

Friendly Faces

Written By: Skabaard

Emma's entire body ached, and she groaned as she took an unpleasant breath, filling her lungs with brisk, mercilessly chilly air and cracking her eyes against the sharp, piercing glare of the sunlight that burned down on her. It must have been midday, and she felt an almost pleasant heat on her scales from the shining disk, enough to slice through the bite in the air. Perhaps spring would come sooner rather than later that year. Her vision was blurry, and she lifted shaky arms to scrub at her eyes with her knuckles before she pushed one beneath her, intent on levering herself upright.

A gentle hand pushed down on her shoulder, and a pair of soothing, intermingled voices, soft and pleasant but resonant and powerful, murmured a quiet, "Easy, easy. You've been out for more than a day."

She turned and looked, and then promptly barked a sharp, surprised yelp and scrambled away from what she saw. Memory crashed through her, igniting a fire of realization in her mind, and she clawed her way to her feet, spinning into a defensive stance, snarling a prompt, "Where is she?! What have you done with her?! So help me, if you so much as touched her, I'll-"

It dismissed her angry glare with a casual wave and replied with a simple, "Calm down. Your friend is fine; worried about you, but fine. She's been kept safe and comfortable, I promise. Right now you need to relax and focus on staying conscious."

As if mentioning it was enough to remind her body what it had been through, she was suddenly attacked by a nauseating wave of dizziness that left her panting and blurry-eyed. The dragoness groaned and slumped over, clutching at her head and internally begging for the pounding in her skull to recede. She remembered. She remembered what had happened to her, what had been pulled out of her, and Emma's brain sluggishly connected the dots and dragged with it another meek moan. Any other time, she would have been ecstatic at her body's continuing development, but she really didn't have time to deal with the dragon that was sluggishly waking up inside her. It made her all the more homesick.

The wolf that had been lounging next to her didn't move from its spot, and she blinked blearily at it, encouraging it to smile. This one was a different creature than the three she had seen before, with bright, tawny fur and long, golden blonde hair. It didn't quite have the hulking stature of the other's she'd encountered. It was still powerfully, resolutely muscular, but it balanced out its bestial strength with much more in the way of feminine allure, with big, heavy breasts, luscious curves, and a face that was rather pretty, even taking into account its savage, lupine features.

Its fluffy tail waved behind it, and its ears twitched as it reclined easily against the trunk of a tree it had been sitting before, likely doing its own visual investigation of the dragoness. "I'm sorry." it began somewhat hesitantly, "For what happened, that is. Your friend reeks of some evil taint, and instinct got the better of some of us. It's no excuse, I know, and it never should have happened." A scowl parted its lips, showing enormous fangs. "Lily is... distraught, to say the least." It rose to its paws in a single fluid motion as Emma staggered to her feet, and it offered her its wickedly clawed hand. "My name is Venata, for what it's now worth, and I'm sorry that we had to meet under such unfortunate circumstances."

Discontent writhed in the dragoness's gut, but she eventually huffed and accepted its outstretched peace offering. "An apt enough name, I suppose. I'm Emendata."

It bowed respectfully and smiled happily down at her. It was at least a foot taller than she. After they shook, it spun, muttering over its shoulder, "This way. Your friend will be glad to know you're awake." and sashayed, hips swinging with a sensuality that likely couldn't be helped, through the trees that towered around them. Emma followed.

She must have been taken somewhere, because she didn't recognize her immediate surroundings, save for that she was certainly still in the depths of the Greatwood, so she followed in Venata's gentle footsteps until the trees parted a little and a modest clearing, bordered on one side by the banks of a mostly frozen river, exposed itself. There were more of the wolf-creatures scattered around the space: the big, black-furred one, the two that had attacked her, whom she noticed with a soft hiss that she couldn't contain, and another with silvery grey fur and flowing, sable hair that was sitting next to Amena and chattering happily with its dual voices.

At the sight of the petite amnesiac, relief threatened to drop her to her knees. Rather, her legs decided to carry her forward at a dead sprint, her talons digging up clumps of frozen dirt to bleed off her momentum before she crashed into the slender woman. Amena squealed as she threw her arms around that insignificant weight and dragged it off the ground in a gleeful hug. The release of the worry that had been bound up in her robust frame was implosive, and she found herself sobbing before she could rein in her emotion. She pressed a firm kiss into a delicate cheek, eager to reassure herself of the solidity of the body crushed into hers, and she finally allowed herself to collapse, her knees punching a pair of dimples into the sun-softened soil.

Amena wriggled and hugged her back, slim arms squeezing her with strength impossible for their girth, and said in a breathlessly glad voice, "You're awake! You slept for so long I started to get worried, but you seemed okay, and we didn't feel anything wrong with you so we let you sleep. Are you okay?"

"Yes." she wheezed through her relieved euphoria, "I'm fine now. I just... I just needed you to be alright."

"I am!" Amena chirped gaily, "Alexis was teaching me how to fish! There's fish in the water! Big ones! They're slow, because it's so cold, and you can just reach in and pull them out." The woman wiggled out of her grasp and pointed ecstatically toward a little fire nestled in a pile of smooth river rocks over which hung, suspended on a spit, several silvery fish roasting away. "I made you breakfast!"

Amena helped haul her to her feet and practically dragged her over. She was starving. What had happened to her had left her drained, and her stomach felt cavernously empty. She didn't even bother to sit down first. Amena watched her simply fall upon the hapless spit and violently indulge herself. It was messy, and the fish weren't completely cooked through yet, but she hardly cared. Everything: fins, flesh, and scales were ripped apart and swallowed nearly whole, and she didn't stop until she was licking the juice from the spit and using the thin spindle to pick her razor sharp teeth. "Gods' Blood, that was good."

Amena's eyes were wide, but she recovered from the display of primal vigor with every ounce of her preternatural good cheer. "I'm glad you liked it! Venata says that a little salt would make them better, so we should get some as soon as we can so I can make you something really good."

She laughed in spite of herself at her ward's joy and dragged her into another, less vigorous embrace. The dragoness let herself fall backward, hauling the lithe shape atop her and

spreading her tattered wings to bask in the unseasonal warmth that filtered through the trees, blithely uncaring of how many sets of lupine eyes rested on her. She ran her snout along a smiling cheek, nuzzling her thoughtfully, and whispered a soft, "Thanks, Amena. I feel so much better now."

Dark blue eyes shined happily, and Amena snuggled relaxedly into her, squishing breast to scaly breast with only a few layers of cloth to stand between them. "I'm really glad you're okay. I... I was afraid for you." She glanced furtively to the side, pulling Emma's eyes with hers to glance at the bulky, silver-furred she-wolf. "They're not so scary once you talk to them a little. They all said they're really sorry, and they're really nice. Can... can they be our friends too?"

"It sounds to me like you've already made a few friends." she chuckled, much of her unease dissipating in the face of Amena's boundless enthusiasm.

"W-well... I... They're really nice, and I-"

"I know, Amena. Relax. It's not for me to decide whose company you find enjoyable. That was my point. You can be friends with whoever you want." She sat up, holding the frail human's comforting warmth securely to her chest, and flicked her eyes back at the wolves casually trying not to seem voyeuristic. "Thank you." she grumbled in a blanket statement, to which she received a few thoughtful nods.

She sat there for a few moments more, and Amena was content to lounge placidly in her arms, against her, breathing smoothly, and she let the sounds of life filter through her hidden ears until restlessness stirred her. She stood, expressing the desire to take a walk, and Amena gladly plopped down next to what she presumed was Alexis, the greyish wolf that had been speaking earlier. In an attempt to display a little trust, she wandered from the smallish clearing and meandered along the river, between trees whose branches stretched out over the half-frozen water. Amena had been right; she could see the fish sluggishly moving in the current. Maybe she'd go swimming for a few more. The snack she'd gotten had piqued her appetite.

Heaving a heavy sigh, she stopped at the greyish-brown trunk of some sleeping tree and, carefully digging her claws into its outermost layer, so as not to overstress the dormant life hidden within, she climbed up into its lowermost branches to lean back against its girthy bole and let her feet dangle listlessly. With an aimless thumb, she rubbed along the most recent addition to the crown of sharp, backward-curving horns that ringed her draconic visage that rose in a bristly thicket around her primary pair, two lengthy pieces of bony obsidian that curled inward on themselves like those of some enormous ram. She should have realized it sooner, but she'd had, at the time, more important things to worry about. Vague bouts of memory loss. Headaches. Phantom pains and a suddenly voracious appetite for both food and... other forms of stimulation. She should have known.

Emma realized that she was changing, waking up for the first time. She was becoming a proper dragon, complete with everything that came with it. She was young, but she'd always been ahead of the curve when it came to her development. She felt it dully, in the back of her mind and beneath the torrent of cascading potential that constantly roiled in the center of her chest. Something was stirring, and it was as exciting as it was intimidating. The dragoness just silently prayed that she retained her personality. According to her mother, dragons had been known to change completely during their Awakening, who they were. Uncommonly, she had been assured, but not unheard of. She wondered how it would change her. Her mother had been a spindly little thing before her Awakening, and now the curves that Emma's powerful frame packed were only a hint of what she had inherited from her parents.

Adrift in her musing, Emma twitched when she heard something padding quietly below. She looked down, spying the shape of the wolf-beast whose reddish brown fur and shoulder-length hair seemed to share a color with cinnamon. Watching with a coolly disdainful gaze, she sat as its powerful legs allowed it to easily leap up into the branches around her. The wood on which she sat creaked ominously when it accepted the wolf's weight, and it sat down next to her, seemingly unable to match her stare.

Its fingers tangled into knots over the densely packed muscles of its abdomen for a moment before it whispered, "I'm sorry." Its tail hung forlornly behind it, and its ears were folded backward as it peeked up at her, making eye contact for just the briefest of moment, long enough for Emma to get a glimpse of dark green eyes, shiny with tears.

"Yeah." she breathed, uncertain of how she was supposed to feel, "You should be."

It recoiled like she had slapped it. She wanted to, just to sate the outrage that lingered in her gut, but she restrained herself. "I'm ashamed." it continued quietly, pausing between sentences to take calming breaths. "I thought I was better than that, but I guess I just... lost myself a little. When I was... way too young, a lot of people very important to me were taken away, and for the longest time, I thought that I had gotten over it. But then I smelled it, and I *knew* I'd smelled it before, and all I could think about was how hurt I'd been, and I wanted to save people from that, what happened to me. I guess... I guess I didn't turn out any better than they did, and I'm sorry for my... stupidity. I just... I just... I'm sorry. For what it's worth... I don't think I could have done it... killed her. She was so scared, and I remember being that scared, a long time ago. It was like my nose and my eyes were arguing over what was in front of me, and I don't think I could have actually gone through with it. I kept hesitating. She was afraid... of me. How are you supposed to kill someone who's afraid of you, who's so helpless?"

Emma sighed and reached out with a hand to brush her clawed fingers over the thing's shoulder in as close as she could come to a display of sentiment in her current, conflicted state. "I don't know. I've never had that issue. I usually try to protect the ones who are afraid from the ones who aren't." It bent further over on itself in its sorrow, and she kept her hand on it, reminding herself that it, too, was alive, and had emotion and desires, and that everyone was entitled to mistakes so long as those mistakes were recognized, which was what it was trying to do, she presumed. "I had trouble too." she added, extending an olive branch.

"Wh-what?"

It looked at her, and she shrugged. "You had to get me pretty worked up to commit to doing more than discouraging you, and still, I had difficulties, there at the end. I don't think I really wanted to kill you. I think I was doing what I felt I had to." She wasn't sure if that was a lie or not. It didn't feel like one. She remembered part of herself desperately wanting to end them both, having their heads in her hands and feeling their skulls crunching like eggshells, but at the same time, she hadn't gone through with it. Perhaps she had just been toying with them, but she felt like there was something more to it, perhaps a little bit of sanity to what she had become. It didn't look to certain, and she patted it on the arm, genuinely trying to cheer it. "Besides, we've got to stick together, right?"

"I... What?"

Pushing another sigh through her nose, sparking between her nostrils, she tried to let go of the stubborn anger that threatened to take root in her gut in the form of a grudge. "Well, as long as we're sharing secrets with total strangers..." The dragoness wrapped her tail around the branch on which she sat and braced herself on the tree's trunk, spreading her legs. It took a little

focus, but after a brief, concentrated grunt, she opened herself. It was an awkward process with no stimulation, and one she wasn't used to, but she managed.

The wolf next to her stiffened and sucked in a shocked breath as more than a foot and a half of thick, coal-colored masculinity poured from her loins to flop downward under its own ponderous weight. Emma stared nearly as hard. It was a rare, rare event to see herself completely soft, and with a vague wave in the direction of the wolf's own overendowed crotch, she reached down and lifted her dragonhood aside to show off the silken lips of her delicate vulva.

A clawed, furred hand twitched, as if it desired to reach out and touch her. "Holy shit... you're hung like a horse."

"Or a dragon, even. Although I guess I only know one horse who's bigger, and she's a special case." The air was cold, and her mixed organs retreated gratefully back into her body with the quiet sliding of velvet on scales. She took a sidelong peek, and gestured innocently at the other hermaphrodite's furred sheath and heavy, taut sac. "You can't be too small yourself."

"Uh... yeah, I guess so, but *damn*. How... how big does it get?" In answer, she made a thoughtful sound in the back of her throat as she raised her hands, slowly spreading them until roughly twenty-six intimidating inches hovered between her palms. She hadn't been aware wolves could whistle. "Well fuck me sideways. I bet you'd make Furball jealous. What I wouldn't give to see the look on his face..."

A breathy chuckle bounced from her lungs, and she idly kicked her feet as she relaxed a little. "Would it have done it?"

"What done what?"

"Would it have killed you?"

"Uh, I don't really know. I haven't been decapitated yet. I'll get back to you the next time I pick a fight with something that can kick my ass like that. I usually don't have to deal with anything more rambunctious than a buck who sticks an antler in my gut. Maybe I'm going soft..."

"Well your friend certainly didn't have any trouble getting the better of me. I didn't think anyone could move as fast as I could. It surprised me."

"Yeah. Henna's like that. She's always gotta be my competition, little brat. I guess I should have been the one to go after you. I think she was going easy on you."

"I got that feeling, yeah. Like you were just trying to keep my busy."

"A little. But then you hulked out and broke every bone in my body. Gods' Blood, It hurt almost as much as my first shift. If it hadn't been so close to the full moon, I'd have probably been out for a while. It, uh... surprised me. Is that something dragons do?"

"Y-yeah, though usually only when things get really bad. It... It'd never happened to me before and I wasn't ready for it to hurt that much. Though if it's any consolation, you both probably could have taken me if you had focused on me instead of Amena. You're both stronger than you look, which is... saying something."

A thick, reddish-brown arm rose and flexed, giving them both a view of a hard, well-rounded bicep as she poked it sheepishly with a single claw before waving in her general direction. "Look who's talking, Scales. Where the hell's are you hiding all that muscle you must be packing? And that's not counting you getting... what? Three times bigger?"

She batted her eyelids playfully, laying a demure hand on her well-endowed chest. "Now, now. A lady's got to have her secrets."

A sharp, barking laugh shook their branch. "I suppose we do, now that the surprise is all spoiled. Listen, you ever need a sparring partner, I wouldn't turn down a fight with someone

who's actually a challenge every now and again, so long as you can keep yourself from *cheating*."

She laughed along, giddy in the face of the dissipating tension. "Maybe I'll take you up on that. All my friends are afraid to fight me, even if I promise not to break anything important. If you're ever in Southcliff, look me up. I'm not hard to find, I promise."

"I just might. Maybe it's time for a break from the trees for a while, a little breath of fresh air. Thanks. I, uh... I just... Just thanks."

She just let out a relaxing breath and leaned her head back against the bark until her horns met the rough surface. Her eyes closed, and she laced her fingers over her stomach as her feet swung rhythmically. Lily smelled nice, once she let herself think about it, sweet and flowery, with the unmistakable tang of someone who was packing more than they had any right to between their legs. She breathed it in, relaxing, forcing the tension from her body with each smooth exhalation, though she was careful to keep it from sinking too low into her. It wouldn't do to lose herself now and screw the attractive wolf into unconsciousness, especially considering what had transpired so recently. Maybe later, though. Someone who might not mind a broken bone or two... the chance to *really* let loose, it brought a lascivious grin to her face and a lighthearted chuckle to her lungs. She could get revenge in so many more pleasant ways for the both of them.

Lily questioned her quiet mirth, and she waved away the wolf's confusion as she slid her eyes open and dropped casually to the ground, feeling much, much better than she had just minutes ago. With a soft thump that belied her tagalong's sturdy bulk, the cinnamon-haired wolf landed on her padded paws and followed the dragoness almost silently back to the modest clearing. The tremendous black wolf, who made her father look skinny, though far from short, had disappeared, but Amena was still chatting amiably with Alexis, and Venata lounged by the fire, her paws stuck nearly into the flames for warmth. An air of peacefulness blanketed her immediate surroundings, and she took a few deep breaths.

The only one to whom she hadn't had at least a cursory introduction, the white one who seemed to be taller than them all apart from the male, was huddled on the far side of the open space, pressed back against a tree with a despondent look worked over her face. She looked at Emma, and the absolute boundless sorrow in the icy blue disks bit deeply into her and drew up a bloom of pity she hadn't felt was necessary. She strolled over, and the she-wolf shrunk further over on herself, her tail tucked between her legs and ears drawn backwards in glum acceptance of what she would get.

That look would brook no verbal expression of forgiveness, or even understanding, and when Emma got within arm's reach of her, she knew what she had to do almost by instinct. The dragoness lashed out with more suddenness than the wolf had expected, and she let out a sharp, surprised yelp in a lupine cry for mercy. Emma just held on tighter, and squeezed with sudden, friendly affection in an abrupt but nonchalant embrace. "I'm Emendata, and I'd like to avoid any awkwardness if I can."

At the look of utter shock that surely crossed that wolfish muzzle, Lily laughed. "She's Henna, and she's not much one for awkwardness either."

Henna was warm, very much so, and soft, with the exception of all the robust, rigid muscle that flexed against her, which was most of the wolf's body, she admitted. She was soft enough though, particularly where the side of Emma's snout pressed into the outer curve of a single rotund breast. There were benefits to being shorter, she supposed. Hesitantly, thick,

heavily-muscled arms fell to her to wrap her up as well, and the wolf slowly returned her hug, squeezing her happily with the audible swishing of a poofy, white tail wagging ecstatically.

She forcefully pushed out the rest of her stubborn, petulant anger at what had transpired, and gripped with enough strength to crush a wheezy grunt from Henna's chest and haul the wolf's bulk from the ground. The creature was certainly as heavy as she looked, but Emma was strong, and she was too focused on the sound of Henna's rich, melodious voices sounding themselves in an almost odd-sounding, girlish giggle to feel even a hint of strain. The snowy-furred beast wriggled happily in her arms, and before she knew it, a furry paw had slipped behind her foot and tripped her up. She hissed in surprise as she toppled backward, being forced downward by the not insignificant weight that occupied her arms.

The air whooshed from her lungs as Henna landed atop her, and she squealed a sharp, "No! Not the scales! Agh!" as a long, wet tongue ran up her cheek and over her snout. She spluttered and writhed as the hulking wolf playfully held her down and ravished her face with a lapping, pinkish organ that slimed the fine scales of her draconic features with an entirely unnecessary layer of chilling saliva. Emma wasn't certain, but somewhere in the process of making a mess of her face, the contact began to linger over her lips, and then stayed, pressing, eager flesh to her own, and the passage of gentle ardor became very much a two-way road between them as she was encouraged to reciprocate. Her claws snapped to the broad, muscular back that hovered over her and kneaded hotly for a long minute before Henna let her pull in a sharp gasp, slipping away with a breathless grin.

She just blinked for a brief moment. "Oh, you... *you*... are *much* better at second impressions than first!"

"Tell me about it." Alexis muttered slyly, having perked up over the course of... seconds? Minutes? Emma's sense of time was a little hazy after nearly getting lost in someone else's mouth. Having done what she intended, Henna seemed to be completely at ease, and stood in a single sinuous motion to tower over the dragoness. She stretched, exhibiting the entire length of her enormous, powerful body and popping a few joints back into place before grinning like a lunatic and padding over to the wolf that had just spoken up. Alexis squealed as Henna tackled her, pressing a much more... possessive kiss into the darker wolf's mouth and bearing her to the ground.

The sounds that passed between them steadily grew... wetter, and significantly more amorous, and Emma, far from unsettled at the sight of shameless sensuality, just cocked a scaly eyebrow at Lily, who was busy rolling her eyes in a fashion that could have been termed "explosive." "Hey! You two! Take it somewhere else! We've got guests!" At the sharply barked command, Henna hesitantly pulled away from the blatantly mewling wolf beneath her and whined at the shorter creature. Lily just pointed and shooed them away, upon which the huge, white wolf hopped up and casually tossed Alexis over her shoulder to stalk away, into the dried, skeletal trees. "Gods' Blood... Heathens." Emma just tried not to laugh.

Seeing this, Amena smiled broadly, announcing in a very boisterous manner, "I like this place!" followed by a shier, "Can... can we stay for a little bit?"

She bounced to her own feet, scrubbing dampness from her face with her pack, which she had, somehow, managed to not lose through the entirety of her ordeal. "Yeah... I can't see how a day or two would hurt, especially if we can get some real food before we have to keep going."

A day or two turned into a week or so. She got some actual sleep. Venata, who seemed to possess some skill with a needle and thread by some twist of fate, repaired the holes Lily had torn into her cloak while Amena watched in complete awe. She'd experienced hunting through a

slightly different perspective, running alongside Lily and Ulric, the titanic male, and chasing what was easily the biggest deer she'd ever seen. No wonder her hosts could maintain all the muscle that seemed to be their signature trait. The dragoness had been scrounging well for herself and Amena, but she'd admitted to herself that she'd nearly forgotten what a truly full stomach felt like. After weeks of rodents and the occasional starved mountain goat, roast venison had been a godsend, and she'd taken care to stock her pack with an ample supply of strips of dried meat that she'd cured in a makeshift smoker fashioned from rocks and sticks and mud from the river. She surprised herself with her own ingenuity on that one, and even the wolves had looked impressed.

She almost regretted eventually having to leave, especially since spring seemed to getting closer and closer as the air grew more humid and the sun more intense. The river began to thaw and broaden as the same thing occurred higher up in the mountains that fed it, and it would take her most of the way to Southcliff if she followed it on its meandering path through the plains. Amena was distraught, and she felt her own sorrow as they parted from their new friends with a lot of hugs and farewells and promises to see one another again. The dragoness had half expected the betentacled amnesiac to beg to be allowed to stay with the wolf-creatures, and she wasn't sure she would have been able to deny that desire. That lifestyle certainly appealed to her, absolute, utter freedom. She'd almost forgotten about her wings during the few days with the land bound wolves.

But her family and friends waited for her, each passing day another day that she yearned to see them again, and the knowledge that, once her flight was returned to her, she could easily fly to the forest whenever the urge struck her was a comfort. However reluctantly, they continued on their way. It was days and days of walking before they managed to make their way from the forest, and when they broke into the unfiltered light from beneath that last tree, they both heaved huge, audible sighs. The branches behind them had been just beginning to bud, speckling the sky above them with dots of verdant green, and the suddenly uninterrupted view of the sky, full of spring's poofy, white clouds, was a euphoria almost in and of itself.

Seemingly endless gently rolling hills stretched away into the south, covered, for the most part, in lush grasses that would slowly be awakening from their winter slumber to feed the heartland of Arvandor. Southcliff lay amid them, at the rocky intersection between the Upper and Lower steppes, and she felt a senseless urge to just sprint the rest of the way there, so close home seemed to be. Instead, they continued their steady pace, following the river and occasionally stopping to rest and let Amena practice her skills at fishing using the simple hook and line that Emma fashioned from bits and pieces from her pack.

After so long seeing nothing but dead, grey landscapes, the bloom of vernal color that washed slowly over the landscape was nearly enough to bring tears to her eyes. What stunned her even more, though, was the first sign of civilization. She'd spied it in the distance, and had steered slightly away from the river to investigate it, almost not believing that she had made it far enough to reach life. Stopping just shy of arm's reach, she didn't even know what to make of it. A sturdy, wooden fence, stretching north and south as far as she could see, seemed to split the world in half. Amena babbled excitedly at the sight of a horse cropping placidly at tender new shoots of grass, barely a dozen feet on the other side of the wooden barricade, clearly in the process of shedding its thick, winter coat by the way its fur looked too thick in places.

Emma, for a time, could hardly begin to comprehend her own foolishness. She, in a stroke of genius that had come *far* later than it should have, suddenly knew *precisely* where she was. Before she could even hope to begin to explain the depths of her absurd witlessness to

Amena, a thunderous sound, as of dozens of enormous wings mercilessly beating the air, steadily grew and pulled both their attentions upward. In her single-minded determination to get home, she'd forgotten entirely about what lay *between* home and the mountains. People, life, cities, and maybe even a few friendly faces.

High above them, roughly a dozen vague, white shapes speckled the air, moving quickly across the sky. As if sensing their presence, the winged creatures dipped into a series of long, sweeping spirals that bled off their altitude. The shape in the lead peeled away and dove toward them more quickly, and what she picked out as a pair of broad, ivory pinions flapped gently as it hit the ground at a quick jog and paced rapidly toward them. In contrast with the flawless white fur that seemed to cover most of its body, its hooves were a dark, shiny black, immaculately groomed, and it panted from the exertion of flying as high as it had been as it approached.

Hair an unnatural shade of pale, sky blue seemed to suit her, and contrasted favorably with shining, green eyes as she came up to lean heavily on the fence, idly pulling a pair of smoked glass goggles up onto her forehead to peer at the pair of almost-trespassers. The equine woman that scrutinized them folded her feathery wings against her back and casually loosened the thick scarf that was wrapped close to her throat, likely to protect her from the colder temperatures at altitude. Though her body was completely furred, as far as the dragoness could see, her wrists and heels were graced with delicate feathery fetlocks that possessed actual soft, downy plumage. She wore a dense, woolen shirt and matching pants, and a long-sleeved coat tightly encapsulated a figure that was certainly more than eye-catching.

The wood of the fence creaked as she adjusted the weight of her more than seven-foot body and tugged a pair of thick, leather gloves from her fingers to slide them into a pocket on her coat. The herd that followed the avian-horse hybrid down to the earth looked decidedly more bestial, appearing as little more than a herd of perfectly normal, if all completely white, horses save for the long-feathered wings that folded against them as they snorted and nickered greetings to their more terrestrial cousin, who seemed to stare at them with a long-suffering glare. "Now..." spoke the woman in a pleasant voice, "If I didn't know any better, I'd say that at least one of you looks pretty familiar. Of course, that's nonsense, because the Emma I remember was a scrawny little squirt of nothing the last time I saw her." She laughed, a rich and hearty sound that warmed the dragoness's very soul. "Then again, so was I, and look at me now."

Emma couldn't make her feet move. "P-Polly?"

Another deep, belly laugh made her pause. "That's *Miss Poliandra McClain* to most folks nowadays, but if Auntie Val can get away with calling me that, I s'pose I'm not in a position to stop you either." The winged woman grinned, completely at ease, and added in a gentle, more emotional murmur, "How've you been, squirt? What brings you to our little corner of nowhere? Or were you just trying to keep old Allie here company? Naked, of course, because why wouldn't you be?"

She could barely see through the tears that threatened to completely cloud her vision. "Polly..."

"That's my name, squirt, don't wear... it... Emma? Gods' Blood, Emma, what happened to you?!"

The forward step she'd tried to take ended in an unstable stumble, and she landed heavily in the arms that the feathery equine just barely opened in time to catch her sagging, limp weight. Every scrap of uncertainty and fear rushed out of her all at once, and she clawed weakly at Polly's shoulders as she bawled her anguish into a smooth, sturdy shoulder. The woman holding

her spluttered in confusion, but held her as if by instinct, and the warm embrace of familiar arms was enough to leave her practically wailing muffled outcries into the thick fabric of Polly's coat.

The winged horse vaulted the fence between them with casual ease to hold her more securely, and whispered gently to her. She clung with resolute, desperate force to Polly's clothing, anchoring her to reality, and her distraught mind forced out her worries and the hidden concerns that had been lurking in her brain for weeks on ends, slowly fermenting into despair that had gone unnoticed by the dragoness. Amena strode cautiously up behind her to lay a delicate hand on the back of her shoulder, and she swept her arm outward, wrapping the powerful limb around the petite woman's body and hugging all three of them together as she emptied herself.

What seemed very much like an eternity passed before she was left burbling wordlessly into the very wet spot on Polly's shoulder, feeling childish and foolish and weak, but unable to stop herself from sobbing uncontrollably. "Yeah... Yeah, I missed you too." crooned the equine calmly, trying to undo the tension she had screeched into the air, "But why don't you translate the rest of that for me? What happened?"

Being sure to hug Amena tightly to her side, she reined in her quivering voice enough to speak what she hoped was understandably. And then she told her story, everything that happened, from the room in the dungeon she'd been ripped out of, to the sight of a peculiar fence on the horizon. The only thing she left out was the wolves. It seemed like a... breach of privacy to speak of them. By the time she was left breathless, leaning hard into a fencepost and clutching Amena to her body, Polly's eyes were wide and her lips were pursed to let out a low, impressed whistle. "Damn..."

"Yeah..." she sighed, scrubbing away her unwanted tears with the back of her hand, "I just... I need a nap."

"Don't worry about it anymore, Emma. You're in luck." the equine reassured her with a confident hand on her shoulder. "The Captain of the Southcliff Skyguard is supposed to be here in a few days to inspect the Alacorna" She jerked a thumb over her shoulder at the creatures milling about behind her. "I'm sure he can be persuaded to take a message back to the Lance if you ask real nicely. Are you okay? Do your wings hurt? It looks... pretty bad."

"No..." Emma sighed, finally regaining control of her breathing, "It stopped aching a long time ago. Now they just itch like hell. I'm more tired than anything."

"That much, I think, we have the ability to deal with." She turned, sliding a pair of fingers between her lips and breathing a shrill whistle before shouting some wordless command. The winged horses jumped at the sound and wheeled as a single herd, breaking into a fast canter before spreading their wings and taking to the air once more to flap off to the east and leave the more mundane horse chewing thankfully in peace. "Come on squirt. We'll get you and you friend - Hi, my name's Polly, by the way - something hot to eat and a bed or two. The rest of the folks will want to see you. We'll get that message sent as soon as we can, but until then, you should both just relax. Come on. The house is a bit of a walk from this far out in the pastures, but I guess you're both used to that by now, huh? Hey, maybe I can be persuaded to boil some water for a hot bath? How's that sound?"

Emma could have cried all over again.