

Rescue

Written By: Skabaard

Emma pushed the door open as casually as she could manage, defying the adrenaline-fueled tension in her limbs. Her friends had been taken from underneath her nose, perhaps injured, and every nerve in her body was screaming at her to find them while her fingers ached to find those responsible, balling into fists with the force of her seething rage. Her breathing was steady, calm; her footing was solid and prepared, and as she took her first step into the room given to her by the terrified-looking woman downstairs, suspecting the worst, she acted.

There was a shadowy silhouette just inside the door, and she ducked the first swing of a heavy-looking rod at club face. Her attacker recovered quickly, pulling back and swinging down at her. It gave her enough time to react, though, and she caught the weapon in her fingers, twisting it from her assailant's hand and throwing her fist into his chest. There was a dull clang, telling the dragoness that the shadowy figure was armored, and as he staggered backward under the force of the blow, she spun and flung her tail out, sweeping his feet from underneath him.

She affirmed his gender as a coarse, masculine grunt escaped her assailant's throat, but she couldn't go any further before another dark, hooded figure ran at her from her rear. The dragoness whirled and ducked again, catching her second attacker's arm and twisting. Using his momentum, she lifted, spinning him up through the air and slamming him down atop his friend.

With an almost contemptuously casual kick, Emma lashed out at the second shadow's head with strength that knocked him off of the stack. He twitched for a split-second and went limp. Figure number one rolled away, forcing himself to his feet, and she stepped toward him, jabbing her arm out in another vicious punch at his chest.

This one he blocked with his forearm. His limb was armored as well, but he was unprepared for her brute force, and all he succeeded in doing was smashing the gauntlet Emma could see through his sleeve into his own face. His head snapped back, and she took advantage of his disorientation to lock her fingers around his throat. She felt fur, not scales under her claws, and as she lifted her assailant off of the floor, she took a second to observe.

He was a cat, and had rich, tawny fur, covered with the folds of a concealing black cloak. His eyes were wide, but lacked fear, and he scowled down at her from where he dangled, clawing at her hand. Despite that, he smelled afraid. He smelled familiar, and as he gasped and spluttered as her fingers tightened, she smiled at him. "Oh... Don't worry. No need for an interrogation, this time."

The man's partner, lying on the floor, groaned, and she threw another kick, knocking him across the floor and into the far wall so she could focus her attentions on the conscious object of her ire. She smelled him again, letting him flail and struggle as she crushed his throat in her fingers. "Your... brother... is waiting for you downstairs, right? He would know where you took my friends, wouldn't he?"

"He... won't tell you... anything!" gurgled the feline past his constricted airway.

She rolled her eyes and threw her fist into his face, flattening his muzzle as he went limp in her hand. "You just let me worry about that." she growled as she dropped him to the floor. Kneeling, she pulled from her stained satchel several bands of glimmering metal. She pressed them against her unconscious attackers, and they came to life, wrapping around wrists and ankles, quickly securing them.

Making sure the man whose face she crunched wasn't going to drown in his own oozing blood, she stood and stalked from the room, still gripping the key given to her by the barkeep. She strolled down the stairs in a casual saunter, tightly clenching her teeth, biting back her burning rage. She still wanted to break something, namely bones, but she focused on the sound of her talons clicking on the floorboards as she sashayed back to the bar. She kept an ear on the familiarly-scented cat, the only other patron at the inn, but she focused on the canine behind the sturdy, wooden counter.

The youthful woman looked terrified, and her eyes were constantly flicking behind the dragoness's shoulder, to the glaringly suspicious man. "I'm sorry..." the dog whimpered, "They said they'd hurt me if I said anything."

Emma nodded, politely handing the bartender back the key she had been given as she listened the man behind her stand and pad quickly out of the room, into the outside world. "That's alright. That room was taken, and they're going to need their rest. I recommend you go to the town guard and tell them what's happened." The frightened dog morph sounded like she was going to cry, and the dragoness purred soothingly. "Don't worry, go to the guard and tell them everything. Then go find Shelby, and tell her that I'm going to need a rain check on that breakfast. I'm going to go have a chat with our friend who seemed so eager to leave. Will you be okay? Were there any more of them?"

The dog shook her head, and Emma smiled gently, not moving until the slight canine scurried out through the kitchen in the back. That done, she turned and prowled outside. Autumn had turned into winter, and a blanket of snow had fallen to cover everything in a few inches of fluff. It was the middle of the night, but the moon was waxing, and the stars were numerous, providing more than enough light for her sharp, draconic eyes to see by. There was a fresh trail through the snow, away from the inn, and the strides were long. Her prey was running.

She smiled without mirth, showing her teeth as she pulled her rich, blue cape from her shoulder and tucked it into her satchel. The silvery insignia emblazoned into the fabric would gleam in the moonlight, and she needed to be stealthy. She was the hunter now, and without ceremony, she spread her inky, black-membraned wings, and threw herself into the air.

With the rush of wind through her horns, she climbed into the sky above Timbergrove. Her clothing was as black as her flesh, covering the majority of her bronze and blue scales, and her amethyst eyes pierced the shadow like it was midday. She saw her quarry already, running through alleys in an attempt to lose anyone that might be following him, and she flapped higher and higher, following him from above.

It was freezing, but extremes of temperature rarely bothered her. The cold would only help her. Flurries of snow would blur her outline on the stars, and the icy air would slow her prey to a crawl. She watched him flee from her, dashing from shadow to flimsy shadow, quickly approaching the town's wall. He found an unguarded stretch, scaled it with a surprising amount of skill, and dropped to the other side. The cat morph sprinted out into the town's outer sprawl, darting from building to building, sometimes doubling back on himself and sometimes taking long, erratic routes.

It made Emma grin again. He was trying to lose her, and she had to admit, if she didn't have a top-down view, it might have worked. Instead, all he was doing was tiring himself out and wasting her time. Eventually, however, he dashed south, into the surrounding, snow-blanketed farmland, running at a wild pace. To warn his superiors, she suspected.

He performed more back-trailing, zigzagging and taking wild turns to throw what he was surely sure were his pursuers off, but she just watched, waiting. Hours passed, and she had to

respect the cat's endurance, but he finally ran to a remote-looking farmhouse. Emma bled off some of her altitude, descending toward him, and instead of running into the house, he dashed into the cellar beneath it. The dragoness sighed; why did it always have to be underground? She hated fighting underground.

As silently as she could manage, she dropped to the snow just outside the house. She gingerly opened the cellar door, dropping quietly into a room that smelled of dust and rot. She apparently managed silence, because she just caught sight of the feline's slender tail disappearing through a door disguised as part of the wall. It shut with a harsh, rocky grinding sound as she strolled toward it. She was impressed, the hidden portal looked almost seamless, and if she hadn't seen it closing with her own eyes, it would have taken her a while to find it.

She walked up to it. There had to be a hidden button or lever that would open it disguised as part of the room around her. She laid her hand on the door, closing her eyes and looking for any magic traps whose power she could feel vibrating through the rock. Her father was the Archmage, and she was used to living around countless magical auras. If there was any but the most subtle there, she would feel it as a faint pressure against her senses.

The dragoness chuckled when she felt nothing, and she balled her hand into a tight fist. There would be a button or lever to activate the door's mechanism somewhere, but time was of the essence. She cocked her arm back, digging her claws into the rocky floor, and twisted, throwing her weight and every ounce of strength her powerful body possessed against the stone of the wall.

Her arm punched through the door like it was made of paper. Peeking through the hole she had made, she saw the retreating cat spin, look at her, and turn to sprint down the sloping hallway. She smiled at him before she righted herself and threw her arm, again and again through the door, digging her claws into the stone and shredding it under her the force of her fury. She stuck a well-muscled arm through the enlarged hole, pushing against it, crumbling rock around her shoulders and forcing her way into the hall.

She sprinted after her prey, bent nearly to the ground as she raced at his back. The feline was fast, but she was much faster, and before he could turn to face her, she crashed into his stocky frame. He opened his mouth to scream a warning to his allies, but nothing came out as she clamped down on his throat. She lifted him from the ground and slammed him back into the wall head-first. He shuddered and relaxed, and she did it again for good measure before she let him flop to the ground, unconscious.

Slowly, she continued down the hall with slightly more care. It sloped down into the earth, but eventually leveled off and terminated at a sturdy-looking wooden door. Pressing her horns against it, Emma closed her eyes. She could hear a pair of voices muttering to each other in a muted conversation she couldn't quite make out. Two... she could have laughed, and, indulging her fancy, she straightened and knocked politely on the door.

The conversation ceased abruptly, replaced by the sound of someone approaching the door. A confused voice called out, but she remained silent, only acting when the portal began to drift inward as whoever was on the inside opened it. She threw herself forward, throwing her legs out in a mighty kick that nearly tore the door from its hinges and sent it crashing into the figure opening it. She continued inward, lashing out at a surprised face whose arms were pinwheeling wildly. The room's second occupant saw her, watched her brutally silence his companion, and turned to run.

As if she would let him get away. Before the unconscious figure could fall to the floor, she caught it, hauling the body from the floor and hurled it at the retreating man. The weight of

his friend bore him down, and, wings half-open, she likewise threw herself across the room to crash into them. Emma watched him fumble for his weapon, but she didn't let him draw it before she tossed aside the already sleeping man and locked her fingers around this one's throat.

She rose to her feet, teeth clenched with rage, and lifted him off of the ground. She looked down the length of her arm, watched her muscle twitch under her cloth-clad scales with the desire to pull her fingers together, slicing through flesh and bone. Instead, she said in a dire whisper, "Where are they?" His eyes darted to one of the room's adjoining doors and back to her face. She smiled at him, hissing an ominous, "Thank you." as she tightened her grip, cutting off the flow of oxygen to his lungs. He choked and spluttered for a moment, but eventually went limp before she dropped him atop his friend.

Sauntering through the indicated doorway, she was led into another long hallway, this one studded with more doors. Each had a metal grate set into it at eye level, and she peeked through each one in turn. The doors were sturdy, and the rooms were clearly meant to be holding cells, storage areas for people and supplies. The dizzying mix of smells in the dank dungeon made her want to gag, but she forged ahead until the scent of something familiar caught her nose. Flowers, something fresh and clean, mixed with sweat and the unmistakable aroma of anger tinged with fear.

She followed her nose, praying to the gods that she wasn't too late, and as her sinuses told her she was close, she heard a muffled whimper from one of the innumerable rooms. Emma rushed over, peering through the door's slit. There was a formless figure hidden under a set of concealing black robes, but a pair of triangular, feline ears spoke to the figure's species. Whoever it was was bent over a flat worktable, and the sight of Ivy strapped to the cold, metallic surface sent lines of icy, blinding rage through her veins.

With a guttural growl, she threw her weight against the door. It wasn't locked, but that hardly mattered. With sheer, brute force, Emma tore the door from its hinges, ripping it out of the wall and throwing it down the hallway. The robed... man... spun, showing the dragoness the whites of his shocked eyes as he quickly backpedaled away from her partner.

Snarling, she entered the room, focused only on the man staggering away from her. The room was small, and there was nowhere for him to run. He shrank back from her, plastering himself against the wall into the corner. His fur was black; his eyes were yellow and wide with worry, but he didn't smell frightened. Gritting her teeth to stop herself from biting his head off, she approached him and kicked him hard enough to crack bones and send his skull ragdolling against the wall, quieting him before he could cry out in pain.

She wanted to go further, desperately wanted to crush his body to a pulp and fry it to a smoking lump, but another whine pulled her attention away. Emma turned, taking a slow, calming breath, and rushed over to the table. Ivy was conscious, but gagged and bound to the cold metal. The canine could not have looked more relieved if she tried, and as the dragoness's claws sliced through the leather straps holding her to the table, she tore the gag from her mouth and lunged at Emma.

Ivy wrapped wiry arms around her chest, hugging the dragoness. "E-Emma!" she said in a muffled whimper into her chest, "What the hells took you so long?!" The canine staggered from the cold metal, hopping to her feet, and Emma had to stop her from running from the room. "Come on! They have Calian, and they were talking about others. This is big, Emma! We have to go! Hurry! Let me go! Emma!"

Emma held her teammate until the lean husky stopped struggling against her. "Ivy..." she whispered, "You need to relax. Take a deep breath, and think. You're naked, and unarmed, and neither of us really know what's going on."

The dog morph stopped, blinking slowly at her. "Says the one who just tore a door out of the wall..." Ivy took the requisite breath, settling her nerves. "But you're right... here..." She stalked across the room, digging into the cat morph's robes, pulling out a long, slender knife. "There. Now I'm armed. Let's go." Ivy followed Emma out into the hall, and the husky looked at the splinters of the door. "You made one hell of a noise. Listen, Em. Calian's in here somewhere, but I don't know where. It's huge, and now they definitely know something's up."

Emma felt like she was being chastised. Despite being stark naked and holding nothing but a tiny dagger, Ivy looked the part, standing tall and proud, with fire burning in her bright eyes. "Yeah..." mumbled the dragoness, "That's my bad. I just got a little... protective. I know what it's like to be chained."

Ivy hesitated. "I guess so... Thanks, Em. It's time to kick some ass, right? You go deeper, find out what they've been doing. I'll see to the rest of these cells, find Calian and the others that have been taken. I'm a little better at doors, right?"

"As good a plan as any." Emma replied, "Meet up back down the hall with the two sleepyheads once you've found everyone. Be careful, alright? And Ivy? Put this on." She reached into her satchel, pulling from it her cape and swirling it around the husky's slender shoulders. "Like I said before. You deserve it."

Taking up the bright blue fabric in her fingers, the canine looked up at her and nodded. Emma watched her spin and jog off down the hall. The dragoness then headed back the way she had come, toward the first musty chamber. The two men she had knocked out were still sleeping peacefully, and she checked to make sure they would stay that way before she made her way to one of the other doors, opposite the one she had originally entered.

It opened up into yet another room, and a multitude of nauseating scents washed over her. This room was larger, full of tables covered with equipment Emma recognized from the workrooms of the Lance's alchemists. The smells were atrocious, acrid and bitter, but it didn't look like there was anyone currently in the room, despite how there were compounds bubbling in flasks scattered throughout the space. There had been people working in the room, which meant that they really had been forewarned by the racket she had made.

Grimacing at her own hastiness, she prowled through the room, carefully avoiding whatever had been left brewing. She wasn't about to push her luck unnecessarily. She checked in storage rooms off of the main chamber, but found nothing, and quickly forged on through another closed door. She methodically cleared room after room of potions and magic, occasionally encountering easily-quelled resistance.

There was an armory that held her teammate's captured gear, a barracks for the quartering of a surprising number of people. The underground complex must have been immense, and the dragoness almost thought that they had gotten in over their head. She became increasingly suspicious, though, when she found little real resistance. There should have been dozens of people in the rooms, some of them cavernous, but she ran into only a handful during her investigations.

It was getting so peculiar that she was almost surprised when she saw someone. The door she had to throw her shoulder into to open weighed like it was made of solid steel, and was inches thick. The interior of the room didn't seem to warrant such protection, because, apart from

of a terrified-looking woman wearing the same dark robes as the others she had seen and a long, metallic canister, the room was empty.

The woman spun to face her as the dragoness forced herself through the armored portal. "W-wait!" the petite, dark-furred vixen cried, "Stop! You can't come in here! You might contaminate it!"

Emma frowned. "Contaminate what?" she wondered aloud as she took a step into the room anyway, not about to be stopped, "What the hells are you people doing down here, kidnapping people? And where is everyone? This place is huge. What's going on here?"

Worry washed over the woman's features. "N-no, please stop! You can't come in here! I... I-I'm not allowed to tell you anything. P-please, just stop."

"I don't think I'm going to do that..." Emma informed her, taking another step. "What's in the tank?" A tank is what it was. A large, metallic cylinder, more than six feet long, rested atop a sturdy, wheeled table that the woman had been occupied with getting ready to push from the room. "What's in the tank?" she repeated, "And what are you doing with the people you've been abducting?"

She walked up to the vixen, and the frightened woman retreated, splaying herself out against the wall, presenting her with as small a profile as possible. "W-we just needed test subjects, I swear! We ran experiments, wiped their memories, and set them free when we were done! Please listen! You can't be in here. It's not safe! N-no! Wait! Stop! D-don't open it!"

In blatant disregard to the fox morph's desperate pleas, she strode up to the canister. It did indeed appear to have a lid, and she ran her claws across the nearly-invisible groove on its side. She found a latch, and with a soft, metallic click, she popped the cylinder open. There was a pneumatic hiss as pressure was equalized, and she threw the lid open as the vixen cried for her to stop.

It was full of a dark magenta fluid that looked thick and oily, glossy enough to let Emma see her reflection in the placid plane. "What the hells is this stuff?"

The vixen was practically begging her. "I-it's just a stabilizing agent. Please get away from it. Just close the lid."

Her hand hovered over it. "What's it stabilizing? Another experiment? What if I did... this?"

The vixen tensed as she dipped her fingers into the reddish goo. It yielded to her hand like loose pudding, and she sunk her arm into it up to her wrist. "Stop!" implored the vixen, "Please It's not stable!"

Emma ignored her, sticking her arm into the viscous sludge until her hand met with something. She wrapped her fingers around the peculiar mass, and with no small amount of effort, hauled it out of the murky soup. What she saw emerge from the goo shocked her. The thick slime clung to its features, but nothing could mask its femininity. She was clearly a woman of stunning beauty. Her eyes were closed, it didn't look like she was breathing, and Emma turned toward the vixen with an angry scowl. "Is she another of your *experiments*? What did you do to her?"

Before the robed fox morph could answer, the slimy woman in Emma's arms shuddered to life, opening her mouth to gasp in a desperate breath. The vixen yelped and threw her fist against the wall. A hidden panel slid away, revealing a stone tile set into the wall that glowed with a faint blue radiance. "Stop! Put it back! It's still too unstable!"

The word "it" upset Emma and made a flare of resolute stubbornness well up in her. She slipped her other arm into the muck, hooking it under the spluttering woman's knees and lifting

her completely free of the ooze to smear the magenta fluid over her clothing. "It's okay." she cooed, "It's okay. I've got you. I won't let them hurt you anymore. I'll take you out of here."

Despite her assurances, she tensed and felt a wave of icy dread wash down her spine. The air around her tensed, pressing in on her like reality was bending around her, and she slowly turned. The vixen was shaking, terrified, but she had a look of worrying determination in her eye. "Put it back!" the robed fox begged. Her hand was testing on the tile sunk into the wall, and it was glowing brighter around the point of contact. "I... *really* don't want to do this, but I'll detonate this if I have to. Please... please put it back... before it wakes up."

Emma glanced down at the womanly form occupying her arms before looking back up at the vixen. "Really? You'd kill all of us just to keep her imprisoned?"

"You don't understand! It can't be allowed to get out! It's not ready yet! It's not safe, for anyone!"

Cradling the woman to her chest, the dragoness breathed a calming sigh. "What did you do to her? What is so dangerous about an unconscious woman? What are you people doing down here?"

The vixen looked hesitantly at her, opening her mouth to answer when a commotion outside the room drew both of their attentions. Ivy, once more clad in her armor, appeared in the doorway. Blinking in confusion at what she saw. "Emma! Calian managed to get word out, and Mel and Toby are on their way. You'll need this back." She tossed the borrowed cape back to the dragoness, who caught it in her teeth, and promptly turned toward the vixen. "What's going on?"

"Please..." the distraught fox whispered, "Don't make me do this."

Before Emma could spit her cape out and try to diffuse the situation. The thoroughly slimed woman shifted, letting out a soft whine, and Emma caught a glimpse of deep, dark blue irises as the lids hiding them fluttered open. The vixen saw this and moved to trigger whatever it was she had primed. In a single, sinuous motion, Ivy pulled a dagger from her belt and threw it at the fox. The blade embedded into her robed shoulder, throwing her off balance, but didn't stop her from pushing forward. The tile under her hand sunk into the wall, and Emma blinked as the tension in the air suddenly spiked, pressing in on them all.

The dragoness screamed for Ivy to run, but didn't look to make sure the husky did before she spun, putting her back to the suddenly violent glow emanating from the wall. She huddled, shielding the woman with her chest. The pressure behind her grew, and with a dull, concussive thud, she was nearly knocked to the ground. Released energy roared over her, and she could only hope beyond hope that her body was sturdy enough to save the woman clutched to her chest.

Fire roared around her, and the scream of burning air deafened her as her vision went white. Emma could feel her body burning. Her wings screamed agony at her. Sheer, unleashed power scorched her body, and she cried out in pain as fire scoured her scales. She lost her footing, but refused to turn her charge into the fire that was consuming everything. It felt like she had become the sole target of the ire of an angry god, and for a frantic heartbeat that stretched out into forever, she was tortured.

The pressure grew and grew, spiking in an agonizing instant to something more powerful than anything she had ever experienced, and she was sure then that her stubbornness was going to kill her. She just hoped that the fragile form in her arms would survive. The fire consumed her, but before she was lost, she felt a force pulling at her. She was dragged backwards, into the inferno, and with one last tug behind her stomach, Emma and her charge were yanked into the void.