

Writing Warmup 11/8/2014

Selka blinked her eyes. She couldn't quite see, and something wasn't quite right. She tried to move a bit, but was immediately rewarded with a throbbing ache throughout her body. Selka winced at the sensation. She was lying down. When had that happened? In fact, when had anything happened? She was having trouble remembering where she was. A twinge of panic rose inside her: it felt as if she were having short-term memory loss issues. She had become entirely too familiar with such happenings after getting knocked on the head with a wooden trainer sword as a child. Her memory had returned, but it had been unnerving while it lasted. Selka stopped and focused on her breathing, calming herself. She was better than this. There was no need to get worked up about something so minor when it may not even be the real issue. Selka blinked again, finally clearing her eyes, which had already adjusted to the darkness as well as could be expected. She couldn't see much, but she could tell that she lay against a stone floor. The seed of unease in Selka's gut grew a bit. She was becoming aware of the unnatural chill in the air that managed to seep through her thick coat. With a clatter, Selka put a paw on the floor and pushed herself into an oddly contorted sitting position. She couldn't quite sit normally. Selka's eyes widened as she looked down to discover the cause of the hindrance. She wasn't wearing her nightclothes... In fact, it was quite the opposite. She was dressed in full armor, and not just any armor at that. She recognized the form and fit of this particular set. The flexible red and black leather plates set over top of the steel plate-and-maille substructure were unmistakable. It was an older design, but it had served her well. That is, until it was nearly rent to pieces in the final journey into Winter's Crown... Selka's hand flew to the areas that should have been damaged, fumbling around as she clumsily examined the suit. To her astonishment, she found it completely intact, in perfect repair. It should have made her happy to see her favorite armor fixed and back in serviceable order. Instead, it made the fur on the back of her neck stand up. She had intentionally left it in disrepair as a reminder of the peril that hid within the Crown... Selka's head snapped up, swiveling about as she attempted to scan her environment. She seemed to be in a small enclosed space, a corridor or hallway of some kind. It stretched off into the distance behind her, though there seemed to be a bend in the path ahead of her, from which a very odd, dim light seemed to emanate.

Selka quickly made to stand, stumbling under the once-familiar weight of the outdated armor. As she lurched forward to stabilize herself against the nearby wall, her boot clanged against something metallic, which pinged and skittered across the floor. Selka found her footing and followed the sound to where it had stopped just a short distance down the path. She squinted her eyes as she bent down, barely able to make out the shape of the object that she'd kicked. It too was familiar. Her hand shook as she wrapped her fist around the hilt of her sword. She'd had it custom made to suit her style of fighting. It was longer than average, but still short enough for her to wear it on her hip. It also had a hand-and-a-half grip for versatility of use. It was simple, straightforward, and very effective. She'd always been fond of it because she felt it fit her personality. She drew it from the scabbard as she stood upright. The blade gleamed

in the dim half-light, just as she remembered. Well, except for the fact that it was intact: It too, had been destroyed on that fateful foray, blade shattered against the stone wall of the cave as she swung at one of those monsters... Stone wall. Selka began to feel a little ill as she looked up again. She took her left hand and brushed it against the smooth wall of the corridor. A shock of numbness shot up her arm as the bare skin of her paw pads made contact with the stone. It was impossibly cold, literally colder than the ice that blanketed her home year round. She pulled her hand back, clenching it into a fist in an attempt to warm it back up as much as possible. She was thankful for the thick leather and steel barrier of her boots between her feet and the floor. Selka glanced nervously towards the light. This was all seeming far too familiar for comfort, and the bits that didn't add up were gnawing at her mind. She became painfully aware of the preternatural quiet. She could hear nothing but her heavy breathing and her heart pounding in her chest, both of which seemed to echo endlessly. She shivered unconsciously as she tried to process the situation.

Nothing made sense. Her armor and sword had been damaged beyond repair years ago, and there was absolutely no way that she was *here* again. She would die before returning to that god-forsaken cave. Selka swallowed loudly. Deep down, she knew she was in denial. It was all as she remembered: the cold, the stone, the strange darkness, it was all the same, even that unnatural light... Her armor was well made, and made only the slightest noise as she crept towards the bend ahead, sword in hand and scabbard now affixed to her hip mount. Selka's instincts screamed at her to turn tail and run, to stay away from the light, to follow the tunnel behind her wherever it may lead. She focused on her breathing and heart rate once again, making sure not to hyperventilate. She couldn't allow herself to be corrupted by blind fear at this point. Whatever happened, staying in control of her faculties was crucial. As Selka came to the corner, she hesitated. The last thing she wanted to do was look. She felt that somehow seeing what she already knew was there would doom her and seal her fate. She shook her head vigorously, clearing the silly idea from her head. With one deep breath, Selka stepped around the corner.

Selka immediately clamped her hand over her muzzle, stifling a cry of terror. She knew that such a cry unrestrained would mean certain death. An image flashed through her mind. A young boy on an adventure, crying hysterically, having seen the twisted, corrupted form of what used to be his mother standing before him. Before any of them even knew what was happening, that form was on him, ripping him limb from limb before vanishing just as quickly as it had struck. One of the women with their party cried out when she saw the carnage. Instantly, another of the creatures closed the distance and struck her. It had moved so quickly that it was almost impossible to track. It was like a chain reaction. The members of her party dwindled. A few fought back, but that only seemed to make matters worse, the loud clamor of combat simply attracting more attention. They had thought the things were someone's sick idea of a statue until they moved. They had sat so still that it was a logical conclusion. In the end, only one member of the original group remained, making it to the exit with the definition of evil nipping at her heels. Selka rubbed her face forcefully, trying to force herself to focus. There, before her, stood that surreal cityscape, square cornered buildings hewn from

the stone of the cavern itself filling the odd bowl shaped space, leaving a barren raised platform around the outside edge. Selka's gaze drifted upward unconsciously, drawn there by the abomination that hung high above. The enormous sphere was indeed there. She couldn't tell what it was made of, or if it was even a tangible thing. It just floated there, fixed to some indeterminate point as it exuded that impossible light like a black sun. It was so hard to comprehend that it made her head ache just looking at it. The glow illuminated the immense cavern, yet the light seemed darker than the blackest night. She could feel a strange coldness coming from the thing, flowing outward with the light as it filled the space. She tore her gaze away quickly. She wouldn't allow that thing to poison her mind. She'd beaten this before, and she'd do it again. Selka squeezed the haft of her weapon, feeling its comforting weight in her hand. She clenched her jaw, mentally steeling herself. The old battle songs of the Fahli echoed through her thoughts, boasting of victory and everlasting glory stolen from the hands of their vile foes. Selka took a deep breath, the frigid air burning in her lungs. The brief pain gave her clarity. She would not be beaten – *could* not be beaten by these monsters. She scanned the rim around the edge of the cavern. There had been a number of passages and offshoots that she remembered seeing, but the entrance had been relatively easy to identify, as it was at least twice the size of the next largest tunnel. It took her but a second to pinpoint it. It was just a bowshot away, probably something between one and two hundred yards away. It was a long bowshot, but it was still a manageable distance. She could make out the figures of the creatures between the buildings and, more importantly, littering the rim between herself and the exit. They just stood there, facing nothing in particular, not breathing, not moving even the slightest bit. There were a lot of them, too, far more than she had remembered seeing the first time. She wondered for a moment if somehow the members of her former party had joined their number. She dismissed the thought. Nothing here made sense, and it wouldn't matter even if they had. These things didn't have a trace of who they once were. That much was painfully apparent, what with mother dismembering son and all. Selka distinctly remembered that these things had seemed perfectly content to act as statues until they had begun making excessive noise.

Collecting herself, Selka slowly set out to the left along the rim. She had to be careful about which path she took through the monsters. In places they were widely spaced, allowing plenty of space for Selka to pass between. In other areas, however, they were clustered together so tightly that running into at least one would be inevitable. She carefully picked her way between them, moving slowly to muffle her steps as much as possible. She was glad that she'd opted to have the joints of her armor muffled as well. Normally armor of the type would creak and groan quite obnoxiously. It had cost her quite a bit more, but it had obviously been a good choice. She did have to watch her step. There seemed to have been some material knocked loose from a stalactite high overhead, leaving large, unstable chunks of rock that she was often forced to traverse. To her relief, there seemed to be no creatures in the immediate vicinity of the entrance, as if they had intentionally kept their distance. As she exited the field of monsters, Selka relaxed a little, no longer having to worry about running into one of them. She increased her pace, moving as quickly as possible while remaining

quiet. There was just under half the distance remaining. Selka's heart began to swell. Perhaps there really was a chance that she could escape this nightmare in one piece! A triumphant smile split her lips. As soon as she made it to the entrance, she'd have to find her way out of the Crown, but that shouldn't be too difficult, not in comparison at least. Avoid being in the open at night, keep her bearing, and she'd be just fine! Selka stretched herself between two larger rocks, trying to avoid having to squeeze through the gap between. Just as Selka stepped over to the furthest rock, it shifted. Selka's grin twisted into a horrified gape as she fell, her sword falling against the floor with a thunderous clang. Selka quickly pushed herself up, turning around to check the creatures behind her. Every single one within about a hundred steps, which must have been nearly one hundred in number, had turned to stare in her direction. Their eyeless, cratered plaster faces seemed to watch accusingly. Selka spouted a stream of colorful obscenities from her native dialect and spun on her toes, snapping up her sword as she broke into a sprint for the exit. She glanced over her shoulder a moment later to find the first of them mere feet behind her. She whipped her sword around, the tip just contacting the throat of the thing. Without a sound, it seemed to shatter and disintegrate into dust. She glanced ahead just in time to see a blur zip in front of her. She swung again without hesitation, her sword carving an ark through its path of motion. She was rewarded with another explosion, peppering her with fragments as she ran. She was ten yards from the tunnel now. Once she made it to the narrow space, she might have a chance of keeping these things at bay long enough to make it to the end. As it was, she faced a threat from all sides. Just as she began to turn her head to check for more, she felt an immense impact in her right leg. Selka let out a loud "Oof!" as she hit the ground. She immediately knew the leg was broken: She could feel the ends of the bone grinding together as she tried to move it. Selka snarled as she striking another monstrosity down. She knew she was dead. She couldn't run with her leg broken as badly as it, and that meant she hadn't a chance of making it out before they swarmed her. However, she'd be damned if she'd die lying down. Teeth bared in a silent snarl of anger and pain, Selka pushed herself upright. She balanced on her left leg, hopping backwards away from the gathering crowd. She just barely managed to see one rush at her, intercepting it with her blade. Selka was a bit confused. Last time, they'd completely swarmed the party, attacking from all sides. Now, it seemed as if they were taking turns attacking her, almost like they were taunting her. Five yards. Selka blinked. Just as she opened her eyes, she saw the blur of motion to her right. She began to swing her sword, but it was too late. It hit her in the shoulder, sending her sprawling over backwards. "NO!" She shouted, her sword skittering across the floor behind her, well out of reach. It wasn't like she could use it anyway. Her collarbone was broken as well now, and she was almost certain that her shoulder was dislocated. Her right arm was useless. She looked down her body. She could see them standing there. She blinked away the moisture gathering in here eyes, and found a single one standing just in front of her. It was obvious that they'd just been toying with her now. She'd never had a chance. It had only been through the brave sacrifice of her friends that she'd lived the first time. That fact had haunted her for years. She supposed that it didn't really matter now. She was about to pay her dues. Selka snarled in defiance at the empty face of the

thing as it stood before her. Time seemed to slow as she watched it raise one arm, presumably to strike her one final time. Suddenly, a deafening boom filled the entire cavern, leaving her ears ringing. A fist sized hole appeared in its chest and a gout of dust erupted from its back just before it fell to pieces, destroyed. A massive figure stepped over her, straddling her form like a protective father fending off wild beasts. It held some strange device in its hands. As she watched, something at the center of the device rotated. Immediately, another boom sounded, accompanied by a bright flash. One of the creatures further away exploded. She saw one of them move towards them, but before she could utter a word of warning, the figure unleashed a mighty roar and moved to meet the monster. She had to do a double take as it drove a closed fist through the blur, shattering it into pieces. Her savior was moving impossibly fast, especially for something of its size. It leapt for another attacking creature, destroying it with apparent ease. He – as she assumed it was from the general figure and its roar – almost seemed to dance between the monsters as they tried to slip past him, punching, kicking, clawing them to dust. Suddenly, the clamor stilled. Selka found the figure standing still between her and the crowd of monsters. They seemed to back away almost, keeping their distance from him. He snarled loudly at them, turning and striding back to her. Selka watched in wonder and confusion as he approached. She couldn't make out too much detail, but what she could see was astonishing. He appeared vaguely similar in appearance to an enormous, scaled up version of a S'ahl. Where S'ahl tend to stand at six feet, however, he must have stood at eight. Selka looked up as his monolithic figure loomed over her. His fur was as black as tar, with two startling blue eyes set in his face. Selka was too stunned and confused to speak. This creature obviously wasn't anything from Sian, so it must have been from the Crown. There simply wasn't any other explanation. But if that were the case, why wasn't it trying to kill her? There simply wasn't anything from the Crown that wasn't hostile. Many of expeditions and hundreds of dead friends had driven that fact home. He kneeled beside her, grinning.

"Let's get you out of here, shall we?" He held his left hand out to Selka. Selka only thought for a moment before taking his hand, dwarfing her own. Selka let out a pained bark as he helped her to her feet. "Whoa there, take it easy. We're in no rush now. I don't think those things will be pestering us again any time soon." He waited patiently as Selka hopped about, trying to find her footing. "Do you think you can walk?" Selka glanced up at his face. She was surprised that he hadn't simply thrown her over his shoulder and walked off with her, but she was somewhat pleased that he hadn't. She was keen on maintaining at least a shred of dignity. Selka nodded vigorously.

"Yeah. I'll need help, but I can still walk." He gently grasped her left arm to stabilize her. She nodded, and they slowly made their way to the exit. As they made their way up the long tunnel towards open air, Selka glanced towards her savior almost sheepishly. She hated the fact that she had to be saved. Still, she was glad that he had come. She returned to staring at her feet, trying desperately to not stumble and put too much weight on her right leg. They walked for some time in silence. Selka was far too exhausted and confused to make conversation, and completely lacked the desire to do so. Finally reaching the mouth of the cave, they stopped abruptly. Selka looked up. The

light was nearly blinding, but it only took her eyes a moment to adjust. She could see a mountainscape off in the distance. She looked back to the enormous figure. She stood there, smiling warmly at her. It was easy to see now that he wasn't of any Sianese species. He vaguely resembled them, certainly, but just as much was different. His long, thick snout was tipped with a somewhat odd, bulky pad nose, not entirely dissimilar from her own, and his muscular, angular skull was topped with tall, triangular ears. It was a strange visage, but she found the sight oddly comforting. He'd just saved her, so that was to be expected.

"Well, here we are. I told you they'd leave us be." Selka gave a noncommittal grunt, still deep in thought. "You know, you should probably make an effort to not get yourself into trouble in the future. That was some crazy shit back there, and I'd be happy to not have to see it again." He chuckled softly. "Then again, I'm sure you're possessed of the same notion as I am". He turned and strode towards the mouth of the cave, leaving Selka leaning against the wall. He stopped on the precipice and glanced over his shoulder. "Oh, I almost forgot. What's your name, young lady?" Selka started. It was a logical question, but it wasn't one she'd been expecting.

"Oh, my name is Selka... thank you. For, you know... saving me." His grin widened even more as he waived his hand dismissively.

"Don't think anything of it. Just doing my job!" He turned, disappearing from view as he strode away from the cave. Selka realized with a start that she had failed to request his name. It might be important if she ever caught up with him, and she felt that he deserved recognition for his actions in the community. Selka opened her mouth to shout the question.

Selka sat bolt upright, her chest heaving as the blankets were launched off. She scanned the room rapidly, confused and concerned. She calmed down as she realized that she was sitting in her bedroom. She gathered her knees to her chest, staring at the bed in front of her as she tried to put the pieces together. Her mind was still reeling, fresh with the memories of what had just happened. It must have been a dream, but that would be impossible. She'd had plenty of realistic dreams before, but this was on an entirely different level. She just sat for a moment before it all caught up with her. Selka started sobbing uncontrollably, resting her face against her knees. She'd been so scared. It had taken her months to mentally recover from the first incident, and that had been just like it happened all over again. She thought that she was strong enough to overcome the lingering fear, but apparently she'd been wrong. It seemed that Winter's Crown would haunt her for the rest of her life. She couldn't get over how strange it all had felt though. It had been so very real. Usually in dreams, you'd only get a small snapshot of senses, the rest falling away in the haze of the dream, lacking clarity. With this, she remembered everything, had felt everything in agonizing detail. Selka unconsciously ran her hands over her leg where it had broken in the dream. It felt intact, but there was an odd phantom pain whenever she ran her hands past the spot, like an old wound that hadn't quite healed right. She checked her shoulder, finding its motion unimpaired. Selka sighed gently before tossing the covers off completely and rising. A gentle breeze filtered in through the window and tussled her fur slightly. Winter was coming, and the air had a bite to it, but it was nothing compared to that cave. Selka

padded across her small house to her armory. She opened the door and walked over to the rack that held her old armor and broken sword. She opened the case and felt the rent maille and leather of the armor between her fingers. It was the same as it had been, broken and damaged. She felt a pang of regret that it wasn't restored as it had been in the dream. She gingerly closed the cabinet, the latch clicking as it shut. She turned to the small drawer beside the display cabinet that held the pieces of her sword. She yawned as she opened the draw, the earliness of the morning not lost on her. As her jaws clacked shut and she looked down, Selka gave a violent start, backing away from the drawer. Selka began to shiver, the hair on her neck rising again as the implications of the drawer's contents registered. Their, in the hollow of the drawer sat the sword. Its gleaming blade intact and unbroken, as it had been so many years ago. Selka reached one trembling hand into the drawer and ran a finger down the groove in the center of the blade. It was covered in grey dust.

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