

Shifting Allegiance

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He was cold...

He was a great many things, really, but the dull, numbing sensation of the frigid chill in the wintry air thankfully overrode most of the others. He had been walking for what felt like forever, and he was hungry and tired and running on the last dregs of his reserves of energy. He was beyond seconds winds; he had marshaled his fortitude time and time again, and he had little more to give. His pack was empty of what supplies he had managed to scavenge along his seemingly endless walk north, but he was tired enough that even his thick, likely life-saving clothing felt like weighted chains were wrapped around his body, dragging him down.

That part bothered him most, like a nagging at the back of his mind that wouldn't leave him. He was so utterly tired he could barely think through the haze of his exhaustion, but it frustrated him enough to keep him conscious. He was used to fatigue. The circumstances of his life left him used to hardships, and he had always refused to be bowed by them. He had grown big and strong, and his father would have been proud of him, he was certain. He hoped... He remembered his father, a huge, black-maned stallion, so big, but so kind and gentle, even with his giant, callused hands. He would sit in that welcoming lap and listen to his father tell stories through a smile as warm as his personality.

He missed them, his parents. He had taken after both of them, and his appearance was a constant reminder of his progenitors. Within his angular, handsome features, muzzled and equine in shape, taken from his father, rested the warmest, mellowest eyes, from his mother, a deep, solid brown. The fur that covered his entire body was a dark, almost-black brown, the same as that of his sire, but in the light, it shined with the barest hint of a reddish gleam, a reminder of his mother. He had been told by... an embarrassingly large number of mares as he grew up that his fur, thick and smooth and silken, was as soft and inviting as angel-down. They had always let their hands trail along his arms shoulders and had laughed at his blushes as they toyed with his pitch black hair, always trimmed short.

Their teasing caresses had changed as he reached manhood. He was his father's son, and he had grown... and grown and grown. He had been tall and strapping, and then he had thickened with muscle, made hard and prominent from his labors. His father hadn't lived to see him so tall and proud, but he was even taller than his sire, taller than any horses he had seen, a giant among those that were almost always taller than others, standing easily half-way between nine and ten feet. He remembered their hands, those of they who he now knew had been his suitors. They had always lingered on the breadth of his shoulders, the firmness of his chest, the thickness of his arms.

His heavy cloak kept his knee-length horse tail close to his legs, insulating him further against the icy wind, but it had been far too long for him to be able to feel much of anything of his extremities. His heavy hooves clattered clumsily on the rocks beneath him, and it was a chore just maintaining the focus required to put one equine foot in front of the other without toppling to the ground. The landscape was rough and rocky, foothills scattered with the gravel and stones shorn off of the mountains that rose up above him. Everything was the same greyish color, and it was a miracle that it wasn't blanketed with ice and snow, judging by the sheer temperature of the air that tore at his body.

He had needed long ago to get rid of his armor, but he missed its comforting weight on his shoulders. It had always made him feel safe, despite knowing that in his current state, it would have born him to the ground and stopped him from rising. He was unarmed and unprotected, and he had never felt so utterly vulnerable. It was almost a religious experience, and he would have prayed if he thought that any gods would have given half a damn about his plight. The sins weighing down his soul felt more crushing than his exhaustion, and he didn't know what to do about them. Penance... retribution... For a time, it had been his responsibility to mete out justice with unwavering dedication.

He would have laughed if he had it in him. He felt dirty, stained, used, and he was tired. He was tired of deciding; he was tired of watching and fighting. He was tired of being lied to, of having to lie to others, even if he hadn't known he had been lying at the time. Blinking blearily, wishing the numbness in his body would dull the pain of his hunger, wishing his tight, powerful musculature didn't require so much sustenance, he looked around himself, barely seeing. He didn't truly know where he was anymore. He had only an inkling of where he was supposed to be going, and here, in the rocks, everything looked exactly the same.

And then he stopped. Choking down his fatigue, he didn't fight the rush of adrenaline that shot through his limbs and body. His fingers tightened into fists, clenching fiercely as a knot of sudden, unspeakable dread balled up in his gut. He heard something through the scream of the harsh gale. It sounded heavy and lumbering, and he could feel it through his hooves, like an earthquake that shuddered briefly before dropping away. It came again and again, and if he hadn't been certain that he no longer had the ability to run, he would have sprinted away. It was enough to worry him. He knew fear. Fear was sometimes what felt like his only real companion. He had never fled from danger, but what coiled and writhed in him now was far beyond fear. It was terror, unbridled and strong enough to make him forget for a time the limitations of his sorely abused body.

Something growled behind him, something huge and... angry. On shaky legs he spun, flicking his eyes through the bitterly cold air to find the source of his biting dread. When he saw it, he wished he hadn't. He wished he had fell and died days ago. He wished for oblivion; he wished for the welcome warmth of the hellfire that he knew awaited him. At the very least, he wished that he hadn't turned around, so he didn't have to see his doom approaching him.

It was huge. For a brief moment, his memories filled with pain and dragonfire, like his nightmares had come to life to hunt him down and see done a deed left unfinished. Blinking numbly though, he realized that the beast that took thunderous steps into the open, shaking the ground beneath its taloned feet, was a creature entirely different, but hauntingly similar. Judging by its shape, it was feminine, but he was so pitifully undersized, he felt unable to take full stock of his situation. He saw pale, ivory scales, he saw a long, thick tail, he saw huge, bulging muscles, he saw horns reminiscent of a dragon's and he saw teeth nearly as long as his arms bared in a feral snarl.

Its cavernous maw opened, showing a long, reptilian snout full of enormous, flesh-rending teeth, and it roared at him. The air shook with the fury in the deafening vocalization, and he felt it vibrate through his body. It challenged him, dared him to stand against it, and as its thundering voice died away, replaced once more by the whistle of the wind in his tapered, horselike ears, it peered down at him, hate glimmering in its shining, golden eyes.

So this was it. This was how he would die, to a nameless beast in the middle of nowhere, so far away from home, cold and tired and wishing for the warmth of his mother's arms. Legs trembling, they folded beneath him, dropping him painfully to his knees on the rocks. At his

display of shameful weakness, the towering, titanic creature hesitated, and he almost laughed. He would have, if he could have made his numb face move or made the air leave his lungs in anything more than a pitiful whimper. Those eyes, so full of rage and hate, softened, and he could swear he heard it talking as he finished his fall, crumpling forward in a boneless pile of half-frozen horse morph.

"Uh... M-mister?" he imagined he heard it saying as the blackness overwhelmed him, "Are you okay?"

He awoke to pain, more pain than he could have ever possibly imagined. His skin was on fire, and his bones were being shattered again and again. A hoarse groan escaped his lips, and he writhed weakly, certain that he was either alive, or he had been sent strait to the Hells for his crimes. The pounding of his heart threatening to split his skull open under the pressure made him think that the former was the case. The harsh rhythm thumped against the inside of his ribcage, and every time it did, a pang of absolute agony washed over him from his hooves to the tips of his ears like a wave of dragonfire. His body wouldn't work, no matter how hard he tried to move or shift his arms. Gritting his teeth in a fierce snarl, he opened his eyes through the pain, absolutely determined to see the reality of his situation. What he saw confused him utterly.

The room he was in, because he could identify it as nothing other than that, was mostly dark. Through the reddish haze of his agony he could see the sole source of light in the space, a small, glassy sphere, which gave off a wan, whitish glow that faintly illuminated his surroundings. He couldn't bring himself to lift his head, so most of what he saw was a flat, unadorned ceiling that looked to be made of smooth, almost black metal. With a ragged, pathetic moan, he forced his head upward to let him see more of his surroundings.

He was lying down on what looked to be little more than a simple, steel-framed cot. The inelegant bed was far undersized for his lengthy frame, and his legs below his knees were dangling limply. It was clear though that great effort had been made to make him comfortable. He was propped halfway up, and he could see his body with an almost detached lack of real sensation aside from the horrific pain that continued to wrack his brain. His cloak, coat, and shirt had been removed, leaving him bare from the waist up, and a number of long, clean linen bandages were wrapped around his powerful chest, some splotted with blood he could only assume belonged to him. He didn't remember tearing open his wounds.

He found himself crammed into the corner of an already cramped-looking space. There appeared to be little unoccupied floor available in the seemingly tiny room. Several sturdy tables took up the majority of the volume, and were all heavily laden with an expanse of fragile-looking equipment. He saw flasks and vials of glass or crystal, held up by fine wire. There were also more esoteric tools: alembics and drip-stills, as well as things he could put no names too, but looked expensive and important. Fluids of many descriptions roiled and frothed over several small, steady, almost lightless flames.

Likely hearing his terse, half-whimpered grunts, he caught a gentle motion out of the corner of his eye, and he let his head fall back to the cushion propping him up as a vague, shadowy figure approached him. It slowly resolved itself as an almost shockingly beautiful human woman clad in loose, grey robes who stopped to stand over him. Her features were sharp and imperious, and her regal appearance coupled with the razored glint in her cool blue eyes made it seem as if she were looming in judgment above him. Her brow furrowed in thought, and the slim fingers of a dainty hand lifted to rest atop his bandaged chest. "Calm," she stated smoothly, almost an order, "You have been through an ordeal, and you are still recovering."

Despite the unfriendliness in her eyes, her voice was low, even, and almost comforting. "It hurts..." he whined, cursing the weakness in his own voice. Though deep and unrepentantly masculine, his voice was made faltering with his pain, and she spoke with even more calm, patient authority than he could manage.

"I know," said the raven-haired woman, leveling another icy, inscrutable look at him. "You awoke sooner than I expected. It seems that you are too hardy for your own good. You were frozen and half-dead when you were brought to me. Regrowing your frost-bitten skin was a lengthy process. Be glad you didn't wake up sooner; the pain might have killed you outright at that point." Her warm hand left him, and she visibly veiled herself in a blanket of cold, obvious disdain. Turning, she went to one of the cluttered tables, retrieving from over one of the small flames a cup made of some beaten metal. When she returned to him, her hand went to his shoulder, bracing him, and she lifted the cup to his face. "Drink," she very nearly commanded.

He stiffened, worry briefly overcoming the misery running through his body. "Wh-what... what-"

Her hand clutched his shoulder more tightly. "Calm," she repeated, "It's only broth. You haven't eaten in days, and I don't know for how long before that. You need something in your stomach..." She hesitated, her look briefly softening as her eyes darted away from his. She almost appeared nervous or embarrassed. "I... I haven't much experience cooking, but it should be more palatable than nothing. Here. Drink. Slowly."

He wasn't given much choice as she pressed the lip of the cup to his lips and tilted it until the contents lapped against his mouth. It was hot, blissfully so, and the scent of something rich and hearty invaded his sinuses. His mouth opened almost instinctively at the prospect of food of any description, and the woman let him timidly sip at the fluid. Welcome warmth flooded his mouth, and he greedily swallowed before he had a chance to really taste it. The second mouthful lingered longer on his tongue, and he moaned shamelessly at the taste. Either the woman was a poor judge of her own skill in front of a cookfire, or the taste buds of a starving man weren't the pickiest when it came to nourishment. At the time, he didn't care.

The heat that poured into his cavernously hollow gut revitalized him enough to allow him to reassert control over his body. His arms twitched, rising to clutch limply at the cup, but at the motion, the woman stiffened and withdrew it from his lips, leaving him to lap lazily at nothing. He stopped at her apprehension, glancing at her, then back at his first meal since he could remember. The woman quickly took a steadying breath and returned to her self-appointed task of feeding him, letting him grasp shakily as he drank.

She breathed words to him almost inaudibly, reminding him to drink slowly, to take sips, in an almost motherly, compassionate tone. She sat there for minutes, helping him until the cup of broth was empty and he was clumsily licking at the remaining droplets of rich, flavorful fluid. When she slid away from him, taking with her the cup, his hands flopped weakly down onto his chest. The broth took the edge off of his agony, and quieted the pangs of hunger he hadn't even noticed had been stabbing his vacant stomach, and he watched her through watery eyes as the woman set the cup to the side and busied herself at the table.

When she strode smoothly back over to him, she held out to him a small, chalky-looking block that rested in the cup of her palm. "Here," she said, her voice one more hidden from her emotion, "put this in your mouth and hold it under your tongue until it dissolves. It will ease your pain."

Working to make his arms move without trembling like branches on a spindly tree, he accepted the little bit of white that was offered to him. It looked like little more than a fine-

grained sugar cube, and he stared dubiously at it. With an internal shrug, he placed it gently in his mouth and tucked it under his tongue. If the woman was intent on killing him, he doubted she would have gone to all the trouble of saving him and feeding him. The effect was nearly instantaneous. As soon as it began to dissolve under his tongue, the pain tearing his body apart dulled. Relief crept outward, down his neck, into his chest and along his limbs, robbing his agony of its strength and, with it, its hold over his mind. It was enough to pull an audible sigh of gratitude from his lungs.

At that, the woman actually smiled, a startlingly warm gesture that curled her lips upward. "It worked then, good. I'm glad; I hadn't been sure I'd gotten the dosage correct. I've rarely had to... treat people of your stature before."

She left him, returning to her table and fussing with what looked like a sea of delicate equipment, seemingly ignoring him for the time being. He watched her curiously as his pain continued to be mitigated by what was slowly diminishing to nothing beneath his tongue. She moved with confidence, and in spite of the cramped quarters, she navigated it with well-practiced ease. His hostess was clearly attractive, with an alluring figure that refused to be hidden by the fabric of her simple robes, but her bearing spoke of a tremendous gulf of worry and mistrust, a mile of emotional distance, and he noted how her eyes rarely went anywhere without flicking to keep him in sight first. She was... afraid was the wrong word... leery of him, despite his state and the fact that she had already devoted so much time to treating his condition.

As the tasteless tablet finished disappearing in his mouth, his pain dwindled to a barely-felt ache in his bones and muscles, unpleasant, but entirely manageable. Shifting, he pushed himself higher in his seat, testing his motion. He felt as stiff as a board, but he could move. At the slight motion through, she turned halfway to him, muttering softly, "Be careful. You have a long way to go before you'll be ready to do any moving. I don't know what happened to you before you got here, but what looked like half of your bones had been recently broken and you were covered in cuts and old bruises. I have trouble believing you were managing to walk at all, what with the state of your legs as they were." She paused, fixing him with a more concrete expression. "I admire your determination, but I must ask. What could you have possibly been looking for up here in the middle of nowhere, half-dead after being so utterly broken?"

Broken, that was what he had been, shattered like a toy and forgotten by whatever angry god had created him. He thought it a fitting word for himself. "It was the cold." he rasped.

"What?"

"It was the cold." he repeated, trying to work the dryness out of his throat. "Once everything went numb, it was easy to ignore how much everything hurt. I'll admit though, I was dreading thawing everything out almost as much as I was dying." He chuckled feebly. "Thanks."

"I suppose, then, that you are welcome." the woman said matter-of-factly, turning to face him, "But that still leads to the question of what exactly you were doing up in these mountains, underdressed and starving. Who are you, and what is your purpose?"

Glancing around the tight room, the inklings of a thought took root in his mind, and he shifted again, twisting and grimacing at the pain the movement brought on. "My name is Richter... and to be honest. I don't yet know what I'm trying to do. I got tired of making mistakes, and I was... released from my service. I'm looking for the women who saved my life that day."

A single eyebrow lifted, and she drifted idly to his side once again. "Women?"

He chuckled again, groaning harshly as his ribs complained angrily at him. "It was a bit of a group effort by several people I'd never met before, yes."

"And you think these women are here, up in the mountains and away from anything?"

"No," he admitted, "I'm fairly certain I know where to find one of them, and she's far from here. But one, I have reason to believe, is somewhere in these mountains. My information is old and very much second-hand, but it's all I can do."

She hummed thoughtfully, "And why not go to the other? Surely she would make for a safer pursuit."

He had to fight not to laugh again. "I don't think so, actually. If I went to her as I am, I would certainly die."

She cocked her head in apparent confusion. "So instead you walked into the mountains during winter, injured and ill-prepared with no idea where you were really going... Richter, I don't think you have the best mind for self-preservation."

The woman looked and sounded so serious, but her deadpan expression struck a chord in him, and he was soon smiling despite himself. "Yeah. All my commanding officers always told me as much, but it's gotten me this far."

She frowned down at him, resting a hand on her hip. "You were practically dead two days ago."

"And yet here I am, saved again. It seems I'm even further in your debt, Selene."

At the use of what he knew had to be her name, she visibly stiffened. He watched the tension in her jaw as she bit down and clenched teeth, and he could see the veil of now familiar, emotionless cold slip over her. Her eyes lost every hint of warmth they had possessed, and she stared down at him like he was nothing more than a slab of meat. "Are you here to kill me, arbiter?" whispered the woman.

A tense second passed, but she eventually leapt backward as he started laughing. The ridiculousness of the situation tickled him mercilessly, and his laughter thundered against the cluttered walls until he was crying from the pain of making himself breathe. "No." he wheezed, coughing roughly, "If anything, I owe you more than I do anyone else and, were I able, I would devote myself utterly to you to repay that debt." He spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness, indicating his hobbled form. He wasn't sure if he could make himself walk, let alone fight anyone, and Selene seemed to realize that, cautiously sliding the thin stiletto she had pulled on him back into the sleeve of her robes.

Still, that didn't placate her, and she stepped away, lowering herself into a spindly stool as she watched him, the hard cast never leaving her features. "Then why have you come all this way, Richter? Why risk death or worse just to find me?"

He laced his fingers over his abdomen, stifling more coughing, which made his eyes water furiously. "Because I need your help, Selene. You aren't the only one to grow discontented with the... operations of the people we have found ourselves working with, and you aren't the only one to decide to act on that discontent. After what happened to me, I was nearly dead as it was, and no one came to find me after I had been lost. The only thing that I had, the thing that saved my life from what, at the time, seemed like the fury of a god, was my armor, the armor I knew you were responsible for making. I loved that armor, Selene. That armor took care of me, and I it. I'm not much of a craftsman, I'll be the first to admit, but I could tell that the person responsible for that armor wasn't like the people I was forced to be surrounded by day in and day out. It was created with such care and passion... there was soul and love in that armor, Selene. It was beautiful, and I wished I had been able to keep it."

The woman sitting nearby mulled over his words, pressing the tips of dainty fingers together. "I'm no smith, Richter. I only treated the plates brought to me. I'm just an alchemist. That's... that's all I've ever been."

"Maybe." he replied slowly, "But you made one, didn't you? One suit, bent to shape to your specifications and measurements given to you, one touched and crafted by your hands? It was the one eversteel suit that outshone all the others. It was more than simple plate and chain, wasn't it?"

Her eyes lifted to his, slowly creeping wider in shock. "You can't know about that... That wasn't supposed... No one was supposed to know about... you... You?! You can't be... That's not.... They would have... I-"

As she seemed unable to finish a sentence, he let a hand flop limply out toward her, fingers open and palm upward in a plaintive gesture. "I never met you, Selene, but I wish I had. I greatly wanted to meet the person who risked so much to give me something of true value. I didn't have cause to wear it frequently, but I kept it clean and oiled, and it served me admirably. At the end it truly saved my life. I would have been a pile of broken pulp without its protection. You saved me, Selene, and I knew I had to at least see you, to thank you."

She blinked rapidly, as if trying to digest everything he said. "How... did you know where to find me?"

"My position afforded me... a lot of information I never thought I would have need for, but my mind kept hold of a few tidbits that I could never forget. I knew you were up in these mountains somewhere. I suppose I was just... praying to find you before the elements did me in. It got cold a lot faster than I expected, I've got to admit. I'd heard rumblings that you'd—they called it deserted. I knew better. I felt like I knew you better, even though I'd never met you, and after everything that happened, I needed to come to you. I needed to at least see you, even if it killed me."

She seemed to relax a bit, but her voice still held a tone of resolution, "I'm not going back. I'll never go back to them."

"That's good." he assured her, "You shouldn't. You're too good for them. They're all crazy, evil, or too stupid for their own good. I wish I could have done something more before I did a desertion of my own. I... maybe I could have helped someone..."

His voice drifted away, and there was a long silence between them. He was growing tired again, and without the biting pain to keep him awake, he could feel sleep approaching him rapidly. Selene sagged inwardly, seeming to fold in on herself as her own eyes grew watery. "The suit..." she mumbled, "Did it really help you?"

Traitorously, his eyelids threatened to drop, but he managed another smile. "Like I said..." he mumbled drowsily, "It saved my life. Without you, I'd be dead twice over. I... I owe you everything, Selene. Th-thank you."

An uncharacteristic blush worked its way over Selene's cheeks, coloring her fair skin ruddy pink, and she fussed with her hands nervously, seemingly struggling with something. "You... you said you needed my help..."

He didn't know how he managed to keep his eyes cracked. "Y-yes. Please, Selene... I-I need-"

As he stammered, trying to sluggishly spit out the words that were coming with only great difficulty, his savior leaned toward him and reached out. Cautiously, she slid her hand into his. He blinked slowly at the sight of her tiny fingers gently squeezing his. "Calm." she crooned at him, "We can speak more of it later, when you are well again. Rest for now. I'll take care of you. Just rest. We'll take care of you."

He focused on the fragile warmth against his palm, and before unconsciousness swept over him, he pondered at the word "we."

He didn't really know how much time passed, nor how many times he was awoken to get something edible in him, but every time he was ordered back to sleep, he certainly noted how much better he began to feel: stronger, more confident, more like his old self. Selene almost always refused to speak too much with him, insisting that he conserve every scrap of energy he could manage to collect, but he still somehow found himself drawn into conversations over the course of which he wound up spilling nearly his entire story into Selene's lap.

It was on the day he finished his tale that Selene leaned back from her stool to recline against the wall, muttering a disbelieving, "The things you've seen..."

"Yeah..." he said with a heavy sigh, "I... I'd like to avoid any confrontation, but... you understand why I have to go to her, right? I... I *have* to!"

Pressing the tips of two fingers of each hand to her temples, Selene nodded briskly. "Yes," she answered, "I think I do, Richter, but I don't see how I can help you. What could I do to better your situation any? I don't have access to any of my old resources, and healing you is pushing my remaining stores to their limits. I'm just an alchemist, not a warrior, or a spy. What could I do to really help?"

He sat up from the cot in which he had spent what seemed very much like an eternity. He was delighted with the ease with which he moved. Despite still being shirtless, the bandages that had been wrapped around his chest and head had since been removed, and he looked well, at least as good as he now felt. His ears perked up at the sound of her voice bouncing off the odd, metallic walls, and he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "That's just it. I don't need a spy, and I've usually been as much warrior as I need. I need an alchemist; I need you." He paused for a moment to find the words. "You've already done so much for me, and asked for nothing in return. You know I mean you no harm. I... I suppose I don't even really need your help. I just would greatly like it. You, of all people, would be the only person I would trust to do it. I like to think I'm pretty clever, and I'm sure I'd eventually figure out a way to see her, but... You could... help me." At her dubious look, he pleaded, "I vow I'll do anything you need. I will surrender whatever it takes, and I would be thrice in your debt, Selene."

The way the alchemist looked at him was absolutely unreadable. Her eyes never left his, but he felt like she was staring past him. Slowly, recognition dawned on Selene's face, and she finally focused on him, though he wasn't sure he was being addressed. "After everything I've done..." she whispered under her breath, seemingly to herself, "I still have the chance..." She looked at him more solidly now, speaking more directly. "What you're asking is nigh-suicidal. You could end up dead or malformed or worse. I... I don't have much practice with that sort of thing. I'm a metallurgist more than anything! What...? Do you... really trust me, knowing what you surely know about me, about what I've done to people?"

He leaned back into his cushion, plumping it with an idle arm. "Trust is very much a two-way street, Selene. If you wanted me dead or malformed or worse, I would have been so a hundred times over by now. Before you even knew who I really was, you saved my life... twice! You've done nothing but help me so far, and regardless of what you've done in the name of loyalty, I assure you that I have done equally. For every pair of eversteel shackles you've made, I... I've clapped them around an innocent's wrists. For every blade you've made, I've stood by and watched someone who didn't deserve a brutal fate get cut down. Your soul, Selene, is no more stained than mine, but you're rebelling against your past. You clearly strive for better, to *be* better. I have to ask you, if not you, who is left for me to trust?"

Selene eyes grew misty. "Her..." she breathed with complete assurance, "You could trust her." He nodded, the certainty of the statement concrete in his mind. "I could help you get to her..." He nodded again. The alchemist let out a shuddering breath, her cheeks puffing out cutely. "Tell me, Richter. Do you love her?"

It was his turn to heave a heavy, emotional breath. "I don't know, Selene. I don't know if I deserve to love anyone, and I know she doesn't deserve someone like me, but I also know that I don't know what else I can do but find her."

The regal looking woman nodded as if she knew exactly what he felt, and he was shocked to see a single tear slide lazily down her cheek. The bead of moisture didn't make it to her jaw before she buried her face into her hands, hiding herself behind her slender fingers. The alchemist took a few long, slow breaths, and he nearly reached out to her, if just to hold her, but she quickly reined in her emotions. When her hands dropped slackly to her lap, she actually had a small smile stretching her full lips. It looked genuine, and the sight of it was enough to drag one onto his own face. "I'll help you." she said with bold confidence.

His spine snapped vertical, and he could feel his ears quivering in sudden excitement. "Really?"

"Yes..." she repeated herself with a sharp nod, already rising and turning to one of the equipment-laden tables. "You need a disguise, yes? You need to be different, different enough to avoid suspicious... Hair, fur, tail, eyes, it's all got to change..." She twisted, her robes floating around her from the motion. "What did you have in mind? I might be able to work something in."

The sudden question caught him off guard, something he was unused to. "I... I don't know." he muttered through his chagrin, "I never really gave it any thought. I guess I just thought "different" would be descriptive enough."

The alchemist turned away from him halfway through his sentence, humming thoughtfully. "Well, I suppose it is... You'll have to keep your size, any bigger and you'll just attract attention to yourself... Fur... fur... Skin...? Scales...? I wonder... What if...? No, no..."

He quirked an eyebrow as she continued to mutter to herself, and watched her hands practically flying over her equipment with zeal he hadn't expected. Vials and flasks of varying sizes practically floated before her, suspended by her blurred hands, and a number of things were quickly resting over low, alchemical flames to heat practically before he could blink. He was impressed. "What... what should I do?"

Letting her hands fall to her worktable to rest, she peered back over her shoulder at him, "Sleep, Richter. I'm low on a few things, so I'll need your help soon enough. But for now, just keep resting. This will take time to prepare. Sleep, get well, and I'll wake you when I require something of you aside from what you have already given me."

She waved away his weak queries as she glided over to him. Gently, she pushed, and like her very touch could drain the energy from him, he realized he was exhausted. He grumbled, but let himself collapse, idly watching her pull things from unlabeled jars and grinding them to powders before adding them to nearly uncountable other mixtures. The complexity of what he watched boggled his mind, and he let his awed brain languorously drift to sleep, wandering and wondering.

It felt like he was awoken entirely too soon by a tiny hand on his broad shoulder. Selene's voice filtered to him, whispering his name softly. He complained incoherently, but his eyes fluttered open nonetheless. "Nnh... wha... What? What's wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong," the slim woman intimated. "It's been nearly a day, and it's time for you to eat something." She pushed a plate into his hands, and he was surprised at its weight. "Hunting's been good recently, so you can have something a little more substantial."

He looked down as she sashayed away, and he could have cried at the sight. There were a few strips of unidentifiable dried fruit, a few pieces of wrinkly, boiled potato and bits of dry, crumbly bread, but what really caught his eye and the full attention of his stomach was the veritable slab of steaming, juicy meat that dominated the platter. A question didn't even cross his mind as he dug in with nearly vicious force. The bread was flavorless, the potatoes were unappealing, and the fruit was on the edge of spoiling despite its cured state, but the meat was exactly what he needed. It was hot and greasy and utterly, deliciously filling. It tasted of lamb, was dense and fatty, and there must have been a five-pound cut of it filling his plate. Before the same number of minutes could pass, it was filling his belly.

While he was gorging himself, Selene fiddled idly with the glow of a small flame that rested under a beaker containing a simmering, purple fluid. He licked his platter clean, feeling, for the first time since he could remember, satisfied, before he could give voice to anything other than gratified moans. Patting his stomach he mused cheerfully, "I think, Selene, that you underestimate your cooking skills. That was... divine."

The alchemist smiled at him, but shook her head. "No, I'm certain my skills would leave you rather unfulfilled. That was Luna's work. She's much better over a cookfire than I." She gestured to the alchemical burner with which she was toying, her smile breaking into a grin. "Rather odd, I know." Before he could even cock his eyebrow, she forged onward. "There is something you could help me with, however. Do you know what Redmount is?" He closed his half-open mouth, shaking his head. "Hmmm..." she mumbled, "It's this... It's a red-colored flower that shaped like a little, inverted bell. I need its leaves. I'm out, and it's an important catalyst. They grow in these mountains, thankfully, and flower during the winter, so it's the perfect time to gather up a nice big bunch."

He nodded slowly. "I suppose that you'd like me to gather it then?"

"That would be rather lovely" Selene cooed, "I can't leave right now though. The temperature of this compound has to be controlled exactly, or it will be ruined. But I couldn't ask you to go out there alone in the cold, not after what happened last time you decided to meander through the mountains." Before he could assure her that he would be fine, she craned her neck and shouted up at the ceiling, "Luna! Are you listening?"

His stomach dropped out from within him, sinking into his toes as the ground beneath the cot that held his weight suddenly lurched. He wobbled, nearly tumbling from his perch. It sounded like something tremendous had just struck the earth, and was in the process of digging a crater out of the ground, and icy fear raced through his arteries. He had heard that sound before, entirely too often for his peace-of-mind. Selene, on the other hand, just drifted to the wall nearest to them both and put her hands to the dark, metallic material. A window revealed itself to her probing fingers, and she easily popped a hidden latch, allowing a pair of thick metal doors to be pushed outward. He shivered at the wave of chilly air that washed over the fur of his bare chest, but what shocked him more was the presence of an enormous, golden eye hovering within part of an ivory-scaled face barely a few feet outside. "Of course, Selene." rumbled a familiar, thundering voice that sounded like mountains were grinding to dust in the creature's throat.

The alchemist smiled beatifically. "Wonderful, Love. Do you remember that little dell where the Redmount grows?" The eye moved in a partially-hidden nod. "I need some, and

Richter had just kindly offered to retrieve some for me. He needs to stretch his legs, anyway. Would you accompany him and make sure nothing befalls him?"

Concern touched the voice that sounded like distant thunder, nearly deafening with its feminine strength, "Are you sure? Will you be okay alone here? I caught enough food to last a couple days if I only nibble at it... I can stay here with you..."

"I'm sure you could and would Luna, but you mustn't starve yourself on my account. You need a lot to maintain yourself. I can't have you weakening yourself just to protect me from the cold. Where would I be if you were too weak to move, Love?" Luna, the creature outside, seemed to quail at the very notion, and only shook her enormous head. "Good. While you're out, or later, you should find some more of those goats, but for now, Richter needs our help, and to help him, I need his. Will you look after him for me, Luna?"

"Yes, Selene." the creature grumbled as if being chastised, but immediately brightened when Selene stuck her arm through the window and rubbed her hand along what looked like surprisingly smooth scales.

The alchemist turned to face him as the ground shook once more and the massive, slitted eye disappeared upward. "She'll see that nothing unpleasant happens to you. Your clothing is over there, in the corner by the door. Watch your head. This place wasn't built for people much beyond my stature."

Bewildered, he just tried to reconcile what he knew of the universe as he cautiously rose to his feet. His legs complained at taking his weight, but he managed the feat after so long laying down and sitting. He was forced to bent far over to keep his head ears off of the ceiling, but it wasn't too bad. He took small steps to avoid brushing against anything that would explode, and eventually, he managed to make it over to the door, something that looked like he would have to bend in half to fit through.

Finding his long-discarded clothing, he winced at the bloodstains on the dark fabric of his shirt and coat. He hadn't known that he had been in such a sorry state. He shrugged them on anyway, bracing himself against the cold as he pinned his cloak around his shoulders and pulled the hood up over his ears. He heard Selene quip an oddly happy "Happy hunting!" as he slid open the awkward, metal door and stepped into the chill of winter. Instead of what he was expecting, however he was greeted by not the racing, icy wind that had nearly killed him days prior, but a bracing, bearably crisp breeze.

He took a moment to appraise his surroundings. The landscape was the same, muted grey as the rest of the mountainous area, and the sun shone warmly against him, despite the time of the year. It was an unseasonably comfortable day, over which he was not about to start complaining. He turned, blinking in surprise at the structure from which he had just emerged. It looked like nothing more than a squat, squarish box made of panels of dark metal, broken occasionally by windows and the door. It was nestled into a hollow that appeared to have been gouged into a rocky slope by the hands of a giant, hands whose owner he was certain he was going to see again.

As if thinking about the titanic creature that he had seen was enough to summon it, the ground shaking signaled the fall of an enormous foot and a curious, reptilian face peeked around the stony peak under which Selene's home was hiding. "Hi... Mister Richter... My name's Luna..." she said shyly, "I'm glad that you're alright."

Careful to keep his hooves on stable footing, he wandered out and around the jagged spire of rock to get a better look at his tremendous guide. She wriggled uneasily at his visual inspection, but there was little she could do to hide from his eyes. She, and judging by the

absolutely massive breasts hanging off of Luna's chest, she was most definitely a she, was truly monstrous. He was tall, nearly ten feet, but she looked almost five times his height. He approached, and his eyes didn't even reach her knee. Her body was white and scaly, and the trio of horns, two backward-curving and one sticking from the tip of her snout, were even whiter and more lustrous, like pearls. There was a row of spikes lining her spine, from her head to the end of her thick tail, a tail that swished audibly through the air as she fidgeted under his gaze.

In spite of her clear, stunning femininity, evident in the proportions of her breasts and the breadth of her womanly hips, her entire frame was covered in deep, dense layers of thick, frighteningly powerful-looking muscle. He had only once before seen anything that could hope to possess the power that Luna packed, and the last time he had, he had nearly died. Her arm wrapped around her titanic bust, hiding her dusky grey nipples in an almost comically demure display of modesty for something that seemed so unrepentantly nude, and, in the face of her frightfulness, he found himself grinning up at her. "Hello, Luna." he called up to her, "It's a pleasure to meet you under better circumstances. I'll admit, when you found me in that windstorm, I was certain I was going to die. I take it that you're the one that really rescued me?"

Luna's huge, horned head nodded eagerly, and he caught a glimpse at just how many teeth were crammed into the scaly behemoth's mouth as she grinned. "Yup!" she chirped "Sorry for scaring you like that," she added after a heartbeat of consideration, "I just thought that you were one of them, here to hurt Selene, and I... got a little angry, but then you fell over, and I smelled your blood, and you weren't moving, and I got really scared. I begged Selene to fix you after I carried you back. I'm glad you didn't die. You look..." her golden irises, settled in eyes larger than the platter he had just finished eating off of, sparkled thoughtfully, "You look nice... kind. You remind me of someone. I can't remember who..."

He finished pulling on his gloves as he completed his approach, and as he reached her he lightly laid his hand against the scales of her calf and found her pleasantly warm. He had to crane his neck up to continue the conversation, however. "Then I owe you my life just as much as I do Selene. I'm very glad I ran into you, Luna. I'm alive because of you. I'll never forget that."

Smile broadening into a giddy grin, Luna shifted idly, coiling her tail around one thick leg. "Thanks, but it wasn't hard or anything. You're really light, and it was easy to carry you the way. I tried to keep you warm without squishing you or anything..." He wasn't certain, but he thought that if her scales weren't in the way, Luna would be blushing furiously. It was in her bearing. "You were so cold, and I was afraid you wouldn't ever wake up. I'm happy that you made it, Richter. I would have been really sad if you died. Especially after I scared you like that... Sorry again."

"Think nothing of it." said the equine consolingly, "You were just keeping Selene safe. I can respect that. I tried for a long time to keep people safe, and I found scaring people away from hurting each other worked a lot better than trying to actually fight them. Fighting has a tendency to leave people injured, and I really do hate seeing people get hurt, especially if that someone's someone I care about."

Luna wiggled happily like he had just summed up her entire being. "Mmh, I like you Richter. You remind me of Selene. You both talk the same, nice but sad. Plus you're both really pretty. Handsome, I mean, sorry."

He chuckled at the offhand compliment, accepting it with as gracious a bow as he could manage to stretch from his stiff body. "And you, milady, are a paragon of grace and power." Luna giggled and squirmed ecstatically, her modesty forgotten or ignored as her monumental

breasts swayed heavily. He just swallowed and kept his eyes on her face as he continued. "Now, about these flowers. Do you know where we can find some?"

She nodded joyously. "Yep! There's a little field of them not all that far away. It's all red when they're in bloom, poking up between the rocks. They're really pretty! Come on!" He started off in the direction indicated by her swishing tail, but he hadn't made it more than a few steps away before she cleared her throat noisily as much as nervously. He stopped and curiously looked back up at her. "Um..." muttered the apprehensive giantess, "I know you're supposed to walk and stretch your legs and stuff, but... I like talking while I walk, and it's a lot easier if I... Um... D-do you mind if I... carry you? You can walk for a little bit when we get there, and I can get us there faster, I promise!"

He couldn't really see any harm in the innocent request. She had already carried him once, so he accepted her offer with a shrug and a nod. She squealed, a sound that he hadn't suspected she was capable of, and clapped her hands excitedly. Reaching down, her fingers wrapped easily around him, and he was lifted into the air with the ease of picking up a doll. Luna held him with surprising gentleness, but his stomach still dropped, a wave of startled vertigo sweeping through him as he was abruptly forty feet in the air next to a face full of teeth the size of sabers.

Luna looked at him, her eyes bright and warm. "There!" she chirped cheerfully, managing to drop her voice enough to save him from deafness. Her foot rose and fell, and he could hear the impact in the dull rumble of the rock, and felt it in the slow rise and fall of her body as she took another. They left behind Selene's squat little sanctuary, Luna casually strolling at a pace he would have had to sprint to keep up with. "I'm really, really glad you got better, Richter." Luna murmured softly, her fingers, as thick as his legs, squeezing him intimately, "We don't often get visitors I don't have to step on or scare away. And Selene... she got a lot more talkative since she started taking care of you. She sounds happy, so thank you. She was starting to get broody, and I didn't know what to do to cheer her up." She peered down at him, a sheepish grin unsheathing an unsettling number of teeth. "She really just wants to help people, you know. It's all she's ever wanted to do. I guess it sounds weird, but I'm glad that someone else needed her help."

"Well," he answered, resting his arms on Luna's fingers as she cradled him, "I would have preferred it not be on my deathbed, but I suppose that I'm glad she wanted to help too. Otherwise I wouldn't really be alive right now. She's a good person, Luna. I know she is; she can't be anything else."

"I'm glad someone else thinks so." Luna sighed, "Sometimes it's like she doesn't believe it, no matter how much I tell her. Don't tell her I told you, but she cries sometimes... for hours, and I don't know how to make her stop. She hasn't since you showed up, though. If anything, she's just excited to be able to do something for someone."

He pondered that for a moment, feeling that he could certainly sympathize with such a standpoint. Eventually, he felt he had to ask, "Luna... I've never seen anything like you before. What are you?"

Her chest puffed out with pride. "I'm Luna, and there isn't anything like me. Selene says I'm special, but I just think she doesn't want to take the credit for making me like this." At his intrigued expression, she giggled and carried on, "I used to be like her, only littler and not as pretty. She gave me things to drink, and I turned into this." With her unoccupied hand she poked herself in the chest for emphasis. "When she said she didn't have much experience, she was

fibbing. She really is too modest sometimes. Whatever you need her to do for you, she'll do it better than you imagine. You might even be surprised. I know I was."

Blinking numbly, he fumbled with his words, flabbergasted, "Wow... The way she was talking sounded like she didn't know what she was doing."

Luna laughed richly, a sound that, despite how it shuddered in his ears, seemed sublimely happy, "Oh, no! She's the best, the best at everything! Whatever you need, she'll do it better than anyone else could. Sometimes it just takes time for her to make something amazing. Just be patient with her, Richter"

"I think I can manage that. Despite my urgency, I suppose I'm not in any particular hurry, especially with winter nearly here."

He was beginning to doubt if Luna ever did anything besides smile happily. "That would be nice, to have someone to talk to while Selene's busy. It gets quiet up here when the wind dies down, and I've read all the books Selene brought for me." The image of the titaness holding a book up to her eyes in claws thicker than his arms pulled a lighthearted chuckle from his lungs, and she giggle with him. "See, Richter! It's already so much better with you here! Besides, I think-Oh! Richter, look! Look!"

Looking out where Luna shoved him, he peered around as Luna strode carefully up a shallow slope. When she crested it, he looked outward over a little dell, a dip in the rocky terrain that was sheltered from the wind. The monotonous grey of the landscape was broken by a veritable sea of little red splotches, clusters of flowers that huddled together as if for warmth. Luna danced joyously, wiggling her body through the air, and took a few quick steps down into the stony bowl. Carefully, she knelt at the edge of the reddish ocean, letting him slide back to his hooves before she flopped to her rump, making the ground tremble with the impact as she sat down unceremoniously.

Her eyes glimmered with sheer delight at the sight, and she settled back, peering out at the abruptly colorful landscape. "Isn't it pretty?" breathed the reverent giantess, "This is my favorite place to lay down with Selene, just holding her..."

Luna didn't seem keen on continuing speaking, content to just stare out at the ocean of red with a smile of wide-eyed innocence despite her fearsome visage. With a rueful grin in return, he strolled carefully out into the flowers. They peeked up through cracks in the rocks, bundles of soft, green foliage tufted with bunches of tiny, red flowers shaped like upward-facing bells. The air around him, still and cool, smelled sweet and mild, the aroma of a thousand thousand miniscule flowers sitting in the dimple of rocky earth, and he too was content for a time to just meander around, looking at the patch of unexpected beauty in such an inhospitable place during such an unfriendly time of year.

He heard Luna shifting noisily, rock clattering against her scales, and when he turned to face her again, she had turned to lie down on her stomach. Her massive breasts were pressed into the ground, and she rested on her knees, her shapely rump held high for her tail to wiggle far above her. Her nose was pressed into a patch of red as she sniffed gently, careful not to tear the flowers from the ground through sheer suction. Looking at him, she smiled again, her tail betraying her happiness as it became a pale, sun-bleached blur, "Don't they smell so nice, Richter? These are my favorite flowers! They turn into these little red berries in the spring, and then all these birds show up to eat them! I have to fight them just to get a taste! I wish I had some to give you; they're really good! Maybe... maybe you'll stay long enough to go picking with us sometime... I promise not to eat them all if you do!"

Stooping to pluck a few sprigs of leafy green vegetation from around the base of a bunch of the flowers, she felt a pang of sorrow in his chest. "You know, Luna, I wouldn't mind that at all. But I've got to leave as soon as Selene can help me look different. Someone... important to me is waiting for me."

Her eyes grew wide with awe as she watched him continue to pull greens from a few plants, until he had a handful of the smooth leaves, their fragrant sap sticking to his coat.

"Someone special?" she mused playfully, "Is it a girl?"

He nodded as he strolled back over to her, "Yes."

"Is she pretty?"

"Very much so."

"Do you love her?"

At that, he hesitated, coming to a stop a few feet in front of her. "I don't know, Luna, but I'd like to find out. The longer I wait, though, the harder it will be to find her. I haven't seen her in quite some time, and I worry about her terribly."

Luna pushed herself up to sit back against the lip of the dell. "I understand, Richter." she said with a hint of sadness, "I hope you find her, though. Everyone deserves to have someone, especially someone as nice as you. I hope she's nice too."

"I think she is. She's saved my life once already."

"Then she's perfect! Selene saved me once, too! You'll be fine!"

He nodded hopefully before he gestured at her with his handful of leaves. "I guess we should get back?"

Luna pouted briefly, an oddly human expression on the face of an enormous, horned lizard, but she eventually nodded back at him. "Yeah. Selene might need them soon. Let's go." She took another breath of the fragrant air before she braced a hand behind her and hauled herself to her taloned feet to tower over everything again. Stretching her arms high over her head, she bent her back and twisted, working her enormous body free of whatever stiffness that might have been afflicting her. That done, she stooped to scoop him free of the earth once again before starting off back the way they had come. A happy smile slowly crept back over her features, and the silence was companionable for a time.

Eventually, however, she broke it with a suspiciously nervous question. "Uh... Richter, would you mind if I carried you a little differently? It's a lot more comfortable than just holding you in my hand, I promise."

"Sure." he replied despite her fingers clutching at him with impossible tenderness.

She grinned at him, a sly gleam in her golden eyes as she lifted him in front of her, appraising him for a moment. Apparently seeing something appropriate, she clutched him to her chest in a giant's approximation of a hug before letting him slide down. He had a suspicion that he knew where he was going to end up, but it wasn't confirmed until she actually started sliding his legs between the upper curves of her enormous breasts, into the canyon of her cleavage. He wriggled weakly, but that only seemed to encourage her, and she gently pressed him down until his entire lower body was trapped between mountains of soft, surprisingly supple mammary.

He huffed in meek protest, but her wickedly clawed fingers stayed on him, holding him back against her chest and keeping him pinned between her breasts. "See?" she hummed, her voice rumbling against him through her scales, "Nice and warm and comfy, just for snuggling into. Selene likes it there, I thought you would too. Was I right?"

Considering another, more forceful protest, he instead decided to hesitantly agree. It didn't really feel sexual in nature, despite the intimacy of his position, and as her fingertips

affectionately stroked him, he couldn't help but relax and recline against her collarbone. It was rather warm, and soft, and he shifted without thinking, wiggling deeper into her scale-lined cleavage. Luna purred happily at his acceptance and let him work himself lower, until he was buried up to his midriff in her enormous breasts. It was pleasant, heated and comforting, and he felt her titanic heartbeat against him, surrounding him like a mother's embrace. It was enough to pull a relaxed sigh from his lungs. "It really is nice, isn't it? I... have to admit; I've never really thought about what it would feel like. The opportunity to, uh, ride in someone's boobs doesn't really come up often. You're so warm..."

He felt as much as heard Luna giggle. "You just don't know the right people, then. And yeah, the cold doesn't really bother me. Selene says it's because I'm so hot-blooded, but when she says it I feel like she's talking about something else. Don't worry Richter. We can cuddle whenever you want as long as Selene doesn't need me for something. Maybe we can all curl up together, hmm? I think I'd like that. The wind doesn't bother me, but sometimes Selene's little box feels so cold, and I worry about her. She sleeps with me most nights, but when she doesn't, I have... bad dreams. I hope she doesn't."

Trying to keep his hands away from anything improper, he patted the fingers shrouding his chest soothingly, musing at the contact. For nearly his entire life, he had been the biggest and strongest person in whatever room he was. So much for that paradigm. "I'm sure she doesn't, Luna. Not with you there for her. I know I'm feeling... much better now. Thanks for coming with me. I know you would have preferred to stay with her."

Luna patted him back, her palm easily covering nearly his entire torso. "It's alright. I always like going to look at the flowers this time of year anyway. It's a nice reminder that no matter how bleak something is, there's always a little splash of color to be found if you look hard enough."

"That's a pretty good outlook on life to have, Luna. I wish more people saw things like that."

"That's what Selene says too."

"It must be nice to constantly be around someone so wise. I'm jealous of Selene."

The scaly giant laughed and hugged him more firmly to her chest. "You're just saying that because you're squished into me."

He chuckled with her. "I didn't say there was only one thing that made me jealous. The loveliness of her reptilian companion is certainly nothing to complain about."

Luna's smile was actually audibly as she wrapped her arm over her bust, squishing the masses of her breasts into him. The plush, warm flesh yielded to him, enveloping his legs and squeezing him... snugly enough to make his mind wander. "I knew there was a reason I liked you. Thank you, Richter. I really hope you find your friend, and I hope you can be happy with her. We can all use a little more happy, right?" He had his mouth open to voice a most emphatic affirmative, but she squeezed the breath from his lungs in a display of unconscious excitement. "Oh! Here we are! Here, let me just... slide you out of there. Hold on."

His eyes widened as her grip on him tightened, and Luna gently pulled him out of the seemingly endless crevasse of her cleavage, bending to gingerly let his hooves find the rocks. Shakily, his weight settled over his feet, and he wobbled, braced by her finger as he righted himself. Time had flown, and they had found their way back to the little niche in the stony spires just when he had begun to feel really... comfortable. Selene's squat box sat where they had left it, and before he had time to truly get his bearings, the alchemist poked her head out of the door to smile at them.

She stepped out to greet them, her robes brushing against the rocks as she glided over to him. "You two enjoyed yourself, yes?" she hummed pleasantly, "It's a lovely day for it, not too cold. You're looking much better, Richter. How do you feel?"

"Wonderful." he responded casually, handing down to her the leaves he had been sent to gather. She accepted them with a humble smile, like he had just presented her with a bouquet, "Did I get enough?"

She laughed up at him. Standing next to one another, he finally got a good feel of how much larger he was than she. When he had been bedridden, she always seemed so high and mighty. Now she barely came up to his stomach, and she looked so small and frail... everything but her eyes, which had retained their sharp edge, softened only by a hint of compassion. "I really only needed a sprig," she said coyly, "but a bushel will do, I suppose. Thank you."

The ground beneath his hooves rumbled as Luna dropped to her front to put her face next to the diminutive alchemist. "I brought you something too. Here." She pushed a scaly hand forward, daintily clutching between monstrous fingers a bundle of tiny, red flowers. He noted that Luna had managed to pull the entire plant up, roots and all, without damaging the delicate blooms.

For the first time since he had met the alchemist, he watched Selene smile with absolute, genuine glee. "Oh, Luna, it's beautiful! And you even brought the whole plant! I'll get some soil and plant it in a beaker. That way we don't have to go anywhere to see a little bit of color!" As she spoke, she glided forward, accepting the colorful gift into her arms. "This is amazing. I love it." She raised it to her nose and inhaled deeply, her smile growing deep and dreamy. "I don't know what to say, Love." The alchemist leaned in to press a small, private kiss to the scales of Luna's cheek. It was long and slow enough to make him feel like a voyeur, and Luna wriggled happily under the contact, letting several feet of pale flesh run up Selene's robes and onto her face. Spluttering, the stately woman giggled and shoved Luna away, only succeeding in pushing herself backward. "Come on." she said, her smile seemingly glued to her face, "It's almost ready for the next step." Selene gave the ivory giantess another, briefer kiss and spun to sashay back into her armored sanctuary. He followed.

His brief foray into the brightness of the outside world had drained him, and he didn't have much left in him but to shrug off his cloak and coat and flop back down on his pitifully undersized bed. Selene opened the window again, letting Luna peer in as she turned and set her impromptu bouquet into an empty flask she pulled from nowhere. She asked Luna to remind her to replant it, upon which the scaly leviathan agreed, and went back to the various mixtures scattered haphazardly over one of the worktables. Slipping a single leaf into a heavy stone mortar, she skillfully ground it to a paste and let the mess fall into a bubbling, magenta mixture, quickly turning it a harsh, corrosive green. In spite of the concoctions unpleasant coloration, the alchemist hummed, pleased with her progress.

Turning to face him, she indicated the icky-looking flask. "All that's left now is to let that brew for a few days, key it to you with some of your blood, and it should be ready for consumption. You should get some more rest. The exercise did you well; you can see it in your face, but you still need to finish regaining your strength. While we wait I'll make you something to help you, and you should be right as rain in no time."

"Thank you, Selene." he said in what was almost a hoarse whisper, heavy with sudden emotion, "I can't say enough to express my gratitude for what you're doing for me."

"Then don't try." Luna interrupted him. He heard her scales rasping against the metal of the comparatively tiny boxy he was in as she nuzzled it fondly. "You need help, and Selene says we should always help people who really deserve it. I think you do, right Selene?"

The alchemist glanced at him for a quiet moment before returning her eyes to the giant golden one filling the window. "Yes, Luna. I think he does."

Several days passed, and he ate and drank everything Selene pushed in front of his face. With the alchemist's help, he felt his strength eagerly returning to him. He felt strong and confident again. He felt warm and full of life, the exact opposite of how he had felt when he had first shown up practically dead at Selene's doorstep. His body, and everything that came with it, was his again, and he felt better than he ever had before, something that both Selene and Luna remarked on with great enthusiasm. Every day, when it was convenient for Selene, he would take walks with them both, looking for more flowers, exploring and remarking on the hominess they brought to such a desolated, remote area.

He was enjoying himself, despite how dull and sad Selene seemed when Luna was off hunting for enough food to appease her equally massive appetite. The days passed quickly, faster than he truly wanted them to, but eventually Selene notified him that everything was ready. It was a chillier day than it had been, but the sun was high and bright, and warmed their home and the rocks alike, and he almost didn't believe it when the alchemist pushed a small, glass vial, full of a couple ounces of bright, cherry-red liquid, into his broad hands. "I can't fully say what its effects will be, but it should change you enough to make you unrecognizable while keeping you similar enough to make the transition easy." She blushed fiercely, continuing falteringly. "It... should feel rather pleasant, and I recommend that you remove your clothing before you drink it just in case of any unexpected... growth. I don't have the supplies required to sew you a new wardrobe."

He accepted the insignificant little thing with a grateful nod. She politely suggested taking it outside, to prevent him from knocking into anything, and he agreed graciously, slipping through the door into the sunlight. Luna was away, and he was alone. Keeping the potion upon which rested his future secure in his palm, he slowly, languidly removed his clothes, not in any hurry to be on the next step of his journey. He stood for a time, naked in the sun, the light gleaming red off his almost-black fur and darkly off his certainly-black hair. A gentle, cold breeze ruffled the strands of his tail, and the nip of it bit into his bare loins, making him shiver briefly.

Taking a moment to survey his body, he hoped that he wouldn't lose too much of himself. He was covered nearly from head to toe with lean, hard muscle, well-worked and stunning in definition. He was tall and broad shouldered, attractive and masculine. Wondering idly, he mused playfully at his own vanity, but realized that in the end, it didn't really matter. What mattered was her, and if he had to become a wrinkled old man to find her, he would without hesitation. It was with that in mind that he pulled the delicate stopper from the vial resting in his fingers and poured its contents into his waiting mouth.

He swallowed fearlessly, chuckling for a moment at the strong, nearly overwhelming flavor of ripe berries that lingered on his palate. Laying the now-empty vial on the pile of his folded clothes, he braced himself and waited for his doom to befall him, for good or ill. Stock still he stood there, waiting, and waiting, head bowed in focus and eyes closed in anticipation. He felt the potion hit his gut, and roiling, energetic heat ignited in his stomach. Mentally, he traced its outward progress as it bled through his veins, filling his chest and leaking into his arms and

legs. It left him breathless, and not only from his growing nervousness. He had set himself on this road, and he was going to see it through to its end. He just had to take it one frustratingly miniscule step at a time.

The heat burning in his abdomen quickly became sweltering, and it pulsed regularly, matching the pace of his heartbeat as it quickened. With the pleasant, exciting warmth came a dull, throbbing pressure that bloomed outward from his center, pushing and straining against the inside of his furred skin with increasingly urgent force. His body was filled with tantalizing slowness, from the roots of his hooves to the tips of his ears, from his tumultuous center to his very extremities. The pressure forced its way into his head, beating with his heart at the inside of his skull, and as it utterly filled him, boiling and aching deliciously, he felt it be given purpose, felt it shift against his insides.

At the strange, spine-tingling sensation of some incorporeal force moving within him, pushing and prodding, his eyes snapped up to let him peer back over his shoulder. His tail rustled softly as it twitched, swishing in a display of nervousness he himself didn't quite feel. He had to admit, he only felt curious, curious and wonderfully aflame with awakened enthusiasm as his tail quivered in eager anticipation. The pressure grew and grew, building at the base of his spine, heating and compounding on itself until his legs shook with unrestrained excitement.

There where his tail intersected with his back above his compact, muscular rear, his furred skin bunched and writhed, flesh bulging obscenely around the base of the curtain of dark black hair that was his tail. A pang of something tightened in his gut, and it bent him over, wrapping his arms around him over his stomach as sensations of overwhelming euphoria washed over him. It pushed his boiling blood through his arteries with relentless force, and his teeth clenched around a delirious moan as it began in earnest.

His tail thrashed as it surged and thickened. Flesh, lean, taut muscle, coiled around the stiff spur of bone and cartilage that was the root of his long horse tail, and with a painless crackling sound, even its bones began to blossom and multiply. Blood roared through his body, pouring through his vessels and into the morphing growth that slowly, in shuddering spurts, pulsed from his lower back. His spine lengthened and pushed further and further from him, tendons popping and bones cricking noisily, all muffled by his rough groans of pleasure, which grew louder as the process continued. Its base thickened in girth, making room for the newly-born muscles that crawled along fresh vertebrae.

His formerly stiff limb spooled from his body, taking on a muscular, tapering appearance as his fur sprouted from skin that stretched over the increasingly long appendage. It hung limply, drooping until it twitched violently as rapidly firing nerves poured a rush of alien sensations into his mind. He gasped hoarsely, stunned at the feeling of muscles he couldn't have imagined having tensing and twitching aimlessly. Grunting at his elongating spine, his reshaping tail flicked wildly, slicing through the air as it went from something decidedly equine to something long, flexible, and lined with lean power. As it contorted, it curled around itself, fur sliding on fur, and it seemed hesitant to slow its quivering expansion.

As his transformation gained energy, he felt a disconcertingly pleasant tingling take up residence in his skin, like he was immersed in boiling water without being burned. The bubbling, tickling sensation spiked in intensity, sweeping down the length of his body again and again, and he noticed a previously nonexistent splotchiness in the fur coating his forearm. He stretched his thickly muscled limbs out before him and stared in awe at what he saw begin to happen. The short, fine hairs covering very nearly his entire body fluffed upward as his skin prickled beneath it, and it was with a slack jaw that he watched his fur change color.

The dark, almost lightless hair coating the entirety of his form lightened and took on a reddish hue, bringing out the faint hint of red that his mother had left him and strengthening it until it shone through to the surface of his body. His sleek fur shone a dull scarlet when it appeared to be done, dark but now unmistakably different than what it had been. That, however seemed to be far from the end of the changes sweeping across his body. His scalp and the tip of his tail prickled in a familiar fashion as the rest of his skin, and while he couldn't see the hair on his head, from what he noticed happening to the hair that remained from his equine tail he was able to make an informed guess.

The long strands of hair that hung from the end of his now strong, flexible tail brightened as had his fur, but didn't stop at merely dark, deep red. The color flared in intensity, seeming to catch fire, and as the sun struck it, it shimmered a bright, very fiery red that reminded him of a half-finished blade pulled from a smith's forge. As they changed, the remnants of his equine tail retracted, shortening slightly and pulling back into the tip of his tail as he watched, completely taken aback at the sight. Instead of the long, swishy hair he had possessed previously, he was left with a short, bristly tuft reminiscent of the end of a paintbrush, or, as he took in its color, the flame of a candle.

What truly shocked him was the appearance of more of the bright, flame-tinted hair appearing in other places than his head and tail. Starting in a line at the end of his newly-grown appendage and, by the itching on his nape, the beginnings of a mane of the same, fiery crimson lanced up from his skin to bisect his back into two halves, separated by a thick band of bright, silken hair. He'd seen horses with manes that went down to between their shoulder blades, but never one that ran the length of their back, and he had to admit that he was intrigued.

He was distracted by the new developments on his back by more merciless itching, this time coming from very nearly his entire front. He looked down at his barrel chest, taking in his fur, muddy red, when he swore he saw it thinning. It shortened, growing patchy and scruffy, like he had mange, before finally disappearing altogether. What really got his attention, though, was that it wasn't skin that lurked under his silky fur. What greeted his wide, stunned eyes wasn't his smooth, pinkish hide, but was rather a solid coat of fine, overlapping scales.

At this new, wholly unexpected phenomenon, he uttered a breathless, "What?!" as he slapped his hands down on his chest. The scales that came to rest under his trembling fingers weren't rough, as he had thought they would be, but were smooth enough to almost feel like skin if he hadn't been able to see the outline of the sturdy-looking shield shapes. His entire chest and abdomen, beginning just under his chin and continuing down along his crotch and the underside of his tail, glimmered a shiny, ruby red, reflective enough to stain the rocks around him the color of blood from the sunlight bouncing off of his broad torso. The scales did an even more admirable job of highlighting his indomitable musculature, and every contour of his physique was visible, from the outlines of his thick pecs to the creases between the individual muscles of his abs, and before he could stop himself, his fingers played along his new smoothness, curious and probing.

Still, it seemed, he wasn't done, because the pounding in his head in particular increased in urgency, tearing his attention away from the strip of gemstonesque color lining his front. His fingers went to his skull, cradling it as the throbbing became a merciless drumbeat, like the tramp of an entire army marching to war. It robbed him of his balance, and he collapsed to his knees, his ears twitching furiously as he grunted and groaned. It never quite hurt, but his painless, false headache thundered inside him and quickly became unbearable. His skull felt overfull, like it was going to split open under the pressure and release something with explosive force.

So catastrophic was his temporary distress that when he found his relief, he dared not question it. The tension was torn from his head when a resounding, horrific **crack** that felt like it reverberated through his entire body shuddered through his burdened skull. Against his will, a ragged, gasping groan was dragged from his lungs as more of the same sound continued to rattle through his head, soft but continuous, like the popping of green wood in a bonfire. It wasn't until he felt the things pushing against his palms that he realized what had happened.

His short, fiery red hair was parted by the emergence of a pair of squat, stubby horns that jutted into his awaiting fingers. They were hard, and felt like part of his skull, growing from him in twin nubs of shiny black bone. As the popping, cracking sounds went on jarring his skull, they grew longer in sharp, jerky bursts. They bent backward after their almost perpendicular rise from the sides of the crest of his skull, but they quickly shifted upward again, crawling longer and longer, sharper and thicker with agonizing laziness. It sounded gruesome, and while it caused him no real pain, if the unsettling noises were to cease he would not have complained.

His fingers trailed along the growing, onyx horns that continuously sprouted from his head, building a mental image of what he must now look like, but he couldn't place what was happening to him until the tip of his growing horns split apart, one part continuing its stuttering, upward march while one stuck forward threateningly, growing longer briefly. "No..." he gasped as more deviations to his horns lined their main lengths. They tapered and were clearly made of sturdy bone, but when their distressing growth stopped, his hands were roaming along a set of horns shaped like a rack of branching, decidedly cervine antlers.

He didn't believe it. It was impossible. He was no deer. There wasn't even any deer in his family tree since the first horse morph, but the wiggling of his tufted, scale-and-fur-covered tail reminded him that he wasn't anything natural anymore. He dragged his fingers away from the crest of bony antlers that split his scalp and hair alike, shuddering on his knees as he felt the heat within him begin to recede, pulling back down to his core. It drew down inside him, and as it condensed, the fire in his belly grew hotter and hotter. The pressure and nearly volcanic warmth focused on his stomach, and he was certain that his transformation was nearly over.

That was, at least, until it dropped lower. The pressure spiked, and rather than be quenched, the flaming, blissful heat that burned like an out-of-control wildfire against his skin only bit into him, taking hold of his body and yanking it out of the grip of his intent. He shuddered and moaned again, more loudly and absolutely shamelessly. The tension in his frame fell into his loins, throbbing and building, and he knew suddenly that his journey wasn't quite yet over. The sheath that contained his masculine equipment was no longer the tough, furred thing it had been. It was now thick and scaly, and as the rapturous, pulsing heat roared between his legs, he watched it bulge obscenely.

With almost comical shyness, the flattened glans of his equine tool peeked from where it had been lurking so patiently, and he couldn't stop himself from letting a hand fall to cup the aching flesh of his sheath. He felt... full, disastrously so, and he felt himself throbbing with pent-up fervor. As his excitement grew, inch after inch of twitching horseflesh poured from his crotch, drooping briefly under its own heft. He was a horse, a big horse, and his meat was more than a match for his stature, more than two feet of thick, vein-lined shaft capped with a huge, flared head.

He knew not where his propriety had gone, but he couldn't find it in himself to care that he was in the open, moaning like a drugged whore as the hand he was using to cradle the sheer weight of his masculinity gave it a slow, longing stroke. He had always been the object of desire of the women he had bedded in his youth. They had thought that his bulk would ensure his

virility, and he had never been accused of disappointing any of them. He throbbed longer and thicker, stiffening within his wandering fingers. His heart roared in his thrashing, equine ears, and he could feel the blood rushing from all over his body straight to the intersection of his legs.

The hand he wasn't busy with the state of affairs of his cock dipped lower, palming the weight of his now scale-covered sac. The twin orbs of his testes were the size of large apples, and he could feel them pulsing in time with his delirious endowment, brewing a sea of something rich and thick and potent. He didn't know where his mind, his modesty, had gone, but as he stroked himself to hardness he couldn't care. He squeezed and kneaded his scaly scrotum, urging himself into a state of emergency-production. The heat roiling from his length was tremendous, shocking, pleasing, and he felt little but pride and overwhelming ardor as he stared, wide-eyed at his own growing erection.

He burred wordlessly, practically drooling as he stumbled over his own tongue trying to beg his own dick to stunning rigidity. He got harder and harder, blood-tightened flesh pushing his fingers apart with enticing strength, and he eagerly pleased himself, seeking out the gratification that his lust-hazed mind screamed that he needed. Drops of clear, viscous precum dribbled from his urethra, dripping from his flared glans to the gravel beneath him as he started to rock his hips back and forth, gleefully humping his own hand. The trickle became a steady stream as his alchemically-induced desire grew, and the sheer scent of his own lust wormed into his mind through his sinuses. His hand darted forward to his tip to collect it, and he happily smeared the slick substance over his fingers, beginning the arduous task of smearing it over his taut flesh.

His pre eased his passage, and he was producing a more-than-ample supply of it, more than he ever had before. He didn't... couldn't question it, only silently thanking whatever gods had favored him for their intervention in his stallionhood. His fingers squelched noisily, his skin shone wetly with his own slimy liquids, and he worked himself into a giddy rut, pounding an artificial hole formed by a ring of the fingers of both hands. His hips moved as violently as he could make them, and he furiously squeezed himself, forcing as much friction as possible around the girth of his horsecock.

As he violently humped his own hands, lost in a sexual fantasy of his own hazed mind's creation, his slick fluids were slung everywhere in his frenetic state. The stream of precum he was leaking over his fingers and smearing over his shaft was interrupted every few thrusts by a thick spurt of the heady stuff that gushed out over the rocks as much as his hands as he approached his onrushing climax at a reckless, dead sprint. He grunted like a stud rearing a mare in heat, his hands in that moment better than any hot, tight tunnel he could have found, and as his muscles tightened with growing, pre-orgasmic strain, he only poured himself with more vigor into the effort of bringing himself to a swift and decisive climax.

His spine bent as he arched his back, and he snarled viciously as he clenched his teeth. He was so close, he could taste it, smell his cum in the air. His swollen testes were so full they almost hurt, and he knew without a doubt that he had to empty them or else. They swung heavily back and forth as he humped the air like a wild animal, big and firm and taut, practically sloshing with the ocean of his seed that roiled within them. The heat filled him, filled the only part of him that mattered in that moment. His massive maleness dilated, on the edge of orgasm. He bulged even girthier, forcing his fingers wider as he prepared to unleash his load, and that was when the potion completed its directionless task.

He found his voice before his orgasm could rob him of it, and as he bent backward, throwing his head back to the sky, he roared triumphantly as he came more explosively than he

ever had before. He thrust forward, hilding himself into a dripping, phantom snatch but before the first rope of his jizz could be sent hurtling through his impressive length, he felt it happening. His fingers, wrapped around the base of his throbbing horsecock, were suddenly shoved away as he bulged ludicrously. The column of quivering flesh jutting from his crotch changed. Several additional inches forced themselves out of his distended sheath, and he grew even thicker, veins standing out against his shockingly enormous maleness.

Shuddering, trapped mid-orgasm, his hands, tightly gripping the new inches that had sprang from his very root, were pushed away from his cock by something utterly unforgiving. Inflating like a balloon, filling with blood and tightening to a steel-hard, irregular orb of flesh, a huge, thick knot bulged into existence at the base of his still-equine endowment. His fingers clamped down on it, crushing it with all his frantic strength, but it resisted, only lancing bolts of jagged lightning deep into his brain at the sensation of something collapsing down onto it, mirroring the motions of the ghostly womanhood he had been so utterly abusing. He howled, wailing himself hoarse as he was finally able to begin the process of emptying himself.

His seed erupted from him like steam from a geyser, lava from a volcano, with the same cataclysmic energy. His jizz was a pearlescent fountain, spurting wildly from his crotch straight from the depths of his overburdened gonads. He sprayed alabaster cum dozens of feet through the air, blindly jerking as he coated the rocks in front of him in a wide arc with a thick glazing of his virile spunk. His knew knot bulged harder and harder, growing bigger until he couldn't have stopped from tying himself to whomever it was he had been giving the fucking of their lives. It was bigger than both his fists put together, a huge, twin-lobed affair, almost but not quite canine in appearance, and as he finished his quavering orgasm after what felt like a minute of spraying his seed, his voice finally died away in a weak, gurgling moan.

He took one look down, blinked at his alien manhood, flared and bulbous and knotted with something that looked ludicrously unpleasant for all but the largest or stretchiest of partners, and promptly passed out.

"Richter?" he heard a deep, almost godlike voice murmur to him. It sounded feminine, but frightfully powerful and full of almost motherly concern. "Richter, wake up. You're starting to make us worried. Please wake up..."

Air filled his lungs in a sudden, frantic gasp that sounded as coarse and ragged as he felt, and his eyes fluttered uncertainly open, latching onto the only spot of color he could manage to see, a circle of bright yellow-gold, broken only by a narrow, reptilian slit. "Ah! Luna!" he panted deliciously sweet air as if he had been drowning, "I... what...? Gods' Golden Blood, what the fire-blasted Hells happened?!"

Selene drifted into his vision, and he dully realized he was lying on his back. "I..." she said hesitantly, blushing outrageously, "I think you... enjoyed yourself a little more vigorously than I intended." She coughed meekly. "Sorry about that... I guess I put in a little too much starthistle."

Like a hammer fallen from the heavens, the weight of memory suddenly slammed into him, and he realized what he had done. "Oh, Gods..." he moaned weakly, "I... I didn't... I couldn't... Bones and Ichor that was... intense."

Luna showed him a splash of pearly white with a knowing grin. "I know the feeling, Richter. Don't be embarrassed. I've made bigger messes; don't worry."

Pushing himself to a sit, he groaned at the sight of an endless array of rocks plastered with drying seed. He must have been out for not too long, and he had to swallow his chagrin at

what Luna and Selene must have seen: him lying unceremoniously unconscious before a veritable ocean of his own spunk. And then he realized that he was naked, and his still half-erect cock was lying limply against his abdomen, knot still swollen absurdly. His hands slapped instinctively down over it, but in spite of their most valiant efforts, they had not hope of concealing his sheer size. He appeared to have kept his extra inches, and despite having just been drained wholly, his scaly sac looked... bigger and more burdened. He supposed he had gotten more than just a temporary upgrade to his equipment.

The scaled giantess, laughed at his abrupt modesty. "Relax Richter." he purred, "It's cute. I bet it would feel really good. If it would make you comfortable, I'll show you mine... if you ask nicely."

The offer was enough to raise his eyebrows, but Selene stifled that train of thought, slapping Luna playfully on the hand. "Stop teasing him, Love. Here." she continued, offering him her dainty hand, "Can you stand?"

He took her hand, not suspecting her to be capable of hoisting him off of the ground, but she didn't need to. Luna's tail slithered sinuously underneath him and helped lift the brunt of his weight from the rocks. His center of gravity came to rest over his hooves very unwillingly and Luna laughed again at his unsteadiness. The long, half-reptilian tail that now occupied the space that his thin, equine appendage once had was heavier than he expected, and he had to hold it carefully to stand, using muscles almost instinctively. At least that seemed to come naturally, and as he hobbled, Luna's tail bracing him, over to his clothes, he felt himself already growing used to it. Normally, his pants would have gone on first, but he was left staring glumly at them, his eyes bouncing from his clothes to his crotch and back. He guessed he would have to wait for himself to soften and retract back into his sheath before he could dress himself.

Giving up, he just tugged on his shirt, sliding it over his head before Selene could finish barking a warning. There was a sound of shredding cloth, and he jerked, looking up at the tattered remnants of his shirt. He had forgotten about his antler-like horns, and now his shirt was sporting an unseemly number of ragged rents. Luna found this hilarious. "That's why I'm glad I don't need to wear clothes!" she mentioned blithely.

"Okay... I'll just wait a bit." he told himself as Selene approached. He looked down at her, the gravity of what had been done to him finally sinking in. "You did it, Selene." he said in soft realization, "You did it. It worked perfectly. I'm so different; my own mother wouldn't recognize me. You... you really did it." He dropped to his knees and threw his arms around the spindly woman, clutching her body to his chest. "You really did it!"

The alchemist didn't seem to know what to do at the prospect of his sudden embrace, and she stiffened awkwardly, unsure of what to think. Luna, on the other hand, didn't give her time to pull away, coiling them both in a loop of her tail and lifting them to where she sat. They both received a hug of much greater magnitude, as if the scaled behemoth was showing them how to give a real hug, and Luna hummed happily to them, "Of course she did, silly. I knew she could! I told you she was the best! I-" Luna quieted when a soft, meager sound made itself heard. Selene's little form shook against his bulk, and her arms slowly curled around his chest, holding him tightly as she cried privately into the scales lining his front. He was surprised, and Luna was utterly aghast. "S-Selene!" she whined, "What's wrong?!"

The alchemist didn't seem capable of answering as she just shivered and sobbed against the two others, and he found himself holding her back, pressing her into his chest, desperate to comfort her in her sudden, apparent grief. "I did it..." she repeated after his assertions, half mumbling through her tears. "I really did it. I was afraid... afraid I couldn't help people, but I did

it..." She cried, sniffing and quivering against his body. "I really, really did it... I made someone happy, someone other than Luna. I can do it." Her head tilted back, looking at him, and there was a fire burning low in her eyes, a passion he hadn't seen before. "Thank you, Richter." Her face returned to his chest, and she reached back, pawing at Luna's finger. "Thank you both... for trusting and believing in me... Thank you."

Luna spoke for him. "I always trust you, Selene. I always believe in you. I always have, and Richter's sweet and kind. Of course he would! How couldn't he! Please, Selene... Don't be sad."

"I'm not sad, Love..." she replied, looking up at Luna's shimmering, nearly metallic eyes, "I'm just so happy I don't know what else to do but cry. I've cried for so long, it seems it's all I can do. But... I'm not sad, I promise."

A thick, ivory claw drifted down to brush away Selene's tears. "If you're sure then... but... just don't cry anymore. You're supposed to laugh when you're happy, not cry."

That seemed to be enough to shatter the alchemist's misaligned mood, and Selene gave a weak, but lighthearted giggle. "Of course, Luna. How could I forget?" She looked at the giantess for a long time, but a hint of glumness slowly crept over her face, and she returned her teary gaze back to him. "You have to leave now don't you... to find her?"

He nodded, trying to keep the sorrow from his eyes. "Yes, as soon as I can."

Selene let her head fall back to him, allowing it to come to rest against his ruby-scaled chest. "Then you should go. Every minute I cry like a child is one of yours I waste. Don't let me keep you."

He peered down at the thin, fragile form occupying his arms, and he felt suddenly protective of the slight figure. "Yes..." he muttered, "I will need to go soon, but not right away. I can stay here with you both for a little bit, a day or two more. I need to gather some things and fix my shirt right?" She looked up at him, joy and admiration shining under her veneer of stubbornness. He just lifted a few fingers up to her head, brushing strands of her long, ebony hair from her face. "Who are you to argue with the word of an arbiter anyway?"

That broke Selene, and she started laughing gently, shaking happily against him. He held her, and Luna cradled them both, speaking softly to him. "Don't worry, Richter. When you go, I promise I'll take good care of her. I promise you can go find your pretty lady, and you can always come back to us. I won't think about squishing you like I did when I first found you. I know better now. I'm glad you'll stay for a little bit, but don't forget about your lady."

"I won't." he vowed to the huge, ivory lizard, "I'll find her, and one day I'll come back up here to visit, and I'll bring her with me, and together, the four of us can talk and walk and find flowers all day. We... we can all be happy then, okay?"

Luna smiled and nodded, clutching her two charges to her chest and humming an already happy affirmative.