new horn, my *prime* horn! It's important!"

"And why's that, mini?"

"It means I'm still growing!"

"As if you haven't been doing *that* your whole life. If I didn't know better, I'd say you were just trying to catch up, pipsqueak."

Emma pouted up at the equine. "Just you wait, long-legs. You've only got a couple feet on me. Give me another half-century or so; I'll look down on you yet."

Valorie scoffed as she started back down the hall. "Yeah, sure. Maybe then you'll be able to give me a challenge."

An elbow to the ribs pulled a grunt from the horse's chest. "Please, Val." cajoled the dragoness, "You and I both know I only let you win sometimes because it's never a fair fight. You're too... squishy to handle me."

"Oh really?" Valorie returned, throwing her hips hard enough into Emma's side to shove the scaled woman across the hall, "I've handled a lot worse than you, twerp. I don't think an extra spiky bit's going to help you that much."

"We'll see about that next time you feel like showing off to the recruits. A gold harrow says I can have you down in thirty seconds."

At that, the equine cocked an incensed eyebrow. "Is that so? Two harrows say I can have *you* down in twenty-five."

"You're on."

Valorie laughed and threw her arm around Emma's shoulders. They grinned at each other and hopped down the stairs to the first floor, eventually making their way down to the cavernous entry hall. Even this early, it was a hive of activity, people of every description rushing to and fro. The equine stopped, throwing her arms around the dragoness, pulling Emma from her feet and crushing her into a chest that rivaled hers in proportion. "I'm proud of you, squirt. Take care of yourself, alright? I'll definitely never let you live it down if I have to come to your rescue... *again*."

As she was lowered back to the ground, she squeezed Valorie's waist with affectionate, enthusiastic tightness. "How about we agree not to get into too much trouble before I can kick your ass again, okay?"

As the strapping horse let out an uproarious laugh and wandered away toward the grand doors, she flashed a grin back over her shoulder. "I don't know if I can wait that long, but I'll see what I can do. Take care, sparks. Don't keep them waiting too long while you're stuffing your face."

Emma grinned at the retreating, golden brown horse tail before spinning and stalking her way back through the compound, her wings pinned close to her back. She was reminded that she was starving, and she followed her nose, tracing down the intoxicating scent that mixed in with the smells of the countless people that made the Sanctum Arcanum home. It smelled delightfully greasy, and she wanted a stomach full of it as soon as possible.

The dragoness crept into the spacious mess hall, slithered between groups of Lancers preparing for the day, and swiped a stack of dense-looking pastries. They were heavy and full of potatoes and vegetables, made headier by the addition of thick, meaty gravy. It was delicious, and she gorged herself before licking herself clean with a slender, fleshy tongue.

Afterwards, she said a few warm goodbyes to friends and trotted back the way she came, taking the time as she did so to pull from her satchel her brilliant blue cape. She strung it around her shoulders, letting it fall over her right side to keep it out of the way of her wings. It was purely ornamental, with a stylized image of a lance of thin argentum inlaid into the fine fabric. It accented with her colors well, and though it covered her right arm where it hung, she thought it made her look playfully roguish.

The dragoness half-flew through the broad, airy halls, and with farewell waves directed at the Lancers at the gate, she skipped through the huge, ornate doors and into the brisk, late-Autumn air. It rushed through her wings, making them tingle with abrupt chill, and for a split-second, she missed the warmth of her home. The longing was vanquished by a wave of giddy excitement, and she meandered her way to the stables to wait for her teammates.

To her slight surprise, they were already there. There, tending to a pair of strong, long-legged horses were two figures clad in flawless silver armor that gleamed in the morning sun. One was tall, only a few inches shorter than her, thick and strong-bodied, while the other was

smaller of stature, with a lean, sinewy build. They saw to their horses, their own rich, blue capes snapping behind them in the chilly breeze.

Calian, the barrel-chested otter whose horse matched him to a tee, looked absolutely miserable. "Hey, water-boy!" the dragoness laughed as she approached, "That fur doesn't cut it in the cold, does it?"

The otter grinned at her despite his discomfort. "We don't all have the benefit of draconic fortitude, Emma." His horse snorted in agreement, and he affectionately ran his fingers through the fur of the horse's neck. The horse and her rider were the exact same warm brown color, had the same, placid eyes, and had almost matching personalities, resolutely cheerful.

"An unfortunate truth, I guess." admitted the dragoness with a shrug, "How're Terra and Bolt?"

"They missed us, of course." Calian mused with a warm-hearted chuckle, "They could smell you coming, I think. I'm pretty sure Terra's allergic to dragons." As if in answer, the well-built mare snorted again, pushing her nose into the otter's hand.

Emma laughed as she finished crossing the intervening distance. "And what about you, newbie?" she quipped to the figure bent consumed with the task of cinching Bolt's girth-strap, "The cape looks good on you."

With a bark that made it sound like she had been surprised Emma was talking to her, the newly graduated recruit snapped upright. Pointed, canine ears swiveled before she could finish turning to face the dragoness. The athletically-built husky nodded fiercely. "Y-yeah. I'm good... ma'am."

The look of frightened worry on the canine's white-and-grey-furred features made Emma snort almost violently before she bent over on herself, laughing furiously. Ivy jumped back, plastering herself against her horse as if she thought the dragoness was going to eat her, which only left the reptilian woman laughing harder. "Ma'am?" Emma wheezed, "Ma'am! Gods' Blood, I don't think anyone's ever called me ma'am before!" It took her a moment to get herself back under control, and she sauntered forward to peel the husky from her horse to wrap her in a friendly embrace. "Call me Emma, Ivy. If there's someone out there to whom I *am* a ma'am, it sure as hells isn't you."

She hugged the canine until she felt Ivy relax and heard a soft. "O-okay... Emma." She let go, dropping the husky back to her paws as she meandered around to the horses, letting them get a good smell of her. Animals tended to be nervous around her, and while the Lance's horses were all well-trained, it never hurt to be safe. Ivy's horse, Bolt, like Terra, was a perfect match for his rider, lithe to the point of lankiness, and looked like he could run with the best of them.

Ivy settled her saddlebags atop her mount as Calian did the same, and was clearly trying to sound as casual as possible as she mentioned, "We stick together in groups of three, right? Doesn't your team need you, Emma?"

"Three's the rule, yes." The dragoness answered in a thoughtful hum, "But since we had so much trouble the *last* time I tried to go to Timbergrove to investigate some questionable goings-on, Cera and Valorie decided to switch it up a little. Did you read the assignment?"

"Y-yes, I was just wondering-"

"Why I was separated from my team and put with you in place of a different recruit?" she finished, "Well, because of the previous difficulties, we're being a little more careful this time around. Toby and Mel's half of the job requires a little bit more... discretion than I can manage." She flapped her wings weakly before folding them back against her back. "We're there to distract any suspicious parties from the real investigation they'll be performing, and if there's something

dragons are particularly good at, it's attracting attention to themselves." She patted the husky's back as Ivy set her foot into her stirrup and hauled herself onto her horse. "If it makes you feel any better, don't think of it as *me* going with *you*, think of it as *you* going with *me*. We'll show up in Timbergrove, ask a bunch of superfluous questions while we strut around in full parade uniform, and Toby and Mel will get the real work done. This is as much to wet your whistle as it is to do some snooping around."

Ivy looked glumly at her from her perch atop Bolt. The canine seemed much less bothered by the cold than Calian, likely a by-product of her thick fur. "So... all that training and I'm just baggage?"

Emma's brow furrowed in confusion as she folded her arms beneath her succulently ample chest. She glanced at Calian, who looked just as perplexed as she. "Yes," the dragoness informed her, "This is your inaugural outing, such as it is, so we're taking it easy on you. I'm sure, though, that if you looked hard enough, you'd find someone willing to summon a demon for you to take on. Maybe you'd get lucky and survive."

Blinking, Ivy looked taken aback at Emma's bluntness. "Wh-what?"

The dragoness leaned backwards, letting the girth of her powerful, bronze-scaled tail support her weight. "You heard me. Is that not what you wanted to hear? If you want something more high-stakes, go back to Cera and ask for something more dangerous. She'd probably give it to you to teach you a lesson, let you take out a cult or something single-handedly. But before you do, just remember that I was going to Timbergrove a few weeks ago, going to do exactly what we're going to do now, and Mel and I got ambushed, knocked out, and captured. She was bound and gagged, sent back to the Lance in the back of a grimy cart, and I was held for days with no food or water." She lifted her clawed hand to the husky's greaved calf. "Ivy, nothing ever goes smoothly, even the easy missions, but you have the cape, which means you're as ready as you can be for what this world can throw at you. You've earned my respect by *earning* that cape, and I know I can trust you with my life if I have to. I called you newbie, but that's because I've been with the Lance longer than you've been alive, not because I don't think you can pull your weight. Do you understand?"

The horse carrying the canine's meager weight stamped his hoof impatiently, and the sound of it against the massive, stone pavers was, for a moment, the only sound that could be heard. After a tense few seconds though, Ivy's voice came, meek and supremely chagrined. "I-I... Y-you're right. I'm sorry. I just... didn't want to be treated like a child."

Emma patted an armored leg with a tension-diffusing chuckle. "Trust me. No one is going to treat you like anything other than what you are: a member of the Silver Lance, a friend, and an ally. Some of us just have different ways of showing it."

"Y-yeah..." Ivy stammered, "Mel... really likes walking around the hallways nude doesn't she?"

The dragoness grinned. That was certainly true of the sharklike woman. "She just... rarely gets the opportunity to feel comfortable around other people, and she takes advantage of it every chance she gets. You know what that's like right?" She elbowed Ivy's leg again as Calian prodded his horse into motion down the Sanctum's hill. "From what I hear, you've been finding all kinds of ways to get *comfortable*... in the showers, in the armory, in the obstacle course in the middle of the night, and Calian always seems to disappear around the same time."

The canine's tail flattened against her horse's rump, and Emma was sure it would have curled between Ivy's legs if it could have. Even the otter ahead of them hunched over on himself under the weight of the awkward pause. "I wouldn't worry about it all that much, though." she

mentioned, shattering the silence, "At least you can be comfortable in silence. The sounds Mel and Toby make are fit to wake the dead, although I'm sure Melana wouldn't mind you joining in and making a nice, long, relaxing day of it."

"Not you too!" Ivy whined.

"Me?" she said, moseying between horses with a hand on her chest, "Nah, Calian's all yours. I don't know if he could handle my brand of relaxation. I'm just saying that there might be some who feel terribly left out."

The canine urged her mount forward, pulling next to the otter's. "Some people will just have to find their own entertainment."

Calian took the opportunity to chime in. "Entertainment? Come now, ladies. I'm right here. Can we make it out of Southcliff before you start ganging up on me?"

"I'll think about it." Ivy and Emma chirped in unison. They blinked and looked at each other for a split-second, long enough to burst out into a cavalcade of uproarious laughter.

The city was enormous, and their uncontrollable giggles subsided into companionable silence long before the trio made their way out of the lofty walls. Finally free of the sheer volume of traffic the inner city was notorious for, they wended their way through the less densely crowded outer city and onto the road that would lead them north to Timbergrove. Calian urged his horse into a slow, controlled trot, and Emma pushed herself into a brisk jog next to Ivy. The scant breeze that had made itself felt in the city turned into a bracingly chilly headwind that threatened to pull her wings from her back. It smelled like the coming winter, and she could almost taste the snow that would soon be falling.

The cold didn't bother her all that much, and Ivy's thick fur seemed to do its job admirably, but Calian's posture spoke of misery. "And just think." mused the dragoness, "Timbergrove's more than two week's walk north of here. Winter will be on us in the time it will take us to walk there. Is your armor's padding not cutting it?"

The otter grimaced over his shoulder at her. "Oh, no. It's doing great, but my face is already freezing. I'm not built for this weather. The sooner we get there, the better." Acknowledging this fact, he urged his horse into a faster trot as the road's traffic continued to die down as they left Southcliff behind them.

Ivy pulled alongside him. "Is this the best pace?" she murmured.

Calian glanced over at her. "Well, we could go faster for a little bit, but we shouldn't stress the horses too much for too long."

"No... I mean shouldn't we keep it slower?"

The otter looked perplexed. "Why? You and I both know Bolt and Terra both can maintain this speed for a while before we'll need to let them walk. Trust your horse, ace."

Ivy shook her head almost imperceptibly, glancing back over her shoulder. Emma caught the doubt in her eyes and immediately spoke up. "Oh, is that how it is? Trust me; *I'm* not going to be the one slowing us down, so you two just go as fast as you want. I'll keep up."

"N-no. That's not what I meant. I understand if you can't ride. I just don't want you to tire yourself out."

Emma glanced at Calian, and the otter was clearly determined not to join in on the conversation. "You don't want to tire *me* out?" she grumbled, "Believe me, newbie. I'll outpace and outdistance any horse you can dig up."

The husky pushed a windblown lock of her dark, shoulder-length hair out of her face. "You're already running to keep up, Emma. I just don't want anyone to push themselves too hard. I know what that feels like, and it's awful."

The dragoness frowned contemplatively. "Alright... alright... How about this?" You see that hill down the road about a mile, the one with the pair of trees on it? I bet a gold scale that I could beat you to it, even without the help of a smelly animal. No offense, Bolt."

Ivy's gauntleted hands tightened on her reins, and Emma watched her considering it. "Make it two, and it's a bet."

"Confident, are we?"

"No horse is faster than Bolt."

"Two scales is a lot of money."

"Oh, so now the dragon's worried about her hoard?"

Emma laughed. "As if, newbie. I'm more worried about yours while I pray I won't fall asleep waiting for you to get a move on."

Ivy grinned fiercely and spun back to right herself on her horse. She barked a sharp command and flicked her reins as she dug her legs into Bolt's flanks, and with agility befitting his name, the lanky paint leapt from a quick trot into a full-on gallop that left the two thundering into the distance. Emma let herself slow down from her jog as Calian dropped to a walk beside her. "You're terrible, you know that?" muttered the otter under his breath.

"Yeah." replied the dragoness, "How much of a lead should I give her?"

Calian chuckled. "That depends, I think. Do you want to show off, or just make a point?"

"Does it really matter?"

"I suppose not..." he admitted, pondering, "Give her halfway. I'll just catch up."

She smiled and nodded, letting herself walk for a minute or so, until it looked like the spot of shining argentum down the road had made it about half of the way to the denoted hill. Then she pushed herself into a jog, pulling away from the otter as she launched herself into a run that carried her over the stone-paved road. Her claws tore flakes of rock from the path, and after only a few long bounds she had reached her max speed.

The dragoness topped a low rise, and, pushing against the ground with every ounce of strength she had, she flung herself into the air. She sailed a dozen feet off of the ground before her quivering wings snapped open, catching her weight and lifting her higher. Her powerful, black-membraned limbs carried her upward, and she angled her body forward as she flapped herself into a breakneck pace.

The headwind made progress difficult, the chilling breeze fighting her the higher into the air she rose, but the opportunities were rare that she could give herself a challenge, and she relished it, laughing into the wind that roared past her. The dragoness forced herself forward, her expansive wings leaving a black shadow on the road beneath her, and she saw the miniscule figure ahead of her drawing close.

She dove, letting herself gain velocity as she tucked her wings close and fell, using only her tail to angle herself toward her target. As she plunged toward the rapidly approaching rider, thrilled glee pushed through her veins, powered by the hammering of her heart, and at the terminus of her dive, she spread her wings again, pulling from her nose-dive and rocketing toward her prey.

Ivy was barely three-quarters of her way there before the dragoness overtook her, and Emma grinned slyly as she dropped, letting herself drift alongside the galloping horse. She lifted up, slipping behind the bouncing husky, and with a few flaps, she descended on the racing canine. Her strong arms hooked under Ivy's, and she pulled upward, dragging the husky out of her saddle and into the air.

Her squirming burden squealed wordlessly, and Emma peeled away from the confused horse, pushing herself up with brute strength. She sped onward and upward, climbing steadily as she raced toward the designated hill, letting Ivy dangle below her. As the dragoness neared her destination, she let herself fall into another, more controlled dive, and picked up speed as she neared the ground.

Ivy shrieked up at her as she leveled off, screaming over the green along the side of the road, floating such that the husky's paws brushed against the tips of the grass. She flapped, pulling herself up the hill and toward the trees, and as she reached them, she threw her wings out, catching the air and slowing herself down just in time for her taloned feet to catch the ground. The grass flattened around her as she bled of the rest of her frightful momentum, and let herself fall, spinning around to catch Ivy's weight on her chest as she landed on her back.

As the wind dominating her hearing silenced, she looked up at the clear, blue sky and listened to Ivy laughing. The husky pushed herself upright, straddling Emma's waist, and the dragoness caught the glimmer of joyful euphoria in Ivy's bright blue eyes. The canine was grinning ear-to-ear and panting in daredevil excitement. "I... I guess... you won..."

Emma's breasts rose and fell as she caught her own breath. "Looks to me like we tied." she breathed, "I guess no one gets paid."

At that, Ivy giggled and fell forward, hugging the dragoness tightly to her. "I guess so... But we... definitely need to do that again sometime."

"Oh, you are way more fun than Mel. She never lets me take her anywhere." Her claws clinked lightly as she patted the husky's back. They lay there for another minute before Bolt, looking as displeased as a horse could look, trotted up and stamped his hooves.

"What are you looking at?" Ivy barked to her horse, "Maybe if you were faster, she wouldn't have caught us." She jumped off of Emma's chest, strutting over to her mount. With an armored hand she petted the horse's nose while with the other she vigorously rubbed the animal's neck. "But that's okay isn't it? You did your best, and I'm so proud of you, you magnificent thing, you."

As Ivy purred to her horse, Emma pushed herself back to her feet and shook the dust off of her scales, straightening her cape on her shoulders. A couple minutes later, Calian came trotting up, looking as patiently enduring as his mount. Emma could see the gleam of mirth in his friendly brown eyes, though, and he wheeled around as the canine hopped back into her saddle. "Are you two done goofing around?"

"Hardly." the dragoness assured him, "It's going to be a long walk, and having to follow your lazy asses around is going to be torture." She grinned at them as they maneuvered back onto the road, continuing north. "I've got to do *something* to stay sane."