

# Survival Instinct

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Time passed, sometimes slowly, sometimes too quickly for her liking. Eventually, the gods granted her with a cloudless night, and she was able to use the familiar shapes of the constellations to discern her location. She was north of the Ordis Mountains and far to the east of her home. She was countless miles away from friends and family, but she knew where she was, and she knew roughly where she needed to go to make her way back to Southcliff, and that brought her a peace of mind that she hadn't truly realized she had been lacking.

Amena seemed to latch on to her good cheer, smiling often and speaking gaily. She passed the time by asking a deluge of questions, trying, thought the dragoness, to rebuild her understanding of the world. Emma just did what she could to answer and explain and nurture while trying to keep from seeming too matronly. It likely wouldn't have been proper for someone in a motherly position to be doing what else seemed to occupy their time.

It had been a week after Amena had first reawakened. She'd managed to catch a half-starved winter buck with a bolt of whitish lightning, and in the process snagged herself and her ward something a bit more substantial to eat. Ever since that first day, her guest had a more reasonable appetite, and had left her enough to sate the hunger than had begun to burn at her gut. After that, a squeaky moan had filtered through Amena's lips, accompanying the tinting of her snow-colored hair a dark, pitch black. The friends she had made a week prior had showed themselves once again, and they'd taken a break to indulge themselves once more. At the time, she'd had to admit to herself that she could certainly never get enough of the way Amena's face scrunched up in the midst of her euphoria.

They'd also taken the opportunity to go through a more thorough exploration of each other's bodies. Near the warmth of their nightly campfire, she'd been persuaded, not with great difficulty, to peel Amena out of the heavy layers that shielded the fragile-looking human from the cold. It was then that she had seen what had escaped her detection before. Marring the alabaster skin of the slim woman's back were four perfectly circular splotches of the same glossy black as the flesh that made up the growths that seemed to manifest themselves as they pleased. Two occupied symmetrical spots just below the meaty part of her shoulders, and the other two rested deep on her lower back and bordered the little concave hollow behind her spine. It was amazing, due in part to its novelty, she imagined.

Until they had hunted down the deer, she'd been happy to carry Amena's insignificant weight in her arms, curled up against her chest, but the other woman had expressed the desire to walk under her own power, so the dragoness had fashioned a pair of embarrassingly makeshift slippers from the skin of the animal. They were a little rough around the edges, but warm and functional, and kept the delicate amnesiac's feet out of the snow that would occasionally fall from the hazy grey sheet above them. Mercifully, they were spared from the roughest that Emma knew the season was capable of producing. She'd tasted it the first few days after arriving in the stony hinterlands that laid beyond the Ordis and before the broad tundra that stretched into the frozen north.

From where they were, they had two choices. There were people to the north, a collection of tribal kingdoms that were content to deal with themselves, cut off from the rest of the continent as they were by the sky-piercing peaks of the Ordis. She could take Amena north,

further into the winter, but it was a long march through the ice before they would reach civilization and a place that could send a message to Southcliff. A more appealing option, she could move south, toward home, fleeing the cold. The further they went, the warmer and wetter it would grow, and there would be more plentiful game in the forests that stretched along the southern foothills of the mountains.

But that was that plan's concern, the mountains. She was home in the mountains, but before it would get warmer, it would get colder as they climbed in search of a pass between the precipitous heights. She knew of several and she could navigate them nearly by instinct, but she worried of the strain that would put on the one who would be following in her footsteps. The crags were no place for someone so soft and fragile. It was a distressing dilemma - to go north, toward potential hardship and uncertain rescue, or to go south into what was sure to be strenuous, but would place them closer to friendly faces.

Discontent roiled in her bowels for a time, and she discussed their options with Amena, who, while unable to offer much in the way of solid advice, proved to be a grounding influence nonetheless. Trust that bordered on the absolute mellowed her, made her even more determined to see them both to safety. She had turned her nose toward home, practically seeing Southcliff's gleaming spire past the bulk of the mountains that interposed themselves between her and warmth and security, and made her decision.

There was a relatively low-altitude pass, cut by a river whose source was high in the mountains, which would see them over and across the rocky barricade that loomed above them day in and day out. She steered them toward it, fuming silently at the need for her to walk rather than fly. Her wings itched restlessly and she flexed the skeletal, tattered limbs as she and Amena marched to the southwest, further up into the foothills. When the second in their parade of two grew tired, Amena would return to her arms, and she would forge onward, putting her inhuman endurance to use.

The constant, bone-chilling wind grew fierce, and at times they were forced to find shelter beneath a rocky outcropping, huddled together before fires that dwindled in size as the availability of firewood became sparse. She grew tired of weather-worn rock, grey, featureless expanses that rose up and up before her, but she eventually spied it, right where she knew it to be, and she thanked the countless maps in her father's libraries and her parents' insistence that she study them.

It appeared that a god had swung an axe from the heavens and split the mountains that towered around them apart, and a narrow, perilously steep-sided defile slithered between peaks whose names she had forgotten. Food was hard to come by so high up, and their progress had slowed as she spent more and more time scrounging for edibles, both flora and fauna, but it was worth it, because the sight as she crested that final rise had been enough to take her breath away and pull an awed gasp from Amena's lungs.

Surrounded on her flanks by nearly sheer walls of crumbly granite, with the unworn path they had taken falling away behind them, they looked outward at a veritable sea of swaying, snow-covered trees that ran up onto the lower slopes of the mountains that the forest bordered. Nearer to the cold of the mountains, the trees kept their foliage, deep green murk hiding the grey of ancient stone, but further out, her sharp eyes made out the skeletons of dormant life, and beyond even that, she spied the beginnings of the gently rolling hills of the massive plains that made up the heartland of Arvandor. Southcliff lay beyond, so utterly far, but she could almost see the gleam of dark, polished walls offset by the shine of silvered marble. The sun had begun to set, and they set a makeshift camp, forgoing supper in favor of sleep as the sun sank into the

eastern horizon, splashing waves of red and gold over the landscape. The dragoness sighed, curling tightly around Amena, and peered southward as she drifted to sleep.

Awakening, they began the slow, careful descent into the trees that made the inhospitable crags their home. They were forced to navigate treacherous ravines and wind their way through mazes of boulders that had been shorn of the mountains above by the harsh weather, among other forces of nature, she was certain. Eventually, though, they were able to follow the frozen mountain stream into the gnarled, bony trees and conical furs of the wood.

The forest had dozens of names, and for good reason. It was easily the largest continual stretch of woodland on the continent, and by far the oldest. Tales of faeries and elves as much as goblins and trolls haunted its reputation, and some of them were even true. What she was certain of, however, was that there was food, water, and shelter from the incessant mountain wind beneath the winter-stripped boughs, and she intended to take use of it. The murk between the trees harbored nothing that could concern her, and Amena seemed just as eager to get down out of the mountains.

Following a rocky trail down a cliff that was adorned with the intricate, crystalline spikes of a frozen waterfall, they forged into the forest proper, the sun filtering easily through the ice-laced branches above them. Occasionally, wood would creak and snap under the weight of the frozen water that covered it, and they were surrounded with a sporadic chorus of nature's casual destructiveness. It brought a coy smile to her face, and she kept eyes open, as they walked, for signs of the game animals that she knew made the forest their home. She yearned for another deer, something meaty.

Firewood was finally plentiful again, and the warmth was more readily trapped by the trees around them. The further down out of the mountains they made it, the less frigid it got, though it was still far from comfortable, and she relished the changing temperatures. A few weeks had passed, and the height of winter was behind them. The longer they walked, the closer spring would come, and she eagerly anticipated the burst of sudden life that would herald the coming warmth. For someone with so little memory of her past, Amena proved an avid conversationalist, chattering away as she made observations of the world around them. It broke the unending silence that pervaded the space between the trees, adding a little vitality to their surroundings, and Emma relished it.

As the stars spun around them night after night, they pushed south and west through trees uncountable. The forest had been larger in the past, but civilization had corralled the wilderness, hedged it in. It made the dragoness feel pity for it. Though perhaps not sentient, the endless conglomeration of trees was alive, though dormant, in a very real manner. She'd had conversations with too many plants to feel nothing for the march of progress and the taming of the wilds. She mused on the numbers of trees that had been felled to warm some farmer's hearth, but she mused further on those farmer's families, the stubbornness of life that would not be extinguished, and gave herself the satisfaction of a smile that Amena questioned.

The thin stream that they followed thickened as they went on, fed by meltwater from the mountains to behind them, and before long, it grew broad enough to be sufficiently resistant to the cold. Liquid flowed under the sheet of ice, and it took just a little of her strength to punch a hole and give them something to drink that they didn't first need to collect and thaw out. If she had a container, she could have made herself some pine tea, and she frowned at the ample supplies, water, wood, and the thin, waxy needles as she made a firm, mental note to start carrying a pot in her pack as soon as she could get her claws on one.

When the river they were following twisted east, they left it, delving into further and further to the southwest. They were in the heart of the forest now, its deepest reaches, and, as days passed, she developed an unnerving, prickling sensation on the back of her neck, like they were being watched. She stifled it as best she could, though. It was likely just some sylvan nymph eyeing them from the trees. There were few coniferous trees around them now, and most of the sky could be seen through the tangle of naked branched above them, a view that was interrupted by the occasionally opening in the coarse boles that rose up from the roots that twined around themselves underfoot. She tried to keep her talons from the wood, not intent on wounding any of the trees when they were at their most vulnerable.

One day, however, something strange enough to make itself known immediately to her interposed itself in their path. It was another open area between the trees, vacant of woody growths and blanketed with a layer of snow that hid dry, brown grass. What set it apart was the unnerving circularity of the opening in the thatch of branches overhead and the faint tension in the air. Some magic hung in the atmosphere, and she could feel it vibrating faintly against her scales. She couldn't understand why she hadn't felt it before, as she came up to it, but it was unmistakable nonetheless.

Amena stopped when she did, looking her and voicing a nervous question, clearly sensing something amiss, "What's wrong? Something feels weird. What...?"

The dragoness peered up through the smooth, round hole in the trees, at the dimming, evening sky. "I'm not sure." she answered in a cautious whisper, "There's some kind of power here, but I don't know what it might be. This place looks almost... artificial. Maybe it's some old druidic ritual circle or something. Whatever it is, we should probably keep going." The other woman nodded anxiously, and they continued onward with a little bit more purpose.

They kept walking until the sun had fallen, and when Amena began to drag her feet, she swept her off of them and carried her in the crooks of her elbows for a couple more hours before stopping for the night. She wanted to put as much distance between them and the unsettling clearing as possible before, at about midnight, she set up camp and kindled a little fire whose glow warmed them both. The slender body that seemed to fit so perfectly in her arms was propped up against her as she sat back against the thick trunk of an enormous elm, and she kept a warming arm thrown over the bundle of her blanket as Amena snored contentedly and she stared into the fire.

Her eyes closed sluggishly, and her tail curled around the woody bark behind her as she began the journey into her dreams, but something stopped her. She stiffened, sliding her eyelids apart and looking with a furrowed brow around her surroundings. That sensation that she wasn't alone peaked against the back of her neck, prickling along the skin beneath her glimmering bronze scales, and her nostrils flared as she instinctively inhaled deeply. Something was on the air, but she couldn't place it. She took another breath, shifting uneasily and trying to make out what seemed to be so out of place as to make itself known.

Whatever the source of the unexpected aroma was, it smelled of flowers, sweet and faintly herbal, feminine, tinged with the spice of musk that made her want to sneeze as it tickled at her sinuses. Her tense movements disturbed Amena, who snorted fiercely from her restful slumber to look blearily up at her. The dragoness silenced a sluggish question with a breathy hiss, straining to make pick something out of the silence. Her clawed feet accepted her weight as she stood in a smooth, sinuous motion and rounded the fire, putting the warmth to her back and interposing herself between the vulnerable form behind her and the majority of the trees around them.

The moon provided light enough for her to see as if it was midday, and she scanned the columns of wood that made up their surroundings with sharp draconic eyes. She hissed again, defensively, when a long, ululating howl echoed around them, threatening enough to make her hackles rise and her fingers ball into tight fists. It was answered by another, higher, that sounded from the opposite side, closer. "Great..." she grumbled, "Just when I was nodding off."

"Emma..." Amena whined, "Wh-what's happening?"

She dismissed the other woman's concern with a flick of her tail and a comforting wave behind her, though she didn't take her eyes off the trees. "Don't worry. No wolf would be stupid enough to attack us. Well... me, at least. Just sit tight. Once they get a whiff of me, they'll turn tail and run. They're probably just coming to check out the light from the campfire. Don't worry."

Casting nervous glances to their flanks, Amena nodded, but didn't seem to be very at ease. Emma just tried not to be too grumpy at her interrupted beauty sleep. The scent of whatever it was lingered around them, strengthened, and the disconcerting sensation of being watched grew only more and more insistent. Instinct as much as reason told her something was wrong, and her tail batted around the space behind her as she shifted her weight from foot to foot. "Come on..." she growled, "Get a good whiff and screw off, you blood-soaked, mangy-"

The rest of her sentence was cut off by a sudden, strained grunt as something heavy suddenly dropped into her from above. It crashed into her shoulders and slammed her to the ground with undeniable force, and her face was shoved into the frozen soil as thick fingers closed around the back of her neck. She stiffened, writhing and trying to reconcile what had just happened, when a tinny squeal, full of terror, called her name with frantic desperation. Whatever was atop her growled a warning as she struggled to turn her head, managing to just barely catch a glimpse of Amena wriggling away from a huge, hulking silhouette that loomed over the tiny figure.

It was enormous, and was covered in thick, reddish fur that caught the light of the fire and gleamed like drying blood. From the side, she spied the outline of a smooth, tooth-filled muzzle that bore a feral snarl. It stood on only its hind legs, but there was no mistaking its lupine origins. Pawed feet capped its lower limbs, which were packed with thick, sinewy-looking muscle that was deeply ridged with bestial strength. The thing's entire form flexed as it moved, towering over the meekly retreating woman before it, and showed hard, unyielding might that twitched as it took a threatening step toward what it seemed intent to make its prey. However, the rigid, etched muscle couldn't hide the swell of an ample breast in profile, and the smoothness of its hulking physique spoke of something utterly powerful, but womanly.

At the sight of the fright that was stretched over Amena's face, her world threatened to go white with absolute, mindless fury. It tightened in her gut, steeling her, and she roared a guttural, "No!" as she threw herself into her resistance. Whatever was atop her felt immensely strong, and it straddled her, hand on her neck, holding her down with its weight, but there had yet to be a time where her strength wasn't vastly underestimated, and it had left her hands free. With a furious screech, she twisted, snapping her tail up and twining it around the thing's massive leg as she levered herself upward. The hand around the her nape tightened, but she yanked her tail, and the sharp motion threw it off balance for enough time for her to snap her head back, baring her throat to the earth and slamming the horns that ringed her visage, the ones around her primary, ramlike pair, into the beast's hand.

She grinned fiercely as it let out a shocked yelp and pulled its and away. She pushed upward, refusing to be born down, and bucked, throwing the thing off of her. It scrambled for purchase on the soil, recovering quickly, but she had enough time to whirl to her feet. What had

attacked her was another of the wolf-creatures, but even bigger and more clearly feminine. It was covered from head to toe in crisp, white fur that color of the snow that still sat, slowly melting, in patches on the ground. Icy blue eyes looked in apparent surprise at her resistance and flicked toward its accomplice as Emma promptly ignored it, spinning and digging her talons into the earth to power her headlong sprint at the other.

Shouting a wordless challenge, she covered the distance before the red one had time to fully turn around to face her, and she crashed into it with all of her disastrous momentum, lifting its frame, nearly a foot taller than hers, off of its feet and carrying it a dozen feet through the air before slamming it's back into the trunk of an unfortunate tree. The wood cracked under the force of the thing's meaty body hitting it, and she growled up at it, meeting its dark green eyes with her polished amethyst irises.

The wolflike beast barely flinched, snarling and shaking off the impact fast enough to take Emma's shoulders up in huge, meaty paws, clamping down tightly. Thick muscle rolled under the fur stretched over it, and the dragon's feet left the ground. She was strong, but the sheer amount of muscle that lined the creature's body would have intimidated anyone else, and it hurled her through the air. She pinwheeled, her wings flapping in a useless attempt at stabilizing her careening flight, and smashed through branches that snapped over her body to fall in a dazed heap thirty feet away.

Beneath her anger roiled another sensation, excitement. It was so rare that something posed a challenge to her, and she shook her head as she quickly regained her feet. The red-furred wolf-beast growled at her, as if daring her to try that again, and she growled right back, rumbling in a primal vocalization that shook her chest, "Leave, animal, and we'll go about our way. I don't particularly want to hurt you." That was a lie. She would very much like to hurt them, and the tension across her shoulder and in her balled fists likely betrayed the untruth.

Lips peeled back from enormous canines, baring teeth in what she supposed was supposed to be an intimidating display were her own teeth not already showing and far sharper. It didn't answer her, but at some nonverbal cue, the white-furred beast turned away from the pair that stared one another down and began to advance on Amena. She matched its first step with one of her own, and she barked a sharp, "Stop!" with vigor enough to slow the thing's approach toward her ward.

The one before her stepped between her and her charge, and she focused on it, her fury fighting with her reason. When it spoke, the sound surprised her. Its voices, for that was the only thing that they could be called, were deep and rich, musical and feminine. "You don't know what it is, lizard." It spoke with twin voices, a warbling, metallic chord, a higher, almost human-sounding tone that vibrated alongside a bestial sister that rumbled with primal anger, nearly rage enough to match her own. "It's a danger to everyone it's around. If it gets out of this forest, there's no telling what havoc it might cause, what families it might destroy. Stand down, girl."

Contempt boiled in the pit of her gut. "I know exactly what she is, *dog*." She took another step forward. "She's innocent. She's afraid. And as long as I'm still breathing, she is *safe*!" Her talons dug thin ruts into the frigid ground, and her claws threatened to puncture the scales of her palms with how tightly she forced her fingers into defiant fists. The beast opened its muzzle to voice something else, but she didn't listen. She charged.

She covered the distance between them in a heartbeat and, her head dipped low, she shoved her curling horns into the thing's stony abdomen. Thick, bestial claws scrabbled for purchase on her scales as she knocked the wind from its lungs, but she gave it no such satisfaction as she, with a flick of her body, tossed its bulky weight aside. It was big, and would

recover quickly, but she didn't care at the moment; she only turned toward the snow-colored one and continued her furious rush.

The hulking form tensed, digging into the dirt in preparation and she met with less success. Instead of trying to carry it along with her momentum, she just ducked under its guard and butted it upward with her skull, ramming it backward with enough force to audibly crack ribs and knock it onto its back to wheeze and whine. Then she spun, putting her back to Amena's form and facing both enormous creatures, whispering a sincere, "I won't let them touch you." over her shoulder.

She bent her knees, huddling low to the ground with her arms out, prepared, as both of her assailants regained their footing and glared angrily at her. She scowled; she couldn't go on the offensive. They could too easily split up and get around her if she picked out one to target, so she waited while they slowly approached, eyeing the threat she posed with caution. They split, circling around her, and she took a step backward, toward her ward. Her claws ached to tear into them, but she withheld her violence, eying them and trying to figure out which one was going to lunge first. Packs always had an alpha, and despite the difference in size she suspected the red one was the leader; there was a dominance to its stance.

She took them both in, absorbing their shapes and scents, preparing to use all of her senses. Her eyes focused briefly on the burdened sheath that rested between reddish-furred thighs and over a taut scrotum, but she only catalogued them as a weakness to be exploited. They were both hugely muscled, thick and heavy-looking. Their weight was likely greater, giving them leverage if she couldn't get under their centers, and she would have to be careful how she approached.

Her tail drooped low, bracing her against the ground as, as she suspected, the smaller one charged first, just a hair's breadth ahead of its white-hued companion. It wasn't much, but it gave her sliver of time to deal with one before she would have to fight them both at once. She took advantage of it, running at the leader with a gleeful grin. The burly hermaphrodite came at her claws-first in a reckless charge that left it completely open and unguarded, and she could have laughed, if she had been given enough time to voice her mirth.

She pivoted on her foot, digging her talons into the icy ground fast enough to halt her and spin her gracefully away from the beast's grasping claws. She shoved her weight into its side mid-step, throwing it off its balance as she raked her own claws down its face, digging her fingertips into its fur and flesh. It yelped and spun away, just as her spin placed her in front of the heavier one, grinning like a madwoman as it grunted and threw its arm out at her, in an open-handed strike that would probably have just broken the thing's claws on her scales.

Not about to give them the chance to experiment, she shifted her weight, her stance flowing like quicksilver as she twisted sinuously to the side. The motion would have let the blow sail past her, but instead she grabbed it, forced it downward, using the creature's strength and determination against it as she brought her palm upward into its elbow. The limb folded with an explosive crack, and pain hazed pale blue eyes that would have been alluring in any other situation. It yelped, tearing itself free of her grasp and backing away as it clutched its shattered arm and gritted its fangs.

They regrouped, and she let the first one's blood drip from her fingertips as she waited to see what they would do. What she saw stunned her and made the beginnings of doubt cloud her thoughts. With a sharp, meaty popping, the beast whose limb she broke grabbed the ruined appendage and bent it back into place with a strained grunt. The arm twitched for a moment, but its owner eventually flexed it experimentally, articulating it through its full range of motion as

the smaller one looked at her with a contemptuous expression. The cuts she had sliced into its face sealed over as flesh knitted back together on its own. No wonder they were being so reckless.

"Give up." rumbled the leader with its dual voices.

"Run while you can." she replied with no less resolution, popping her knuckles threateningly and bouncing on her digitigrade feet, "I can do this all night."

"Everyone has a breaking point, lizard."

"I'm going to enjoy finding yours."

The shorter creature huffed heavily in acceptance, and as one, they ran at her. Emma rooted herself, but snarled in dismay as the mass of white fur pulled ahead of its leader and sprinted at her. She knew what they were doing, and she quickly backpedaled to stop it, but not quickly enough. She reached her arms upward, but failed to catch anything but air between her fingers. The shorter, stockier wolf used its counterpart as a springboard to leap high into the air and sailed over the dragoness's open claws a frantic heartbeat before the other's tremendous bulk thudded into her. She was carried backward as she had the smaller one moments prior, and she wheezed as her back impacted a robust trunk.

Before she could use her position to her advantage, huge, white-coated arms bent her own limbs back around the curve of the tree at an awkward angle, robbing her of much of the advantage her immense strength would give her. She bucked furiously, trying to shake the thing off of her, but its greater bulk crushed against her, hard muscle taut against her scales with the effort of containing her. In a feral fury, she opened her mouth wide, and bit down on the thing's sturdy shoulder. Her teeth sank deeply into its meaty flesh, and blood poured over her lips, tinting white fur a bright crimson that glimmered a ghastly hue in the campfire that lit the air around them. She screamed, burbling through its blood; she could feel its regeneration repairing it even as she mauled it without mercy, and it was quickly clear that it wasn't going to yield to her razored teeth.

She tore her face away from the grievous wound she had inflicted, cocking her head back and slamming it, horns first, downward into the bloody hole, pummeling it with vicious brutality. The mass of snowy fur and unyielding muscle grunted, tensed, but didn't move, just accepting the horrific agony her actions must have been causing it. She screamed again, furiously defiant, past what held her pinned, at the broad, muscular back of what loomed over Amena, who had just curled into a defensive ball, hands over her ears in a pitiful display of almost childlike terror.

Not while she still drew breath.

Absolutely not.

The bigger beast, in dumb ignorance of whom, of what she was, had left alone her breath, and she pulled in massive, twin lungfuls. She felt the frigid air filter through her sinuses, and she held it in her chest, forcing it to mingle with the furnace of passion and utter fury that filled her. Her power condensed, welling up from her center, from what made her a dragon, an ocean of roiling potential that just begged for an outlet, that reacted to her desire, her anger, and her resolute defiance against what fate seemed to have laid out ahead of her.

Her tapered, draconian maw fell open, and the brute that held her trapped tensed as if thinking she intended to bite it again. Its eyes widened in shock, however, when the back of her throat began to glow a muted violet that quickly, over the course of a single desperate heartbeat, grew in intensity to be almost blinding. Between her teeth, sharp pops sounded from short sparks that jumped over them and around her mouth, and the eyes that continued to widen in utter surprise looked as if they were staring into infinity, half-blinded by the glow emanating from her frame.

She exhaled, and she shocked even herself.

What issued from her gullet, ripping from her throat and crossing the intervening distance faster than she could see, was not the lightning she expected, but was no less thunderous. A crystalline beam, very nearly solid in its complete, cataclysmic brilliance, shot from her open maw, a bright, unstoppable cascade of whitish-purple violence. It split the air, ripping the atmosphere asunder with its brute force, and arcs of lightning, true, explosive bolts of power, lanced around it, outlining and accompanying it as its brightness seared into her retinas.

For a brief, viciously satisfying moment, the thoughtless animal that presumed itself so superior was connected with her very essence, and time seemed to slow to a crawl so she could watch the result of her unleashed strength. Her rage impacted its shoulder, barely clipping it as it spun toward her, but even the slightest touch was far more than enough. Where the column of light touched it, flesh practically vaporized. Meat burst from the unyielding strength of it, sizzling and popping as the impact lifted the thing and threw it through the air to crash down into a smoking lump that writhed weakly.

The catastrophic sound of it nearly deafened her, and the pale brute that held her firmly blinked in utter shock down at her. "You can't have her." seethed the dragon through teeth that she tightly clenched, "You will *not* have her!" Coiling like a python around the creature's leg, her tail snapped taut and lifted, yanking its bulky limb from the ground as she threw herself forward. Robbed of its stability, it lost much of the advantage its size granted it, and she hissed as she slowly, resolutely forced her arms away from the tree to which they were held. Her muscle, prominent but far from as hulking as the beasts that attacked her, heaved under her scales as she resisted the thing's squirming and pried herself from the rough bark against her back.

It opened its mouth to put its huge fangs into play, but she didn't give it a chance to crack its teeth on her scales. She threw her head forward, slamming her skull into its jaw with enough force to make it recoil. Its grip slackened, and she tore her hand away, balling her fingers into a furious fist and driving it upward into the creature's hard-packed abdomen. It grunted as she drove the air from its voluminous chest, and with each strike, it was forced further and further away from her, granting her more and more room to maneuver.

As she brutally freed herself, it tried to pull away, put space between itself and her pummeling hands, but she dug in her talons and held on with her tail, yanking its leg out from under it and dropping it heavily to the ground. It focused its attention on the limb that held it, jerking its ankle free of the sinuous strength of her tail, but it gave her time to lunge at it. The dragoness threw her shin into its ribcage, cracking it and sliding it across the ground away from her, unlikely to be a crippling injury, but visceral and painful enough to make it scabble to its feet and lope over to where its ally was sluggishly rising from the dirt.

She watched them consider her, but more importantly, Amena. The one whose shoulder gradually healed, flesh flowing to seal the hole she'd blasted into it, growled at being distracted from its murderous intent. The dragoness coolly strode to place herself, feet apart and back straight, between them and the woman whom she promised to protect, but her scales hid a ferocious torrent of biting, indignant fury that she'd never before experienced. Murderers, ignorant, stupid beasts whose actions boggled her rational mind with their foolishness. Who were they to pass judgment on someone who'd done them no harm? What were they, to contest her strength? The arrogance baffled her, making her anger spike, sending lines of vicious fire through her arteries, throbbing in time with her heart.

Emma felt like she was going to burst. Each passing moment, with every hard, fast pulsation of her blood through her body, her mind focused more and more on the injustice that

sought to befall the innocent woman huddled in her protective shadow. Rage that bordered on the absolute poured up from her very core, percolating upward through the violently roiling inferno that was her draconic birthright. It pulled with its power, sent it lancing through her veins. She felt its heat in the sharp, burning sensation that seethed beneath her scales. It begged for an outlet, to be used, and only her protective instinct kept her from a bloodthirsty charge.

She kneaded her palms with her fingertips. Her claws yearned for flesh and her muscle twitched restlessly as fire bordering on pain filled it. She smelled their blood, sweet and metallic, under the reek of scorched meat and burnt fur. She smelled Amena's fear, acrid beneath everything else, and her eyes narrowed dangerously as she said in a dire, threatening whisper, "Leave." Her voice was low, quiet, and rough, but it packed with enough furious emotion to make itself heard across the intervening distance.

They stood up straight, showing her, perhaps, how much larger they both were than she. "You don't know what you're doing."

She knew precisely what she was doing. "And you don't know what you're dealing with. Leave. Now."

The creatures tensed, and her body likewise went rigid. Pressure pounded a drumbeat against the inside of her skin. All she could see was the beast before her, and her vision darkened around the edges as she poured all of her disastrous focus onto the objects of her ire. She held her wings tightly against her back, intent on keeping her weaknesses well-protected as she adjusted her stance, one foot out and the other back, bracing her against the frozen soil. The world around her was silent, but she was still almost deafened by the thundering roar of her blood as it pounded through her skull. Part of her mind quailed at the disaster she could feel building under her scales, but another part egged it on, daring her assailants to give her an avenue through which to release the unspeakable tension that grew across her frame.

A cool, surprisingly calm breath whispered between her lips when they began their advance. The creatures charged in unison, splitting and curving inward toward her flanks. Not about to let them come upon her together, she spun and rushed the larger one, casually intent on crippling it before having to turn and face its friend. The mass of corded, steely muscle and sleek, white fur snarled at her and slowed to meet her sprint as she ran at it, horns down and claws out, utterly intent on only the most brutal of violence. After nearly a lifetime spent holding herself back, she felt her true potential boil under her impregnable hide, and instinct drove her to utilize it.

When her muscle met with its, it grunted, but she let out a yelp and flailed wildly as it did something she hadn't anticipated. In a display of fluid dexterity that would have likely rivaled her own, it shifted its weight and snaked its arms around the threat of her own. It wrapped fingers around her curling, outermost horns, and Emma tried too slowly to correct her mistake. The beast used her own terrific momentum, coupled it with its obvious, immense strength, to rip her from her feet and hurl her through the air. The dragoness tried to catch its trailing arm, to secure herself, but all she managed to do was tear long, bloody stripes into the fur over its balled bicep, a paltry wound.

Her neck hurt from the vigorous twisting it had just gotten, and she tumbled head over heels into the leafless branches, splintering wood with her body and crashing back down through the dried, dormant canopy to impact heavily with the bole of what her mind comically identified, in its ragged state, as a massive oak. Her vision spun for a brief moment, and she staggered back to her feet, shaking away the haze of dizziness and shock, but the thing was on top of her almost before she could regain her feet.

Something pale and enormous impacted with her, and the beast drove the weight of its bulk up into her abdomen, slamming the air from her lungs in a terse grunt and ragdolling her back against the tree's rough bark. It cocked its arm back and threw its elbow into her cheek, knocking her aside and snapping her head into its waiting fist, which popped up under her jaw in an uppercut vicious enough to lift her claws from the ground yet again. Hands roughly grabbed her before she could go sailing away and threw her back into the dirt. A huge, padded paw slammed down on her back, between her wings, and it just levered its immense weight onto her chest as it threw a kick at her face.

She was dazed, and in pain, but far from down, and as she braced herself against the earth she opened wide her maw and caught its ankle in her mouth, letting it use its own strength to drive her teeth into its flesh. It squealed and tried to pull away, but she held fast as she clamped down on it with mouth and hands both. Her fingers dug into the meat of its calf, ripping mercilessly into its muscle, and she tore it into agonizing strips as blood dripped down the leg and across her face, hazing her vision in red that as born from more than just her fury.

Her teeth met bone, and in the shrinking sane corner of her mind, she wondered whether or not its foot would grow back if she bit the appendage off. Emma wasn't given the opportunity to find out, however, when it pulled its weight off of her and kicked with its freed foot at the side of her head. The quick motion snapped the bone set between her teeth with a sharp crack, but did the job of ripping the limb from her mouth. The creature retreated a step, falling when its shattered ankle folded grotesquely and dropped it to the dirt to contort furiously.

At it healed, she forced herself back up, blinking away the mixture of blood and grit that was slicking her scales. The other was practically on top of Amena, and she loosed another, more natural bolt of lightning from her parted jaws, shouting a sharp, "Run! Get out of here!" at the amnesiac as her electrified breath, wan and much less impressive than it had been before due to her haste, spun the thing around and made it convulse wildly. She heaved a thankful sigh when her ward appeared to hear her, scrambling upright and trying desperately to flee.

The slender woman wasn't faster than the speed at which the reddish wolf-beast recovered however, and Amena only made it a step before the thing snapped its arm out, snagging claws in the cloak pinned around her charge's shoulders and yanking backward. Amena fell with a strangled cry to the frozen loam, and Emma screamed, pushing herself into a sprint that would cover the intervening distance in a second that would take far too long. Before she could put her second foot to the ground, a powerful hand grabbed her ankle, holding her with resolute, implacable strength and disallowing her to continue. She yelled and jerked her foot, battering the creature behind her with her tail, but it refused to let her go, and panic mingled with ferocious anger that was suddenly shuddering with the growl in her lungs.

A single red hand rose, vicious claws gleaming in the silvery moonlight and poised to fall onto her ward. She shocked it again, trying to throw it off balance as she dragged the white one behind her. Slow. Too slow. Fear crawled through her mind, and as the beast regained its footing, shooting her an almost apologetic glance, it prepared to take a life.

She screamed, and her heart cycled through a rapid beat a single time, a quick doublet pounded on an apocalyptically thunderous drum. That single, internal motion swept away all other sensation, and with it came a tide of white-hot agony that stabbed from her chest and into the depths of her brain. It erased thought, and she screamed again, dropping numbly to her knees as sudden, overwhelming pain filled her, driving her rational mind back into the darkest recesses of her skull and filling the void with terrifying torment. She couldn't make her body move, and

she clawed weakly at her chest during a desperate attempt to relieve the pounding pressure that tortured her.

It left her stability compromised, and the thing that had her by the ankle pulled, throwing her bodily backward, away from Amena, and she rolled limply as she landed. The dragoness stared blankly up at the star-studded sky. The moon glared garishly down at the world below as if to mock her for her weakness, and a single second stretched outward for what seemed like eternity. It left her alone with her misery, and she contorted with her suffering, cursing her body's sudden betrayal of her intent.

And then her heart beat again, pushing with it more jagged, boiling fire through her veins, a deluge of pure, destructive force that scoured her insides and redoubled the ferocity of her misery. It felt as if her heart had suddenly doubled in size and pushed at her organs, constricting her chest and preventing her from taking a full breath as she wheezed between hoarse, ragged outcries. Her heart beat again, and again, and yet again, and as she stubbornly rolled over onto her hands and knees and dug her clawed fingers into the dirt, she peered upward, staring down the creature's whose doom approached them.

Her vision blurred for a split-second. Colors bled together: the black of the sky, the greyish brown of the trees, the reddish splash of fire and the splotch of white that loomed in her view. It only lasted, however, for as long as it took for her to notice it before reality snapped back into sudden, flawless clarity. Her tail thrashed, and she saw *everything*, heard everything. Emma saw each individual strand of hair that coated the bulky, pale creature that stood between her and Amena, heard it breathing. Instinct buried her thinking mind, and she suddenly felt separated from herself. The reddish beast stared, looking at her, and she struggled to stand. The dragoness would gladly give them something to gawk at.

Her heart pounded against her ribs, each rhythmic pulsation coming closer on the heels of the previous. Her blood pressure skyrocketed as her drumming heart forced blood hot enough to boil through her arteries. The network of veins that spiderwebbed across her sturdy physique pulsed upward under her scales, each standing out in stark contrast against its surrounding flesh and throbbing visibly as her core, her heart, fed power directly into the rest of her robust frame. Pain crawled under her scaly hide, burning her, consuming her with its fury, and left little in its wake apart from pure, frigid rage.

Something inside her broke as she heaved in a huge breath, forcing her lungs to fill past the horrific constriction of her chest. With an internal snap that she could almost hear, the chains of restraint that had for so long been wrapped around her were sundered by what roiled in her chest. These things... knew nothing, and when the air left her lungs, it escaped as a long, cacophonous roar that quaked through the atmosphere and quivered with the endlessness of her outrage. She took a step forward, and her eyelids narrowed under the weight of the violence that threatened to burst from her chest.

As her foot struck the ground, the muscle lining her leg rippled and writhed, seeming to crawl over itself beneath her scales. A continual growl rumbled in her chest as her hide was suddenly stretched taut over what rose up under it. The dragon's strength flexed of its own accord, heaving upward and turning from corded steel to diamond as individual fibers defined themselves from their sisters. The agony that crashed through her body braced her, reminded her that she was alive, and that she would not be stopped. The power lining her frame went absolutely rigid, bulging with phantom strain, and the grooves between her already prominent muscles deepened as she took another step forward.

The dragoness grunted when her shoulders surrendered to the impossible tension that lay across them. Her traps bunched and rolled with stark, meaty popping noises that emanated from her bones and tendons as her chest began to broaden to make room for her throbbing might. The next step felt like she was climbing an incline, and as she levered her weight onto the ball of her foot, she rose a couple inches as the bones in her legs lengthened and pushed her taller. Her calves accepted her shifting mass, tensing with the effort required to continue her forward march. Fibrous bundles flexed over her thighs as her quads swelled in bulk and rubbed against one another before her pelvis could crack noisily and stretch wider.

Sparks arced over her body, and the scintillating power that danced across her scales scorched away the blood that had slicked them, leaving her metallic bronze hide and brilliant sapphire underbelly clean and pure as it stretched and stretched over her growing musculature. The dragoness had always been powerful, immensely so, but as she grew, her form pushed her strength into an entirely new dimension. She felt unstoppable through the torturous spasms that rocked her frame and made her grunt and growl, and with each heavy thud of her heart against the inside of her spreading ribcage, her entire physique pulsed upward and outward, dragging with it her skeleton.

Her breath came short, and she groaned as her abdomen, layered before with an obvious, but smoothly contoured six-pack, rippled and changed. The muscles that lay there tensed with each breathless grunt that escaped her lungs and joined their sisters in each mound's unstoppable rise. Her abs grew bricklike, spasming as she clawed at her stomach, running the tips of her fingers through the ruts that separated them. Her obliques turned into an intricate mesh of entwined muscle, and her lats flared powerfully, jerking her even broader as she filled out in a way that was new to her.

Each step covered more ground as her bones cracked and shuddered longer, stretching her bundled muscle out as it bunched and swelled and voraciously took advantage of the room with which it was presented. Her veins pulsed faster and faster as her heartrate as much as her inner power spiked higher and higher, building with her blinding fury, and the arcs that rolled over her scales thickened with her, making more than tinny pops as the space between the trees was lit by a ghastly violet light.

Her rage hit her arms hard, and the already far from spindly limbs twisted beneath her skin. Her biceps bulged massively as her arms snapped inward in an unintentional flex, and the strain that the motion brought on pulsed her shoulders broader. Her triceps rounded out her upper arms, pushing at the scales that hid their striated mass, and her limbs tensed under immense pressure, each dire pulsation forcibly inflating them, making them thicker and harder without end. Fingers curled inward in desperation, the tendons stood out along her forearm before cords of steely might could writhe down from her elbow and wrap her in a quickly deepening layer of unrelentingly taut muscle.

Her pecs, hidden beneath the amble curves of her feminine endowments as they normally were, flexed as her endless wrath covered her ribcage with what rapidly became slabs of thick, enormous muscle. They pushed her breasts outward and became plainly obvious, tensing as she convulsed against herself and grunted beneath the bulk that buried her even as it elevated her to something far beyond that to what she was accustomed. Her teeth were bared in a feral snarl, and she hissed at the panicked expression she swept across the face of the white-furred animal that still stood before her. The dragoness was already nearly its height, fully eight feet, and showed no signs of stopping as her bones cracked deep beneath her musculature and elongated her frame even as she thickened.

Her tail thrashed the air behind her, and her still-tattered wings quivered against her back. The end of her sinuous appendage thudded heavily against the ground and tore gouges into the frozen soil, and she groaned hoarsely as, with sharp, bony cracks, inches of new horn pulsed from her skull. The shiny, obsidian growths that ringed her savage visage lengthened with the rest of her, and her primary pair curled further inward on themselves. As if starting a chain reaction, the rest of the bony, black spurs that jutted from her body pulsed longer, her claws and talons.

And then, with the sound of steel grating on steel, she screeched and felt her body part around what rose unceasingly from within it. From the nape of her neck, and sweeping down her broadening back along the line of her spine, thick, onyx blades pushed upward, sliding apart her scales and trailing downward to the end of her tail. They lengthened, razored serrations lining their outer curves as they bent in on themselves and followed her spine to its terminus at the top of her tail, shrinking along the way until her tapered limb was graced with a few stubby spikes.

This was far from the only armament that she would receive and her tail suddenly spasmed bonelessly, flailing around behind her even as the muscle that powered the limb thickened, increasing its girth with layer after layer of tight, tense strength. From the end of her tail, to either side of its distal limit, her scales were once more split to release a pair of glittering, ebon growths. The color of a lightless midnight, twin, curving blades erupted from the end of her body and swept back out along the line of her tail, bending inward at their tips until they nearly touched, giving her heavily-muscled limb an elegant combination of a crescent-bladed axe and a tapering spearhead.

She felt half-formed. Her body had reached its final proportions, huge and nearly hulking, but was far from its final size as her from struggled to contain its own viciously roiling potential. Her bulk heaved with each motion, every step thunderous enough to rumble through the icy ground, and before she had reached nine feet, she dug her talons into the earth and hurled herself forward at the snow-furred obstruction that stood between the dragoness and her ward. She put on another foot before she reached it, over the course of a few long strides, and its eyes widened in very appropriate fear as it began to retreat.

It wasn't fast enough, and she was on it before it could even open its mouth to cry out. With casual contempt, she swept out her massive arm and brought her fist against it. The dragon slammed it aside with all the care she would show a speck of dust on her scales and didn't so much as slow her pace as she poured all her murderous intent on the shape that stood over Amena, who was crying wordlessly. The air shook with each impact of her feet against the ground that dropped away from her, and was full of the wet, deep popping of her stressed tendons as she continued to stretch outward.

The creature seemed to rethink its decisions that led it to the present, but it was far too late. The dragoness's bulk shuddered, foot after foot pouring onto her frame, and she didn't even bother to bend down to strike out at it when she reached it. She threw her trailing foot at it, and it only just managed to save itself from splattering over her scales. She clipped it, and the force behind the titanic leg that roared through the air sent it flying away to crash heavily against the first tree to intersect its tumbling path.

She went on the offensive, tearing deep ruts into the icy loam as she shifted her momentum and threw herself at it. Her entire bulk thudded against the same tree as she threw her shin into the thing's body. The branches that laced together over the dead, grey undergrowth scraped over the scales of her head and shoulders as she rose up into the canopy, and wood cracked and splintered under the force of her strength as she drove knee into its chest again and

again, until it was little but a broken pulp that she scooped off of the ground to hurl at the larger one, which was running frantically at her. It leapt and caught its ally's broken body before it could hit the ground, and she turned as she reached her final size, nearly twenty feet of pulsing might that unleashed another throaty, challenging roar, deep chest heaving, pendulous breasts rising and falling with her heavy breaths.

Just because her form was finally a fit for her fury didn't mean that it didn't continue to rage at the confines of her body. Bolts of pure energy cracked over her body, occasionally finding an outlet through the ground around her feet. The creature she had pummeled writhed, impossibly alive, and she hissed. She was going to break them. She was going to *unmake* them! The blood and bits of bone that soaked her knee dripped noisily to the ground, and, making sure that Amena was always behind her, she kicked up huge chunks of dirt as she tore off in their direction.

She drove her weight in addition to her immense strength behind her clawed fist and cratered the ground where the thing had been standing a heartbeat after it leapt away from her. The dragoness followed behind and shouldered aside a squat tree that screamed its death as she tore it up, roots and all to get at the object of her ire that tried unsuccessfully to flee in the face of her mindless wrath. She lashed out with her tail, its bladed tip slicing cleanly through another unlucky bole that had thought to serve as a shelter to them whom, in their arrogance, had thought to challenge her.

She sliced with her aggressively armed limb into the larger one. Blood flew, and it threw its friend away from her. The dragon snarled and snapped her tail down, slamming both wickedly sharp points that capped her sinuous appendage into its gut, through its innards and out the other side before hauling it off the ground, harpooned on her body and gurgling weakly. She felt it trying to heal around her, stopped by the presence of her obsidian armament, and she stalked over to the red-furred beast, which had recovered enough to hobble, not away, but towards her, and wrapped her fingers around its body to lift it up in front of her to join its ally.

The dragoness was more than twice the size of either of them. They struggled, clawing desperately at the parts of her body that held them, and her normally bright, amethyst eyes, pupils thinned to bloodthirsty slivers, narrowed as she took them in. "How far can I push you, I wonder," she mused, not at all shocked by the rumbling depth of her shuddering growl. "Will you survive dismemberment, creatures? Decapitation? What would you have done to my friend? Disembowel her? Will *you* live with your organs removed? Shall I peel the flesh from your skeletons, push you to your limits?" No... As intriguing as those answers may have been, she cared not for them, and she gave them no time to reply before curling her fingers around the little one's skull, palming it as she did the other and slid her tail with a wet, meaty *schlick* from the larger of the two bodies.

They dangled from her hands, like dolls. The muscle lining her arms twitched eagerly, begging to be used, to just pop their heads like overripe grapes and be done with it. Instinct, absolute fury demanded it, release and relief from the horrifying distress that throbbed across her form. They whined, her hands not allowing speech, but they burbled wordlessly, both of them, and clawed at her wrists, grinding away their sharp, bestial nails on her impenetrable scales. She dropped her hands to her sides, their feet still kicking wildly above the ground, and squeezed, gently, experimentally. The sound of their skulls cracking under her fingers was sweet music, and she felt them resealing as her fingers pleaded to be allowed to do so much more. The ease of it resonated in her cavernous chest and shook her to her core.

The gentle plipping of the blood that dripped from her body added an almost choral undertone to their helpless whining, and she lifted them back up so she could watch them die. The dragon had only just begun to squeeze when an unexpected sound shocked her into stillness.

*"Enough!"*

She turned toward the source of the thunderous voice that resonated almost as much as her own, and hissed at the sight of another of the hulking creatures, this one dark and masculine and absolutely enormous, perhaps almost nine feet tall. It might have nearly reached her hips if it stood next to her. "Leave," she growled down at where it stood, hunched over in what looked like deference, "and live, animal. They are forfeit.

She sneered down the length of her snout as it replied. Its voice seemed to be as deep as hers, and it rumbled like thunder over the plains as it spoke. "Yes. They have erred grievously, and I am drowning in sorrow that I could not get here in time to save us all from this. I only beg that they be left alive to learn from their mistakes."

Grinding her teeth together for a moment, she rolled her thumbs over their scalps, savoring what was hers. "Why?" she grunted, full of bland, uncaring disdain.

It relaxed, as if it had been unsure it would get even that much from her, and it bent even lower in supplication, falling to its knees. "They are young, dragon, and foolish beyond their years. More so that I had even believed myself. Your friend... she smells... concerning, a scent that many of us remember from a very dark time in our communal past. She brings with her unpleasant memories, and with them, a fear of having to relive them. Lily, especially, was affected by it, and I fear that instinct got the better of her reason. I assure you, dragon, that we are not all mindless beasts."

So they had names... An almost continuous arc of electricity snapped between her nostrils as she sighed heavily and let her arms go slack. With a derisive snort, she casually tossed the pair of wriggling bodies in her hands in the sable-furred creature's general direction. They scabbled meekly away from her, but she stayed where she was, cracking her knuckles as she clenched her fingers together over and over, trying to soothe their lust for blood. "Make me regret my mercy, and I swear on my scales I will exterminate you all, even if I must uproot the entire forest to do it."

Bowing deeply, it muttered a respectfully soft, "We will not, dragon. You have my word."

And just like that it was over. She huffed and turned to see to Amena, already feeling her vicious, boiling wrath sinking down into her gut, forming a cooling lump in the pit of her stomach. She grunted in surprise, however, when her footing betrayed her. Her legs trembled weakly as the emotion that had filled her left her suddenly hollow, and she dropped to her knees with a pair of dull booms that rolled through the trees. She gasped, pain flaring once again, as her body began to recede, its mission accomplished, and she fell onto her palms and shook frantically as her extra mass bled away and all her weaponizing growths slid back into her body.

She felt so, agonizingly empty, and she stubbornly crawled forward a step, clinging with desperation to the consciousness that she felt slipping away from her. Amena was on her feet, and was running toward the dragoness, but as her exhausted body punished her for the strain to which she had subjected it, she collapsed numbly, barely able to keep her nose from the frigid dirt. Endless fatigue washed through her again and again, and accompanying the strenuous groan that rattled in her throat, blackness overwhelmed her.