

Identity Crisis

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Identity Crisis - Arden's Story

By Hikaru Katayama

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Chapter 1

Reversal of fortunes

Coughing, I opened my eyes as I gasp for breath. Rolling onto my side, I continued to cough and suck in badly needed air. Feeling a hand on my arm, I heard a deep voice asking, "Are you all right?" Unable to stop coughing, I simply nodded. "Thank God," I heard, relief apparent in the voice, "When I woke up, I found you trapped under me. You weren't breathing."

Thinking back I remembered what had happened. We had been in the locker room when Sheila revealed that she had the amulet. Confessing her shame at keeping it, she had made a wish. The oddly familiar feeling of pain as we were engulfed in the demon's fire blotted out all sensation. Unlike the first time though, it seemed to last forever. There also was the sensation of my spirit being pulled and ripped in different directions. Just when it felt like it was going to last forever, I heard a scream that drowned out both Sheila's and mine.

Released from the flames, I had dropped to the ground, something heavy landing on top of me. It was an immovable mass that crushed the breath from my body. Unable to leverage myself up to breathe, I had passed out only to reawaken a few second ago.

Rolling over onto my back, I felt something laying underneath me, but was too tired to worry about it. Looking at the form next to me I saw a familiar face. It took a few moments for me to register the fact that it was my face. The one I wore when I was human. The one I had when I was with the SDF. "Arden?" I asked, "Arden Eastridge?" My voice sounded wrong, it was too high pitch.

I saw a sad look on his face. He almost looked close to tears. "No. It's me, Sheila." The shock of what he said struck me like a physical blow. Feeling everything spin, I closed my eyes and concentrated on breathing slowly, trying not to hyperventilate. "What the hell was Sheila doing as a human and in my old body no less?" I asked myself.

Opening my eyes again, I once again saw my face. Everything was identical, right down to the shape of the goatee. The only things different were the eyes. They were the dragon's eyes! I reached out to touch his face, I needed to know it was real, but was stopped by the sight of my hand as it came into view. It was covered in black fur half way up to the elbow, where the pattern changed to a zig zag of burnt orange fur.

Trying to sit up, I was assisted by Sheila as she... no he helped me up. Looking down at my body, I was horrified to see that I was now a Vixen. I was in Sheila's body. I don't know how long I sat there, just staring. My mind had locked up at the distress of what I was seeing.

"Arden?" I heard through the fog. "Arden!" came the voice again, this time shaking me. Coming out of the fog, I looked over at Sheila. "Arden, what happened to us?" she asked. Shaking my head, I just shrugged. My mind raced for an action. "I don't know. I just don't know enough about the amulet." I said, trying to figure something out.

"The Amulet!" It hit me like a bolt of lightning. "Where's the amulet! We can't afford to

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lose it!" I demanded, grabbing Sheila by his shirt. "It's all right," he said, "I've got the amulet right here." Holding up the amulet he handed it to me. Hanging it around my neck, I tucked the medallion inside my shirt, startled at the cold feeling as it lay between my breasts. This definitely ranked a fifteen out of ten on my Weird Crap O'Meter.

"What am I?" I heard Sheila ask. Looking back over at him, I saw the confusion and disgust as they played across my old face. "You're in my old body," I said quietly, "My first body. Before I became a bear." Crossing my legs, I rotated myself so that I could watch him. It took me a second to realize just how effortlessly I was able to twist my legs into a lotus. This body certainly was far more different than anything I'd ever expected to be in.

As I watched, Sheila began to examine his body. I knew how he felt. I was intentionally refusing to do the same. It was a form of denial.

Flexing his hands, I watched as Sheila got used to having a fifth finger. "I'm a...a... What did you call it?" he asked. "Human. We're... You're called Human," I answered him. "Human," he repeated. Rubbing his hand over the skin on the arms, he shuddered. "Don't you get cold with this little fur?" he asked. Nodding, I grunted an agreement.

While Sheila continued to examine himself, I took inventory of our surroundings. We had shown up in a small clearing in the woods. The woods weren't too dense and had little underbrush. Not seeing any signs of life in the near vicinity I turned my attention back to Sheila while keeping my ears perked.

He had paused his investigation with his hands at his waistband. Sitting there tailor style, he glanced up at me and swallowed. "I'm almost afraid to look," he said. Chuckling at the image, I shook my head. "It's nothing you haven't seen a hundred times," I prodded. "Though I suppose it will be a bit different from what you're used to," I said a bit sheepishly, remembering the differences.

Pulling the waistband out, he looked down. "Gack!" he exclaimed. "What?" I demanded defensively. That had been my old body after all. "It's so... so..." he said hesitantly. "So *what?*" I asked. With a shrug, he glanced up at me. "Different," he said looking back down. "It just...hangs there." Getting a sudden case of the giggles, I stood up. "I'll give the two of you a little privacy so you can get better acquainted," I said trying not to laugh.

Sheila got an indignant look on his face and backhanded me in the arm with his fist the same way he used to in the other world, the only difference is that he hit me hard enough to knock me off my feet. Completely unprepared for the blow, I landed hard on my right side, barely able to break my fall with my hand.

Hugging my left arm to my chest, I kneeled, my head touching the ground and whimpered. It hurt like hell. "Oh no! Arden!" I heard Sheila say as he crawled over to me. "Are you all right?" he asked. "Christ Sheila, do you think you could have hit me any harder?" I answered angrily. It didn't hurt this bad when I had been shot. If Sheila's body was this sensitive, I could be in for some serious trouble.

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Wincing as he probed the arm, I was relieved not to feel any bones rubbing together, though it still hurt like hell. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hit you so hard. I'm used to having to really throw my weight into it before you feel anything," he said, stroking the fur on my head. Breathing deep, I fought to speak. "I know," I said, nodding, "but you've got to be careful Sheila. You're not some lightweight vixen now. Just a little more effort and you could have broken my arm."

Hearing Sheila crying, I sat back and looked up at him. "Oh no...Please... Stop that." I begged, watching him. Sniffing he scowled at me. "What? Real men don't cry?" he asked. Giving a weak smile I shook my head, "No. It's just too weird to sit here and watch myself cry." He gave me an incredulous look. "So you think this is difficult?" he asked. "Try looking at yourself huddling on the ground, knowing that you almost broke your arm," he said getting a confused look. Reviewing what he had said in his mind, Sheila decided he had the right tense. Shaking his head he said, "You're right, this is too weird."

Wiping eyes, Sheila stood up. Reaching down with his right hand, he took a hold of my good arm and helped me up. "How's it feel?" he asked. Shaking my head, I sniffed and tried to keep it still. "It throbs pretty bad," I answered, "I don't know. It might be cracked. If nothing else I'm going to have a heck of a bruise."

Nodding, he took off his shirt. Wrapping it around the arm, he paused each time I yelped, eventually tying the arms around my neck in a serviceable sling. Smiling up at Sheila I saw him hugging himself and shiver. "Cold?" I asked. Looking around he shook his head, "No. I feel... I don't know... *Exposed*," he said. I nodded. "You're used to having your fur, even when you don't have clothes. You don't even have that now as a human." I explained. Giving a quick nod, he agreed. "Now I see why you were so tight assed about clothes," he responded.

Looking around the clearing, Sheila planted both hands on his hips. Watching him I started to giggle again. I never realized how cute I looked standing like that. Still giggling, I turned and walked away, shaking. "What the hell am I doing?" I asked myself. I felt what little grip I had on reality getting stretched to near breaking.

"I do not think I like being a Human," I heard Sheila say. Turning to look at him, I began to laugh harder. "Oh really?" I managed to squeak out. Grabbing a breast in my good paw I shook it at him. "For your information, I just wanted to have you as a lover, not *become* you!" I declared, eyes wide as the absurdity of the situation pounded in on my brain.

Giving me a concerned look, he walked over to me. "Are you OK Arden?" he asked. "OK? Sure I'm OK," I answered, my voice rising in pitch. "I'm just peachy keen. I'm the most screwable female vixen I could ever imagine, stuck in some unknown reality with myself standing around looking like fricken Robin Hood." I declared. Throwing my hand in the air, I gave another bark of laughter. "And to top it off," I said leaning forward, "All I can think about right now is the fact that you look cute!" Giggles dissolving into laughter, I finally lost control.

After a few seconds I felt the sting as Sheila slapped me. The pain and shock brought

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me back from the edge. Rubbing my cheek with my paw I looked back at Sheila. "Thanks," I said, blinking. I was still shaking from the adrenaline, but my mind was curiously quiet. When I was in the hunt, I could purge myself of emotion, but this was different. The emotional turmoil was still there, just detached. A small piece of my mind was still jabbering, but it was now safely stuffed away in a corner.

"We can't stand around here forever," I heard Sheila say. "Do you smell or hear any water?" Inhaling, I tried to see if I could smell water but failed. Closing my eyes, I listened for the sounds of running water, but couldn't hear any. Shaking my head at Sheila I took another good look around, trying to decide which direction was best.

"I don't know about you, but I think we should head south," Sheila said pointing. "How do you know that's south?" I asked. Giving me an odd look, he scowled. "By the moss silly." Putting my face in my good paw, I shook my head. "Never underestimate someone's knowledge because of their appearance." I remembered Ito beating that into my head repeatedly. Now, to my shame, I had made the same assumption with Sheila.

Nodding, I agreed, "Sounds reasonable to me." Walking over to where he stood, I took the Wakazashi from his belt and slipped it into mine. I'd be better off using it one handed than I would with the Katana. Hopefully the need would never arise.

Giving a sigh, I tried to brush off the kimono I was wearing. The thing was made from real silk too. Unfortunately it also hung down around my ankles. Looking for a way to give myself some mobility, I finally just looked up at Sheila. "Hey babe.... er.... boyo you mind whacking this kimono at about knee length for me?" I asked. His jaw dropped open in disbelief. "Are you nuts! I had to put a three hundred dollar deposit on that thing!" he argued. Straightening up, I just looked at him for a second. "And you were planning on collecting it when?" I asked.

That got him. Thinking about it I saw him smile and shake his head. Kneeling down next to me, he took the bottom of the kimono. Peeling it outwards and up, he then tucked it in under my belt from the inside out. It had a tendency to flare out at the bottom, but otherwise accomplished the goal. Standing up, he smiled. "See? And we didn't have to cut it," he said mockingly. Shaking my head, I rolled my eyes to the heavens and just muttered "Men."

Turning away, I started walking south, listening to the sound of Sheila laughing. Smiling, I felt a little better about things. Maybe being in Sheila's old body wouldn't be that bad.

After about three hours or so we took a break from walking. It's not that the trip was hard, just that we weren't really ready for it. These damned wooden sandals I wore were killing my feet. To top that off I was hot, thirsty, tired and my arm throbbed. Sitting down, I removed the clodhoppers and massaged my feet with my good hand. "Oh man,

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what I wouldn't give for a good set of hiking boots," I complained. Sitting down next to me, Sheila chuckled. "You're the one that had to go for accuracy Arden-san," Sheila quipped back.

Thinking about it, I realized that we'd have to do something about Sheila's name. "Can't have him running around with a sissy name like Sheila," I thought to my self with a chuckle. Looking over at me, Sheila asked, "What's so funny." Still laughing, I gave him an impish smile. "A guy named Sheila," I explained. Thinking about it, he laughed. "I suppose that could be a problem," he said thoughtfully, "How about Vic? Short for Vixen." Nodding I liked the idea. "Vic Sheen," I said extending it. Nodding we came to a general consensus about his new name.

As the wind shifted I smelled something that made me perk up. "Water. I smell water," I said to Sheila. Extending a hand I let him help me up. Tucking the sandals in my sling, I followed my nose. All that was missing was a toucan beak.

After about five minutes of fast walking up wind, we came to a tree line. Before us was a small stream, about five or six feet across and not too deep. The water was fairly fast flowing and sparkingly clear. Walking forward I knelt by the stream. Scooping up water with my good hand I realized I couldn't get enough to make it worth the effort. Putting my hand on a stone in the river, I lowered my muzzle in and took a good mouthful. Swishing it around for a bit, I then swallowed.

"Are you sure you should be drinking that Arden?" Sheila asked. Nodding I took another mouthful. "A stream like this is usually clean enough. You never want to drink from stagnant water or slow moving water. Fast water like this, especially with lots of rocks and stuff to aerate it is generally safe," I explained.

After drinking our fill, we sat back against a tree, enjoying the day. There was a couple of hours left by my reckoning. We should be able to get in another hour or so before needing to camp for the night. Our big problem was going to be food. We didn't have any on us, and I hadn't spotted anything bigger than the occasional squirrel or rabbit. They probably heard us coming and ran.

"Uh oh," I heard Sheila say. "What's up?" I asked. Giving me sheepish grin he confessed, "I think I need to use the john." Laughing I corrected him. "You're a guy now. Either you're pissing or taking a dump. Anything else is unmanly," I explained with a chuckle.

Standing up he looked down at me. "Fine, I'm going to go take a piss," he said, walking to a nearby tree. Listening to him relieve himself, I realized that I too had the call of nature. Standing I walked over to a worthy looking tree and dropped my panties. Careful to make sure that I wasn't going to get splattered, I let go. Eyes wide at the feeling, I simply added it to new experiences on my list. Realizing I had no way to "shake it off" I was stuck for a moment. I don't care what the Boy Scout book says; I was never one to use leaves when there was paper available. Standing up I pulled up the panties and hoped for the best. I'd have to ask Sheila about this. God this was going to be embarrassing.

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Returning to Sheila, I saw him adjusting his pants with an uncomfortable look. At least we weren't on uneven terms.

Following the river downstream, we discuss the little things that were likely to trip us up, fur maintenance being primary on the list at the time. It was quite an entertaining talk and very educational as to viewpoints of the other sex. Mentally I shelved the 'Guy Book of Rules' and started working on a pink one.

About forty minutes or so into our walk, we came to the edge of the forest. Before us sat a wide valley. Running down the middle was the stream we had been following. About half a mile or so in, we saw a cluster of buildings that formed a town. A dirt road led through the town and into the woods off to our right. I could make out people milling around, but no specifics. I had Sheila's eyes.

"What do you see Sheila?" I asked. Shaking his head, he shrugged. "I can't make out much yet, but it looks like they're human," he said. Putting my good hand on his shoulder, I gave a squeeze. "Concentrate on trying to see them clearly. See if you can zoom in," I instructed. Squinting a little, he concentrated on the town. "Whoa!" he exclaimed, shaking his head. "What the heck was that?" he asked, looking at me, "Can all humans do that?" Shaking my head, I frowned. "No, only ones with dragon's eyes," I said quietly.

As it sunk in, Sheila's eyes got big. Sticking out his tongue, he used a hand to check it. It wasn't forked like it was in the old world, little relief though that it was. Once again struck with the realization that he wasn't normal, Sheila shivered.

Turning back to the town, he concentrated again. "I see humans, and animals, nothing like us. Or rather like you," he said. Nodding, my worst fears were confirmed. I was going to be a freak. "Describe differences you see between these people," I suggested. Nodding he looked back. "Height, hair color and length. Females generally have the longer hair. Only males have fur on their face, though not all do. Size and weight vary. There are some really tall ones standing out by the tall building that look a little different. They're tall and thin. Their ears are pointed, not round, and the faces are longer and narrower than the others," he reported.

Thinking about the description, the only thing I could think of was Elves. If there were elves here, then there should be magic and other faerie races. If that's so, then I might squeak by as just being exotic and not an abomination.

"Lover boy," I said, "I think we've lucked out. Those last ones you described to me sound like Elves. If so, then there's hope for us to get by here yet." Smiling, Sheila rubbed his hand along my snout. "Lover boy. I think I like the sound of that," he said. Leaning over, he started to kiss me, but I backed away.

Surprised and hurt he stopped. "What's wrong Arden?" he asked. Shaking my head, I felt like an idiot. "I'm sorry Sheila, but..." I paused, trying to think what to say. "I'm sorry. There's still too much guy left in me right now." Seeing the sorrow on his face, I stepped forward and hugged him with my good arm. "I'm sorry hon. I just need some more time

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to get settled in, you know?" I explained, looking up I continued. "I wasn't gay or even bi-sexual in my other life. Kissing my old body just.... It's just too weird right now." Nodding, he hugged me back and gave me a little kiss on my head. "I guess I can understand that," he said, stroking my fur.

Keeping his arm around me, Sheila and I walked towards the town. Somewhere in this world was the key needed to bring Bjorn back and we needed to find it before we could move on to Husaquahr and Ruddygore.

Chapter 2

Who's your doggy? Who's your doggy?

"Ummm, Arden?" Sheila said, getting my attention. Looking up, I wondered what was wrong. "What's up Sheila?" I asked. "Vick," she said, correcting me. "OK. What's up Vic?" I asked correctly. "Would you *please* stop dragging your tail? You're not a sopwith camel you know," she pointed out to me.

Thinking about it for a second, I realized I clamped down on my tail when I got nervous. Being a stumpy bear, that wasn't a problem, but being a vixen, it wouldn't do. Forcing myself to relax, I lifted the tail up and waved it around as high as I could, using it as a counterpoise to my stride. Beside me I heard Sheila chuckle. "Now you're getting the idea," he said, "Just rock your hips a little and you'll have them drooling in no time."

Chuckling, I adjusted my stride. I'd practically been marching. Walking like this in my old body would have gotten me shot. As a vixen, it worked. Watching Sheila I noticed he could use a little correction. As we walked towards town we occasionally critiqued each other's walks, trying to cover all the bases.

As we got to within a hundred yards or so, folks started taking notice of us, a few pointing in our direction. "Showtime," I said to Sheila. Looking over I saw his hand resting on the hilt of the Katana. "Um, Vic?" I said, getting his attention. "If you want to hold onto something, use the scabbard. Holding onto the hilt is an aggressive posture. We're just two, friendly strangers strolling into town." Watching him slide his hand back to where the scabbard and belt met, I nodded. We didn't need anyone getting the wrong idea. Not yet anyway.

Walking past the first outer buildings, we stayed in the road, away from the storefronts. Looking around, I saw that the buildings were good quality wood construction based on planked wood. The glass appeared to be of good quality too, though it showed ripples from being hand manufactured. With the boardwalks and awnings in front of the buildings, it reminded me of something almost out of the old west.

Everywhere I looked, folks were watching us. Some had stopped while others continued walking. All, though, were paying attention to us. We walked along for about ten or fifteen minutes, perusing the town and its occupants. Stopping us, Sheila looked around. "We are definitely the center of attention," he observed. Nodding, I agreed. "First things first. We need to get money," I suggested. "Sure, but how?" he asked. Spotting the frontage for a dress shop, I gave a smile. "I think I see our income now," I said, leading Sheila over.

Looking in the window, we saw several fancy ballroom dresses and gowns on display. Giving Sheila a feral smile, I did my best imitation of her getting ready to shop. "What's the most expensive thing in there Vic?" I asked. Sheila was taken back for a second. "I'd say it's the wedding gown in the center of the display," he answered. "Great," I agreed, "That will give is a yardstick on the values here. Let's see just how much this kimono's worth!"

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As I started to turn, he grabbed my arm. "Hey! We can't sell that! My deposit!" he pleaded. Giving a sigh, I turned and looked back at him. "Look, we don't have a choice. Think of it this way. If you ever do get back, you've got the money to cover it. If you don't get back, then the money's gone either way. As for the here and now, this thing is going to pay for some food and lodging. If we're lucky, it will get us some good equipment for our travels," I said, explaining the facts to him. I could see him agonizing over the money. He'd put close to five hundred dollars down in the deposit for both outfits and the accessories. Finally accepting defeat, Sheila nodded and followed me into the store.

Once inside, I un-tucked the kimono from the belt and brushed it out. Sheila helped get the backside where I couldn't reach. Just as I was finishing brushing off the hem of the kimono, I felt Sheila goose me under the tail. He didn't hit the sweet spot, but it sure got my attention. Straightening up, I let out a bit of a yelp and scooted forwards a good foot. Turning around I shot Sheila a hard look, but she just laughed. Thinking back to the times I had done it to him, I had to laugh too.

Hearing someone clear their throat behind me, I turned to see three ladies standing. Two were cowering behind the one that was clearing her throat. All three looked nervous.

"Can I help you.... Miss?" the lead one said. Nodding I gave her a polite smile. "Yes, we were looking at your wonderful dresses. Might we inquire about some of them?" I asked as femininely as possible. Realizing I wasn't there to eat any of them, the leader smiled. "Well I think we can certainly help you out. My name is Junip and these are my sisters Elista and Coranine. You'll have to excuse them, they were just getting back to work," she explained, shooing them away.

"Actually," said Sheila, "We were curious about that wedding gown in the front center. It looks like an amazing piece of work. I assume it was a commission?" Raising an eyebrow at Sheila, Junip (pronounced Yew-nip) smiled. "Indeed. It was commissioned by the Duchess for her daughter's wedding two years ago. It took us almost a year to craft and is unique in its design," she said, leading us over to the gown. As Junip described all the details, I listened to her and Sheila as they discussed the gown, mentally wanting to smack him.

".....Of course," Junip continued, "everything on the gown is original, worn at the wedding with, of course, the exception of the jewelry. This is simply a copy of the jewels we had commissioned as an exact replica of what she wore. The Duchess was very generous in granting us a permanent loan of the dress as well as a conservation spell from the court sorcerer to protect it." Nodding, I gave the appearance of being impressed, though I had zoned out through much of the conversation. "And just how much did the Duchess pay for the gown if I might ask?" I queried. Smiling, Junip waved off the question. "It's common knowledge. The Duke paid over one thousand gold Imperials for the construction, not counting the jewelry of course. It's the pride of our township and the greatest work we've ever produced."

Hearing the price, I let out a low whistle. This thing had probably cost more than the entire town made in a year, easily. We hadn't checked out a yardstick, we had looked at a

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mile marker. Looking at Sheila, I could see he felt the same way. Taking a last look at the gown, we allowed Junip to show us the other gowns in the store. The average price ranged from as low as two or three gold Imperials up to one hundred and fifty or sixty. The upper end gowns were on a par with the kimono I wore but were of a lesser material. Nothing in the store even resembled silk or had its qualities.

Ending the tour, Junip asked if we saw anything we liked. She had some simple dresses that I thought would work if modified for general getting around stuff. I sure as heck didn't want a gown. If Sheila even suggested it, I'd deck him.

Smiling, I held my arm out to show off the Kimono. "Tell me, how much do you think something like this would be worth?" I asked. Confusion flittered across her face for a second. Hesitantly she reached out to touch the material, unsure if I was going to object. Simply standing there with what I hoped was a pleasant smile, I allowed her to look at the workmanship.

"This fabric is amazing. I've never felt anything like it. It feels so light and soft. Is it very warm?" she asked. Shaking my head, I shrugged. "Not to me it isn't. It breathes very well but blocks the wind and so is good to wear when warm or cold. My people don't feel the cold as easily as you do so I can't say how it would feel for you," I answered. Nodding, she looked at the embroidery. "Is there any way I can take a look at this embroidery close up?" she asked. "Certainly," I answered. "Is there somewhere...." Looking around for the equivalent of a dressing room, I saw her realize what I was looking for.

Leading me around to the back she showed me a classic dressing screen. Seeing the only other people in the room where her sisters, I didn't bother with it. It's not like I was naked underneath. I was wearing a protective undergarment. I just didn't want to draw any more attention from the outside. I had seen a few boys peeking in through the front of the window. Tempted to give them a show, I had decided not to.

Taking out the Wakazashi and removing the sling, I handed them to Sheila. Removing the belt, I began to unwrap the obis. Handing it to Junip, I saw her eyes go wide as she felt the material. Taking it over to her sisters, she showed it to them. All three were most excited by the fabric. Removing the outer coat of the kimono, I still wore the white tabard like shirt that the store had recommended to help protect the silk from the oils in my fur. It reminded me of a child's nightgown when the saleswoman first showed it to me as it only came down to the knees.

Folding the kimono, I almost didn't want to hand it over. It was real silk, painted using the traditional Yuuzen method. It was a hand crafted work of art that was worth a small fortune. Hopefully it would be worth it here too. Holding the kimono between both paws, I held them out, bowing Japanese style to Junip, allowing her to take the gown.

Watching them examine the gown, they reminded me of a bunch of vultures, picking over a carcass. I felt Sheila's hand on my shoulder as he gave me a little squeeze. Hugging my bruised arm to my chest, I waited for their decision. After a few minutes, they came to a consensus.

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All three approached us with the gown. Junip spoke again, "We understand how valuable this gown is and wish we could afford to offer you what it's worth, but I'm afraid we don't have that kind of money." She held the gown out for me to take. I considered it for a second than made a decision. "How about this. How about if you give us a down payment on the gown, then when you sell it, you pay us the remainder of its value. You would, of course, keep a generous percentage for your efforts," I suggested.

The trio huddled together and whispered excitedly. Giggling they broke up. The smile on Junip's face told me she was up to something. "We're willing to front you one hundred gold Imperials on one condition," she said. Waiting for the hammer to drop, I was a little annoyed with their glee. "We want his outfit too. They're obviously a matching pair," she said, leaning close to give us a conspiratorial whisper. "I think we could sell these to the Duke and Duchess for the upcoming Imperial ball." Standing back she had a very wide grin on her face.

Looking up at Sheila, I gave him a "well?" look. Scrunching his face up, Sheila was torn with indecision. "We think we could easily get a thousand Imperials for the two outfits combined. You are both almost a perfect match for their size," Coranine contributed. Hearing this, Sheila's eyes snapped open. Getting an almost feral gleam in his eye, Sheila nodded. "I presume you can provide us with some suitable garments and the cash this evening?" he asked. Smiling at her victory, Junip's head bobbed up and down. "Easily. Our father owns the store next door. He can fit you with anything you should desire to wear."

Finalizing our deal, Junip rushed off to the bank to get the cash for us. Meanwhile her sisters quickly made alterations to two peasant dresses and undergarments to allow for my tail. They were both entranced with it. Elista commented that she would love to have my body, especially the tail. I heard Sheila mumble something about her not being the only one and gave him a little kick.

After making a few alterations to the dresses, I was satisfied. It was odd wearing something specifically designed with breasts in mind. Then again, so was having them, especially when they're jumbo sized.

Dressed in local attire, I followed Sheila and Elista next door. The store was a marvel of stuff. It had everything from basic utilitarian farm clothing to some high priced looking frippery. Watching Sheila's reaction when he measured his inseam was priceless. What a lousy time not to have a Polaroid camera.

Getting a long strip of cloth from the girls, I used it as a sash to wrap around the dress. Tucking the Wakazashi back into it, I felt much better. I had been tempted to ask them to make me up a replacement sling for my arm, but I changed my mind. I could tell it was pretty badly bruised but wasn't broken. I'd just have to take it easy and not push it.

Finished dressing, Sheila came out from behind the dressing curtain wearing a good quality utilitarian outfit. Their father had sent his apprentice out to get some boots for Sheila, which were black and came up to mid-calf. The pants were made of a fairly loose fitting material that resembled denim. His shirt was a simple tabard with a split "V" for

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the neck, and short sleeves. Both pants and shirt were of a neutral brown color and wouldn't show the dirt and grime of travel. Topping it off with a tri-cornered hat, he almost looked like something from colonial times.

Giving a polite golf clap, I took another length of cloth and helped him to wrap it around over his belt and tie it off. Showing Sheila how to tuck the swords between the layers so they would hold their position, I then stepped back and took a look at the work. Walking around him to examine the back, I was impressed with the quality of the workmanship. "Nice butt too," I said to myself.

Completing the circuit, I walked away from the group and towards the window. "Nice butt?" I asked myself. What the hell was I thinking? Leaning against the front wall, I looked out the window at the darkening sky, watching people as they passed by.

"What's wrong?" I heard Sheila ask, placing his hand on my shoulder. Looking up at him, I laid back my ears. "You know, you have a cute butt?" I asked. Turning around he tried to get a good look at his butt. Turning back, he said, "I guess I'll have to take your word for it until I get to a mirror." I just stared at him. After a few seconds the smile faded to curiosity, and then realization. Nodding, he gave me a little shrug. "You're a vixen now babe. Learn to live with it," he said lightly.

Turning back to the vendors we had abruptly abandoned, Sheila completed the transaction. Returning to me, he gave me half the cash in a small pouch that hung on a long string. Hooking it over my head, I tucked it inside the blouse of my outfit. If something happened Sheila's portion of the money, then we'd have mine for a backup.

Holding the door open for me, Sheila waited for me to walk through. "Ohhhh," I cooed, "A gentleman too," I teased. "I had a good example," he answered. Walking out into the open air, I stopped to look at the sunset reflecting off the clouds. It's amazing how the simple things can catch your attention. After a few seconds I felt Sheila's hand on my shoulder as he looked, watching it too.

"Ohhhh... The big man and his pet doggy," I heard someone off to the side say. Looking over, I glared at three scrawny young men. They had troublemakers spray-painted all over them. The one in the middle was whistling at me. "Here poochy, here girl. Come on, doggy," he said taunting me. Judging the distance between us, I pushed off with my left leg, leaping towards him sideways while drawing the Wakazashi. His eyes flew wide open in terror as I swung the sword at his neck. Landing on my right foot, I froze the blade as it was about to hit his neck.

Pressing it lightly onto the skin, I was careful not to slide it. Japanese swords cut best while being drawn along the target, slicing. Putting my muzzle in his face, I growled. "What did you call me?" I demanded. I could smell his fear. The shock of what I had done was clear on his friend's faces as they watched in horror what I was doing to their friend.

"I asked you a question. What did you call me?" I demanded again. Whimpering, he began to beg, "Please, I didn't mean anything by it. I'm sorry. Please don't kill me..." Growling I pressed a little harder on his throat. "What did you call me?" I yelled. About

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that time I became aware of the smell of urine. It coincided with the most pathetic look I'd seen on anyone's face in years. "You listen to me carefully. If I *ever* hear you or your friends referring to me as a dog again, I'll use your balls for kibble. Do I make myself clear?" I asked. Jerking his head up and down frantically the lead punk stammered that he did. Looking at his friends, they were all agreeing, afraid that they would be next.

I felt Sheila put his hand on my shoulder. "That's enough," he said. Letting my face relax, I stepped back from the punk, blade still resting on crook of his shoulder and neck. "As you wish, my lord," I said formally. Flicking the sword upwards, I drew the back along the side of his cheek, causing him to fall to the ground, whimpering and pleading for mercy. Snapping the sword vertical, I then slapped it against the top of my left paw as it sat poised over the end of the scabbard. Drawing the blade along until the tip was between my thumb and finger, I guided it into the hold without looking. Ensuring my thumb wasn't pressing the edge of the blade I snapped the hilt home, never taking my eyes off the punk. Turning, I slapped him in the face with my tail, and walked casually away.

Catching up to me, Sheila leaned close. "Don't you think you over did it a little back there?" he asked. Trying not to smile I nodded. "Of course. That's exactly why I did it, too." Glancing up, I saw confusion on his face. "Think about it. Those punks are going to spread word all over town that I'm no pushover. Nobody's going to make dog jokes, or tease me. If anyone refers to me it's going to be as 'That psychotic bitch with the sword,' and even that will be behind my back, never to my face. That's exactly how I want it. They'll also spread word that you're my lord. That will give you a reputation by association," I explained, detailing out my reasons.

"Well, you scared me back there. I thought you were really going to kill him," Sheila said with a worried voice. Chuckling, I gave him a smile. "I was tempted, but only for a second. From here on you need to treat me as a vassal in public. I'm your combination of guard and servant. Just don't get too carried away with it," I said, setting the scene. Chuckling, Sheila thought about what I just said. I could tell he was getting ideas.

Getting to the inn, we were greeted by a pleasantly plump old man. He informed us that there was a large room available for us. Negotiating the rate, we got him to agree to a week's stay for two gold Imperials, meals included. Satisfied with the deal, we paid him and allowed him to show us to the room. It really wasn't a bad place. We were up on the third floor.

The room was quite spacey and occupied one quarter of the floor. The innkeeper informed us that these rooms were normally reserved for royalty. Junip had informed him that we were going to be coming by and made sure he gave us the best room in the house. Thanking him, we settled in. Sheila hung up the two extra dresses that the women had given me in the wardrobe and placed his outfits in the dresser. Placing our swords on the tables by the bed, we both laid back and relaxed on top of the covers.

Relaxing, I tried something I'd seen Sheila do many a time. Bending my knees, I took the end of my tail and rolled it back and forth across the soles of my feet. Giggling, I enjoyed the feel of the fur as it brushed the bottoms of my feet. It was oddly soothing.

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"What's so funny?" Sheila asked, leaning over and propping himself up on his arm. "I could never figure out why you were doing this," I stated dreamily. Confused, Sheila looked me over and spotted the tail. "Oh," she said, "Feels pretty good eh?" Relaxing, I tried to let the tension flow out of me. "Oh yah," I sighed, "Just what the doctor ordered."

I was mildly surprised to feel Sheila's hand as she trailed it down along the edge of the front of the dress, caressing my breast. Opening my eyes, I looked over at him and saw he was smiling. "If you think that feels good," he stated, "You don't know the half of it." Taking his hand, I kissed it lightly and rubbed my muzzle against it. "Not yet, hon. I'm not ready for that yet," I said quietly.

Sheila let out a groan and rolled back over onto his back. I could see he had gotten himself a little worked up. I fought the urge, but couldn't stop myself from laughing. Giving me a sideways look, Sheila asked, "What's so funny now?" The irony was just perfect. "You know, I remember a certain vixen leaving me in a similar position on our first night together," I explained. "And that was after she had toyed with me for over an hour." Rolling over, I ran my hand across his chest. "Payback's a bitch baby, and I'm just the bitch, too," I said with glee.

Putting his hands over his face, Sheila let out a moan. "I suppose I deserve that," he said, letting his hands fall to his side. Rolling over partially on top of him, I rubbed my knee lightly over his crotch. "You know what lover boy?" I asked in a low, husky bedroom voice. A smile quickly spread over Sheila's face as his anticipation....and other assets, grew. "No, what?" he asked. I leaned real close, pinning his arms over his head, lightly nibbling his ear and whispered, "I think I smell dinner ready."

Giving Sheila a soft kiss, I snapped my body over and rolled off the bed before what I said sank in. Realizing what I had done, Sheila let out an inarticulate cry of frustration and threw a pillow at me. Laughing I picked up my Wakazashi and strolled for the door, waving my tail like a banner behind me. Stopping at the door, I turned to blow Sheila a kiss.

Opening the door, I headed downstairs. I don't know what the old boy was cooking up, but it smelled good.

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Table for a party of one please?

Pausing at the top of the stairs, I checked to make sure nobody was watching. Reaching into the pouch, I removed a couple coins and slipped them into a pocket on the dress. Tucking the bag back safely between my breasts, I was reminded of the presence of the amulet. Reaching in, I touched it, noticing that it was at room temperature. I hope that transporting the two of us didn't somehow break or damage the talisman's magic.

Letting out a bit of a sigh, I headed down the stairs. The stairs terminated in the commons room. Chairs and tables filled the area, with a huge fireplace against one wall, extending almost ten feet in length. Behind the stairs was a door that led to a kitchen area. This was the source of the smell. Turning left at the bottom of the stairs, I saw another open area with a bar, more tables and another fireplace. There was also a small stage with a stool on it, probably for traveling bards or minstrels.

Walking over to the bar, I saw a younger man behind the counter washing glasses. He bore a striking resemblance to the old man that had rented us the room, so I presumed he was his grandson. Taking a stool at the end of the bar, I looked around at the dozen or so patrons in the room. All were looking at me, and the general conversation had vanished.

Walking over to me, the barkeeper was toweling off his hands. "What can I do for you tonight, miss?" he asked with a small smile. I liked him. He wasn't presumptuous and didn't fear me. "Mind if I run a tab?" I asked. Shaking his head, he looked genuinely sorry. "I'm afraid we're not allowed to run tabs for your folk, miss," he answered. Taking out a gold Imperial, I tossed it up on the counter. "Tell you what, get me a mug of your best ale. Once you've done that," I said, raising my voice, "go ahead and give everyone else a round of whatever they're drinking."

That got a round of cheers from a majority of the house. As always, there was one dissenter. "I don't care about the rest of you, but I'm not going to drink with no *bitch!*" a man's voice declared to the room. The barkeep just shook his head. "We know that, Brookman! That's why you drink here and not at home with your wife!" I heard someone shout back, igniting a round of laughter.

Looking over to the crowd, I could clearly see the angry man in the corner, scowling at me. Wandering towards the bar, I saw a rugged looking man carrying a stein. He was about even with my height, sandy blond hair, light brown eyes and a full mustache that rippled as he laughed. Wearing a worn and beaten leather vest, light tan shirt and dark pants, he looked like a photographer in the field, only without his cameras. Sitting down at the bar just around the corner from me, he sat his drink on the counter. Sticking his hand out, he introduced himself, "Hi, I'm Mitch."

His voice was the one taunting my attacker. Smiling, I put my paw out and shook his hand. "I'm Arden," I informed him, "Thanks for sticking up for me." Lifting up his stein, he saluted me. "Not a problem, Arden. I'm not too picky about who I drink with," he said. Leaning close he spoke low. "Especially when they're as cute as you," he said giving a wink. Chuckling I took a drink of my ale. The guy was kind of cute.

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Putting my drink down, I took a deep breath. OK, he was cute. I can live with that assessment. As long as I didn't decide he had a nice butt, I suppose I could handle the odds and ends that my subconscious seemed desperate to shove out in the foreground.

Seeing my expression change, Mitch reached over and touched my paw. "Hey, what's wrong?" he asked. Looking down at my paw, I looked up at him without moving my head. Pulling his hand back, he held his hands up in apology. Shaking my head I looked up at him. "Just a long way from home. It's been a long time since I sat in a pub like this and enjoyed a drink with my friends," I explained. Nodding, Mitch stared down into his stein. "I guess I can see how that would be. You're home has got to be a heck of a long ways off. I've never even heard of your people," he said solemnly. Smiling, I took another drink. "Hey! I didn't come down here to get depressed. I came down here to enjoy myself and get some food," I declared, brushing away the moment.

Hearing me mention food, the barkeep came over. "Would you like to eat at the bar or in the commons, miss?" he asked. Glancing at Mitch, I saw him shrug. Smiling at the barkeep, I pointed to the space in front of me. "This will be just fine. Thank you."

About the time I finished off my ale, a young girl came out into the room with a huge waiting platter loaded with plates. Coming over to the bar, she put a large plate in front of each of us. On the plate I saw a deep bowl of beef stew, half a small loaf of bread and a small round object that looked like a deep fried cup-coaster that was about half an inch thick.

Settling the plate in front of myself, I realized that I now had yet another problem. It was going to have to be careful eating if I didn't want to drip on my dress. As a man I didn't have this problem, just lean forward a little over the stew and it shouldn't get on me. With these breasts I'd have to take great pains not to slop. Being a female was starting to be a real pain in the tail.

Taking the spoon, I dipped into the stew and took a taste. Smiling, I felt my tail swishing as I enjoyed the flavor. It was wonderful stew. The beef was good and tender. Although there were vegetables, it wasn't overloaded with any one vegetable, like potatoes or corn. It was well spiced without being overpowering. All in all I was pleased.

Watching Mitch take a bite of the deep fried, coaster-sized object on his plate, I took that as a hint and tried mine. I was surprised by the strong flavor of hazel nuts, honey and barley. It wasn't fried, but baked to a crisp yet still quite moist inside. Smiling, I placed it back on the plate. It would be good as a desert.

When we were about half way through our meal, I saw Sheila standing in the door, looking around. Waving my mug, I got his attention. Coming over to us, he sat down at the stool besides me and looked at the food. "Smells good," he commented. "I believe I would enjoy a plate of that and some ale myself." I was about to tell him to fetch it for himself when I remembered my roll. "As you wish my lord," I said, bowing to him. Walking around the corner of the bar, I let my tail rub the base of Mitch's spine just above his belt, chuckling as he straightened up. Being a tease was fun.

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Reaching the kitchen, I spoke with the young girl who was waiting on folk and got a plate for Sheila. Returning with it, I caught the attention of the barkeep and ordered another ale. Returning to my chair, I set the platter down. "Is there anything else you require, my lord?" I asked. I saw Sheila consider asking something, but the look in my eye put an end to that. "No, there isn't. Thank you Arden," Sheila said magnanimously. Bowing to him, I turned and sat back down on the barstool.

Waving his spoon between Sheila and me, Mitch got a curious look. "Just what's the deal with you two?" he asked. Looking at Sheila, I saw him ignoring the exchange. "He is my liege lord. I have sworn my life in his duty," I informed Mitch. Spreading his hands, Mitch asked, "And just what kinds of duties would those be?" Giving a little shrug, I sipped my ale. "Anything he requires of me," I replied simply. Glancing between Sheila and myself, he smiled, "Anything?" "Anything," I answered, "I am all things to him, bodyguard, companion, advisor, philosopher, healer," giving a sly grin, "and nanny. Any service that he needs performed, I am capable and empowered to do," I explained.

Getting a sly smile, Mitch looked at Sheila again. "When you say you're his companion, are we talking...you know...companion?" he asked, too embarrassed to say it. Looking at Sheila, I saw that he was now looking at me, eyebrow raised, smiling. Turning back to Mitch, I shook my head. "Despite his best efforts, that has not yet come to pass," I informed Mitch. "So you're available?" Mitch asked. Looking at Sheila again, I saw that the smile was gone from his face. "No," I said, shaking my head, still looking at Sheila, "I'm spoken for."

Turning back to my stew, I took another bite, letting the swirl of flavors echo the emotions floating around in my heart. Looking over at Mitch I smiled a little. From the perspective of a vixen he'd be a fun romp, but I was still in love with Sheila. If I were going to bed any man, he would have the honors, but that wasn't going to happen soon.

Losing my appetite, I shoved the plate away and picked up the ale. Downing the trailing third of the mug, I waved the barkeep over for a refill. Picking up the refreshed mug, I walked back over into the commons. Spotting a table in the corner that wasn't occupied, I sat on the chair. Tilting it back, I propped my feet up on the table while wrapping my dress around and between my legs so it wouldn't hang open. Sipping my drink, I watched the folks eat their dinner. They still openly stared at me, discussing me in a low voice with the people at their table.

About half way through my drink, I noticed a small kid crawling between the tables. He looked to be about seven or eight years old. Crawling out from under my table, he stood up a few feet from me and looked at me in awe. "Wow! Can you really talk?" he asked. Chucking, I nodded my head. "Yes, I can talk," I said "I'm Arden. What's your name?" I asked as an introduction. Standing up a little straighter he thumped his chest. "I'm Tommy, but all my friends call me Fish," he announced with pride. "Fish?" I asked, "Why Fish?" Smiling, he took a step forward, "Because I'm the best swimmer in town. Everyone says that I swim like a fish, so that's what they call me---Fish," he explained.

Laughing, I took another drink and glanced around. Folks had stopped paying much attention to me. "Hey lady, can I pet your tail?" he asked, watching it as it wagged slowly

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behind me. Slipping my feet off the table, I turned my knees away from him. Twitching the muscles I caused my tail to do a little dance in front of him, finally coming to rest in his hands. Stroking it, he his face almost split in two from the smile. "Wow! That's neat. You got real soft fur too," he noted. "Thank you," I said, pleased at the compliment. Twitching my tail away, I brushed it across his face before turning around so I faced him.

Resting my elbows on my knees, I took another sip of my drink. "You must come from a long way off," he said in the way of an observation. Nodding, I agreed. "Yep, you could walk for a very long time and not reach my home," I said wistfully. "Oh yah? I got a cousin in the Imperial City. That's almost two weeks away on horseback!" he declared defiantly. Shaking my head, I looked at him sadly. "You could ride a horse for years and not reach my home," I said.

Just as he was about to ask another question, I saw a short harried woman come running over. "Thomas Livingston Brant! What did I tell you?" she said, scolding the boy. Picking him up, she turned away without even acknowledging me. "I told you not to go near that thing. You have no idea where it's been. It could have bit you, then you'd have rabies..." Laying back my ears, I didn't listen to the rest of her tirade.

Standing I returned to the bar. Sheila and Mitch were happily chatting. Getting the bartender's attention I got the local equivalent of a bottle of hooch and headed for my room. Hearing him call out, I paused. He wanted to know about my change. I told him to keep it.

Walking up the stairs, I saw Tommy...Fish to his friends...wave to me. Giving a little swish of my tail, I used it to wave back. Reaching the door to the room, I unlocked it and went in. Kicking the door shut I wandered over to the large couch and plopped down wincing as I did. Rolling off, I rubbed the base of my back where I had pulled my tail. Angry for forgetting it, I tried getting on the couch again, this time making sure I had it safely tucked between my legs.

Draining the remainder of the ale, I pulled the cork out of the bottle with my teeth and spit it out on the floor. Pouring the contents into the mug, I dumped about an eighth of the bottle. Setting the bottle on the floor, I leaned back and took a drink. Swallowing, I gagged for a second on the aftertaste of the drink. Gasping for breath, I coughed trying to get some air. I tipped the bastard a weeks worth of wages and he gave me this crap? And to think I actually thought he liked me.

Feeling the warmth spreading outwards from my stomach, I took another drink, this time ready for it. Thinking about Mitch, I realized that he was just another male, interested in a piece of exotic tail and a pair of gorgeous hooters. He had no more respect for me than any of them did. His little innuendos about Sheila and myself were just his way of finding out if I was available.

Noticing that my mug was empty, I poured some more alcohol from the bottle, now emptying it to the half way mark. Setting it back on the floor, I was very careful not to tip it over.

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Now where was I? Oh yah, no respect. The women at the tailor shop didn't give me any. They just wanted our clothes. Clothes that Sheila had paid good money for too. And how about those punks outside? I definitely didn't get any respect from them. Absolutely none. I had really enjoyed it when that boy had pissed his pants. Now THAT was the highlight of the day!

Saluting my victory over evil, I realized that the mug was once again empty. This was no way to celebrate a victory! Taking the bottle, I upended it into the container and drained the contents. Holding up the empty bottle, I gave it a regal look. "You gave your all soldier," I said shakily, "But now it's time for you to retire." Taking the bottle, I tossed it over in the corner where a large bucket sat. Watching it ricochet off the wall and into the container I gave myself a cheer. "And Arden scores from the three point line!" I announced to my imaginary audience.

Only there was nobody there. I was alone in this god-forsaken world. Nobody was around for me. No, that's not true. Sheila was here. Thinking about him, I smiled. He had a cute ass. And so he should! It was my ass after all, and it was cute! Sheila loved me. But I wouldn't love her back. What kind of friend was I? He'd let me screw him when he was me...or her...whatever.

Just as I was about to take another drink, I saw the door open. Hey! It was Sheila! "Hey babe! Glad you could join the party!" I declared, trying to sit up. I had a bit of trouble on the first try, but managed it on the second, and without spilling a drop I might add.

Sheila glowered at me. "You're drunk," he said. Well duh! "Nope, I'm *very* drunk," I replied with a giggle. Coming over to me, Sheila reached down and took the mug from my paw. "Hey!" I objected, "That's my drink." Sniffing it, Sheila wrinkled his nose. Turning it upside down, he watched as a small drizzle of alcohol poured out.

Tossing the mug on the table, Sheila lifted me up off the couch. "Time to get you to bed little lady," he said. "Ohhhh.. Bed. Sounds like fun to me," I said, rubbing my paw around in the general area of his crotch. "Damn it, Arden," he said, grabbing my hand, "Knock it off."

Giving him an indignant look, I let my ears wilt. "What's the matter with you, Mr. Grumpy?" I asked as he half dragged and half carried me into the bedroom. "You are smashed out of your gourd," he said, clearly annoyed. "I am? I didn't know I had a gourd to get smashed out of," I said, laughing at my little joke. Apparently Sheila didn't find it funny.

"Stand up," Sheila ordered. Taking a look down, I saw I was vertical. "I am standing up," I stated in my defense. "On your own," Sheila complained, letting go of my arms. Suddenly without support, I felt my self falling and grabbed onto his shirt. Reaching up with one arm, I hooked it around his neck for a better grip. I felt him untying the straps that held my dress in place on the back. Thinking that was a good idea, I looked for the buttons on his shirt, but couldn't find any. That's when I remembered it was a pullover.

Looking down, I realized that he wore a belt. I could help with that. Reaching down, I started to undo his belt. "Knock it off, Arden," Sheila said again, scolding me. Slapping

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my paw, he tucked the end of the belt back behind the loop. "I'm just trying to be helpful," I replied. "You want to be helpful, just stand there," he said, aggravated. How was a girl supposed to get laid if she wasn't allowed to help out? Oh yah, Sheila's a guy now. He probably wanted to drive. That's it. He probably just wanted me to be cute little passive puppy. I could handle that.

I felt the dress slip off my shoulders as he finished with the ties in the back. Looking down, I could see I still had on the undershirt. That was no fun. Reaching down, I started trying to pull it up over my head. Sheila grabbed the top and helped me pull it off. Picking up the dress, he carried them over to the wardrobe and began to hang them up.

Realizing something still wasn't right, I looked myself over. I still had on panties. That was going to definitely be a showstopper there. Pushing them down, I got them to about my knees when I felt them binding on my tail. I had forgotten the snap in the back. Too late to do anything about it now, I'd just have to force them. Pushing harder, I pulled up with my tail.

Popping free of the elastic at last, my tail flew up and over my back, smacking me in the head. It also threw me off balance. Hands still firmly gripping the panties that were now at ankle level, I noticed the world was starting to turn. Landing heavily on my back, I let out an "Erf" as I had the air rushed out of me. Loosing grip on my panties, my legs flopped to the floor. Looking up I saw that Sheila was standing over me, doing that Robin Hood thing again. He didn't look that bad from down here either. He did look annoyed. What a grouch.

Putting my arms, up, I felt him lift me up off the floor. Squealing in delight as I floated in the air, kicking off my panties and, landing on my tiptoes, did a little pirouette. Stopping my spin when I faced him, I had to reach out and grab him for balance. Reaching up, I tried to pull his face down for a kiss. Cute lips too. I would have nailed them if he hadn't stopped me. Holding me in a bear hug....no, he's not a bear, he's a human. I guess that would be a human hug? That's not right either. Whatever kind of hug he had me in, it wouldn't let me stretch my muzzle far enough up to kiss him. Not to be denied, I give his nose a quick lick as he carried me over to the bed.

Reaching down, he pulled back the covers. "In you go," he said. "You coming in too, right?" I asked, smiling. Sheila just shook his head, "Not this time, love." Oh yah? We'll see about that. Lifting up my legs, I wrapped them around his groin, locking my feet together. With a twitch of my tail, I pulled it up between his legs, thumping his crotch with it. From the surprised look on his face I knew I had a Bingo! The growing pressure against my crotch as I rubbed against him told me I was right on target.

His expression turned angry. Turning to the bed he shoved against my shoulders hard enough to break my grip on his neck, dropping my body on the bed. Reaching around behind him, he unlocked my legs. Fighting with me, he finally yelled, "Stop it!" Surprised and hurt at the tone in his voice, I stopped. "Now get in bed, damn it!" he said, teeth clenched, pointing to the covers.

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Sniffing, I felt the tears start. Climbing on the bed, I pulled the covers up over me, looking at him stand there and glower at me. "I knew it. You don't love me any more. You're just like everyone else here. I'm just a freak to be stared at," I said, crying. Turning away, I took the oversized pillow and wrapped myself around it,

I felt Sheila sit on the bed behind me. He began stroking my back. "You're not a freak. You could never be that to me," he said quietly. "I still love you. You're the most important thing to me. I wouldn't trade you for the world."

Rolling back over, I threw the covers off. "Then why won't you make love to me?" I demanded. Reaching over me, he took the covers and pulled them back. Leaning over me, he rubbed his fingers along the side of my muzzle. "It's because I love you that I won't. This isn't you, this is the alcohol," he said quietly, stroking my fur. "When I make love to you, I want it to be with Arden, not some drunk who's not going to remember it in the morning."

Looking in those draconian eyes of his, I lost myself, floating on the clouds of alcohol flowing through my blood. His soft words caressing my hurt and anger away as I slowly fell asleep in the arms of my love.

Chapter 4

You only wish it were PMS.

As my mind clawed its way out of the cloying black fog of sleep, I realized that I was dying. It felt like someone had pummeled my head while I was asleep. Rolling over onto my back, I let out a low moan as new waves of pain flowed through me. Putting my paws to my face, I rubbed the sleep from my eyes, blinking at the light streaming in through the window. Throwing the covers off of me, I gently forced myself to sit up, regretting the move. My head was spinning, my mouth tasted like a tarmac and I thought I was going to puke.

Acting on the rising sensation in my stomach, I looked frantically around for a container. Spotting the metal bucket used for "evening relief" in the corner, I dove for it, barely reaching my target before my stomach let loose. Pausing for a second, my stomach gave me enough time to take a breath, immediately reminding me that having a good sense of smell could be a curse as the odor struck me. A new wave of nausea had me hunched over the bucket as my stomach tried to empty content that were no longer there. Groping around the bucket on the floor, my hand found the lid that had been leaning beside it. Capping the container, I weakly crawled over by the bed and sat down, cursing as I pinched that damned tail again.

Hearing the door to the room open, I looked over, secretly hoping it was some unknown assailant with murderous intent, coming to put me out of my misery. Unfortunately it was only Sheila. He was carrying a mug in one hand and a small vial with a thick looking liquid in it. Spotting me on the floor, he began to chuckle.

"Oh yah, yuck it up," I said, regretting the screeching feeling my voice made in my head. Still chuckling, Sheila squatted down next to me and held out the vial. "Here. Drink this. It's supposed to help," he said. Taking the vial, I looked at the liquid. There was crap floating around in it. Giving Sheila a untrusting look, I watched him smile and nod. Pulling the cork out, I sniffed the contents and laid my ears back. The smell made me want to howl. "Go ahead," he urged me, "It's the local version of a hangover cure."

Grabbing his shoulder, I pulled him close. "This had better not make me puke again," I growled as a warning. I wasn't in a good mood and misery wanted company. Stealing myself I dumped the contents of the vial in my mouth and swallowed, gagging on the taste. It felt like my mouth and stomach were on fire. Digging my claws into the floor and Sheila's shoulder, I arched my body, my muscles convulsing while the elixir penetrated my system. After a small eternity of this, the pain began to fade away and with it the muscle spasms.

Putting my paws on my face, I ran them back through the fur on my head, pushing it out of my face. Taking a deep breath, I realized that my head didn't hurt nearly as much. Letting my arms drop, I saw Sheila holding the mug out in front of me. Taking it, I sniffed. It smelled like chicken soup. Taking a sip, I found that's exactly what it was. It was a bit salty for my taste, but did manage to find a welcome place in my stomach. Drinking about a third of the mug, I set it on the floor next to me.

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"What the heck was in that stuff?" I asked. Hearing Sheila laugh behind me, I started to worry again. "You don't want to know. I got it at the local apothecary. From the way the old geezer was talking, they believe in magic here," Sheila answered as he sat on the bed. Nodding, I could believe it. "Right now, I don't care about the content, but I will admit this. My headache's faded," I commented, feeling much better. Leaning my head back against the bed, I closed my eyes and relaxed.

"Glad to hear it," Sheila said, getting off the bed. Behind me, I heard him in the wardrobe getting something. Feeling something land on my head, I ignored it until I got the smell. Snatching it off my head, I held it up before me, looking at it. They were my panties. Looking down, I realized for the first time that I was naked. Or at least as naked a vixen with fur can be.

Clenching the panties in my fist, I recognized them for what they were. He'd take them as a trophy after the fact. I remembered working hard at getting drunk. I had been upset with what had happened downstairs. I was going to seek solace in the one place I could and he had obviously accepted. The fact that I was totally blitzed or even unconscious probably hadn't stopped him. Sheila had gotten his revenge for what I did earlier before dinner.

Standing, I turned and picked up the dress. Slipping it over my head, I threaded my tail through the small opening in the back the sisters had made for me. Tying the cord at neck level, I then tied the slit in the back where I had threaded my tail. Wrapping the cloth strip around me as a belt, I threaded my Wakazashi through the layers. Ensuring I still had the amulet and bag of coins around my neck, I picked up the panties and headed for the door. Walking past Sheila as he reclined on the couch, I tossed the panties on his head. Ignoring his protest, I walked out the door and headed out to the street.

Not pausing in front of the hotel, I turned back towards the edge of town and stalked purposely towards it. Inwardly, I felt a small bit of glee as I watched people scatter out of my way. Glancing in a window I caught my reflection. My fur was a mess, plastered against my head. Ears flat against my skull, I looked ready to kill something.

Leaving the town, I followed the stream out towards the woods where we had come from. Reaching the edge of the forest, I followed the water for a few moments and then, finally, stopped. I had to take a piss and I needed to do it now! Finding a reasonable spot over in the trees, I hefted my dress out of the way and let it rip. Finishing up my business, I walked back to the stream and looked around. As I searched for a place to sit, I saw a rock in the sun that looked reasonably flat. Taking a seat, I folded my legs in front of me.

Sitting there, I tried to center myself. The emotional overload that had been beating at my mind since we first arrived here was as strong as ever. It was trying to drive me insane. No, that wasn't right. It was trying to force me to pay attention, with a stick if necessary. I had trained myself to be able to control my emotions. As a man I had been able to turn them off and shove them in a corner indefinitely until I was ready to deal with them. Obviously I wasn't going to be able to do that any more.

Going with the flow, I looked for the strongest emotion: Anger. I was a very angry

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boy...err...vixen. I was angry at the dragon for holding out on me when I needed his strength, resulting in Bjorn's death. I was angry with Khansman for trying to kill my friends. I was angry with Sheila for making the wish that got us into this predicament, not to mention last night. I was angry with the people here that treated me like a freak, even though I expected that to happen. Most of all, I was angry with myself. I prided myself on my ability to identify, adapt to and overcome problems. I wasn't doing a very good job.

Next, surprisingly enough was jealousy. I was jealous of Sheila and his ability to adapt to this situation better than I. This surprised me, as I never thought of myself as the jealous type. I had fought being a woman fang and claw from the beginning. Sheila just slipped into the role, trying to enjoy the experience to its most. I had become even more of a tight ass than I was when I was human or bear.

After examining those two big emotions, I found fear to be lurking in the shadows. This surprised me. Fear was an emotion I learned to deal with a long time ago. The fact that it was there wasn't the surprise. The surprise was what I feared. I was afraid of losing my identity. Not my identity as Arden, but as that of a man. I feared letting the female side of myself loose. If I did, I was afraid of what might happen to me when I became a man again. I was afraid I might like making love to a man too much. I was afraid of becoming gay. This was something I would have to deal with over time. I suppose I could live with becoming another Eddy Izzard, just as long as I still preferred girls.

Examining the rest of the emotions, I found they were trivial. Permitting them to wash over me and flow through me I acknowledged them and finally centered my self emotionally. Sitting alone in the darkness of my mind, I felt the one remaining constant emotion that had been buried beneath it all, my love for Sheila. It had sustained me through the recent trials and tribulations that we had endured. Now, allowed to come forward, it filled me with its warming glow.

Basking in the warmth of the sun, I heard the call of birds, the rustle of the leaves and the sound of the water as it flowed. I smelled the water in the brook, flowers and grass. The breeze gently blew against my fur, stroking it with its feather touch. Enjoying the moment, I let all my worries and cares flow from me. I was in harmony with my surroundings.

Hearing the snap of a twig, looked towards the sound, half drawing the Wakazashi from its scabbard. Seeing that it was Sheila, I replaced the sword in its sheath and watched him as he walked cautiously over to me. Scooting to one side on the rock, I made room for him. Settling in beside me, Sheila tried to fold his legs into a lotus. I had to laugh as he grunted at the effort, finally giving up and simply crossing them before him.

Turning to me, I could see the concern etched in Sheila's face. Not giving him a chance to say anything, I rocked over onto my hip, grabbing his neck and kissing him. Once the initial shock of what I had done passed, Sheila wrapped his arms around me and returned the kiss. Breaking it, I sat back and hung my head.

"What's going on, Arden?" he asked, concern in his voice. Not quite sure how to explain it, I finally just shook my head. "I'm sorry, Sheila. I've been a total jerk," I confessed to

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him. "I don't understand," he said, still confused. "Why did you run off like that back there?" Giving a little shrug, I couldn't look him in the eyes. "I was mad about last night," I confessed.

Taking my paw, Sheila held it in his hands. "I know you got drunk so you'd be able to stand going to bed with me," he said quietly. "I understand how difficult the idea is for you, and I haven't made it any easier. I just couldn't bring myself to do it though, Arden. Not like that. I want our first time to be special," he said pleading.

What Sheila said soaked in. Looking up at him, I raised my ears. "You mean you didn't....?" I asked, the question incomplete. Confused Sheila just shook his head. Understanding dawned on him and he laughed. "You thought that I screwed you while you were drunk?" he asked, still laughing. Totally embarrassed, I nodded. "I assumed that's why you tossed the panties on my head. As a trophy," I said. Now completely out of control Sheila laughed so hard he was having trouble staying on the rock. The absurdity of the situation sank in and I joined him. "No...." he said, waiving a hand at me. "They were hanging on the door to the closet. They landed there after you kicked them off last night," he explained between laughs. Putting my face in my hands, my embarrassment now total and absolute. I had gotten upset over an imagined wrong.

At last, getting a grip on himself, Sheila patted me on the leg. "I've had to put up with so many jerks that thought the only way to have sex was to get a girl drunk. There's no way I could do that to you," he declared. Rubbing his hand along the inside of my thigh, Sheila gently stroked the fur. "I could never do something like that to you," he promised, quietly.

Feeling my body responding to his attentions, I felt the swirl of emotions as they bubbled up within me. All my hang-ups as a guy were there vying for my attention. I wasn't quite ready to try and give them the brush off. Snuggling up close to Sheila, I lifted his arm off my leg and over my shoulder, hugging it tight. Laying my head against him, I let out a sigh. "I'm sorry, hon. I'm still just not ready," I said quietly. Giving me a hug, Sheila lifted my muzzle and gave me another kiss. "That's all right. I think I can live la vida vergine for a bit longer," he said with a quiet chuckle.

As I closed my eyes, I felt sorry for Sheila. I'd been a total dick tease yesterday and then he managed to resist temptation of me pawing him last night. Now, I was again putting him off. "I don't know how you put up with me," I said quietly. Tickling me under my chin with his free hand, Sheila let out a small chuckle. "I seem to remember a certain bear putting up with a lot of crap from a certain vixen," he said, hugging me again.

I could have sat there forever, but my stomach objected. It seems a half of a mug of chicken broth wasn't enough to hold me for long. Letting out a low moan, I untangled myself from Sheila. Accepting a hand up, I brushed off my dress. It was comfortable enough considering I didn't have the layers I saw humans wearing, but it wasn't me. Or rather that vixen look I fell in love with. I'd have to see if Sheila could help me work with them for something a little more....exotic looking.

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Walking back to town, I gave my head a little scratch. Sheila had giggled me for going out with my fur a mess. That reminded me to explain that humans referred to head-fur as hair. Using a small strip of cloth he'd cut from my sash, Sheila had tied my hair back in a severe ponytail. It pulled on my scalp and made my head itch.

I noticed that although people still tended to stare, they weren't paying quite as much attention to me. Sheila wanted to go find a restaurant, but I insisted on returning to the room first. He had left his swords there. Not that I expected him to be able to defend himself, but they were something important to me. I didn't want them stolen.

As we stepped into the hotel, I was stunned by what I saw. The place was packed. Every table had people at it except one in the middle. Every head in the house looked our way as people began to furiously whisper amongst themselves. The innkeeper came over to us. "I'm sorry, but word of your companion has gotten around," he said, speaking to Sheila. "I'm afraid we've got people here from all over the area looking for a spectacle."

The guy sounded apologetic, but the empty table in the middle made me suspicious. "Gee, what a coincidence that there's one table left, and in the middle of the room, too," I commented sarcastically, glaring at the innkeeper. Taking a step towards him, I laid my ears back. "Don't give me any crap about having to save us a table either," I said with a slight snarl. "Next time you feel compelled to save my lord and me a table, make it the one in the corner, where I was sitting last night."

The innkeeper's eyes got wide with the realization that he'd made a very serious mistake. "Yes my lady. I'm sorry. It won't happen again," he stammered out.

Satisfied that I'd made my point, I stepped around the old man and headed for the stairs. It took all the effort I could scrape up to relax my ears and lift my tail. I had an audience and I didn't want to give a bad impression.

Reaching the room door, I unlocked it and walked in. Either Sheila had straightened up the place, or the old man's daughter had been in taking care of maid service. The honey bucket was empty and the bed had been made. Both of Sheila's swords were still on the table next to the bed, to my relief.

With a sigh, I walked over to the table and picked up the swords and cloth band. Returning to Sheila as he closed the door, I held them out. "Please, if you leave the room, wear these," I pleaded. Taking the cloth, Sheila began to wind the belt. "I don't even know how to use them. I'd be as likely to cut myself as I would anyone else," he said in way of an excuse. Watching to make sure that he got the swords threaded properly so they wouldn't twist or slide out, I thought of what to say. "I know, love, but it's part of the veneer. You're my lord and liege. You may not be a warrior, but you shouldn't be defenseless," I explained. Considering the predicament, I could see Sheila's point.

I spent a moment considering the situation. Sheila was right. With a shrug and a sigh, I removed the Katana from Sheila's belt and inserted it into mine. "Please promise me you'll carry the Tanto?" I asked. Smiling, Sheila looked relieved not to have to carry the big blade while nodding.

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We were interrupted by the sound of a knock at the door. Raising an eyebrow, I watched as Sheila opened the door. It was the serving girl from down stairs. "Pardon the intrusion, but would you like me to bring some food and drink up for you?" she asked politely. Sheila and I exchanged looks. I was just hungry and didn't care, but he didn't want to eat in the room. "Thank you, but we want to look around for a bit. We'll find a place to eat," Sheila explained. Smiling, the girl nodded. "If you like there's a very nice restaurant further in towards town, by the river docks. It's called Jeklom's. It's about a twenty minute walk, but I think you'll find the food well worth the trip, though it is very expensive," she informed us. Seeing that I didn't care, Sheila got detailed directions from the girl.

Passing through the commons area, I was once again reminded of my uniqueness. Although the room had fewer people in it than before, the reaction was almost identical when I came down. Keeping my tail high, I did my best imitation of Sheila's strut and walked out the door.

Once again out in front of the hotel, I took a good look at the town. At first glance it appeared to be a small town by a stream, but I realized that was an optical illusion. From the girl's description of the area, the Duke's great grandfather, upon receiving his fife, decided that he wanted to avoid the same problems that other central cities had. In response, he had laid down very specific rules about maintaining a large percentage of the forest to help break up the town. Apparently he despised the look of "stone cities" and preferred to keep a rural feel to his Dukedom.

Following the main road through this part of town, we found that it lead past a peninsula of forest that I thought was solid woods, but in fact was only a couple of hundred yards deep. The road led to a large intersection where it crossed four other roads in a five-way intersection. Watching as traffic filtered between the different sections of town on this side of the river, I was suddenly struck by the fact that I'd seen something like this before. Laughing at the vision, I clung to Sheila for support.

"All right. Care to let me in on what's so funny?" he asked. Waving my arm in a sweeping gesture, I gave a small bow. "Welcome to Disneyland. Please enjoy your stay." Realizing what I meant, Sheila looked around for a second and made the connection. Off in the distance, the castle that belonged to the Duke was visible, its flag tipped spires raised to the sun.

Laughing, Sheila took my arm, leading me to our lunch date at Jeklom's.

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You ain't just whistling Dixie.

Enjoying the walk, Sheila and I strolled along the road in the second township leading towards the restaurant. Coming to the second intersection, we made a turn towards the river, entering an area of with much higher quality buildings than we had been used to seeing. Now quite hungry, we picked up our pace looking for the restaurant. Spotting it on the other side of the street, we started to cross. About half way over, I saw something that made me freeze.

A line of five large feline-looking creatures, all carrying large loads of supplies on their backs, was marching in from the river area. Their long, sinuous form was highlighted by lesser-developed paws, which, though they had rudimentary fingers, they obviously didn't have dexterity someone like I would have. They had long gold colored fur with various odd striping and spot combinations. The ears were large and tufted at the end like a lynx would be. They all were also wearing large, black metal collars. Behind them was a human male dressed casually, carrying a clipboard and a whip.

Realizing I had stopped, Sheila turned and came back to me. Seeing the expression on my face, he turned and saw the same thing I did. "My god, Arden. Is that what I think it is?" he asked, incredulously. All I could do was nod as we watched them march by us.

As the man with the whip glanced over at me, he got a surprised look on his face. Seeing my expression and my death grip on the hilt of my Katana, he quickly passed us by, urging his charges on.

Now I understood some of why people were staring at me too hard. There were anthropomorphic animals in this reality, and they were slaves. It explained the flagrant abuse and outright snobbery that I had been face with. It chilled me to the bone.

Taking my arm, Sheila said, "Come on. Let's go eat." Still in a daze, I followed him, wondering just what kind of world he had wished us into. Reaching the door to the restaurant I regained some of my wits. Stepping away from Sheila, I opened the door before he could and held it, bowing as he went through. I was going to be a good little doggy. Following Sheila in, I almost forgot to pull my tail up close before the door closed.

Inside we saw a very plush foyer. It had a couple of comfortable looking couches and chairs. Beyond them, was a small podium for the maitre d' to greet guests. The man standing at the podium, for the life of me, had the word 'snob' written all over him. As Sheila approached, I took a place behind him and to the right.

Putting on a false smile, he greeted Sheila. "Welcome to Jeklom's. How may I help you this evening?" he asked. He didn't ask how many, just how he could help us. "I'd like a table for two if you please," Sheila informed him. Giving a weak smile, the waiter looked to see if there was anyone else. "You are expecting someone else?" he asked. Annoyed, Sheila frowned, "No. It's just the two of us."

Stepping forward, he spoke in a low voice. "I'm sorry, my lord, but we do not have the

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facilities to handle animals," he informed Sheila. Crossing his arms, Sheila gave the maitre d' a hard look. "And just what animal would you be referring to?" he asked. Looking distinctly uncomfortable, the maitre d' nodded to me. "You're... umm...what ever it is. We do not have facilities for it," he stated.

Uncrossing his arms, Sheila put his left arm around the maitre d' and herded him towards me. "Let me enlighten you, my good sir. This is Arden. She is not an animal, nor is she an 'it.' Do we understand each other?" he asked. Swallowing, the maitre d' now saw the swords that were previously eclipsed by Sheila's body. Steeling himself, the maitre d' stuck to his guns. "I'm sorry, my lord, but you don't seriously expect us to put a bowl of kibble in front of it while others are trying to eat, do you?" he asked incredulously.

Unable to take it any more, I stepped forward so I was within his discomfort zone. "Let's get something straight. I'm no dog and I don't eat kibble. I would also appreciate it if you would quit talking like I'm some kind of dumb animal," I stated frankly. A look of amazement crossed his face. Before he could say anything, we were interrupted as the door opened.

Turning, we saw a foppish young male, about seventeen or so in age, come in flanked by a couple of professional looking gents wearing some sort of uniform. He had curly blond hair that flowed down to below his shoulders, bright green eyes and a small, cleft chin. He was dressed in very fancy clothing, which looked painfully expensive. "What's going on here?" he demanded, spotting us.

Slipping from Sheila's grasp, the maitre d' scooted over to the young man. Bowing deep, he practically groveled. "My lord. This man wishes to take this...thing, in with him. I however, have explained such is not allowed," he complained to the young man. Stepping forward, the young man faced Sheila. "Are you daft man? This is a reputable establishment. They don't allow animals in here," he said. Looking at me, he gave me the once over. "And what's it doing with those weapons? Why doesn't it have a collar?" he asked backing up.

Seeing his reaction, the two guards moved around him, imposing themselves between the young man and me. "He is my lord and liege. I have sworn my life to his service. I am armed because I am his guard," I stated flatly, explaining away his questions. Surprise showed on the young mans face as I spoke. It confirmed what I had suspected. None of the other creatures were capable of speech, or if so it must be rudimentary.

Getting over the shock, the young man resumed his tirade. "I don't care. Get it out of here. You too. Their kind isn't allowed in here, even if it is some kind of freak," he stated. Both of the bodyguards got a hard look on their faces, hands on the hilt of their sword. I felt Sheila put a hand on my shoulder. "Relax," he said. "We were just leaving anyway."

Keeping my distance from the two guards, I kept my hand at the ready on the Katana should they try anything. Reaching the door, I opened it with my backside, holding it for Sheila, never removing my gaze from either of the armed men. Once Sheila was through the door I closed it hard.

Turning, I stormed away from the restaurant. "Animal! Put me in a collar! I should have

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guttled the little twit!" I complained to Sheila. Paying attention to our surroundings, I now saw more of the large cats working in the backs of the buildings and in the alleyways between them. They were doing the menial work that people would normally do. All wore a large, black metal collar.

Reaching the edge of the high rent district, I slowed to a stop. Sheila, right behind me, placing his hand on my shoulder as I fought down the anger. "What have we gotten ourselves into Sheila?" I asked. "I don't know, love," I heard him respond.

Sighing, I forced my self to relax and adopt a neutral air about myself. Turning to Sheila, I gave a small bow. "After you, my lord," I said, waving back towards the hotel. I saw Sheila about to object, but he saw the hard, emotionless look in my eyes and changed his mind. Nodding without speaking, Sheila walked past me and didn't look back, maintaining the façade that we had been forced to adopt.

Passing through the intermediate zone of buildings that would lead us to the intersection our hotel was near, Sheila spotted a restaurant. Against my objections, he insisted on trying. Entering through the front door, we saw an open commons area not unlike the hotel. Seeing nobody in a rush to seat us, Sheila walked over to a table and sat down, gesturing for me to take a chair besides him, back to the wall.

After sitting down, a young woman spotted us and walked over. Giving me a worried look she approached Sheila. "Beg your pardon, sir, but is she...ummm...house broken?" the girl asked. Sheila glanced at me, and then looked back at the waitress. "You'll have no problem with her. Just please bring us two mugs of ale and two of whatever you served for lunch, please," Sheila responded. The waitress gave a sheepish smile and ran off.

"Why didn't you just wait till we got back to the hotel?" I asked. Sheila looked down and shrugged. "I don't know," he admitted, "Maybe I was just trying to see if there was anyone in this town with a sense of decency." Shaking my head, I knew it was futile. "I'm just an animal to them. If Junip hadn't warned the innkeeper about me then he would have done the same thing. I suppose I'll just have to stay in the room until we figure out what we're here for," I said, dejected. "No," Sheila said forcefully. "I don't accept that. You're not some animal and I'm not going to have you treated like one."

We paused our conversation as the waitress appeared. Placing down the two platters of food, I looked at the crap she had put on my platter, a bowl of ale besides it. "Hey!" I barked at the woman. "What's this crap?" I asked, pushing the food away. "He asked for two lunches and two ales. He said nothing about floor sweepings." Surprised the waitress shakily picked up the plate and bow, rushing off to the kitchen. Pissed at what had happened, I sat, fuming.

Watching as the young woman returned with a platter and a proper mug, I never moved as she placed them in front of me. Glancing down, I saw that she had taken the precaution of putting flatware with the food. "Thank you." I stated with false pleasantries. With that, the woman retreated from the table to the safety of the kitchen.

Now, no longer really hungry, I ate the food only because I needed it. It was pathetic, bland tasteless and chewy. Its only redeeming feature was that it didn't make me want to

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puke. Finishing the meal relatively quick, I tossed off the last of the ale. Pushing the empty platter away, I waited for Sheila to finish his meal.

Finished, Sheila looked around for the waitress who was nowhere to be seen. Shoving his seat back nosily, he took a couple of odd coins from his pocket and tossed them on the table, then lead the way out of the restaurant.

Reaching the front of the hotel, I steeled myself for the spectacle inside. As we entered, I saw there were a fair number of folk in the commons, but not nearly as many as there were for lunch. Ignoring them, we headed upstairs to the room, locking ourselves safely inside.

Walking over to the bed, I flopped face down on it, burying my head under a pillow in a vain attempt to retreat from reality.

I was kneeling in the middle of the road, my muscles racked with pain. Rain poured down around me, soaking me to the bone. The sound of tires sliding on pavement caught my attention. Turning my head, I saw the lights of the car as it spun out of control. Frozen in place I watched as the passenger door swung towards me, sending me flying through the air. Landing hard on the slick pavement, I bounced and rolled coming to rest at the bottom of the ditch.

Laying there I saw snatches of clouds as lightening flashed, illuminating the night in a flickering dance of electricity. I saw Sheila standing over me, those beautiful eyes staring at me with fear and concern.

There were the paramedics, checking my vital signs, asking me questions. It was all a fog, my mind neither acknowledging nor responding to my surroundings. I was a blank slate, sights and sounds etched and buried in my memory, conscious though absent.

The ride in the ambulance a new lesson in pain as the jolting of the vehicle caused the broken bone in my leg to rub sending fire through my body.

The emergency room, with the doctors and nurses scurrying around, poking, probing and injecting me. Machines measuring the beat of my life. Bags of fluids dripping their sustaining liquids into my body. The buzz of an X-Ray as they checked to see what bones were broken.

The sterile lights of the operating room, its medicinal smell rasping across my senses as masked specters danced around me. The sight of a cup with hoses being lowered over my muzzle bringing darkness and oblivion.

Breath pressed into my body, I am again awake, suspended between life and death. Trapped within a body I do not control, existing without being. The recovery room frames my existence, ventilator breathing for me. The gagging sensation of the tube as it is drawn from my throat by a doctor. Questions asked go unanswered as I float within my body, unable to drift free.

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The vision of a panther, dark and sinister talking to those around me. He lifts my hand, examining the mark. I feel a jolt as a spark leaps from the wound into his hand. Staggering, he regains his balance, shaking his head at the effect. Paw held to head, he stumbles away into the hands of a doctor, confusion and pain etched on his face. Regaining his composure, he looks back at me, his eyes carved by hatred into a threatening glare. Turning, he flees the room, the breath of the dragon trailing behind him in his wake.

The sound of a knock at the door startled me, waking me. Panting, I sat up. The memory of the accident and what followed were new to me. I hadn't remembered much of anything afterwards. I most certainly didn't remember Khansman visiting me in the hospital. The feel and smell of the dragon's breath about him after touching the mark disturbed me. The way he looked at me with total hatred. I now had an idea why he had tried to kill me. I now understood what had happened.

A knock at the door got my attention. Sheila was nowhere to be found. Standing, I walked over to the door. Opening it I saw Junip. She looked repulsively happy. I was tempted to close the door on her, but I was still too much of a gentleman...or maybe a lady to do that. Giving a false smile, I invited her in.

"I have the most wonderful news," she said, bubbling with enthusiasm. "I talked to the Duchess this afternoon and showed her the belt from your dress." "Kimono," I corrected her. Seeing her confusion, I smiled, "It's called a kimono where I come from." Nodding she repeated the odd name several times.

"Anyway," she continued, "The Duchess wishes for you and your lord to come the day after tomorrow for an audience. She was most intrigued when I told her of you and wishes to meet you and your lord. We are scheduled for late afternoon so I will meet you and your lord here tomorrow after the noon meal if that is acceptable." Thinking about it, it made sense. It would take an hour or so to walk there, though I wondered why we weren't taking a wagon or something. Somehow I didn't think they had yellow cabs here.

"That sounds fine. I will let my lord know when he returns. It should be a most memorable experience for both of us." I said, realizing that she truly was acting in my best interests. Sheila was right, there were a few decent people here.

Leaning forward, she spoke in a conspiratorial tone. "That's not the best part. The Duke and Duchess are scheduled to leave for the Imperial Capital City in four days. If they are impressed with you and your lord, there is a good chance they will invite you along," she said, cheering with her hands. "Since none of your people has ever been seen around here before, this will make you the first of your people to greet the Emperor. It will be a great honor for you and your lord. It will also bring great favor on the Duke and Duchess."

So I was a trophy after all. The Duke and Duchess would use me as a new carnival exhibit for the Emperor. I could tell that Junip honestly thought that she was doing the best thing she could for us. I only hoped that it was.

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Sitting by the window, I watched the traffic as it went about its business, the milling of people as they passed by, going on with their life. At least they had lives. Two lovers meeting on a corner, exchange an embrace and a kiss, walking away hand in hand. A young woman, two small children in tow, holding their hands, going about their daily business.

I sat there, my arms crossed on the windowsill, muzzle resting on them. I thought about the past with all the things I had done. The time with my family, now forever lost to me. I wondered how my mother took my disappearance so soon after the loss of my father. My brothers, my cousins and my nieces, they were all lost to me now.

I thought about my time with Sheila. It was some of the best times of my life and the worst. Even in the arms of my love my life was a disaster. The worst part was that it had destroyed those around me. Sheila's fiancé had paid the ultimate price for my love of Sheila. Though I may have avenged him by killing those who had murdered him, it made no difference in the scheme of things.

That brought me to killing and death. It followed me everywhere. My love of the martial arts when I was in a kid, visions of Bruce Lee kicking bad guys' asses on the screen fueled the fire. The SDF when they recruited me because of my talents. All those years on my grandfather's farm out in the middle of nowhere. Nothing to do but target practice with his rifles, always pushing for a more difficult shot to break the boredom. All the people I had killed without a regret for some stupid ideal of national security. It wasn't even my native country. It was a foreign land full of people, none of whom truly accepted me because I was gaijin. Even coming back to the states hadn't helped. Time and again people had forced me to kill, sometimes in defense, others in executions to rid society of another rabid animal. How could I walk the path of the healer with so much blood on my hands?

Now, sitting here, watching life as it strolled by, I became aware of the fact that death and killing would be inevitable for me again. Some time soon, someone would decide that I was just another animal, wild and dangerous. They would try to kill me and I would be forced to take a life again.

To make it all the worse, I was isolated from the spirit realm. No matter how hard I tried to breach the barrier between worlds, it was closed to me. They had abandoned me when I needed guidance the most. The really depressing part was that I had come to depend on them. It was a crutch that I never thought I would have adopted.

Sitting in my self-imposed prison, I watched life as it passed me by.

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Don't tell me they have dogcatchers here.

It was getting dark. Sheila still wasn't back and I was beginning to get worried. He had left while I slept, not leaving any word as to where he was going. How was I supposed to protect him when he runs off?

As I watched the people in the street, I kept a sharp eye out for Sheila. I would practically have sold my soul for the dragon's sight, but that was denied me. A banging on the door interrupted my observation.

I opened the door and saw it was Fish carrying a platter of food and a huge mug of ale. "Hi, Miss Arden," he said cheerfully. "I got Mickey to let me bring your dinner up to you." Happy to see the little runt, I opened the door wide for him. Struggling with the platter, he carried it over to the table and carefully slid it on, making sure not to slop the drink. Closing the door, I walked over and watched him unload the tray.

"How in the world did you carry that up those stairs?" I asked, amazed at the feat. Smiling he finished unloading the tray. "I'm a big boy. I can do stuff like this when I put my mind to it," he said proudly. As I sat down at the table, I saw that there was a large steak that had been grilled with some mixed vegetables on the side, and a small mincemeat-looking pie was set to the side. The huge mug of ale had to hold a quart.

"Good lord, Fish! Think you got a big enough mug?" I asked laughing. Taking the chair opposite of me, he laughed. "I didn't want you to have to run down stairs for refills," he answered. This kid definitely was restoring my faith in humanity. Smiling at him, I spoke very softly, "Thank you Tommy, that's a very nice thing for you to do." He shrugged with a sheepish look. "After what my step mom did..." he let the rest trail off.

Reminded of the hag, my ears wilted. Seeing this Fish aimed for a quick recovery. "Hey, you better eat that steak," he said, changing the subject. Cutting a chunk off it, I popped it in my mouth and chewed. It was nice and tender, not to mention rare. A dreamy smile spread across my face. "This is wonderful, Fish. I can't believe they're serving this for dinner," I told him, savoring the flavor. He just smiled and laughed. I took another bite, watching him and chewing. "What aren't you telling me?" I asked. Now hardly able to contain himself, he leaned forward. "It's not what they're serving for dinner. It's what my step mom was cooking for herself."

Laughing at what he told me, I almost choked on the meat in my mouth. "Aren't you afraid of what she's going to do to you when she finds out?" I asked. He got an absolutely disgusted look on his face. "Not in the least. She's a total bitch and I hate her," he said vehemently. Struck by the violence of his words, I realized just how much the term bitch hurt me. I had tried to claim it for my own, but that didn't make it any less hurtful.

"You realize that technically I'm a bitch too?" I quietly asked. I watched his expression changed as what I said sank in, then stood and walked over by the window. Looking down, I strained against the last twilight of the evening, looking for Sheila. "I'm not even a person here. I'm just an animal. A freak that can talk." As I sat on the windowsill, I

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looked at him. He was almost crying. "You've got to be careful what you say, Fish. She may be your step mom. She may even be a total and complete bitch. The fact is, your words can hurt more than just her," I told him.

He hung his head and let out a little sniff. "I'm sorry, Miss Arden. I didn't mean to hurt you," he said contritely. I hopped off the windowsill and walked over to squat down in front of him. With my paw, I reached out and wiped a tear from his face. "Don't cry, Tom. It's all right. I just wanted you to be aware of what you were saying and how it made me feel," I explained. "You're the only friend I have here, Fish. I don't ever want to risk losing you. I've already lost too many friends." As he looked up at me, he gave a brave smile.

"You know, Tom, you're the only person I've ever let pet my tail," I stated solemnly. His eyes got a little wide at this. "What about Vic?" he asked. Smiling, I shook my head. "He's never petted my tail," I told him honestly. Of course, the poor kid didn't know I'd only had this body for two days, but that was just a technicality.

"But I thought that you and Vic were... you know, lovers," he said, curious. Chuckling, I gave his nose a little lick as I stood up. I sat back down in front of my steak and cut off another piece as I thought about his question. "I love him with all my heart, Tom," I confessed, "but we're not lovers, not yet." As I paused to chew the steak, I thought about what I wanted to tell this kid. "I wasn't always like this," I said, "I used to be human like Vic. I'm this way because of a curse. Until...until I'm human again...if I'm ever human again...I just don't know."

"Wow," Fish said, "A curse! Was it an evil sorcerer or something?" With a chuckle, I cut another piece of stake and popped it into my mouth. "Another time maybe...I think that's enough about me for a while," I said with a smile.

Fish watched me eat for a little bit. When I had almost finished my steak he asked, "Arden, what's it like to be someone's vassal?" Good question. We were roll playing. "On my world, I would be called a Samurai, a warrior who serves a liege lord without question to the death. If Vic were to tell me to fall on my sword tomorrow, I would do it. I live and die at his command. He is my reason for living. Without him I would become Ronin. I would be a warrior who is disgraced and without purpose." I could see him soaking this up. "Of course, in other places being a vassal is different. You still pledge yourself to someone's service, but they may not demand your life. Some do not even demand absolute obedience." I could see him soaking up everything I said. "Why do you ask, Fish?"

He just sat there, looking down at his hands and shrugged. "Come on, Fish, I answered your questions. Don't I deserve an answer?" I asked. Reluctantly looking up at me, he gave a little nod, and then hung his head again. "It's like this. All I got for family is my step mom and her relatives, and they don't really like me. I'm just what was left over after my dad died," he said dejectedly. I leaned back in my chair and took a drink of the ale. "Your step mom sounded like she was worried about you yesterday," I observed. Barking out a laugh of sarcasm, he shook his head. "No, she was just mad that I ignored her. She's always bossing me around, giving orders. She never asks polite, like she does with my

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stepsister or uncle."

He looked up at me with those wide, pleading eyes. "When you go Arden, will you take me with you? Let me be your vassal?" I had to smile. He was such a sweet kid. Before I could answer, he continued. "Don't make up your mind right now. Just agree to think about it, all right?" he begged. He was so damned eager. I knew how he felt. He felt trapped and saw me as a way out. Nodding, I agreed. "All right, I'll think about it."

Finished with the meat pie, I piled up the dishes and pushed them away. "That was wonderful. Please thank your step mom for me," I said with a laugh. Laughing with me he leaned back in the chair. "No thank you. Why do you think I'm hiding out in here?" he queried me.

After a couple of hours sitting around chatting with Fish, I was really getting worried about Sheila. I equipped just the Wakazashi, and headed down stairs to the bar. He was probably chumming around in there. I looked first in the commons first and saw a few people still scattered around, chatting, but no Sheila. Turning into the bar, sure enough, there sat Sheila down at the end. The bartender saw the look on my face and asked, "Hard or soft?" I remembered what happened last time I got drunk and decided to take it easy. "Make it soft. Ale will be fine," I replied. Mug in hand, I tried to pay the barkeep. He refused saying I owed nothing.

I took a look around and saw that there were a fair number of people in the room. A seven-string guitar was leaning against the stool on the stage. Still unhappy with Sheila I walked over to where he was busy chatting with an old man. I saw him look up as I approached and smile. "Hey Arden. How you feeling?" he asked, cheerfully. With a neutral expression, I bowed to him. "I am well my lord. Is there anything that you require of me right now my lord?" I asked. Bewilderment fluttered across Sheila's face. "No. I'm fine, thank you, Arden," he replied. "Very well my lord. Since you have no further need of me..." I said, trailing off. After giving a small bow, I turned and walked to an empty table near the wall where I could see the stage clearly.

I became aware of someone sitting down beside me as I took a sip of my ale. "All right, what did I do now?" Sheila asked wearily. "Do you realize that I've been going out of my mind, upstairs, in that cage, worried about you? You were gone when I woke up and that was at least six hours ago," I complained. "Hey, you didn't have to hang out in the room. There was nothing stopping you from coming down and socializing," he stated flatly. Sitting up, I smiled and batted my eyelashes, holding my paws in front of me like a dog. "So all the people can watch the trained doggy?" I asked sarcastically. Glaring at me, Sheila became angry. "Knock it off. Quit wallowing in self pity and accept the fact that some folk around here don't see you that way," he said in an angry voice.

Relaxing, I picked up the mug and took a drink while counting heads. Of the twenty-three people, eighteen were watching me. Waving with my mug, I swept the room. "Eighteen out of twenty three people in here disagree with you," I said, imitating a commercial. Gazing around the room, Sheila saw what I was talking about. "Ok, so

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they're staring at you," he conceded. Leaning forward, he got a very conspiratorial tone. "I hate to break it to yah, babe, but even if we were back in my home world, people would still be staring at you," he said smiling.

After thinking about for a second it I nodded, but wasn't willing to surrender the fight. "That still doesn't explain where you've been all day," I stated. With a sigh, Sheila shook his head and spoke, "I've been doing some research on those cats. Apparently they were discovered about thirty or so years ago on a continent that's a fair trip from here. They do have rudimentary speech of sorts and can understand commands, but don't speak English." Taking a deep drink, he set the mug down and shook his head. "Of course, the collars are what we thought. They are slaves," he stated flatly.

Looking up at him, I pleaded with my eyes. "Let's get out of here." I said agitated, "Let's take off, tonight." With a shake of his head, Sheila disagreed. "We can't leave yet. We're supposed to see the Duke and Duchess, day after tomorrow. Until Junip gives us the money for the clothes, we need to stay," He explained. I was confused. How had he known about the meeting? Then it occurred to me that he must have run into Junip.

"Please Sheila," I said as his head snapped up from the drink, "I've got a very bad feeling about this. I don't want to stay. Something bad is going to happen." He put his hand on my paw and gave it a squeeze. "Don't worry. Everything is going to be all right. You're just feeling nervous because you're out of place...and other reasons," He said smiling. I thought about it, I could see what he meant. I was definitely feeling a heavy dose of angst. It didn't make things any easier thought. I had learned to trust my intuition for trouble and it was barking at me.

I woke up in the morning with the comfortable feeling of Sheila as he spooned with me in the bed, his arm hugging me as he slept. Sheila had been incredibly patient with me. Last night, he had just snuggled up to me and gone to sleep. It was a relief and frustrating at the same time. I decided I was going to spend some time today and work on my hang-ups. I was going to work towards making tonight the most memorable night for Sheila. I knew for a fact it would be one for me.

Carefully slipping out from under his arm, I snuck quietly over to the wardrobe. Slowly opening it to avoid a squeak, I took out a dress. This one had split sides and would show off my legs. Slipping it on, I tied off the straps. Looking down, I realized that it reminded me of a very wide and long loincloth that was split from just below the hips down. I wrapped the cloth I was using for a sword belt, and then tucked the Katana and Wakazashi into it. Retying off my hair in a ponytail, I headed down stairs, feeling refreshed.

At the bottom of the stairs, I spotted Fish bussing tables. I returned to my preferred table and plopping down in a chair, I greeted him as he came over. "You want some breakfast, Miss Arden?" he asked. I got a very serious look on my face and leaned close. "Please don't call me Miss Arden. It's just Arden, OK?" I asked. With a smile he nodded. He said that for breakfast there were mostly cold meats, breads, jams and some pastries. Hungry,

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I had him bring me a plate of mixed meats and some ale. I leaned back in my chair and scanned the room seeing only a few folk there. The ones that were paying attention smiled and nodded to me. Smiling back, I returned the nod. I guess they weren't all that bad.

After Fish delivered my food, I sorted through it and found cured ham, roast beef and some summer sausage. There was a lot more food than I could eat. Hungry I dug in and ate a little bit of each type of meat, managing to consume about a third of the platter before starting to feel full. Content, I sat back and sipped my ale.

After a little bit, Fish came around. "All done?" he asked. I nodded in agreement and gestured for him to sit. "Have a seat, finish it off if you want," I invited. After glancing back to the kitchen, he shook his head. "I'm not allowed to eat until I'm done with the breakfast chores," he said dejectedly. I used my paw to push him gently into the chair and then shoved the platter over. "Don't worry about your mom. If she objects, I'll take care of it," I stated.

Sure enough after about five minutes, the little woman came out. "Thomas Livingston Brant! What do you think you're doing?" she asked, stomping over. Standing up, I blocked her path. "He's eating," I said simply. Surprised, she took a step back from me. I could see she was torn between arguing with me and berating her stepson. Decision made, she planted herself firmly and looked up at me. "He's got chores. He's old enough he needs to earn his keep," she stated. Annoyed, I leaned forward and got right in her face. "He's earning his keep. I've hired him as a guide," I informed her. Startled at my tone of voice, she took a couple of steps backwards. "That's right. I'm paying him to act as my guide while I'm here," I restated.

After regaining her composure, she looked me over again. "And just how much are you supposedly paying him?" she inquired. I thought about it as I sat back down. "We're going to be in town for a few more days. We've negotiated a price of one gold Imperial for four days of his *undivided* service." Her eyes blinked at this, causing me to smile. "And just where is this gold Imperial you've agreed to pay?" she asked. Rolling my eyes, I reached into my blouse and removed a coin from the bag. While holding it up, I snatched it away as she reached for it. "Thomas gets the money," I stated, handing it to him.

He smiled from ear to ear, as he looked at the coin. I doubt he had ever held one before. "Thomas," his stepmother said, getting his attention. "Give me the coin boy," she directed. Reluctantly, Fish got up and handed her the coin. Rubbing it in her hand, his stepmother carried it greedily back to the kitchen.

Depressed, Fish walked back over to the chair and plopped down in it. "Oh well, it was nice while it lasted," he said most philosophically. I dug out another Imperial. "Hey Fish," I said, getting his attention. With my thumb, I flicked the coin in the air, watching as he caught it. He looked at the coin and then gave me a confused look. "What's this for, Arden?" he asked. "Because I believe that *you* deserve the money," I explained. He held the coin for a long minute, and then put it on the table in front of me. "I can't take it," he said, "It wouldn't be right. You've paid my step mom. You shouldn't have to pay a second

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time."

As I watched him, I realized that I really liked this kid. Most any other kid in his place would have snatched the money. He returned it because he felt it was wrong to accept. That was rare, especially for someone his age. With a smiling, I pushed the coin back. "Pick it up," I instructed him, "You just earned it." He gave me a curious look and shook his head. "You just passed your first test. I wouldn't want a squire that I couldn't trust. Take the coin," I again instructed. I could see he didn't quite trust what I was saying, but didn't want to refuse me. With a small smile, he picked up the coin and placed it in his pocket.

I sat at the table for a bit longer and finished off my ale while he ate. After Fish declared himself full, I made him leave the dishes for his stepsister. He was working for me now and not the hotel. After we walked out side, I took a deep breath, enjoying the early morning air. I thought about what I wanted to do and decided I needed a morning workout. Fish showed me a short cut that lead to an open area outside of town. It was in the buffer area between the commercial buildings and the woods. After surveying the area to ensure there was enough room, I declared it suitable for my exercises.

Worried that the dress may cause a problem, I took the ends and tucked them under my belt. I then spent the next few minutes working on stretching my muscles, trying to loosen them up. Sheila's body was pretty limber to begin with, but it didn't hurt to get things warmed up first.

Standing stiffly erect, I closed my eyes and spent a moment centering myself. Once I reached a neutral state, I drew the Katana and took up the starting pose in my exercise routine. Cautious, I started out with slow fluid movements and began to get the feel of this new body. I was having a real hard time dealing with both my tail and my breasts. Sheila was one buxom vixen and it hampered my movements, interfering as I crossed my arms over my chest. I wasn't used to having this kind of mass moving around, and in such a free manner. I now realized why every woman I'd ever sparred with always wore a bra and padding even if they normally went without.

About the third pass I had gotten the feel for my new body. I didn't find my stride being thrown off by swinging anatomy. I picked up the pace and started to work through a pass at full speed. I mentally smiled at Fish as his mouth dropped open. Mesmerized by the flashing steel as it whistled around my body, he stood frozen in awe while I danced in combat with a shadow.

The routine completed, I stopped, panting. Lifting the sword in a salute, I slapped it on my hand and sheathed it. As I stood there sucking wind, I was greeted by the sound of Fish's applause. "That was great! Can you show me how to do that?" he asked? I smiled and nodded. "Maybe tomorrow. We'll have to see. One step a time," I said between breaths. Sheila's old body was pretty athletic, but it wasn't conditioned for this. My left arm ached from the bruise I'd gotten two days ago and both arms felt like lead.

I took a few minutes to stretch again and then sat down in the grass. "Man, I'm out of shape," I declared. Fish plopped himself down in the grass opposite me. "Naw, you look

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great," he declared. Laughing, I shook my head. "That's not what I'm talking about. I need to work on my stamina. A warrior should never have gotten this winded this fast," I explained.

Smiling, Fish was about to say something when his expression changed, his face dropped. "Uh oh," he said. I stood up and turned to see six warriors escorting a large man. All wore uniforms with an insignia. "Who are they?" I asked "They're from the royal stables," he replied. I didn't like the sound of that.

Worried, I reached back over my neck, removing the amulet and the pouch, passing them to Fish. "Put these away," I directed, blocking their view of him with my body. We stood there and watched as the group approached, my combat senses screaming.

"That's close enough," I said when they were about fifteen feet away. Holding up a hand, the man in the lead stopped the group. The men spread out on either side of him forming a loose wedge. Their leader was a tall, thin man. Bald, the only hair on his face were the two caterpillar-like eyebrows on his face and a small goatee. With an earring in the right ear, he reminded me of Cipher from the Matrix, only tall. "What do you want?" I asked.

"I have been ordered to detain you. You are a dangerous, unlicensed animal. You have not been properly restrained and are in possession of lethal weapons in violation of Ducal decree," he stated. I simply shook my head. I knew something like this would happen. "I'm no animal. Your decree doesn't cover me," I stated. With a shake of his head, he waved to his men. "Take it," he ordered. Drawing the Katana, I looked for options. My best bet was going to be the woods.

Ordered to capture, the others started to draw swords. "Our orders are to bring it in alive. I'll break the man responsible if it dies," he ordered. That would give me some breathing room.

With my free paw, I pushed Fish away. "Get out of here, Fish," I ordered. As he hesitated, I growled, "Damn it, Fish, get the hell out of here. That's an order!" Torn for a second, Fish decided to obey me and fled the scene. As one of the men move to intercept him, I leapt forward in an attack posture causing the man to flinch away and give Fish room to get by. Now fearing for my freedom, I fled into the woods. I raced through the woods, cursing the branches as they grabbed at my fur and dress.

Reaching the other side, I turned towards the edge of town opening up my stride. I had gotten maybe twenty meters when I felt something wrap itself around my legs, causing me to stumble and fall. I landed hard and out of control. Scrapped and bruised, I rolled onto my back and looked down at my legs. There was a large set of bolos wrapped around my legs. Cursing my lack of a Tanto, I sliced the ropes with my Katana. On the third stroke the ropes parted allowing me to move again. I pulled my knees to my chest. I kicked up and out with all my strength, I used my arms to help push off and throw my body forward. Landing on my feet, I barely deflected a flat bladed blow from one of the guards. I squatted low and extended my leg while spinning. I swept his feet out from under my first attacker in time to deflect a second attacker. I backpedaled, realizing I was

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overmatched. I couldn't let them flank me.

As I parried his blows, I tried to find an opening to disarm him. Once I found his timing, I was about to break and run when I was struck from behind in the back. Pitching forward, I ran into a right cross from the guy I had been fighting, his pommel adding power to the blow. Stunned, I stumbled backwards, dropping the Katana. My legs tangled, I spun trying to catch my balance, instead receiving a heavy kick to my stomach, dropping me to the ground. For the next few minutes, I felt like a soccer ball as they proceeded to beat me, yelling at me.

I became aware of another voice driving them back. As I lay on the ground, I felt rough hands rolling me over onto my stomach. Removing the scabbard for my Katana and my Wakazashi, they began to cut the clothes off of me. Weakly fighting them, I was struck in the face and ordered not to resist. Using rough, hemp rope, they tied my hands and feet together, hogtying them behind me. I looked back towards the forest and saw Fish standing there, watching what was happening.

Someone grabbed the fur on my head and yanked back as they tied the cloth I had used as a belt around my muzzle for a gag. It would keep me from biting anyone. Lifting me up, they dumped me in the middle of a net that was tied to a pole. They hefted the pole onto their arms, carrying me away.

As I whimpered softly from the pain, I prayed for some miracle of deliverance.

Chapter 7

DISCLAIMER: The following chapter contains a *graphic* scene depicting a violent rape. As I have intentionally tried to avoid any explicit sexual content in the story, this will be an unfortunate diversion from my rule. I tried several different ways to convey Arden's experience in an "off camera" mode, but was unable to successfully show the brutality that she had to endure. This scene is NOT in any way intended to be a yiffy/bondage item. Anyone who feels aroused by it may feel free to remove themselves from the gene pool by any convenient method available. It does, however, accomplish a few things. It set's the tone for slavery, the attitude towards non-humans in this world and Arden's actions in the next chapter.

As always, if you find the material objectionable, please feel free to skip this chapter. Nobody is forcing you to read this. (I hope)

Chapter 7

I tell ya', she was just asking for it!

Hanging in a net suspended below a pole, I am carried through town towards the Duke's castle. All around me I see people milling about their business, staring as the animal is carried by. As we get closer to the castle, the houses become more lavish and expensive. With wealth brings more of the cats. As I am carried past them, they pause and stare at me, knowing what I am facing. They, too, had been taken like this. With the crack of a whip, they return to their work.

As we came to the outer walls of the castle, I hear the bald man conversing with the guards. Their comments about me are crude and lecherous. I fear for more than just my freedom.

After carrying me into the courtyard, they veer off from the main path towards the stables. I see a large multi story building, barred windows peering to the outside. Within, there are dozens of the cats, chained together, being led about for certain purposes. Any sign of rebellion or misdeed is immediately punished by a taste of the lash. I cringe, ears laid back against my skull, whimpering with each crack.

They turn a corner, hauling me down a wide stairway leading underground. As we enter a dark area, I am reminded of medieval dungeons. They dump me roughly on the floor and unwrap the net from around me. Hogtied with my hands and legs behind my back, I'm unable to do more than squirm as their hands roam over me, exploring and probing my body. With my snout tied shut, I have no recourse.

"She's a lot livelier then those damn cats," I hear a voice say. "Yah, and will ya' look at the tits on it, too?" another one asks, roughly handling my breasts. "Aye, this is a distraction I think we can all enjoy," comes a third voice. "Remove your hands," I hear the bald man say. "She's reserved for his highness, and not for the likes of you."

The bald man giving the orders directs them to place me in irons and a proper muzzle. One of the hands refers to him as the stable master. Suddenly released from the ropes holding me, it is all I can do to move my arms and legs. Grasped by strong hands, I'm lifted and dragged over near a forge. Held down, they proceed to hobble me by placing heavy iron cuffs on my hands and legs. A small length of chain, only a foot or so long spans the ankles and wrists, with a longer one of about two and a half feet in length connecting them vertically. Lastly is a large black collar. Swooning because of the heat radiating from the forge, I pant, trying to cool my body as I am again held down against the anvil. With each bang of the hammer, I jerk as they drive the rivet into the metal, sealing the collar.

Unseen hands grab my hair, pulling my head back so that the smith can get a good look at my face. I am held there while he fashions thin rods of metal into a serviceable muzzle for me. Fitting it to my head, they use a small lock to connect it to the collar. There is no way I can remove it.

Ordered to my feet, I manage to stand, but am hunched over by the lengths of chain.

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Shuffling in the direction ordered, I feel the stroke of a lash on my back, the pain driving me to the floor. I am not moving fast enough for my captor. I need to learn discipline.

Again ordered to stand, I shuffle as fast as possible. Lead to a cell, I am forced to pull open the door. Kicked from behind as I stand in the doorway, I am sent sprawling inside the cell. The door slams shut behind me, locking me within a small room that was maybe six foot by four foot in size. The only light was what trickled in through the small slit in the door. In one corner is a filthy bucket of water, in the other a bucket for waste, which hasn't been emptied recently.

I curse the bear and the dragon for abandoning me as I curl into a ball, swearing that if I get out of this I will hunt them down and kill them for it.

Warned by the unlocking of the door, I try to shield my eyes as the light pours in. "There you go, your highness," I heard the stable master say. I look at the two men standing in the doorway, the small, foppish boy with the blond hair that harried us at the restaurant stands beside the stable master. "Excellent. It's just as I remembered, too. Take it to a suitable room and prepare it," he orders before walking away.

The stable master cracks a whip over my head and orders me out of the room. I climb unsteadily to my feet, and shuffle quickly outside. Lead down another corridor, I am forced to climb back up stairs. These are different. They are narrower, and set off behind a door for privacy. Having difficulty spanning the steps because of the chains, I am given another taste of the lash for not moving fast enough. Now on all four paws, I leverage and hop up the steps for speed.

Reaching the top, I roll out of the stairwell and onto the floor, exhausted. Panting, I receive a kick to the ribs and am ordered to get up again. I again climb painfully to my feet and manage to walk in the ordered direction reaching a large wooden door. He shoves me into the room. I see it is a bedchamber.

"No!" I declare, turning to glare at the stable master. Smacking me in the head with the hilt of the whip, he drives me to the floor. "Shut up, bitch! You'll do as his highness says or you'll taste the lash," he informs me.

He grabs my hair and drags me across the floor to a corner where there are numerous types of restraints. With a small key, he removes the chain running vertically between my ankles and hands. Frantic, I try to break away from his grip. I am again struck from behind. The stable master pulls my hands up under my chin, using the lock to attach it to a ring there. He then unlocks the chain between my ankles, allowing me to extend my legs fully at last.

Now finally able to stand up at my full height, I am lead over by the bed, his whip wrapped around my neck as a leash, choking me, and ordered to kneel again. Here I am forced to wait. After about ten minutes, the door opens. The young man walks into the room. I can see from his pants that he is obviously aroused. "Isn't she a beauty?" he asked the stable master. "Aye, your highness, quite a find."

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The young man walks over and reaches down towards me. "Don't touch me!" I bark out in a low, threatening voice. The stable master smacks me from behind. "Say another word, bitch, and I'll cut your tongue out," he threatens. "No-no-no-no," the young man says, "Let it speak. It makes it all the more desirable."

Again reaching down, he grabs my hair, drawing my head back. "Please me well, and I won't have your master killed. Disappoint me, and I'll make you watch as he's drawn and quartered," he says almost gleefully. If I resist him, he will kill Sheila. Defeated, I close my eyes and give a small sob. "All right," I growl between clenched teeth.

He lets go of my head and orders me to stand. Rising before him, I stand unprotected. My hands locked to the collar around my neck, I have no privacy.

Gently he reaches out with his hands, stroking my breasts. "Now there's a treat," he mumbles, "You won't find these on any of those cats, eh Marduke?" he observes. "Aye, my lord, quite a find on any female," the stable master responds with a laugh. As he continues to explore my body, I feel a sense of betrayal as my body begins to respond to his touch. Trying to center myself, I cannot control my body, my heart pounding, as it becomes aroused.

His hands reaching my groin, I feel the shock, gasping as I am violated. "Ah, you see, Marduke? The bitch is wet," he observes. He stands up, orders me to turn around and climb on the bed. I comply and climb onto the bed. As I begin to lie down I am hauled to my knees again as he grabs my tail. Roughly forcing my legs apart, he positions himself behind me. My head buried in the pillows, I am unable to support my body with my hands. If it weren't for my tail, I would be exposed.

"Damn it bitch! Move the tail or I'll have him cut it off," he says, smacking me. I force myself to remember Sheila's life hangs in the balance and manage to lift my tail. The shock of his assault caused me to cry out in pain. The horror of the experience is multiplied as he continues his abuse by the growing feeling within me as I approach orgasm. Cursing the dragon, my mind explodes in a mixture of pain, ecstasy, horror and revulsion.

Through with me, he shoves me roughly away from him and sits on the bed. "Damn, Marduke. That was good. I think I'm going to enjoy having this one around," he declares with a laugh. They aren't paying attention to me. I reposition my body slowly while they talk. If I'm lucky, I'll be able to get at least one good kick into Marduke before he can do anything about it.

As the young man stands to leave, I make my move. By rolling off the bed, I come upright. Marduke's eyes fly open seeing this. Taking a step forward I see him bringing the whip around. I would be too close for it to work and he knows it. With my right leg, I lash out, kicking his whip hand, disarming him. I hop from foot to foot as I continue to spin. Now using the other leg, lifted high as I bent forward, I heel-kick him in the head. It may not have had the power I wanted behind it, but it dropped the large man nonetheless.

I turn towards my rapist and leap towards him, grabbing him with my paws, dragging him to the ground. Head butting him, I watched as his skull bounced off the floor. Unable

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to rip his throat out with my fangs, I scoot forward on him, leaning down, I wrap my paws around his throat, choking the air from his lungs. He gags and tries to pry my hands from this throat, but is unable to budge them. Desperate, he began to hit me, but with each blow, his strength fades. Just as he is about to lose consciousness, I am struck from behind, causing me to lose my grip.

Hauled off of the young man, I am slammed against the wall. Stunned, I fall back, turning as I fall. I try to break my fall, but fail, landing hard. I feel the wind explode from me as I hit. A boot to my ribs lifts me from the floor and throws me a couple of feet away. I land on my back, hard. Marduke picks up his whip, a murderous rage in his eyes.

Rolling away from him, I try to dodge the lash as it strokes across my back, parting fur and skin to draw blood. I scream with the pain and try to get to my feet again, but am driven back down by another lash. The pain in my body grows with each strike as he relentlessly flays the fur and skin from my body.

"Stop!" I hear the young man shout. Pausing in his task, Marduke walks over and helps my assaulter up. "No, don't kill it. Give it to the stable hands," he orders. "And when they're done with it, give it to the cats," he spits out, vehemently.

The young man walks unsteadily over to me. Lashing out with his foot, I feel some ribs crack with the impact. Again the boot comes, this time joined with the audible sound of my arm being broken as it was smashed from above. Screaming in pain, I try to crawl away, but cannot escape the boot. Kicking me in the head, he does me the favor of sending me to oblivion.

Sputtering as cold water was thrown across my face, I awake to find myself back in the lower stables. My hands, still bound by my neck, are now forced in an artificial fist by cloth tied over them. My legs have been tied up close to my body by cords running between my knees and elbows. My right arm shrieks with pain at the slightest movement as the broken bones rub together.

Hunched over like this, I feel someone grab my tail. Clamping something painfully onto the end, they use a rope to tie the tip up by my collar. Kneeling behind me, they each take their turn, adding insult to injury. With each one, to my horror, my body betrays me by responding. I want to die.

I have lost count of the men. Cold, wet and violated, I lay on the floor shivering. From time to time someone comes by and take advantage of me. It is all a fog. My mind has shut down. I just lay there, watching the forge, disconnected from reality.

I have no idea how long I am there. Time had no meaning. My trance is broken as two pairs of hands lift me, setting my arm and ribs on fire. Carrying me like a heavy sack, they take me to a large enclosure filled with cats. As one holds the door open, the other throws me inside.

I skid across the floor stopping in the middle of the room, leaving a trail of blood behind

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me. "There you go, tabbies. There's something for yah to play with," I hear one say as they walk away laughing.

I lay on my side, looking around in the room. My one good eye gives me a picture of half a dozen or so cats, all male. They approach me, sniffing and grunting. I close my eyes and sob quietly, hoping they will just kill me.

The first hesitant touch startles me, causing me to jerk. Slowly they become more curious, sniffing and touching my fur. Soon I become aware of a pulling sensation on the rope between my knees and the elbows. After a few seconds the rope parts allowing my legs to straighten out.

I open my eyes and look around. I can't read the expressions on their faces, as they are too alien. Two large cats each take a manacle in their paws and pull. Straining against a chain that had never been designed for their strength, they snap it. The sudden motion of my broken arm makes me scream in agony. Clutching my broken limb to my body, I curl up into a ball, crying at the pain

Behind me, I feel someone release my tail from the clamp. Blood rushing back to the tip, I feel a new pain as the nerves came alive. Having been stretched to the limit for so long my tail muscles can't contract to draw it down. It just lay on the floor behind me. Now feeling the muzzle move, I become aware that they are fighting with the lock.

It finally sinks into my pain-addled brain, that they are releasing me from my bonds. My captors had assumed that the cats would rape me as they had, but they are wrong. I feel a gentle strength in them as they eventually manage to break the lock. Peeling the muzzle off of me, they throw it away. It bangs noisily as it skitters across the floor.

One of the cats reaches behind me, tucking my tail down between my legs and rolls me onto my back. As I lay there, I look at my cellmates, wondering what is going through their mind. I could see them studying my body as I lay helpless before them, but they do nothing. While I watch, the largest of them wipes the hair from my face. He has two large, sensuous looking, luminous yellow eyes that reflect my bruised and battered image. I try to swallow and realize that my mouth and throat are dry.

"Water," I managed to croak out. "Please, water." Grunting among themselves with a combination of yowls, screeches and hisses, they come to a consensus. One leaves the group to return a few seconds later with the bucket. Helping me to sit up, they hold it for me so I can drink. Coughing with the first mouthful of water, I manage to drink the next few without a problem. I nod and straighten up. "Thank you," I said. This sets off another round of cat talk.

I have no desire to listen to their noise and roll slowly and painfully onto my knees. The raw gashes on my back reinforcing the pain I already felt as I tried to move. I try to stand. I find myself lifted by the same large tabby that had bitten through the ropes around my knees. With a nod of my head where I want to go, he helps me walk over to the bucket sitting in the corner. I can tell by the smell what it is for. With one foot I kick it away from the wall. Unsteadily squatting over it, I lean on my new friend as he holds my arm while I relieved myself. I am horrified to see blood mixed in with the urine that is pouring

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from my body.

Shakily I manage to walk over to a pile of hay and straw. Lowered gently onto it by my new friend, I sit looking at him. His scent has a strong musk about it that makes my body want to respond. With great care, he reached out and removed the cloth that had been tied over my hands to prevent me from using them. Dipping one in the water, he begins to gently clean my wounds. Floating on a cloud of endorphins, I watched the muscles rippling under his short fur as he continues to wipe away the blood and grime. Each time I wince at his ministrations I see his jaw clench in empathy. I look him over closely, watching the rise and fall of his chest as he breaths and the flexing of his thighs as he shifts his weight. The motion of his tail as it flicks behind him mesmerizes me. I follow the rippling motion back towards his groin.

Realizing that I was becoming quite aroused, I close my eyes in a vain attempt to block the feelings as well as the erotic imagery they evoked in me. I shudder at the horror of what I have endured and huddle into a ball. Feeling his caress on my head, I look up into his sad eyes. He knew what they had done to me.

With my good paw I reach up and mimic my mouth opening and closing with my fingers, moving them in synch. He cocks his head sideways a little as he watches, and then begins to mimic me. Now taking my paw, I open it and grabbed my throat violently, as if it were being attacked. I watch his brow furrow as he tries to figure out what I meant. I try again and reach out, this time towards him. At first he flinches, but then leans forward. I put my paw to his mouth and gently pry his jaw open. Grabbing a fang, I shake it lightly, and then grab my throat with my hand, shaking it.

Realization of what I am asking him to do was obvious as he lays his ears back. He hisses at me, skittering back from where I sit. "Please," I beg, "Kill me." He shakes his head jerkily from side to side in imitation of a human. He won't kill me.

Defeated, I slump over on my side. I close my eyes and turn inwards, trying to find a place in my mind where the pain can't find me, looking vainly for rest.

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Safe in the arms of my protector.

Hearing the clatter of metal on metal, I was jarred from what little sleep I had managed to get. Waking to my pain-racked body was a relief compared to the nightmares that had tormented me. Looking towards the door to our cell, I saw that a bucket had been deposited just inside. All the cats in the room had risen with the sound and approached it.

Picking it up, the large tabby that had cared for me, carried the bucket into the center of the room. As the others lined up, he scooped a pile of meat out with his paw, handing it to them, ensuring each got an even amount. Giving the last his share, he brought the bucket over to me and set it down.

Reaching in, he sorted the contents, pulling out a long strip of raw meat. Holding it in front of me, he gestured for me to eat. Closing my eyes, I turned away. Surprise and shock hit me as he lightly cuffed my head. Growling, he gestured for me to eat again. Again I shook my head and closed my eyes. "Heeeeeeeat," I heard him hiss. Opening my eyes, I stared at him. Forcing his mouth in an unnatural shape, he again hissed, "Heeeeeeat." So they could talk, just not well.

Bringing the meat up to his mouth, he bit off a small amount, then again pressed it to my lips. I could see the pleading in his eyes as he tried to get me to eat. He cared for me. Undoubtedly he had seen his own females treated this way. Opening my mouth, I accepted the meat. Chewing it mechanically, I watched as his eyes softened. Gently brushing his paw across my muzzle, he watched as I ate. I rubbed my muzzle against his fur, inhaling his scent. The touch combined with his musk caused my blood to boil.

I reached out with my left paw and rubbed it against his cheeks, feeling the texture of the whiskers that protruded on each side. I slid it gently along the side of his head as he leaned into my hand, feeling the silky texture of his fur. With a shudder, I surrendered to my body's demand for physical contact, pulling him close, pressing my muzzle to the side of his neck and reveling in his texture as he rubbed his snout over me. I forced myself to keep my tail close in between my legs as I rolled onto my back, taking care not to jar my arm.

He laid his ears back and pulled away from me. His eyes showed confusion or fear. He gently pulled my hand away from his neck, and returned it to my injured arm. He shook his head as if to clear it then reached into the bucket again and withdrew meat for me.

He sat there, feeding me, until I was full. Not until I was sated, did he then eat the remainders. I could tell by looking that he had given me the choicest of meats. Finished eating, he again brought me the bucket of water which had been renewed and helped me to drink.

Sated, I lay back on the hay, watching him as he ensured that the others in his charge drank. He was the largest of the cats and obviously the leader of the group. Far from home, he had assumed the role of leader. Now, an alien in his midst, he had adopted me into his clan without reservation. I was a kindred soul. Taken from my love, abused and

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discarded. Though we couldn't talk, I felt I knew him. I had been him for a short while. I pitied him that his only release from this nightmare would be the same as mine, death.

Finished, he lay down in the hay beside me with his back turned. I snuggled close to him in my desire for some physical contact. I scooped out a small space in the hay for my injured arm. Gently, I rolled onto my side, allowing the pressure of the hay against my body to immobilize it. I snaked my good arm between his elbow and his chest, hugging him tight to me. At first he tensed at my touch, but soon relaxed. I felt him lift my paw and thread his fingers through mine, holding it close to him as we both drifted off to sleep.

Sheila lay on a soft patch of moss in the forest as I knelt over him. Kissing his face, I felt him caressing my breasts. I reveled in the feel of his touch, the smell of his scent, and the feeling of him as we made love. I was the one setting the pace to our love, timing it to the metronome of my hearts desire.

Heart pounding, the dream slipped from my grasp as I awoke to reality. Breathing hard, my body was alive with sexual tension, demanding a release. Realizing that I was rubbing against something hard, I looked down to see my protector's tail. I had been humping it in my sleep. Laughing to myself, a thought occurred to me, "That's one way to get a piece of tail."

Taking a deep breath, I tried to relax. As I lay there, I felt my protector shivering. Pulling my good arm away, I used his body to try to leverage myself into a sitting position. Crying out as my broken arm shifted, I fell back, hugging it to my chest. Sitting up, my guardian turned and put a paw out onto mine, concern clear in his eyes. I could see why he had been shivering. In my dream's attempt to find release, I had driven him to frustration.

Holding my arm tight, I attempted to sit up again. Seeing what I was trying to do, he placed a paw behind my shoulder, helping me. Now vertical, I dug the claws of my right hand into my fur, suspending it from my chest, allowing me to free up my left arm.

Reaching forward, I grab his neck and pull him towards me. He resists at first, only to realize that I won't be dissuaded. Rubbing my face against his, I gently nipped at the fur along his neck. Frozen like a deer in the headlights, he just quivers at my attention. Nipping along the bottom of his muzzle, I come to the front of his face. Backing away, I see anxiety and desire mixed with fear in his eyes. Turning my head, I press my muzzle to his in a human-style kiss.

Uncomfortable, I pivot on one knee so that I now sit on his thighs. Pressing myself against him, I barely feel the pain of my arm as it comes in contact with his body. Rubbing my muzzle along the left side of his face, I continue down along his neck, resting my chin on his shoulder. His nip on the side of my neck sends a shiver down my body. I tingle with anticipation.

Putting my good hand on his shoulder, I pull myself up so I am kneeling above him,

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poised to seek the relief we both so desire. Looking in to those large black pupils ringed in yellow and froze with the shock of what I saw. Within his eyes I could see my reflection. Beaten and bloodied, it is still the face of my love, of Sheila.

My god, what am I doing? What's happening to me? I feel the need for this cat, this man. I seek comfort and solace in his arms, but what about Sheila? He is my love? How can I be doing this? Shivering at the turmoil in my mind, sit back down, hugging myself, and begin to cry. I don't understand what's happening to me. I feel as if I'm losing my mind.

His hands gently take my shoulders and pull me to him. Careful of my arm, he hugs me to his chest. Rocking gently, he sings an oddly soothing chant in a quiet voice. Weeping quietly, I fall asleep in the arms of my guardian.

I spent most of the day trying to talk to my guardian. Their language is very difficult. Consisting of grunts, growls, hisses and yowls, all of which are tonal in quality, it was quite hard to get even the basics. I had learned that his name was RRRRan'eee. With some practice, he managed to wrap his mouth around Arden, though it sounded more like heart-den. Hard though it may be, I was picking up small bits and pieces. Water, food, hay, get, put, male, female; they were all basic words that I could almost reasonably pronounce. It was difficult, and my throat was sore from trying to talk, but it was better than nothing.

Often, while I was trying to learn a new word, I would see stable hands standing outside the cage, watching the animals. I blocked them from my mind. Some day I was going to get out of this cage and when I did, the floor would run with their blood.

Later that day, I don't know when as I never saw the sun, they came. There were about half a dozen of them, carrying whips. Seeing this, the cats gathered around me, protecting me. Using their whips, they began to drive the cats away from me, breaking up the group. Skittering on three paws, I stayed behind my guardian and two others as they tried to protect me. The stable hands, however, knew their jobs well and soon had me isolated.

"OK, pooch. We can do this the easy way or the hard way, it's up to you," the leader said. He was carrying new chains and my muzzle. "You bastards aren't touching me again," I said with a low growl, "I'd rather die first." Shaking his head, he waved to the other trainers. "Sorry, that's not one of the options," he said, shaking his head. "Take it."

As he backed off, two of the handlers moved forwards. I remembered them. They had enjoyed slapping the wounds on my back to make me yelp as they raped me. Growling, I dropped into a combat stance. The wounds on my back screamed as the muscles twisted to support me. I reveled in the pain and the adrenaline it brought. Soon the endorphins would kick in and the pain would lessen.

As they approached, the one on the left was a couple of feet ahead of the other. Short whip in hand, he snapped it at me, testing my responses. I waited. He would have to try to grab me. When he did, he would be too close for the whip. His friend hung back, using

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his whip to try to distract me.

As I shift my eyes between the two, I was forced to flinch as the whip cracked near me. Seeing me flinch, the left one rushed. Moving a hair too slow, I leapt high in the air, rotating as I swung my left leg around with all my might at his head. I saw the fear in his eyes as I attacked. Raising an arm to try to block my leg, he managed to deflect it slightly. My mistiming of the attack caused my foot to miss his head, but fortunately it allowed my shackle to be in the right place at the right time. Deflected from its target of his jaw, the shackle smashed into his temple instead with a rather satisfactory crunch.

I had a hard time with the landing and maintaining my balance because of my broken ribs and arm, but I managed somehow to remain standing. Taking a glance at the still form before me, I grinned as I watched the blood flow from his head. "Who's next?" I asked with a small laugh. I could barely stand, but they didn't know that. That landing had ripped open my back again. I could feel the blood running down my back.

I watched the other trainers. Most of them were now paying more attention to me than their charges. Their fearless leader was backing towards the cell to the door. Giving a little "come hither" motion with the fingers of my left hand, I glared at the other guard. "Come get some," I invited. Bearing his teeth, he lashed out with the whip, catching me across the shoulder despite my attempt to dodge. Clenching my teeth against the pain, I straightened up.

"Oooo. We're a real man aren't we? Using a whip on a lady?" I taunted. His face turned red as he became enraged. This was going to hurt. As he lashed out with the whip again, I stepped forward, bowing so the snap of the whip would be behind me. I found I hadn't moved far enough. Wincing as the lash slashed up the back of my shoulder, I grabbed it with my left hand, wrapping it around the wrist. Pulling hard, I was rewarded by the fact that he pulled against me.

With all my strength I yanked, I launched myself at him, kicking out with my leg, aiming for his stomach. Assuming I was aiming for his head as I had the other, his arm was nowhere near my foot when it landed just below his ribs. With a surprised look on his face, he doubled over. Stepping forward, I brought my knee up into his face, smashing bone and cartilage. Screaming, he released the whip and fell back. Their leader, having seen me dispatch the second man, bolted out the door.

Encouraged by my performance my guardian let out a screech and charged the tamer nearest him, prompting the others to attack also. Dropping to my knee, I sobbed against the pain. As I watched, they began to rip the stable hands apart. Covered with blood, some of it their own, most from their handlers, they lifted me.

As they carried me out the door, we heard the sound of running feet echoing within the confines of the basement. Now with a sense of urgency, we made our way towards the stairs. As we were about to reach them, we saw the leader of the stable hands come around the corner, followed by some of the Duke's guards. Enraged, the cats released me and charged the guards screaming, heedless of their swords. As I watched, the first two cats smashed into the guards before they could react, bowling them over. As they ripped

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and clawed at them, they were slashed and stabbed from behind.

I fought to stand as I watched my friends die. These human animals were slaughtering them. At last, getting to my feet, I charged the stable hand. He was standing away from the group. As I leapt, I howled my rage, for it was demanding blood. He turned and managed to block my good hand from grabbing his throat as he fell to the ground under me. My mouth open wide, I lunged for his jugular, only to have him block my jaws with his other hand. Locked together, he fought to keep me from killing him. I was too light. I was too weak. I couldn't kill him.

Grabbed from behind, I was bodily lifted and thrown against a wall. Unable to stop my forward momentum, I slammed against the stone. Reeling away, I felt hands grab me and throw me to the ground. I could hear someone yelling orders. My hands were grabbed and pulled behind my back causing my arm to explode in pain.

Looking up, I saw my guardian, hand out stretched towards me, eyes wide, blood bubbling from his mouth. "RRRRan'eee!" I cried out as I watched the light go out from his eyes. "NO!" I yelled, screaming until a blow to the head sent me into the darkness.

I blinked in slow motion while I listened to the sound of the air flowing through my snout, my heart as it pumped and the marching steps of the men walking alongside of me. I saw the six guards that had slaughtered my clan, my family in the mews escorting me. Again I was hogtied, my snout bound shut with a leather strap to keep me quiet. Suspended in a net that was carried by two stable hands, I felt the pain of the bone in my arm as it protruded through the skin and fur.

Detached from reality, I saw, smelled, felt and heard my surroundings, but they didn't quite register on me. Each thought took great and deliberate effort to occur. It was easier to just exist.

As I was carried through a doorway, I saw guards standing at their station. The room we had entered was tremendous. Huge vaulted ceilings with enormous elaborate chandeliers suspended from upon high were first to catch my attention. We passed through a crowd of finely dressed people. I suddenly realized that they were courtiers. Their finery, while tasteful, was nothing more than secret attempts to look better than their neighbor. The animals had preened themselves.

Carried out into the center, I felt myself dumped none too gently on the ground, face down. I became aware of yelling. Turning my head I saw Sheila, Fish and Junip. Sheila seemed to be floating towards me, bouncing lightly on his feet as he came. His eyes glowed red as they caught the light. Two of the guards escorting me made the mistake of trying to intercept him. Lashing out with a palm strike, Sheila sent one guard flying backwards.

Shadows danced around me as the other four guards, drawing weapons, moved forwards to stop Sheila. Enraged, Sheila snapped out a kick, catching the second guard in the neck. Holding his ruined throat, the man stumbled backwards and fell. Sheila turned towards

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the other guards as they lunged towards him. I saw him snarl, eyes glowing like hellish red embers. A wave of fear flowed over me, not connecting with my mind as I watched the guards skitter to a halt, and began to back away.

Tanto in hand, Sheila approached me, eyeing the guards with unmistakable hatred as they stepped past my prone body. Reaching me, I saw him kneel out of the corner of my eye, his face filled with horror at what he saw. Sheila used the dagger to cut away the bonds that held my arms and legs in place, allowing me to unfold from my cramped position. As Sheila rolled me over, I heard myself cry out as my shattered arm was pressed beneath my body.

I lay on my back, looking up at the roof and its intricate pattern of tiles. I felt Sheila brush his hands gently along my face, avoiding my bruised and battered eye. Realizing that Sheila was calling my name, I looked at him, seeing the pain at what he saw. Reaching out with my good paw, I gently caressed his face. In his eyes, I saw RRRRan'eee dying as he fought to protect me.

"Kill me," I begged, asking for release. Sheila's eyes reflected his disbelief in what I asked. "Please, my love, kill me," I begged. The tears in his eyes cast an eerie reflection of that which was around me. As he looked up I could see Mardukes image locked in his gaze. Leaping to his feet, Sheila charged the man. His hands locked around the stable master's throat, Sheila began to strangle him.

Tired from twisting my neck to watch Sheila, I let the muscles relax and began to look around. Beside me, I could see the Tanto that Sheila had used to cut my bonds as it lay on the floor. With my good hand, I lifted the blade. Reflections danced on the surface as I turned the razor-sharp edge so that it faced me. I could feel the cold steel as I placed it against my neck. Closing my eyes, I whispered "Goodbye" to Sheila and began to drag it around my neck.

I felt the pain of the blade as it bit into the muscle and sinew of my neck, and the warmth of the flowing blood. They followed the blade as I drew it forwards around my throat.

Prepared for oblivion, I was unexpectedly surprised to find the blade no longer at my throat. Opening my eyes, I saw Fish kneeling next to me, both hands pulling on my arm as he yelled, tears in his eyes.

"Please, Miss Arden," I heard him beg, "You can't die!"

Fish. The one true friend I had in this miserable place. With all his strength he fought with me for the Tanto. He had wanted so much to be my squire, to have a chance at a life better than he had been given. If I died, so would his dreams. So would Sheila. How could I leave Sheila, alone in a strange world, forever denied a chance to go home? Releasing the Tanto, I watched as Fish threw it behind him.

The young boy frantically pressed his small hands against the side of my neck, vainly trying to staunch the flow of blood while yelling for help. I could feel myself dying, just when I had decided I wanted to live.

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Behind Fish I saw Bjorn. His soft, glowing form looked down on me with sad eyes as he shook his head.

Crying softly, I felt the darkness nibbling away at my mind until it swallowed me whole.



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If you love them, let them go.

In case you haven't guessed it, Arden died. This chapter chronicles how everyone, including Arden, handles the fact that she is no longer alive. Please be prepared for a heart wrenching introspective into Sheila, Thomas (Fish) and Arden as they deal with what has happened.

Sheila sat on the bench of the balcony that overlooked the garden. Below him was a bounty of color and life spread out over the panorama of the land within its boundary. As he watched, the Duke's young son, along with several other children, ran out from the doorway under the balcony, laughing and shouting into the day.

Sheila had wanted a child. Back when he was a vixen, he had wanted to have Arden's child. That would never happen now. Even if one had been conceived, it was now too late. It had been too late for many things. Arden had tried to warn him that something was wrong, that there was danger. He had ignored her, assuming she was just nervous due to the hormonal imbalance, because she was in heat.

Sheila knew how Arden's smell had affected him. Refusing her the night she had become drunk was one of the hardest things Sheila had ever done. Just being in the same room for a long period of time could drive a man up the wall. Arden had been hurt when he hadn't returned that evening to her. How could he tell Arden that she was making him horny whenever they were in the same room?

The memories were almost too much. It was all he could do to sit upright on the bench. Thomas' shouts had broken his rage. Seeing Arden lying in a pool of blood, her throat cut, had torn the heart from his chest. To his horror, he saw the bloodied Tanto as it lay on the floor behind Thomas. The boy was vainly holding his hands to her neck, bravely trying to save her life, yelling for help.

Inside his head, Sheila had heard a voice. It was the voice of the dragon, telling him that he could save her. Sheila was now in possession of Arden's body, and with it came his powers. Kneeling beside his love, he remembered giving himself over to the Dragon as it channeled Nanuk. The feeling of mortal agony was almost overwhelming as Nanuk drew power from Sheila's very soul, channeling it into Arden, healing the damage.

But it had been too late. When the court healer examined Arden, he gave the sad news that the essence was gone. Although Sheila had healed the physical wounds, bringing her back from death, it had been too late. Arden's soul had already fled her mortal shell.

Hearing a sound behind him, Sheila became aware of a woman as she placed her hand on his shoulder. Glancing back, he saw a handsome face, framed in flowing red hair, an intricate three-banded torque wrapped around her head and resting upon her brow. Her regal stance, head held high, was only marred by the sadness in her hazel eyes.

"We just wanted to you know we are so sorry for what has happened. We had no idea that Marduke had taken your...lady," she said quietly as she sat beside him. Sheila simply

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nodded, fighting the urge to cry. "Is it true what the boy, Thomas, has told us?" she asked gently. Looking at the Duchess, Sheila shook his head slightly. "I'm sorry, my lady, but I don't know what you're referring to," Sheila said, somewhat confused. Slightly raising an eyebrow, the Duchess nodded. "The young man has told us that she was once human. That her condition was as a result of a curse," she informed Sheila.

Sheila was dumbfounded. "Arden had told this to a child?" he asked himself, trying to figure the logic. Thinking on it, he could see the reason. Arden had been lonely, and a stranger in a strange land. She had been befriended by this child who neither knew nor cared who or what she was. All he cared about was the fact that she was kind to him and respected him.

Reaching up to his chest, Sheila touched the medallion through the cloth of his shirt. Arden had given the amulet to Thomas who had returned it to him, informing him that she had been taken captive. That he would return the medallion itself was a surprise, but when the child also turned over the bag of gold coins, Sheila was stunned. Now to find that he had learned a piece of the truth behind them was an indicator of just how much Arden had trusted the boy.

"Yes, my lady, it's true. Arden was once human," he replied through a tight throat. He wouldn't tell her that Arden once inhabited the body that Sheila now possessed. Nor would he divulge that his true body is the one Arden had been forced to endure while in this world. Such things seemed trivial now.

"Then the tragedy is truly compounded beyond what we knew," the Duchess said quietly as she watched the children playing in the garden. "We hate to ask this of you, Lord Sheen, but time requires it," she said, placing a hand on his. "We are scheduled to leave for the imperial capitol city tomorrow. We would like you to accompany us. Do you think you will be up to traveling so soon?"

For a moment, Sheila was distracted as two small birds took flight, startled by the children. Twisting and turning about themselves, they flew over to a less busy part of the garden and landed out of sight. "I'm sorry, but I don't think I'll quite be ready to travel, my lady," Sheila answered quietly. "We understand completely," the Duchess replied. "We have some leeway in our plans, therefore we shall delay our departure for a few days to give you some more time. Until then, if there is *anything* that we can do for you, please let us know," she said with all sincerity.

Standing, she placed a hand on Sheila's shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze before returning inside the castle. Sitting alone on the bench, Sheila watched the children, his mind numbed by the experience of the past few hours, unable to contemplate a future without Arden.

Thomas (Fish to his friends) wandered slowly through the hall of the castle. Sniffing, he remembered taking one last look at Arden before they had shooed him away. She had been so still. It almost wasn't real. She had been so full of energy, so *alive*.

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That day out in the grass, when she had been practicing with her sword, she had moved with such poetry and speed that it looked more like art than exercise. Dancing with an imaginary adversary, she had done amazing maneuvers, leaping and rolling, always in motion, never stopping. He had been mesmerized by the sunlight as it flashed off the blade of her sword. She had called it a Katana and told him it was over two hundred years old. It was a family heirloom, but now that would end.

When they had captured her they had taken her swords. She would never have a child, an heir to pass them down to. Maybe Lord Sheen would take them and pass them down for her. Surely Vic would find a new love some day. He could train one of his kids to be a warrior like Arden and give him the swords when he was old enough.

Thomas used an already soaked portion of his sleeve to wipe the tears from his face. He remembered seeing Arden put the knife to her throat. Fighting with all his strength, he had kept her from completing her gruesome task, but he wasn't fast enough. She had already cut a horrible wound in the side of her neck. He shivered at the memory of trying to stop the flow of blood as it pumped out between his fingers. The sad look in Arden's eyes as she realized just what she had done, desiring to live in the end.

His cries for help had brought Lord Sheen, but it was too late. Or so Fish had thought. Even though her heart no longer pumped the blood from her body, Lord Sheen had managed to heal her. Fish remembered his eyes as they glowed with an eerie white light as Lord Sheen pressed his hands to Arden's neck, healing her.

His joy at seeing her breathe was short lived when the court healer came and gave them the terrible news that her spirit had already fled. She was truly lost to them now. Never had anyone found their way back from the afterlife once the cord that bound the spirit had been broken. Arden would never return.

As he turned a corner, Fish contemplated his future. Arden had considered taking him on as her squire. Now that would never happen. The Duchess had told him that if he needed anything to let her know. Maybe he would ask if they would allow him to become a page at the castle or something. Or perhaps Lord Sheen would take him on, though he doubted that. Vic was nice enough, but it wasn't the same. Something about his eyes scared Fish. Without Arden, it wouldn't be the same.

Sniffing, Fish wiped his nose on the back of his shirt as he haunted the halls, looking for some meaning to what had happened. If only he had been a little faster.....

I felt like I was in a dream. I had an incredible sense of well being as I stood in the locker room at ZZ Studios. This was where Sheila had made the wish that had catapulted us into a new world.

Looking down at myself I saw that I was still in Sheila's body, though I had a faint glow about myself. My wounds were healed. There was no pain, just existence. Reaching out to Sheila's locker, I tried to open it, but my hand simply passed through the metal of the latch.

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Walking as if in a dream towards the door that would lead to the main corridor, Tammy startled me as she came around the corner. She didn't break her stride as she passed right through me, never noticing that I was there. As I watched her walk towards her locker I saw her give a little shiver. She looked miserable, her ears wilted, her tail almost dragging. Our disappearance had obviously hit her hard. Losing a sister would do that to you.

I turned and walked out into the hall, then headed towards Zig Zag's office, stopping at the closed door. I hesitated for a moment before pressing through. Inside I saw her sitting at the desk, hunched over her paperwork, pencil in mouth, chewing on the eraser. As I watched she threw the pencil down and closed the folder. Swiveling her chair, I saw her lean back and look at the wall, a tear in her eye as she looked at the pictures there.

I had never bothered to pay much attention to that wall. Looking closely I saw that she had added two new pictures to her collection. One was of Bjorn, a publicity shot that they had taken for the new movie, a movie he would never complete now. Next to it was a picture of Sheila and me, dressed in the silk costumes that we had worn our last day there.

Under each picture I saw a small plaque; Sheila and Arden, Bjorn, Tor, Lianas, and more. Each picture showed someone who had worked for the company, but was now gone. Unlike Tor and Bjorn, our picture didn't have a date. I guess Zig Zag just told everyone that we had gone walkabout like Sheila had planned. I suppose it was better that way.

Looking back at Zig Zag I felt the urge to give her a hug, but knew it was impossible. I was intangible. I was a ghost. Despite my desire to live, I had managed to die anyway. I had abandoned all I loved and cared for. Now, all I had to do was figure out why I was back here at the studio when I should have moved on. If I were going to haunt anyone, I should be haunting Sheila. It was confusing.

My desire to see an answer rekindled, I walked through the wall and back out into the hallway, heading down towards Sabrina's cube. I had avoided her while I was alive. Knowledge of her potentially grim future had made me an emotional wreck around her.

Hesitant at seeing her again, I paused before stepping through the door and into the closet she called an office. Within, I saw that the lights were on. Stacked up on the desks I saw the usual folders of pictures and other promotional materials as well as several very thick books. Sitting there in front of her computer, I saw Sabrina looking at a graphic on the screen and comparing it to something in a book.

Walking over behind her I saw that she was studying the medallion. How the heck had she gotten a picture of it? Leaning closer I saw that, although a great amount of detail was visible, it was actually zoomed out. The full image must have been scanned at an extreme resolution. As I tried to figure it out the answer hit me. Sheila must have come to Sabrina with the amulet and asked her to do some research for her. Now the poor kid was digging around trying to find an answer to a puzzle for someone who would never benefit from it.

Curious at what she had found out, I looked over her shoulder at the notepad she had

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been writing in. It showed a good quality sketch of the amulet and its symbols. Outside the amulet was a sort of translation index for the various symbols. I was shocked to see that "demon", "Lakesh" and "dragon" all were related icons. In fact, as I read through her various notes on the bibliography of the icons, I realized that Lakesh was supposed to *be* a dragon.

This information came as a shock to me. If Lakesh was a dragon, then it's very likely that the Great Dragon I had encountered was, in fact, Lakesh. If that was true, then we were truly lost. Even if Sheila were to continue and complete my quest, then he would undoubtedly do so to the betterment of the demon and detriment of Nanuk.

I hung my head at the thought of failing Nanuk. I had let my grief and despair over what had happened destroy all that I had worked so hard to accomplish. Nanuk had placed all her hope in me and I had proven to be unworthy. My failure now complete, I continued to haunt the halls of the studio, searching for a way out of my personal hell.

A cool breeze blew through Sheila's hair as he sat watching the sunset. He had remained rooted to the bench the entire afternoon. Body drained of all energy, he just wanted to lie down and rest. Forcing himself to stand, he turned and walked wearily into the castle.

Sheila was aware of the occasional staff member walking through the halls. His destination reached, he paused outside the door. Drawing a deep breath, he opened the door and stepped into the room. It was a large bedroom with expensive looking wood paneling. At the foot of the large canopy bed was a fireplace, and on the far wall were two large windows with the drapes pulled back, permitting the last light of dusk to filter in. A ladies dressing table with a large, silvered mirror sat in the corner. On the bed he saw Arden's body as it lay under the sheets.

She looked like she was just sleeping. The rise and fall of her chest as she breathed proved that there was life, but the essence of her spirit was gone. He had saved her only to lose her at the same time. Taking a seat on the bed beside her, he took a paw into his hand. Its warmth felt odd. He had almost expected her to be cold, though he knew she wouldn't be.

He remembered the conversation that had taken place a short time before. The healer had come to him with some disturbing news. He had checked up on Arden in order to magically void her wastes as her body lingered. Since Sheila had given him permission to magically examine her body he had performed a sort of scan to see what made her tick.

He had found most everything in the usual places. Their shapes may have been a bit different, but they were still recognizable. What had surprised him was to discover that she was pregnant. The Duchess had instructed him to make sure that nothing could come of what had happened to her. In searching for an egg he had instead found a bundle of life growing. It couldn't have been more than a week old, but it was definitely not from what had just occurred.

The shock of the news had thrown Sheila's world into even more chaos than it had been

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before. During what he had believed to be their last night together, Sheila had intentionally discarded all the contraceptives that would have prevented conception. Sheila had wanted to have Arden's baby. Now, it seemed that they had succeeded, unbeknownst to Arden.

They could keep her alive. The healer said that using magic they could feed her and take care of waste products. By keeping her healthy they would create a fertile ground for the cub she would give birth to. It was up to Sheila, though; he would have to decide. Should he keep her alive in order to give birth to a child, an inhuman animal that would never know its other parent, or should he allow her to die, and with her their child?

Sheila had lost Bjorn the day he had proposed to her. In her grief, she had destroyed all hope of seeing those she had loved at the studio. Arden had killed herself the day he had tried to save her. Now Sheila must choose life or death for the last remaining bit of love in his life. How could anyone be asked to make such a decision? How could he live with the loss?

Climbing onto the bed, Sheila crawled close to the still form beside him. Holding her hand close to his chest, he quietly cried himself to sleep.

Due to my inability to leave, I stood by the front door, watching as Zig Zag locked up. She was the last one to leave. As I watched her go I felt the terrible loneliness of being left behind. I was anchored here. Something kept me from leaving this place. I was trapped within a world of memories.

"Hello good looking, do you know where a boy can have a good time?" I heard a deep Scandinavian-accented voice behind me say. Turning, I saw the faintly glowing figure of Bjorn standing no more than a few feet away. "Hello, Bjorn. What are you doing here?" I asked. Giving me a smile, he stepped forward and embraced me. Unlike the others in this nether-world, his touch was as warm and solid as I'd remembered it in life. "I have come to take you away from this place. To help you move on to the next life," he explained as he stepped back. "My, but you have changed, and for the better," he said with a laugh. Smiling for the first time since getting here, I nodded.

As I looked at him, standing before me, I felt a feeling of joy mixed with sorrow. "God, Bjorn, it's good to see you," I said, embracing him again, holding him tight. "I'm so sorry I got you killed," I said, trying not to cry. Returning the embrace, he patted me on the back. "Ja, do not worry about it. It is all in the past," he said, trying to alleviate my guilt. I took a step back from him, shaking my head. "I don't accept that. This has been all my fault, and you've paid the price for it," I confessed, looking away from him.

With great gentleness he placed his paw against my muzzle and forced me to face him. "You showed me how great my love was for Sheila. If it were not for you, I would have been content with thinking of her as just another romp in the hay," he said with a smile. "Ja, we didn't get to enjoy the moment. Ja, I was shot by a man in the helicopter. That was not your fault. It was their fault. You tried to save us. You did what you had to. You did it for love," he explained.

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He gazed deep into my eyes, piercing my soul. "Regrets are what bind you to this place, Arden. They are what are holding you back. There is only one thing you should regret; you have broken your promise." he stated simply. I was confused. "I don't understand, Bjorn. What promise?" With a small shake of his head, he smiled. "We agreed that Sheila's happiness came first. Right now, I do not think Sheila is very happy with what you have done," he explained.

Pulling his hands away from my face, I turned away. I knew that he was right. I had allowed my despair over what had happened to control me. Killing myself hadn't been an answer. It had only made things worse. Now Sheila was going to have to find a way home without my help. I had really screwed the pooch. Considering the fact that I was the pooch now, it seemed a most appropriate term.

Bjorn turned me so I faced him again. Taking my muzzle in his paws once again, he pulled me down and began to kiss me. Surprise caused my eyes to open wide, but I soon relaxed into the feeling, embracing him again, enjoying the feeling. After a few moments, he broke it off. "Not bad," he commented with a sly grin. "You are not quite up to Sheila's standards, but with a little practice..." he said, allowing the compliment to trail off. With a mock scowl, I peered down on the little otter. "Some how, I think I've got a biased jury," I complained with a smile.

Bjorn put his arm around me, escorting me towards Sabrina's office. As we approached, the doorway glowed with a white light. "So tell me Bjorn," I asked, "do they have sex in the afterlife?" My answer was a laugh followed by a goose on my rear end. I smiled, imagining spending eternity with Bjorn as we stepped through the glowing portal and into the light.

Sheila and William stood next to the bed containing Arden's body, the young boy sniffing. "But *why* do you have to do this, Lord Sheen? Why can't you wait? Maybe she'll find a way back!" he pleaded. Kneeling, Sheila gave the young boy a hug as he cried on his shoulder. "We have to let her go, William. It's not right to keep her like this. It's...it's something I have to do," Sheila said, fighting back emotions.

Released from Sheila's grasp, William leaned over the bed and gave Arden a light kiss on the cheek. "Thanks for letting me pet your tail," he said quietly, then turned and fled the room.

Sheila stood and looked down at the still form before him. Arden's body lay there as if sleeping. As he watched the slow rise and fall of her chest with each breath, Sheila knew that what he was about to do would be the right thing. Taking a seat next to Arden on the bed, Sheila bent over and kissed her goodbye.

After wiping the tears from his eyes, he drew the Tanto that Arden had given him. His reflection in the blade, tarnished by Arden's blood, made him realize that he had never cleaned it. "I guess I better remember to clean this thing," he said with a little chuckle. "If I don't, you'll probably come back and haunt me for not taking care of your swords," Sheila jested, trying to break the moment.

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"Goodbye, my love," Sheila said quietly as he reached out with the dagger, finally willing to grant Arden the release she had desired.

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If it returns, it's yours. If not, hunt it down and kill it!

Prepared for paradise, I was not disappointed. I was standing in a garden, surrounded by flowers, the sound of bumblebees carried on the breeze as it blew around me. "Where are we?" I asked looking around for Bjorn. To my dismay I could see no sign of him. "Bjorn?" I asked, searching the area for him.

"He is not here, young one," The voice came from beyond a tall hedgerow. Curious as to its source I walked to the end of the hedge and peered around the corner. I was surprised to see a large, bi-pedal dragon sitting on a stone bench. "It's safe to come over. I won't eat you," he said with a small chuckle. Remembering what I learned in Sabrina's office, I was distrustful.

Screwing up my courage I stepped out into the open and approached the dragon. "So just what kind of dragon are you?" I asked. With a hand he patted the seat beside him. He waited until I had sat down. "My name is Illiam. I deflected your transit across the barriers to bring you here. I am the guardian dragon for this realm. I am here to help you regain your lost life, to set you back on the path of your quest," he stated plainly.

He was here to help me regain my life? Was that possible? Were the dragons powerful enough that they held sway over life and death itself? It all seemed too incredible to me.

"How can you bring me back to life?" I asked, awed and confused. He let out a full-bodied belly laugh. "It is not necessary to restore your life; someone else has done that already. The only component missing is your spirit," he said, pointing a claw towards me.

My body was alive. I could return to Sheila, my love. All was not yet lost! "What must I do?" I asked anxiously. Smiling, he nodded his head with approval. "Within the castle," he said, gesturing to the building behind us, "is your body. If you pay close attention you can feel it drawing you back to it." I allowed my emotions to settle, I centered myself and I felt the pull.

"I feel it," I confirmed. "Good. Now hurry along. Our time is short. Do not delay, for all may still be lost," he said, slowly vanishing from my sight.

I felt a bit like Alice in Wonderland having just talked with the Cheshire cat. With a shake of my head to clear it I stood and proceeded quickly to the castle. Pulled along by the faint pulse of my heart I rushed up the stairs, flying through people in my urgency to reach my body. As I rounded a corner I saw Fish, tears rolling down his face, exiting a room.

A small shiver ran down him as I passed by and through the door. Inside I saw Sheila sitting on the bed, his back to me. In the bed, under a layer of covers, I could see my body. As I watched, Sheila took the Tanto that he held within his hands and reached out towards the throat of my body.

"Goodbye, my love," I heard him say. "No!" I yelled, diving for his hand. As my arm passed through his, I felt my paw sink into his flesh as I grabbed at the Tanto. Fire

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engulfed my paw and arm as it settled within Sheila's. Fighting for control of the Tanto, I felt him struggling against me, trying to complete the action.

All the emotion that I held, love, anger, hatred, jealousy, and an infinite variety of others were summoned forth, strengthening my spirit as I fought Sheila for my life. Howling in rage, I forced his fingers open from within, causing the dagger to drop on the bedding in front of my neck. Letting out a shriek, Sheila yanked his arm away from my body, spun off the bed and came to rest on the floor, kneeling, crying.

With a sigh of relief I reached down to my body, caressing its face. The touch was amazing. It felt electric as I brushed the fur with my fingers. It was the first touch I'd been able to feel since my death except for Bjorn. A smile flittered over my face as I bent down over myself. I smiled at the imagery of what I was about to do as I pressed my ethereal muzzle against that of my corporeal body and exhaled myself into it.

Nothing happened.

Trying to press through the flesh of my living body I found myself rebounding from it, as if barred. Frantic, I began to try to fight my way in, to do anything to get in, but to no avail. I stood before myself, shivering in terror, trapped. Why couldn't I get back in?

I took a deep breath, closed my eyes and tried to calm down. Panicking now wasn't going to do anyone any good. Obviously I was missing something here.

An idea occurred to me. I had tried forcing my way in, but maybe it was something subtler. I stepped through the bed, positioning myself so that I could lie down on top of my body. Relaxing, I tried to concentrate on feeling the pulse of life that pulled me. I hoped to sink into my body even as I tried to become more attuned to it.

That didn't work, either.

Now I was getting pissed. With a low growl I hopped out of the bed and began pacing the room. "Damn you, Dragon! What the hell am I supposed to do?" I yelled, demanding an answer in my fury. Of course he didn't bother to answer. Those damn dragons were really beginning to piss me off.

Sheila was stirring from where he had been kneeling on the floor. He stood and unsteadily returned to the bed. I took up a position close by as he picked up the dagger, holding it shakily before him.

"Why can't I do this?" he asked aloud. "What's preventing me?" With a determined look on his face Sheila again bent over the bed, preparing to strike with the Tanto, intent on ending it. What the hell? Couldn't he take a hint?

Angry at being denied, I kicked Sheila in the chest, trying to drive him back. Surprise showed clearly on his face as he fell backwards from the bed, landing in a rather undignified heap on the floor. As he got up I hit him again, tackling him against the far wall. My hand lashed out, striking his wrist, forcing him to drop the Tanto.

Terror. That's what I could see in Sheila's eyes---terror. He had no idea what was

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happening. I reached down for the dagger, but my hand passed through it as I tried to lift it. Not to be deterred, I concentrated on trying to move it, and again I failed.

What the hell? I couldn't affect anything. I could walk through walls, doors, and obviously pass through my dagger. The only thing that offered any kind of resistance was my body and Sheila.

No... Sheila's body and MINE! I had been able to affect my old body when I needed to. I couldn't do that with Sheila's. There was some kind of barrier preventing me from accessing what I had come to consider my body.

A small groan escaped my lips as the answer came to me. "You asshole! You could have saved me the angst and just told me!" I yelled, knowing the dragon would be listening. The hollow echo of his laugh resonated within the room. That bastard had just made my shit list.

Now, knowing what I needed to do, I stood up and looked for Sheila. He stood by the door, looking hesitantly at the dagger as it lay on the floor, and I could see he was preparing to beat a hasty retreat from the room. "Oh no you don't, love," I said, walking towards him.

As he turned to make his escape I quickly stepped into my old body. I felt as if my entire being had been engulfed in flames as I merged with my old form. I could hear Sheila's voice screaming vainly in my/his head, not understanding what was going on. "I'm sorry, love, but I need to borrow my body for a bit," I forced my/his body to say aloud for him to hear.

What I said penetrated Sheila's terror a bit, and I felt him calm down a little. He now understood some of what was happening here.

I had to concentrate on each move, forcing every step as I walked back over to the prone body on the bed. Taking the amulet from around Sheila's neck, I placed it on the vixen's chest. "I'm going to release you now, love.... Please don't do anything," I begged of Sheila.

With a mental scream, I released my control of Sheila's body, allowing myself to be flung outwards from it, ending the torment I had to endure while possessing it. We both stood by the bed, shaking at what had just happened to us.

"OK, Illium, if this doesn't work I'm going to track you down and rip you a new asshole," I snarled, preparing myself for what I hoped to accomplish. I looked at the medallion. The great dragon had once described it as a key to the barriers between the spirit realm and the realities. Although I was literally standing here beside myself, I was still part of the spirit realm. To transit into the physical world I would need the use of the amulet.

Hesitant at the possibility of failure, I slowly reached out and touched the medallion. As my hand came in contact with the surface I saw the medallion dragon's eyes glow, gaining intensity until I was blinded. With the eventual passing of the light I opened my

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eyes and realized I was back in my body, Sheila peering at me in anxious anticipation.

I took a deep breath, reveling in the feeling of air as it rushed in my body. Luxuriating in the feeling of being alive again I stretched my back and shoulders until I was suddenly reminded of the damage to my ribs and arm. While the pain wasn't sharp they were still sore, and they kept me from properly stretching my muscles.

"Arden? Is that really you?" Sheila asked, cautiously sitting on the bed next to me. "Hi, honey. I'm home," I quipped, smiling, tears of joy in my eyes. Sheila grabbed me up in a hug, holding me tight to him, his strength causing me to squeak as he crushed the breath out of me. I returned his hug for a moment, and then weakly pounded on his back, trying to gasp some breath.

Slowly relaxing his grip Sheila held me at hands length, peering into my eyes, a mix of emotions painted on his face. "Oh Arden, I'm so glad you made it back," he said with a slight sob. I was surprised when his expression changed to one of anger and he dropped me, quite rudely, back on the bed.

"You bastard! Just what in the hell did you think you were doing?" he demanded. "You scarred the hell out of me!" All I could do was give a sheepish smile and a shrug. "Actually, love, I'm technically a bitch," I said, trying to deflect the conversation. "Don't give me that!" he complained sternly. "Do you have *any* idea what you've put me through?"

I allowed my smile to fade. My eyes locked on his, I reached out and grabbed his head, pulled him down to me and kissed him deeply. God, I had missed him. The thought of losing him was almost too much for me. As I came up for air I pleaded with my eyes while begging him, "Can you ever forgive me?"

Sheila was having trouble maintaining the scowl on his face. "That's not going to work on me, babe. I've used that very maneuver on more men than you could ever know," he declared, trying not to smile. With a smile and a wink, I raked my paws along his ribs. "Don't try to tell me it didn't work," I said impishly. He decided to reply by kissing me again. A girl couldn't have asked for a better answer.

Our little celebration was interrupted as someone barged into the room. Startled, Sheila spun about, looking to see who it was, dropping me, again, in the process. With a small annoyed growl I lifted my head to look at the door, spotting some old geezer with gray hair and a tall, red haired woman with a silver headband standing just inside the door. They were both staring, jaws agape at what they saw. Apparently it wasn't what they had expected.

"Excuse me," I said, slightly peeved, "but don't you people know how to knock?" The tall woman's jaw worked up and down for a second as she tried to speak. "I...I'm sorry. We though...we mean, we were told..." she said, trying to find the words. I heard Fish interrupt her. "Arden!" he yelled, darting out from around back of the pair.

With a small leap he jumped up onto the bed and hugged me. I let out a small squeak of surprise and then laughed, hugging him tight. "Hey, Fish. Good to see ya!" I said, rubbing

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my snout against the side of this head. I could feel him crying as he held onto me. "Hey-hey. None of that now," I gently chided, patting him on the back. "I'm sorry, Miss Sheila," he said between sniffs. "I though...I---I'd never see you again."

Remembering what had happened, I thought about how I wouldn't be here if it weren't for this realm's guardian dragon. "I know, Fish. I didn't think I'd make it back either," I admitted. I wanted to hold on to him forever, but I knew I couldn't. With a sniff of my own, I pushed him away. As I watched him wipe his tears, I smiled. "Enough of this crying stuff. I won't have any squire of mine blubbering every time I cheat death," I said, trying to break the mood. "Yes, Miss Arden," he said with a small embarrassed smile.

Annoyed, I let out a small snarl while bearing my fangs, inwardly pleased at the look of shock on his face. "How many times do I have to tell you not to call me 'Miss Arden'?" I demanded with a small smile. "I'm sorry, Arden. I forgot," he admitted sheepishly. He was trying so hard. I laughed as I shooed him off the bed and attempted to sit up. Damn, I felt weak. How long had I been lying there anyway?

The other two were still standing just inside the door, staring at the spectacle. "Excuse me," I said, snapping my fingers, "but admission is two gold Imperial's, each." Sheila smacked me in the arm. "Arden!" he said, in a scolding voice.

"That's quite all right, Lord Sheen. We were staring rather rudely," I heard the woman say. "We are the Duchess Rossini, and this is our court healer, Reskin. We are most grateful to find you still alive---despite information to the contrary." The last part was directed quite pointedly towards Fish.

The boy didn't know how to handle the accusation. He had expected to find me dead. Sheila, however, saved him. "I must apologize, my lady, but it *was* my intention to end what I believed was Arden's suffering," he said, deflecting the Dutchess' anger.

"Please don't be too hasty in judging him, my lady," I quickly said, trying to defuse the situation. "If it hadn't been for the help of an old friend, I dare to say I wouldn't have been able to make it back." The healer's eyes lit up hearing this. "Interesting. An old friend, you say?" the old man queried. "Curious. Never before have I heard of someone finding their way back. Perhaps we can talk about this in depth some time."

The Duchess laid her hand on the old man. "Some other time. Right now, we believe that we were interrupting a reunion. If you will excuse us," she said politely. Stepping back out the door, she paused. "Thomas," she said, getting the young boy's attention. "Oh," he said, realizing she intended for him to leave, also. After Fish had exited, the Duchess gave a small nod and then closed the door behind her.

Sheila turned and sat back down on the bed next to me, taking me in his arms. "So, where were we?" he asked. I embraced him, restating my apology in a most enthusiastic manner. "Whoa," he said, taking a deep breath and then smiling. "You keep that up and I'm going to need a cold shower."

I couldn't help but laugh. I felt wonderful. "That, my love, would be a waste of a perfectly good cold shower," I said, pulling him forward as I again lay back in the bed.

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"Hey. Aren't you rushing this a little?" he asked, concerned. "I mean, it's only been a few days since they...." His comment trailed off as he realized what he was reminding me of.

The smile on my face faded as the memory surfaced. "I was dead. To the best of my knowledge I was headed for the afterlife when I stepped into the light. To find myself here, given a second chance at life..." I said, trying to describe how I felt. "I remember stories of the Japanese. Prepared for seppuku, a warrior might be saved at the last minute by his master ordering him not to do it. Given a reprieve, they would find themselves in an altered state of consciousness. It was considered a form of rebirth. Their old life gone, they started over. That's the way I feel."

I took Sheila's face in my hands. "I *was* dead. My spirit returned to the studio. If Bjorn hadn't shown me how to escape, I would have been trapped there. Doomed to haunt the halls of ZZ Studios," I explained, trying to make him understand. "Bjorn helped you?" Sheila asked, conflicting emotions apparent on his face.

The moment lost, I let out a moan and released him. "Yes. Bjorn came to me," I confessed. "He explained why I was trapped there. He explained my mistakes to me. When we stepped into the portal I fully expected to be transported with him into the afterlife." For a moment I was saddened by the thought that Bjorn had returned to the afterlife while I was still alive. Remembering our promise about Sheila though, I realized that he would be just as happy with me here, taking care of Sheila.

As I watched, I could see Sheila remembering Bjorn, and what had happened. Trying to break his mood, I pulled him close and kissed him lightly. "Bjorn reminded me of a promise," I said quietly. "We promised each other that whatever happened, your happiness was paramount. I couldn't do that by dying."

Reaching my hands up over my shoulders, I allowed the sheet to fall from my breasts. "So, are you going to climb in here and let me make you a happy camper, or are you going to sit there and be the tight ass I used to be?" I asked, knowing it was the most loaded of questions. Sheila got a most interesting look on his face as indignation fought with lust. My body shook with laughter as I saw the latter of the two win out.

God, I just knew I was going to *love* being a woman!

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In search of a good bath.

I felt more alive than I had ever felt before. Sheila slept next to me, spooning me, his arm wrapped around my body. I tried to think of how many times we'd slept like this, our positions reversed, but I failed. I remembered my past, but it was like watching a film. You knew the events happened. You knew you were there. Some how they just didn't connect.

My eyes wandered over to look out the windows. It was getting late in the afternoon by the look of the shadows outside. As I watched the clouds floating by I thought about what had happened. Like I told Sheila, I had been reborn. All of the pain, anger, hatred, anguish. It was all gone. Washed away. I no longer had a past that concerned me; only a future.

I remembered Bjorn, and what he had done for me. He would always have a special place in my heart. Of all the people I had lost over the years, he was the one who came looking for me after I had died. I smiled as I thought about him. He would wait for us. I knew he would.

Unable to sleep, I gently climbed out from under Sheila's arm and slid off the bed. My legs were weak and unsteady, but they were still able to support me. I held onto the bedpost holding up the canopy and looked around at the lavish decorations in the room. There was a large fireplace in the wall past the end of the bed, but since it was not yet winter, it sat unused. A ladies dressing table sat in one corner. A large, silvered mirror sat prominently above it, various combs and brushes adorning its surface. Tucked into a corner by the windows was a small desk with quill pens, inkpot and some type of stationary sitting at the ready. On the wall opposite the windows, by the door, was a large dresser and armoire.

As I made my way over to the dressing table, I looked at myself in the mirror. My fur was a mess. Matted and, in places, stuck to the skin, I looked like I had been dragged through a ditch. I was, simply put, a mess. I resembled Sheila after one of Zig Zag's shoots. Correction, I *was* Sheila after one of Zig Zag's shoots.

Inwardly groaning, I walked around the bed and over towards the armoire, only to pause at what I saw. Sheila's Tanto lay on the floor where I had knocked it out of his hand. Carefully bending over to pick up the dagger I felt the muscles in my back protest that they weren't fully healed. As I held it up to the light I saw that there was dried blood still on it. My blood. I paused for a moment to search my emotions, but I found myself strangely neutral. I looked at the blood I had spilled trying to kill myself, and I felt nothing. That disturbed me.

Suddenly desiring to take proper care of the weapon, I looked around for the scabbard. Searching in the pile of clothes that Sheila had discarded on the floor I found the sheath and placed the dagger within. I would clean it next time I got near some water.

Opening the armoire I saw that all of my dresses were there except the one they cut

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away when I was captured. There were several other comfortable looking dresses and what appeared to be a housecoat. Removing the housecoat, I examined it and saw that it hadn't been modified for me. That was all right, I could just keep my tail down.

I donned the housecoat and tied it shut with the attached cloth strap. Satisfied that I wasn't going to give anyone a major heart attack, I picked up the Tanto and headed for the door.

I opened the door slowly, trying to be quiet so as not to awaken Sheila. As I backed out of the room, pulling the door closed behind me, I was startled. "Beg your pardon, m'lady, but should you be up?" a deep voice asked. Not expecting this, I let out a small yip of surprise

"Don't you know better than to scare a lady like that?" I asked breathlessly, paw held to my chest as my heart pounded. The man addressing me was an easy six-foot-four, muscular but with the beginnings of a slight paunch. He wore some type of uniform with cured leather armor under it, a long sword hanging at his side in a scabbard. Looking at his face I saw two piercing blue eyes that reminded me of the water off the coast of Acapulco. He was clean-shaven, his face framed with curly brown hair. The only thing to mar his appearance was the rippling of skin on the left side of his face where he had been burned at some time in the past.

"I'm sorry, m'lady. It wasn't my intention to startle you," he said with a small bow. "Just what were you doing, skulking around my chambers anyway?" I asked, trying not to be put off by his prim and proper countenance. "I was assigned to guard your door, m'lady. The Duchess ordered that you weren't to be disturbed," he explained.

Well, if the Duchess ordered it I supposed I could let him off the hook. "I see. My apologies are in order then," I admitted, nodding my head. He held up his hand, shaking his head. "That's quite all right, m'lady. After what you have been through, it is expected that you would be a bit jumpy," he stated, refusing my apology. "However, I must say again that you should not be out of bed yet, m'lady. The healer has not given permission yet." I mumbled something under my breath about what the healer could do with his permission. I guess I muttered louder than I thought because I saw his brows go up slightly.

"I'll tell you what I really need right now... Um... What's your name?" I asked, not remembering if he had told me. "Theolin, m'lady" he said by way of introduction. "Ah. Well, Theolin, in case they didn't tell you, I'm Arden, and I could *really* go for a bath right about now. Do you know where I can clean up?" I asked, my ears perked in anticipation as I eagerly awaited his answer.

He started to reply, wanting to deny my request, but stopped. After thinking about it for a few seconds, he nodded. "Yes, m'lady. There are some hot springs under the castle, in the basement," he finally admitted. "They are rather popular for people who wish to relax and clean up." Smiling, I stepped up beside him and snaked my arm around his. "Well, since you're supposed to be making sure nobody bothers me, how about showing me where these pools are?" I said with a wink.

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He looked at me for a second, totally unsure what to do with himself. Arching my brow, I batted my eyes at him, smiling. He rolled his eyes to the heavens, letting out a sigh. "As you wish, m'lady," he said, surrendering with grace.

The walk down to the basement was a pleasant one. We descended down four flights of stairs, exiting in a large, well-decorated room. Tiles adorned the floor, walls and ceiling, reflecting the light from the mirrored lamps. The warmth and humidity caressed my fur as a breeze momentarily blew through the room. I could hear people talking and laughing as they bathed in the waters.

"This way, m'lady," he said, leading me along a hanging cloth partition. About half way across the room we came to an opening. "If you will follow this to the left, m'lady, you'll come to the women's section of the baths. There should be towels in there as well as refreshments. You will find a servant who should be able to provide for any needs," he explained.

"Thank you very much. Will you be hanging around here, Theo, or will you be going back to your post?" I asked. He had to think about that for a second. "I had best check in with the commander of the watch. I will return afterwards, m'lady," he said, bowing to me. I gave him a smile and returned the bow before walking towards the women's side of the pools.

Reaching the end of the cloth corridor I came around the corner to spot a large area with five pools. One huge central pool, easily capable of holding at least twenty bathers, was surrounded by four smaller ones, each more intimately-sized to hold about a half-dozen. Running from each of the pools was a trough that trickled water. Each pool was apparently filled by a submerged source, the overflow drained by a shallow trough that disappeared through an opening in the far wall.

In the larger pool I saw five women who had been chatting. Their conversation ended with my appearance as all eyes turned my way. I put what I hoped was a pleasant smile on my face and walked over to where they were soaking.

"Pardon me ladies, but may I join you?" I asked politely. Wide-eyed looks all around as they exchanged glances. The eldest of them, a pleasantly plump matron in her early forties, was the first to break the silence. "We would be honored for you to join us," she said pleasantly. A quick glance confirmed that two of the other four were scandalized by the invitation.

I removed my Tanto, placing it on the ground followed as I took the housecoat off. I was about to fold it up when I felt a touch on my arm. It was one of the cats, the usual large metal collar around its neck. Never taking its eyes off of mine, it reached out and took the cloth from my hands.

The spell was broken as the matronly woman clapped her hands. "That's quiet enough. Back to your station," she ordered. The cat immediately flattened its ears, bowing as it backed away.

"Please don't mind them," she said. "Beasts really, they barely make reasonable

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servants." The shock of what she said stung. These people had been my friends. They were intelligent creatures and I didn't appreciate it.

Closing my eyes for a second, I pushed the emotion down so it wouldn't ruin the mood. Slavery existed here and I would just have to deal with it. I don't think the Duke and Duchess would appreciate it if I started slaughtering their staff.

Picking up the Tanto I stepped into the water, walking along the edge until I was at a point where I could see all of them, then I sat down, placing the Tanto nearby. I closed my eyes, enjoying the sensation of heat seeping into my muscles as I sank into the water. If I had been a cat, I would have purred.

"I do think she likes it," I heard one of the young ones say, her giggling soon followed by the others. "Oh yah," I moaned loudly. "You can say that again. I haven't had a decent hot bath in quite a while," I admitted without reservation as I sank below the water. My ears twitched as the water quickly rose up to the tips, tickling them on the way up. Floating free in the water, my tail supporting me against the bottom, I heard the muffled voices of the women as they excitedly talked about me. From their conversation I could tell they didn't know I had once been human.

After a minute or so, I felt myself becoming short of breath. With a small shove of my paws against the floor of the pool, I bounced up to the surface and floated back to the edge where I had sat. The women had stopped talking when I surfaced and showed no indication of resuming their discussion.

Although thirsty from the heat, I decided against drinking the water in the bath and looked around for the cat that had taken my coat. She was squatting in the corner next to a table loaded with towels, drinking cups and a pitcher, our housecoats hanging on a tree. I thought about the words that RRRRan'eee had taught me and figured I'd give them a try.

"Female" I said, "*water bring*." Her head popped up, ears at attention as she heard what I said. "*Water bring*," I said again, trying to make sure I got the inflection right. She had a look of amazement as I spoke to her. I was probably the first person not of her species ever to talk in her language.

"What was that?" the youngest of the group asked. She was a petite girl about sixteen in age with short black hair and oriental looking eyes. "I asked her for water," I said returning my gaze to the cat. The cat confirmed what I had said with what English she knew, she stood and poured a cup of water. Careful not to spill it, she walked quickly over to the side of the pool and knelt, handing me the cup.

As I took the cup I tried to remember if there was a word or phrase for "thank you" but failed. The only thing I could think of was that the cats used to rock their heads side to side when they accepted something from someone. Imitating that motion, I smiled as her eyes lit up. She was about to say something when she glanced at the others and decided not to. With a deep bow, she turned and walked back to her position in the corner, watching me intently.

"Where did you learn to speak that... that... noise?" This came from one of the women I

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had tagged as "the opposition" before getting into the water. "I had the opportunity to learn their *language* while I was held in the mews," I stated slightly annoyed.

"That's not a proper language," she stated in a matter of fact manner. "Learned scholars have tried to teach them the proper way to speak, but they're little more than dumb animals. Sure, they can recognize a few words, but even a dog can do that. They're just primitive, uncivilized beasts. We did them a favor taking them from the jungle and giving them good homes."

The elderly matron got a concerned look in her eyes as my ears went back. "Uncivilized? Let's compare them to humans, shall we?" I asked as a rhetorical question. "I was captured by your stable master even though he knew I could speak and was no simple animal. Stripped of my clothes, bound and gagged, I was carried to the mews where I was shackled, muzzled and tossed in a small cell. That is, of course, after I had been whipped for not moving fast enough while hobbled."

"They need the lash to learn," she said, defending them. "They never use them to cause harm, just as a lesson." I ignored her and continued. "I was then taken from my cell to what can only be described as a bedroom; there my arms were chained to my throat and my legs freed. Then I was led over to the bed where I was forced, upon the threat of my lord's death, to submit to being **raped**," I stated, the last a snarl. As I watched they looked at me in disbelief. My opponent started to argue, but I cut her off. "Afterwards, I was kicked and my arm broken, then I was beaten unconscious. When I woke up my knees were tied to my elbows to prevent me from moving. My tail was pulled up over my back and lashed to my collar, and then I was **raped** by every man in the mews, some repeatedly."

"I don't believe it," she declared. "Believe it!" I growled. "And when they were done with me they tossed me, still bound and unable to move, into a cell full of male cats which they fully expected would rape me!" I was pissed. My body half way out of the water, I found that I had moved towards the women. "But those *uncivilized animals* in the cage didn't rape me. They removed the ropes and chains that bound me. They cared for me. Tended to my wounds. And when the guards came to take me away, they fought to the death to keep them from me!" I was now yelling, my fangs exposed.

My snarling face only inches from the now terrified woman who was the target of my wrath, I spoke in a dangerously low voice. "So tell me, human. If you were me, who would you say was the more civilized race? The human animals that beat and raped me, or the cats that tended my wounds and tried to protect me?"

The woman sat frozen, her eyes wide with fear as I glared at her. "ENOUGH!" I heard yelled across the room. It was the Duchess, standing by the corner. The command in her voice combined with the look of anger she gave me was enough to break the moment and allow me to get control over my emotions. With a deep breath, I stood up and counted to ten, forcing my anger down. Now again in control, I forced my ears up and hackles down.

"I apologize for disrupting the harmony of your home," I said formally, bowing deeply. I had allowed my anger to control me. The Duchess walked purposefully over to the pool,

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her maid following. "We understand your anger, and we feel it is well justified. However we cannot permit such uncontrolled outbursts. If you must discuss this, you must try to remain calm," she directed.

The Duchess removed her robe, handed it to the maid and began to climb in. Reaching out, I gave her a hand in, ensuring that she wouldn't fall. "I understand, my lady. I won't allow it to happen again," I said, again bowing. As I turned to walk over to where I had sat, I heard a gasp from a couple of the women behind me.

"My god, what happened to your back?" I heard the youngest ask. I ignored the question until I sat down. As I saw at the horrified look on my opposition's face I realized that she finally understood that what had happened to me was *real*. Even after the fur grew back to cover the whip-wounds on my back, I knew they would leave visible crisscross patterns, marks of my defiance that I would carry until I left this world.

"That..." I said unenthusiastically, trying to find the words. "That is an example of just how civilized humans are when it comes to treating their slaves." My piece spoken, I leaned my head back and closed my eyes, trying to release the anger their ignorance had evoked from within me.

Chapter 12

The scent of a vixen.

I must be dense. It's the only excuse I can come up with. How else can you explain me being stupid enough to take a bath in a world without fur dryers and then expect to be able to dry of in a reasonable amount of time? Here I thought I'd done some stupid things as a man. Fortunately, the Duchess and her handmaiden offered to assist me.

Even after spending time wringing the water out of my tail and fur I still almost exhausted their entire supply of towels. By the time they had gotten me to the point where I was no longer dripping I looked like something that had been left out in the rain. My fur stuck out everywhere. I was about ready to cry. And I had been having such a good day.

"Come," the Duchess commanded, "let us retire to our chamber where we can take care of you properly." Once the two of us were wrapped for modesty's sake, we proceeded back up the stairs. Theolin had been waiting at the base of the stairs for me, but was dismissed for the rest of the evening by the Duchess.

It was a long climb from the sub basement up to the sixth floor and I was breathing a little hard by the time we reached the top. That trip would make for a good aerobic workout. Curiously, the Duchess led us down a side corridor used by servants rather than the main hall. "This way is more private, and we will be less likely to run into others," she had explained.

As I stepped into her chambers I was stunned at what I saw. The room was twice the size of the one I was staying in, and was lavishly decorated. This appeared to be her personal chamber, not the one she shared with the Duke. A full body mirror stood between a large makeup table and a writing desk, with an oversized armoire a convenient arm's length away. There were a couple of comfortable looking bench seats by the dressing table as well as some ornately carved chairs. Several large bookshelves were placed along one wall by the windows. Placed in front of the windows themselves was an oversized bed with an abundance of pillows piled on it. A long fireplace dominated the other wall, while knickknacks adorned the mantel overhead.

Intrigued by what I saw on the mantel I walked over and saw that it displayed a small porcelain menagerie. People, animals, mythical creatures and castles were all represented in the collection. I was enchanted with the detail of the workmanship. Some of the patterns had to have been painted with a single brush hair. It was a stunning sight to behold.

"Do you like our collection?" the Duchess asked. I gave her a large smile and nodded. "Yes, my lady. It's quite extraordinary," I complimented eagerly. "It is our pride and joy. We have had it our entire life. Some of the pieces are over three hundred years old, or so we have been told," she said proudly. It was incredible. I could have spent hours examining the detail in the figures.

"That's enough for now, child. Come over here so that we can take care of you

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properly," she directed, drawing me from the objects of my fascination. After her handmaiden removed my housecoat they had me stand near the large mirror while they brushed my fur out. Both of them seemed fascinated by my fur as well as the way I was built. Neither was shy about asking some of the most personal of questions. To my disdain I became somewhat aroused watching them in the mirror as they groomed me.

I think my tail was the part that the Duchess was most intrigued with. She alone worked on it, spending almost as much time brushing it out as the two of them had spent on the rest of my body. Satisfied with her workmanship, she had me sit so she could work on my hair. I was mildly surprised when she dismissed her handmaiden.

"So, tell us of this curse," she directed, brushing out my hair. "I don't know what to say, my lady. I was human, now I'm not," I said, trying to dodge the bullet. "Surely there must be more to the story than that," she inquired. She wasn't going to be easily dissuaded. I had no idea just how much I could trust her.

"OK. Once I was human, then, poof, I was not?" I said, trying to make a joke of it. I yelped as she smacked my head with the back of the brush. "That is not what we meant and you know it," she said, scolding me. As I tried to think of what to say I looked down at the sheathed Tanto I was rolling around in my hand. I drew the blade out a little ways, looking at the blood. I had forgotten to clean it at the pool. I was as bad as Sheila.

"What are you doing with that dreadful blade?" she asked. Drawing it all the way out, I held it up so she could see the blood. As I looked in her murky, distorted reflection I saw the revulsion in her face. "Sheila forgot to clean it. I had intended to do it while I bathed, but I forgot," I finally admitted, not paying attention to what exactly was being said. "Sheila? Who is this 'Sheila'?" she asked.

DOH! "Sheen-ra," I said, making it sound like a correction. "It's kind of a title where I come from." I had a sudden urge to bang my head against the wall, repeatedly, but settled for putting the Tanto back in its scabbard.

The Duchess paused for a moment, digesting what I had said. "Curious that you never used that term before," she said, worrying at what I had said. "There are many things I haven't said in your presence, my lady," I said offhandedly.

The Duchess stopped brushing my hair and moved over to lean against the desk. Crossing her arms in front of her, she studied me. "What aren't you telling us? You refuse to talk about the change, and now you refer to you lord as 'Sheila'," She said, eyes narrow at me. "Sheen-ra," I corrected her. She slammed the brush down on the table, the sound echoing like a gunshot in the small room. "You said *Sheila*. Don't lie to us. We have watched you and we can tell," she said forcefully.

She had a pretty big nose for one with such a small snout. "Has anyone ever told you that you're too noseey?" I asked. She laughed at me. "Never to our face. Now answer the question, young lady," she demanded, "Do not try our patience."

So, she wants to intimidate me. I laid my ears back and growled while climbing to my feet. I had the satisfaction of seeing her eyes get a little wider as she realized she might

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have overdone it. Taking a sudden, small leap I landed well within her personal comfort zone. With my eyes locked predatorily on hers, I pressed forward, trapping her arms behind her.

"You want to know about me?" I said, my voice a low, gravelly growl. Putting my muzzle down by her neck, I exhaled onto the skin next to the jugular, watching her throat as she swallowed. "You want to know about my curse?" I asked, my snout brushing her ear. Sniffing, I smelled her fear mixed with lilac. "You want to know about the dangerous animal you've left yourself alone with?" I asked, now rubbing my jaw against hers as I swung my muzzle over her face, pressing my body against her. "Do you really want to hear about the people I've killed? The friends I've lost?" I whispered in her left ear, and was gratified to see that she was trembling. "Do you really want that?"

I pulled my face back so I was a mere inches from hers. "Do you even know what you want?" I softly rumbled, aroused by the musk of her fear. As I looked into her eyes I realized that I had just made a very big mistake---and she knew it! I let out a small shriek as she threw her weight against me, shoving me back. I silently cursed, making a mental note to myself: I'm a vixen now and not an immovable, testosterone based object.

As I fell away from her she grabbed my wrists. With a spinning motion she reversed our positions, slamming my back against the desk, bending me over, my arms held high above my head as she used her superior size and strength to pin me. "You want to know what we want, little one?" she said, a dangerous gleam in her eye and predatory smile on her face.

"We want *you*," she said, and then she kissed me.

I just laid there, my eyes closed, enjoying the feeling of my fur being stroked as the Duchess lightly caressed my body, my head in her lap. "I take it that you enjoyed yourself?" she asked, a knowing smile prominent on her face. "You know I did, my lady," I responded. "None of that required while we're in private, my dear. You may call me Gwen," she instructed.

What had I gotten myself into? I was utterly horrified when she had kissed me. The real shocker was when I started to return it. I had gotten myself so turned on trying to intimidate royalty I'd managed to somehow seduce her. That, or *she* seduced *me*. Maybe it was some sort of mutual seduction thing. Whatever the case, it was a hell of a ride. She knew tricks Sheila had never told me about. He'd been holding out on me. It was obvious I wasn't the Duchess' first female conquest.

Thinking about what I had done, I realized it wasn't all that illogical. I had spent the first thirty-eight years of my life as a man. I guess there was enough 'guy' left over in me to make a serviceable lesbian. In fact, from her enthusiastic responses to my ministrations I'd have to say there was more than enough. I inwardly chuckled thinking about Sheila. I knew she'd played the bisexual game. You don't work in that industry without doing it sooner or later. I guess it just came naturally.

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"Are you ready to tell us about 'Sheila'?" she asked, grinning like a cat. She wasn't going to give it up. "Really, Gwen, I'd appreciate if yoOOo..." I was unable to continue what I was saying. Being a 'natural' woman, she really did know some good tricks with her hands. I was definitely going to have to make Sheila pay for holding out.

As I approached climax, she slowed her pace, torturing me. "Are you ready to tell?" she asked. "Don't do that to me," I practically whimpered between clenched teeth. "I could stop if you want," she offered, pulling her hand away. Looking up at her, I could see she was enjoying herself tremendously. "You are evil and must be destroyed," I said, watching her laugh.

I intercepted her hand as she reached out to continue teasing me. "Enough," I said with a sigh. Looking in her face I could tell she would continue to dig---in a most sensitive place!---until she had the truth. Even if I didn't talk I knew she'd eventually get it out of Sheila somehow. After all, the woman was a Duchess, and was well-versed in the art of manipulating people---and in the most pleasant of ways, too.

"If I tell you, Gwen, you must swear not to tell anyone," I said, forcefully stating the terms. "We shall be the epitome of discretion," she stated, her face serious. "I mean it. You don't tell your husband, the sorcerer, your priest confessor, you don't even PRAY to the gods about it," I demanded. She nodded in acceptance. "I swear, it shall not pass my lips unless you first give permission," she promised. I suppose that would have to do.

"When I said I had once been human, I was serious. In fact, you've actually seen what I looked like," I stated, enjoying the look of confusion. "The magic item that cursed me took me from my world and transported me to another world, one where I was transformed from a human and into a bear. A walking, talking, bear, not unlike the form you see now," I explained, watching as she wrapped her mind around what I had said.

"So you're saying that you are not from our realm? Not of this world?" she asked. "Exactly. I was a very large, very *male* bear. Sheila was a very beautiful vixen. Or should I say Lord Vic Sheen was a 'vix-een'." I again watched as she digested it, not quite seeing what I was getting at. "Sheila made a crucial mistake. She triggered the magic that transports me between worlds, only this time she caused it to take her with me. The magic is designed to take only one person, move them and adapt them so they fit into their new surroundings. It was never designed to handle two people."

"So when it brought you here," she said slowly, "it restored your old human form, but couldn't change your mate's form." I nodded. Now she was getting it. Or was she? "I don't understand---how is it you're in this body and not your proper one?" she asked, still confused. "I don't know, Gwen. Like I said, the magic was never designed for two," I replied. "All I can think is that it got confused as to who went where."

As I watched her I could almost see the mental gears turning in her head. After a few minutes she began to laugh. At first, it was just a few giggles, but soon evolved into a real gut buster. Not understanding the joke, I sat up and turned to face her, staring. I could see she was trying to control herself and failing miserably. Finally, exhausted from laughing, she leaned back against the wall and just moaned.

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"Now that you're done mocking me, would you mind letting me know what's so damned funny?" I asked. She started to chuckle again, but managed to maintain control. "When you tried to intimidate me by rubbing against me, I thought you had a taboo about women sleeping together. And here I thought I was seducing someone who had never slept with a woman," she explained, loosing it again. Thinking about it, I could see the humor and began to laugh with her. Sure, I'd never slept with a woman as a vixen, but I had definitely done so as a man.

Pausing for the occasional breath, it didn't take much for us to loose control again, laughing at the cosmic joke that had been played on the both of us.

Note to self: *We love* getting our fur brushed.

Gwen had declared an end to our fun about half an hour ago. That gave us plenty of time to clean up, brush out our hair and prepare for dinner. I had already brushed out her hair and now she was doing the same for me.

"All done. Now for the big surprise," she said. Curious, I followed her over to the armoire. Gwen gave me a conspiratorial wink as she opened the closet and took out a dress. It was a semi-formal evening gown. Far superior to my own dresses, it was of a deep green color, lightly dusted with specks of bronze glitter. Looking at the back I could see it had been modified for my tail.

"Gwen! This is gorgeous," I said, holding it up in front of the mirror. "How in the world did you get one made so quickly?" The dress was almost perfect for my size. Gwen was taller than I was and a bit more bulkier. There's no way this was hers.

"Put it on, child," she instructed, dodging my question. Gwen helped me don the dress, threading my tail through the slit in the back. The seamstress had used buttons rather than ties to keep it closed. Once everything was settled into place and buttoned up I checked out my profile in the mirror. Turning side to side I examined how the green contrasted with orange color of my fur. The bronze glitter caught the light giving a subdued sparkling effect. There was only one problem. The chest was a bit tight. It was pushing my breasts up and inwards with a bit more force than comfortable, but it certainly showed them off well. I tried to look at it in a 'guy' frame of mind and decided I liked it.

I turned back to the Duchess. "How can I ever thank you, Gwen?" I asked. She had an odd look in her eye as she smiled at me. "Just seeing it worn is enough," she said, embracing me in a hug. After a moment though, I felt her rubbing her nose against the side of my face.

"Gwen! We're supposed to be getting ready for dinner," I complained with a smile, pushing her away. She had that smile again. "I know. It's just your scent," she explained. Confused, I felt the smile fade away. How could my sent have anything to do with it? "I don't understand. What scent?" I asked. Gwen got a surprised look on her face. "Your natural musk, child. It's most... erotic. When you were rubbing up against me on the desk I found it quite overpowering," she said, arching her brow for emphasis.

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Her words drove me back with fear. My scent was affecting humans? How could this be? I didn't dream they would be susceptible. I mean, if humans could smell it wouldn't Sheila have warned me? This didn't make sense. Christ on a crutch! If that were true, then what happened in the mews...

"Arden? What's wrong?" Gwen said, reaching out to me. "Get back!" I yelled, slapping her hand away from me. I gasped, unable to catch my breath. The room felt like it was closing in on me. I backed into the desk with my Tanto laying on it. Snatching it up, I continued backing away from Gwen. "Just stay away from me!" I yelled and bolted for the door.

As I fled the room I charged headlong down the servants' corridor, knocking more than one out of my way in my panic. I flew down the steps of the castle, taking them three and four at a time. At the bottom of each turn, I would painfully slam into the wall, ricocheting off to continue my flight.

Finally reaching the floor where my room was, I charged down the halls, ears laid back, snarling at anyone that got near me. Each face seemed to stare at me lustfully as I ran by, dodging out of their reach.

As I reached my room I slammed into the door with my shoulder, flinging it open. Safely inside, I slammed the door closed and bolted it behind me. My mind was going a million miles a second. How could this be happening to me? If my scent truly acted as an aphrodisiac, how could I be safe in public? Everything that had happened to me had been my fault.

The young man who had ordered my capture---he had surely gotten a whiff of my scent at the restaurant. If it was as powerful as Gwen had described it, he couldn't help himself. This can't be happening. The men in the mews---there must have been some decent ones there. They wouldn't have been able to resist me either. Oh God! It was *all my fault!*

I was startled by the sound of banging on the door. "Arden? Are you in there?" I heard Gwen call. "Go away!" I shrieked, my voice high pitched with panic. Christ, the door wouldn't hold them. Oh God, *why?* This can't be happening.

I had slowly backed up against the wall opposite of the door. Hugging myself, I squatted down low to the floor, trembling with terror, never removing my eyes from the door.

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"Unlucky in love" or "Who can you trust?"

I flinched at the quiet knock on the door. "Arden? Are you all right in there?" It was Sheila's voice. I could hear him trying to get in. "Arden? Please, let me in," he said, pleading with his voice.

"Are you alone?" I asked, cautiously approaching the door.

"Yah, I'm alone. Please, Arden, unbolt the door," he said with a muffled voice. Standing back from the door I slapped the bolt open and then skittered away. Paw on my Tanto, ready to draw it, I watched as Sheila cautiously stepped into the room and close the door behind him.

"Arden, what's wrong?" he asked, concern on his face.

I backed away as he approached. "I have to leave, Sheila. I have to get away from this place. It's not safe for me here," I said babbling. I could see he didn't understand.

"Nobody's going to hurt you. There's nothing to be afraid of," he said, trying to calm me down.

"Damn it, Sheila! You don't understand! I don't want a repeat of what happened in the mews!" I was yelling again. Anxiety, fear, frustration and anger were all pulling me in different directions.

"But that won't happen again. The Duke has decreed that you're not an animal. Nobody will touch you again," Sheila said, trying to allay my fears.

He still didn't get it. "A proclamation won't do any good if they can't help themselves," I argued. Now Sheila was really confused. "Haven't you noticed my scent? How it affects you?" I asked.

I saw Sheila thinking about this. "Yes," he replied slowly, "but I thought it was just the Dragon's senses. You know, like the eyes."

Sadly, I shook my head. "No, love. It affects all humans. It's like an aphrodisiac to them. They can't help themselves around me," I said, trying not to sob.

I could see Sheila wince as he understood. "It will be OK, Arden," he said, putting his hands out to calm me down. "Give it a few days, three or four at tops. Then your scent won't bother them."

I was confused. Why would a few days help? Maybe he had found whatever we needed to restore Bjorn.

"How can a few days help? What? Are they going to build up a tolerance for it or something?" I asked, trying to understand.

Sheila straightened up, turning away from me. He leaned heavily against the bedpost for

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support. "It's not that," he said quietly. "You've been in heat. The musk will fade in a few days."

All I could do is stand there, looking at him. I was in heat?

"Remember our last night in my condo?" he asked. Before I could answer, he continued. "I told you that I had intentionally thrown myself into heat, but later I convinced you it was just a joke." He turned to me, his face full of anguish. "I really was in heat. I didn't think about your scent because of how powerful the Dragon's senses are. I knew you might still be in heat, but it didn't seem to matter," he said, explaining away his guilt.

His guilt. His fault. Sheila had kept the truth from me and it had almost cost me my sanity, twice now. I could feel the rage building in me. My anger, justified, I felt the flames being fanned as I thought about how Sheila had acted at the hotel. He was always ruttu, sucking up to me, looking to hump. He knew my hormones were causing me distress. He had even said so in the bar, though not directly. He was just waiting for my resistance to crumble.

"You bastard," I said in a low voice. I just stared at him, shaking my head as my words cut him like a knife. "You son of a bitch. You knew and you never told me. You *fucking* knew that I was in heat and you just let me suffer through it, wondering if I was going nuts," I growled, accusing him.

The shock of what I was saying stunned him. "Do you have any idea of what you put me through?" I said with a small voice. "I thought I was losing my sanity. I couldn't control my thoughts. My emotions were tearing me apart." I had no clue if he could comprehend what I was saying.

"In the mews, as I was being raped, my body responded to it. I *enjoyed* it," I said, hissing the last out. "Every fucking time one of them took me, I was horrified to find that I *liked* it! Even after they got tired of me and left me lying on the floor, my body wanted *more*," I was trembling at the memory now. "Do you have any idea what that did to me? I thought they had somehow broken me. Done something to me that had screwed up my mind. The only positive thing I can remember is that ***I...didn't...beg*** for it," I finished almost snarling.

He started to speak but I interrupted. "No!" I barked. "Get out!" Pointing to the door, I repeated myself, watching as he stared at me, unbelieving. Growling, I showed my fangs and drew my Tanto. "I said get OUT!" I yelled, ordering him from the room. Tears in his eyes, he fled the room. Enraged with anger I slammed the Tanto into the woodwork on the wall, sinking the blade deep into the veneer.

He had done this to me. Holding back the knowledge he held, he had destroyed all that I was. Born anew, I thought that it was a second chance, but now I knew that I had been robbed of my identity. It was his fault.

I turned and walked to the windows. I had never really paid attention to them. They looked like tall glass windows but in fact were doors leading to a terrace. The door swung open, allowing me to step out on the terrace, looking out into the darkening courtyard, the

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mews visible at its edge.

I was tired of being afraid. I was tired of running. I was tired of being "Little Miss Nice Bitch." I was ready to kill something. I was ready to embrace the machine. I would wrap its cold, calculating, deadly embrace around my spirit and God help the fool that crossed me.

As I felt the mask of the machine slipping over my mind I found it difficult to fall into the roll. A part of my mind was fighting, preventing it from happening. I still wasn't in control of myself yet and it annoyed me. If the machine couldn't control me, then I would adopt its veneer until it finally won the battle raging inside of me.

Behind me, I heard the door open slightly. "Arden?" It was the Duchess.

"You may enter," I said, formally. The door close as she walked over to where I stood. "I had two swords with me when I was captured. I want them returned," I stated flatly.

I felt her touch on my shoulder. "Are you all right Arden?" she asked. I turned and saw her react as she saw the cold, impassive mask I wore.

"The Arden you knew is gone," I informed her, turning to peer out at the city again.

"What's happened, my dear?" she asked, not understanding why I had changed.

"I had a very interesting revelation from our dear Vic," I said sarcastically. "It seems that I am in heat. He knew this. He was aware of the problems that it was causing me. He knew that it was driving me to the edge of insanity, and he said *nothing*." The last part was said as a growl as my anger flared.

I turned to the Duchess and watched her. She understood what I was saying, realizing the betrayal. "That's right. My scent, which you found so irresistible, was responsible for what happened to me in the mews. He knew about my scent, he said nothing, and in the end it cost me everything," I said, loathing and hatred filling my voice.

"Now," I said, once in an unemotional voice, "I am a warrior again. My life is service, death my ultimate reward. There is no room for this..." I said, gesturing to the gown that the Duchess had given me.

I reached back behind my head and started to undo the strap, but couldn't get it loose. Angry I looked around and spotted the Tanto in the wall. I brushed by Gwen as she hastily backed out of my path and grabbed the dagger. I yanked it from the wall, welcoming the sound of cracking and splintering wood. As I reached behind my neck to cut the dress from my body I was startled by a yell. "NO!"

"Please! Don't cut it," the Duchess said. "Please, Arden, we beg of you," she said, dropping to a knee, one hand outstretched, her face filled with agony.

I paused trying to understand this. "Why? What's so important about this dress?" I asked, pulling the dagger away from the fabric.

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"That dress belonged to our daughter. She passed away two winters ago. Please, my lady, we beg of you don't damage it. It's all we have left from her," she pleaded, tears in her eyes. I felt her sorrow wedge a crack in the mask of the machine. She had lost a daughter, and now she had given me the dress she so loved.

"Why? Why give the dress to me?" I asked, sheathing the Tanto and helping her up.

"You remind us so much of our daughter. She was about your size, the same green eyes and beautiful red hair. She was also very outspoken about the Pantos and their enslavement," she said gently. "You share the same love of life that she did. You have no idea how much it meant to us when you put the dress on."

The crack in the mask grew as I felt the words that she spoke. In a way, I was replacing the daughter she had lost, even if it was only for a night. "I will wear it," I replied, agreeing.

"No," she said, denying my acceptance. "Not this way. Like this, you aren't anything like our daughter. You're everything she hated, rigid, uncaring, cold and passionless. No, wearing the dress now, you do her no honor," the duchess said, shaking her head and stepping forward to put a hand on my shoulder. "This isn't you, we can tell. It's a mask you choose to wear, like the one we must wear as Duchess. Please, don't do this to yourself. Is what he did really that bad?"

I looked at her in disbelief. "Was it that bad? His actions killed me as sure as if he wielded the blade himself," I said harshly. She had no immediate answer, but wasn't willing to concede the fight.

After a few moments of thought, she resumed the argument. "In our chambers you said that you would live or die at his command. That you would give up anything for his love. Are you now telling us that was a lie? Are you saying that because of this, you're willing to throw that love away?" she asked, her question a stiletto aimed at my heart.

Was I willing to destroy my love over what had happened? Could I afford not to? How many times could I afford to have him betray me? He had kept the amulet from me, costing Bjorn his life and now trapping me in this body. Now he had almost cost me my life by holding something important from me again.

"Is it even remotely possible that you can find it in your heart to forgive him?" she asked, breaking my train of thought. I felt the mask crumbling. The machine had tried to control me and failed before. My love for Sheila wouldn't surrender itself so easily. I hung my head, looking at the scabbard for my Tanto. It represented me so well right now, rigid, empty and uncaring. It was a receptacle for the lethal precision of the blade, and yet useless without it. Without a purpose I had no reason to exist. Sheila was that purpose. Could I forgive him? Sure. But could I ever trust him implicitly again? That I didn't know.

I lifted my head and turned to Gwen. "Has anyone ever told you that you have a long snout for a human?" I asked.

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A smile split her face as she saw the change in my eyes. "Never to our face," she said smiling at me, knowing she had succeeded.

"And where does the newborn go from here?" she asked. With a shrug, I walked back out on the terrace.

"Well...I guess I won't be killing Sheila any time soon," I admitted, still irked at him.

"Hearing that pleases us to no end," Gwen said formally.

With a small smile, I reached out and embraced Gwen. She had given me back a piece of my soul that I had been prepared to destroy. With a small peck on the cheek, I backed away, knowing how she would react if I stayed too close. "I would appreciate it if you would have someone find Lord Butthead and let him know that I'm looking for him," I said sarcastically.

"Oh, dear me," I heard Gwen say. "We have so many Lord Buttheads in the castle. Which one would you like?" I had to laugh. I let the smile linger as she left, seeking to find Sheila for me.

I stood on the balcony for about ten minutes before I heard the door open and then close. Sheila's boots tread softly on the stone as he walked up behind me. I held perfectly still, tail frozen in place, watching two guards as they walked towards the gate in the wall.

"Well?" I asked, tired of waiting.

I heard Sheila sigh. "You're right. What I did was inexcusable. I should have warned you what to expect." He paused, I presumed, trying to think what else to say. "It's not enough to say I'm sorry, but I don't know what else I can do to earn your forgiveness.

I had a whirling conflict of emotions running through me. On one hand I wanted to hug him and tell him I forgive him. On the other, I still wanted to kick his ass. Of course there was the physical urge to turn and jump his bones, but that wasn't going to happen.

With a small shake of my head, I turned and leaned against the railing. I wasn't sure how to handle this. As I looked down at my hands, I remembered the Tanto I held. With a flick of my arm I tossed it to him, watching as he caught it, a perplexed look on his face.

"Draw it," I instructed. Unsure of my intent, Sheila drew the blade, looking at the dark stain still on its surface. "There's no question of forgiveness. I love you too much not to. The question now is *trust*," I said, pausing to collect my thoughts. "The blood on that blade is as much by your hand as mine. If you had told me what was happening, I would have been able to understand the situation. The experience wouldn't have destroyed me."

I took a step forward to stand in front of Sheila and grasped the hand with the dagger. Lifting it up near my chin I looked up into his eyes, pleading with mine. "I have to be able to trust you with my life the same way you've had to trust me. If I can't do that, then do me the favor of ending it now. I don't want to have to question everything you do, wondering if you're hiding something."

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While I watched I saw Sheila's expression change from horror at what I said to understanding, tears in his eyes. With a grim nod, he returned the dagger to its scabbard and turned to leave.

I wanted to stop him. Every fiber of my body wanted to reach out and hold him, but I didn't. I turned back to the view of the city, watching the stars as they slowly came out, unable to clear the tears from my eyes.

Sheila and I walked down the corridor towards the dining room, arm in arm, sans conversation. "*Psssst!* Wanna know a secret?" I asked in a loud whisper.

"Are you sure you can trust me with it?" he said, pride wounded.

Trying not to smile, I feigned indecision. "I suppose I'm willing to risk it," I said, coyly.

Sheila looked down at me, a small scowl on his face. "Fine. What is it?" he replied.

I pulled him to a halt and brought his head down close so I could whisper. "I still love you," I said quietly, giving him a quick kiss on the cheek. Sheila straightened up, giving me a scowl. "I do," I said nodding. I could still see he was hurt by what had happened earlier.

I put my hands on my hips and smiled at him. "So how does it feel...to join the club, that is?" I asked.

Now he was totally confused. "Join what club?" he asked guardedly.

"Why, the 'All Men Are Pigs' club," I said in my best, smart-ass voice.

Sheila got an offended look on his face. "I beg your pardon, but I am *not* a pig," he said, defending himself.

I let my jaw hang slack with a look of complete surprise. "Oh yah? From the looks of your hair I'd say you were raised in a barn. Or did you forget to comb it today?" I asked, again being sarcastic.

Sheila, ever conscious of looks as a female was shocked to think that he hadn't combed his hair. His hands flew up, frantically combing back his short-cropped hair before he remembered that he wore a crew cut. He looked down, glaring at me as I laughed at him. "God, I don't believe you fell for that," I said, squeaking it out as I laughed.

Sheila hung his head for a second and then smiled. "All right, you got me," he admitted.

Reaching out I hugged him, hard. "That's better. There's no way I was going to take you to dinner all depressed. Not the man I love," I said, resting my head against his chest. I felt him return the hug, giving me a kiss on the top of my head.

"Yah, but can you ever trust me again?" he asked quietly, hope in his eyes.

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I stepped back a bit and looked at him with my arms crossed, considering it. "Well..." I said, seriously, "I'm willing to give it another try. You gonna try to be honest with me from now on?"

Sheila smiled and nodded. "Just as long as I don't have to break any of the 'Guy Book of Rules' stuff, I guess so," he said using my old excuse.

Satisfied for the moment, I gave him another big hug. "Now," I said, taking his arm again, "shall we head to dinner? I believe the Duke and Duchess are waiting for us."

We had been formally announced as we entered the hall. It was a good-sized room and the guests had been idly standing around, chatting. The Duke and Duchess had met us just inside the door to greet us. Gwen knew what to expect; however, the Duke did not. As his eyes locked on me standing in his daughter's dress he had frozen, stunned at what he saw. As I watched him turn pale I was worried that he was going to faint. Fortunately he recovered quite nicely after shooting Gwen a seriously dangerous look.

The dinner had been marvelous. Since Sheila and I were the guests of honor, we had sat next to the Duke at his end of the table. This being a casual meal, they used one of the small dining tables, seating only about twenty people. The meal was obviously aimed at me as it was mostly different types of meats, though there were some vegetables scattered about. After the main meal we relaxed, chatting as they cleared the main course to bring dessert.

"So, Lord Sheen, tell us about your eyes. How did they get like that?" asked one of the young ladies at mid-table.

Sheila looked over at me for a second and winked. "I'm a half-breed," he stated.

The young woman looked rather confused. "I don't understand. A half-breed of what?" she asked. "Why I'm half dragon, my lady," he responded with a smile and a nod.

I glanced at the Duchess. She had a confused look on her face as tried to figure this out. She knew that neither of us should be half anything.

"I don't understand how..." the young lady said, letting the last part trail off.

"Oh, that's simple. Just take one dragon and one human," he said, as he held up his hands and began to gesture hesitantly, "then they... well he kind of....ummm... Surely you can imagine it." I have no idea how he kept a straight face. The looks on the people as he spoke were hilarious. There were scandalous looks all around the table. More than one young person blushed. I was busy trying not to gnaw off a finger while using my hand to choke back my laughter.

Unable to resist, I reached out and dipped the ends of my fingers in water and flicked them at Sheila. "Hey!" he said, flinching from the water. "What was that for?" he demanded of me.

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I couldn't resist laughing now. "Quit teasing the poor girl and tell her," I said, still chuckling. "Hey! Do you want to tell this story?" he asked, feigning anger

. I held up my hands in defense. "Oh no! No way! That story is your domain and I wouldn't *dare* to intrude," I said, shaking my head in denial.

A glance at the Duke showed he didn't know what to make of our exchange. The Duchess however was another matter. She was openly grinning like the cat that ate the canary. She understood that we had made up and was delighted to see the banter.

Sheila turned back to the young lady he'd been talking to. "As I was saying before we were so *rudely* interrupted," the last was directed at me, "my father spotted a maiden who had been tied to a poll as a virgin sacrifice to a dragon. A barbaric practice, and my father detested it. When he let her go he was terrified to find a dragon landing. It was a female of the species. Prepared to defend the maiden with his life, he was surprised when the dragon assumed a human form. They talked, fell in love and the rest is history." Sounded nice and tidy. I wondered if anyone would poke holes in it.

"Ahem," it was the Duke. "If we may ask a question of you?" he said, looking at Sheila. I wasn't sure I liked his tone.

"Please feel free, my lord. Arden and I have nothing to hide," he said, knowing it was a lie.

The Duke lifted his goblet, swirling the wine within. "We have seen very detailed drawings of all existing species of dragons, yet none have such...remarkable eyes. What type of dragon was your...mother?" he asked. I looked at Sheila, worried that the Duke may have come up with something.

Sheila just raised his goblet and took a sip. "That's very simple, my lord. My mother was a greater dragon of platinum and gold coloration," he said, almost smug. I wondered if Sheila had been doing some research I didn't know about.

The Duke laughed. "That's absurd. The last of the greater dragons was killed over a thousand years ago," he said, catching Sheila squarely.

"But my lord, you forget that Greater Dragons live for tens of thousands of years. The gestation period for an egg is over eight hundred years. I must agree that I look young for my age, but believe me when I say that if you measured a human's life against that of a dragon, my age would be less than seven days in human terms," Sheila reposted, drawing blood. Damn but he had this well thought out. The part about being seven days old was pretty good too.

"Yes," the Duke said, smiling, not yet ready to concede, "but you aren't a dragon. You are supposedly a half-breed."

Sheila got a hard look in his face. He didn't take well to the Duke's taunting tone. "It is true that I probably won't live nearly as long as my ancestors. In fact, from what I understand about my kind, I probably won't live much beyond my thousandth year," he

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said, taking a drink. "That is assuming that I'm not killed through accident or mayhem."

The Duke huffed a laugh. "Other than your eyes we see no reason to believe that you are anything other than someone who's had cosmetic magic," he said.

Sheila laughed at him. "My lord, you don't know the half of it. I'm stronger than a human, faster, I regenerate wounds almost fast enough to be seen, I see equally as well day or night and have a sense of smell that's actually superior to Arden's," he replied, itemizing some of his traits.

"Indeed," the Duke said, raising his eyebrows. "If you have no objection, we would enjoy a demonstration of your abilities some time," the duke replied, calling Sheila's bluff. I only hoped that the dragon didn't screw him over.

"I would be honored to give you a demonstration tomorrow, my lord," Sheila said, with a feral grin, his eyes targeted on the duke as he gave a small bow.

The Duke blinked for a second and then turned his sights on me. I could tell he had been looking for an opening to start in on us. "And what about you, Arden? What are you a half-breed of?" he asked.

It took all my willpower to keep my ears up and fangs covered. "Nothing, my lord. My parents were of the same race as I am," I answered courteously.

"Surely you can't be serious," he said, disbelief clearly showing on his face.

"I can and am serious, my lord," I replied tartly, "And please don't call me Shirley."

Sheila, who had been taking a drink, choked as he heard that last part. It took the Duke a few seconds to figure out what I had said. He didn't like being toyed with. Good. The feeling was mutual. Let's see how his royal assholieness handled some good old-fashioned sarcasm.

"Are you telling us that there are more of your kind?" he demanded.

I laughed. "Of course there are. Where I come from, my lord, humans are unknown. I only met lord Sheen by accident. Washed ashore in his lands by a storm, he found my broken and dying body. He healed me and nurtured me back to health. In payment I have sworn my life to his service," I said spinning a poetic version of my tale.

"So you're a trained fighter?" he asked, reappraising me.

"Yes, my lord. I am skilled at armed and unarmed combat. If my weapons are recovered soon, I would be glad to give a demonstration of my techniques some time," I said, beating him to the punch.

"Why not just use one of our swords? They are of very high quality," he ventured, assuming I was just dodging the question.

"My lord, I have been trained in weapons that I promise you have never seen the likes

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of," I said with all honesty. I'd love for them to show me a .50 cal sniper rifle or an M60. "I dare say that even my swords are unique compared to what I have seen in your lands," I added for good measure. If I were lucky, he would track down the missing blades and return them to me. If he did, I planned to kiss him just to freak him out.

The Duke was about to start back in when he was interrupted by a voice at the other end. "Lady Arden, how long have you been amongst humans?" It was Gwen. I could have kissed her had we been in. Not that I wouldn't have anyway, mind you.

I furrowed my brow in face concentration, looking to Sheila. "How long has it been, my lord? Thirty five, thirty eight seasons?" I asked, sounding unsure.

Sheila nodded. "Something like that," he replied.

"Wonderful," Gwen replied, "Then you should be able to offer us a detailed insight about the differences between your people and ours," She stated, offering me the floor. I looked at Sheila, my ears at attention. I hadn't expected this. He shrugged and nodded to me in encouragement. Trying to think of what to say I stood and slowly paced the table, looking at the people sitting at it.

"Well, my lady, the most obvious difference would have to be the way you fold your napkins," I said with mock seriousness, listening as a few people got the joke.

"We are most serious. Please, enlighten us," Gwen commanded politely.

I gave her a small bow and continued appraising the people at the table. "We both have fur, though yours is limited to the head whereas mine covers my body completely. My hearing is better than human as well as my sense of smell, though I don't see colors as clearly, and I have a tail which, of course, you don't have." I stated, covering the obvious. "We both gather socially for companionship. We both tend to take a single mate, although that's not a hard and fast rule for either of us. We both have trained fighting people to defend us. Unlike humans, though, we do not distinguish between our males and females in this roll."

I stopped behind a gentleman who was rather portly. I bent down, putting my left arm around his shoulder and patting his stomach with my right paw. "Both of us have those who have enjoyed some excesses in life," I said, noting chuckles at my comment. I smiled at him, only to see his terrified expression. With a wink and a laugh I gave him a peck on the cheek, then straightened up and moved on down the line.

The next was a young lady with some very fancy earrings. I used my paws to lift the earrings away from her neck, making an example of them. "Both our males and females wear rings in their ears, though nothing like this. This would definitely be too heavy for us to enjoy," I said, giving my ears an irritated flick. I saw a few of them nod in understanding.

Continuing on, I stood next to a young man with blond hair. "As with my people, there are differences in the coloring of our fur," I said, examining his long, blond hair. "Though I must admit, the range in color of the human...skin?" I paused, feigning having to think,

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"Yes, skin, is truly striking. I suppose it's your version of our body fur patterns."

The next was a woman that was wearing way too much perfume. I bent over and sniffed, practically gagging as I backed up. My face scrunched as I shuddered at the smell. I saw more than one person smile at my reaction. They could empathize. "You humans and your fake scents," I complained. "We don't have anything like that. Each and every one of us has a scent that is quite personal, as do humans. That you would wish to mask your scent is a mystery to me. I find nothing more pleasant than coming into a room and knowing that my lord was just there by his scent. It reassures me that he is well."

I paused, thinking about smell. "There is also home and hearth. The smell of one's family when one returns home, though sometimes that can be a curse," I said, pausing for a chuckle. "To walk by a place and know that someone you care for was recently there. The ability to track down someone you need by their scent alone. We rarely get lost, as the world is a road sign for those of us who can smell."

I was now at the end of the table, near Gwen. Walking around behind her, I placed my hands on her shoulder and rested my muzzle on her head, watching as a few people chuckled at the scandalous image. "In our culture we have people whose snouts are so long they are forced to intrude in other peoples businesses," I said, seeing shocked looks from the Duke and others, some with mouths covered so that their smiles wouldn't be seen.

I straightened up, and smiled down on Gwen as she shot me an indignant and hurt look. "In our land we call these people our rulers. They are the same as your Duke and Duchess. If you are lucky they are wise people who know when and where to intrude, making them a blessing. If you are unfortunate, you will have fools, or worse, dictators who try to control you rather than help you to find the proper path."

"And how do you find us?" the Duke asked. I looked down on Gwen as she waited for my answer. "I have not decided yet. What happened to me in the mews has left me bitter and resentful of your treatment of my kind. However, the care and consideration I have since been given by the Duchess has done much to repair this breach," I answered solemnly. The Duke looked distinctly uncomfortable, as did several others in the room. I could see people whispering, asking what had happened. I was tempted to tell them, but why ruin a good meal. I leaned down by Gwen's ear to whisper. "To your face, in public and as a compliment, my lady," I whispered with glee.

A handsome man with a shaved head occupied the chair next to Gwen's. Standing behind him, I rubbed my hands around the smooth skin with a dreamy look on my face. "Now this is fun." I said, my chuckle joined by others. "You'd never find any of our kind willing to shave their fur thusly. It's strange enough to see some without hair naturally, but to see someone intentionally remove it..." I said, practically drooling on the poor guy as I ran my paws over his scalp. From the looks around the table, both men and women found his predicament most humorous. He was also blushing a very vivid red. Before I moved on, I bent down and whispered in his ear, "Thanks for being such a good sport."

As I moved around the table I saw a young lady who was pregnant. "Here!" I

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announced, wrapping my arms around her, placing my head on her shoulders. She looked at me without fear. She was the youngest of the four girls in the bath. "This is the binding force that is universal," I said, reaching down to gently rub her pregnant womb. "Two people, mated, continuing the chain of life," I said excitedly "This is the keystone for all our peoples." I was grinning like a fox spotting a chicken. "Human, vixen, cat, all of us," I said, looking at her as she gave my paw a squeeze. "Nothing brings greater joy than watching ones cubs play and grow. Nothing is more satisfying than to help them learn and mature. Nothing can match the warmth and love you get from them. This is truly the one thing that binds us all together." I gave her a kiss on the brow before releasing her.

Again I stood and continued down to where Sheila sat. Placing my hands on his shoulders, I stood at attention, trying to look regal. "Duty. Honor. These are the ways of the warrior. Without a lord worthy of my pledge I am without these things. Without these things I am nothing. I know there are some amongst the humans who feel this way. They know what I say is true." I could see a couple of the men nod. "Others cannot understand what I speak of. I feel no animosity towards such people, only pity. They will never know the joy and pride I get from serving a lord worthy of my skills. I am lucky to have found one in Lord Sheen." Stepping back, I gave a deep and formal Japanese-style bow.

I then moved around towards the Duke, watching him as he watched me, unsure what I was going to do. Placing my hands on him, I again stood erect and faced the group. "A Ruler. Strong. Proud. Compassionate. Just. Sure of their decisions. Willing to accept the consequences of their mistakes, to learn from them, to better themselves and their people. This is the mark of a good leader. Wisdom is not something that is handed to you with a crown. It doesn't necessarily come with age or a good birth line. It takes a special kind of person to lead. Our peoples have both been blessed to have rulers with these qualities and cursed with rulers that lacked them." Again I stepped back and gave a formal bow.

I then returned to my chair, pausing before I sat down to look toward Gwen. "I suppose, my lady, that in the end our peoples are far more similar than different," I said, and took my seat. Around the table I saw some people nodding as they chatted quietly. The Duke looked at me oddly. He wasn't sure what to make of me. What I had said as I stood behind him was not what he expected. Gwen on the other hand had a small, devious smile on her face. She was up to something and it made me nervous.

As we sat and consumed a mousse-like dessert, the conversation was livelier than before, now that the water had been broken. Most people asked honest questions that they desired answers to. Others tended to ask loaded questions, or ones that were phrased with a slant. This was useful as it let me know who our opposition would be.

In the end though, it was a good meal and an enjoyable experience.

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"Bio Warfare" or "How I learned to love the Pheromone"

After giving us suitable time for dinner to settle set, we retired to a large commons room. Besides being filled with tables and chairs, the room also had a stool positioned in front of the dark fireplace. The Duchess had arranged for a bard to come and entertain us after dinner.

The bard was a younger looking woman, in her early twenties. Tall, with fine silver hair that almost haloed her head, her alabaster skin gave her the look of an albino. The only things with any color were the vivid, golden eyes that appeared to float on a pool of white. She also had the sharp, upturned ears that ended in points that so reminded me of Tolken's elves. The guitar she played had eight strings; not the kind we're used to, but with eight separate tonal strings, which made for a quite wide neck on the guitar. Had her fingers not been so long, I couldn't see how she would ever reach them all.

As I was enjoying the entertainment I became aware of the fact that Gwen was no longer amongst us. Curious, I peered around to see where she might have gone, finally spotting her silhouette. She was standing, looking out off of a balcony that gave a view of the commons, taking care to stay out of the light. Curious as to what was up, I excused myself and set out to find my way up there.

I did my best to quietly sneak up behind her, hoping to discover whom she was observing. "You know," she spoke softly as I approached, "My daughter couldn't sneak worth a damn in that dress, either," and she peered at me as I gave a sheepish smile.

Joining her, I watched the festivities for a bit before my curiosity finally got the better of me. "Beg pardon, Gwen, but just why are you up here spying on folk?"

She shushed me and pointed to the Duke. "Watch his eyes. Watch who he exchanges looks with," she directed coldly.

As I watched the Duke I saw him coyly look over at a young blond sitting at a table, facing him. She was blatantly playing up to him. "That's who he's going to bed tonight," Gwen said darkly.

"How long?" I asked.

She let out a mournful sigh, "Too long."

"Well," I ventured, "I presume that, if this were war, our objective would be to eliminate the competition and get the Duke in bed with you, right?" Gwen just nodded, watching the exchange. "I also presume mayhem is out of the question," I said, smiling as her head whipped about at my comment.

It was time to gather intelligence. Over the period of the next twenty minutes I managed to draw out Duke Butthead's system for cheating on Gwen. Apparently the young lady would pick some out-of-the-way location for their rendezvous. She would then send a page with a message to fetch the Duke.

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As she described their system I continued looking over the crowd, a plan formulating in the back of my mind. I just needed a decoy for this little misadventure. To my surprise I spotted just the unlucky target. It was Darrin, the supervisor from the mews who had come to take me from the cats that fateful day.

A large grin covered my face. "Gwen, my dear, you just leave this up to good old Arden. I'll see to it that the Duke spends his night with you," I said, giving her a quick kiss on the cheek.

This was going to be fun.

I waited in the hallway leading from the commons room towards the mews having sent a page in after Darrin, my first target for this evening's endeavors. The page was to tell Darrin that he was needed in the mews immediately. That should send him running.

It wasn't too long before I heard him coming and readied myself, waiting for him to round the corner. He stormed around the corner, intent on finding out what was so important only to see me standing there, ready to take his head off. The man never had a chance to make a noise. I grabbed an arm with one paw and his neck in the other, using my leg to block his feet as I threw him to the ground.

With a snarl I put my muzzle next to his face and breathed in the smell of his fear. "Well, well, well. What do we have here?" I asked, squeezing my claws into his throat.

He lay on the ground, frozen in fear. "Please. Mercy, my lady," he begged.

"Mercy?" I asked, perking my ears up. "Are we talking mercy like the cats you killed when you took me from the mews?" I laid back my ears and snarled again. "Or maybe the mercy you showed me as you *raped* me along with the others?" I asked as an alternative.

"Please, my lady, you can't do this!" he whimpered.

I laughed in his face. "As long as I get rid of the body, I can take my revenge anyway I want too," I said with a low chuckle.

"Please, my lady, don't kill me," he continued to beg, "I'll do anything you ask. I'll give you anything. Please!" He knew he was dead. Step one was now complete.

"How would you like to earn your life back?" I asked quietly, giving a small humorless smile

"My life?" he squeaked out.

"Yes," I said, drawing the word out. "I'll even let you keep all your parts intact, too." I glancing down at his crotch for a second before looking back at him, snapping my jaw shut. He tried to swallow a couple of times.

"What do I have to do?" he asked.

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Phase one was complete.

Darrin and I stood just outside the commons in the hallway. "I don't know about this," he said, "The Duke's as likely to kill me as you are."

I gave him a sweet, sugary smile and batted my eyes at him. "Yes, but he won't dine first," I said, watching him swallow again.

"OK. You know what to do, right?" I asked, making sure he knew the plan.

He nodded. "Yes, my lady. I'm supposed to watch the minstrel until she leaves and follow at a discrete distance. Then I wait till she sends a page for the Duke before I move in and seduce her. But I don't see how that's going to work. She's never paid any attention to me before," he whined.

I gave a quiet laugh. "That's because you never had me giving you a hand before," I explained with a light laugh.

"Now kneel," I ordered, my voice again hard. When he hesitated, I used a leg to knock his knees out from under him, forcing him down to where he would be convenient. "Now just hold still," I directed. I moved around behind him and began rubbing my muzzle around and over his neck and face.

"Whoa. Hey, what are you doing?" he asked.

"Just shut up and keep still," I commanded. After a few seconds I had layered him pretty good. I figured I had reached my stopping point when he tried to paw at me with his hands.

"Enough," I said, smacking the back of his head. "If she doesn't go for you now, she's dead. Get yourself together and go do your job. Fail me and I will dine on mountain oysters tonight." With a shove I pushed him out into the commons and watched as he headed over to a table.

Phase two was now complete.

"So," the Duchess said. "What's next?" I smiled as we watched our target leave the commons before the end of the show.

"Right on time," I commented, watching Darrin follow her out of the room. "Have you picked a location yet?" I asked, smiling at Gwen.

"The war room," she said with a sly grin. How appropriate.

"Fine. I'll intercept the page and then meet you there," I said with a wink, fading back into the shadows.

I caught up with Darrin a few minutes later. There was no problem tracking him as I had really laid it on thick. I'm amazed that the first female that happened along hadn't sidetracked him. Of course my threat may have had something to do with it. He didn't know it was a bluff. It was a good thing he hadn't had the balls to call me on it.

I followed them around until they had gotten almost to the barracks. She had apparently chosen one of the armories for her rendezvous with the Duke. As I watched, she stopped a page, spoke to him and then sent him off to find the Duke. After the page left, I watched Darrin make his move.

Following my instructions perfectly, he got very friendly. Although she resisted at first, I watched as my musk took over and her attitude slowly changed. Satisfied that my plan would work, I hightailed it out after the page. I had a message to change.

Phase three was complete.

I got lost twice on the way to the war room. Heck of a time to get turned around in those stupid halls. "You are in a maze of twisty passages, all alike." The phrase came to me from that old dungeon game. Slightly out of breath, I skidded to a halt in front of the door to the war room, then pushed my way in.

I heard the door slam shut behind me. "What took you so long? I was getting worried!" Gwen exclaiming.

"Sorry, I got lost on the way here. For some reason they don't have big signs saying 'War Room this way' posted all over the castle," I quipped.

Hurrying to complete my task before the Duke arrived, I saturated Gwen with my musk the same way I had Darrin. Unfortunately, threats of dismemberment weren't going to keep her hands off of me in the process. "Gwen! Please! Let me finish so I can get out of here. You don't want your husband walking in on us, do you?" I asked.

She gave me a look that scared me. "It could be interesting," she said with a glimmer in her eye.

I decided to cut the treatment a little short. Lord knows I didn't need to deal with the Duke as well as the Duchess. Batting her hands away with my paws I skittered out of her reach. "Enough, wench," I said with a wink, blowing her shocked face a kiss before ducking out the door.

I barely made it around the far corner of the corridor before the Duke came into sight. As I watched he slipped into the room. Quietly I padded back over to the door and used the small dagger that Gwen had given me to wedge the latch so it wouldn't open. He was trapped.

I could hear his angry curses as he tried to get the door open. He was pissed that we had

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tricked him. As I leaned against the door I tried to keep from laughing as he slowly changed his tune. Once I heard them getting into it, I removed the dagger and walked away.

I love it when a plan comes together.

It was a glorious night out. I had wandered around for a bit after helping Gwen, and had wound up on the roof of the castle. Strolling along the ramparts I came to a spot that showed off the lights of the city as the river divided them, the stars floating above in contrast. I had climbed up on one of the blocks that leaned out somewhat from the wall and sat down, spreading my dress out around me.

I sat there, looking at the stars and enjoying the panorama of lights. They weren't our stars. None of the constellations that I knew were there. To add spice to the mix, there were three moons. It showed just how far from home I really was, not that being trapped in Sheila's body didn't do that for me. It had been fun to use my scent for something positive, but that only reaffirmed just how much danger I was in at the moment. I'd have to be careful.

I closed my eyes as a breeze blew by me. The cool wind combined with the color of the leaves told me that fall was on its way. I wonder what the winters would be like. I doubted that I would suffer much, but I worried for Sheila. That was assuming we were trapped here that long.

I knew the amulet I wore still had power. It had given me access to return to my body, though it was still cool to the touch. I suppose it hadn't yet recharged sufficiently. Who knew how long it would take? We could be stuck here for years, or even decades.

"M'lady?" I heard behind me, breaking my musings. Turning I saw Theolin standing several feet behind me. He wore a worried look on his face. "M'lady, please come down from there," he asked. I smiled at him. "Hey Theo, good to see you. Come on over here and enjoy the view," I said as I patted the stone beside me.

He took a step forward, arm outreached and then hopped back as if I was going to bite him. "M'lady, please! I beg of you. Come down from there," he pleaded, his face filled with anguish. I couldn't figure out what was wrong with the guy. "Please, m'lady," he beseeched.

"All right," I answered quietly as I climbed down off of the stone. Theolin was breathing hard. Pale and shaking, he looked like he would collapse. I stepped forward, reaching out to him but stopped as he flinched away. "What's wrong?" I asked. He just stared at me, trying to find his voice. Again I stepped forwards. This time he didn't flinch, allowing me to touch him.

I looked up into those haunted eyes and saw my reflection in the flickering torchlight. "Theo, please tell me what's wrong," I begged.

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He swallowed. "I'm sorry, my lady. Sitting on the stone, you looked..." he stopped, trying to control his emotions. "From the back like that, you resembled the Lady Elaine. She... That...that was her favorite spot, m'lady," he explained.

He had lost someone close to him, someone who enjoyed the view as I did. "She... It was..." he said, forcing the words out. "Two winters ago, m'lady, she threw herself from that spot. When I saw you there... You look so much... For a second..." he broke down, crying for someone he obviously cared a great deal about. I stepped up and embraced him, trying to take some of the pain.

I thought about what he had said, that this Elaine had died two winters ago. Gwen had said the same thing of her daughter. Could Elaine have been Gwen's child? They both talked about how I resembled this other person, but the ramifications of this were beyond my immediate scope. Was Gwen trying to replace a lost daughter? Was she trying to find a way to endear me to the Duke? Maybe I was reading too much into this.

"I'm sorry, m'lady," Theolin said as he broke from me.

"There's nothing to be sorry for," I replied, knowing the pain of loss. "This Elaine you spoke of---who was she?" I asked.

Theolin sniffed, wiping a tear while trying to compose himself. "She was the daughter of the Duke, m'lady," he said stoically. So it was her daughter. She had killed herself as I had done.

"Why?" I asked. He looked at me, uncertain as to answer. "Please, Theo, tell me why this happened." I begged, "Make me understand."

He turned away from me for a second, scanning the roof of the castle. "She had just witnessed the death of her...lover," he said, looking for the last word. So she had lost love and thrown away her life in response.

I put my paw on his shoulder and gave it a small squeeze. "I'm sorry," I said quietly, "I didn't know. I grieve for your loss. She obviously meant a lot to you."

He turned his head, looking at me for a second. "Obviously not enough," he said cryptically and walked away. What did he mean by that?

I found my way back to the stairs leading down while thinking about what I had learned. This was going to make my life more complicated than I ever wanted. The last thing I needed was to try and fill the shoes of Gwen's daughter.

On my way back to my room I spotted the little shit as I was on my way back to my room. There, strolling nonchalantly down the hall, accompanied by an overgrown goon who looked like Hulk Hogan's evil twin brother, was the curly-blond-haired fop who had ordered my capture.

"You!" I shouted as I broke into a charge, my ears laid back, snarling. I really need to

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control those outbursts as it warned the little bastard I was coming. He turned and ran as his bodyguard moved to intercept me.

I ran straight for the goon, fangs bared, trying to convince him that I wanted to run through him. At the last minute I dropped and slid between his legs, smacking his hands away as he tried to grab me. *Sucker!*

The only problem came when I tried to pop up. Planting my feet to the floor, combined with my momentum, gave me the leverage to pop back up to my feet. The only drawback to this plan was the dress. The damned thing was so long that I was now standing on it. Of course I immediately fell flat on my face. The next thing I knew, that blasted gorilla was sitting on me, pinning me to the floor.

"Get off of me, you son of a bitch!" I ordered as he pinned my arms safely away from his face.

"I'm sorry, my lady, but I can't do that," he stated, having safely immobilized me.

"Look, one way or another I'm going to hunt that bastard down and clip him. You're just delaying the inevitable," I snarled.

He let out a sigh of exasperation. "Please, my lady. You don't want to say such things about him. That can get you in rather serious trouble," he warned.

"Oh ya, like I'll get in trouble with the Duke or something?" I replied with all possible sarcasm, trying NOT to sound a valley girl.

"Not him, my lady; the Emperor," he stated emotionlessly.

That got my attention and stopped my struggling. "Why does the Emperor care about him?", I asked, worried that I already knew the reason.

"He is the Crown Prince, my lady. The Emperor would be most put out if someone killed the little bastard," he explained.

Little bastard? That was a new title of respect. I turned my head to get a good look at the guy pinning me. "Little bastard?" I asked.

"Truce?" he countered.

I thought about it. It *was* kind of fun being under him, but I didn't want to get him too worked up. I nodded. "Truce."

He got off of me and gave me a hand up. Carefully checking the gown for damage, I was relieved to find it only dusty. I had gotten lucky and not ripped anything. With a flick of my head I tossed my hair back over my shoulder, then I faced my opponent. Placing my hands on my hips, I sized Giagantor up. "You were saying? About the little bastard, that is," I prompted.

He glanced down the hallway to verify that nobody was around, and then decided

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discretion was the better part of valor by gesturing for me to follow him. As we walked along the hallways he explained, "The Prince is a disgrace to the Crown, my lady. I loathe having to guard him but it is my duty."

I could understand this man. For duty and honor he must protect this offensive piece of filth. "So if I kill him, you get in trouble, right?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"Aye, my lady. I would be in it up to my neck. Most likely I would be transferred to a frontier fort on the border of the iced lands," he stated rather flatly.

"I know!" I said with mock cheer. "How about I just maul him a little?" I begged. "All I want are a pair of plums---honest. You can keep the rest." Sadly, I already knew the answer.

Laughing he patted me on the back, confirming it. "I would love to permit that, my lady. However, as a warrior I know you realize my position. Should harm befall him I would hate to have to hunt you down. I think that neither of us desires such a conflict."

Well, wasn't that just ducky. If I take out numbnuts then I have to deal with Gonad the Guard-barian here, and I was realistic enough to realize that I probably wouldn't win that fight, not as a vixen. Hell, I'm not sure I could win it in my old body. You don't get to be the guardian of the Crown Prince by being a pushover.

I suppose I would have to change tactics. I may not be able to kill or maim the little bastard, but I could think of a few ways to make his life a living hell.

Once I got back to our room, I found that Sheila was already in bed, asleep. Careful not to make any noise, I managed to get that dress off without having to use the dagger on it. I slipped under the covers, snuggling up close to Sheila, happy to be with my mate.

For a few moments I had considered waking him up the way he used to do to me when I was a "he" and he was a "she". (Did I get that right? Yep.) As pleasant as those memories were, I decided to let sleeping dragons lie. Maybe I'd give him something to wake up to in the morning, if he didn't beat me to it.

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Wrongly Accused

I awoke in the morning, sprawled out over most of the bed. Sheila was gone. From the look of the sun I had slept well past dawn. I wondered how late I got in last night. It was kind of hard to keep track of time without a watch..

I uttered a low moan as I crawled out of bed and stretched. I had not slept well last night. The revelation about my scent, combined with what I had learned about Gwen's daughter, had haunted my dreams.

My life was so out of control, and yet so in control right now. For the first time since I started this bizarre journey I was seriously beginning to wonder just who or what I was, or even wanted to be. I wasn't even sure about my quest any more. The path of the bear or the dragon no longer bound me. If anything, I was simply following their lead out of habit.

As I sat down in front of the mirror I examined my image. This wasn't Sheila's image any more; it was now mine. Even when I, my spirit, had returned to the studio, I had maintained this form. There was something basic here that I was missing. Just what the hell was happening to me?

I picked up a brush and began to work on my hair. Had I changed so much? Is this all that I am now? What if I never recover my old form, would that be so bad? Would it really be such a tragedy if Nanuk ultimately passed? Maybe it was time for such to happen. All things do pass in time. If it wasn't intended to be so, then why had the creator made the spirits so limited?

And then there was Sheila. I hated to admit it to myself, but I wasn't sure what was happening to our relationship. Was it right to have blamed him for what had happened to me? He had just thought that it was the enhanced sense of smell that was affecting him. I had blamed him for not warning me, but would I have known to do so in his place? I know I had forgiven him, but did he forgive me for turning on him? His not waiting for me before retiring to sleep had bothered me a little. Not waking me up in the morning, or waiting for me to wake up had definitely screwed with my day. This was the first night I could ever remember where we hadn't even spoken to each other, and it disturbed me. Something was definitely wrong.

Finished with my fur, I replaced the brush on the table and walked over to the armoire. Neatly hanging within its confines were what clothing I had. Four dresses, one gown and the housecoat that had been there comprised the inventory. I claimed to be a warrior, but when I had commissioned some clothing from the three sisters I hadn't even thought about my ability to fight in them. How could I have made such a simple mistake? It didn't make sense. I would have to see if there were any women warriors and find out about getting better equipped.

I picked a simple dress that laced up in the front. Pulling it over my head, I fought with it for a little bit as I worked to get my tail through the slot. Putting on a pullover was a

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real pain without help. Lacing up the front was a heck of a lot easier than fighting with ties behind my back though.

Again returning to the mirror I checked my appearance. It was satisfactory but somehow didn't feel right. No, for some reason I didn't look right. I don't know why, but there was just something that was out of place. Maybe it was just because I was coming down off of the hormones. I only hoped it wasn't the hormones that had made me so happy and content. Last thing I needed was to become a prick again.

With a bit of a sigh I ran my paws through my hair one last time as I checked it out in the mirror, then headed out the door. I wasn't particularly hungry, and I wanted to find Sheila. I was in dire need of a hug right about now and he was just the bloke to do it for me.

After fifteen minutes of asking around I discovered that Sheila was out in the garden. Another five minutes of searching found him standing near the entrance to the hedge maze. As I approached I gave him my best 'I see something I want' walk, along with a big smile. He made it a point not to watch me directly as I walked up. He was playing hard to get. That was fine with me. I know how to play this game, too.

As I sidled up to him I turned around, swishing my tail under his nose as I prepared to sit on his lap. "Don't touch me," he spat, batting my tail away. I turned around, hurt at the tone in his voice. As my eyes locked onto his I knew fear from him for the first time. He was angry, and I could feel it.

He stood up and glared at me, forcing me back with his anger. "Don't you ever touch me again!" he commanded, raising his voice. As I slowly backed away I tried to think of how I might have offended him, but I failed. "What did I do?" I asked weakly as he started to turn.

His head snapped back around at me, a snarl of teeth showing. "You have the balls to ask me that?" he demanded not waiting for an answer. "You, the person who ripped me a new asshole because you couldn't trust me. You want to know what you did wrong? What? Do you think I'm stupid or something?"

His eyes were literally glowing, forcing me down towards the ground as fear overwhelmed me. "You two-timing slut! Don't you think I would know if you were cheating on me?" he demanded.

My god, he must have found out about what happened with Gwen! "Sheila, please! You don't understand. I didn't intend for it to happen!" I said, pleading as he started to turn away from me.

He turned, raising a fist to strike me. I was stunned by his actions, frozen, kneeling on the ground, unable to defend myself. "No, not you," he said with a low growl. "No. Maybe I should go take it out on your lover. Since you didn't intend for it to happen, it must be your lovers' fault."

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"No!" I cried out. "Please, not Gwen. She couldn't help herself," I pleaded, praying that he wouldn't do something stupid.

I saw Sheila's jaw drop in surprise. "Gwen?" he asked, confused. "As in Gwendolyn, the Duchess?" His face a mask of disbelief and outrage he spun around, looking for a target for his rage, only to find me again. "That's just peachy. Tell me, is there ANYONE in this castle that you haven't slept with?"

As he started to walk away I climbed to my feet, chasing after him. "Sheila, please!" I said grabbing his arm. He stopped and spun, backhanding me with the arm I had grabbed, sending me flying. I landed hard, stunned by the blow to my muzzle, as the world spun around me.

Forcing myself to roll over, I tasted blood. As I reached for my snout, I suddenly sneezed blood, clearing my sinuses. All I could do was lie there, dripping onto the manicured grass as I watched Sheila storm away, wondering if I had lost him for good.

I sat on a bench by the entrance to the hedgerow, trying to figure out what had just happened. I was at a total loss. If he didn't know about Gwen, then what the hell was he upset about? There hadn't been anyone else for him to be jealous over. I hadn't betrayed his trust. Not intentionally. Maybe that's what had been chewing me up this morning. Somehow I doubted it.

As I sat there, my emotions in turmoil, I became aware of the fact that Gwen had sat down next to me. All I could do was to look at the blood on my hands and dress. I was still terrified by Sheila's anger and its physical manifestation.

"Arden," she said quietly, placing a hand on my shoulder. "What happened here? Who struck you?" I could hear the concern in her voice as she tried to find out what had happened to me.

I looked up from my hands, my eyes still haunted by what had happened. I could see the echo of my pain in her eyes. "It was Sheila. He thinks I've been cheating on him," I said quietly. I could see the thoughts passing through Gwen's head as she assumed it was her. "Not you," I said interrupting her train of thought. "He thinks I have been with another man."

Gwen nodded. "Did you speak to your mate last night?" she asked, clasping her hands in her lap.

I shook my head. "No, he was asleep when I returned, and was gone when I awoke," I explained.

Once again, Gwen nodded. "We didn't have much time to talk last night," she stated. "Otherwise I would have mentioned that I saw him watch as you followed your decoy out of the room."

Oh god, he didn't think I had humped the stable hand, did he?

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"After my husband and I were finished with our initial encounter," she continued, "we returned to the commons. Your decoy showed up not to long after. Sheila made it a point to walk by him on the way out. His expression wasn't one of pleasure afterwards."

My god, he must have smelled my scent all over the guy and assumed I had slept with him.

"I sent Theolin to locate you, but he obviously didn't find you before you retired," she finished, telling of her attempt to warn me and failing.

So that's why Theolin had come looking for me on the roof. Only he had been so shaken by what he had seen that he had forgotten all about his mission to find me. Christ. I'd really done it again, hadn't I? In my enthusiasm to help Gwen I had inadvertently made Sheila think that I had betrayed him.

Gwen read the expression of total despair on my face and tried to cheer me up. "Don't worry. He will calm down soon and we will try to bring him around to his senses. Surely he can't stay mad with you forever," she said not understanding the depth of my screw-up.

"I suppose you're right, Gwen," I said without enthusiasm. "There's only one little problem with that." I turned and looked her in the eye. "I thought Sheila had found out about you. When he threatened to take his anger out on my lover..." I shrugged.

There was nothing I could do as I watched my words sink in. Gwen now realized how badly I had screwed this up. Side by side we sat, contemplating what had happened.

"Tell me, Arden," Gwen said. "When you were a man, how would you have reacted if Sheila had slept with another man?"

I didn't have to think hard on that one. I had been ready to kill Bjorn when I had first found out about him. "I would have been very jealous," I replied tersely, not wanting to dwell on Bjorn's memory.

"And how would you have felt if you had found her in bed with another woman?" she asked, a small smile on her face.

I thought about what she said. I don't think I would have been very mad about it. Heck, it was almost a stock fantasy for most guys to watch a little lesbian action, or even better to get invited in on the action. Gwen laughed as she saw the expression on my face change. I was grinning like a fox in the chicken coop.

"I thought so," she said, smiling. "I'm sure Sheila was more upset at the thought of you cheating with a man than with me. I doubt he'll hold a grudge against us."

Gwen stood and held a hand out to help me up. I accepted it, embracing her, thankful that I had such a friend in this world. As we separated, she smiled and reached up to wipe a tear from my face.

I was startled by the sound of birds taking off from the hedgerow next to us. Turning, I

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was shocked to see a man with a crossbow taking aim. Pushing away from Gwen with all my strength I tried to separate us, destroying his aim, only to see the bolt fly as he released the catch.

Dipping my knees I arched my back, dropping my body down below the flight of the quarrel. As it passed by I twisted towards the assassin, turning to charge him. The assassin, seeing that he had missed me, turned and fled into the maze, discarding the useless crossbow. He had a small head start, but I was quicker than him. When I caught him he would pay for his actions.

Digging my claws into the soft grass I used them like cleats to give me extra purchase as I charged after him. Rounding a corner I found I was hot on his heels. With a last burst of speed I dove forward, tackling his legs from behind, dragging him to the ground.

As we came to a stop I tried to scramble up onto his back, but was again foiled by that stupid dress as it snagged on the ground under my knees. Using my paws to yank the hem up away from my feet, I leapt forward only to have him roll over before I could try to pin him.

He saw my attack and countered with a right cross to the muzzle, striking my already injured nose and causing the pain to flare. Momentarily stunned, I felt him knee me in the ribs, driving me off of him. I barely regained my wits in time to see him draw a stiletto as he straddled me and prepare to strike.

Now as I fought in defense of my life I grabbed the wrist of his dagger hand as he swung it down, stopping it inches from my neck. There was no way I could stop him with one hand so I tried to reach my other paw over to help only to have it captured by his left hand and held at bay.

I looked into his rage filled face and recognized him. He was the man in the mews who's nose I had broken. It was still purple and discolored. With a quick lunge of my head, I tried to strike his injured face, but he reacted too quickly, laughing at me.

"His highness will pay me well for your demise, bitch," he bragged, forcing the stiletto down slowly towards me, drawing out his attack. There was no way I could support his weight behind the dagger, and there was no way I could throw him off.

Frantic for a solution I remembered the basics of self-defense. I would have only one chance, and it would hurt me almost as much as it would him, but it was my only chance at life. "I don't think so, asshole," I spat back.

With a deep breath, I exhaled through my shout, spraying his eyes with blood, causing him to flinch and lift up a little. Now blessed with a little room, I brought my knee up behind his groin as hard as I could while pulling my arms down and outward, forcing him off balance.

I screamed as the stiletto pierced my shoulder, impaling me onto the grass, but I was ready for it. His neck, now down next to my face, was perfectly positioned. I turned my scream of pain into a war cry as I sank my fangs into his neck, my jaws encompassing his

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windpipe all the way around behind the ear.

Biting down, I was rewarded by a choked gagging sound as he tried to cry out. I tried to concentrate on maintaining the pressure as he twisted the stiletto dagger, trying to cause me to scream out in pain. Now totally committed to the fight for my life, I began shaking my head from side to side like a wild animal, trying to rip his throat out.

I momentarily gagged as a stream of blood burst forth into my mouth, choking off my breath. Looking down my snout I could see that he knew he was dead. His eyes, betrayed the fear I couldn't smell. He had tried to kill me and now was paying the ultimate price.

I continued to shake and rip at his throat even after I watched the light fade from his eyes and he collapsed on top of me. It wasn't until I realized that the blood no longer flowed that I released him, spitting blood and flesh from my mouth as I gagged, gasping for breath.

Using my right arm I managed to slide the corpse off of me, freeing me from the dead weight of my would-be assassin. Now able to sit up, I supported myself on my good arm and retched the blood and other contents of my stomach, trying to purge myself of his filth.

Once I was sure I wouldn't start puking again, I sat up and tried to remove the stiletto. Although I pulled with what remaining strength I had, I was unable to budge it. The damned thing must be wedged between the bones or something.

I gave up on trying to remove the stiletto and just sat there, waiting for someone to come. After a few minutes of this though, it became apparent to my pain-dulled mind that I didn't hear anyone coming.

Concerned, I forced myself unsteadily to my feet and retraced my path back to the entrance of the maze. As I stumbled around the corner I was stunned by what I saw. Gwen lay on the ground; the quarrel was buried in her chest.

Hastily I staggered over to where she lay and kneeled by her side, checking to see if she was alive. My heart knew some joy as I felt a pulse and saw her breathe, though the large wet pool of blood on her chest proved that she was in mortal danger.

Once again I staggered to my feet and began walking towards the castle, shouting for help. As I approached the outer corner of the hedge maze I saw two guards come scrambling in my direction. I could see the shock and dismay on their faces as I collapsed into their hands.

I felt the world spinning around me as they lowered me gently to the ground, careful of my wound. The last thing I remembered as the darkness took me was begging them to save Gwen.

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Revelations

I awoke lying on the bed in our room. There was no pain. In fact, I had no sensation of feeling at all. Opening my eyes, I saw the bed sitting on a patch of stone floor, surrounded by a curtain of inky black darkness.

"Ahhh. You're awake. It's about time, little one," a deep, resonant voice said off to the side of me. Looking for the voice, I saw a lesser dragon step from the shadows and stand next to the bed.

"Where am I?" I asked, looking around, trying to peer beyond the veil of black.

"You're on a layer of the spirit plane just beyond the reach of the astral," he explained. "I brought you here because, simply put, we need to talk." As he spoke, he gestured causing a chair to appear upon which he sat.

He wanted to talk, eh? I wasn't so sure I wanted to talk to him. The dragons had been giving me a bit of a hard time of late. Without any effort I sat up, rotated, and crossed my legs on the bed, facing him.

It occurred to me after I had sat up that the last thing I remembered was passing out after getting stabbed. Looking back down in the bed where I had been lying I saw my body. A large bandage was wrapped around my body's chest and shoulder, blood showing through where I had been wounded. It suddenly occurred to me that the last time I had seen Illiam I had been dead. He had intercepted my spirit while it was passing through the barriers with Bjorn, on my way to the hereafter.

"How bad is the wound?" I asked, concerned. I didn't want to die. I felt myself beginning to panic at the thought of not being able to speak to Sheila again, never to explain what really had happened.

The dragon glanced at my body and chuckled. "It's not a bad wound. The blade *was* poisoned, however you have an immunity to it," he explained. "Which brings us to part of what we need to talk about."

Relief flooded through my being. I would live. Despite the best attempts of an assassin, I had once again cheated death. "All right," I said, nodding to Illiam. "What did you want to discuss?"

Getting up a little, he scooted his chair closer to me. "The one who's name we must *not* speak," Illiam declared, lowering his voice. "Unless his attention is drawn to us by his name, he will not be able to hear us. It would not bode well for either of us were he to learn of what I shall tell you."

So Lakesh didn't have his talons as deep into the Guardian Dragon as I thought he did. That was a pleasant surprise. That meant that there was hope for me to ultimately complete this quest without getting screwed (literally or figuratively) by Lakesh. With a small smile, I nodded for Illiam to continue.

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"The best place for us to start is the beginning. When you crossed the barriers for the first time, your wish was to speak with Sheila and for her to become your love," he said, stating ancient history. "This was not a good thing for your quest. Though you didn't know it yet, by falling in love with Sheila you have created a tremendous problem in the scheme of things. The least of which is the fact that she delayed your quest for over two weeks."

Wow. I knew that was true, but when it was put like that I guess I did screw things up big time by falling out of lust and into love with her. I bet it didn't help for her to wish us both into this world, either. That was just more of a delay.

"I see you understand," Illiam commented, watching my expression. "Then know this: From the day Khansman touched *his* brand and became a pawn of *him*, Sheila has been the true target of the attempts on your life. Had she been eliminated, all hindrances would have been removed from your path."

Christ on a crutch! It made sense! The first attack was a drive-by shooting with ammo that annoyed me more than anything else. If Sheila had been hit, it could have killed her. And that night, in her bedroom, the mouse just stared at her. He hadn't continued looking for me. Then there was the kidnapping. Zig Zag had told me that Bjorn had pushed Sheila out of the way when the helicopter was strafing them.

Illiam nodded as I reasoned out what was happening. "But why isn't he trying to kill her now?" I asked, confused.

"Ahhh but he is. In fact, he has killed her once already," the dragon said with a small smile.

Confused, I thought about what he said. Sheila hadn't died, I had. I let out an audible moan, as I realized what he was implying. Lakesh thought *I* was Sheila! "He doesn't know that our spirits have swapped bodies!" I declared excitedly.

"Exactly," Illiam confirmed. "He interfered with the adaptation process for Sheila's body, altering its chemistry to make her scent a potent aphrodisiac to humans. Of course, this small change he wrought also made you immune to the poison on the blade today." The dragon was laughing at the last. Lakesh had inadvertently saved my life. Now that was a good one.

"You must be warned though," the dragon cautioned. "He still speaks to your old self. Sheila does not know this. He believes these thoughts are his own. The one who must remain nameless does this to drive you apart."

I thought about Sheila's reaction in the garden. His failure to mention the fact that I was in heat and a dozen other little things all pointed to Sheila not acting like himself. Now Lakesh had really pissed me off. God only knows what kind of twisted crap he was feeding Sheila. The longer we stayed in this reality the harder Lakesh would try to divide us.

"The wish that Sheila made," I prompted the dragon. "That we would find a way to

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bring Bjorn back. Obviously it brought us here. What do we have to do so that she can accomplish her goal of bringing him back?"

The dragon just shook his head. "You have already accomplished your goal," he said quietly.

Now I was lost again. "I don't understand, Illiam. Bjorn's still dead. How could our goal have been accomplished?" I asked, still confused.

With large, sad eyes the dragon looked up at me and sighed. "When you were dead. Your spirit returned to the studio. Who came to greet you there?" he asked, probing my memory.

"Why, Bjorn of course," I said, worried where this was leading.

He just stared at me. Waiting for me to get it.

As the realization sank in, I understood. "He came back for me. My death brought him back. Not in life, but in death," I said, finally comprehending the curse of the wish. "Is there any way we can return him to life?"

Illiam nodded, still sad. "There is one way," he said reluctantly. "You must obtain an object called the Chro'nisphorum. It belonged to a Greater Dragon of this world by the name of Illialakeska. It is in the possession of the Imperial Court Sorcerer at the capital."

I nodded absorbing the information, committing it to my memory.

"There is one problem," he warned, again unsure how to explain. "This is another of *his* devices. If she uses it, she will travel back in time to a point before Bjorn died. Back further even than that, to a point before she met you." He paused, collecting his thoughts. I could see the struggle going on as he decided what to say. "If she does this, Bjorn will be restored, but at the cost of all we have worked for. You two will never meet. Since she *must* have the amulet to return to her home reality, you will never get it from Lisa since there can only be one medallion in existence at any time. The quest will never be completed. All will be lost."

I sat there for a moment, mourning my friend again, knowing he was lost to us in this life. Sheila had truly and permanently lost her one, true love. I knew I could safely say that since the love she felt for me was no more than part of my wish. At times, I wondered if the love I felt for here were just as false. I could only hope it was for real.

"Now," Illiam said, interrupting my thoughts. "We must get you back into your body. The Duchess lies mortally wounded, and only arcane magic can cure her."

Arcane magic? "I don't understand. What's this arcane magic you're referring to?" I asked.

Illiam's eyes narrowed. "The healing power that Sheila has while within your body is arcane," he stated, explaining what he meant. "It is derived directly from the spirits. This world lost the secret to arcane magic with the death of Illialakeska. Sheila is now the only

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practitioner of the healing arts that can dispel the poison from the bolt."

I nodded as I reached out for the amulet understanding that Gwen's life now lay in Sheila's hand. It was ironic that I must now convince Sheila to forgive my lover and convince him to cure her. Before touching the medallion, I paused. "If I need to speak to you again, how can I contact you?" I asked.

He laughed at me for a second. "Just use the amulet to cross back over into the astral. It *is* the key to the barriers, you know," he said, stating the obvious.

I let out another low moan at my own stupidity. I had known that, it just hadn't sunk in. Touching the amulet, I closed my eyes and willed myself back into my body.

The pain in my shoulder quickly let me know that I had once again returned home. Opening my eyes, I saw Sheila sitting on a chair by my bed, asleep. Slipping my feet over the edge, I used my legs to leverage myself around so I could sit up.

As I sat there, I took inventory of myself. Although my shoulder was clearly injured, I appeared to be otherwise unharmed. My fur was clean of blood so I presume someone had cared for me while I was unconscious. The fact that I felt neither weak nor excessively tired was a good indicator that I hadn't lost too much blood.

For a moment, I sat and looked at Sheila as he slept in the chair. He had told me he never wanted me to touch him again. Obviously he had calmed down since then or he wouldn't be in here sitting by my side.

I stood and stepped over to Sheila, bowing my legs out so that I straddled him and then gently sat down. Sheila stirred, sensing the pressure. With a smile on my face, I sat there, watching him as he blinked himself awake. Using my good paw, I pulled myself towards him and kissed him.

"Good lord, Arden," he said, pulling back from me. "What are you doing out of bed?"

I smiled at him as I put my cheek against his. "I'm apologizing, my love," I said quietly. "Even though, according to the 'Girls Book Of Rules,' you are the one who should apologize."

Sheila pushed me back so he could look me in the face. "This is no time for jokes," he said, concern clearly written on his face.

"It's no joke," I said seriously. "Whether you believe me or not, I never betrayed you with another man." Sheila started to speak, but I pressed my paw to his mouth. "Hear me out, my love. Yes, my scent was all over the man from the mews, but that's because I needed him for a decoy. In exchange for my not killing him, he agreed to seduce the Duke's mistress. In doing so, it allowed me to trick the Duke into bedding Gwen that night."

I could see Sheila as he processed what I had said, some understanding of the situation coming to him. "There was no way my plan would succeed if he didn't have my scent to seduce the woman with," I explained further. "The same goes for Gwen. She, too, bore

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my scent, bringing her husband to her bed that night." I looked into his eyes, pleading from my soul. "I never betrayed you, my love."

Sheila looked confused. It was as if his world were being turned on its ear. "I don't know, Arden," he said, searching for the words. "I want to believe you, but something tells me you're lying." He looked at me with pain filled eyes.

"*The dragon!*" I exclaimed, realizing what was happening. "Sheila, listen closely. The dragon doesn't *know* that we have swapped bodies. It believes that you are still in this one. *He* is the one responsible for all the carnage. He's been trying to kill *you* from the beginning!" I prayed that the urgency in my voice would get through to Sheila.

"But...why me?" he asked, not understanding.

"Because you were a hindrance to my quest," I explained, almost crying. "You kept me in your world for over two weeks. The dragon wanted me out as fast as possible. Every act of violence against me was really aimed at you. Even Bjorn. He died shoving you out of the line of fire from the helicopter. Had he not done that, *you* would be dead."

I could see the fire in Sheila's eyes as he realized that what I said was true. "But nobody has tried to kill me since we got here," he stated, not quite getting it all.

"Yes they have, love. I have *died* here already," I reminded him, his eyes getting wide with the realization. "*He* altered my chemistry, changing my scent so it would be irresistible to humans. Fortunately it also made me immune to the poison on the dagger I was stabbed with."

Sheila's head snapped up at me as I said the last. "How did you know there was poison on the dagger?" he demanded.

I gave him a sly smile. "I had a long talk with the dragon of this realm. He explained what was happening to me, to us, including the fact that I was immune to that particular poison because of the change Lakesh made in me."

I could see Sheila becoming angry. "I see it all now," he declared. "The whispers in the back of my mind. Don't tell you about being in heat. Stay away from the room while you're in heat. Don't worry about your anxiety. It was all a pack of lies."

I nodded, caressing his face. "I'm sorry, my love," I said softly. "We have allowed him to control us, to dominate our lives. I swear by all I hold dear and sacred to me I won't allow that to happen again."

Gwendolyn

It was the voice of the dragon, but a mere whisper in my ear. I stood up from Sheila's lap, his face surprised at my sudden move. Moving over to the armoire I opened it and removed the housecoat. Looking at the remaining dresses within, I suddenly thought, "And then there were three."

"What do you think you're doing?" Sheila demanded, trying to stop me from putting the

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housecoat on.

"Gwen is dying," I said, slipping into the mask the machine. I had a mission to perform. I had failed to protect Gwen. Now I had to see that she didn't die. My voice assumed a commanding tone. "We must go to her."

For a second, Sheila hesitated and considered arguing with me. One good look at the steel in my eyes was enough to dissuade him of that idea. Lending me a hand, he helped me put the coat on over my wounded shoulder and tie it in the front.

Sheila took the lead, preceding me upstairs to the Duke and Duchess' chambers. As we approached I saw several guards as well as Captain Moore, the head of the Duke's personal guard.

"Hold it right there," Moore said as we approached.

"Please," I said, stepping around Sheila. "We must be allowed to pass."

The officer just shook his head as his men took up position behind him. "I'm sorry, but nobody is permitted past, especially you," he declared.

I was stunned by the last part. "What do you mean by that? Why are we not permitted to pass?" I demanded.

The captain's expression hardened even more than it had been before. "His highness has decreed that you are not to be permitted anywhere on this floor. You must return downstairs," He directed. The guards behind him had their hands on their swords, ready for a fight.

"What?" I asked, totally confused. "Why would the Duke order us away?" This didn't make any sense.

"Not the Duke. Prince Hiram gave specific instructions that you were to be denied access," he stated, correcting my confusion. "You will leave *now*."

I was stunned. "You mean that rapist ordered you to keep us away from Gwen?" I asked not believing my ears.

"Watch your tongue, bitch!" he snapped back at me. "You will show respect to the prince or I will teach you some respect."

"HA!" I laughed back at him. "The only respect I'll show him will be at his grave when I piss on it," I growled back.

The captain took a step forward, probably intending to hit me, but froze at the low echoing rumble that came from behind me. Sheila was growling. It was a sound I had never heard before.

As I watched, most of the guards took a staggered step backwards, though the captain managed to stand his ground. I felt Sheila as he pushed by me, ignoring me, stalking

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forward with a look on his face like he was ready to kill something.

"What did you call her?" he asked, his voice so low it was barely audible.

The captain drew his weapon and stood his ground as Sheila continued to approach. I just stood there and stared, rooted to the spot in fear at what Sheila was about to do. There was a rage on his face the likes of which I'd never seen before.

Once he had gotten within four feet or so of the captain, Sheila literally roared causing the other guards to scatter and flee. Even the captain backed up a step at the sight and sound of the man-creature before him.

The captain, seeing an opening as Sheila roared, leapt forward in an attempt to strike him. Sheila rotated away from the arc of the blade, causing it to miss his neck and allowing him the start of a snap kick that caught the warrior behind the shoulder and knocked him off balance.

As the captain stumbled forward, trying to catch his balance, Sheila snapped a second kick out, striking the tall man in the side of the head, sending him sprawling on the floor. I watched Sheila walk over and pick the dazed man up and held him against the wall. To my horror, Sheila began to beat Moore.

Stop him

It was Illium's voice, breaking the spell that held me fast. "No!" I yelled as I charged towards Sheila. Grabbing his arm, I tried to prevent the next blow but he just flung me free. "Damn it, Sheila, STOP!" I yelled as I again grabbed his arm and pulled, feeling pain rip through my shoulder at the strain. He just ignored me.

I knew I had to do something radical, so I did the first thing I could think of. I bit Sheila, hard. He screamed in outrage as he dropped the now unconscious man and batted me away.

I skidded to a halt against the opposite wall with a small thump. Fearing for my life I stood and backed away from Sheila. I was now the target of his rage. "Don't let the dragon control you!" I commanded, trying to make Sheila understand what was happening to him. "Damn it, Sheila! It's the dragon's rage! You must fight the rage!" I pleaded to deaf ears.

I knew there was no way I could defeat Sheila so I did the only thing I could. I stopped and stood, my arms at my side. Within my mind all of my combat instincts urged me to run, but I stood my ground, watching as he approached me, my eyes pleading.

Sheila's left hand shot out and grabbed the housecoat, lifting me before him as he drew his right hand back. I knew he was lost to the dragon. I closed my eyes and turned my head, forgiving him for what I knew would come. I hung there suspended in time, each heartbeat separated by a small eternity as I waited for the blow.

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And the truth shall set you free.

Suspended in the air at the end of Sheila's arm, I prepared myself for oblivion, fully expecting to be pummeled senseless or worse.

"Arden?" I heard Sheila ask quietly in an unsure voice.

Opening my eyes, I saw a confused look on Sheila's face as he set me down gently.

"What just happened?" he asked, looking back at what he had done to the captain.

"The dragon's rage. Remember what I said about it? Remember how I told you I had to fight it all the time?" I asked, jogging his memory. For a moment all Sheila could do was nod in awe at what had happened.

"I never understood how powerful it was," he said quietly. "You always made it look so easy. Like it was just a minor annoyance." Sheila turned to me, horrified at the power that had controlled him. "I was ready to kill him. I would have beaten him to death. I would have killed you, too," he said still in denial over what had just happened.

"I understand," I said, placing my paw on his chest. "But right now I need you to be strong for me, love. I need you to use your healing powers and cure Gwen."

Sheila shook his head for a second as if to clear it, and then nodded gravely.

I considered checking on the captain but I was concerned about the delay. Whether he lived or died would be up to the guards cowering at the other end of the hall, trying to figure out what to do about us.

After we reached the door leading to the Duke and Duchess' chambers I paused to make sure Sheila was still with me. Using the side of my fist I pounded on the door.

"Who goes there!" came the challenge from the other side.

"Lady Arden and Lord Sheen," I answered, speaking loudly. "Please, my lord. We must be allowed to enter."

I could hear the exited voice of the prince as he argued for us not to be let in. The voice that challenged also agreed with him. We were obviously dangerous from the sounds of the battle that had just occurred.

"My lord!" I shouted, trying to get their attention. "We have the ability to cure the Duchess of her poison!" I could only hope they would believe me.

The prince declared that we must be lying. No cure existed. It was just a ruse to gain entrance and kill them all. I had tried to kill him last night, after all.

I turned to Sheila with a grim look on my face. "They're not going to let us in," I decided.

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Sheila got a sly grin on his face. "You know," he said, eyeing the door, "part of the martial arts training they gave at the Y involved breaking boards and stuff. I wonder how I'd do with this door?" He looked too damn happy for my taste, but I wasn't going to complain.

With a bow I moved out of his way and watched. Sheila backed away from the door and took up a kicking stance as he concentrated on the door. For the longest time he stared at it, not moving, barely even breathing, and then he suddenly attacked. With a loud yell he stepped forward, snapping a kick at the spot above the lock where a door would be barred. The impact of his foot was echoed with the cannon-like sound of wood and stone as they gave way to the brutal force of his attack, causing the door to crash open.

Sheila hopped back and forth on the balls of his feet for a second before the look on his face changed from one of joy to pain. "Son of a bitch!" he exclaimed, standing on his left foot while holding the right one up.

Trying not to laugh at the sight I stepped inside the door, only to see the prince's protector standing in the middle of the room, his weapon drawn.

"Please, my lady. Come no further," he implored of me. We understood each other.

"We're here to heal Gwen. I don't care about Little Lord Rapes-A-Lot over there," I said, nodding to the prince.

"It lies, uncle! There is no cure!" the prince declared, still trying to save his hide.

I turned to the Duke and approached, ignoring the prince's guardian. "Strange how I can be standing here when there is no cure for the poison, wouldn't you say, my lord?" I asked of the Duke. I could see that I had just struck some major points with my argument. "Even more curious is how a lowly stable hand obtained a poison that could only be cured by arcane magic, wouldn't you agree?"

"What are you implying?" the Duke demanded, not liking my accusation.

"Simple, my lord. The assassin who tried to kill me stated that, and I quote, 'His highness would make him a rich man for killing me'," I testified, glancing to the prince. "The man was nothing more than a low-life paid assassin. Paid by pretty boy over there to murder me. Only he screwed up, my lord. His bolt hit the Duchess."

The Duke glared at the prince, now convinced that he was somehow involved. "How can you heal Gwendolyn?" he asked. "The last of the arcane practitioners died a thousand years ago with the last greater dragon."

"Have you forgotten so quickly, my lord, that Lord Vic is the child of a greater dragon?" I asked, still chuckling.

I heard Sheila limp up next to me. "I am?" he asked for a second, realizing what I was implying. "Yes I am. That's right, my lord. I'm a child of the greater dragon. I should be able to heal your lady." Nice recovery.

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I saw a glimmer of hope in the Duke's eye. He hadn't believed Sheila's claim, but now his only hope lay in his healing abilities.

"It is too late," the healer said. Shock and dismay was clear on all our faces. "She still breathes, my lord, but the magic of the poison has cut the cord. Her spirit is lost to us now."

No! Not Gwen! "I refuse to accept that!" I declared. Sheila put his hand on my shoulder and gave a squeeze. I pulled away from his grasp. "Heal her," I commanded. "I will recover her spirit."

"What are you talking about, Arden?" Sheila asked, confused at my statement.

I walked over by the wall and sat down in a lotus position. "I will find her spirit and return it," I restated. "You *must* heal her body."

"No!" Sheila cried. "You can't! What if you become lost? I couldn't stand to lose you, not now---not after what we've just learned!" Kneeling in front of me, he pleaded with his eyes.

"Hear me and know what I say is the truth," I pleaded. "As a guest here I had a duty to protect Gwen. When I dodged the bolt and allowed it to strike her, I failed in that duty. Now to restore my honor I must do this. I *have* to do this." I looked deep into Sheila's eyes, hoping to make him understand.

"Screw honor!" he said venomously. "I'm sick of you risking your life for honor. What about love?"

"Love? What about life?" I asked in return. I reached up and stroked his cheek. "I walk the path of the bear. As bear I have a duty to heal body and soul. Just because I am cut off from my totem doesn't make my responsibility to Nanuk any less." I tried to make him understand why I needed to do this. "Above all else, unto thine own self be true. If I don't do this I betray all that I have worked to become."

"I don't accept that! I won't do it! I won't risk you!" he declared defiantly.

I sighed and shook my head. "One way or another, I'm coming back with Gwen's spirit. If her body no longer lives, then I'm sure I can find a suitable receptacle," I said, refusing to expand on my statement.

Horrified at the implications of what I was threatening Sheila nodded reluctantly, accepting my decision and moved to sit on the bed to at Gwen's side. "For honor and duty," I heard him say quietly, starting my liturgy with his head hung and eyes closed. "I call upon the powers of the dragon. By the pact I summon the healing powers of bear to aid me in my time of need. For life and love I call upon Nanuk to guide me."

For a second I saw Sheila wince in pain, a pain that I remembered all too well. His body tight as he fought the powers that now flowed within him, he was frozen in a moment of agony. Slowly Sheila relaxed and opened his eyes. Where once the yellow-on-red color of his eyes had been, now there was a white glow that reminded me of glare off snow on

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a bright day. I smiled as I watched him begin the healing process, knowing that Gwen would have a vessel waiting for her if I brought her back.

Anxious to begin my search, I turned inward and towards the place I normally found the barriers to the spirit realm. Once there, I searched around with my mind and located the amulet. Reaching out to it, I commanded it to release me from the prison of my body. The next thing I knew I was once again standing in the Duchess' room, my body sitting against the wall with Illiam squatting next to it.

"Well, that was easy enough," I commented, startling Illiam.

"But..." he said, looking between my body and my spirit, "how? I didn't see your spirit leave."

"I used the amulet just like you said," I replied with a shrug. "So tell me, Illiam, how can I locate Gwen's spirit?"

He just shook his head. "If you had something important to her, something from the material plane, you could use that to locate her," he explained. "But there's no way for you to bring something like that into the astral."

Damn. I wasn't going to be stumped that easily. "Is she still here in the astral, or has she crossed over?" I asked.

Illiam closed his eyes for a second, concentrating on something. "Yes," he said finally, opening his eyes again.

I stood there for a moment, waiting on him to elaborate. When he didn't I prompted him. "Well?"

He gave a small shrug and a sheepish grin. "I can't tell you," he said meekly, shaking his head.

"All right then, can you keep her from crossing over?" I asked, hoping he'd make my life easier. Again he shook his head.

This was NOT going the way I had wanted. Illiam had said that I needed something very personal from Gwen. It would have to come from the material plane, but there wasn't a way to get there.

Or was there?

Kneeling down by my body I reached out to the amulet. I could feel its presence, since it existed in the astral as well as the material, though it wasn't solid to me. Focusing my mind I concentrated on the amulet and ordered it across the barrier. To my surprise it slipped free of my body's neck and settled into my palm. Amazed at what I had done, I stood and held the amulet, showing it to Illiam.

I had never seen a slack jawed dragon before. "How did you do that?" he asked again. This was getting to be his mantra.

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"I simply willed it across the barrier," I stated. "I figured that a key to a door should be able to pass through the door, right? So I should be able to use the medallion to cross the barriers."

He tried to speak several times, his mouth opening and closing though no sound came out. With a shake of my head I slipped the chain over my neck and looked over to the bed. Sheila was finished curing the Duchess and had slumped against the bedpost in exhaustion. Nanuk had been undoubtedly forced to use Sheila's life essence in order to cure Gwen.

It was sink or swim time. Holding the amulet in my hand I willed it to allow us to pass into the material world. A gasp from the healer caused all heads to look at him. Eyes wide with fear, he pointed to where my spectral form stood.

By the gods!" I heard the Duke say, his voice oddly muffled as it echoed around me.

I walked over to the bed and sat down next to Gwen. She wore a small locket around her neck. In all the times I had seen her she had never taken it off, not even to bathe. This would be my compass. Reaching out with a paw I lifted the locket and willed myself back into the astral, bringing it with me.

It worked! I now held the locket. I now understood the amulet. You could use a wish to control it, but if one knew how one could command it directly. Lakesh's ass was mine!

"OK, Illiam," I said, holding the locket up to him. "Now what?"

Illiam blinked again and shook his head. "Inconceivable," he muttered.

"Yo! Snap out of it!" I commanded, snapping my fingers in front of him.

"Yes," he said, rubbing his eyes. "I'm sorry. This is just so...so...."

"Ya, inconceivable. You said that already," I said impatiently. "How do I find Gwen?"

He nodded, understanding my urgency. "Hold the locket by the chain and allow it to swing free," he explained. "Now, by concentrating on the one you seek it should draw you to their spirit."

I held the locket before me and watched it swing. In my mind I imagined Gwen's face as she laughed, happy, alive. I felt the locket begin to pull me, dragging me from the room. Releasing my desire to remain there, I allowed it to draw me through the walls of the castle and down into the garden.

There, I saw two glowing, standing forms; one was a young woman and the other was Gwen. Behind them, I saw a blindingly bright portal similar to the one Bjorn had taken me into back at the studio. With all the urgency I could muster, I sprinted towards the pair.

"Gwen! Stop!" I cried out, and was grateful to see both women turn.

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"Arden! Not you, too." Gwen said, a sad look on her face. As I reached her I wrapped my arms about her in an embrace. "I'm so sorry, child. You and Sheila had such a future," she said, believing I was dead.

I stepped back to speak, but was interrupted by Gwen again. "Sheila, this is my daughter, Elaine," she said, introducing me to the other spirit. "Elaine, this is Arden. She is the most wonderful person. You'll enjoy getting to know her."

I looked at Elaine and saw the resemblance that everyone had spoken about. We could have been twins separated at birth if it weren't for my being a vixen. We both wore our hair in the same fashion, allowing it to cascade over our shoulders, the color almost identical. I saw my image reflected in the same piercing green eyes that I had looked into so often as a man. This truly could have been my sister.

As she smiled, Elaine face lit up. "I'm so happy to meet you, though I'm sorry for your passing," she said as she gave me a hug.

Gwen giggled. "You know, Elaine," she said conspiratorially. "Arden used to be a man, but was transformed into a woman by a magic curse."

I saw surprise register on Elaine's face as what Gwen said sank in. Gwen was obviously enjoying the moment.

"Gwen, please. This isn't easy for me," I said, holding up a paw as she started to talk. "I'm not dead, and neither are you."

Gwen looked at me like I was daft. "Of course we are, child. How else would my beautiful Elaine be here?" she said, gazing longingly at her daughter.

I took Gwen's face in my paws and forced her to look at me again. "Gwen, listen closely. *I'm not dead!* Remember how I died and then found my way back?" I asked. She nodded slightly, her head still trapped between my paws. "This is the same thing. Your body is still alive, but your spirit has become lost. I'm here to show you the way back."

She pulled my paws from her face, and turned away. "And if I have no desire to return to that life?" she asked.

Christ! I thought I was the one with the 'why not die?' angst problem. I placed my arms around her shoulders, hugging her tight. "You have people who still love you, Gwen. Your time isn't finished in this world yet."

"But I don't want to go back, Arden. I'm finally free of that burden," she explained, turning to me, longing in her eyes. "I can finally rest. Please let me go."

I knew the longing she had. Once I felt the same way, but I learned that life was worth living despite the burdens that it brought.

"What about those you leave behind? Your husband?" I asked.

Gwen shook her head. "Though I still love him, that's not enough to keep me here," she

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said flatly. His indiscretions had hurt her far more than I had ever imagined.

"Ya, I suppose not," I said. "That's all right. He'll replace you soon enough. I'm sure that blond bimbo would be more than happy to take over your bed permanently." I could tell I was getting to her. "In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't wait a proper year or so before putting her on the throne next to him. They would make a splendid couple."

Gwen turned on me, angry. "I know what you're trying to do, and it won't work. You may make me angry or even jealous, but it won't bring me back."

"Of course, once she's the Duchess," I continued, ignoring her outburst, "I have no doubt that she will remodel your personal chambers." I let that sink in for a second. "Undoubtedly she would throw away all those silly little porcelain figurines that you keep on the mantel. To her they would be just a collection of junk, gathering dust and taking up valuable space."

"You bitch!" she spit at me. "Why is it so damn important to you that I go back that you feel you must torment me like this?"

I placed my paws on her shoulders and hung my head. "I want you to know something about me. This is who I am, and what I am," I said quietly, spinning my history. "As a young man I was convinced to kill for my kingdom. Not as a warrior, but as an assassin. I killed hundreds of people who had never done a thing to me. This is the black stain on my soul that I must carry with me forever."

I looked back up into her eyes. "But know this also. When I was transported across the vale by my wish to see Sheila, I met my totem. You see, I walk the path of the bear spirit. I am no longer an assassin, slaughtering innocents for some esoteric sense of patriotism. Now I am a healer."

Again I closed my eyes, trying to think how to explain this. "My totem, my guardian spirit, a force of nature dedicated to healing, and from whom I draw my power, is now dying. Her name is Nanuk. I am on a quest to renew her so that the healing power of the bear will not be lost. In this quest I have become not just a healer, but also truly one with Nanuk."

Now the words flowed from me. "My honor and duty now serve life, love and the light. My spirit is dedicated to the healing of body and soul. I am bear, and as such, your life is precious to me." I opened my eyes and looked down into her wide eyes. "For this reason I can not allow you to pass through the vale and leave this life. To do so is to deny that which is me, and destroy all I have worked to become."

Leaning down, I kissed her, wrapping her in the loving embrace of the bear and trying to fill the empty place in her soul that longed for her lost daughter. As our lips separated I gazed into her tear-filled eyes, wondering if I had reached her.

"What are you?" she asked, staring upwards at me in awe. It was then that I realized that I was now taller than she was. Glancing down at myself I saw that I was once again a bear. I had broken free of the shell that had bound me within Sheila's form. I was again

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one with Nanuk.

"This is my true form. I told you I once looked like this," I said, gesturing to my shape. "Now you know how I looked when I first met Sheila."

"You're so beautiful," she said quietly. I was just thankful that a spirit couldn't blush.

"Will you return with me, Gwen?" I asked again. She thought for a moment, looking over to her daughter who stood patiently by. "She'll wait for you, Gwen. There's no rushing these things. She has all eternity."

Gwen broke from me and walked to Elaine, embracing her. "I'm sorry. I can't go with you now," she said to her daughter.

"That's all right, Mama. It's better this way," Elaine responded, hugging her mother again.

As they separated I took Gwen's arm to lead her back into the castle. "Tell Daddy I forgive him, ok?" Elaine said before stepping into the light and vanishing.

"You have a beautiful daughter," I said, hugging Gwen tightly to my side.

She returned my hug and looked up. "And you would have made a wonderful sister...or brother to her," she replied, smiling at me.

Returning to the room, I saw Illiam pacing in the center. "If you keep that up, you're going to wear a rut in the stone," I joked with a broad smile.

"Arden?" he asked, not recognizing me.

"I got her. It took a little work, but I got her back," I said, leading Gwen over to the dragon. "Gwen, this is Illiam, the dragon who guards the vale of this world."

Gwen gave him a gracious smile. "We are most honored by your presence, kind dragon. We are not worthy of your attentions."

Illiam chuckled. "I'm not here because of you. I'm supposed to keep her...um... him... whatever the heck Arden is, out of trouble," he stated with a smile. "No offense, of course."

Gwen just laughed. "None taken, good dragon," she said looking up at me. "We are most pleased to find that Arden has someone looking out for her."

The dragon crossed his arms as he looked at me. "So how are you going to bind her with her body?" he asked, looking to stump me.

I released Gwen and passed her to the care of the dragon. "I don't know yet. But if you'll kindly make sure she doesn't wonder off, I'll go find out," I replied. Before Illiam could object, I stepped forwards and into Nanuk's realm. I was home again.

The terrain was desolate, trees barren and collapsed. Nothing grew here. Even the pond

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was dry. Nanuk was dying. I hurried into the hut only to find Nanuk lying on the cot by the fire, the embers cold.

Quietly I made my way over by her and knelt by the cold fire pit. I knew that this place was a reflection of Nanuk's power, and as such I could make a difference here if I desired. I was after all, her child.

I closed my eyes and concentrated on my surroundings. The warm fire, the soft bed, a memory of the sent of flowers that lingered; all these things I focused on, trying to make them real. After a few moments I was rewarded with the feeling of warmth coming from the fire. As I looked down, I saw that it was burning bright as the day I first saw Nanuk.

"You shouldn't have done that," Nanuk said, stirring.

I knelt next to the bed, rubbing my paw lightly across her muzzle. "It was such a small thing, Mother. Accept our gift, please," I said quietly looking in to that ancient face.

"You have made us proud, my son," she said quietly. "We were worried that, when we trapped you in the female's shell, you might not be able to break out. But you proved worthy and you have learned our lessons well." A weak smile lightened her face.

It took a few seconds for what she had said to sink in. "*You* trapped me in Sheila's body?" I asked.

"Yes, we did," she acknowledged. "For you to truly become one with Nanuk, you had to learn what it is to be female. To live as one, love as one, and to bear a child. For this reason we interfered with the change, giving you this test." Her eyes closed for a second as she rested. "By appearing here in your true form you have proven to me that you are truly my child."

I understood. I had to literally get in touch with my feminine side. Since Sheila made the wish bringing both of us here, Nanuk had the perfect opportunity to give me my lesson in being a woman. "Thank you, Mother. I won't disappoint you," I said, rubbing my muzzle against hers. "I must ask something of you now, mother. Something important."

She smiled again. "You want to know how to bind your lover to her body," she said with a small chuff of laughter. "Listen closely, my child, and we shall tell you how..."

Once again we stood in the bedchamber, looking down at the still form of Gwen, transformed once again. In order to return her soul I had to first take it within myself. We were no longer just Arden; we were also Gwendolyn, with all her memories, feelings and experiences. Together we stepped across the threshold of the astral and into the material plane.

"Arden?" To the side we saw Sheila looking at me, confused at what he saw. He wasn't expecting the bear to return. We smiled at him then turned to the Duke. We felt our love renewed for our husband despite his flaws.

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It was now time to return Gwen to her shell. The longer we delayed the harder it would be for us to separate.

We sat on the bed next to her sleeping form and brushed an errant hair from her face. With a deep intake of breath, we bent over her sleeping form and exhaled all that was Gwen back into her body. Our world exploded in a panorama of memories, emotions, sensations, and most dominant of all, *pain*. Her soul was being ripped from my being, twinning us, lessening us.

We shuddered as the last fragment of the Duchess left us, and we fought to straighten up. We felt weak, almost immaterial from the strain of returning her. It was all we could do to maintain ourself.

We were confused. Though we knew that Gwen was no longer part of us, we still felt the echoes of her within us. We then remembered what Nanuk had said and knew that this would fade with time.

As we watched we saw Gwen slowly open her eyes, proving that we had succeeded in our task. Our mission was through, though there was one minor thing left to do. In our left paw we still held her locket. Placing our paw briefly on her chest, we left the locket behind as we stood.

Fighting our exhaustion, we stumbled towards our corporeal body, falling to our knees before it. Warily we took off the medallion and hung it around our body's neck. With the last bit of strength we had, we willed ourselves back into our body and welcomed unconsciousness as we let exhaustion claim us.

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We know all about you.

I didn't want to get up, but I knew I wouldn't be able to get to sleep again. Opening my eyes I was surprised to see that I wasn't in my room. This one reminded me of Gwen's private chambers without all personal touches. It was huge.

As I stretched out in the bed I felt someone beside me. It was Sheila, asleep. I rolled over and reached out to put my arm around him, only to be stopped by the pain in my shoulder. I had to settle for brushing my right paw through his hair as he slept. I could tell that healing Gwen had really taken it out of him.

"Miss A... Um, Lady Arden, you're awake," I heard a small voice say. Rolling back over I saw Thomas sitting in a chair over by the corner, book open in his lap.

"Hey, Thomas. Where've you been hiding?" I asked, having not seen him for quite some time.

Thomas hopped off the chair, closing the book and walked over to the bed. "Lord Tines has had me working with the other squires of late, Lady Arden," he explained. "Do you need anything? Some water or food?"

Water or food, I could sure use some of both. I hadn't had a chance to eat this morning, and it was really biting me now. "I'll have a little of both, but not here," I responded. "Get me one of my dresses, please, preferably the one that laces up front, ok?"

"Yes, Lady Arden," he said, putting the book down on the table next to my bed.

As Thomas went over to the armoire to get a dress I sat up in bed, slipping my legs over the edge and allowing the covers to fall aside. Curious as to what he had been reading I picked up the book and examined it. It was an illustrated manual of arms showing various fighting styles and techniques. Thomas probably couldn't read the text, but he would certainly be able to study the images.

"Umm...Miss Arden?" Thomas' voice caught my attention. He was standing over by the armoire holding a dress, his back turned to me. "Is this good?" he asked.

"That's fine, Thomas. Bring it over here would you?" I instructed. The kid started walking backwards towards me. "What are you doing, Thomas?"

"I'm bringing you the dress, Miss Arden," he replied, continuing to back up.

I was about to ask why when it occurred to me. Grabbing a hand full of sheets I pulled them over me. "It's safe to turn around now, Thomas," I informed him. Nervously he glanced over to verify I was covered, and then hurried over with the dress.

Taking the outfit from him, I tossed it on the bed beside me, ignoring it. Thomas just stood in front of me, nervous at being subject to my undivided attention. Oddly enough, I had actually forgotten about being female even as I asked him to bring me a dress. This was something I hadn't thought out in advance. If I were to take on Thomas as a squire I

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would have to figure out how to handle getting dressed around him.

It was time to decide if I was serious about this whole thing. Not really sure about his age, I asked, "Thomas, how old are you?"

"I just passed my eleventh year, Miss Arden," he replied still looking unsure of himself.

Damn! Eleven years old. And all along I thought he was seven or eight. He obviously hadn't hit his growth yet. I guess he figured out my train of thought as he elaborated on his answer saying, "My father was a Dainalin. I'm already taller than he was before he died, Miss Arden"

Dainalin? That was a new one. I guess they were the equivalent of kinder or dwarves. Whatever he was, he certainly was old enough to handle the responsibilities of being my squire.

"All right, Thomas. I want you to list the responsibilities of a squire for me," I directed.

He straightened up, standing at a kind of attention as he answered, "A squire is responsible for the care and maintenance of a knight's animals and equipment, obtaining and preparing provisions, and helping his lord prepare for battle as well as aiding in his defense to the realm."

Good answer. "Let's take a close look at your answer. Specifically the part about helping a lord prepare for battle. Expand on that section," I directed, taking an instructor's tone.

"A squire must ensure that all his lord's armor and weapons are ready for battle, as well as to assist him in putting the armor on," he stated, his answer straight out of the text book.

"All right. As my squire, is it reasonable for me to expect you to assist me in preparing for battle?" I asked, handing him a loaded question. As I watched, he floundered, looking for a way out of the question. He hadn't considered that aspect.

"Thomas," I said quietly, getting his attention, "I'm not going to have anyone other than you and Lord Vic to help me out once we leave here. Either you've got to commit yourself to my service, without reservation, or tell me now that you want out." I watched him think about it. I didn't want him to go, but I wasn't going to coddle him, either. If he stayed, I would have to let him in on the truth about Sheila and myself. He was going to have to get used to us doing weird and funky stuff.

I saw Thomas come to a decision. Straightening back up he nodded to me. "I want to be your squire, Miss Arden. No matter what it takes," he declared.

I smiled at him. He hadn't disappointed me. "All right, let's make things a little easier for you," I said holding out my arm. "Put your arm next to mine."

Thomas extended his arm next to mine. His pale skin showed in sharp contrast to the orange and black pattern of my fur. "Now, which of us has a naked arm?" I asked.

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He gave a little shrug and answered, "I guess mine, Miss Arden."

"Now you're getting the picture, Thomas. With my fur I'm never truly naked, not like you humans are. Now do you understand why I didn't anticipate your reaction to seeing me without clothes?" I asked. Thinking back, I remembered the day they had captured me and hauled me to the mews. "In fact, I remember you seeing me without anything on before, back when they captured me. Isn't that so?"

"But that wasn't the same thing, Miss Arden!" he complained, and rightfully so. It's quite a different thing to help a lady get dressed, than to watch helplessly as she's stripped and hauled away like an animal.

I nodded in concession. "You're right, Thomas. It isn't the same." Allowing the covers to slip aside, I stood and picked up the dress, shaking it out before me. Thomas, to his credit, managed not to turn away, though he was most definitely nervous.

Hanging the dress over my arm for a moment I did a little runway walk, batting the boy's head with my tail as I turned. At the end of my little walk I folded my arms in front of me and cocked my head to one side. "Well? Now do you see what I was saying about having fur?" I asked.

Thomas gave a sheepish nod. "Ya. You don't look *anything* like my sister!" he declared, stating the obvious.

The comment took me by surprise and made me laugh out loud. That was the last thing on earth that I expected him to say. I stifled my humor as I heard Sheila moaning in bed. I had no intention of waking him.

I grinned at Thomas and gave him a sly, accusatory look and asked, "Have we been peeking in on our older sister?"

Suddenly realizing what he had said, Thomas floundered for a moment while he sought in vain for an answer that would proclaim his innocence. "It's not like that at all, Miss Arden!" he finally announced. "Really!"

"Ya, right," I said, still laughing as I unfolded the dress and slipped it over my head. "Help me with my tail, will you, Tom?" Out of the mouth of babes. I wondered what other pearls of wisdom he would drop on me.

Once I was dressed, I wandered across the room to a large dressing table. It resembled the one in Gwen's chambers. As I sat down I saw that the brushes and other items were of silver rather than polished wood had been the ones in the other room. I looked up at Thomas in the mirror and asked, "Where the heck are we, anyway? This isn't our old room."

"You're in the royal guest chambers, Miss Arden. The Duke ordered you and Lord Vic to be moved here after what happened this morning," he replied, filling me in on the details.

I picked up a brush and handed it to him.

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"What's this for?" he asked, looking at the brush like it was evil.

"It's for you to do my tail while, I do my hair," I explained, picking up another brush and starting on my hair.

He just started at me for a moment like I was crazy. I stopped brushing and raised an eyebrow at him. "Are you going to help me or not?" I asked sternly. "I'm not planning on having a maid, so you're going to get 'fur duty' just like Lord Vic. Either get used to it or get out." That got through to him. With a shrug, he began brushing out the fur on my tail while I worked on my hair. He really was a good kid. A little rough around the edges, but I felt I could whip him into shape.

"Miss Arden?" Thomas said, getting my attention. "Is it true? What they said you did today?"

Oy. I guessed it was time for some spin control. Lord only knew what kind of rumors would be flying about. "And just exactly what would that be, Thomas?" I countered neutrally.

He didn't take his eyes off of mine even while continuing to brush my tail. "They said that you brought the Duchess back from the dead."

Oh ya, this place was a regular *spin city*. "No, it's not true," I replied, wanting to set the record straight. "She never died. Her spirit however, had become lost. I was able to help the Duchess find her way back." I watched him mull that over as he continued to work on my fur.

"Oh no!" he said, looking up, horrified. "I was supposed to tell the Duke as soon as you woke up!"

I laughed. "Don't sweat it, Thomas. You work for me, not the Duke. I'll let him know when I'm ready, and not a minute before. A lady must make herself presentable before appearing before a duke, wouldn't you agree?" I asked, giving him a smile.

Thomas laughed with me as he resumed brushing my tail. "Absolutely, Miss Arden."

Satisfied with my general appearance I replaced the brushes on the table and stood, then lead Thomas to the door. "I want you to go get me a platter of meats and some of those honeyed pastries. Not a lot of food though. Just a small plate and a mug of ale," I directed. "You'll be able to find me with the Duke."

As we stepped out the door I sent Thomas on his way while I headed for the guard standing at the door to the Duke and Duchess' chambers. "Pardon me, but where may I find the Duke?" I asked politely.

The guard smiled and nodded down the hallway. "You may find the Duke in his library, Lady Arden. It's the last door on your left," he replied formally.

Thanking him with a bow, I proceeded down to the designated door. There was no guard there so I could only presume that the other one was to ensure Gwen wasn't

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disturbed. Reaching the door, I rapped lightly with my knuckles on the hardwood panel.

"Come." I heard from within. Opening and stepping through the doorway I entered a rather cluttered looking room filled with a scattering of books, maps, tomes and various models of different castles. Though at first it appeared rather disorganized, I quickly recognized the method of his madness. He used the "heap-sort" method.

"Ahh, Lady Arden, please come in," the Duke said warmly, waving me to an empty seat near the table where he was sitting. "I wanted to thank you for what you did today. What you did was far beyond anything I would ever have expected of one such as you."

I'll be damned if that didn't sound like a back-handed compliment. "My honor demanded nothing less, my lord," I said flatly, taking the chair. My attitude was totally lost on him as he stood, then walked across the room to get something. I was composing a suitably sarcastic compliment of my own when I realized he looked obscenely happy as he returned, holding something behind his back.

"I believe these are yours," he said, holding my swords out to me.

Standing, I took the swords from his hands and drew the Katana to examine the blade, not believing that they had finally been returned. I sheathed the Katana in its scabbard and set them on the table beside me, then turned back to the Duke. With all thoughts of sarcasm lost, I grabbed the Duke and kissed him, reveling in the shocked look on his face as we broke.

"Thank you, my lord," I said giving a deep bow of gratitude for returning my swords.

"Don't you *ever* do that again!" he snarled, wiping his mouth with the sleeve of his shirt.

I laid my ears back and glared at him. "We've never known you to be particularly choosy in your preference of women to kiss," I stated angry, Gwen's personality popping up to the front of my mind.

The Duke's face turned red with rage. "You know *nothing* about me! Don't you *dare* speak to me like that again!"

"We know all about you," I declared, pulling forth Gwen's memories. "We remember meeting you for the first time when you were but nineteen, fresh from the war with the Iced Landers, having driven them from the empire. We remember you courting us at your father's estate by the lake. We remember the first time you made *love* to us, under the willow tree three days before we were to be wed. We know all of this for we now share Gwen's memories of you." The shock of realization on his face was emphasized by its pale color as the blood drained away. "So trust me, my lord," I said sarcastically, "when we say that we're well aware of your taste in *females*."

The Duke was visibly shaken at the revelation that I knew things he never imagined anyone other than Gwen would know. "You overstep your bounds," he finally stated. "You may have helped our Gwen return to us, but that does not give you the right to

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speaking thusly to us."

"Help her return?" I said, allowing a small laugh to echo my disbelief. "I didn't help her return. I dragged her back to you, kicking and fighting all the way."

The Duke leaned forward, his fist clenched, "You lie!" he stated angrily. "Our Gwen would have no reason not to come back to us!"

"No reason? No reason? Are you that *obtuse*?" I asked, realizing that he truly had no clue.

The Duke stepped forward, hand raised to strike me, but I was already backing up, lifting a sword from the desk. With a flick of my wrist I discarded the scabbard from the Wakazashi and brought it up in front of me, enjoying the shocked look on his face as he suddenly backpedaled.

Lunging forward, I pinned him against the wall, my sword a hair's breath from his neck. "Gwen can not tell you these things, so I do it for her. It's time you knew the pain you have caused those you claim to love." My voice was but a low growl as I put my left paw to his head. Looking deep into his eyes, I used what Nanuk had taught me about connecting to another's soul, and I gave him Gwen's memories.

I started with the memories of the birth of their child, and of the joy that it had brought to her. Her fondest memories of raising the child were tainted with bitterness as she became aware of his cheating on her. Then I made him relive that fateful day two years prior, when he had discovered Elaine had taken a Pantos for a lover.

Gwen had tried to stop him as he ordered the guards, Theolin among them, to break down the door, catching them in the girl's chambers. Enraged at the sight, he had ordered Theolin to slaughter the cat on the spot. Though he had resisted, Theolin had no choice but to obey his lord.

Elaine, horrified at what her father had done, struck Theolin with a lamp, burning him, before fleeing the room with Gwen in pursuit. Together they raced to the roof where Elaine climbed up upon the stone from which she so often viewed the city, and to Gwen's horror she cursed both her and the Duke before plunging to her death. Were it not for the quick thinking of the guards who had followed them, Gwen would have followed her daughter.

"This is how you show your love?" I demanded, stepping back from the now sobbing Duke. We now stood in a lit circle, surrounded by absolute darkness. This was the spirit plane. This was my domain.

"This is what you have done to your daughter and wife! How could you *do* such a thing to your own blood?" I again challenged, enraged at his actions.

"It was an animal!" he shouted in defense. "I could not stand by and let my daughter be defiled by an animal!"

"Animal? What the hell do you know about being an animal? Let me show you what it

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means to be an animal under your rule!" I shouted back, this time assaulting his psyche with my own nightmare memories.

I showed him our first encounter with slaves and the prince, and then the next morning, when Marduke came for me and carried me to the mews. I let him experience the way the men in the mews abused me and the other *animals*, treating us with less respect than they would a pet. He cringed at how I was whipped for not moving fast enough, and then locked in an unlit room.

Then came my encounter with the prince. I could feel the Duke's horror as he endured my cruel degradation, and the senseless beating I had received afterwards. Then came the time in the mews. I made him suffer each and every assault his men inflicted on me. He was their lord and master. Since he was ultimately responsible for everything they did, it was high time he learned what atrocities were being done in his name.

Then we came to the time I spent with the cats. He was terrified at what he expected them to do to us, but he soon realized, as I did, that they meant no harm. He felt the gentle strength as RRRRan'eee convinced me to eat, haltingly speaking the human language despite claims to the contrary that the cats were unable to do so.

He experienced the fight as Darren came to take me away, not bothering to tell me *why* he came. The Duke felt my pain as I fought for survival against what I perceived to be even more abuse. He knew, first hand, the loss that I felt as I watched RRRRan'eee and the rest of the Pantos die trying to win my freedom. And lastly he felt the painful bite of cold steel as I slit my own throat.

I fell to my knees as I broke from him, the memories ripping the wounds afresh in my mind. "Now, my lord, tell me which of us is the animal," I said, grasping his tunic and lifting his face up to mine. "Answer me!" I demanded, shouting.

"I'm sorry," he sobbed, feebly grabbing at my fur, his eyes filled with the soul-wrenching horror of what he had experienced. "I didn't know! I *couldn't* know! *Please*, I beg of you, no more! *No more!*"

As I examined the terror in his eyes I realized the extent of what I had done. I had intended to show him the pain he had caused, but in doing so I had lost control of myself and committed a crime as vile as any which had been done to me. I had never wanted him to endure the rapes and other abuses.

I held him to my chest, stroking his head as he cried into my fur. "I'm *so* sorry. I should never had done that to you," I soothed, trying to think of some way to redeem myself. My god, what had I done?

Horrified with my actions I broke the link, stumbling away from him as a terrible weakness took me. Unable to maintain my balance I collapsed to the floor, losing grip of my sword. As I lay there I watched the Duke huddling against a pile of books, his arms wrapped around himself in a protective embrace.

"Oh god, I am so sorry. Please forgive me," I said weakly, trying to get through to him.

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He looked up at me with haunted eyes. "No," he said shakily, "you owe me no apology. It is I who has done you wrong. I am responsible for these atrocities." He crawled shakily on his hands and knees over to me. "You have shown me the evil in my heart, and now I understand," he said, lifting my sword. "There is but one way to cleanse this stain from my soul."

I grasp his wrist with my paw, holding the sword away from him. "No! This is not the way!" I beseeched him, but I knew it was useless. He no longer saw the life around him. I had shown him my desire for death and he, too, now desired its kiss.

Once again I dragged us back inside the circle of light. "I cannot allow you to kill yourself, my lord," I said, exhausted by the strain of what I had done.

"No! Please! After all that has happened, how can you force me to go on with the shame of what I have done?" he demanded, not understanding why I would stop him.

Within my mind I called up the faces of the dead, all the people I had killed through the impersonal touch of my rifle. Scattering them around us I grabbed his hair and made him see my private nightmare. "Look at these people. All of them died by my hands. None of them were warriors," I stated, baring my soul. "I was no warrior, though I like to think I fought for my country. I was a mere assassin, murdering for an abstract ideal set by men who thought to govern but did not rule. Look at my accomplishments and tell me that my crime pales next to what you did!"

The Duke looked around, stunned at the bodies arrayed around him. Hundreds were piled one upon the other, the stench of death embracing us, gagging our psyches.

"But this is no longer me," I said, allowing the corrupt vision to fade. "Now I serve the light. Through the power of my totem, I have become a healer. To atone for the death I have brought into the world I now work to *save* the lives of those around me, redeeming myself with each success."

"And who will redeem me?" he asked, his tortured soul searching my eyes. "Who will be the first to forgive me? Will it be you?"

I smiled. "I never blamed you, but I do know of someone who had a message for you." With my head I gestured over to the memory of Elaine as I began to take Gwen away.

"Tell Daddy I forgive him, ok?" Elaine said before stepping into the light and vanishing.

"Elaine!" he cried out, reaching for his daughter who was now beyond his grasp. He reached down, hauling me up close to him, his face next to mine. "Tell me that was no lie! Tell me that was the truth!"

I reached up and caressed his face, looking deep within his eyes. "In this place there can be no lies. What you have seen, what you have experienced, is all echoes of our memories. If you don't believe me, ask Gwen. She'll tell you that all I have said, all I have shown you, has been real."

Unable to maintain the connection I found myself again on the floor looking up at the

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Duke. "Please...no more death," I whispered as I felt a cold wind blow across my spirit, sending the world spinning away from my grasp.

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A high-maintenance life style.

I was falling and had no way to stop myself. Reality after reality spun by me as I fought for control of my existence and failed. What the heck is going on here? I couldn't control where I was going. A flash of light blinded me just before I slammed into a hard surface.

"Ahhh, the prodigal son has decided to drop in." The voice was insanely cheerful and practically dripped with sarcasm.

With a low groan I forced my ursine sprit to its feet and looked around, dismayed at the visage before me. I was standing on top of a huge pillar, thousands of feet in the air. Below me was spread out a panorama of fire and magma that was the epitome of hell.

As I panned the horizon, my sight fell upon a small table with a silver tea set on it and two wrought iron chairs. Sitting in one chair was a human male of average height, wavy black hair and a devastatingly charming smile dressed in a quite conservative business suit. He was unnaturally beautiful. Perfect in every way, he was the ultimate culmination of grace, stature and beauty. The only thing to mar this perfection was an intangible aura around him that turned my heart to stone.

"Oh yes, Nanuk sure picked a big one," he commented giving me a salacious smile as he stood. "Yes, you will do quite nicely." I didn't like the way he was looking at me. It gave me the willies.

"Just what the hell is going on here?" I asked, trying to maintain my distance as he circled me, eyeing my physique. This guy was definitely freaking me out.

"Cute *and* observant. I like that," he said, giving me a wink. Approaching me directly now, he placed his hand on my chest, rolling his eyes at the feel of my fur. "My oh my but that does feel fine. Tell me," he said conspiratorially, "did it bother you at all when you screwed the bitch for the first time?"

I growled and grabbed his hand, forcing it backwards almost to the breaking point enjoying the pained look on his face as his knees buckled. "Don't talk about her like that," I said in a low, dangerous voice.

He practically swooned with pleasure as his hand slipped out of my grasp despite my best efforts to hold on. "Oh, please. No rough stuff. We'll save that for later," he said with a smile as he crossed his arms and looked at my scowling face.

"Just who the hell are you?" I said, worried that I already knew.

His face fell as the disappointment pushed aside his glee. "And here I thought you were going to be a little brighter than the others," he said, sulking a little. "Well, if I must spell it out, I'm Lucifer. Prince of Darkness, Lord of Hell, Father of Lies, yada yada yada..." he sounded quite bored as he listed off his titles. "*And*, just ask around if you don't believe me, one of the most popular party animals since the big guy set the game in motion."

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"Like I care," I said flatly. "What do you want with me?" Arms crossed, I waited for his answer. I just hoped that I wasn't going to be his new play toy. Unless the Duke had decided to kill, then I shouldn't be down here.

Lucifer scowled at me for a second then snapped his finger. It suddenly became obvious to me that I was much smaller. Looking down at myself, I saw that I was a vixen again.

"Hey! What's the big idea?" I demanded, annoyed that he could do this to me.

With a sigh, Lucifer shook his head. "You were always such an asshole as a bear, though you'd loosened up quite nicely as a 'foxy lady'," he said with a sly smile at the last part. "I figured maybe putting you back in your borrowed fur suit would lighten you up a little."

He strutted towards me, staring deeply into my eyes with a smile that would knock over an elephant at fifty paces. Once he was within arms length he reached out and ran his finger along the lower side of my muzzle, rubbing the fur lightly. Annoyed at his attitude, I snapped his finger, biting it hard.

"Ouch!" he cried out, yanking his injured digit. "Now, now," He said, waving the injured finger at me. "No fun stuff right now, remember?" Man, what did it take to discourage this guy?

I just crossed my arms and stared at him trying to appear nonchalant. "I assume you dragged me down here for a reason. Mind telling me what it is?" I asked, trying to sound as if I had all the time in the world.

Lucifer let out a deep sigh, shaking his head. "I do *not* need this shit," he said to himself before looking up at me. "Here I am, trying to be a congenial host and what do you do? You stand there and give me a hard time about it." He turned and walked back over to the table and sat down, gesturing for me to do so also.

As I thought about ignoring him he shot me a hard look that froze my soul. This wasn't someone I wanted to be dicking around with. I decided that discretion would be the best idea right now and took the seat opposite him.

"Much better," he said, smiling as he picked up the teapot and began to pour. "Tell me, do you take one lump or two?" This was unreal. I was sitting at a table in Hell with Lucifer who was pouring me a cup of tea and asking how I wanted it fixed. Maybe this was just some kind of LSD flashback.

I accepted the prepared cup of tea and took a sip, surprised at the taste. It tasted like Black Ceylon and Pekoe mix.

"You seem surprised at my choice of tea," he said, enjoying my reaction. "What were you expecting, brimstone-flavored tea or something?"

"I must admit, I wasn't expecting such a good flavor. This is supposed to be hell, after all," I said with a sheepish smile.

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Lucifer laughed and snapped his fingers, changing the setting to one of a tropical garden. The air was light with the scent of flowers and fresh cut grass, and it carried with it the sounds of cheerful birdsongs.

"As you can see, Hell can be as pleasant or as unpleasant for any given person as *I* care to make it," Lucifer commented, taking another sip of his tea.

I looked around, impressed at what I saw, until I remembered that he was the lord of lies, too. It was very probably an illusion of sorts, but I suppose I could play along. "Impressive. It makes one wonder what Heaven has over Hell," I commented, baiting him a little.

"Very good question," he replied with a polite nod, grinning at my admission. "They want you to believe that everything down here is all horrible and nasty when in fact it's not much different from the life you led on the material plane. I really don't see what the big deal is anyway. Sure, we still have disco down here," he admitted with a shrug. "But hey, they are people that still enjoy it. Not to mention more than a few people that *deserve* it too." The last part was spoken with an evil smile.

I smiled and nodded, agreeing. "I can see your point, however I don't think that's why you brought me down here, is it? Just to show me the façades of Hell, that is," I asked wanting to cut to the chase.

Lucifer just sat and glared at me for breaking his jovial discourse. It scared the crap out of me. "Next time you fuck up, I'm going to leave you for that asshole *Gabriel* to deal with," he finally said, spitting at the archangel's name. "I don't need to put up with an ungrateful shit like you."

"I beg your pardon," I said rather indignantly. "Would you mind explaining that last little bit?" How did I manage to screw up this time?

Lucifer leaned back and created a lit cigar, which he proceeded to puff on for a second. "I saved your immortal soul from destruction a few minutes ago."

I just stared at him, cocking an ear in his direction, and invited him to continue. I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

He stood up and stepped away from the table, pacing with his hands behind his back. "I'm sure your Nanuk warned you about overuse of your power without being able to draw from it," he said, looking at me to confirm that I was paying attention. "Well, I got news for you sister, you've been pissing your life force away." His tone was as derisive as the look on his face.

As he turned to give me a view of his profile I saw he sported a large erection, which he was waving around with one hand as he urinated. "Yep, pissing it all away just like your morning water," he commented. "Over here we have you tracking down your mistress and binding her to her body," he said, creating a small pool. "And over here, we have you screwing around with old Leo's head, giving him a mind fuck he ain't gonna' forget any time soon," he said, creating a large pool of urine.

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As he concluded speaking, the flow of liquid dribbled to a stop and the erection shriveled up and disappeared. "Oh my, look at this," he said, feigning shock at his vanished member. "I wonder what happened?" Now he slapped his cheeks with both hands, a horrified look on his face. "I wonder if I used it all up? Oh my!" he cried out, slowly melting into the ground.

With a swirl of vapors, bits and pieces of his body floated into the air. "Oh no. My soul is dissipating. Someone please help me. Won't anyone save me?"

As the drama unfolded, I realized what he was getting at. I had been overusing my powers and had stripped my spirit of its energy.

As the gaseous body was about to dissipate, I saw another incarnation of Lucifer appear, this time flying around looking like Tinker Bell, tapping the gaseous form and causing it to reform, dropping to the ground before the small apparition disappeared.

"Dear me! Look at what's happened! Some kind entity has given me an infusion of life force, saving me from oblivion," he said, jumping up and dancing with joy. "Thank you, you most wondrous of all his creations, for saving my pitiful, meaningless life..."

"All right!" I cried out. "I get the idea already!" This guy was giving me a headache. I was *not* in a good mood, and he wasn't helping. I couldn't believe that I hadn't realized I was draining my spirit of its life force.

As I watched, he strolled casually back over to his chair and sat down, sucking on that stogie again.

I watched him sitting there, blowing smoke rings for a little bit, ignoring me. "OK. I've got the 'why am I here?' part down. How about covering the 'why did you do it?' part now," I said wearily.

He looked over at me and winked. "I'll give you three guesses, cutie-pie, and the first two won't count," he offered.

I thought about it. I was on a quest to restore bear. So far I had been lucky and gotten some rather esoteric help. Help from everyone but Lakesh. That bastard kept demanding more and more from me. And Illiam *did* say that Lakesh had pissed both Heaven and Hell off.

"Lakesh," I said, the word dripping with venom.

I was almost startled out of my chair as a mariachi band began to play Mexican music behind me. "Give that fox a cigar!" he shouted with glee. I winced at the piercing sound of the trumpets, trying to burry my ears beneath my paws. Lucifer saw this and laughed for a few seconds before making the mariachi band from hell vanish back into the ether.

"Here's the scoop. Lakesh has pissed me off for the last time," he said, taking another deep draw on the cigar and blowing it out again. "In fact, he's been screwing with the game so much that I've actually agreed to work with...Heaven." As I watched, he gave a small shudder of revulsion at the concept of cooperating with the divine. Our

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surroundings trembled as they echoed the disturbance in his soul.

I was shocked. Lucifer was actually conspiring with Heaven against Lakesh? Oh man, I smelled trouble brewing, especially since I was going to be stuck in the middle.

"Here's a bit of information for you that even your little dragon bud, Illiam doesn't know," he said, leaning towards me a little. "Lakesh has stacked the deck in his favor. If you win, he gains a big chunk of extra power from the renewal. If you fail, he gets *all* of Nanuk's power. However, in order for the pact to be enforced, he has to do everything in his power to ensure you succeed."

Oh, man. I couldn't believe it. It was bad enough thinking that if I failed that Nanuk would be lost, but to know that Lakesh would absorb her powers was just too much. I really needed to get my furry butt in gear and end this thing.

"All right, I'll accept that we're on the same side, for the moment," I acknowledged watching as Lucifer gave a small pout at my attitude. "What do I have to do in order to get out of this world and into the next?"

He turned so as to face me fully and held his hand out. Within there appeared the image of a glowing band of platinum, inlaid with an intricate scrollwork of gold and silver that I couldn't read. "You need to obtain the Chro'nisphorum from the Magus Arcanum," he explained. "Once you have it, you'll be good to go."

Isn't that what Illiam said Sheila could use to go back in time and restore Bjorn? But he said that doing so would destroy the quest. I smelled a rat.

"Ummm, not to sound stupid or anything, but just why should I get the Chro'nisphorum?" I asked, curious as to what he'd say.

He let out a small chuckle of amusement. "Trust me, my dear. You're going to need it when you make the jump into Husaquahr."

"Not to be a dick or anything, but you're asking me to trust the 'Lord of Lies'," I said with a small laugh, hoping I wasn't going to piss him off.

He shook his head, scowling at me. "You really are making this difficult," he complained.

"I'm making it difficult?" I asked indignantly. "Let's see if I got this straight. I'm sitting here in Hell at a table drinking tea with Lucifer, Prince of Darkness, Lord of Lies, party animal extraordinaire, and you wonder *why* I'm having a bit of a problem believing you?"

He pursed his lips, considering what I said, eventually nodding in concession. "All right, you got me there, babe. How about this," he said, starting an offer. "You get the Chro'nisphorum for the jump. If it doesn't save your life while you're in the realm of Husaquahr, I will grant you one request for anything within my sphere of influence."

I looked at him wearily, not trusting his intention. "Sounds like you're looking to make a bargain. What do I have to give up if you win?"

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He took another drag on his cigar, flicking the ash aside as he exhaled. "If you win, I get one request from you for anything within *your* sphere of influence."

That sounded too good to be true, unless he expected me to be in a position to accomplish something for him. Like maybe change the wish I was going to make so it benefited him rather than Nanuk. "Naw, I think I'll pass on that bargain. I appreciate it though," I said declining his offer. "However, I will go ahead and get the Chro'nisphorum."

He smiled and nodded. "Well, my dear. The tea is gone, my cigar has been smoked and it's time to send you back to where you belong," he said as he stood. Walking around the table he held his hand out to help me up. "And if you see my dear old friend Lakesh," he said with a pleasant smile, "tell him to fuck off and die."

I laughed at that. It fit him so. "Well, I must admit that I've rather enjoyed my stay here and I hope you won't take it personally if I say I hope I won't ever see you again," I said with a smile.

He laughed a good belly laugh for a few seconds. "Darling, you can plan on seeing a *lot* of me. Maybe not in the near future, but definitely in the long run."

I didn't like the sound of that. "How do you figure?" I asked, worried at the answer.

"Are you kidding?" he said, laughing again. "Let's see... You've killed hundreds of people, murdering them in cold blood, lied, stolen, committed adultery and a slew of others nasty things that the divine don't approve of," he said, listing off but a few of my sins.

I tried to swallow as I realized he had me, finding it difficult to accomplish. Knowing that I was doomed to eternity in hell was something I never wanted to be faced with. "Yah, well maybe I'll get lucky and redeem myself in the eyes of Heaven somehow," I replied nervously.

"Don't worry, hon," he said, giving me a wink. "You help me screw Lakesh over and I promise you a most pleasant stay in Hell should you find yourself here permanently." With a gesture of his hand I found myself flung away from him, spinning out of control again through a flickering panorama of realities before finding myself back in my body, lying in bed.

I sat outside on the stone railing that surrounded the balcony, watching the sun as it set. The dark, wet clouds overhead reached out, extending almost to the horizon where they terminated, allowing light from the setting sun to set fire to the sky beyond. The cool wind brought with it the kiss of water, blown on the wings of its breath as a light mist blew by the window. It was a cold, damp and gray day while still allowing a glimpse of the wondrous beauty that lay past its edge to the west.

The low rumbling sound of thunder as it echoed in the distance almost drowned out

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Thomas' voice as he spoke, "Miss Arden?" Without looking, I nodded to acknowledge his presence.

"I spoke to Lady Ann. She says that there's no need for you to stop by, and that she'll send over a variety of outfits that should suit your needs," he reported. Lady Ann was one of the few female warriors in this world. She was slightly smaller than I, though she definitely wasn't in my league as far as cup size was concerned. I could only hope she wasn't expecting me to wear a corset or something so I could fit into one of her outfits.

Thomas saw me nod at his report and continued, "I checked and there won't be a formal meal tonight. Food will be served in the commons in an hour if you care to dine, otherwise I'll bring something up for you."

That was no surprise. After what I had done to the Duke I wasn't sure I wanted to stay beyond the night. I'd have to talk to Sheila about setting out for the capitol without the Duke and Duchess. As much as I love Gwen, I felt the shame of my crime and did not want to have to face her or her husband.

"Is there anything else, Miss Arden?" Thomas asked after my extended silence.

"Yes. I want you to go find Lord Vic and get enough money from him to buy three horses and outfit them for travel." I paused and thought about Thomas' ability to find what we needed. "You'd best find one of the older squires and get him to help you," I directed, turning to look at him. "Make sure they're equipped for a trip to the Imperial Capital City. I want to leave here first thing in the morning."

"But, aren't we still traveling with the Duke and Duchess?" he asked. It was an honest enough question.

"No, Thomas," I replied, dismissing him. "Now see to the horses and provisions."

"It looks like it may rain. You want me to get you a coat or something first, Miss Arden?" Thomas asked. He would make a good squire.

"No, Thomas. I require nothing further tonight other than what I've instructed you to do. You are excused," I replied, emphasizing the last part. I heard him hesitate, not sure if he should leave or not, then turn and exit the room.

I sat there and watched the lightening as it danced in and around the clouds, wondering how I would be able to avoid the awkwardness of begging out of traveling with Gwen and Leo.

Thomas was turning out to be a better squire than I had ever imagined. He had realized that there was no way he would be able to take care of purchasing horses, equipment and supplies while at the same time ensuring that I didn't go hungry. Using his initiative he had conscripted one of the younger houseboys to get me a platter of meat and a huge mug of ale. That, combined with the Duke's ordering of the fires to be lit due to the cold wind that had blown in, left me curled on the rug in front of the hearth, casually gnawing on a

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rib as I watched the flames dance.

I've always enjoyed watching a fire. Sometimes, if you stared at them long enough, you could see echoes of reality. You might see someone or something from your past. A place you once visited but haven't seen in a long time. Or even the occasional glimpse of the future. Tonight though, I wasn't looking to the fire for anything more than just heat and the flickering comfort of its light.

The rib, now bereft of meat, was a tempting target for me to break open. I had found that the taste of the marrow inside was delicious. I now understood why dogs enjoyed cracking open bones that were fresh. With a glance at the remaining food on the plate I set the bone aside. If I were still inclined after the meal, I would make the marrow my dessert.

The sound of the door opening shifted my attention away from the fire. It was Sheila, returning from whatever had occupied his day. I smiled and reached out to him as he walked over, kneeling to give me a kiss.

"So, you've been hiding out in here all day eh?" he asked as he sat down on the rug beside me.

I shook my head, disagreeing. "Not all day. I did get out for a bit to talk to the Duke," I admitted, not elaborating.

Sheila ran his hand through my hair, stroking it absent mindedly as he talked, "Must have been a heck of a talk, considering he brought you back here unconscious. What happened?" I could tell he was genuinely concerned rather than possibly jealous.

The last thing I wanted to do was to admit that I had emotionally raped the Duke. "I guess you could say that I overdid it today. I had exhausted my reserves and wasn't ready to deal with Leo," I replied, answering honestly yet still hiding the truth.

"Leo?" he said, incredulously, "As in Leopold? Since when are you on a first name basis with the Duke?" His tone was light, but I could feel the change in the way he stroked my hair.

I rolled over onto my back, resting my head in his lap and looked up into his face, watching the flickering reflection of the fire in his eyes. "Ever since I returned Gwen to her body," I replied, answering his question. "Part of the process gave me all of her memories and her feelings towards Leo. I wasn't prepared to deal with that yet. It was all still too fresh in my mind." I hugged myself unconsciously, feeling a chill that I knew wasn't really there.

As I looked into Sheila's eyes, I could see that he misunderstood what happened. I smiled as I reached up to brush his cheek. "Nothing happened, my love. I just wasn't ready to deal with it," I said allowing the smile to fade at the memory. "They have such great pain between them. I fear I may have only made it worse."

Turning my head away from Sheila's gaze, I stared once more into the fire as Sheila

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resumed stroking my hair.

"What exactly happened, Arden? What went on today?" he asked, knowing I was keeping him in the dark.

I couldn't face him. "Please, I don't want to talk about it," I pleaded, hoping he wouldn't push.

"All right," he conceded. "Then tell me why you had Thomas come and get three hundred gold Imperials from me?"

Oy. "I sent him to buy horses, equipment and provisions for us," I explained. I considered leaving it at that, but knew he wouldn't be satisfied. "I want to leave in the morning."

Sheila stopped stroking my hair. "What? Leave now? Without the Duke and Duchess?" he demanded, stunned by what I had suggested. "Damn it, Arden! What are you not telling me?" I cringed at the anger in his voice.

I looked back up into his eyes, begging with mine. "Please, Sheila. I can't face him-Leo. Don't make this any harder for me than it is," I again beseeched. "Do you seriously think I want to leave Gwen? After all we've been through together?"

At the mention of Gwen I saw Sheila's expression soften. "No, I don't suppose you would," he admitted, remembering what I had been willing to do for her. "So what's the deal with the Duke? I can't imagine you're simply avoiding him because of some second-hand emotional angst," he declared, reading me like the proverbial book.

I took his hand from my shoulder where he had been stroking my fur and held it tight. "Please, my love. Don't ask this of me," I implored of him. "If you never grant me any other privacy, please give me this one thing." I watched his eyes as they reflected the anguished look on my face while he searched for some clue from me.

Finally, Sheila nodded to me. "All right," he conceded. "I'll talk to the Duke in the morning and let him know we're leaving. It's the right thing to do," He added quickly seeing my expression. He was right, of course. There was no easy way to leave without one of us talking to them unless we tried to sneak out.

I closed my eyes, enjoying the feel of Sheila's hand as he ran it through my hair. That, combined with the food, fire and ale, had all but put me to sleep. I would have dozed off too if it wasn't for my right ear. Something kept tickling the fur on the tip, causing it to twitch in response. After about the fourth or fifth time, I let out a low groan and looked up at Sheila.

"Are we having fun yet?" I asked, clearly annoyed.

He smiled down on me with sinister glee. "We're enjoying ourselves *tremendously*," he replied, again tickling my ear.

"That's no fair. Your ears don't do that," I complained, laying my ears flat so he couldn't

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tease them any more.

"True," he admitted with a sly smile. "But I remember a certain bear whose ears weren't ticklish tormenting me in exactly the same manner." Payback *was* a bitch.

"Mercy, my lord," I cried out, playing up the part. "What must I do to earn your forgiveness?"

Sheila's traced his hand down the front of my dress, lightly brushing it between my breasts. "I'm sure you can think of something," he said coyly.

I let out a false sigh of exasperation. "Jeez. Is that all you guys *ever* think about?" I said, trying to concentrate on my whine rather than what Sheila was doing with his hand.

"You certainly should know," he answered back with a laugh. "After you finally got that stick out of your ass you turned out to be pretty fun guy." He leaned forward and gave me a little peck on the end of my snout. "Not to mention a most willing partner."

I was now having a bit of trouble concentrating out our little sparing match, but I wasn't ready to concede quiet yet. "As I remember it," I said, between clenched teeth, "I was nothing more than an over-sized, fluffy dress-up toy that was a fun distraction in bed."

Bingo! Sheila had a look of righteous indignation. "A fun distraction?" he demanded, giving me a chance to catch my breath. "I'll have you know I spent a lot of time and effort into turning you into a good lover! I don't waste my talents on distractions."

I let out a non-committal 'Ah' as I thought about my repost. "I suppose that's true, though you were definitely holding out on me," I said, sounding unconvinced by his arguments.

"And just how was I holding out?" he demanded.

Hook, line and sinker. "Nothing you can say will convince me that the tricks Gwen showed me are anything new to you," I said with a sly smile.

That got Sheila. At first he looked indignant, then gave a sly smile and nodded. "Ok, you got me there," he admitted to my bark of laughter. "But a girl's got to keep a few things in reserve. You don't want to give away the show on the first night."

I clasped my hands over my stomach and gave him a small smile. "And what's your excuse for holding back on me since *I* became the vixen?"

Sheila started to answer then stopped a couple of times. I had to laugh as he looked for a way out. "Don't laugh, that's not funny," he complained, a broad smile on his face.

"That's all right," I said, consoling him. "I'm sure you'll think of a way to make it up to me."

As I watched, Sheila got a bit of a confused look on his face. "Hold on a second here," he said, trying to think. "Just how in the heck did we go from you owing me, to me owing

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you."

I let out another bark of laughter. "Good lord, Sheila. You've been a man too long if you can't figure that one out," I said, enjoying the look on his face.

"So," I said, unlacing the front of my dress. "Think of anything yet?"

Sheila definitely knew how to make an apology.

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Judge, Jury and Executioner.

Thomas had performed his job wonderfully. The two packs of supplies and associated saddlebags were well thought out and had just about everything we'd need for the trip with some room to spare for clothes and other miscellaneous items.

Lady Ann had also seen fit to drop by at dawn with the armor and clothing she had promised. She had brought several items that resembled the Roman skirts, their armored tabs hanging half way down to my knees. There were also several Scottish-style kilts of varying weight that would work better in more social contexts. She had also thoughtfully provided several pair of riding pants that had been modified for my tail.

To top it all off, she had provided me with a wonderful shirt of chain mail that had also been slightly modified. You could tell from the gloss of the welds where new rings had been added to the armor. The chain combined with a leather undercoat and a good war kilt would have me gussied up for battle. Although the chain shirt only weighed about 30 pounds, it was enough that I'd have to train to get used to it. I'd also have to be careful of some martial arts maneuvers, as I would be horribly off balance until the added weight was second nature.

Despite both our best efforts, we couldn't get her to accept any payment for the goods. It had been her honor to provision the woman who had helped to save the Duchess' life. I didn't press the point that it was my fault the Duchess had been near death to begin with.

Another wave of nausea forced me to pause in my packing. There must have been some tainted meat on my tray last night. Such things would have to be common in a world without proper refrigeration.

I was packing away the armor along with the few remaining dresses when I was interrupted by a knock at the door. I quickly donned a housecoat before opening the door to see Captain Moore and two other guards.

"Good morning, Captain. Can I do something for you?" I asked, curious as to why there were two other guards with him.

"Yes, my lady. I have orders from the Duke to bring you to him," he replied uncomfortably. I had been dreading the possibility that he would send for me.

"All right then," I replied nodding. "Let me get dressed then and I'll be right with you." I started to close the door, but was blocked by his hand.

"I'm sorry, my lady. But you need to come with us now," he said, emphasizing the word 'now.'

I let out a sigh of frustration. "Let's get something straight, Captain. Unless you and your boys want to fight me about this, and I *do* mean with blades, I'm not coming out of this room until I'm presentable. Have I made myself clear?" I asked, cocking an ear towards him.

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Captain Moore's face got hard for a second as he considered the challenge before nodding. "Please hurry, my lady. The Duke is not a man to be kept waiting," he said, removing his hand from the door.

I flashed him a pleasant smile. "Come now," I said with a gleam in my eyes. "What man isn't used to waiting on a woman at one time or another?" A smile from the two guards behind him proved that I had struck a chord, though Captain Moore had better control. After closing the door I bolted it. No sense in him getting any ideas that my time was up.

Now, what to wear, what to wear... I thought about the gown that Gwen had given me, but discarded that idea along with the dresses immediately. Instead, I strapped on a dark tan heavy war kilt and laced up the leather shirt. I considered putting the chain on, but I knew that without help I'd probably rip half my hair out in the process. Instead, I settled for tying the cloth band that I used for a sword belt around my waist, slipping the two swords into position.

Quickly checking my appearance in the mirror, I took a soft strip of leather and tied my hair in a ponytail, letting it fall behind me. With my hair like this I no longer bore any resemblance to Gwen or Leo's daughter. Satisfied with the look, I got up, unbolted the door and opened it.

As expected, the guards were still there, though they were standing around casually as they waited. One look at the way I was dressed gave Captain Moore a sour look.

"I'm sorry, my lady, but you'll have to hand over those weapons," he said, pointing to my swords.

Instinctively my hand went to the hilt, startling the other guards who thought I might draw. "No," I replied flatly. "The last time these swords were taken from me I was hauled to the mews. I won't give them up."

Moore gestured to his men not to interfere. "I'm sorry, my lady. But you are not to be allowed weapons during your visit to the Duke. I have my orders," he said politely yet with a tone that indicated it might as well be written in stone.

I could tell by the way he stood that he had no intention of attacking. In fact, he was doing his best to calm the situation down. "I'll tell you what. How about if I turn the swords over to my lord first, then you can escort me to see the Duke," I offered as a compromise.

He smiled, relieved that there wouldn't be trouble. "I have no problem with that. Lord Sheen is in with the Duke and Duchess as we speak, my lady. If you would care to come this way," he offered, turning to lead the procession, assuming I would follow.

We walked down the stairs to the first floor, turning into a small maze of corridors that I had never been down before yet were oddly familiar. Our trip eventually terminated at a large wooden door reinforced with steel bindings. Using his mailed fist, Captain Moore banged on the door. Rewarded by the command to enter, he opened the door and led me inside, keeping a restraining hand on my shoulder.

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The room appeared to be a private office of sorts for the Duke. It had several other exits, presumably to the court and other parts of the castle. Plush didn't even begin to describe the furniture and decorations in the room. I guess opulent would have to do, as I couldn't think of any other way to describe it. There was more gold, silver and fancy woodwork in this one room than I'd seen in a museum.

"What is she doing armed?" the Duke demanded angrily.

"I'm sorry, my lord. She will only surrender her weapons to Lord Sheen," he said, nodding to Sheila who had stood at the Duke's outburst. Behind him, I saw the Duchess standing next to a window that she had been gazing through.

Reluctantly I withdrew the scabbards from my belt and held them out for Sheila while not approaching any closer to the Duke. Captain Moore's hand on my shoulder gave me a gentle squeeze. I'm not sure if it was to be supporting or a warning, but I took it as a positive thing.

Sheila had a concerned look on his face as he walked over and took the swords from me. "What's going on?" he whispered to me.

Unable to answer him, I shook my head and walked forwards towards the desk where Duke Leopold sat. Stopping about six feet from the front, I lowered my head, bowed and spoke, "You summoned me, my lord?"

"Yes. Sit down," he directed.

Without looking up, I sat in the right-hand chair.

"Would someone please tell me what is going on around here?" I heard Sheila ask as he walked over to stand behind me, placing his hands on my shoulders.

"We will get to that in a minute, Lord Sheen," the Duke replied. "If you will take a seat, there is some business we must attend to before the two of you shall be permitted to take leave."

I looked up at Sheila, watching his reaction to the Duke's words. He looked like he was going to argue so I gave his hand a squeeze to get his attention. A gentle shake of my head implored him not to argue as he glanced down at me. He didn't want to let it go, but eventually gave in and reluctantly sat down.

"Now... Where to begin?" the Duke said, drawing out my agony. "We suppose we should start with your saving of our wife's life." He picked something up from his desk and walked around to stand in front of it.

"Look at me when I speak to you, Lady Arden," he directed.

Unwillingly I lifted my gaze to his face, noting the rigid, neutral expression that he wore. "Yes, my lord," I replied meekly.

He studied me briefly before opening a scroll he held in one hand. "This scroll is from

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the Magus Sanctum Arcanum at the Imperial Capitol City. It is an official invitation for you to accept a position within their ranks as a member of the Spirit Warrior Elite."

The Spirit Warrior Elite? I had never heard of them, but it sounded like it would be quite an honor. The Duke was smiling slightly at my expression of confusion as I thought about what he had said.

The Duke, seeing that I hadn't a clue as to what was going on, decided to elaborate. "The Spirit Warriors are a very select group of Magi who are trained in the arts of war. There are very few in this world that have both the talent for magic as well as the martial arts. The Spirit Warrior Elite are even more special as they have shown the ability to travel onto the astral plane, carrying battle to creatures that may seek to flee justice within. To be offered status in their ranks is quite an honor." Rolling up the scroll, he held it and a small emblem out to me.

"I don't understand," I said, totally lost for the moment. I had expected to have my head chewed off. "Why would they do something like that?"

The Duke sighed and lowered his hands. Apparently he wasn't used to people questioning him when he gave out 'a great honor.' It was something he'd just have to learn to live with, I suppose.

"The Healer Reskin contacted the Magus with one of his toys and informed them of your accomplishment yesterday. They were most impressed with the news that you had not only been able to find our wife's spirit, but to bind it to her body again." Again he held the scroll and emblem out to me, waiting patiently for me to accept it.

With trembling paws, I reached forth and accepted the objects, staring at them as I held them in my lap. The emblem was a silver sword piercing three gold circlets each interlinked with the next on a rectangular polished steel badge.

The Duke stood and walked around behind his desk, sitting down noisily in the leather chair. "Now, there is a matter of a crime that has been committed," he commented, causing my head to snap up.

No! He wouldn't! I couldn't believe that he would give me this and then do that to me!

"Captain, bring in the prisoner," he directed in a loud voice to Captain Moore behind me. All heads turned as he opened the door and gave an order.

A minute later I saw Marduke hobble in. He was clothed only in a rag that gave him some semblance of privacy, though not by much. His skin was streaked with dirt and filth, and I could see where he had been kicked or beaten. He wore the same wrist and ankle binding that I had been forced to endure causing him to haunch over almost parallel to the ground, shuffling as he hurried into the room. A guard with a whip directed him over near the desk where he was forced to kneel on the floor only a few feet from me.

As I sat there and looked at him I saw the terror in his eyes as he watched me. He knew he was screwed. Beaten and broken, he was a shell of the man who had once controlled

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the mews. I pitied him even as I loathed him.

"Marduke Kalliam Dresden," the Duke said, pronouncing the name with military precision. "Do you recognize this sentient creature sitting next to you?"

Marduke looked at me and nodded. "Yes, my lord."

"And did you not hold a conversation with this creature prior to abducting her?" Leopold asked, his tone sharp as a knife.

Again Marduke nodded, "Yes, my lord."

"And is it not true that you did, intentionally with malice and forethought, take part in her rape as executed by Prince Hiram?" Leo practically spit Hiram's name out.

Marduke was trembling now with the knowledge that even the Prince wasn't going to save him. He swallowed several times before replying, "Yes, my lord."

"I won't go through the list of remaining charges against you. Remarking on such filth is beneath our dignity," he said, his voice filled with revulsion. "What is the punishment for the crimes you have committed?"

Totally defeated, Marduke hung his head and answered quietly, "Death, my lord."

"That is correct, death. By all accounts we should judge you guilty and condemn you to death; however we will pass that privilege on to another," he said, leaning back in his chair.

Marduke looked as confused as I felt. What the hell was the Leo doing dragging him in here if he wasn't going to judge him?

"Lady Arden," the duke said, getting my attention. "As the injured party, we are permitted to pass judgment in a capitol case to you. It is your decision. Do with him as you will."

Surprised at his actions, I turned to Sheila only to find a similar expression on his face. The Duke was handing me the pig that had been partly responsible for what had happened in the mews. A glance at Gwen showed concern on her face. She had no idea what I was going to do.

I stood, handing the scroll and emblem to Sheila and walked around Marduke, examining his battered form the same way he had once examined me. Justice. How would I administer justice to someone like this? I looked up at Captain Moore and held my hand out. "Give me your knife," I directed.

He raised an eyebrow slightly as he looked to the duke for confirmation before handing me the large knife. It was a finely crafted blade that was razor sharp. It reminded me of a Bowie knife from my world only without the curve on the top.

Bending over, I used the knife to cut the cord that bound his wrists to his ankles and

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lifted him upright. As I stood there, looking into his eyes, I could smell the fear that emanated from his filthy body.

"Give me one reason to spare your life," I said, curious at what his answer would be.

He again swallowed before replying, never taking his eyes from mine. "I have no excuse for my crimes." That surprised me a bit. I had figured he'd at least use the 'I was just following orders' excuse or something.

I place the tip of the knife under his left nipple, ready to pierce his heart and take the life that was owed me, but couldn't. Something inside me cried out not to do it. Agreed, he had been under Prince Hiram's orders, but that was no excuse. There had also been the question of my scent. Once we were in an enclosed space I could see it having an effect on him, but not before that. Would the taking of his life be justice?

Could I even take his life? I had told both Gwen and Leo that I wanted no more killing. Did I mean it, or was it all just propaganda to make myself feel better? Was I truly bear? Was I a healer? That was the ultimate question here. If I had the strength, I would give him the memories of what he did to me and serve justice that way. Unfortunately, I doubted that I had the reserves to do it.

My mind made up, I grabbed his face with my left paw and turned it to the side. Using the tip of the knife I carved a large V deep into the flesh of his face, then backed away as he cried out, pressing his hand to his bloodied cheek.

"Here's your punishment. You are stripped of all titles and lands within the bounds of the Duke's domain. You are hereby exiled from the Duchy, never to return on pain of death. Before you leave these lands that wound is to be permitted to heal and thus allow the scar to provide you with a visible reminder of your crime," I said in judgment, returning the knife to Captain Moore.

As I watched them take him away I felt something was missing. "Wait!" I commanded, and approached them. Standing in front of Marduke I let out a low growl before kneeling him in the crotch with all my strength. The surprised look on his face followed quickly by pain satisfied me greatly as he collapsed into a whimpering heap on the floor. "Oh yah, and that's for *fucking* me in the ass."

Satisfied that he had paid his dues I turned and walked back towards the Duke, and I saw he had an odd expression on his face. There was a curiously satisfied smile, while his eyes showed mystification at my actions. Without a word I sat back down in the chair.

"That is hardly what I expected," Leo finally commented.

"And what did you expect, my lord? That I would gut him on the spot?" I asked angrily, knowing I had been set up.

The Duke nodded. "Yes, that's exactly what I expected. Why didn't you?"

I dropped my head for a second "I walk the path of the bear. I can't take a life, not like that. If he were trying to kill me then I could defend myself, but not like that," I explained

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quietly.

"Ahhh yes, walking the path of the bear," he said. "That brings us to our next item--- what happened in our study."

Oh no, he wasn't actually going to do this. God, please don't let him do this to me, not in front of Sheila.

"What are you talking about?" Sheila asked, concerned by the look on my face.

The Duke held up a hand towards Sheila. "Please, Lord Sheen, in due time," he said turning his attention back to me. "How would you describe your crimes yesterday, Lady Arden?"

I glanced over at Sheila and back to the Duke. I didn't want to answer, but knew he wouldn't let it go. "You know damn good and well what my crimes are," I shot back, angry that he was doing this to me.

The bastard had a smug look on his face as he nodded. "Indeed we do. However, we wish for you to state them for us," he explained.

I glanced over at Sheila and then back to the Duke. "Please, my lord. I beg of you, dismiss Lord Sheen, now, before we go any further," I implored.

The Duke shook his head firmly. "I don't think so. As your lord, he's partly responsible for your actions. Now, state your crimes," he commanded.

I let a low growl out as I glared at him. "You want my crimes?" I demanded. "Fine! How about rape, assault and attempted murder!" I felt the firm hand of Captain Moore on my shoulder, holding me firmly in the seat as I shouted at the Duke.

"What the hell are you talking about?" I heard Sheila demand, shock clearly audible in his voice. As I looked over I saw him out of his seat, backing away slightly.

I turned back to the Duke, enraged. "Are you happy? Is this what you want? To destroy me before my lord?"

"Please sit down, Lord Sheen," the Duke said calmly.

"No! Not until someone tells me *what* is going on here!" he shouted. "Just what did you do, Arden?"

I couldn't look at him. I couldn't face either of them.

"Your lady, in an attempt to show me exactly how poorly we have performed our duties as a father and a husband, got a bit carried away," he explained calmly. "Please sit down so we may resolve this issue."

I heard the rustle of fabric as Gwen moved over to Sheila. "Please, it will all right," she said, maneuvering Sheila back to his chair. After Sheila had sat, I felt the Captain remove his hand, only to feel it replace by Gwen's.

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"Lady Arden," the Duke began, "has shown us some of our Gwen's memories, and in doing so, shown us how we have been flagrant in the abuse of certain privileges." He paused, steepling his fingers in front of his face as he thought. "Unfortunately, we were a bit stubborn and as a result, caused the Lady Arden to pummel some sense into our head."

"No," I said forcefully. "What I did was rape. It was no better than what was done to me in the mews."

"What did you do?" I heard Sheila insist in a horse whisper.

I crushed the scroll in my hand as I responded. "I forced my memories, from the moment I was captured until I killed myself, onto the Duke," I replied, trembling at the shame I felt.

"Good god, Arden! What were you thinking?" he asked, comprehending what I had done.

"She wasn't thinking, and for that we *are* grateful," the Duke answered for me. "She has opened our eyes to the true crime that has been committed here in my lands for the last thirty years. Lady Arden, stand." He commanded.

My knees felt weak as I stood, unsure what was about to happen. "When last we talked, I asked you who would be the first to forgive me, and if it would be you. What was your answer?"

I thought back to our time in the spirit plane. "I told you that I didn't blame you for the crime, my lord," I answered in a horse whisper.

The Duke stood, and spoke formally, "Then hear me now and know that we do not hold this against you. As the wronged party, we give you your life and tell you that we hold no ill will against you. You are free to go."

It would have been better if he had just killed me. One look at Sheila's face told me that this wasn't something that he would just shrug off. I gave the Duke a small bow before turning to leave.

As I walked by, Gwen reached out and grasped my arm, stopping me. There was a concerned look in her eye. She knew that the Duke had handled it wrong with Sheila. "We intend to leave tomorrow. It is our desire that you travel with us and share our company. Will you join us?" she asked.

I glanced at the Duke and saw him nod. Another look at Sheila showed a hard expression as he stared at me, his eyes still reflecting the horror he felt. "I don't know, my lady. That's up to my lord," I responded and pulled away, nodding to the guard that held the door for me.

Once out in the hall I collapsed, leaning heavily on the wall for support. My world had just been destroyed. How could Sheila ever stand to look at me again? As I stood there trying to compose myself I heard the door open and saw Sheila exit the room. His eyes

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locked on mine as he walked angrily over to me.

"How could you?" he demanded, his voice accusatory and disbelieving at the same time. There was no way for me to answer. I hung my head in shame, unable to look Sheila in the eyes. I was startled by the sound of my swords as they were carelessly dropped to the floor.

Without a saying another word, Sheila stormed away.

My god, what have I done?

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Aftermath

My swords. Sheila had simply dropped them on the floor. He knew what they represented to me and was giving me a message. I no longer had a place by his side.

Unable to face what had happened, I turned and walked away, in the opposite direction that Sheila had taken. I had no clue where I was or would wind up. I just needed to get away from those swords.

I pushed my way through a set of double doors and into a cavernous room. Intricate pillars supported the ceiling; their strong, marble grace merged seamlessly into the mosaic pattern above.

I recognized this place. I had died here. Staring at the ceiling, I made my way to the spot where I remembered first seeing the pattern, and there I oriented myself, verifying that the image was identical. Reluctantly I looked down at the floor for some trace that would have shown what happened, but all evidence had been scrubbed away.

I turned to face the dais with its two ornate chairs from which the Duke and Duchess ruled. Oddly drawn towards them, I soon found myself standing next to Gwen's, looking back out over the room.

Courtiers line the room, awaiting the spectacle of the animal that this odd stranger has claimed can speak and reason. It had been captured out by the edge of town and taken to the mews. This comes as a surprise to us as the stable master hasn't bothered to inform us of that fact.

As we watch, we see the guards bring the animal in, suspended within a net hung below a pole. A trail of blood follows its path into the room, terminating in a pool where it has been dumped, beaten and broken. (The "trail of blood" is not "beaten and broken"; "it" is "beaten and broken". Your modifiers must be "attached" to what they modify.) We feel outrage at its appearance. It has obviously been abused.

We are about to order the healer to examine it when we are startled as the large man, rushing to the injured creature, quickly disables two of our guards and then stares down four more. A wave of irrational fear sweeps over us as his gaze passes briefly over us, before he kneels by the creature's side.

Indecision prevents us from taking action as we watch him cut the ropes that bind the creature, rolling it over onto its back. As we watch, words are spoken that we cannot hear, words that enrage the man and send him into a furious assault on the stable master, whom he attempts to strangle.

Our attention returns to the creature as guards again move in to stop the assault on the stable master. It has picked up the dagger that its master has discarded. Alarmed, we cry out, pointing to the weapon and trying to alert the guards to the danger, only to watch in horror as it puts the knife to its throat, trying to kill itself.

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A small child, companion to its master, is by the creature's side, fighting for the knife, pleading for the creature's life. We know that the child is too late as we watch the creature's life blood flow freely onto the floor.

I cried out as I broke the spell of Gwen's memory. Reeling backwards from the dais, I stumbled and fell. Dazed, I scrambled to my feet, desperate to flee this place and its memories.

As I burst through the doors which led me into the room to begin with, I collided with a figure on the other side, sending it sprawling. The figure turned out to be Gwen, and she had been carrying my swords.

Still traumatized by the memories, I turned and fled, running down corridors that were both familiar and yet strange to me. In my mind I knew where every room was, though I'd never seen most of them. The sensation of being trapped drove me to the rear of the exit and towards the gardens.

My claustrophobia vanished as I burst forth into the cold, crisp autumn air. I stumbled slightly as I left the stone path, heading for a large pond that held decorative fish.

The mirror flat-surface of the water cast my reflection back at me while I knelt, looking down at it. As I stared at the transparent visage before me I realized that no matter how much I tried to deny it, no matter what form I took, I was a menace to myself and those around me.

Sobbing with anger and frustration I smashed my clenched paw into the image, shattering it into a thousand tiny rippling duplicates, each one reflecting my shame. Hugging myself tightly, I closed my eyes and cried, seeking an outlet for the pain.

"Arden?" Gwen's voice startled me.

"Go away," I sobbed, still angry with her for taking part in my destruction.

I felt the feather light touch of her hand on the armor covering my shoulder. "Are you all right, my child?" she asked.

I growled, twisting away from her hand. "I'm not your child, damn it!" I declared, glaring at her. "She's dead, Gwen! For God's sake let it go, and quit trying to turn me into something I can never be."

She shrank back from my verbal assault, her face drained of its color as my words impacted her. Loosing her balance, she collapsed the few remaining inches to the ground, sitting down in a most undignified manner as she stared at me. "Have I hurt you so much?" she asked quietly, tears forming in her eyes.

I suddenly realized what I had said and winced. Once again I had lashed out and hurt someone who had only wanted to help me. "I'm sorry, Gwen," I said, turning away. "I didn't mean that. It was uncalled for."

"You're right, you know," she replied quietly. "I *was* trying to use you as a pawn against

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my husband." This wasn't news. I had figured it out a long time ago. "I never expected you to turn out to be such a good and kind friend."

I turned towards her and sat back in the grass. "Good and kind?" I asked in disbelief. "After what I've done, how can you say such a thing?"

She shook her head and smiled. "Dear child, don't you understand?" she asked, knowing there could be no answer. "Everything that I have seen you do since you got here was out of love. Or have you forgotten that you risked your very soul to bring me back?"

"I haven't forgotten," I said reluctantly. "But you know me better than any other living being. We share each other's memories. I am not a good person."

Gwen nodded soberly. "Yes, I know you better than I know my own husband," she agreed. "I know that you have lived a very dark and desolate life. I also know that since you started your new life all you have done has been out of love for Sheila."

I shook my head in disagreement. "No," I stated flatly. "What happened in the Duke's study wasn't done out of love."

"My husband spoke to me at great length about what happened," she said, looking down into her lap. "He told me about what you did, sharing my memories with him. How you showed him what he had done to Elaine and me." She looked up at me with a great sadness in her eyes. "I also know how his arrogance forced you to show him what we share."

Oh no! She had those memories, too. It hadn't truly sunk in until this moment, but I suddenly realized that Gwen had been forced to endure them also. I leaned forward, burying my face in my paws, horrified at the revelation. "I'm so sorry, Gwen. Oh God, I'm so sorry," I mumbled between sobs.

I felt her hand on my knee as she spoke. "No, Arden. Please do not cry for me," she said gently. "You have done me a great service."

"Yah, right. I gave you forty eight hours of living hell," I said contemptuously.

"Yes. That and much, much more," she said sincerely. "You gave me a reason to live again." I looked up, uncertain if I should believe her. "I didn't want to come back. I returned because of you and your *need* to bring me back. But when you gave me your memories you showed me worlds that I never knew existed."

Gwen scooted herself closer to me and took my paws in her hands, gently squeezing them. "I have always lived as royalty. I never had a chance to experience any other station in life," she said as if it were a bad thing. "Through your lives I've learned much about other worlds, other people, and how they act and are treated. I've seen the horrible things that you did for love of a country that wasn't even your birthright, as well as the horrors you've endured for the ones you love."

Gwen's expression changes as her eyes focused on something beyond me, looking to a vision that only she could see. "I never really understood how lucky I've been. I mourned

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for a child but forgot to celebrate the fact that she lived. You and Sheila never even had that. Both of you lost your mates before you could know that singular joy."

Her eyes snapped back into focus as they locked onto mine. "So please, I beg of you, don't mourn for the memories that you have given me." Her voice was gentle yet commanding, not begging. "You have set my spirit free, and I will always be in your debt for it."

It sounded so good. Put that way it sounded like I had done her a favor, but deep down inside I knew that I had, on some base level, caused more harm than good to both her and Leo. Not wishing to argue I simply nodded, giving all appearance of accepting what she had said as being true.

After helping Gwen to stand, I excused myself. I needed to think about what had happened. Before she parted, Gwen handed me my swords. I almost refused them, but relented and accepted them without comment. Had I not taken them I don't think she would have understood why.

I still had to face Sheila, and I didn't know what would happen when I did.

I paused outside the doorway to our bedroom. Sheila could be heard rummaging through the dresser he kept his clothing in, packing. Steeling myself, I stepped into the room and closed the door behind me, making sure it latched. Sheila gave me a hard look before he returned to his packing.

"Sheila," I quietly said. "Honey, please. We need to talk."

"We have nothing to talk about," he replied harshly.

"Please," I begged. "You have no idea what happened, or even why."

He stopped packing and glowered at me. "I don't?" he asked. "Let me guess. You got pissed off and used your 'bear powers' or whatever to go into Duke Leopold's mind, and once there you raped him. Does that about cover it?"

I nodded. He had me dead to rights. "That about covers the *how*, but it doesn't cover the *why*," I replied quietly.

Sheila shook his head sharply. "I don't care about why. I've had it up to here with you and your crap," he said, raising his hand up under his chin. "I don't give a damn about your excuses, your quest or anything else to do with you!"

I couldn't believe he would say something like that. Had I screwed things up so badly? I walked over to the dresser and, under Sheila's harsh gaze, pushed the drawer shut. "Did you ever?" I asked, not believing his attitude. "Did you ever really care about me?"

Sheila got an offended look. "What the hell do you mean by that?" he demanded.

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I stared at the stranger across from me. "It's simple. I've done everything humanly and *in*-humanly possible to please you, to show how much I love you," I explained, realizing for the first time what had been happening all along. "But you've taken every opportunity to jump on me for any offense, imagined or otherwise."

Sheila walked over in front of me, his face twisted in anger. "That's bullshit! You're just trying to change the subject!" he angrily accused me.

"All right," I said, afraid to push him too far. "Pick one other thing I've done wrong that was truly my fault alone."

Sheila started to reply and stopped, thinking. Several times he started to answer, but realized that his answer would be wrong.

"And yet how many times have I forgiven you, even when you out-and-out betrayed me?" I asked, interrupting his search.

"I've never betrayed you!" he countered defensively.

"What about Bjorn?" I asked, and was rewarded by a shocked and indignant look on his face. It was a low blow, but at this point I didn't care. "Or have you forgotten the day you picked him up at the airport. The day that, despite your promise to me, you slept with him." I could see that had struck a chord with Sheila. It had hurt me terribly when she had done that.

Sheila shook his head irritably. "That's not the same thing, damn it! That's not raping someone!"

I hung my head, unable to look at him. "No, it's not," I agreed, looking back up into the dragon's eyes. "But you weren't there. You don't know what happened. You have no right to judge me for what happened without knowing the facts."

"No!" he shouted, poking me in the chest with his finger. "I won't allow that. I won't agree to any 'he was asking for it' defense. That's totally unacceptable!" he declared.

"You're right," I agreed, trying to look calmly into his eyes, fighting back the emotional turmoil, trying not to flee his presence. "He didn't ask for it. Nor did I intend to do it."

I saw Sheila about to say something but interrupted him. "I never intended to give those memories to him," I explained. "All I wanted to do was show him what it felt like to be treated like an animal. I never intended that to happen. I just...couldn't stop them once they started to flow."

Unable to face Sheila, I turned and walked a few paces away. "For God's sake Sheila, do you really think I wanted to do that? Do you really believe that I'm such a horrible person that I would want to force something like that on someone?" I felt the warm dampness of my tears as they soaked into the fur of my muzzle.

"I don't know," I heard him answer. "I just don't know about you, Arden. I still remember you standing over Bjorn's dead body, looking at it without any emotions. Like

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he was just a... statistic to you."

Oh no. He still held that against me. How could I possibly defend myself from that? I turned back towards him and shook my head. "No, that wasn't me. You know that."

His face was unreadable. "Yes, it was. You may not want to admit it, but that was still a part of you," he observed. "Deny it all you want, but its still in there. You may not let it show, but you can't deny the fact that when you need it, you can put that damned mask on and do unimaginable things, things the rest of us would shy away from."

I cringed at his statement because he was right. When I wore the mask of the machine I could do any atrocity, and it wouldn't affect me until afterwards. It was like a Teflon coat whereby the most disgusting of filth could splatter me and it wouldn't stick. Too bad it couldn't have helped me in this situation. But then again, would I have truly wanted it to?

I felt Sheila's hand on my shoulder and looked up. "Listen," he said gently. "I realize that you may not have intended to do what you did, but that doesn't change the fact. Right now I just can't handle that. I need to get some space, find out how I feel about this mess. Once I have my head on straight I'll come back and we'll see what happens."

His words drove a dagger of ice through my heart. "You can't be thinking about leaving. Not now, not when we're getting ready to head to the capital," I challenged.

Sheila nodded before replying. "I need to get out and explore. I've been cooped up around here, tagging along with you," he said, taking both my shoulders in his hands. "This is a whole new life for me, Arden. I don't want to spend all my time hanging out with royalty."

I nodded. I understood his feelings. But he was missing a very important part of the picture. "And what about the dragon? What about the quest?" I asked.

He looked confused by my questions. "What are you talking about? That's your quest. There's nothing stopping you from completing it," he answered.

I wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. Didn't he understand the danger? I took his left hand from my shoulder and turned the palm up, revealing the brand from the amulet. "Have you forgotten the mark? You don't seriously expect the dragon to forget about you?" I challenged, trying to make him realize the truth.

Sheila smiled and gave a little laugh. "Don't worry about it. I'm sure that once you make the jump the dragon won't bother with me. I won't be able to interfere any more," he answered lightly.

I had to think of something that would convince him. "What about getting your body back?" I asked, looking for anything to hold onto him. "Don't you want to return to being your true self?"

He smiled again and shook his head. "Not really. I kind of like being a guy," he replied with a shrug. "It was a little weird at first, but now I think I'm getting used to it."

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I turned and leaned my forehead heavily against the bedpost, as I thought frantically for a way out of this predicament.

"Don't worry about me," he said, patting my back, trying to console me. "I'll be all right, really."

"What about Zig Zag?" I quietly asked.

"Huh?" I could hear the confusion in his voice. "What about Zig Zag?" he challenged.

I turned and looked at him. "Zig Zag, James, Sabrina," I said listing off all her old friends. "What about your sister Tammy. Are you ready to forget about all of them?"

Sheila shook his head, still confused. "I don't get what your saying. You told me that the amulet could never take us back," he replied, unsure what I was suggesting.

I put my paw on his chest and looked up into his eyes earnestly. "The amulet can't, but the lamp can," I explained. "When I recover the lamp for my quest you'll be able to make a wish of your own, and return home."

I could tell by the look in Sheila's eyes that I had just turned his world on its ear. He had truly believed that we would never be able to go back. Now, thinking of friends he had believed lost, Sheila realized that there was a glimmer of hope.

Sheila turned from me and walked over to the glass doors, opened them and stepped out onto the terrace. I followed close behind, worried about his reaction. As I watched, he leaned heavily against the stone railing, dizzy with the emotional trauma of what I had said.

"For God's sake, Arden. Why didn't you tell me this before?" he demanded, still not looking at me.

I put my paw on his shoulder. "I thought I had," I replied. "I'm sorry. So much has happened to me in such a short time that I just lost track." I moved around to sit on the railing, lowering my head to that of Sheila's. "I swear by all things sacred to me, I thought I told you. I'd never hold something like that back from you."

Sheila looked up at me. For a moment I thought I saw an accusing look in his eye, but it flickered and was gone as he nodded to me, straightening up. "Yah," he admitted gravely, "things have been going by pretty fast for both of us."

"Can you forgive me?" I asked earnestly?

He glanced at me before turning partly away, hugging himself. "After what you did to the Duke---I don't know, Arden," he replied sadly. "I'd like to think so, but I just don't know right now."

Although he couldn't see me I nodded anyway. "All right. I can accept that," I replied, trying to keep my voice calm. "I'll have Thomas come and pack up my stuff. There's no need for you to move out of this room," I stated, finally accepting the consequences of

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my actions.

"No," Sheila replied, shaking his head. "The Chamberlain set me up with a new room. One more fitting of a lord than a lady."

"Sheila," I said, stopping him as he turned to leave. "No matter what, I'll never abandon you," I said with all honesty. "I swore my life to protecting you and ensuring nothing ever happens to you. Nothing short of death will prevent me from doing that."

Sheila paused as he listened to what I said. With a small nod, he turned and walked back into the room to complete his packing.

I watched him for a few minutes before I turned and looked out over the city. A cold wind blew by, echoing the feeling in my soul. First I had screwed up with the Duke, then Lucifer saved my soul (like I needed to be indebted to him), and now I had lost Sheila.

Could it get any worse?

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Whoa there, doggie.

Capitol Trip Log: Day 1

My ass hurts. No, that's not right. My ass throbs. And to make matters worse, Sheila, who has NEVER ridden a horse before, isn't bothered in the least by all the riding we did today. It must be that damn dragon regeneration ability that lets him get away with it.

To add insult to injury, the saddles weren't designed for someone with a tail. Gwen has the local livery guy working on modifying my saddle, but that didn't save me from almost thirteen hours of abuse. I should have swallowed my pride and ridden in the carriage with Gwen and Leo, or at least hitched a ride with one of the wagons in the train. Anything but trying to prove that I could still ride a horse.

I swear, if that healer doesn't hurry up and do something about this pain I'm going to do something irrational...

I was lying on a small bed in the room that had been assigned one of Gwen's handmaidens and myself. The girl was so painfully shy I hadn't been able to get a name out of her. A petite little thing, she stood barely five feet tall. I would have sworn she was an elf except that she had round ears. The large, almond shaped eyes and fair hair made her a dead ringer for one, though.

Lucky for the Healer Reskin, he had managed to come up with some salves that soothed my poor, abused flesh. That, combined with an hour of healing meditations, had put the world to right again. I was tempted to lie there for a while and relax, but I knew I'd have a hard time sleeping if I didn't get a move on.

After climbing off the bed I did a few stretches to make sure I wouldn't be walking funny, then I proceeded to don my chain shirt. Lady Ann had been kind enough to braid my hair this morning, which allowed me to easily thread it through the hole for my head. Fully armored, I made quite an impressive sight. With a quick addition of the cloth belt and my swords, I was ready to head down stairs. I was tempted to head up to see Gwen, but figured I'd drop by after dinner when things were winding down. Undoubtedly, she was entertaining the local magistrate and his entourage.

Upon reaching the bottom of the stairs I discovered that the party was in full swing. When the Duke and Duchess come to visit they get all kinds of folks coming by to pay tribute. The best part is the food. These folks went out of their way to prepare a spread that would feed a small army. Considering the size of the entourage that Gwen and Leo were traveling with, all that food would be needed.

The sound of the conversation became muted as I walked across the room, giving my best "Sheila strut"; after all, I was a vixen. Casually I scanned the people around me as I strolled towards the end of the line, inwardly pleased as the crowd divided, allowing me to pass. Once again I was an unknown, only this time all the doubts and fears were gone. I was again in control.

The young man standing at the end of the line was holding a forgotten plate in his hand,

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about ready to drop it as he watched me approach. I smiled as I took the platter from his limp fingers, and winked. "Thank you," I said pleasantly, before turning to the table.

First thing I did was to grab a bundle of flatware that was wrapped in a cloth napkin. As I proceeded down the table I stopped for tidbits of meats, desiring to sample them all. I was restraining myself fairly well until I came to some marinated liver. The aroma set my mouth to watering and I had to take a full slab. I loved broiled calves liver. I could only hope that this would be as good.

With my plate well loaded I stopped once more to snag a couple of slabs of bread and a chunk of butter. Now fully provisioned, I began to look for a place to sit, and spotted Thomas who was waving for my attention from across the room. As I proceeded over to where he stood I saw that he had reserved a table for me in the corner by the fireplace. He had obviously remembered I had chosen such a table when we first met.

I set my plate on the table and prepared to sit down, only to find Thomas holding the chair for me. Chuckling to myself, I allowed him to seat me, scooting the chair in close to the table.

"What would you like to drink, Miss Arden?" he eagerly asked.

"Grab me some ale," I directed. "Make it a some local stuff. Whatever they're bragging about." Thomas nodded and ran off, disappearing into the crowd.

Briefly I looked around, wondering where Sheila was until I remembered that he wouldn't be joining me for dinner. Determined not to allow that to spoil my mood, I unrolled the flatware, laying the napkin across my lap before attending to that delicious looking liver.

As I popped the first bite of liver into my mouth I was pleased to find it incredibly tender, with the marinade creating a panorama of taste that complimented the meat. I closed my eyes as I chewed, concentrating on the symphony being conducted on my palate. Now *this* was good food.

I hacked off a larger chunk of meat and popped it into my mouth before sitting back and relaxing. While I chewed, I noticed that a fair number of people were staring at me outright. Although this was expected, it still made me feel a little nervous. Just to make things lively, I would give a smile and a wink occasionally to someone who was staring and note their reaction. Most folk would just turn away, but a few would smile back and wave. It appeared to be a friendly enough crowd.

About half way through the slab of meat, I was beginning to get a little annoyed with Thomas. He still hadn't returned with my drink and I was seriously getting thirsty. I was almost ready to go get something to drink for myself when I finally spotted him. He was carrying a tray with several different mugs on it, carefully avoiding traffic in the room while he worked his way over to my table.

With great care Thomas set the tray down on the table and removed a mug, placing it before me. "There you go, Miss Arden. A mug of the local specialty," he gleefully

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announced. I didn't trust him. The way he stood back and watched me made me suspicious.

Cautiously I picked up the mug and took a sniff. It appeared to be safe enough, though there was a bit of an odd smell to it that I couldn't place. I took a small sip, letting it roll over my tongue, and I regretted it almost immediately. Every muscle in my snout contorted as the concoction invaded my palate. I shot Thomas a dangerous look as he began to laugh, trying to cover his mouth.

"Blech!" I said with a shudder. "What the heck was that *crap*?"

Thomas gave up on maintaining control and laughed. "That was the local barkeep's personal brew. He's *very* proud of it," he said, amused at my reaction. Undoubtedly he'd endured the same flavor. He somehow managed to contain himself as he took the drink from me, handing a different tankard over in its place. "Try this," he suggested.

I accepted the container and again sniffed the contents before tasting. This time I found it to be a pleasant mead that quickly flushed the last traces of that awful brew from my mouth. "Not bad," I commented as I saluted with the mug before putting it down on the table. "Thanks, Thomas."

"You're welcome, Miss Arden," he replied with a curt bow. "Will there be anything else right now?"

"Nope. That'll do me for now. How about grabbing yourself some grub and joining me?" I offered as I gestured to an empty chair.

"No thanks, Miss Arden. I already ate," he explained, declining my invitation politely. "However, if you don't mind I'd like to check up on your saddle and make sure everything's going right with it."

I took another sip of my ale and nodded as I set it down. "Sure thing. When you're done, go ahead and take the rest of the night off," I said with a smile. Thomas bowed again and ran off. He was a nice kid. I was lucky to have him for a squire. A girl could really get used to being treated this way.

Dinner had been fabulous. I couldn't resist going back for more of that liver, and now I was stuffed. While I had been eating I could hear little snippets of conversation about me. Much of it was pure speculation, though there were some of the Duke's people trying to correct certain misconceptions. This went on for about an hour before a group of young men managed to screw up the courage to come over and ask me about my tail.

After people figured out I wouldn't bite them for asking questions I drew quite a crowd. They asked everything from "Do you eat vegetables?" on up to very intimate stuff that I wouldn't have answered on a bet.

About half an hour into my interrogation the innkeeper approached and asked if we'd move over by the bar. At first I thought he was just looking to profit from the situation,

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but then I noticed a lot of people standing around, waiting for a place to sit. My audience wasn't letting that happen.

With the promise of free libations I packed up and headed over to where the bard was performing. Since he took breaks fairly often it gave me a chance to tag-team with him and answer questions. It also gave me an opportunity to sit and chat with him for a couple of minutes during our switchover.

I took another sip of my spiced rum and smiled as I watched the bard Danedajin performing for the crowd. As humans go he was one skinny guy. Standing about five foot nine, he must have weighed barely one hundred and twenty pounds. I could probably pick him up without too much strain. With his long black hair, narrow chin, brown eyes and dark complexion, he resembled an American Indian. The only thing to mar his rugged appearance was the fact that his nose had obviously been broken and not set properly. It had healed in such a way that it drew a crooked line down from his brow to his lip.

I joined the crowd in a round of applause as Dane finished up his last set. We had both declared an end to the evenings entertainment and I now looked forwards to just relaxing with some casual conversation.

Dane set his instrument gently on the table as he sat down, letting out a tired breath as he lifted his mug and took a drink. "You know, Arden, as much as I enjoy entertaining people I really find it difficult to play in a busy place like this," he said, looking around at the crowd. Although it was getting quite late there were still a large number of people in both rooms. "Normally I enjoy a nice, quiet inn where I don't have to raise my voice to be heard," he explained waiving his mug around. "There's so much background conversation tonight, I almost have to shout to be heard."

I nodded knowingly as I took another sip of rum. "Well," I said, drawing the word out, "you can always look on the bright side..." I waited to make sure I had his attention before continuing. "You've only got two more weeks until we reach the capitol."

He winced as he set his mug down, pinching the bridge of his nose with his fingers before looking up at me, peering out from under his brow. "That was cold, lady," he said with a tight lipped expression.

Oops... Time to try for a quick recovery. "You know, Dane," I said, trying to think of something. "Where I come from, we have an expression: 'Misery loves company.' I think that would apply here." Dane cocked his head as he looked at me trying to figure out what I was getting at. "Or haven't you forgotten that I've also got two more weeks of this to look forwards to?" I asked innocently.

Dane leaned forward, propping himself up on the table with his mug held between his hands and smiled. "Yah, I guess that's true," he said. "That will give us plenty of time to know each other better, eh? Learn all about each other?" He had a mischievous gleam in his eye.

I laughed as I set my cup down and reached out for his instrument. "May I?" I asked,

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pausing before I picked it up.

Dane got a panicked look on his face for a second before he realized I wasn't going to touch it without his permission. He looked at my innocent expression and then nodded. "Please be careful with it," he implored, worried for his treasure.

I was tempted to fumble with the instrument for a second, but decided I had picked on the guy enough for one night. For the most part it was a six stringed instrument that appeared to be fretted like a guitar. Though it didn't have the traditional figure eight body of a guitar, I found its long, oval shape comfortable to hold.

I tested out the strings and verified that it was tuned like a regular acoustical guitar. I tried a couple of cords with my left paw and found that though my fingers were smaller now than I was used to, they still had plenty of reach. The only bad thing were my claws, I had to make sure they didn't rub the adjacent strings. My claws *did* make for good picks and allowed me to pluck multiple strings with ease, something I had never gotten the hang of as a kid.

I pursed my lips for a second before trying to think of something to play. I hadn't touched a guitar for over fifteen years. I had broken my left hand in an accident, making it impossible to finger the strings properly. It didn't make any sense to torture myself trying to play something I no longer could manage.

I closed my eyes, thinking of what to play. With a sly smile I decided on the first song I ever learned to play, *Stairway to Heaven*. I managed to pick my way through the opening phrase of the song and transition into the cords without screwing up too badly. I couldn't count how many times I'd played this song for my friends as well as myself. It brought back memories of home, school and the karaoke bars I used to hang out at between missions. For a few minutes the song transported me from the vixen I had become and back into my youth.

As I ended the song, I tried to hold onto the memories but felt them chased away by the pain in my left paw. I rubbed the tips of my fingers against my fur, trying to dull the pain I felt. This body had never learned to play the guitar and thus had no calluses.

"That was very beautiful," Dane said as he accepted the instrument back from me. "Where did you learn to play like that?"

I took a sip of my rum, welcoming the distraction for a second. "My father gave me a guitar for my thirteenth birthday. It was the first song I learned to play," I replied, the memories fresh in my mind.

"Indeed. So you were apprenticed to become a minstrel before you became a warrior?" he asked, trying to place me.

I shook my head and smiled politely. "Where I come from, people don't apprentice. They choose what profession they wish to pursue," I explained.

Dane got a far away look as he thought about it. "What an amazing place you come

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from," he finally said, looking back at me. "Every time you talk of your homeland I see a place that's so different from ours. So many different forms, so many different ideas; its all very intriguing."

I used the claw on my right index finger to draw some patterns in the liquids on top of the table as I thought about home. "You know," I said quietly, "in a way I miss it dearly, but in other ways I'm glad I'm not there."

Dane smiled at me as he looked into my eyes. "Maybe some day you'll get a chance to go back," he said in a low voice, placing his hand on my paw. "If you do, I hope I'll be with you so I can see it for myself."

It took me a second to realize what was happening before I pulled my paw from his grasp. I felt a confusing swirl of emotions as I looked back up into his face, not sure what to say. Unable to maintain eye contact, I looked down into my drink, studying my rippling reflection within.

Once again Dane put his hands back around his drink as he spoke to me, "I'm sorry if I startled you."

I took a sip of my drink before answering. "That's all right. I...I just wasn't expecting it," I replied, still not looking up from my drink.

"I've offended you," he said quickly, "I'll go."

I looked up as he lifted his instrument. "No, wait." I used my paw to trap his guitar against the table. "Please, don't go." I said, looking up at him. "You didn't offend me. I... I... Please, just stay." I wasn't sure what to say. I enjoyed being with him, but hadn't expected any of this to happen. I had never thought about anyone other than Sheila being interested in me.

Dane slowly sat down and released the grip on his instrument. "What's wrong, Arden?" he asked, his eyes searching for an answer. "Am I so hideous to you...?"

Hideous? How could he think that? But of course, he doesn't know that I, too, once was human. "No, you are far from hideous," I said, wrapping my paws around my mug so they wouldn't shake.

"Then please tell me what's wrong," he said, leaning forward. "I know you've been assigned a room with one of the Duchess' maids, so you must not be spoken for. So please, tell me what's wrong."

I looked at him for a moment before looking over to where Sheila sat at the bar, surrounded by a small group of women. They had been clustered around him all night. Each time I looked over there, a small piece of me died.

"It's not that," I said, looking back at Dane. "It's my lord..."

Dane expression showed an odd mixture of confusion and humor as he smiled at me. "Your lord? What? Do you have to get his permission or something?" he asked

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incredulously.

I again looked over at Sheila who was kissing one of the females draped over him. I dragged my eyes away from him and looked again at Dane. "It's not that. I...I love him," I explained quietly.

Dane's face showed consternation for a moment, as he looked over where Sheila stood and back to me. "I'm sorry, Arden," he said gently. "I know what it's like to love someone unobtainable. If you ever need someone to talk to, or just a shoulder to cry on, please feel free to call on me." Again Dane stood and lifted his instrument. With a brief, sad glance back at me, he turned and walked away.

Once more I looked at Sheila and the female he was holding close, the one taking my place, and felt my hackles rise. I rose and took a step towards them before stopping. Making a scene here wouldn't help anything and would only hurt my standing further with Sheila.

The need to get away sent me out of the inn and into the street. I looked around to see who, if anyone, was still about, but I saw only the Duke's guards. I looked up at the night sky, once again reminded by the alien stars that I was a stranger in a strange land.

I walked back over to the railing in front of the inn and hopped up onto it, balancing myself so that I sat somewhat uncomfortably in the middle. I looked down at my paws and thought about what had happened. Sheila was obviously taking advantage of his freedom; who was I not to do the same? That was a stupid question to ask myself, considering I was the one who started all this. It was my wish that brought me to him in the first place.

"Well, well, well. Old Sheila sure is enjoying himself in there, eh Arden?" I heard the honey sweat voice say behind me.

I knew that voice. "Lucifer," I growled. "What do you want now?"

A dark figure separated from the shadows to lean on the railing next to me, the red ember of the cigar matching those in his eyes. "Now, is that any way to greet someone who's just looking out for your interest?" he asked with an injured voice.

I turned and glared at him. "Oh, I'm so sorry, Lucifer. I had no idea your cup runneth over with good will," I said sarcastically.

"Yes, yes, I know. It's so rare for me to be in such good form," he said drearily. "It's fortunate that I don't have many days like this or all hell would go to... well...*to hell*."

It took all my will not to smile at that. For some god-forsaken reason it actually made a sick sort of sense to me, and it was funny. I hated him for breaking my mood.

"Yep," he continued, ignoring my reaction. "I saw the way you were pining over your old boyfriend and figured I'd just offer to lend you a hand."

Great, that's all I needed now. "Look, thanks for the offer, but I think I'd like to muddle

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by without you screwing with Sheila," I said flatly, turning away and ignoring him, hoping vainly he'd crawl back under the rock.

"Sheila?" he said, sounding confused. "Who said anything about messing with Sheila? You're the one I was gonna fix up. Or rather un-fix up."

"What do you mean, un-fix up?" I said, immediately regretting the fact that I had fallen into his trap.

Lucifer took a drag on his cigar and blew out a smoke ring before answering. "Simple, my dear. When you made your little wish, oh so long ago, back when you were human, part of the wish was for Sheila to love you, right?" he asked, covering the basic details.

"Yah, that's right," I acknowledged cautiously.

He just chuckled at me. "Well, honey. Did it ever occur to you just *who* is inhabiting your lusty target's body right now?" he asked, his eyes roaming my body.

I was in Sheila's body. If the magic of the wish that made her love me was still bound to this body, then it's what was driving me to distraction. It would also explain why Sheila had always been so ready to forgive once she calmed down, just as I had.

"So, here's what I'm gonna do for you, babe. This is a one-time offer, now or never," he said, taking another drag on his cigar. "I'm gonna break the spell that you're under, freeing you from Lakesh's influence."

That got my attention. Lucifer had a definite grudge against Lakesh. The question is just exactly what he was planning on doing. "Give me specifics. What will you do?" I asked.

"Why that's simple, my dear. I'll break the compulsion that makes the inhabitant of that body love the inhabitant of your original body. Nothing more, nothing less," he stated.

There was no doubt that I wanted to get rid of the spell for my own sake. It also wouldn't be fare to force Sheila to have to contend with it if she ever got back into her old body. There was only one question now. "What do you want in return?"

"Nothing."

"Yah, right. You're doing this out of the kindness of your heart," I said halfheartedly.

Lucifer grabbed me by the scruff of my neck with his hand, the nails on his fingers digging in as he pulled me towards him. "Listen, you fucking bitch! I don't need this shit from you!" he said with a snarl. "You know perfectly well I'm doing this to fuck with Lakesh. Now you can be graceful and accept it with a smile, or I'll bend you over and you can take it up the ass. Either way, you're going to help me put a major hurting on Lakesh."

The pain where his fingers dug into my fur burned like nothing I'd ever experienced. I kept forgetting just who I was talking to. Playing with this guy was definitely playing with fire, and it was time to suck up to him. "You know Luci," I said, imitating Ricky

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Ricardo, "I *love it* when you talk dirty to me."

Lucifer's expression hardened for a second before finally cracking, and he began to laugh. He released the fur and smoothed it out as he smiled. "If I even had an inkling that you were telling me the truth, babe, I think I'd kiss you," he said, relishing my attempt at humor.

Just as I started to relax, he grabbed me again and kissed me. As I pulled away, I elbowed him in the face, which knocked him back from the railing and putting a severe hurt on my arm. "Don't you *ever* do that again!" I shouted at him.

I spun around looking for him, but he had vanished. I started to draw my sword, but found my arms pinned as pain lanced through my right ear as the bastard's bit it causing me to cry out in pain. I brought the heel of my right foot up between his legs, smashing it into his groin, causing him to let loose of my ear with his teeth.

"Oh baby, you know what I like," he said with a laugh, as he let me go.

I whirled around, drew my sword and slashed it through him and struck nothing. The bastard was immaterial.

"Enough fun," he said, as he wiped a tear from his eye while he tried to stop laughing. "Yes or no babe. I gotta get going. You know, things to do, people to corrupt, souls to steal, that sort of thing."

Yes or no. It always came down to the lesser of two evils. Leave the spell, or let the devil break it. Either way I was screwed, but there was only one answer I could give. "Yes," I hissed out between my fangs.

Lucifer made a slashing motion with his hand, passing it across my torso as if he were trying to cut me in half with an axe, and it felt like it. I was struck with a sudden dizziness that drove me to the ground and forced me to retch.

Once my stomach was empty I crawled away from the mess I had made in the street, gasping for breath. I was trembling, not so much from the fading dizziness but from the sense of loss. There was an emotional gap where the warmth of my love for Sheila used to reside, buoying me and sustaining me.

Dear God, what had I done?

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The morning after.

I just don't get it. I hadn't eaten anything after I had puked last night and yet I was sick again. To make matters worse we were supposed to be out of here in an hour. It was all I could do to just lay on my bed and hoped that my guts would mellow out before I was forced to rise.

The sound of the door opening got my attention. It was Niko, my roommate, returning. She walked over by my bed and held out a vial to me. I took it and looked at the contents for a second before cocking an ear at her. She had yet to say a word to me. I simply called her Niko out of convenience. She had smiled at me when I told her what it stood for. I'd have to make a point of asking Gwen if she was simply shy, or a mute.

Niko, seeing my questioning look, imitated my vomiting then pantomimed drinking the liquid followed by a big smile as she rubbed her stomach. So it was supposed to cure my nausea. I could live with that. I popped the top and tossed the contents down without trying to smell or taste the contents. Their version of a hangover remedy had cured me of that habit on the first try.

I was surprised to find that the liquid was rather pleasant tasting and didn't cause me any discomfort. In fact, I found that my nausea had faded after a couple of minutes, allowing me to rise and get dressed for the day.

Niko helped me with my outfit, lending a hand as I struggled to lace the leather up tightly. I had wanted Thomas to help but she had nixed that idea from the start. There was something about her that I couldn't put my finger on. It was more than just her not talking. She could be quite assertive when she wanted and yet so shy otherwise. It was quite confusing.

Dressed in armor and swords, I headed out the door and was ready to go downstairs when Niko stopped me and pointed upstairs. Pushing me up a few steps, she made it clear I was supposed to go up and see Gwen. I smiled and patted her hand before tackling the stairs without her assistance.

Once at the top I walked down the corridor nodding to the guards as I walked towards the main room. I knocked on the door and was rewarded by having another of the maids open it and ushered me in and sat me in one of the plush chairs.

"The Duchess will be right in," she informed me before bowing out of the room.

A few minutes later I heard a door open. I started to stand, but Gwen waved me back down. "It is good to see you this morning, Arden. I take it you are feeling better?" she asked as she sat down in the chair across from me.

"Yes, I am, thank you." I replied.

Gwen smiled at me, pleased with my answer. "You really should have come to us when you began feeling ill. We have elixirs that can relieve such symptoms," she said lightly

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scolding me.

I shrugged, trying to think of an excuse. "I didn't think it was important," I said honestly. "That and the fact that I wanted to figure out what I've been eating that's been making me sick."

Gwen got a confused look on her face. "Nothing in the food is making you sick," she said before a sudden look of realization hit her face. "You don't know." Gwen stared at me.

"Don't know what?" I asked confused by what was happening.

Gwen stood and turned, walking around the chair as she leaned on it with one hand, the other rubbing her chin in thought.

"Please, Gwen. What is it I should know?" I pleaded.

Gwen looked up at me and walked over to where I sat and knelt in front of me as she took my hands. "I'm sorry, Arden. I thought you had been told," she said, drawing out my agony. "You're with child."

"I beg your pardon," I said, fragments of my world spinning around me. "Would you mind saying that again?"

Gwen laughed lightly. "You're pregnant, child. You're going to have a baby," she explained.

This wasn't happening. This is most definitely not happening. I've been here for less than two weeks. There's no way I could have gotten pregnant and started having morning sickness. Not unless...

I stood, knocking the chair over as I stumbled backwards from Gwen. "Oh no... Dear God, no," I said as I staggered backwards towards the wall.

Gwen's face showed the concern for me she felt as she spoke to me. "It will be all right, Arden. Trust me. This is a wonderful thing," she said, trying to calm me down.

"Damn it, Gwen, don't you understand? There's no way I should be pregnant. I shouldn't be compatible with humans," I explained, huddling against the wall. "And even if I am, then it has to be from what happened in the mews! For God sake! Don't you see?"

Gwen stood by my side and began to stroke my fur, trying to calm me down. "Hush now, child," she said quietly. "The child isn't from the mews. I know this for a fact."

Her words penetrated the horror that I felt bringing a ray of hope. "How can you know this?" I asked, looking in to her eyes, hoping for the truth.

"I instructed the healer to ensure that nothing could come of what happened in the mews," she explained. "He told me that you were already with child."

How could that be true? Nothing had happened before the mews. There was no way that

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could be right unless... Not unless Sheila had gotten pregnant before we made the transition to this world.

"You see, child. There's nothing to worry about," she said as she continued to soothe me.

But Gwen didn't know the truth. She didn't know that Lucifer had broken the spell that bound Sheila to me. Sheila was his own person now. I might get him back for the sake of the child, but I didn't want him on those terms. I wanted Sheila because he loved me, not because I was pregnant or from any damned spell; I wanted him for true and honest love.

I stepped away from Gwen and straightened my armor. "Thank you, my lady," I said formally, with a bow. "If you will excuse me. I must prepare for our departure."

"Arden, please, don't go like this," Gwen said as she wrung her hands. "Let me help you through this."

I gave a terse shake of my head. "I...I can't, my lady. I need to figure this out for myself," I replied, refusing to look at her.

Gwen reached out to me, wanting to speak, but stopped as she saw the expression on my face. "We will delay you no longer, Lady Arden," she said. "Please feel free to call upon us after we reach tonight's destination."

I gave Gwen a small bow before leaving the room. At the top of the stairs I leaned heavily against the railing and tried to calm myself.

I was pregnant. I would be responsible for bringing a life into the world. But was I truly capable of doing such a thing. Could I be a proper mother to this child and still complete my quest?

And what about Sheila? Did I have any right to make demands of him? He was partly responsible for the child; of that there was no doubt. If I confront him with this now, he could misconstrue it as a ploy to get him back. If I don't, I could lose him forever.

Dear God, what should I do?

Capitol Trip Log: Day 2

I'm screwed. Sheila's running around sowing his oats, and I've just found out that I'm pregnant. This isn't anything I ever thought I'd have to contend with. It never even occurred to me. I mean, I'm a vixen in a human world. How the hell could I be pregnant? But that's not the truth is it. The truth is that Sheila got pregnant and now I have to deal with the consequences

I'm pregnant.

Every time that runs through my mind I shudder. My God, am I ready for this? Can I

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truly bring a child in to the world? I know that Nanuk said that I must truly learn what it is to be a woman, to bear a child and raise it. Could this be what she meant? If so, then just how am I supposed to accomplish this and accomplish my quest at the same time?

Even if it isn't part of my quest, why must I bear this child? I don't even know if it's mine, for God's sake. For all I know it belongs to Bjorn or one of the actors at the Studio. Why should I even carry this child to term?

My God, what am I saying? Even if I had nothing to do with this child, there's no way I could forsake it. It is part of me now, and like it or not I must see this thing through to the end.

Now the question becomes Sheila. What do I do about him? Does he know about this child? If not, should I even tell him, or should I keep this to myself until it can no longer be hidden?

I dread confronting him with this knowledge. If I do, he may take it as some sort of ploy to get him back, even though he was at least partially at fault that this happened. I remember him saying that he intentionally threw himself into heat before we jumped. That meant that he...she must have been using conventional contraceptives. Is it possible that she intentionally did this thing? She never planned on Bjorn being killed.

My God, what if it's Bjorn's! She loved him so, enough to have accepted his proposal of matrimony. Is it possible that they consummated their engagement and this child is the result? If so, should it be my responsibility to raise this child? Even if that's true, am I capable of turning my back on it? As one who walks the path of the bear, I think not.

For now I must do all in my power to ensure that this child thrives as it grows within me. To that end I have begun using the lessons that Nanuk taught me, the most important of which is gathering of power. She warned me about overuse of my abilities, and she showed me how to recover energy from the life that surrounds me. Now I must use this ability to ensure that I am never again faced with oblivion, not while I have this responsibility.

Today, while riding, I spent time in meditation, gathering power from my surroundings. Although it was a difficult balance between concentrating on riding and summoning strength, I managed to find an equilibrium that allowed me to accomplish both tasks. At day's end not only was I refreshed, but I had none of the discomfort I had been forced to endure yesterday.

At least there was one high point to my day.

God help me. I'm going to have a child.

Capitol Trip Log: Day 3

Sheila continued his trend of picking up women at each inn. Each time our eyes meet I get the feeling he's looking for a reaction from me. I won't give him the satisfaction. I was

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taught long ago how to hide my feelings and emotions. The only thing he sees when he looks at me is a neutral expression.

Though the euphoria of the spell is gone, I still feel the pain when he carouses with the women. There is still something deep inside of me that cries out with each betrayal. Maybe it's love and maybe it's just my sense of honor. Then again, it could just be old-fashioned jealousy.

I don't know anymore. My life no longer makes any sense. All I have left is the child growing within me, and my quest. Without Sheila, I am incomplete. Without Sheila, I am lost.

Capitol Trip Log: Day 4

We are making good time. According to Gwen, we will reach Bastion Keep tomorrow afternoon. Beyond it we will find the Plains of Kaldaska. It will take us five days to cross the plains. The way Gwen has talked about the keep, it must be a marvel of engineering and magic. I can't wait to take a look at it. I doubt I'll be able to see all of it in just two days.

Dane has offered to show me around the keep. He has been there many times, playing for the Count and Countess. As much as I enjoy Dane's company, I still feel that somehow I'm betraying Sheila by spending time with him. Although he's been the perfect gentleman, I feel myself falling for him. I see a warmth and companionship in this human that is missing from my life. I'm torn between desire and guilt.

Last thing of note for the day is Thomas. He's been a keen student, learning the basics of Gung-Fu quickly though his impatience to learn more mars his technique. Unfortunately for the other squires here, this sort of hand-to-hand combat isn't known and has given Thomas the definite upper hand when it comes to settling disputes. I had to reprimand him today for breaking an older squires nose. I hope I'm not making a mistake in teaching him these skills.

It was a cold and blustery day, one requiring a riding cloak even for me to keep warm. Perhaps I had over estimated my fur's ability to keep warm. Then again, I had no idea if this body naturally grew a winter coat or if that ability had been lost to evolution.

Beneath the cloak I wore the usual armor, though today it was with a roman style skirt, the heavy metal pleats backed by a cloth liner that was designed to keep the wind out. Either way I found it a cumbersome affair when riding on a horse. No wonder the Romans always marched wherever they were going.

Niko had been most insistent about me being properly gussied up for a visit to the keep and had insisted that I wear the badge of the Spirit Warrior Elite. Although I argued with her for almost half an hour I found her to be an immovable object. It's bad enough

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having an unruly squire who's making up for lost time in causing trouble, but now I had a mute nursemaid who insisted on making sure I was dressed properly. I suppose I should feel grateful, but it rubbed my sense of independence the wrong way.

Dane and I had ridden well ahead of the main group, out-ranging even the lead scouts. He was in a childishly eager mood and kept edging me on towards the top of the pass that would lead us to Bastion Keep. Far above us were the watchtowers that stood like huge obelisks on either side of the pass, giving an unrestricted view of the Duke's territory.

As we approached the top of the rise Dane had insisted that I cover my eyes with a cloth so as not to be able to peek at the keep as we crested the ridge. Once at the top he removed the cloth with a flourish and revealed the keep to me.

To say that it was an awesome spectacle was an understatement. The entire keep appeared to have been carved from the very side of the mountain. Its smooth walls spanned hundreds of yards between the valley of the pass, while arch-like supports merged seamlessly with the mountain, supporting it as it sat over the road. Suspended over the road like this, it gave absolute control to whoever occupied the keep, allowing them to rain all forms of death down upon their enemies.

On either side of the keep were long, sloping ramps that led upwards into its lowest levels. They were narrow enough that you would have barely enough room for a wagon or carriage with a scant few feet to spare. It would not support any form of massed assault by an invading army.

Hundreds of feet in the air the top of the keep was picketed with poles and their waving flags, all decked out for a visit by the Duke. On either side of the mountain, high above the keep, was another pair of lookout towers giving a commanding view of the other side of the mountain range. Nobody would be sneaking up on this place without being seen.

"It's amazing, Dane!" I said in awe of the structure.

Dane smiled as he basked in my amazement. "Yes, it is. The Dainalin, as a gift to the Emperor, constructed it over five hundred years ago. There are two others controlling the passes from the east and west. To the north is the Sea of Camantok. It separates the Imperial home territories from our northern holdings, and acts as a buffer should the Iced Landers ever defeat our northern defenses.

These Dainalin sounded like Dwarves. "Just what is a Dainalin, Dane?"

Dane gave a brief shrug and said, "They're people who have a special affinity for working with rock. They possess an innate magic that lets them shape rock in ways we can't begin to imagine. To them it's a living thing."

"That sounds exactly like the Dwarves," I said with a nod. "Short folk, averaging maybe four feet of height average, quite stout with an affinity for working stone and metal. They prefer to live underground in tunnels and caves instead of up in the open as humans do."

Dane flashed me a smile of acknowledgement. "That describes them perfectly. So,

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would you like to wait here for the rest of the caravan, or should we continue on down to the keep?" He asked.

We were easily a couple of hours ahead of the Duke's retinue. There wasn't any way I was going to hang around out here when I could be getting a tour of the keep with Dane.

"Let's go," I said as I prodded my horse

Together we cantered down the road towards the marvel that was Bastion Keep.

My first impression of the keep wasn't wrong. It had been carved from the very stone of the mountain. There wasn't a single brick or speck of mortar in the entire building except for things the humans had added afterward. You could walk down a wall, trailing your hand on the surface and find it smooth as glass. The halls and rooms were lit with an ingenious system that reflected light from mirrors high above on the mountains and down into the keep, each beam bouncing and splitting as needed, allowing for daylight to flood the interior with a soft, natural luminance.

Entering the keep had been simple. We just rode our horses up the half-mile long ramp that climbed almost two hundred feet before rising into the bottom of the keep. Looking up I could see small arrow slits from which defenders could fire down on people approaching. There was also a huge stone that could be dropped into position, blocking and guarding the entrance from intruders.

Once inside I discovered that the base of the building was mostly a stables area that was devoted to the care of animals and carts, though it also contained all the required hardware for defense.

We quickly checked our horses in with a stable hand, took our saddlebags and proceeded up the stairs to the next floor of the building. The steps were broad with low risers, obviously having been designed for use of both armored men as well as for people having to carry heavy loads.

At the top of the stairs I glanced around the room, looking for some form of elevator, and wasn't disappointed to find what appeared to be a large freight carrier in each corner. It would be interesting to see how they drove them.

Once we passed through the large double doors at the top, I saw a table with an officious looking little guy backed by several bored looking guards, and he seemed to be checking traffic. Dane directed me towards the short line leading to the man, whom I assumed was the equivalent of a customs agent.

Once we reached the front of the line, the small man looked up and smiled at Dane. "Ah, Danedajin, how good to see you again," he said pleasantly. "And what new wonder have you brought us today?" The last was said while looking at me.

"This is the Lady Arden Vixen, Mirak. She is a visitor to our lands and is part of the Duke's party," Dane explained, introducing me.

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"And can it talk?" the little man asked.

"Arf. Bow wow. Woof woof woof." What can I say? I'm a smart ass.

Dane gave me a shot to the ribs with his elbow. "Arden!"

I just shrugged. "*It* asked if I could talk," I said sullenly.

"Ah, so it is capable of some speech," the small man commented as he made a note on some paper.

I stepped forwards to stand next to the table. "Let's get something straight, little man. I'm not an 'it', I'm a 'she' or 'lady'. Take your pick, but stop calling me 'it'," I directed. I'd had enough of people treating me like I was some inanimate object or animal. My stern voice had awakened the guards who were lounging around behind the man, making them realize that I might pose a problem.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. "Arden, please. Don't make things any worse," Dane said, trying to calm me down.

"Danedajin, please restrain it until we are finished here," the small man said.

I let out a growl as I windmilled my arms to throw my cloak back over my shoulders. The guards started to take a step forwards but froze as I grabbed the small man by his tunic and hauled him up so his face was equal to mine. "This is your last warning, little man. You talk to me directly or you'll never talk to anyone again."

The official started at me, his eyes wide with the shock of what he saw. He wasn't looking at my face, but rather the emblem I wore on my left shoulder. "Drijen! I'm sorry, Drijen! I didn't know!" he sputtered out quickly, apologizing as he saw the symbol for the Spirit Warrior Elite. The guards behind him snapped to attention and saluted me.

"Drijen?" Dane asked, as he maneuvered himself around in front of me. "Arden! Why didn't you ever tell me you were Drijen?" he asked.

I let the runt go. It was satisfying to watch him scramble off the table, all hopes of dignity lost.

"Why should I?" I asked. "What I did to earn it was no big deal. I don't see what all the excitement is."

Dane's face showed a combination of shock, awe and incredulity at what I had said. "Please tell me you're joking, Drijen," he said in disbelief as I shook my head. "Don't you realize that there are less than a score of Elite? Last time I was at the capitol there were but eighteen. If they have added no others, then you will be the nineteenth."

I turned to Dane and grasped the hand that rested on my shoulder, giving it a squeeze. "You don't understand, Dane," I explained. "I was given this the day before we left. I know very little about these 'Spirit Warrior Elite' of yours. To me, it is just a title and nothing more."

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My words clearly disturbed Dane greatly. His expression made it clear that he was not pleased with what he had heard. "We shall have to discuss this in private," he said, his tone most serious. "There is much that should have been explained to you before you accepted the emblem."

Great. The Duke had slipped a fast one over on me by not explaining exactly what went with the emblem. Lord only knows what kind of trouble I was going to be in now. With my luck they probably have a "Shaved Head" rule or something.

I turned back to the official and glowered. "Great. Sooner we get finished up with this twit, the sooner we can get out of here," I commented.

"Please, Drijen. I had no idea. How was I to know when you had covered the emblem?" he asked in defense.

I glowered at him angrily. "You just don't get it, do you?" I asked. "I'm not pissed that you weren't groveling before. I'm pissed because you insisted on treating me like some inanimate object that didn't have a thought in its head. People like you *really* twist my tail."

"I'm most sorry, Drijen," he groveled. "I assure you, it will never happen again."

I gave a snort of derision. "It damn well better not. Now what do we have to do in order to pass?" I asked.

The shrimp bowed and waved us by. "Nothing, Drijen. You and your guest are welcome in this keep."

I gave another snort before pushing by the guards. Why the hell couldn't life be simple for me? Why was crap like this always popping up to screw with my brain?

As we walked down the hallway I watched the people as they bowed to me when I passed by. This was ridiculous. I reached back with my paws, grabbed the edged of the cloak and flipped them back over my shoulders, covering the emblem.

"Drijen, please don't cover the emblem," Dane said, reaching for the edge of the cloak.

I intercepted his hand and held it as I stopped to talk to him. "Dane, you've known me since before you found out I was one of the Elite. Please, just call me Arden, not Drijen," I asked, pleading with my eyes.

"But, Drijen..." Dane began to object before I interrupted him.

"But nothing, Dane," I sated flatly. "This title means *nothing* to me. You know my story, my history. This title doesn't matter to me since it isn't anything that my people have an equivalent of." I could see that my words were getting through to him. "I would be just as happy without the 'honor' of the title as with. OK?"

Dane mulled that over for a few seconds before he nodded reluctantly. "All right, Arden," he conceded. "Until you know the full extent of what it is to be an Elite, then I

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won't push you to accept the responsibilities."

That sounded like a reasonable compromise. I smiled as I released his hand, hooking my arm through his before we resumed our trek. "So, what's first? Do we find our rooms, or find food?" I asked lightly looking to change the subject.

"Rooms?" Dane asked, emphasizing the plural. He gave a small, dejected sigh and continued, "In that case I'd say we need to find food, since that'll be the only immediate gratification I suppose I can count on for now."

We both laughed at that as we followed our noses in search of a meal.

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It's not a retreat; we're advancing to the rear!

Capitol Trip Log: Day 5

After a rather satisfying lunch, Dane and I stored our stuff in our rooms then went to one of the balconies that overlooked the open square in the center of the keep. It had been converted from an open-air commons area into a reception hall by the strategic use of trees, flowers and shrubbery. On the south side of the square stood the arch from which the Duke and Duchess should enter. On the opposite side stood a temporary dais upon which the Count and Countess sat with their daughter standing by their side.

The Duke and Duchess made a grand entrance with all the fanfare of a small circus, though somehow it worked in a regal sort of way. During the proceedings I had noticed that Dane wasn't watching the procession, but rather his eyes had been locked on the Count's daughter. I could tell from his expression that he had fallen hard for this woman. Now I knew just whom he had referred to when he spoke of an unobtainable love.

After the show was over Dane and I split up to take care of separate business. I needed to find Thomas and make sure he got all of my things to my room. Fortunately I wouldn't be bunking with Niko again, however it did turn out that they had assigned Thomas to the room with me. Not that it bothered me, but it almost sent the Chamberlain into a fit when he discovered that Sir Arden was actually Lady Arden, and an animal at that. I had almost bitten him.

Afterwards, Dane dropped by to explain what it means for me to be an Elite. I really did owe the Duke a solid thrashing. The Spirit Warriors weren't just some high muckity-muck warrior group; they were the right hand of the Emperor. The Spirit Warriors traveled the land, enforcing the Emperors commands and his law. The Elite were not only the prime defenders against all forms of attack and subterfuge against the crown and its citizens, they were the law incarnate. An Elite was the sheriff, judge, jury and executioner all rolled up into one package. The only reason the Duke could hand me Marduke's life for judgment was because he convinced the Arcanum to name me as an Elite. He had manipulated me to see if I really would kill Marduke or not and I wouldn't soon forget that.

Tonight, after the dinner and dance in the Grand Ballroom, Dane has hinted that he's going to take me someplace special. I'm both excited and somewhat afraid for what will happen. I still haven't quite come to grips with my feelings for him or Sheila. I can only hope that I come to some resolution soon, if not for my own sake, then for the sake of my child.

I had been prepared to wear the gown that Gwen had given me to dinner, but Dane had informed me that it was traditional for Drijen to wear armor at all times, even to formal occasions. Although I didn't have any formal armor, my chain mail was sufficiently new to be acceptable with a little polishing work. Between Thomas, Dane and myself, we got

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every piece of equipment in my inventory buffed and polished to a shine with time to spare.

Dressed once again as a warrior I examined my reflection in the mirror. This wasn't the woman I had fallen in love with, not by a long shot. For a moment I was tempted to simply consider this my new look, but decided that I didn't want an entirely new look. With Dane's help, I undid the braid that held my hair and brushed it out so that it once again cascaded over my shoulders. Although my hair still showed a slight kinking effect from the braid, letting my hair flow greatly diminished the image of my simply being an animal.

With the addition of an iridescent green cape, compliments of Dane, I was ready to rumble. After I dismissed Thomas, allowing him to go seek food and companionship with the other squires, I then took Dane's arm as we proceeded to the dining room.

The one thing I noticed as we waited to be seated was that there were other warriors like myself in armor and wearing capes, only they covered their left side with the cape. Dane explained that this was to conceal our weapons and thus not to insult the eyes of our hosts. Sounded like a goofy excuse to me, but who was I to argue. Besides, by draping the cape over my left shoulder I also covered up the emblem and thus avoided a lot of bowing and scraping that I had no stomach for.

We mingled for about ten minutes as Dane took the opportunity to introduce me to several people that he knew. Being a well-traveled bard whose talents were in high demand, he was well acquainted with most of the people who had shown for tonight's festivities.

"Danedajin," came a cultured voice from behind, causing us to turn. "What is this creature doing here?" We turned together to see a short, plump woman dressed in an extravagant gown and well decorated with quite expensive jewelry. She was also painted up like a two-dollar whore.

I was about to make a snide comment about which one of us was the creature when Dane stepped in. "This is the Drijen, Arden, Countess," he explained with a curt bow. I just stared at her.

The Countess looked me over with a confused eye. "I have heard nothing about any animal joining the ranks of the Elite," she said eyeing Dane sharply.

"Animal?" I growled in a low voice. I started to take a step forward but Dane was holding me back.

"Please, Countess," he said quickly and with a nervous smile. "Drijen Arden was just invited into the circle but a few days ago. There hasn't been time for the news to have spread yet." I could feel his fingers digging into the meat of my arm as a warning. He didn't want me to do anything stupid.

She looked at me again, as if to make sure I was housebroken before returning her attention to Dane. "All right, Danedajin. But you are responsible for its behavior," she

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said before she turned and walked away.

I just stared at her as she took great pains in ignoring me and my reaction. She had just made an enemy of me. I wonder if she has any idea how badly she had screwed up. Only time would tell.

I glanced about the room, looking for Gwen and spotted her over with Leo, as she chatted with some nobility I hadn't yet been introduced to. I threw the cloak back over my left shoulder and marched over towards them. Noble sentiments be damned, I wasn't in a mood to be subtle and that Elite badge was going to shake things up.

The reaction of the various people between Gwen and myself as they scrambled to get out of the way was most entertaining. There was a look of dread on Gwen's face once she spotted me coming towards her with my weapons showing.

The woman who had been speaking with Gwen turned to see what she was looking at and cleared the way for me to speak with Gwen. "We have to talk," I said flatly as I gestured towards a door.

Gwen glanced at the people watching us before looking back at me. We were the center of attention. "Certainly, Arden," she said, concerned more about my attitude than any problem I may have.

I lead her through the double doors and a short distance down the hall. I glanced around to make sure we were alone and noticed that Dane had trailed along. I was tempted to run him off, but decided that it wouldn't make any difference at this point.

"What's the problem, Arden?" Gwen asked, seeing the hard look in her eye.

"I will not eat at the same table as that...that...*female* you call a sister," I said tartly.

Gwen visibly winced and looked down at me with pained eyes. "What did she do now?" she asked though she didn't really want to know.

"Twiggy," I said recalling her childhood nickname from Gwen's memories, "insists on treating me as an animal, despite the knowledge that I'm an Elite." I let out a small growl before continuing. "She even had the balls to make Dane promise to be responsible for *it!*"

Gwen reached out and stroked my hair, trying to calm me down. "I'm so sorry, Arden. Sometimes I forget how narrow minded she can be," Gwen admitted. "I'll go and have a talk with her, straighten her out."

"And will this time be any different? From the others, that is?" I asked, expecting her surprise. I remembered what a little bitch her sister was. She enjoyed screwing with people. The fact that their parents had spoiled her rotten hadn't helped any. Gwen had never been able to get her to change her mind once it was set on something.

Gwen looked at me, pained now by my accusation. "This time it will be different, Arden. I'll find a way to make her understand," she declared, trying to believe it herself.

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I gave her a sly smile as an evil idea slipped its way into my brain. I had no clue if Lucifer were responsible or not, but it was welcome anyway. "Do you remember Ito?" I asked with the sly smile now an open grin.

Gwen got a far away look as she tried to think of who I was talking about. "I'm not sure I remember an Ito," she said eventually.

"Hikaru Ito. Remember? He was my controller. He taught me the art of psychological warfare," I prompted, trying to make her remember.

Gwen's eyes lit up with recognition at the name as it finally came to her. "Yes. I remember him now. He was your best friend when you were in Japan," she replied with a smile.

I nodded eagerly. "That's right. Think of all the ways he taught me to screw with people's heads. All the ways he had of making someone so totally paranoid that they were ready to jump out of their own skin," I instructed while trying to suppress a chuckle.

Gwen had a small smile on her face as she thought about what I said, but still didn't have the full picture. "But what will I use for leverage?" she asked.

What indeed! As I thought about her sister the first thing that popped out was her makeup. She wasn't just making a fashion statement; she was covering something up. She had an addiction to a narcotic that the Emperor had declared illegal. The telltale signs were an odd stain on the lips and cheeks. No wonder she wore a ton of makeup. If she was still using the stuff, then she had to mask its effects.

I got a very serious look on my face. "I am Drijen, a member of the Spirit Warrior Elite. We are the hand of the Emperor, we are justice," I said with a hard tone. "Your sister is in violation of Imperial edict, the punishment for which is death." I cocked an ear towards her, waiting for her reaction.

Gwen got a horrified look on her face. "Arden! You wouldn't dare!" she exclaimed, afraid that I might not be bluffing

I held the glower for a second before I relaxed and looked away and nodded. "No," I acknowledged. "You're right. I don't think I could do something like that to you." I looked back up at Gwen my expression showing anger again. "But your sister doesn't know that. That's the leverage you should use on her. Tell her I could *smell* it on her, and I am only holding my judgment at your behest, or something similar."

Gwen glanced over at Dane, who made a great show of not paying attention to us and then nodded to me. "All right, Arden," she said with a small smile. "I've wanted to nail her hide to a wall for so long. If this works, it will be a pleasure for both of us." Gwen gave me a small peck on my head. I guess with Dane here she didn't want to make a scene.

"Gwen," I said, stopping her as she walked away. "I hope she doesn't try to call our bluff, for both our sakes." Gwen paused as what I said sank in. She knew that her sister

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would be in serious trouble should I blow the whistle on her addiction. If I took my revenge that way, I don't know if Gwen would ever be able to forgive me.

"What was all that about?" Dane asked as Gwen reentered the dining area.

"What was what about?" I asked, putting on an air of innocence.

Dane glanced back towards the doors Gwen had just passed through, then turned back to me, glaring. "What just happened with the Duchess!" he declared in an angry whisper.

I crossed my arms and looked at Dane with a neutral expression. "I believe I just had a conversation with her concerning her sister's actions," I said, skirting the issues.

"That's not what I mean, Arden," he said with a sigh of exasperation. Dane looked away for a second while running his hand through his hair before turning back to me. "What was all this stuff about the Duchess remembering your trainer? Or you asking how this time would be different from the times before?" Dane pressed his hands to his temples and winced. "This makes absolutely *no* sense to me. How can this be happening?"

I took a long, hard look at the man before me. He was a minstrel, a storyteller. Could I tell him something without him feeling the need to let it out somehow? Could I trust him?

"All right, Dane. But understand this," I said as I got right up in his face, my snout only inches from his nose. "If you *ever* let any, and I do mean any of what you learned tonight out, I will hunt you down. Do you understand me?" I have him a look that I hoped would let him know that I was *deadly* serious.

Dane took a step backwards, his face filled with fear. "I swear, Arden. I'd never let anything that was told to me in confidence out. Never!" I could smell the terror coming from him. He was so sold on how all powerful the Elite were that he had no doubt that I could do what I threatened.

I looked away for a moment, afraid that I might have overdone it. I wanted to intimidate the guy, but not cower him. When would I ever learn some finesse? I may not be a bear in a china shop, but I still acted like one.

"I'm sorry, Dane," I said in a low voice as I leaned heavily against the wall. "You must understand that what I tell you now could potentially damage or destroy Gwen's credibility in certain circles." I looked back up at Dane, hoping to see understanding.

Dane nodded. "I don't get you, Arden," he said placing a hand on my shoulder. "One minute you're talking like all this is so new to you, then you turn around and are an entirely different person. How in the world did you even know about the Countess' addiction, or that there was an Imperial edict about it? There's no way you could have learned those things so fast."

I nodded and patted his hand. "Your right. There's something you don't know. It's about the day I saved the Duchess' life. It's about how I became an Elite," I said solemnly. "The poison that was used to try to kill me was arcane in nature. Part of its effect is to weaken the cord that binds the soul to the body."

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I glanced both ways down the hall to make sure that we weren't going to be overheard. "You know the story of how I sought out and retrieved her soul. What you don't know is what I had to do in order to bind it back to her person," I stated, moving a little closer to make the conversation more intimate. "I literally had to merge Gwen's soul with mine. We had to become one entity in order for me to bring her back across the line and restore her to her body."

I watched as Dane digested my story, his brow furrowed as he began to realize what I was saying. "That's right," I said. "Gwen and I are mirror images of one another. She has all of my memories just like I have all of hers."

Dane turned and stepped away while rubbing his chin in contemplation. "I understand why you are loathe to tell anyone this. I also understand why you often refer to the Duchess by her given name when no other commoner would dare to do so," he said turning back to me. "No wonder you care for her so. She must be like a sister to you now."

I nodded and crossed my arms. "More than a sister. We're like twins and yet we're still different." How could I explain it? "If I consciously think about it, I can remember almost every detail of her life, and yet so many things take me by surprise, things that I should know about." As I looked up at Dane I could see he understood. "Sometimes its almost maddening. Can you imagine seeing yourself as you lay dying on the floor, only knowing that it's not your memory while at the same time *knowing* that it *is*?"

Dane stepped forwards and took me into his arms, holding my head against his shoulder as I wrapped my arms around him. "No. I don't quite think I can," he said quietly. "There's no way any of us could ever imagine going through what you two must be experiencing."

The tinkling of the small bell that signaled dinner broke the moment. As I backed away from Dane I looked towards the dining area and shook my head. "I don't want to eat in there tonight," I said sourly.

Dane gave a nervous laugh. "After all you just went thorough just so the Countess would treat you like a normal person?" he asked incredulously.

I shrugged and turned away as I replied, "Yah, well, let her stew for a while. If Gwen read the riot act to her then she should be about ready to have a fit. We'll see what happens tomorrow. Right now I just want to go somewhere and get some air."

Dane slipped his arm around mine and steered me down a side corridor. "Your wish is my command, Drijen. Just let me take care of the details," he said as he led the way towards the kitchen.

Once at the kitchen Dane made me wait outside as he raided their pantry, returning after about five minutes with a large basket. If we weren't going to eat with the nobility then we might as well eat someplace else.

Dane took me to the heart of the keep where two guards stood, blocking access to a

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door.

The older of the two stopped us from entering. "I'm sorry, Danedajin, but you know the rules," he said apologetically. "You must be accompanied by an officer."

Dane smiled and waved to me. "True, Scritch," Dane responded. "That's why I have this lovely Drijen to accompany me." He was wearing one big, toothy grin on his face. I had a feeling he was trying to get me into trouble.

The guard looked at me, unable to see the emblem since I had covered it up. "Is this true, my lady?" he asked.

I brushed the cloak aside to reveal the emblem. "I am an Elite, if that's what you're asking," I replied.

Both guards snapped to attention. "I apologize, Drijen. You and your guest may pass," he said as he held the door for us.

Once inside I grabbed Dane's ear between my claws and pulled it down near me, pleased at his yelp of surprise. "Just what kind of trouble are you trying to get me into?" I asked in a low whisper.

"Trouble?" Dane said, an innocent look on his face. "Why, no trouble at all, Drijen. You have the lawful right to be here. Now let me show you my most favorite of all place to visit when I come to this keep."

I gave a small snort, but decided to play along. Dane led me down a short hallway that opened up into a large round chamber. Within was a large metallic silver circle with a pedestal in the middle. Dane led me up onto the circle and next to the pedestal.

The pedestal appeared to be made of a marble and had a several glowing stones set into the top. Dane placed his fingers on two of them and spoke an odd word, causing our surroundings to flicker and change.

We no longer stood within the round room, but within a small, square room with open sides that looked out over the horizon. Two guards were standing by the openings, scanning the horizon with what appeared to be field glasses. One noted our arrival and turned to greet us.

"Halt and identify..." he said, stopping as he caught a glimpse of my emblem. "My apologies, Drijen, how may we assist you?"

Dane smiled as he led me off of the platform and towards the window. "We require nothing, my good man. We are simply here for the view," He explained.

The guard, seeing that we would require nothing from him, saluted and returned to his post, scanning the horizon.

I looked out the window that Dane had led me to, marveling at the view. You could see the ruddy glow of the horizon as the last light of the sun tried to burn off the clouds.

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"Hey, check that out," Dane said, pointing down.

I looked down into the gray shadows of the evening, looking for whatever Dane had pointed to only to realize that it was a trick. I now knew where we were. We were in one of the watchtowers, thousands of feet above the valley floor. A fact that Dane had somehow left out. If it hadn't been for my training, the vertigo would have definitely done a job on me. Even with it, I still felt a moment of terror before I got control.

"What?" I asked innocently. "I don't see anything special." I looked up at Dane with an expression that feigned ignorance at his little joke.

Dane gave me a tight-lipped smirk. "It figures that wouldn't bother you," he said before walking back over to the table in corner of the room and setting the bundle down on it.

I, on the other hand, walked back over to the pedestal and took another look at it, searching Gwen's memory. There was something about it that I remembered from her early childhood and wanted to try.

"Dane. Come here," I said, waving him over. "Bring the food," I directed as he started to leave it behind.

Once Dane was up on the podium I placed my fingers on the two gems that should return us to the keep and spoke, "*Kaldaine*." I was rewarded by a flickering change in our surroundings as we were back in the keep. I gave Dane a sly grin and placed two fingers from each hand on four gems.

"No! Don't!" Dane cried out as he saw what I was about to do.

"*Osak gen t'aldesh*," I said, pronouncing the words carefully and was rewarded as the scene changed again. We were in a dark room, the only illumination coming from the gems in the podium.

"Do you have any idea what you've done?" Dane asked. "Do you even know where we are?" I could hear the frightened tone in his voice.

"I know exactly where we are," I said with a chuckle before raising my voice and shouting, "*Shirak!*" The word tripped off a long dormant spell and caused lights around the room to flare into life.

We were standing in a large circular room with lights at the base of six arched pillars, with the lights illuminating the surroundings. Each pillar slowly arched up to meet in the center of the ceiling where a metallic hemisphere the size of a large beach ball was embedded in the material. The room was without any furniture, with the only unique thing about it being the floor. What covered it resembled a deep shag rug, though it was infinitely softer.

I stepped off the circle and walked towards a pillar that had some metallic strips at about hand height on it. If I remembered right, each one controlled a different aspect of the room.

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"Arden! Get back here!" Dane said in a panic. "Do you have *any* idea where you've taken us?"

I paused, to look at Dane and smiled. "Of course I do. I brought us here, didn't I?" I said with a wink.

"You're going to get us executed!" Dane whimpered. It was his turn to panic. "This is the Emperor's retreat!"

I reached out to the panel and stroked the first strip of metal downwards, lowering the lights so they barely illuminated the floor. I caressed the second strip, causing the walls between the pillars to vanish, giving us an unobstructed view of the horizon and the stars as they began to peek out of the darkness.

I walked back over towards the center of the room and sat down on the floor; its mist-like substance buoyed me and supported me without ever quite giving the sensation of touching the floor.

"And just who's going to find you?" I asked mischievously.

Dane looked like a kid that needed to go to the bathroom, bad. "I don't know, but they will," he complained, looking around. "Arden, someone will find out!"

I laughed and decided to let him off the hook. "Dane, nobody's going to find out because nobody other than Gwen knows the key to getting in here," I said as I lay back on the mist.

"What are you talking about? This is the Emperors retreat! Someone's got to know about it!" he said, not believing me.

I sighed. "This isn't the Emperor's retreat. This is the Empress' retreat. And to the best of my knowledge, only four people know it exists. Five if we count you," I replied.

Dane looked around, then stepped off the platform, surprised at the feel of the floor as he made his way over to me. "Empress' retreat? I've never heard of it," he said as he sat down.

I smiled as I looked up through the transparent roof at two of the three moons. "Not many people do. Emperor Kodan the Fifth created it for his first wife at her behest. If I remember right, she died shortly after its construction. The Emperor's new wife had no interest in it and it fell into disuse. Gwen found the key to getting here in an old tome when she was a little girl. Nobody else to the best of our knowledge even knows of its existence."

Hearing the story calmed Dane down considerably. After a few minutes he started to unpack the contents of the basket, revealing a loaf of bread, cheese, some cold cuts, a bottle of wine and a couple of mugs. It would do for a simple meal, which was all I was interested in.

"You know," Dane said as he began pouring the wine, "you never cease to amaze me."

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He handed me the mug while helping me to sit up. "You are the most enchanting person I've ever met."

I laughed. "I bet you tell that to all the Drijen," I said jokingly.

He finished pouring wine for himself and stoppered the bottle. "I'm serious. Think about all you've accomplished in your life," he said excitedly. "Even just the fact that you had the ability to track down the Duchess' soul and rebind it to her body." He shook his head in amazement. "I've never heard of anyone being able to work such magic in over a thousand years."

I shrugged off the compliment. "Yah, well, you've never heard of my people, either. Don't be too impressed with me. People who get too close to me tend to get hurt," I said quietly. "Sometimes they even get killed."

Dane reached out and put his hand on the paw that held the wine. "Hey, that's just all part of living," he said gently.

I gently pulled my hand back. "Let's just stick to dinner, ok?" I asked, reminded that he saw me as more than just a friend.

"As you wish, Arden," he said as he set down his mug and began working on our meal.

I looked out beyond the low lights and watched as the last sliver of sunlight faded from the horizon, leaving nothing behind but a sea of stars around us, with the two moons floating overhead. I thought for a second about why I had brought Dane here. Gwen had brought Leo here when they were betrothed. I remembered the joy that she had felt in this place, and I wanted to try to relive that memory.

I looked over at Dane as he prepared the food. He was a wonderful person, someone I could see spending time with on an intimate level. But each time I thought about that, a pang of guilt would strike me. I wondered what Sheila would be doing tonight, who he would be sleeping with this time.

The real question I should be asking myself of late is: Does he even care what I do?

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You made your bed, now sleep in it.

The early light of the sun peeking over the lip of the window was enough to rouse me. I didn't want to wake up. I was wonderfully comfortable as I lay on the floor with Sheila curled up behind me, cuddling as we slept.

Sheila?

I woke up completely with a start and rolled away from Dane who had been startled awake by my sudden movement.

"What's going on?" Dane asked in a bleary voice.

"Do you have *any* idea what time it is?" I demanded angrily.

Dane blinked as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes and squinted out the window. "Yah," he said with a yawn. "It looks like it's a couple of hours after sunrise."

I gave a small golf clap. "Very good, Dane. And just where should we have been hours ago, rather than snoozing away in here?" I asked sarcastically.

Dane rubbed his neck as he twisted it about, trying to get rid of the kinks. "Any damn place we wanted to be?" he replied snidely.

"Damn it, Dane, I'm serious," I growled in an annoyed voice. "People are going to want to know where we've been all night."

Dane gave a light laugh as he waved off my complaint. "Then just don't tell them," he replied. "Remember, Arden, you're an Elite. Elite answer only to the Emperor and the Arcanum."

That part still hadn't quite sunk in yet. Such a high level of autonomy scared the hell out of me. I couldn't quite understand how an organization like the Spirit Warriors could exist outside the conventional rules.

I just shook my head as I gave Dane a hand up. "That won't work with Thomas," I said, still annoyed with myself at having fallen asleep. "I have no doubt he'll be concerned that I didn't show up, and he'll go tell Lord Sheen."

Dane started to make another off-handed comment, but caught the dangerous look in my eye and reconsidered. He knew how I felt about Sheila and didn't want to press his luck.

I reset the windows and lights with the control panel on the arch before making my way back across the darkened room to the pad and its pillar. Again I used four fingers and spoke the activation phrase that took us back to the keep's central point. Nobody was in the room to challenge us. Hopefully the guards at the door wouldn't bother us either. I made it a point to leave my shoulder uncovered to display the Elite badge I wore.

The guards at the door took one look at the badge and snapped to attention and allowed

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us to pass unquestioned. I didn't like abusing the power I had been given this way. It was dishonorable, but I saw no other way. Once away from the guards I pulled the cloak over my left shoulder.

"It really bothers you, doesn't it?" Dane asked. "The fact that we hold the Elite in such high esteem, that is."

I shrugged. "Its not that. It's what they represent," I said, trying to understand my feelings on the subject. "They have so much power and so few restrictions. What's to prevent one of your Elite from abusing their power for personal gain?"

"That's a good question," Dane admitted. "As I understand it, all Elites must return to the Arcanum and face a tribunal; there they answer for their actions during their time away from the capitol. A ritual magic is involved that allows the council to review their actions without having to rely on testimony or any corruptible source."

I thought about that during our walk back to my room, and it did make a sort of sense. If I had the ability to give my memories to someone, then surely there must be a method of pulling the memories from a subject, although the thought of them doing that to me was terrifying. They could learn my entire history that way. What if they decided that I wasn't worthy to be an Elite, despite my having saved Gwen? Or worse, if they considered me to be a danger to the Elite, then they'd have to try to destroy me. It definitely wasn't giving me a warm and fuzzy feeling.

As we stopped in front of the door to my room I turned to Dane and smiled. "Thank you for last night. I enjoyed myself tremendously."

Dane smiled and nodded. "Thank you for showing me the retreat. It will be something I'll remember for the rest of my life," he said dreamily. Just as I thought he was about to turn, Dane reached out and cupped my cheek as he leaned forwards and gave me a gentle kiss.

Startled, I placed my paws against his chest and pushed him away as I stepped back. "I wish you hadn't done that," I said, not really meaning it.

Dane gave me a sly smile. "I know," he said with a twinkle in his eye. "I must be off. I have an appointment with the Count and Countess this morning and I shouldn't be late." With a quick bow he turned and hurried off to his own quarters.

I watched his retreating form for a few seconds before I turned and entered my room, latching the door behind me. The drapes were open and Thomas was sitting by the window, a book in hand.

"Miss Arden," he said excitedly as he put the book down and started towards me.

"Good morning, Thomas," I replied wearily as I sat down on the bed. It must have been three or four in the morning before we had fallen asleep. Though it had been restful, it wasn't nearly as restful as it would have been if I hadn't been in armor.

"Is there anything I can get for you, Miss Arden?" Thomas asked excitedly as he stood

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in front of me.

I shook my head as I started to twist my hair into a ponytail. "Just help me out of this armor," I directed. With a little help from Thomas to keep my hair from catching on the chain links, I managed to shuck the shirt without the loss of too much fur. After that, getting rid of the leather coat and shirt along with the war skirt made me feel almost alive again.

Thomas carefully laid out the chain and leather in the corner as well as placed my swords on the dresser before returning to find me flopped face down on the bed. One look at my fur was enough to send him scrambling for a brush. The feeling of the stiff bristles on the matted fur was enough to almost get me to purr. If I had been a cat you probably would have heard me in the hall.

"Do you know where they have the baths in this joint?" I asked dreamily.

It took me a minute to notice that he didn't answer. "Thomas?" I asked as I turned my head to look at him. He had an almost scared look on his face. "Spit it out," I said tersely.

Thomas rolled his head for a few seconds before giving in to my command. "I was told by the Chamberlain that animals should be cared for down in the stables," he stated reluctantly.

I felt myself getting angry, but quickly squashed that. It wouldn't help. I started to tell him to find out where they were when it occurred to me that I already knew. Some day I'd get it through my thick skull that I knew all about this keep. Unless things had changed, I should be able to find my way there with no problems.

"Don't worry about it, Thomas. It's not your fault these people are a bunch of backwoods hicks," I commented snidely.

I was almost asleep again when a pounding on the door snapped me back to full awareness. As Thomas went to see who was at the door, I tucked my tail between my legs and crossed them. No need to give anyone a free peek.

"Is she in here?" I heard Sheila demand as he pushed his way past Thomas. "There you are! Where the hell have you been?" he demanded.

I turned my head back and glowered at him for a moment before looking over to Thomas. "Thomas, leave," I directed in a cold, harsh voice. The boy swallowed as he glanced at us and then quickly fled the room, pulling the door closed behind him.

I climbed off the bed and faced Sheila with hands on my hips and asked in an angry tone, "Just who the hell do you think you are barging into my room and making demands?"

"Don't try to get all prissy with me," Sheila retorted as he stepped towards me. "Where were you last night?" he again demanded.

I crossed my arms and looked up at him. "It's none of your damn business where I was

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last night," I said flatly.

Sheila's face furrowed with anger. "You were with that bard, weren't you? You slept with him, didn't you?" he demanded as he hovered over me.

I started to deny it, but he was right, we had slept together. "Yes, I was with Dane, and yes we slept together," I replied, enjoying the hurt look in his eye.

Sheila gave me a pained look of revulsion. "How could you?" he asked simply.

I straightened up, my fists at my side as I snarled at him. "How could I?" I shouted. "How about you, picking up every whore we've seen from here back to the Duchy. Who the hell are you to talk to me about who I sleep with!" I angrily pushed by Sheila and went to the wardrobe.

"They aren't whores! I'd never sleep with a whore," Sheila said in a weak defense.

I took out a robe and put it on, tying the front closed as I turned back to him. "All right then. You picked up every bar slut from here to the castle. They were stuck to you like Velcro. You sure have a double standard...I meet one person that I enjoy being with and you get all jealous!. You didn't see me going ballistic every time you copped a feel." Again I pushed by him as I moved to the other side of the bed, putting it between us.

"Sure, I had some fun with them in the bar, but I never slept with them," he confessed.

Really? Could I have been so wrong? It was true that I had never actually seen him take one up to his room. I had only *assumed* from the way he was acting he would do that.

"I wanted to," he continued quietly as he sat down on the bed. "But every time I was about to do it I kept thinking of you and...and I just couldn't." Sheila shrugged, as he tossed his arms up for a second. "I was just trying to get a reaction out of you, but you never seemed to care."

"I cared," I said quietly. "Every time I looked at you with one of them draped all over you, it was like a dagger going straight into my heart."

Sheila turned and looked at me with a sad expression on his face. "Then why didn't you show it?" he asked. "Every time I looked at you all I saw was a blank expression, as if you just didn't give a damn."

I walked back around to the end of the bed and leaned against the post. "You told me that you needed some space. You made it clear you didn't want to have to deal with me, so I used my training to hide my emotions," I replied, resting my head against the unyielding wood.

Sheila hung his head as he tried to find something to do with his hands. "I was wrong," he finally admitted as he looked up at me. "I guess I just got scared. I've never felt like this, Arden. I've never...*needed* anyone before."

"What about Bjorn?" I asked, regretting it almost immediately. "You did accept his

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proposal for marriage," I reminded him.

Sheila gritted his teeth at the memory before he shook his head. "I knew that you would be leaving me soon, and I didn't want to be alone. That's why I accepted his proposal," he quietly explained.

I moved over to next to Sheila and sat down beside him. "You know, I gave up everything to be with you," I said, reminding him of my first wish. "I thought I'd live some bucolic fantasy life with you, raising a couple of pups, maybe have a pet Countess in the yard," I said lightly.

Sheila laughed at that last part. "God, she is ugly isn't she?" he asked with a smile.

I shook my head sadly before replying, "You don't know the half of it."

We sat like that for a few minutes, lost in our own thoughts before Sheila spoke again. "So what do we do now?" he asked, looking over at me.

"I'm willing to give it another try if you are," I replied hopefully.

"What about the bard?" he asked.

I shrugged as I shook my head. "What about him?"

Sheila got a sour expression. "You slept with him. Don't you think that counts for anything?" he asked.

I laughed, enjoying the confusion that brought to his face. "Sure I slept with him," I admitted lightly. "But that's all that happened. We fell asleep looking at the stars last night."

As the realization hit Sheila, his face lit up. "So you didn't...?"

"No!" I said as I reached over and gave him a big hug. "Nothing happened."

Sheila lifted me up and sat me on his lap before wrapping me in a strong embrace and kissed me. All the fears, worries, and stress of the past few days melted away. Just being in his arms again was euphoric.

"Let's not do that again," he said seriously.

I gave him a confused look. "What? Kiss?" I said, teasingly.

"No, silly---fight! I don't ever want to have to go through that again," he said.

I kissed him again, giving my answer the best way I knew how.

As we broke from the kiss, I was reminded that everything wasn't quite settled yet. I disentangled myself from Sheila's arms and walked over to the corner where I turned and faced him.

"What's wrong now, Arden?" he asked noting the way I carried myself.

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"I need you to answer a couple of questions as honestly as possible," I said gently, hugging myself as I thought about the subject.

"Sure. I'll answer anything you want to know," he said, genuinely concerned for me.

I looked him in the eyes, my ears flat against my head. "Did you know I'm pregnant?" I asked.

Sheila's jaw dropped for a second before he turned away and nodded. "Yah, I knew." he admitted.

"And just how long were you going to wait to tell me that?" I snarled.

Sheila got a sheepish look on his face as he shrugged, "Never, if things went right."

I couldn't believe what he was saying, and I visibly bristled as I stormed over to him. "Did you really think I was so dense I wouldn't figure it out? Nine months down the road you'd just tell me I'd passed one hell of a kidney stone?" I asked, venom dripping from my voice.

Sheila shook his head and avoided my gaze. "It's not like that," he said, embarrassed at his predicament. "I figured that in a couple of weeks we'd have the doohickey that you needed for the next wish. Then, when we made the next transition I'd get my old body back, and you'd never need to know."

He had planned to keep this from me? Not even tell me that there was a child? I dreaded the next question, "Whose is it? Bjorn's?"

Sheila's head snapped around, and he had the strangest expression on his face. "No," he softly replied. "It's your...*our* child."

"How can you be so sure?" I asked, worried he might just be trying to placate me.

Sheila stood and caressed my face with his hand as he answered. "It was to be our last night together," he gently stated. "I had planned on giving you the amulet the next day. That's why I intentionally didn't bother with any contraceptives."

Sheila had talked about having other methods than the pill for contraception, but never said that she had used them. I felt like a sap. "And you weren't going to tell me about my child? You were just going to take it from me and never say a word?" I asked, hurt at the thought.

I could see that this was hurting Sheila as much as it hurt me. "I knew you had to leave, to complete your quest," he explained tenderly. "If I had told you, you would have wanted to stay, and I couldn't do that, not to you."

I understood. He had lost Bjorn and was about to give me up, too. In some strange way, what he had done made sense to me. I reached out and gave him another hug, not wanting to let go. "Just promise me one thing," I said into his chest. "Once this quest is over, promise that we will be together to raise our child."

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Sheila held me tight against him. "Nothing will ever separate us again," he promised.

Chapter 26

False Badge of Honor.

Capitol Trip: Day 6

I had been pissed at Dane for letting me fall asleep in the Empress' Retreat last night, but now I see it was a blessing in disguise. Sheila had come storming into my room looking for trouble when neither Dane nor I had shown up last night, assuming the worst. In a way, this was a good thing as it let us work out our differences.

I suppose I should be happy that we're back together now, but it's not that simple. I've really grown fond of Dane, and now I must distance myself from him. How do I do this without building a wall? Being a "free spirit", he has his own set of rules about personal relationships. I'm still trying to find my way when dealing with men.

I look to Gwen's memories, hoping to find a clue, but she never had the opportunity to "shop around." She has always been royalty. There was never much of a choice for her. Worse yet, I almost feel like I'm snooping when I do this. It's almost maddening. How can I handle these feelings and emotions without the background of being raised a female? Am I still too much of a man to fully handle this transformation?

I don't know why, but there's always a tiny voice in the back of my head telling me that none of this is supposed to be happening. Maybe it's just my paranoia. I don't know. I've always heard that pregnant women get moody and, in most men's opinions, a little psychotic. Maybe it's just affecting me a little different.

Whatever it is, it's got me on edge. Something's got my fur standing on end and I don't know what it is. It's the same feeling I had just before I was captured. But that can't happen again, can it? I mean I'm an Elite now... That shouldn't ever be a problem again, right?

Sheila ran off to take care of something or another and I still haven't eaten or bathed today, both of which I need dearly! I need to get my priorities straight if I am to care for the child growing inside me.

First food and then a bath. That should get my day going.

Why do I still feel such dread?

I needed a bath. It was as simple as that. Four days on the road topped off with a night dressed in armor was enough to nearly push me over the edge. Attired in a housecoat with my swords tucked into the cloth belt, I padded my way up to the bath chambers. I looked forward to lounging in some hot water for a while.

The baths were right where I...rather Gwen, remembered them. I guess word of my being an Elite had gotten around with the guards as they all saluted despite the fact that I wasn't wearing the emblem.

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I was tempted to turn into the baths reserved for royalty but continued on down the hall to the commoner's bath. Although it didn't have the expensive decorum of the royalty, it did have the same cascading waterfall of hot water that the royal baths had.

If my memory served me right, the water came from melting ice on top of the mountain range that had been routed through artificial aqueducts then over an arcane heat-stone where it was super-heated almost to the boiling point before being released into the baths. The remainder of the water was channeled past another heat-stone where it was then sent through numerous pipes in the complex, creating a form of hot-water heating in the winter.

The only person in the room at the time was the servant whose job it was to see to the needs of the bathers. I handed her my robe and swords, instructing her to ensure that nobody touched them. Apparently I'm not the only female warrior who goes to the bathes armed, as she didn't bat an eye at my request.

I practically dove into the pool and swam through the shallows to where the water cascaded down from the rocks, allowing myself to surface behind them. Again the memories turned out accurate as I found a ledge several feet behind the falls that contained shampoos and soaps. I was mildly surprised to discover that the shampoo was scented. I never expected such extravagance in the commoner's baths, but then again, the Countess was probably going all out to upstage her sister.

Normally, I would have just stood in the water and lathered my hair, but with a full body of fur, I needed some room to work. I cleared off a little space on the stone shelf and hopped up onto it, beginning to lather up my lower body, working my way up from my feet.

I had just finished my legs when a form pushed their way through the waterfall and grabbing my attention. It wasn't anyone that I recognized from our caravan so I could only assume they were either from the keep or another traveler. A gasp of breath confirmed that she wasn't familiar with me as it punctuated the surprise on her face.

She was a young human, maybe nineteen or twenty in age. Standing about five nine, she had long brown hair and sea green eyes. Her fair complexion was testimony to the fact that she wasn't a commoner or traveler. Although she was a little plump, I seriously doubt she'd have any trouble finding a mate should the urge find her.

"It's all right," I said as I gave a friendly wave. "I won't bite."

She stood frozen at the sight of me. I'm not even sure she was breathing. Her arms were full of bottles and cakes of something or another. For about fifteen or twenty seconds we just stood there and stared at each other.

Now, I'd just *love* to blame Lucifer for this, but I know that deep down inside, it was all my own idea.

The smile on my face turned into a large, toothy grin showing off all my teeth. With a quick motion, I threw my arms open wide as I leaned forward and said "Boo!" Sure

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enough, she screamed as she dropped everything into the water, turned and fled.

That definitely made my day. I laughed so hard I slipped off the ledge and fell into the water. Unfortunately I came up sputtering and coughing water I had unwittingly inhaled when I took my plunge. Still laughing, I made my way through the falls out into the main pool, looking for the poor unfortunate girl that had been the subject of my twisted humor.

Once through the water, I combed the fur out of my eyes with my paws and looked around for my victim. She was talking excitedly to the servant in charge of the room, gesturing wildly in the direction of the falls. That set me to laughing again, this time so hard that I had to clutch the side of the pool for fear of accidentally drowning myself.

Between my gasps for breath, I watched as the servant explained my presence in the baths. The expression on my victim's face changed from one of stark terror to that of major annoyance. She obviously wasn't enjoying my little joke.

I was just starting to get my laughter under control when she re-entered the pool and waded over to me.

The girl scowled at me as she watched me try to control my laughter. "That was *not* funny," she declared.

That set me back to laughing for a second. "Yes..." I said, gasping for breath and trying not to laugh, "it was."

She gave a harrumph and turned to wade back through the water, again sending me into hysterics. I couldn't remember the last time I had laughed this hard.

After a few minutes, I managed to calm down enough to stand without fear of falling over and made my way back through the cascade of water. Beyond I saw the woman searching for the items she had dropped in the shallows. The foam from the falls made it difficult at best to see the floor much less anything laying on it.

She spotted me out of the corner of her eye and frowned before continuing the search. "You are *not* a nice person," she said peevishly.

I leaned against the ledge and smiled down at her. "I'm sorry, but you have to admit, you were a perfect target," I replied lightly in my defense.

She abandoned her search and turned angrily to face me. "I was not! You were quite rude and there's no excusing it," she said with a pout.

That almost set me to laughing again. This girl must have led a sheltered life. "Let's see if I was mistaken," I said as I backed up so my tail was brushing the falls. I mimicked her expression of surprise, mocking her surprised expression and fear.

I threw up my hands and gave a weak scream of horror and pantomimed running from the falls before I again started to chuckle and looked back at her. The girl's expression was hard as stone for a minute. Her scowl would have made a good reference for a

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gargoyle.

I frowned a little and walked over to lean next to her on the ledge. "Look. You've got to admit, you totally over reacted when you saw me," I said casually as I cocked one soggy ear in her direction.

She stared at me for a few seconds before she nodded, a small grin slowly making its presence felt on her face. "I suppose you're right," she finally admitted. "I just had no idea I'd find an...a creature like you here in the baths." She gave me a little shrug as she began searching again for dropped items.

I gave her another little chuckle as I knelt in the water and helped pick up her stuff. "Well, I'm glad you decided to be such a good sport about it," I said as I handed her a bar of something or other.

She gave me a small lop sided grin as she accepted the cake. "Oh, I wouldn't say that," she replied mischievously. "I do have a reputation as a practical joker myself to maintain. I'm afraid I'm not going to be able to let you off that lightly."

Oh no. As much fun as this had been, the last thing I wanted to do was to get into a war with a practical joker. "I'll tell you what," I said handing her the last of the stuff she had dropped. "How about I just concede the title to you and you keep your reputation intact?" I offered as I gave her a hand up.

She gave me an evil grin that would have made Lucifer proud. "Nope," she laughed. "No deal. You're now amongst the elite of all the folk here. You've made my 'Must hit' list."

I let out a low groan that set her to laughing. Some how I don't think my status as an Elite would be much of a deterrent to her. "Oh well... May the better joker win," I said as I stuck my paw out.

She looked at me oddly for a second before she accepted my paw in a firm handshake. We chatted casually for a while as I did the rest of my fur. She was nice enough to help me do my back, which I appreciated greatly.

With the exception of a practical joke war hanging over my head at the end of the bath, I must admit that it was one of the better experiences of the past few days.

Kerry, as it turned out, was a real dear. Despite her threat of retaliation, she had accompanied me back to my room after the bath, enchanted at the opportunity to hear my story. Fortunately for Thomas, she offered to help comb out my fur, thus saving him from "girl work." Since he wouldn't be busy, I let him spend the time he would have used brushing my fur by working on my armor. Girl work indeed.

Kerry chuckled. "You know, I envy you while at the same time I pity you," she said.

I cocked an ear backwards in a querying fashion and asked, "Why's that?"

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Kerry leaned close to my ear and spoke, using it like a microphone and making me wince. "Because you've got such beautiful hair while at the same time you have all that fur you've got to deal with," she explained, laughing at the ear I now had pinned against my head. I must remember she's a practical joker.

I looked at my image in the mirror and thought about it. Having fur was definitely more of a chore to maintain than not, but was it something to be pitied? When I first became a bear, I had missed my ability to towel off in a few minutes after a quick shower. But there was something ever more comfortable about having fur. Like I had told Thomas, you're never quite naked when you're covered in fur.

I nodded back to Kerry's image in the mirror and smiled as I replied, "Yah, I see what you mean, but I feel pity for you for the same reason. You're so naked and vulnerable without any fur, whereas I'm never really exposed like you are. In a pinch, I can walk down the hallway and everyone will just see a furry female. In your case, they'd see a lot more than they bargained for." That last part got a chuckle out of her as the imagery struck home. It was true and she knew it.

I stood and took the brush from her hand and placed it back on the dressing table along with the one I had been using. "Thank you so much for lending me a hand, Kerry," I said with a smile.

She waved my gratitude aside. "Don't worry about it. Anything to delay having to go deal with mother," she said in a slightly grim voice.

I looked down at Thomas on the floor who was still working on my armor. "Aren't you done with my armor yet, boy?" I said in mock annoyance.

"Not yet, Miss Arden," he said without looking up.

I crossed my arms and frowned as I watched him. "And what's taking so long?" I asked.

Again he didn't bother looking up. "Any job worth doing is worth doing well," he answered with a rather bored voice.

"Hey!" I objected with a laugh. "That's my line!"

He looked up and gave me a toothy grin and replied, "Yes, I know," before he went back to polishing the armor.

Kerry harrumphed as she watched our little exchange. "You don't beat him do you?" she asked as she watched him.

"No, I don't," I answered, more than just a bit surprised and concerned.

She shook her head as she smiled and gave me a wink, still watching Thomas. "Well, I guess it's too late to start now," she said gravely as she continued to study my squire.

I was about to join Kerry in poking some fun at my squire when he received a reprieve by way of a knock at the door.

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"I'll get it," Thomas volunteered quickly as he set the leathers aside to stand.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" I asked, looking down on him, my arms crossed in front of me.

Thomas just cocked his head back at me, not realizing what I was referring to.

I let out a sigh and shook my head as I waved my hands over my body. "Don't you think it would be a good idea if you got me my housecoat?" I asked in a chiding voice.

The poor boy got a very pained look on his face as he realized his mistake. "I'm sorry, Miss Arden," he said as he picked up my housecoat. "Like you said, with all that fur, you're never really naked." He held the coat out for me slip on, guiding my arms through the sleeves.

I nodded as I tied the belt. "That's all right, Thomas. Just don't let it happen again," I instructed. He nodded to me, acknowledging the lesson before he rushed to open the door.

I sat back down in the chair, crossed my legs and pointed my ears towards the door to listen in on the conversation. It was one of the guards looking for me. "It's all right, Thomas. You can let him in," I said, preempting Thomas' inquiry.

The guard, no longer barred by Thomas, stepped into the room and bowed slightly. "I'm sorry to disturb you, Drijen, but the Countess has requested your presence in her audience chamber at your earliest convenience," he said formally.

I smiled and nodded back to him. "Thank you. Please let her know that I'll be along presently."

Again the guard bowed to me before turning to Kerry. "Lady Kerrindin," he said getting her attention. "Your mother also requests your presence." He got a small, humorous smile on his face. "I believe she mumbled something about you learning how to handle future duties."

Kerry winced and pinched the bridge of her nose before responding. "I don't suppose there's any way you'd tell her you couldn't find me, is there?" she asked awkwardly.

The guard laughed. "Not on your life. I'll let her know you'll be along presently," he said with a laugh as he turned to leave. Before stepping out the door he paused and turned back to look at Kerry. "By the way, the trick with the flower and yeast in the armpits of my armor? That was a good one." His smile was quite predatory. It looked like Kerry was getting some just desserts.

"You can't prove that was me!" Kerry hastily declared in her defense.

Again the guard laughed. "I don't have to," he said as he gave us a small bow before exiting the room.

Kerry moaned and flopped backwards, spread eagle on the bed. "God, I hate that old

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hag," she sighed with exasperation.

I was still a little stunned over realizing who she was. I hadn't realized that she was the Countess' daughter. Last Gwen had heard, her aunt in the Imperial Capitol City was still raising her. To find her here was somewhat of a shock. Also, she had grown considerably since Gwen had last seen her over eight years ago. She was no longer the trouble-making tomboy that I remembered. Now she was the grown up tomboy making trouble that I remembered.

I stood and walked over to the dresser, removing one of the large shirts I wore under the armor to protect my fur from the leather. "I take it you're referring to your mother?" I inquired casually as I changed out of the robe and into the shirt.

"Please," she growled, "don't remind me that we're related!" Kerry let out another moan as she covered her face with her hands.

Thomas gave me a hand with the leathers as I slipped them on and began lacing them up. "Come on," I said chidingly. "She can't be all that bad."

Kerry sat up on the bed and shook her head. "You don't understand, Arden," she said tiredly. "I've been living in the capitol for the last ten years, and though there's a lot of internal politics, I have *never* met anyone as conniving, self centered, vindictive and down right evil as my mother."

I could see that this conversation was upsetting Kerry. She really did hate what her mother had become. I could understand. Gwen's memories showed me her evolution into the amoral creature that she was today. It seemed entirely possible to me that if I were to do my duty as an Elite, that I might have to take steps that would not only destroy the countess, but also my friendship with Gwen.

Kerry slapped me in the ribs, thumping the hard leather to get my attention. "Hey, what are you so glum about?" she asked. "It's not like you're related to her."

Little did she now. "Yah, I suppose your right," I admitted as I accepted the pleated, heavy kilt from Thomas and began to strap it on.

Kerry stood and walked towards the door. "I'm going to go get changed. I'll meet you in chambers, OK?" she asked at the door, looking back at me.

I accepted my swords from Thomas and inserted them into my belt as I hurried over to her. "Wait up," I said, trying to position the scabbards properly. "I'll give you a hand." I turned and looked at Thomas as we paused in the doorway and waved to the rest of the armor scattered about on the floor. "Put this stuff away then join us in chambers."

I watched Thomas nod as he began to police the room. Once I was assured that he wasn't going to slack off I followed Kerry out. It was now my turn to make sure she looked presentable to the public.

The only thing to mar my day so far was a nagging curiosity as to why the Countess had summoned me.

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What do you mean I have the power? I thought you had it!

Together, Kerry and I walked from the kitchens up to the Countess' audience chamber. She had joined me for a light snack to help break my morning fast, or so she claimed. Personally, I think it was just an excuse to avoid her mother for a while.

On our way to the chambers, we were practically mugged by some old geezer in fancy robes as he rushed over to Kerry. "Lady Kerrinda, where in the world have you been?" he demanded. "Your mother is absolutely furious at your absence."

Kerry put on a mock look of horror as she clutched her chest. "Oh, dear me. She's not so furious as to suffer some sort of stroke is she?" she asked, feigning concern.

"Fortunately, no," the old man replied as he all but dragged her over to the doors leading into the audience chamber.

"Damn," Kerry said as she snapped her fingers. "Oh well. I guess you can't win them all." She gave me a sly smile and a wink before entering the room.

The old man looked down his nose as he approached me. "Please wait over by your squire, Drijen," he instructed and waved over to a corner where Thomas waited.

I ignored his attitude and gave a small nod of acknowledgement before I took my seat next to Thomas and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

After an hour of waiting, I had decided that it was no longer convenient and rose to leave. "Come on, Thomas. We've got better things to do," I said as we headed for the door.

The old man came scurrying over from his little cul-de-sac. "I beg your pardon, Drijen, but the Countess is expecting you. I'm sure she'll be ready soon," he said, trying to delay me.

I paused by the door. "She instructed me to come at my earliest convenience. It is no longer convenient," I informed him.

The old guy looked around frantically, trying to think of a way to stall me. "Um, please, Drijen. Let me check with the Countess. Perhaps she will move you to the front of her schedule," he suggested.

I looked around the empty waiting area. "Ahead of whom?" I asked, giving him an annoyed look.

The guy was starting to sweat. I had a feeling he was going to feel the bite if I wasn't here when her uppitness had finally decided that I had stewed long enough. "Fine. You

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have two minutes before I walk out that door," I stated flatly. I was really enjoying watching this guy squirm. "Better hurry," I prompted. "The clock's running."

He displayed a rather pained look before he turned and hurried into the audience chamber. I could only imagine what must be going on in there. Perhaps she would get so angry she'd have a heart attack or something....

That thought made me chuckle. I think Kerry was rubbing off on me.

I had almost counted to one hundred when the old geezer opened the doors and gestured us to enter. As we entered the room I noticed the fact that he simply closed the door without announcing me. That was not a good sign.

The Countess' chamber was about the size of a high school gym, with a small dais at the far end and exits on either side, which were closed. The room, though it could easily hold fifty or sixty, was absent of petitioners. The only people waiting for us were the Countess, Kerry, a warrior and at least thirty armed guards who were evenly spaced along the walls. The only person not situated along the edge of the room was the lone warrior who stood about ten feet in front of the Countess.

I looked down at Thomas as we slowly approached the dais. "Whatever happens here, Thomas, you stay out of it," I quietly ordered.

He looked around nervously for a second before he nodded. "Yes, Miss Arden."

I stopped just shy of where the other warrior stood and examined him. He wore gold tinted chain armor over a standard leather shirt, similar to what I was wearing. Unlike my Roman skirt, he had chain leggings that were tucked into high top black leather boots that shone. His light brown hair was closely cropped against his head in a style that resembled a crew cut. The most notable things to me were the Elite emblem that he wore on his chest and his hand resting on the hilt to his sword.

I smelled trouble.

"You summoned me, Countess?" I asked after a small bow. I glanced over at Kerry and noticed that she had a worried look on her face. Oh yah, I was in it deep.

The Countess stared at me for a few seconds before she looked at the Elite and spoke, "There it is, Drijen. That's the imposter."

The elite drew his sword and squared off against me. "Defend yourself, imposter."

"Aw, shit!" I drew my sword and stepped back. "Get back, Thomas," I ordered as I maneuvered to ensure he wouldn't be near our initial exchange. Thomas glanced back at me and then wearily backed away from us, heading towards the side of the room.

"Look," I said to the Elite. "I don't want to fight you. This is all a big mistake."

He gave me a predatory smile as he advanced. "Your kind never do," he replied sarcastically. "However, since you don't want to fight, we'll end this here and now."

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I was momentarily confused by his words until I realized what he meant. With his left hand he traced a glowing symbol in the air and spoke. The resulting ball of lightning shot towards me, struck me in the chest and forced me backwards.

The electricity momentarily stunned me and made it hard for me to stand. As I got control of my body I shook off the last of the effects and brought my Katana back up in a combat stance. It felt like I had struck my funny bone all over, but wasn't enough to stop me from fighting. The most shocking thing to me was his expression. He clearly thought that the spell would do more to me than just stagger me.

"So, it's true, you *are* a demon," he said as he made another gesture. This time, a ball of fire about the size of a cantaloupe shot forth from the glowing glyph that he drew in the air. I tried to dodge the flaming sphere but the damned thing followed me and struck me dead center of the chest, knocking me off my feet and throwing me backwards. I skidded across the floor and came to a stop about ten feet from where I had been standing.

I reached up to where I had been struck with my free hand only to yank it away as it touched the ragged, glowing edges of the armor that remained. I fought for breath, gagging on the stench of burned fur. To my horror I looked down to see a section of my chain and leather vaporized in a perfect circle about five inches across. Clearly visible in the new hole was the amulet of Lakash, its eyes were alive with energy. I guess the Elites' spells were just what the doctor ordered.

I glanced over at the Elite as he casually strolled over towards me, a look of utter superiority on his face. A growl escaped my lips as I rolled over and stood and faced him with narrowed eyes. "Is that the best you can do, little man?" I asked.

He stopped and gave me a shocked look. Obviously he hadn't expected me to get up. "So, demon, you are finally revealed," he said, noting the now glowing amulet. "Now we end this charade."

Demon? He thinks I'm a demon? I held my free hand out in a vain attempt to get him to stop. "Look, you don't understand the situation," I started to say. Unfortunately he wasn't listening and charged me. I drew my Wakazashi and held the swords Florentine style as I awaited his attack. I watched his sword while he approached and anticipated the attack. When he was about five feet from me, I swung the Katana around to intercept his long sword, only to find that he had vanished with a small popping sound.

I followed through on my parry and a repost, but he was gone. This wasn't just some invisibility trick, the sucker had actually teleported. I searched the room and tried to spot him while keeping my body in motion. I tried to move in a random pattern, but there are only so many directions you can go.

I heard the pop again, this time behind me. I ducked forward while bringing the blade of the Wakazashi up behind and across my back. Sure enough I felt the impact of a blade as it was deflected by my sword and skittered off my armor without harming me.

I spun around and slashed out with my Katana as I brought the Wakazashi back over in a crossing pattern. He couldn't block both blades. But then again, he didn't have to. Once

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again, he had vanished.

I stepped to the side and felt something under my feet. For a moment I glanced down and saw some small metallic semi-circles scattered across the floor. They were parts of the armor I wore. His sword had shaved them off with a glancing blow.

I'm going to be screwed if he gets a solid shot in.

To your left!

I lashed out with my Wakazashi just as he materialized. The blow from our weapons connecting jarred my arm. He danced back and once again vanished.

I had gotten lucky. No, not lucky, a guardian dragon. It was Illiam's voice that had warned me of the attack. He was still watching out for me.

Once again I moved in a semi random pattern, hoping to avoid giving him an easy target. The popping sound of his reappearance off to the side got my attention again. I spun to parry an attack only to see him standing a couple of meters away as he drew another glyph in the air. I charged, hoping that I would be able to interrupt his spell, but was slammed backwards as another ball of fire struck.

My chest felt and smelled like it was on fire, though it wasn't. The amulet had again absorbed the power of his attack though now it was almost too hot to handle. I couldn't rely on it to keep saving me from this idiot. I had to find a way out of this mess and quick.

I rolled over and got unsteadily to my feet to face him. The bastard was right on top of me. With a lash of his boot he kicked my Wakazashi out of my hand as I brought it up to parry a feint. That was enough for me to drop into a low crouch and sweep him off of his feet before he could recover fully. I lashed out with my Katana and got a good hit on his arm, though I don't think it fully penetrated his armor before he rolled away and vanished again.

I spun and moved away from where we had just fought and looked for my Wakazashi. I saw Thomas dodge the grasp of a couple of guards by the wall as he broke from then to retrieve it. If I needed it, I knew he could throw it to me in a clench.

My eye was drawn to the Countess and noticed the smug look on her face. She was enjoying this. If I managed to defeat this guy, I was going to kill her. No two ways about it.

Nobody ever said I was smart. By allowing myself to be distracted by the Countess, I almost missed his reentry into the fight. I spun and saw the Elite standing about ten feet away, again making glyph in the air. As with before, a blue ball of lightening shot towards me. I tried to parry it with my sword out of reflex and was partially successful. Though the ball was deflected off to the side, a large chunk of its energy traveled down the steel of my sword and into my arm, shocking me.

I dropped to my knees as my right torso began to spasm from the electricity. I had lost

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all control over my right arm, which caused the Katana to fall from my limp paw.

It was over and he knew it. I couldn't defeat him. He glared down at me as he walked confidently towards me again. "Well, Demon. You put up a good fight, but like all of your kind, you were no match for a true Elite," he gloated.

"I am no demon," I replied panting, "and there is no justice if you kill me, for I have committed no crime."

"I will be the judge of that," he sneered as he raised his blade for the final cut.

I straightened up and faced him squarely. I would die as a warrior, not some cowering vermin. I fully expected the next thing to happen would be my head leaving my body, but it wasn't to be. The *cu de gras* was interrupted by the sound of a scream as Thomas charged the Elite with my Wakazashi.

"Thomas! No!" I screamed out, knowing that his attack was futile.

The Elite turned and spotted Thomas's charge when the boy was three or four meters out. He gestured with his hand sending a bolt of lightening out that struck the boy firmly in the chest and slammed him backwards into the floor where he lay unmoving.

"No!" I cried out, horrified at what had just happened. Not Thomas! I watched the Elite as he turned back to me, dismissing what had just happened. The bastard would pay for that. "Damn you to HELL!" I shouted as I leapt forward. My attack startled him. He barely deflected my left paw as I tried to knife hand his throat. Rather than attempt to fight him, I followed through with my lunge, slammed into him and drove him backwards.

For the first time I saw terror in his eyes. I had him in my grasp, with my fangs poised to tear out his throat as the world exploded around us in flames. All hell had broken loose as we smashed into the rough stone surface that formed a wall.

I took advantage of his surprise and head butted him. His skull made a hollow thump as it bounced off of the rock. I brought my knee up into his groin, slamming it into the armor codpiece that he wore, knowing that it couldn't stop the attack. I wasn't disappointed as he cried out and fell to his knees. I grabbed the chain with my left paw and began using my right to pummel his face. It was still weak, but was more than enough to inflict grievous damage to his face.

"*WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?*" The voice resonated within my head, driving me back. I saw the Elite holding his head too, so it must have affected him the same way. I looked around wildly for the voice and realized that we were no longer in the keep. Around us was the desolate environment I had seen when I had first met Lucifer. We were in Hell.

Lucifer appeared before us in a burst of flame. "What do you think you're doing bringing him here?" he demanded of me.

I brought us here? I did this?

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"You want to toy with the mortals, do it in your own realm! *Now get out!*" he commanded. With a wave of his hand, we were slammed against the rock momentarily before pushing through it.

I stumbled and fell into the deep, cold snow as I found myself in yet another place. To the right I heard a cracking sound followed by a splash as the Elite fell. I rolled to my feet and stood, looking for my adversary only to find him trying to climb out of a frozen pond, ice and water pouring off of his armor. He was clearly confused by the sudden changes in scenery.

It suddenly dawned on me where we were. I glanced over to the right, beyond the pond and spotted Nanuk's hut. The once thriving forest was dead. The trees were frozen and broken, with many of them lying on the ground where they had fallen. There was no sound other than the noise of the Elite as he sloshed out of the water towards me.

I let out a howl of rage and anguish at what had happened to Thomas, reveling in the look of horror that crossed his face. With fangs bared charged forwards to finish him off, but then felt something smash into my side and send me flying.

I skidded to a halt in the snow, my ribs felt like a bus had hit me. I rolled over just in time to see a huge, clawed hand reach down and lift me towards the head of its owner.

"Now you're mine, bitch!" the dragon said.

Oh no.

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Judgment Day

"Lakesh! No!" I cried out as he lifted me from the ground. What the hell was the dragon doing here?

The dragon smiled, showing all of the teeth in his pointed snout as he said, "You have distracted him long enough. Now you will die."

I tried to speak, to say anything so that he would understand, but I was unable to take a breath as he slowly crushed me in his claw. My frantic struggles to free myself only made him laugh.

I tried to release my spirit in the hopes that I could free my corporeal form from his clutches but was only partially successful. As I felt my body fade from my perception I found myself still within his grasp. Worse yet, my spirit had manifest on top of my real body. The pain of conflicting dualities of existing in the same spot with what were essentially two real forms in this place was overwhelming. I cried out in a silent scream that set the world to shaking around us.

"No!" the dragon cried out as he dropped me. Lakesh backed away from the writhing forms that were my bodies as I fought for control. "No! This can't be!" I could hear the panicked denial in his voice.

It took all my control to relax and allow my spirit to fade back into my body. The agony faded to simply that of the crushed ribs and bruised body that were the result of Lakesh's assault.

The dragon pinned me with his claw, trapping me against the snow-covered ground. "Who are you?" he demanded. "What the hell is going on here?"

I started to laugh, but the sharp stabbing pain from my ribs stopped me. "What's the matter, Lakesh? Can't you tell your mortals apart any more?" I asked sarcastically.

Lakesh pushed down, squeezing me again. "It's Lakash, damn it! Get it right!" he complained. "Now answer my question before I tire of this and destroy you."

Oooh. The big, bad dragon was threatening me. "Go ahead and kill me," I said with a snarl. "And when you do, the quest will end, the pact will be broken and you will lose all you have worked for."

The dragon shook his head in denial. "No. Arden will continue the quest without you. He'll never know what happened to you."

"Are you stupid?" I asked. "First off, what makes you think Nanuk wouldn't tell him?" That got him. He had forgotten just whose realm he had invaded. "Beside, I *am* Arden, you dipshit!"

It was interesting to see a dragon looking confused. "That's impossible," he said with a shake of his head. "Arden's still back in the mortal world. I can feel him." He leaned

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down and bared his fangs at me. "You'll have to do better than that, bitch."

"You are a fool, Lakesh," I said, intentionally mispronouncing his name. "You were so busy dicking around with our bodies when we came to this world, you didn't pay attention to our *souls*. Sheila inhabits *my* body. You've been trying to kill the wrong person, you idiot!"

One of the things I will always cherish is the vision of a slack jawed dragon. Lakash again backed away as he stared at my prone form. "This is impossible," he stated in denial. "The magic doesn't work like that. It couldn't have swapped you."

I painfully rolled over and climbed to my knees. "And yet, here I am," I stated flatly.

I tried to stand, but the agony in my ribs drove me back down to the ground. "Look at me, you son of a bitch," I said trying to break his train of thought. "I would kick your ass if I could stand right now. Just who do you think you are, trying to kill Sheila?"

Lakash spoke in a low rumbling voice as he answered, "She's been a hindrance to your quest since the day you met her. What I've done is for the good of the quest."

Finally, I managed to force my self to stand in spite of the pain in my ribs. "Well I've got news for you, you better hope that nothing happens to Sheila before I end the quest or your ass is going to be dragon-chow."

"You dare to threaten me?" he asked incredulously.

"Absolutely," I responded. "If anything happens to him, I'll do everything I possibly can to screw you over." I glared at Lakash as he tried to digest what I had said. On one hand, he needed me; on the other, he seriously wanted to squash me.

"And what about your quest?" he retorted. "Nanuk made a bargain. If you do anything against me, it will break the bargain."

I let out a weak laugh. "Bargain? You want to talk about bargains?" I asked. "Right now you're in breach-of-contract on a bargain, so I wouldn't go getting all uppity about my renegeing on an agreement."

"What bargain?" Lakash asked, confused by my statement.

"I swore to complete the quest in return for you granting me the powers of the dragon," I replied. "I seem to be lacking such powers of late."

Lakash shook his head. "Those powers are bound to your old body."

"Not good enough," I said with a sneer. "You screwed up. You slacked off the first time around, and bound the powers to my body. That's unacceptable. I want them tied to my spirit so this can't happen again."

Lakash laughed. "You've got to be kidding! Do you have any idea what that would entail?"

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I shook my head. "No, and I don't care," I replied. "You're in breach of our bargain. If you don't rectify it, then the entire deal's off and you won't gain *anything* when I renew Nanuk."

"You don't have that authority," the dragon said quietly.

"No? How about we go ask Nanuk?" I offered as I started towards her hut.

"You should be careful what you ask for, mortal," he warned in a low voice, not moving from where he sat. "You have no idea what kind of Pandora's box you're trying to open."

That stopped me. I had a taste of the dragon's power, but it was only a taste. If he truly allowed me to tap the raw reserves of the dragon, how would it affect me? I had once almost killed Sheila because of those powers. Is it possible I could become more of a menace with them than without?

Then again, could I afford not to have them? I still had to face the Magus Arcanum and demand the Chro'nisphorum. Could I do that as just a vixen, or would I need the backing of the dragon?

The deciding factor was Lakash himself. He didn't want me to have it, and that was enough for me. "Do it," I directed. "I'll live with the consequences."

Lakash stared at me with narrowed eyes and let out a low rumbling growl. "So be it," he finally said. "Prepare yourself, bitch."

Bitch? I was about to comment when he struck. He moved like lightening as he charged forward and dove towards me. I let out a small shriek as I tried to dodge only to find his shrinking form funneling into my chest as my perception of the world around exploded.

For a second or an eternity, I'm not sure which, I *was* the dragon. My mind's eye expanded showing me reality after reality. I was everywhere and nowhere at the same time. I had glimpses of Zig Zag, Sabrina, Sheila and everyone else I knew. Alternate versions of themselves spread out across realities, some doing the same things as their counterparts while others had taken different paths. Worlds where my father and brothers were still alive and others where all I knew were gone. The most startling thing of all to realize in the end, as reality after reality flashed through my perception, was the fact that I had seen no duplicates of myself. I was the last of my personas in existence. It was a chilling revelation. If I screwed up, there were no more chances.

The panoramas of realities was dizzying as my perception flittered from place to place without rhyme or reason. I tried to find my way back to Nanuk's realm and succeeded for a moment before I was distracted by something in another plane or world. Each time I would find my way back something new would drag my attention away. It was maddening.

Rather than concentrate on a realm, I tried to locate Sheila. Again I was frustrated by the myriad of echoes of her soul as I saw her repeatedly, sometimes at Zig Zag's, others her life on the street or out in the wilds.

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For a moment, I was able to lock onto Sheila in the Countesses' court. He was fighting with the guards for some reason and it wasn't just a friendly brawl, the guards had weapons out and were doing their best to kill him. Despite the gifts of the dragon, they were taking their toll on him. He had a myriad of small cuts on his body to match the array of bodies scattered on the floor around him. They were mosquitoes, but even mosquitoes could bleed a man dry.

Again my mind was drawn away as another of Sheila's twins drew my attention away. I had to find something to anchor myself. I couldn't use Nanuk as she touched so many different people in so many different worlds.

I was almost to the point of panic when I thought of my child. How many children could I have had with Sheila if I were the last of my selves in existence? I concentrated on our unborn child and found myself back in Nanuk's realm. The child that grew within me had been unharmed by the dragon's attack. It would anchor me until I learned to control this power.

As I calmed down, I became aware of Lakash as he looked down on my prostrate body. The bastard was laughing at me. I stood and faced him, preparing to berate him for what had happened, when I realized how my perception had changed. I saw Lakash for what he truly was. Millions of tiny dragons linked together creating the greater illusion of his form while the divine creature that was Lakash lay curled within, directing the dragons in all their power and glory with leashes of magic. I, too, was now bound to Lakash by such a leash.

"Now you see your mistake," he gloated. "Now, you are finally mine. Kneel before me as your kind should."

I felt the conflict within myself as he tried to force me to my knees, but I was able to fight it. Lakash's look of victory slowly changed as he concentrated on the leash, trying to force me down. Although it took all my self-control and willpower, I managed to stay standing.

"This is impossible," he stated in disbelief.

I smiled and let out a small laugh. "You miscalculated, Lakash. I'm not one of your creatures," I explained. "I'm a mortal, born of free will. Your hold on me isn't as absolute as you'd like to think."

"I will control you," he stated. "Maybe not today, but you will be mine in the end. You will complete the quest. You will make the wish. Nanuk will be renewed and I will be more powerful than ever."

"No," I stated flatly. "You will not control me." I slowly walked towards him, my rage at his arrogance growing. "I will complete the quest and Nanuk will be renewed. But you will *never* control me."

I was surprised to find Lakash backing away as I approached him. "In fact," I continued, remembering what Lucifer had said, "if you want to toy with mortals, do it in your own

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realm. Now get the *hell* out of mine!" I released my anger in an immaterial burst of emotions and directed them at the dragon. To my surprise, he simply vanished from the realm.

I took a moment and, searching with my minds eye for Lakash. I found him in his own realm, rampaging and destroying everything in sight. He spotted me and did something that snapped me back into Nanuk's realm.

What had just happened here? Had I just thrown Lakash out of Nanuk's realm? Had he overplayed his hand by actually binding his powers to me?

I looked around at Nanuk's realm with new eyes. Where before all I saw were hints of the magic of this place, I now saw the individual threads that bound this realm together.

The Elite that I had been fighting was kneeling near the waters edge, shivering from the freezing liquid that covered him. I saw the magic that had been woven into the armor he wore as well as the sword he wielded. His very body pulsed with a lesser magic that had allowed him to cast the spells within his own realm. Here in Nanuk's realm, it would be useless.

I walked over to him, determined to end this. His expression was the same one I had worn when he was about to kill me. He knew he had lost. All I knew was that he had killed Thomas and that he needed to pay.

I summoned forth the power of the dragon and shaped it into the form of a Katana. "Do you have any last words, murderer?" I could feel the power of the dragon flowing through me as stood over him. No trick he had would stop me from carrying out my justice.

He held his sword out, cradled in his hands as a form of surrender. "I didn't know," he said by way of explanation. "The Arcanum had confirmed an invitation, but they never said you weren't human. The Countess conveniently forgot to mention your name when she accused you of being an imposter."

I gave a small snort of derision. "And that's supposed to get you off?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No. Nothing can excuse what I have done," he replied. "I just ask that before you strike, please promise to insure that the Countess pays for her crime."

"Oh yah. You can count on the fact that she's going to pay for what she did," I said as I raised the sword. He lowered his sword, sat up straight, and lifted his chin to give me an easy stroke.

The image of Thomas' body as it lay on the ground haunted my mind. I let out an angry growl and began to swing.

"No, Arden! Don't."

Nanuk's voice stopped me. It was so weak I could hardly hear her.

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"You must not kill. Not here. Never here."

"Mother?" I asked to the air, ignoring the Elite. I turned, ran to the hut, and entered to find Nanuk as she lay on her cot. She was nothing but fur and bones. "Nanuk! What's happened to you?" I asked. Looking at her was horrifying.

"It is Lakash, child. He gives only the most minimal of power to support me that our bargain calls for," she explained, pausing for a breath. "He insures I have no power to interfere."

That son of a bitch! How could he do something like this to an ally? I now had yet another reason to take his ass out. When all of this was over, he was going to become my personal project.

I looked around and examined the magic of the room. Once before I had channeled my own personal power here to help Nanuk. Now I had a direct pipeline to the Dragon. It was time that bastard helped a little. I concentrated on the power of the dragon and channeled it into the room, using my memory of how things had been to reform it. Lakash was fighting me, trying to staunch the flow of power but he couldn't. The leash worked both ways. I had his power and by god I was going to use it.

"Arden. Please, don't," Nanuk said quietly. She placed her paw on my shoulder. "You must be careful when you use such power."

I was confused. All I wanted to do was to help by taking some of the load from her. "I don't understand, Nanuk. What am I doing wrong?" I asked.

"It's not what you're doing, but why," she explained. "Search your feeling. Your heart is full of anger and hatred. That contaminates the magic that you use here." She waved her hand around the room, pointing to changes I had made. Each one was fully restored but was tinged with an odd color to the magic. "Your anger and hatred are contaminating our domain."

This couldn't be. All I had wanted to do was help. Why was it that every time I tried to do something, it would go wrong? Why couldn't I do anything right?

Nanuk knew what I was thinking. "You have done many things right, my child," she said giving my paw a pat of reassurance. "Today, you made us most proud when you banished Lakash from our realm. You are finally ready to complete the quest."

So I did banish him. "Yah, but I had to use his power to do it," I said trying to dismiss the accomplishment.

"No," she said emphatically. "You banished him because you are our champion. None can deny us in our realm. You have fulfilled my hopes and dreams by accomplishing this. You are truly capable of renewing me, my child."

Nanuk laid her head back and closed her eyes as she relaxed. "Now it is time for you to go," she said in a whisper. "Take your new ally and return to your world. Sheila fights a losing battle and will be lost if you don't hurry."

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Sheila! I had forgotten the image of him fighting. And what did she mean about my new ally? I stood and turned to leave only to spot the Elite standing in the doorway. His sword was again sheathed at his side.

I strode purposefully towards the Elite as he backed out of the door. Once outside I closed it behind me. "You and I need to talk," I said as I closed on him. "Unfortunately, my lord is in trouble back in the real world." I grabbed his armor and willed the amulet to take us back to the material plane.

The sound of fighting was the first thing to greet us as we reappeared within the audience chamber. Sheila was surrounded by guards who were looking for any opening to attack. He had somehow gotten his hands onto one of the ceremonial pole-arms that had been mounted around the room, using it like an oversized staff. As I watched he swung the tip at two guards that were getting a little too close then snapped the rear of the poll backwards into the chest of a guard that had tried to charge him.

"Get away from him!" I yelled as I moved to pick the Katana I had dropped on the ground before we left. A couple of the guards spotted me and moved to intercept. They were too slow though as I got to my sword first. I dove, rolled, and picked up the sword. The guards skidded to a halt as I came up with the sword at the ready.

I growled as I prepared to charge them but was distracted as I sensed something powerful off to the side. I glanced over to see the Elite gesturing as he drew glyphs in the air to gather power. The distraction almost cost me an ear as one of the guards attacked from my blind side. I barely parried the sword before I followed through with a palm strike to the face that smashed his nose and knocked him to the ground.

The other guard backpedaled away as I turned my attention to him. He had a look of absolute terror on his face. I was trying to decide if I should either run him down or move to help Sheila when I felt the Elite's spell fire off. A blue shockwave of energy rolled across the room from where the Elite stood. As it rolled over the guards, most of them staggered and drop to the floor, unconscious. The few that it didn't knock out were stunned and could barely remain standing.

I looked at the Elite, amazed at the power of his spell. He had just gained a new level of respect from me. Some how I think he had just been toying with me before.

The Elite looked over to me. "Stop him or I will," he said and nodded to Sheila.

I hadn't noticed, but Sheila was in the process of mopping up the remaining guards and he wasn't being gentle. "Sheila!" I yelled as I charged towards him. My yell fell on deaf ears.

He was in the process of pummeling one of the guards when I reached him. I body checked him with the intent of just getting his attention, but wound up sending him into the wall. Either the dragon had withdrawn his power from Sheila, or I was now a lot stronger than I had realized.

Sheila turned on me snarled. He was lost to the Dragon's rage. The last time it had

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almost cost me my life to break it. I did *not* intend to let that happen to either of us this time.

"Sheila, hun," I said as I slowly backed away with my hands out. "Try to calm down. There's no nee..." I never got a chance to finish my sentence as he charged me. He still had that quickness I had seen before, but somehow it was different now.

Everything around us slowed down as my combat training kicked in. I parried his attack as I sidestepped and then reposted with a hard strike to the kidneys. It should have dropped him, but he just grunted. Again, he attacked. Again, I parried and followed with what should have been a disabling blow. Each time he just shrugged off the damage. I had the strength now that I could probably pound him into submission, but that wasn't my intent. To make things more interesting, the guards were beginning to come around and I don't think they were going to let me handle things on my own.

A quick glance over at the Elite showed that he was engaged in an animated discussion with the Countess. I could only hope that he was reading her the riot act. Of course this meant that I couldn't count on him for support with the guards *or* Sheila right at the moment.

I thought desperately for an option and decided that since this was Lakash's work, I would deal with him in Lakash's realm. It took a couple of more quick exchanges before I was able to safely grapple Sheila long enough to take us to the Dragon's realm.

The last time I had looked in on Lakash, he had been rampaging in his realm, destroying everything in sight. Now I found myself standing with Sheila inside of a large, Roman style coliseum. The seats were filled with monitors, each showing the face of a dragon in a different realm. They all were watching us to see what would happen.

My distraction at our surroundings cost me as Sheila nailed me solidly in the back with a kick and sending me flying. Though the strike hurt, it wasn't hard enough to cause serious damage to me. In this place, I was at the peak of my powers. I turned my flight into a semi-controlled fall and rolled to a standing stop at its end.

I had to find a way to disable Sheila without causing any permanent or even long-term damage. I circled and studied Sheila's movements as I tried to formulate a plan. With each attack, I learned more and more about his technique and its weaknesses. I was about to unleash a flurry of blows that I hoped would lay him out flat when it occurred to me that I was going about this the wrong way. We were in the spirit realm. I had a direct line to the dragon. I could create, change, or destroy anything I wanted to here.

I parried Sheila and used a throw to knock him off his feet and onto the ground. With a gesture of my hand, I concentrated on the imagery needed to create the chains that suddenly appeared around Sheila, cocooning him so that he was unable to move.

"Boo! Hiss!" I heard from behind me. It was Lakash in human form. "Here I was ready to watch you beat the hell out of him and you had to go and use your brains," he complained. "What's the fun in that?"

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"Fun?" I asked back angrily. "You want fun, laughing boy. I'll show you some fun." I stepped forward and hit him as hard as I could with a sucker punch. To my utter amazement, he went down. Unlike the times I'd smacked Lucifer, he didn't just pop back up.

Lakash sat on the ground for a second massaging his jaw as he glared at me. "That was uncalled for," he said before standing.

"You want uncalled for?" I growled and pointed back to where Sheila lay, bound in the dirt. "That's uncalled for. Release him."

Lakash casually shook his head. "Those are your chains, you untie him," he said flatly.

I growled at him again. "That's *not* what I meant and you know it," I replied in a low voice. "I'm talking about the rage."

Lakash gave me a surprised look. "Oh, that," he said with a shrug. "Don't look at me. I had nothing to do with it."

I scowled at him, tempted to take another swipe at the jerk. "Don't give me that crap. You've been looking for a way to get Sheila from the beginning. Don't try to feign innocence now."

Again, Lakash shook his head and shrugged. "Believe what you will, but I had *nothing* to do with it," he replied calmly. "Sheila lost it when he saw your boy Thomas and heard the Countess gloating about how she had convinced a Spirit Warrior to kill you. He gave himself freely to the rage. I had nothing to do with it."

I winced and gave an inward moan. I could just see it. If Sheila believed that I was dead, then I could easily see him loosing control. "Fine, you had nothing to do with it," I admitted. "But you can, and will break it."

Lakash cocked an eyebrow at me and gave a little chuckle. "I will, will I?" he replied. "And just why would I want to do that? It's not *my* problem."

Damn him. I couldn't force him. I had nothing to hold over him since Sheila had done it to himself. I knew that if I wanted the rage broken, I'd have to make some sort of Faustian bargain. "All right, what do you want?" I asked resignedly. "And don't expect to get my undying loyalty or willing servitude as that just isn't going to happen."

Lakash gave a small smile of victory. "I don't want either. I want the same thing I've always wanted," he explained. "I want you to complete your quest and assurances that you will speak the proper wish when you do so."

"You're talking about the geas," I said somewhat confused. "I already agreed to the geas."

Lakash nodded in agreement and explained, "As you pointed out to me earlier, the geas was cast on your body. I can't risk you moving into yet another body and not being covered by it. This time I'm going to bind it directly to your soul."

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He was going to bind it directly to my soul? I didn't like the sound of that. "Name the parameters of the geas," I directed warily.

"Simple," he replied. "First you will do all in your power to gain possession of my lamp. Second, you will make the wish to renew Nanuk."

"And third?" I asked.

He shook his head. "There is no third. It's the same conditions I've always demanded."

I looked down at Sheila. He was currently trying to brain himself by pounding his head against the ground in an effort to break the chains. I looked back at Lakash and nodded, "Agreed."

Lakash nodded and reached to touch me. I could feel the magic being manipulated but it was far too complex to follow. After a second, he stepped back and nodded. "All done," he said before turning to Sheila. "Now for your mate." Lakash gestured causing the strands of power that bound my old body to the dragon to wither but not quite fall away.

As the power faded, so did the rage in Sheila's eyes. Sheila blinked a couple of times then looked around. "What... what's going on here?" he asked as he examined his bonds.

"That's all?" I asked, looking to Lakash. "Just restrict the flow of power and that will break the rage?"

Lakash looked startled. "You could see that?" he asked incredulously.

Rather than answer, I concentrated and released the bonds that held Sheila. "How do you feel?" I asked as I gave him a hand up.

Sheila stretched experimentally and winced as his numerous injuries became apparent. "I feel like a soccer ball after a long rugby season," he commented with a low moan. "What happened? And who's this guy?" Sheila was beginning to take inventory of his surroundings.

"This is Lakesh," I said as I nodded to the man.

"That's Lakash, damn it!" he barked back at me.

"Whatever," I said as I turned back to Sheila. "We're in his realm right now. I needed his help to break you out of the rage."

"Rage?" Sheila asked in confusion as he tried to remember what had happened. He shook his head and winced at the new pain that brought. "I remember getting word that you had been summoned by the Countess and that she had something nasty in store for you." Sheila looked over at me with a pained expression. "When I saw Thomas' body..." He let his statement trail off.

I had almost forgotten about Thomas. Things were happening too fast around here. I stepped over to Sheila and without another word transported us back over into the real

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world. It was a relief now that I had the dragon's power, and using the amulet was no longer a drain on me.

I turned to where Thomas still lay. The guards were milling around where we had disappeared and had not yet noticed our reappearance. I walked over to where Thomas lay and knelt beside him. I could tell at a glance to his chest that he had died before his body had struck the floor. I reached out gently and closed his sightless eyes while trying to blink the tears from mine. He had been such a good kid. Why did he have to go and get himself killed like that?

"Guards!" I heard the elite say in a booming voice. "All of you. Move back against the wall and stand down."

I looked up towards the remaining guards that the Elite had spoken too. They had spotted us and had been moving to renew the battle. As I watched, the guards looked around amongst themselves for a minute. Apparently they were figuring out who was in command as one of the more ragged individuals addressed the Elite, "I'm sorry, Drijen, but we have our orders. We must destroy these creatures."

The Elite walked over towards us as he addressed the guards. "I'm countermanding those orders. You are to stand down," he commanded before waiving to the carnage. "Take your wounded and get the healers to attend to them."

The guard looked like he wanted to argue, but the no-nonsense attitude of the Elite quickly snuffed out that idea. "As you command, Drijen," the guard replied. In a low voice, he directed his men as they began to tend to their wounded. A quick count of the bodies scattered around the room showed that the original thirty must have been supplemented as there were easily thirty injured guards on the ground with another thirty or so still milling around.

The Elite came over to where I knelt by Thomas' body and looked at the boy. "I'm sorry for your loss, Drijen," he said softly as he removed his cloak. With great care, he covered the boy's body, blocking the ghastly wound from my sight. "I didn't realize he was but a boy when he attacked me. I'm sorry."

Sheila let out a low growl. "You're the bastard that killed him?" he asked in with a dangerous voice.

"Sheila," I said sharply, getting his attention. "Let it be. It wasn't his fault."

Sheila looked back at the Elite and glared at him. From the way he was starting to tense up, I don't think my words had sunk in.

I stood and placed a hand on Sheila's chest as I moved between them. "Please, Sheila, let it be," I implored quietly. "He was just defending himself. It wasn't his fault."

Sheila looked down at the shrouded corpse that had been my squire then back at me and nodded. "If you say so, Arden," he replied quietly. Sheila looked around for a second and then back down at me. "You look like you have things under control here," he said in a

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tight voice. "If you don't mind, I'm going to get some air."

I nodded gravely, wishing I too could leave this carnage behind. "Go ahead, love. I'll come find you when I've dealt with all of this," I said. As Sheila walked quickly out of the room, I wondered for a second which of us was taking Thomas' death harder, him or me?

"Drijen," the Elite said, getting my attention. "We must deal with the Countess."

Yes. The Countess had much to answer for. "Do me a favor," I said as I followed him towards the dais. "Just call me Arden, OK? All this 'Drijen' stuff gets kind of old, don't you think?"

The Elite laughed. "Indeed, Arden," He said in agreement. "My name is Yoseph. It is common for the Elite to use proper names when conversing, otherwise a room full of Drijen would become a most confusing place."

That got a smile. Sounded like a convention of doctors. "So what now? How do we handle the countess?" I asked taking note of the terrified expression on her face as we approached.

"We must determine her crimes, judge her, and declare the punishment," he replied in a serious voice.

"And if the punishment is death?" I asked.

Yoseph gave me a startled look. "Death? Are you serious?" he asked incredulously.

I nodded. "Think about it," I said as I started ticking items off on my fingers. "She gave false testimony to you: IE, I wasn't an Elite. She withheld information from you, specifically my name. She conspired to cause the death of a Spirit Warrior Elite by using you to kill me. She is also indirectly responsible for the death of my squire." I paused for a second then decided to go whole hog. "And if that's not enough, she's addicted to Ka'spakh extract."

Again, Yoseph looked startled. "How do you know she's addicted to the extract?" he asked, stunned at the revelation.

"I can *smell* it on her," I snarled in a low voice. It was true too. Now that I had the dragon's power again, I could smell the sickly sweet crap on her breath even at this distance. I doubt a normal human would be able to detect it. Hell, I hadn't noticed it as a vixen and I had a sensitive snout, too. It smelled just like Gwen remembered it the first time she caught her sister using the junk.

Yoseph had a bit of a wide-eyed look as he considered my statement. "I agree that she must be punished for these crimes, Arden, but do you really think the penalty should be death?" he asked.

I grabbed him by the arm, sinking my claws in between the links of the chain to get his undivided attention. "Let's get something straight, Drijen," I said with a snarl. "I don't

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care if it were the Emperor's favorite concubine. The penalty is death and that is the judgment that will be made. Rank makes no difference where I come from as far as the law is concerned, and I won't let it change me here."

Yoseph winced at the pain I was causing to his arm. "But, Arden," he said with a slight whine, "you don't understand the political ramifications. Something like this could cause an incredible amount of trouble for the Arcanum. If the royalty were to believe that they were subject to the full wrath of our law, they would withdraw support for us."

I let out a sigh of exasperation as I released him. "Fine, then I'll do it and the Arcanum can cast me out as a radical that overstepped her bounds," I replied, giving him an excuse.

"Actually," he said looking a little nervous, "you are an Elite in name only. Until you swear the oath to the Emperor at the Arcanum, you wear the badge and title as a courtesy. You actually don't have the power to judge her."

I let out a low growl, turned, and stalked angrily towards the dais, ignoring Yoseph's attempts to stop me. The Countess stood and tried to get away but she was no match for my speed. I grabbed her, lifted her with one hand by the front of her truss, and pinned her against the wall. "You were warned not to screw with me," I snarled. "When I get through with you, you'll wish I had killed you outright."

I discarded her casually to the side, the same way I would any other piece of trash, and walked purposefully towards the door. I hoped that my attitude would keep people away from me, but it wasn't to be.

"Drijen," I heard a guard call out as he ran towards me.

I turned, ready to bite his head off, but saw that he was carrying my swords.

"I believe these belong to you, Drijen," he said as he held the swords out to me.

I nodded as I accepted and sheathed them. "Thank you," I said graciously. I would have gone nuts looking for those swords later if he hadn't brought them to me.

I glanced over at Thomas' body again and sighed. "What will you do with my squire's body?" I asked.

The guard glanced over, surprised at the question. "Um, we'll prepare it and then give it a warriors burial," he replied.

I thought for a second and shook my head. "No," I said flatly and was rewarded with a startled look from the guard. "Have his body prepared, and then take it to the observation room over the heatstone. An honor guard is to remain with him until I can attend to his disposition."

The guard didn't know what to make of my orders. He looked like he wanted to argue, but his conditioning gave in. "As you command, Drijen," he said with a bow.

I took one last, long look at Thomas' body before I turned to leave. Once again,

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someone else had died in my place.

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The politics of death.

I paused outside the audience chamber to lean against the wall. I desperately needed to get my emotions under control. I couldn't afford to lose control, not now. Later when I could afford the luxury of being in private, I would let it all out. Until then, I would have to hope that damn mask would be able to hold my emotions in check.

The first thing on my agenda had been to find Sheila, but it occurred to me that I was running around in armor that had been trashed. I walked down to my room and began to strip the slagged chain mail over my head when I realized that I didn't have Thomas around to help me avoid ripping my hair out. I managed to get the armor off without doing too much damage to my hair, but it was a painful reminder of my loss in more ways than one.

The next to go was the leather coat and undershirt. Both of them had been scorched and burned by the magical attacks that Yoseph had unleashed on me. I paused to look at myself in the mirror and almost cried at the sight. The damage from the spells hadn't been limited to just my armor. My fur was burned and scorched in a spider web pattern around the amulet with the majority of the damage in the center where the medallion rested. Although the burns I had received were almost healed already, apparently the dragons regenerative powers wouldn't do anything for my fur. It was heartbreaking to look at.

I forced myself away from the image in the mirror and over to the armoire to look for alternative attire. Since I had no functional armor other than the skirts, I decided to discard what I was wearing and just go with one of the dresses I had commissioned back with the sisters.

I chose the one with the split sides that would fully cover my damaged chest fur while still giving me plenty of mobility for my legs. Again, I was reminded of Thomas' loss as I struggled with the ties in the back. It's not that they were particularly difficult, I had simply become used to his assistance.

Another burst of emotions shattered what control I had managed to maintain. I sat wearily on the edge of the bed as the feelings of loss and grief poured from me. He had been my best friend in this world as well as my squire. I had almost come to think of him as my son and now all of that was gone.

After a short time, there came a knock at the door. I tried to ignore whoever it was, but they were persistent. "Go away!" I ordered, but to no avail. Finally fed up with the knocking, I slapped the bolt back and opened the door to see Yoseph standing on the other side.

"Are you all right, Arden?" he asked quietly.

Was he kidding? I was a mess. "Yes, I am. Thank you for asking," I replied curtly. "Now if you will excuse me, I must deal with something." I didn't give him time to answer before I closed and bolted the door.

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I turned and walked back to the bed. On the nightstand was the book that Thomas had been studying. I looked around and noticed lots of little things that were his. Clothes, books, his training sword and armor. At first I thought I'd have to pack it all up, but then it occurred to me that there wasn't anyone he would have wanted it given to. That made things all the worse, as Sheila and I had become the only family he knew. He had been so happy to get away from his stepmother and her relatives, and now all his dreams and hopes were gone.

I heard a small popping sound behind me and let out a low growl. "If you don't get out of here by the time I count to ten, I'm going to kill you," I said quietly.

"Please, Arden," Yoseph said as he sat on the bed behind me. "You don't have to carry this burden alone. Let me help."

"Help?" I asked incredulously. "Haven't you helped enough?" I turned to face him. "You've killed my squire. He was my best friend in this godforsaken world, and you killed him." I stood and moved away from him, trying to distance myself. I don't know who I was more angry with, him or myself.

Yoseph hung his head and gave it a sorrowful shake. "Don't you think I know that?" he asked solemnly. He looked up at me with anguished eyes. "Do you think I'm proud of what I did? Do you think I like the thought of having killed a *child*?" He stood and walked over to me. "His death is my responsibility, Arden. Please, don't blame yourself."

I crossed my arms, hugging myself unconsciously. "And what makes you think I'm blaming myself?" I asked as I again tried to distance myself from him. I didn't like the way he was getting inside my head.

He turned and followed, keeping close but never invading my personal space. "Because I know what its like to loose a squire in battle," he said earnestly. "I know that he must have been your first squire. You're too young to have been forced to go through this before."

I shook my head in denial. "But ultimately it *was* my fault," I replied. "I knew there was going to be trouble as soon as we stepped in the room. I should have sent him back outside."

He nodded and leaned against the wall as he talked. "But you didn't, I know. You did order him to stay back when I drew on you. From the start you maneuvered yourself to make sure that he was never in any danger of being injured."

I sat back down on the edge of the bed and looked at the floor. "None the less, he died," I said flatly. "He threw his life away in a meaningless attack that accomplished nothing."

"NO!" Yoseph said vehemently. "Don't you *dare* cheapen his death like that!" He grabbed me by my arms and lifted me from the bed. "He died like a warrior, trying to save your life, and *succeeded*. Don't you dare try to dismiss his sacrifice!"

His reaction startled me. The look in his eye was as intense as the passion in his voice.

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He obviously had some emotional scar that this touched.

Yoseph released me, took a step back and turned to look out the window. "I've known squires that talked a good fight, but when the time came to show their merit they turned and ran," he said with a little more control, though he was still angry. "Your squire attacked an adversary he knew he could never defeat as a distraction, knowing full well he'd probably die. That kind of valor is rare in one so young."

He paused for a second before he repeated in a low voice, "Don't ever cheapen what he did."

I sighed, shook my head and asked in a sorrowful voice, "So that's supposed to make it all right? His sacrifice was a 'noble' one and that's supposed to make some kind of difference to me?" I sat back down on the bed and leaned against the post. I was weary with physical and emotional exhaustion.

Yoseph sat down beside me and put a hand on my shoulder. "His death had meaning," he said gently. "He died doing what he wanted to do, supporting you. He could have died in a rockslide, or a fall from a horse, or even choking on a bone. That would have been meaningless." He gave my shoulder a small squeeze before he continued, "You can either look at what he did and acknowledge that what happened was his choice, or you can continue to blame yourself for what he chose to do. If you decide to wallow in self pity, then you will prove you weren't worth the sacrifice."

I nodded. He was right. Unlike Bjorn, he had made the choice to be there, to put himself in harms way. He had wanted to be a warrior, to live the warriors life, and if need be, to die like a warrior. I still felt guilty for playing a part in his death, but I would have to accept the fact that it *had* been his decision. It might take time, but I kne...

"Arden?"

The voice startled me. "Illiam?" I said as I glanced around.

"Illiam?" Yoseph asked in a confused voice as he also looked around, trying to spot what I was looking for.

"Arden, can you join me in the astral please?"

"Why? What's going on, Illiam?" I asked to the air.

Yoseph looked around some more and asked, "Who are you talking to?"

"We've got a problem, Arden. Can you come here, please?"

I waved a hand at Yoseph to try to quiet him. "Is it urgent, Illiam?" I really didn't feel like having to deal with anything having to do with the dragon right now.

Yoseph opened his mouth to speak, but saw the look I gave him and snapped his mouth shut.

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"It is a matter that only you can deal with, Arden."

I let out a sigh of exasperation and looked over to Yoseph. "I must go for a moment. I've been summoned to deal with a problem. I'll be back as soon as I can," I said as I stood.

Yoseph started to say something, but I didn't hang around to hear it. It took almost no effort to step into the astral where I saw Illiam looking rather sheepish.

"OK, Illiam, what's the problem?" I asked

Illiam gestured behind me. When I turned and looked, I saw Thomas' spirit standing there. "He won't cross over, Arden," Illium said in a somewhat annoyed voice.

Looking at Thomas made my heart soar and sink at the same time. He had this puppy dog look on his face that says he knew he had screwed up and expected to catch hell for it.

I stepped over to him and knelt down. "Thomas, why are you still here?" I asked gently.

He shrugged. "I can't go, Miss Arden. You still need me," he replied.

My heart went out to him. It was hard to refuse him but I smiled and shook my head. "No, Thomas. Your duty to me is done. It's time for you to move on now. Your life here is over," I explained while trying to keep the smile on my face.

He shook his head. "No," he replied determinedly. "My job isn't done. I just know there's something else I could be doing for you. I know it."

I let out a small sigh as I brushed my paw through his hair. "You saved my life today, Thomas. There's nothing more for you to do for me now. Please, you must go," I said earnestly.

"No! There's more, I know it!" he stated forcefully. His hand was clenched in a fist to emphasize the words. "I know there's something else I can do for you, I just don't know what. I know it!"

I stood up and looked down on him with a stern expression. "You're right. I have one last order for you," I said, watching his expression. I paused for a second to make sure my voice wouldn't crack then said, "I order you cross over, Thomas. Your duty to me lies beyond this life."

He shook his head and answered, "No. I won't go."

It was time to change tactics. "Do you see, Illiam?" I asked the dragon. "You see the crap I put up with?" I said as I looked back at Thomas. "I take this kid, make him a squire, try to teach him what it means to be a warrior and what do I get? Attitude and disobedience."

I crossed my arms and glowered darkly at Thomas. "Sheila was right. He was more trouble than he was worth. I never should have taken him on."

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"No!" Thomas cried out. "You don't mean that."

"See? Even now he argues with me," I quipped offhandedly. I stepped over towards him, grabbed him by his tunic, and lifted him up to face level. "I spent a lot of time and effort on you and in the end, you got yourself killed for *nothing!*" I gave a sneer of disdain as I tossed him to the ground. It took every ounce of my control to maintain the harsh look on my face.

"No! I distracted him. I saved your life!" he said in rebuttal.

I let out a bark of laughter. "You idiot! Do really think he had me defeated?" I asked sarcastically. "I was setting him up."

The look of shock and horror on Thomas' face was almost enough to break through the mask, but I forced myself to maintain control. I had to drive him away so that he would be free of this world.

"No!" he cried out, tears streaming down his face. "That's a lie!"

"Look at me," I ordered. "I can step in and out of the astral realm at will. I can travel to the spirit realms. I was *toying* with the Elite so I could catch him off guard. You accomplished *nothing* other than to get your self killed." I deserve an Oscar for the look of disgust that was on my face. You couldn't find better acting if you had Tom Hanks playing the part.

Thomas knelt of the floor, appalled by what I was saying. If it were true, then he had died for nothing. He had disobeyed me and gotten himself killed all for nothing. I could see what was running through his mind by his aura.

"You really are a disappointment to me," I said finally. "Go ahead and haunt this place if you want, but don't expect any sympathy from me. I don't coddle losers." With that last I turned and walked back over to Illiam as I listened to Thomas.

Thomas stood and began walking away. I could hear the gate forming that would take him to the next life. I could only hope he would forgive me for what I had done.

For several long seconds I waited for the sound of the gate closing, but heard Illiam moan instead. I turned and saw Thomas walking back over to me with a determined look on his face.

Thomas stopped a couple of feet from me and gave me a hard look. "I know what you're trying to do, and it won't work, Miss Arden," he said determinedly. "I won't let you drive me away. I still have some service I can do for you, I know it."

I sighed and let my shoulders slump in defeat. What the hell was I supposed to do with this kid now? I glanced over at Illiam, but he just shrugged. It was going to be my problem.

I thought about bringing him over into the real world, but I could imagine how well a ghost would go over as a squire, though the image of him haunting the Countess did

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tempt me.

In the end, there was only one place I could think of where he might be useful. "All right, boy," I said in surrender. "If you won't move on, then maybe there is something you can do for me." I walked over, put my paw on his shoulder, and took us to Nanuk's realm.

"Where are we?" Thomas asked as he looked around.

I lead him towards Nanuk's hut. "This is the realm of my Totem, Nanuk," I explained. "Nanuk is one of the animal spirits. She is also, in a way, my mother."

As we reached the door, I unlatched it and led Thomas in, closing the door behind us. The room hadn't changed since earlier this afternoon. I could still see the odd tinge of anger that my magic had infused the room with, regretting what I had inadvertently done.

I looked down at Thomas and saw him examining the room nervously. I placed my paw on his shoulder again and guided him over to the cot where Nanuk lay. She watched us with an intense gaze as we approached.

"She's a bear," Thomas observed as we stopped by her cot.

"As was I, Thomas," I commented as I knelt beside the cot. "Mother, this is my squire, Thomas. Thomas, this is Nanuk."

I watched as Thomas held his hand out to Nanuk without any apparent fear or hesitation. Nanuk gave me a curious glance before she lifted a weak paw to shake Thomas' hand.

"It is good to meet you, Thomas," she said politely before looking over at me, "though I am curious as to exactly why you are here." Her statement was clearly meant as a question for me.

"Thomas was killed today while saving my life, Mother," I explained carefully, trying to insure I didn't put anything in the wrong context.

"That would explain why he's dead," Nanuk said sarcastically. "But it doesn't explain *why* you brought him *here*. He's not one of ours, child. He doesn't belong here."

I glanced over at Thomas and saw a nervous look on his face. This was all unknown territory for him. "Thomas refused to move on, Mother," I replied. "He insists on continuing to serve me, even in death. Although I've tried to convince him that's not possible, he still refuses to leave."

Nanuk let out a long sigh. "When are you going to tell me why he's here?" she asked, sounding somewhat annoyed.

I let out a small sigh of my own. "You need someone to help you here, Mother," I explained. "I thought maybe I would be able to give Thomas some of my power to help maintain this place, and take that burden from you."

Nanuk shook her head slightly. "He's not bear, child. His spirit is fox. What you ask for

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is unheard of," she said quietly.

"As unheard of as the dragon granting a bear total access to its power?" I asked in return.

Nanuk's eyes shot wide open as her ears perked up. "Total access?" she asked.

I gave a very predatory grin. "Total," I replied. "I have the same access as all the guardian dragons have now, Mother. I can tap his reserve at will."

Nanuk got a pained look on her face. "Oh, child, please tell me that isn't so," she said sorrowfully. "Now he can control you at his will."

I could see she was disappointed in me, but obviously she was unaware of what had happened between me and the dragon, despite the fact it had occurred here. "He's already tried that, Mother," I said with a small grin of satisfaction. "It didn't work. I'm not a creature such as the guardian dragons, or a spirit like yourself. I'm a mortal born of free will, and he can't control me."

I saw Nanuk nod as she relaxed a little at my revelation. "Be careful, my child," she warned as she fought for breath. "Lakash is no fool. He will find a way to use this against you in the end."

I nodded as I stroked the fur on her head. "I will, Mother. So how about Thomas?" I asked as I drew the boy forward. "Are you willing to give him a try as caretaker of the realm?"

Nanuk looked Thomas over. I could tell she was using her power, though I had no clue what she was doing. Finally she relaxed and reached out to take his hand. "You wish to do this thing, boy?" she asked.

Thomas looked over at me and back at Nanuk. "If Miss Arden says that she needs me to take care of you, then I guess that's what I'll have to do," he said with a nod.

"You don't sound very sure of yourself," she asked as she narrowed her eyes at the boy.

Thomas gave a little shrug. "I know that my time with Miss Arden isn't done," he said with great assurance. "I don't know how, or why I know it, I just do."

"I see..." Nanuk nodded and released his hand. "He will do," she said as she closed her eyes.

I gave Nanuk a gentle kiss on the forehead before I got up. With a small gesture, I shooed Thomas outside. I would teach him the basics of maintaining the realm before I returned to the real world. There was also the question of figuring out how to give him some of my power so that he wouldn't have to tap his own spirit.

Although I was saddened by Thomas' death and refusal to move on, I was glad that he would be caring for Nanuk. That would be one less worry on my mind until I could complete this bloody quest and try to return to a normal life.

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With all that had happened today, there was one thing I was absolutely sure of...

I need a vacation.

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Illusions destroyed.

Once I had finished dealing with Thomas, I returned to the real world to deal with him there. I still had the matter of his body to take care of. I had sent the keep's pages out to spread the word that anyone wishing to attend his funeral should come to the observation room over the heatstone at sundown that evening.

Fortunately, Yoseph was gone by the time I returned to my room, so I wouldn't have to deal with him right away. For some reason, Dane was also making himself scarce, though right now, I didn't mind that either.

I collected what little belongings Thomas had owned and placed them in a small wooden box. Much of it was borrowed training materials, though there was some clothing that he had been issued while at the Duke's castle. I also found the gold Imperial coin that I had paid him before my capture. He still had it. I kept that aside for myself. I'll take it to him later tonight. They say you can't take it with you, but in his case, I was going to make sure there was an exception.

After returning Thomas' borrowed items, I took what little remained and passed it out amongst the other squires that he had talked about. It made little sense to keep the clothing for myself. Besides, it would help his friends to have something to remember him by. After all, they couldn't just pop into the spirit realm for a visit like I could.

Last on my list, before I could try to relax for the day, was to check out the maintenance balcony over the heatstone. Normally, one would have to wear special garments with a spell woven into the fabric to stand the heat. I wanted to see if the magic of the dragon was powerful enough to protect me without such requirements.

The sorcerer, who was responsible for maintaining the keep's heatstone, as well as its other base functions, had been most disturbed when the guards had brought Thomas' body to the observation window. He had been even more disturbed when I explained what I intended. From Gwen's memory, I knew that the stone's temperature could be driven quite high for very short periods of time. During the siege of Chasok Keep where Gwen had been temporarily trapped, they had used the stone to dispose of waste materials by incinerating it. I now intended to use the stone to cremate the body of Thomas.

I had been nervous about entering the room, as the sorcerer had informed me that the temperature inside generally hovered around one hundred and eighty or so. If the power of the dragon didn't protect me from the heat, I would definitely be beating a hasty retreat.

Curiously enough, I found the heat slightly oppressive at first, but then oddly relaxing. It reminded me somewhat of a Jacuzzi, where you're uncomfortable with the heat but soon become used to it and relax. I spent the next fifteen minutes just looking around the inside of the chamber with one of the workers following me in case the heat overcame me.

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The truly startling revelation came after we left the chamber. The technician had asked me why my eyes had changed. As it turned out, while I was using the power of the dragon to protect myself, my eyes had taken on his aspect. I wasn't sure if it was Lakash's way reminding me who's power I was using, or if it was purely a side effect. Either way, I wasn't going to let a small thing like the way my eyes looked bother me. Been there, done that.

Rather than mope in my room, I went up to the top of the keep's walls. The day was cheerful enough, with light airy clouds floating by in the breeze. I could feel the harsh chill of winter coming, forcing the guards on duty to don heavy surcoats, though I had to concentrate to feel it anymore.

One of the most intrusive things I noticed about the Dragon's power was the detached feeling I had of my surroundings. It was as if my sense of touch had been muffled under a huge pile of cotton. On the other hand, my sense of sight, smell and hearing had become incredibly sharp again. I remembered the boost that I had gotten when I was a bear, and it had been nothing compared to the raw input I was getting now. It was so difficult to concentrate sometimes.

I not only had to tone down my hearing so as to concentrate on just the person I was with, but I also had to keep my mind on where I was and what I was doing. It was so easy to find myself watching Zig Zag or Sabrina going about their daily life and tuning out my current surroundings. I wondered what the significance was that I would think more about those two than I would Sheila. Maybe it's true what they say about absence making the heart grow fonder. I know I definitely missed Zig Zag's company.

At the moment I was content with leaning on the stone ramparts and watching the clouds float by. Not that I was looking for anything, I was simply trying to loose myself in the slowly changing shapes as they meandered leisurely on the currents of air. There truly is no rest for the wicked or the weary.

The sound of Gwen's tentative voice came from behind me, "Arden?"

I let my ears wilt at the thought of what our conversation would undoubtedly be about. "Yes, Gwen." I answered back, softly without turning.

The touch of Gwen's hand on my shoulder destroyed any remaining fragments of solitude that I had left. "Arden, can we talk? Please?" she asked quietly.

I closed my eyes and let my muzzle rest on my paws. "We are talking, Gwen," I replied without too much sarcasm.

Gwen moved to stand next to me and leaned against the rock. "Please, Arden. You know what I'm talking about," she implored quietly. "I'm worried for my sister."

Ah. There you have it. The crux of the conversation. I knew she'd be coming around to beg for her sister. I opened my eyes and looked at her without moving my head. "As worried as you were when she sent her real elite to try to kill me?" I asked in a low voice. She got a pained look in her face as she turned away slightly. I straightened up and turned

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to face her with a stern look. "She tried to kill me and as a result, Thomas now lies dead."

"That's not fair," she said quietly. "I didn't know about that." Gwen turned back and looked me in the eye with a wide, sorrowful expression. "I swear, Arden, I didn't know. If I had any inkling of what she had planned, I would have warned you, I swear."

For a moment, I was tempted to let my anger prod me into doing something cruel, but I knew deep down inside that what she said was the truth. Despite any loyalty she owed her sister, I knew for a fact that she was telling the truth. We were too close to each other to lie without knowing. I nodded my head, ashamed of myself. "I know, Gwen. I'm sorry."

Gwen looked like she wanted to ask something. A couple of times she started to say something but bulked before she finally asked, "What's going to happen to my sister?"

I let out a low growl as I turned back to the clouds and rested my muzzle on my paws again. "Do you mean what would I do, or what will the Arcanum do?" I asked.

"I know what you'd do," she said quietly, "and I can understand it completely. But she is my sister, Arden."

I let out a sigh as I thought about her sister and the memories from Gwen that I held of her. The more I looked through their youth, the more assured I became that her sister didn't care about anyone or anything except herself and her pleasure. "Gwen," I said with flat, emotionless voice, "You don't have a sister, you have a leach that's sucking the blood that ties your family together dry."

"Arden!" she exclaimed, shocked at my declaration.

I turned and looked at her while keeping my emotions from my face. "I know evil when I encounter it, Gwen, and your sister is evil," I stated flatly. "I have met the Prince of Darkness himself, and your sister would make a good match for him."

Gwen stared at me for a second before she shook her head as if to clear it. "Who is this Prince of Darkness you speak of? Are you talking about Prince Hiram?" she asked somewhat confused by the turn of the conversation.

I laughed at the thought of that little twit being compared to Lucifer. "No, Gwen, he is not the prince I speak of," I said with a small smile that quickly faded. "I speak of none other than Lucifer." There wasn't a hint of recognition. "Beelzebub?" Gwen just shook her head.

"Try Nalboljia" I heard Illiam say.

"How about Nalboljia?" I asked, taking my prompt from the dragon.

Gwen backed up as she made a mystical or religious pattern in the air with her hand. "Arden!" she exclaimed. "You've had dealings with Nalboljia?"

I ignored her outburst and leaned my back against the rough stone. "Know thy enemy,

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Gwen," I responded casually. "And, although he is one of my enemies, we both have a greater enemy that I must defeat."

She looked at me with an expression of shock and horror. Gwen had never imagined that I would be dealing with the likes of him. "And that's supposed to make it all right?" she asked in disbelief. "Arden, you risk your very soul dealing with one such as him."

I looked away and stared at the stone I was standing on for a second. "My soul's already lost, Gwen," I replied in a hushed tone of voice. "I have killed too many people to go elsewhere."

"That's not true, Arden," Gwen said as she stepped back over to me. "You're too good of a person deep down inside for that to be true. Don't believe what one such as he tells you. Your soul isn't lost."

I wished I could believe her, but deep down inside, I knew they were just words. The blood of too many people, innocent and guilty covered my paws. There was no way I would be able to avoid being judged for them in the afterlife

I looked back up at the setting sun and sighed. "It's time, Gwen," I said to change the subject. "We both have a duty that calls for our attention."

Again, Gwen looked like she wanted to argue with me, but changed her mind. "As you wish, Arden," she said. She turned to walk away, stopped then came back and gave me a light kiss on the cheek before she left.

I watched her as she walked towards the stairs leading down into the keep. She was the closest thing to a sister I had in this or any world, and it was going to be my duty to see justice was done to her sibling.

I sighed and rubbed the bridge of my muzzle. I was beginning to get a headache from all the stresses of the day and the need to deal with Thomas' funeral wasn't helping. I still needed to track Sheila down. I had been looking for him when the clouds caught my attention. I was slacking and still needed to find him. It was time to cheat.

"Illiam? You around?" I asked to the air.

"Of course, Arden," the disembodied voice came back.

"Do you know where I can find Sheila?"

"Sheila is at the top of the north tower."

What was he doing up in the north tower? From my recollections, or rather Gwen's recollections, that place was being used as a storage site right now. A long time ago, it had been used to house very important prisoners, but hadn't been needed for that in a long time.

I took one last glance at the sun as it neared the horizon before I went to fetch Sheila. The walk up the tower was a long one. The dust lay thick on the stone steps except where

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they had been disturbed by Sheila's boots. From the looks of things, nobody else had been in here for ages.

At each level I found thick, wooden doors that lead into fairly respectable sized chambers. Each was lockable from the outside and had a small viewing door at head height for the jailers to look through. As I glanced into the rooms, it was obvious from the dust that nobody had been in them for a long time.

The final and uppermost doorway was open, leading into a room that occupied the entire top floor of the structure. I followed the footsteps as they meandered through the room until I spotted Sheila as he sat on the edge of the window, gazing out at something unseen to me.

"You know, Arden," Sheila said without looking. "I could hear you open the door at the base of the tower. All the way up, I've listened to you stop at every door and look in." He turned to look at me for a second before returning his attention out the window. "Now I understand why you called these abilities a curse."

I walked over to him and wrapped my arms around him from the rear. "Don't worry, love. You won't have to put up with them for much longer," I replied in an attempt to soothe him. Something was definitely bothering him, and I had the feeling it wasn't the dragons powers. "Soon enough we'll get the Chro'nisforum and be on our way to Husquahr. But first, we have duties we must attend to. It's time for Thomas' funeral."

Sheila took a deep breath and let out a wistful sigh. "I'm not going," he finally said in a quiet voice.

I let go and straightened up in surprise. "What do you mean, you're not going?" I asked incredulously.

Sheila shook his head as he restated, "I'm not going, Arden. I can't."

I moved around Sheila and sat down next to him on the windowsill, facing in towards the keep rather than out. "Sheila, what are you talking about? Why can't you go."

He didn't look at me. In fact, he made it a point not to look in my general direction. "I'm sorry, Arden. I just can't. Please, don't ask me to do it," he replied with a slight pleading tone in his voice.

"But Sheila, he was our friend!" I stated as a rebuttal. How could he do this?

Sheila's head whipped around to face me. "No he wasn't! He was your friend, not mine!"

The venom in his voice startled me enough that I banged my head against the wall with the shock. I just stared at him in disbelief while I tried to glean some bit of reason behind his reaction. I never even had a clue that he felt that way.

Sheila's expression softened a little as he continued, "I'm sorry Arden, but that's just the way I feel about it." He got an embarrassed look on his face and turned away again to lean against the stone windowsill.

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I slumped against the wall as my strength abandoned me. "I had no idea, Sheila," I said quietly. "Neither of you ever gave me any indication..."

He sat there quietly for a second watching something outside the keep. "You've got to understand, Arden. Before we came here, you were always there for me. You were my best friend, my lover and companion." He turned and got more comfortable with his back against the sill and continued his explanation. "Since we got here, that kid's been around you almost all the time. You've paid more attention to him than everyone else combined." As he talked, he got more agitated. "That damn kid has monopolized your time from the start of the day to the end. The only private time I ever got with you was at night, and even then only when you told the rug rat to get lost."

All I could do was stare as I watched him bang his head against the stone. His face was filled with anguish. "Damn it Arden," he said as he gasped for breath, "I was jealous of a kid. Do you understand me? A kid! What kind of a damn fool is jealous of a stupid, pubescent kid?"

I had no answers for that. I couldn't even imagine what he must have been going through. It was too much for me to absorb all at once. I had constantly run into Sheila's jealousy and distrust before we had been transported into this world. What kind of a fool would forget all about something like that?

I took a deep breath and tried to calm myself a little before I responded. "I can't claim to know what you're feeling because I've never been there," I said gently. "I'm not the jealous type. If I were, I don't think I could have stood the thought of you working at the studio after we got together." I paused for another breath and to think about what to say. "I know you've been hurt by a lot of guys that promised to be there for you and then dumped you. I know that's caused you a lot of scars. And I can see how that could have affected your attitude towards Thomas. But the fact remains that I still need you to stand by me at his funeral."

Sheila shook his head in denial. "I just can't do it. It wouldn't be right. How could I stand there and pretend to have been his friend when I wasn't," he said in a hushed whisper.

"You mean like I did for Bjorn?" I asked back. That got his attention. "Bjorn and I weren't friends. I never liked the little rodent from the day I found out he'd screwed you knowing that we were a couple. And yet, I stood before a gathered crowd of his friends and admitted my feelings for him and what I *did* respect about him."

I reached out and took Sheila's hand in my paw and gave it a squeeze. "Can you honestly say that there was nothing about Thomas that you respected? That he never did anything that you approved of? Could you truly have hated him so much that he could do no right?"

I let the question linger in the air for a minute. Sheila looked like he was mulling over what I had said. I decided to let things be. Either he'd come, or he wouldn't. I wasn't going to force him. I gave his hand another squeeze as I leaned forward to give him a gentle kiss before I hopped down from the windowsill. I paused at the door on the way

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out to look back at Sheila. His face was ruddy orange like the color of the setting sun. I could only try to imagine what was running through his head right now, and that was something I really didn't want to do.

With a sigh, I slowly started down the stairs on the long journey to the heatstone. Only time would tell if Sheila would show up or not.

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The dragon gets his due.

Once again I was standing in the heatstone room, only this time I was watching Yoseph as he walked around without protection. He was fairly sure that he could keep up his protection spell, but he wasn't sure he could do it while keeping a second spell up.

Right now he was practicing levitating a large stone chair while maintaining his protection spell. I didn't just want to shove Thomas' body down a ramp and onto the stone. If possible, I wanted there to be some dignity. That's why we were making sure Yoseph would be able to handle levitating him down while maintaining his own protection spell.

Once we had completed the test, we returned to the main observation room. The room itself wasn't huge, but it was still roomy enough to handle the twenty or so people who had shown up. Unfortunately, Sheila wasn't amongst the crowd. I was pleased to see Gwen there and equally horrified to see her sister. From the look on Gwen's face, she wasn't too pleased with her being there either.

I took a deep breath to help center myself and headed over to the main observation window to get the ball rolling.

As I was about to start, the sorcerer who maintained the stone interrupted me. "I'm sorry, Drijen, but I must inform you that we will be unable to perform the ritual you have requested."

I blinked at him in surprised. What the hell? We had gone over this earlier today. He had his reservations, but was willing to do it. Why the sudden change? I glanced over at the Countess and the insufferable smile she wore and knew with all certainty what had happened. I looked back down at the sorcerer who was now sweating slightly and pursed my lips for a second before I asked, "And just why can't you do this?"

The little man glanced over at the countess before returning his attention to me. "I'm sorry, Drijen, but it has been pointed out to me that doing such is dangerous and stresses the magic of the crystal. Imperial Edict forbids us to perform such acts unless under siege and have no other recourse." He gave a sheepish smile along with the explanation. It made sense, although I knew of no such edict. But then again, Gwen didn't control a keep and wouldn't be expected to know such things.

I sighed and nodded. "Thank you. I'll see if I can find another way to handle this."

The small man smiled as he returned his attention to the day-to-day operation of the stone.

I let out another sigh of exasperation and headed over to talk to Yoseph. "Yoseph, we have a problem," I said in a low voice.

Yoseph saw the look on my face and winced. "What's the problem, Arden?"

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I nodded toward the sorcerer. "The little guy says they can't ramp up the temperature to the flash point unless the keep's under siege and it's an emergency. Does this sound familiar to you?"

Yoseph massaged his chin for a moment as he thought about my question. "You know, I think that may be right. It was done to protect the stones. If they ever get destroyed, we have no way of replacing them."

Great. That's just what I didn't need. "Any chance you can do it?" I gave him my best puppy-dog look.

This time it was Yoseph's turn to give me a sheepish smile. "I'm sorry, Arden. I was having enough trouble just trying to maintain two spells. I don't think I'd be able to do three. And you know I can't cast magic while in one of those cold suits."

Damn. That's what I was afraid of. I tried to think of another way, but the only one I could think of made my blood run cold. I had a choice of either swallowing my pride, or giving up and letting them bury Thomas. The gloating look on the Countess' face made the decision for me. I turned back to Yoseph and nodded. "Keep everyone here. I'll be back shortly, ok?"

I took a second to steel myself then used the amulet to cross over into Lakash's realm. As expected, the bastard was waiting for me. What surprised me was the way he appeared. Once again he was in human form, only now he was wearing some sort of regal outfit that you would expect to see on a monarch or very important religious figure like the Pope.

He smiled at me. It was a smile that bore an uncanny resemblance to the one the Countess had been wearing. "So. What brings the prodigal child back today?" he asked in a smug voice.

Right then I wanted to be anywhere but in his presence. Hell, for that matter I'd prefer to be playing footsies with Lucifer, but somehow I don't think he'd help with this. I took a deep breath, swallowed my pride and stated, "I need a favor, Lakash."

He let out a low, rumbling laugh. "And what can we do for you today?" Damn him, but he was enjoying this.

"I need a way to cremate a human body," I explained, my voice humble. "I know the magic you've given me should enable me to do this, but I don't know how to use it in the real world. Would you please instruct me?"

He sat on his throne and thought for a second before he answered. "Yes, I could teach you to channel the magic into the breath of a dragon, but it would take too much time for what you need." He had a slight smile on his face as he waited for my next move.

"All right, then," I said calmly. "If I can't learn to channel the power in time, is there another way?"

"Yes," he said and left it at that.

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I took a few deep breaths to keep calm. "OK, Lakash. Just how do you suggest that I do this then?"

He steepled his fingers together under his chin and smiled. "You must summon forth the *spirit* of the dragon," he said with a broad smile.

I blinked in surprise. "Summon forth the spirit of the dragon? What are you talking about?"

Lakash stood and walked towards me as he explained, "You are now tied to the dragon. You are the gateway for it to enter into the real world. By summoning the spirit of the dragon, you will be able to direct it to do your will." There was a look of glee in his eye as he stopped in front of me. Something still wasn't right.

"All right, what's the catch?" I asked flatly.

He laughed again and smiled down at me. "Why, you must kneel before me and acknowledge me as your lord before I will permit that to happen."

So. We were back to that again. "You understand that even if I do this, it doesn't mean I'm going to be your lackey."

He smiled again and held out his right hand. Prominently displayed on it was a large ring with a fire opal set in a gold base with the figure of a silver Chinese dragon curled around it. I bit my lip and knelt as I took his hand. "My lord," I said calmly and kissed the ring. He had won this round. His pride was satisfied.

They say that if you're going to sell out, make it for something worthwhile. I could only hope that salvaging my pride in the real world would balance out for what I had done in the long run.

I stood and looked him in the eye. "Now, just how do I summon the spirit of the dragon

He chuckled and smiled at my question. "The same way you call on any of my powers. It's up to you if you want to make a show of it or not."

That's all I needed to know. Without so much as a "By your leave" to my new, so-called master, I used the amulet to step back into the real world. My reappearance caused a small stir in the room, as this was the first time most folks in the room had witnessed that ability.

Yoseph gave me a look that asked if I found what I needed. I smiled and nodded before I returned to stand in front of the window. The people in the room slowly settled down as they realized I was waiting for them. Hushed whispers fluttered around the room as people shushed each other.

When all was quiet I walked out into the middle of the room, drew my Katana still sheathed in its scabbard and held it high above me. People hastily backed away, unsure of my intent. I brought the covered blade down and slowly turned in a circle so as to force the group in the room to line up. I then held the blade in front of me and studied it for a

second. "We are warriors," I intoned, my voice firm. "We live by the blade and we die by the blade. We do not seek conflict, but we are drawn to it like moths to a flame. Our lives are brief, bloody and violent. Few of us ever survive to die of old age."

I paused for a second and looked up at the Countess. "We are here to *honor* one of our own who has fallen in battle. We are here to honor Thomas Livingston Brant." She squirmed a little under my gaze, but didn't look away. "The traditions of my people are far different from those of yours," I continued as I passed my gaze over the crowd. "As Thomas had no true living family other than myself, I have chosen to handle his death as my people traditionally would."

Seeing that nobody was about to object to what I was going to do, I walked back over by the window. The line split enough to let me join the circle. "It is traditional that we do not mourn for the passing of a warrior since his spirit will live on. Instead, we try to remember something good about that person; maybe some trait that they had, some habit, or perhaps a humorous anecdote about them. The point is to keep their memory alive and share it with each other."

I turned to the young man to my right. He was one of the squires Thomas had been bunking with. I put my hand on his shoulder and gave a little squeeze as I nodded for him to proceed. He looked a little nervous as he stepped forward. "I..umm... Well, I didn't really know Tom that well," he said nervously. "He always kept to himself and was real quiet-like. He never bragged. Not even when Miss Arden here became a Drijen. I guess that's what I'll remember about him. He was just...quiet."

I gave his shoulder another squeeze and looked to the next person. As the stories progressed around the circle, I discovered many things about Thomas I didn't know. I was aware that he had been fighting, but he never explained why. I discovered that the squires had been teasing another new boy who was also squired to a woman. Thomas had taken it as his job to defend the kid and break a few noses in the process. He stayed to himself for the most part, until someone teased him or the other kid about being squired to a girl. That's not to say he didn't get into a few fights just to maintain his status in the pecking order. He just didn't open a full can of whup-ass on someone unless provoked.

Everything was going fine until it came around to the Countess. I gave her a harsh look, hoping it would silence her, but to no avail. "We didn't know the boy, Thomas," she said elegantly. "We had only seen him on rare occasions when he was doing errands for his animal." I had no doubt that last bit was meant for me as she looked at me when she said it. "It is most unfortunate that he was forced to throw his life away defending a creature that cared no more for him than it would for any other pawn." Muffled gasps echoed around the circle as her words struck home.

She was taunting me, trying to make me angry, and she was succeeding. It took all my reserves not to draw the Katana and charge her. I think Yoseph knew this since I could sense him moving around the outside of the group to where the Countess was standing. I hope he wouldn't try to defend her if I truly lost it. I hate to think about what I might do to him.

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"It brought him to the audience chamber, knowing full well it was there to answer for crimes it had committed." Her face had a serious expression, but her eyes were laughing. "We saw how it pretended to allow the *real* Drijen to defeat it. We also saw how it threw away its squire's life as a distraction to give it an opening for its final attack. The Drijen Yoseph has even admitted that he never stood a chance against the true power that it controls." More than one person in the circle was taking her at face value. Could these people really believe that I would be so callous?

I could feel the Dragon's power wrapping itself around me as I became enraged. My vision shifted slightly as my eyes changed. I could tell the Countess had spotted the change, her eyes got a little wider as she paused in her harangue. I could see the horrified look on Gwen's face. Whether it was at her sister or in reaction to my rage, I couldn't tell.

The Countess swallowed and then cleared her throat before continuing. "Yes... umm... We tell all of you now, this creature has no regard for human life. If you place your trust in it, you may very well pay with your lives as its squire did."

"Do you seek death so eagerly?" I asked in a low, rumbling voice that echoed off of the walls. "You stand here amongst his friends, claiming to do him a service while you instead do him a great dishonor by using this as a forum to attack me."

"Miss Arden, please don't."

The voice stopped me, as I started walking towards the Countess. It was Thomas' voice. Nanuk must have been teaching him tricks I had been too busy to learn.

"She's not worth it, Miss Arden. Really. I know you didn't mean for it to happen, and that's all that's really important."

He was right, of course. I nodded and let the rage recede. "Fine," I said to the Countess. "You've had your say. Now it's someone else's turn to *honor* the memory of Thomas."

I think the Countess would have said something if Gwen hadn't spoken first. "*Our* first impression of the boy was on the day that Lady Arden killed herself." She said it in such an offhanded manner, I'm not sure everyone realized quite what she had said. "He had come to us with this incredible story about a creature that resembled a fox, but walked and talked like the rest of us. We must admit that his testimony to the fact was so convincing we hardly needed to hear from Lady Arden's lord as to the veracity of his claims."

Gwen paused in her speaking as she walked out into the circle and towards me. "After we had discovered that she was being held in the mews, we ordered her brought before us. Unfortunately, she had been harmed terribly by her experiences there..." I could see in her eyes the fact that she was remembering my side of it, just as I was now remembering her side.

"This extraordinary creature had been broken, both in body and spirit. Rather than live with the shame, she picked up the knife her lord had dropped, and tried to take her life." Gwen reached out and traced the line that I had drawn with my Tanto that day. "The only

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person other than ourselves to see this was the boy. He fought with her to try and save her life, pleading with her."

The two of us just stood there for a moment, lost in the memory before Gwen pulled her hand back and turned toward the main group again. "Afterwards, once she had been healed, there was a question of her survival. Nobody knew if her spirit would find its way back," she explained as she walked slowly around the circle. "At this time, we asked the boy what reward he wished for trying to save her life."

She paused for a second and looked up at her sister. "He told us that he desired no reward. He had done it because she was his friend." I couldn't see the look she gave her sister, but I could tell it struck a nerve. "We explained that we valued such actions of heroism from one so young, and that he should name his reward. Again he refused, saying that all he wanted was to be with Miss Arden. If that couldn't be, then maybe we could find him a job at the castle, as he had no family to return to."

Gwen paused in front of me again. "This is what we remember most about your squire," she said with a smile. "That is how we will always remember Thomas." She turned and walked back over beside her sister, not bothering to excuse herself when she shoved the woman aside to resume her position in line.

I smiled and nodded for the next person to continue. With the exception of the Countess, the gathering was going along well. Unlike the others in the room, the sharp pain of his loss didn't strike me as deeply. For me, he wasn't quite dead, though I figure that would change once I saw his body destroyed. It would give me closure and finality to the act...

As the circle of tales and remarks came to a close, I was saddened. Not by any story or remark, but by the fact that Sheila hadn't come. It hurt me terribly that he couldn't bring himself to attend the memorial.

With the last of the testimonies, it was my turn. It was then that I realized that I hadn't really planned what to say, so I decided to start at the beginning. "I remember when I first met Thomas," I said with a smile as I thought about that night in the inn. "The first thing he asked was if I could really talk. His very next question was to ask if he could pet my tail." That got a laugh out of most of the people in the room. "Now I don't let just anyone pet my tail, but in this case I made an exception. He was such a nice kid. He had that wide eyed wonder that was always looking for something new and exciting no matter where he would find it. I think that's the moment when I fell in love with the boy." I paused for a second then realized just what I had said. "Mind you, I'm talking strictly in a platonic sense," I said quickly to cover my tracks.

The smile faded from my face as I realized that Sheila was right to have been jealous of Thomas. The kid had struck a chord in me, and I hadn't realized just how strong its call was. "Thomas was more than just my squire. He was my best friend in this world, and the closest thing to a son I've ever had. I'll miss him."

I looked back up at the group and watched as Yoseph made his way over to Thomas' body. It was show time. I opened the first door of the airlock as he levitated the body and directed it into the chamber. The people in the room slowly migrated over to the window

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as we cycled through the airlock.

Once on the other side, Yoseph directed the body out so that it hovered over the central core of the heatstone chamber. "How are you going to pull this off, Arden? You pick up some new trick?" he asked curiously.

I chuckled as I moved over to the opposite side of the room from the window. I winked and gave him a big smile as I closed my eyes and concentrated on summoning forth the dragon.

Summoning the dragon is like getting hit with a flamethrower from the inside out. I let out a screech that echoed off of the walls and drove Yoseph to his knees. To this day I don't know how he managed to keep up both spells while under the assault of my voice. The muscles in my body convulsed, causing me to arch my back and throw my arms open wide. The agony reached its peak as the flaming visage of a dragon shot forth from my chest and out into the chamber.

Released from the agony of the summoning, I dropped to my paws, panting as the creature I had summoned flew around inside the chamber. With each circumference its size grew, finally reaching a point where its wings stretched from side to side. Then it paused, hovering in the middle of the chamber.

I forced myself to stand and gaze at the back of the creature. It was an awesome sight to behold. The creature only had a wingspan of about sixty feet, but when you looked at it, you had the impression of a creature easily ten or twenty times that size. It was as if space had been warped so that it could fit within the chamber. For the first time in a thousand years, a greater dragon once again flew in this world.

The creature slowly rotated to face me. I was awestruck by the majesty of the creature. Unlike the dragon that Lakash had perverted, this was a pure essence of the dragon spirit. The question now was, how am I supposed to control it? He said it would do my will, but just how did I direct it? I shifted my perspective so that I would be able to see the magic of the room. The chamber came alive with colors that showed the ebb and flow of energy. It also showed a conduit that connected the dragon to me that wasn't dissimilar to the one that connected me to Lakash. I grasp the conduit and used it to direct my desires to the dragon. It nodded and looked up at the body that floated overhead as it slowly allowed itself to sink down into the pit where the heatstone resided.

As the dragon settled on the stone I saw it react to his presence. He was a creature of arcane magic, and the stone was designed to turn arcane magic into heat. As the stone drew power from him it grew hotter. To my surprise the dragon crouched down and spread its wings over the stone, gathering the heat that was radiating from it. After a minute or so its color started to change from a ruby red to a lighter pink and then almost a glowing white. With a sudden spasmodic jerk the dragon leapt up from the stone and exhaled the heat it had absorbed upwards in a blast furnace of heat that knocked me on my ass and vaporized everything in its path.

And I do mean everything.

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The metallic grating in the roof that was designed to prevent objects from falling on the stone had been vaporized. The lining to the chimney was also vaporized, as well as the grating that was on top. To make matters worse, the stone inside the chimney was now rippled and had literally run in places.

I climbed slowly to my feet, awestruck by what had just happened. As the dragon hovered before me I looked at it with a new level of respect. The power of its attack terrified me. Now I understood why the humans had hunted down and killed the greater dragons. I bowed to it, thanked it and ordered it to return to wherever it came from. The dragon let out a small screech, folded its wings and dove into me.

I had been prepared to endure the pain of it returning, but there was none, just the slight ruffle of my fur by the wind it displaced. I glanced at the roof again for a second before I headed around to the door that lead back into the observation room.

To my shame, I have to admit that I had totally forgotten about Yoseph. As I came around the balcony I saw his unconscious form crumpled against the wall. I could smell the burned and burning flesh as I ran over to him. The blast had been too much for his defenses, and now that he was unconscious nothing was protecting him from the heat within the stones. He was literally cooking.

I snatched up his limp form and rushed over to the airlock. For once I was truly glad to have the strength of the dragon. Without it, I'm not sure I could have carried him.

Once we cycled through the airlock, I pushed my way through the throng of people who had been standing by, waiting for us to reenter.

"You see!" I heard the Countess shout. "Every human that has put their trust in it has been betrayed. It will kill all of you!"

I wanted to kill that woman, but I was more worried about Yoseph. His armor had stopped much of the blast, but not all of it. He easily had over fifty percent of his body covered in third degree burns.

Once again I had tried to use my power for something good, and once again I had caused only pain. I cursed myself inwardly even as I worked on centering myself and concentrating on channeling my own personal power into the healing spell that Nanuk had taught me.

Slowly, as more and more of my life essence poured into Yoseph, his wounds began to heal. Even as this occurred, I realized something. I had not bothered to return my sight to normal and I saw energy seeping away from his burned body. It was the energy created by change. It was the power source for the dragon. I smiled and changed my tactics slightly. I used Nanuk's teachings on how to gather power, and concentrated on the energy that was seeping out of Yoseph. This close to the source, very little was lost. I found that I was getting close to half the power I was putting into the spell back by absorbing the energy from the change.

That scared the hell out of me.

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I remember reading about a programmer who worked for a big bank in New York. He had worked on the accounting system, but had been passed over repeatedly for a promotion by a petty boss. So to get his revenge he took the fraction of a penny left over from calculating interest and put it in a special account. At the end of the day, that account would have its funds transferred to a Swiss bank. The amounts weren't huge compared to how much money the bank dealt with on a daily basis, but over time it added up. After two years, he had several million dollars. He quit the company, flew to Switzerland and mailed a letter back to the bank telling them about the bug and how to fix it.

That's what this reminded me of. If Lakash absorbed just one percent of the energy that I was harvesting, it would add up to a tremendous amount of power when multiplied billions of times across a near infinite amount of universes. No wonder both Heaven and Hell wanted his ass taken down!

After about three or four minutes of shuffling power I realized that my spell was no longer affecting Yoseph. He was fully healed. Exhausted, I leaned backwards and sat down on the floor. It had taken a lot out of me, but not a critical amount. I would have to spend time re-gathering the energy I had expended over the next few days.

The crowd milled around us. Nobody was willing to touch either of us directly. I think I had heard someone sending for a healer, but I had been too busy to worry about it. I looked up to see the Countess hovering over Yoseph. "Just for your information, Twiggy," I said in a derisive tone, "In order for me to heal someone, I have to sacrifice my own life force." I could tell that she and others around her understood exactly what I was saying. "I have to wonder if you would be willing to do the same if you were in my position."

I crossed my legs and tried to relax as Yoseph started to come around. It had already been a long day, and it wasn't over yet.

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The School Daze or Life Without Principal.

"You want me to do what?" Lakash said with a bit of a surprised look on his face.

I sighed, and in a resigned voice answered, "I want you to teach me as much as you can about how to use these powers." This was the last thing in the world I wanted to be doing right about now, but I really felt I had no choice.

Lakash stood and walked over to me. "So let me get this straight," he said as he slowly circled me, pacing. "You beg a favor from me, then pop out without so much as a thank you or a by-your-leave. Then you come back and have the gall to stand there and ask me to teach you?" Lakash stopped in front of me then bent over so his nose was about an inch from mine. "Give me one good reason why."

Aw, Christ. Not this again. "Because you need me to complete the quest," I stated.

He straightened up and considered my answer as he rubbed the side of his nose. "Not good enough," he announced before whirling around and marching back to his throne.

"Not good enough?" I asked incredulously as I followed him. "Just what the hell do you want from me?"

Lakash plopped down in his chair and propped his feet up on a stool that appeared underneath them. "Something that's going to make up not only for the crap that you've been giving me, but for all the trouble that you undoubtedly will make for me." He waved casually to indicate that I should try again.

Great. I now have to come up with some way to appease this asshole and get him to teach me how to control these damn powers. The worse part of it all was that I couldn't really think of anything. I glared at Lakash for a second and realized that despite his attempt to look all regal and serious, he was smirking slightly. "There isn't anything I can say that will convince you, is there," I said more as a statement of fact than a question.

He chuckled and spread his hands. "There's no excuse I can think of," he replied offhandedly.

I took a deep breath and counted to ten. "Fine," I said flatly. "What do you want from me?"

He smiled and licked his lips. "Oh, there's a lot I want from you," he said with a small leer. "However, I'll settle for you doing some tasks for me in the mundane world." The footstool vanished and he leaned forward. "There is a key person in your realm whose actions and those of his forefathers is of great offense to me personally. I want you kill him."

I took an angry step towards him. "What do I look like, your personal assassin?"

He just shrugged and smiled. "Isn't that what you are? An assassin?" he asked, stating the obvious. "Unless I'm mistaken, you were a professional hit man for the Japanese for

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quite some time. You racked up a rather impressive kill count without ever getting caught."

"I'm not like that any more," I denied quietly. He was right, though. Despite all my protests to the contrary I was good at one thing: killing.

"Of course you're not," he said condescendingly. "You're the caring healer who has done nothing but good for everyone you've ever touched." He got up from his throne and lifted my muzzle in his hand so I couldn't avoid looking at him. "Admit it, Arden. You're a natural-born killer. I invested a lot of time and effort directing your life so that you would become the consummate killing machine. Lethal, without making a mess of it---that's what I need now. There is one person, one entity whose family is responsible for the destruction of the greater dragons, and continued persecution of the lesser dragons in that world. I want his head and you're going to give it to me." He let go of my muzzle and stared at me for a second. "Or is that too much to ask in return for control over powers beyond your imagination?"

He sounded so damn reasonable. I knew that man had hunted down and destroyed all the greater dragons in this world. I knew that the regular dragons were unknown in Imperial territory as they were hunted mercilessly if any tried to get a foothold. Is it possible that one family, one person could be responsible for this hatred? Was I willing to sacrifice his life so that I could learn to harness and control these powers that I had so arrogantly demanded?

To my shame, I decided that the death of one more person was a small price to pay. "All right, Lakash. I'll do your bidding," I replied. "Show me how to control these powers, and I'll kill whomever you want."

To tell the truth, the worst part of all of this was the fact that his smile no longer bothered me.

"That will be enough for today," Lakash said sternly. "You're getting tired. I don't want to have to repeat these lessons tomorrow."

I nodded. I was getting burned out. Up until now I had been relying on the raw power behind the dragon, but now I was learning true magic. I always did have an aptitude for math in school. Who knew that magic and math were heavily related? "OK, Boss. I guess I'll catch you tomorrow," I said wearily. Lakash nodded and waived me off.

I thought for a second about where to go and then remembered Sheila. I let my mind roam and found him standing on the balcony of our room, looking down into the courtyard. I concentrated on a spell Lakash had taught me and opened a portal between realms. It was a draining spell since it was crossing so many barriers, but I could power it directly from my connection to the dragon. I stepped through to find Sheila standing there with one of the ornamental maces from the wall in hand, ready to bash me.

"Good lord, Arden!" Sheila exclaimed as he tossed the mace onto the bed and swept me

into his arms. "Do you have any idea how close you came to getting brained?"

I would have replied, but I was too busy hugging him to worry about it. It had been a long, hard day and there was no other place I wanted to be other than in his arms right now. I managed to unbury my muzzle from the folds of his cloths and turn it up for a kiss. God, it was good to be back.

After a couple of minutes, we slowly untangled from our embrace. "Where have you been?" he asked, his concern etched on his face. "Last thing I heard, you had almost killed Yoseph and promptly vanished into thin air after helping cut him out of his armor. That was two nights ago. I've been going nuts worrying about you!"

I sighed and flopped down on the bed, stretching my arms out over my head to relax. "I'm sorry, love," I said by way of an apology, "but with everything that happened the other day, I decided that it was time to swallow my pride and learn how to control these powers I have." I rolled over and caressed his face with my paw. "I know I should have told someone what I was going to do, but I hadn't planned on being gone for so long. Time doesn't work the same way there as it does here."

Sheila smiled and kissed my paw. "Don't worry about it. I'm just glad you're all right. I was so worried that something had happened to you." His expression changed a little as he continued, becoming more solemn. "I didn't know what had happened. I thought maybe you were pissed that I wasn't there for you. I was afraid you were mad at me for not going."

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I was disappointed with you," I said, choosing my words carefully, "but I wasn't angry. It was your decision to come or not to come. I really could have used your support, even if you didn't say anything."

Sheila rolled over onto his back and looked up at the canopy. "I know, Arden, and I'm sorry. I just couldn't bring myself to do it. I've been kicking myself in the ass over the whole thing with Thomas. I don't know..."

I smiled and climbed up on top of his chest, the same as he used to do back when our rolls were reversed. "Hey, it's in the past, lover. Right now the most important thing I'm concerned about is getting the Chro'nisphorum from the Arcanum and transporting us to Husaquahr so we can end this thing. I'm tired of having friends hurt or dying around me. I just want to take what time I have left and spend it with you. I still want to go back to Zig Zag's, raise our kids and watch them grow up to give us grand kids. I want to have a normal life again."

He sat up and wrapped his arms around me. Sitting on his lap, I sat almost as tall as he was. He pulled me close, squeezing me against his chest and whispered in my ear, "If we make it out of this mess alive, I swear that I'll never leave you."

I could only hope that things would work out in the end.

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In the morning I helped Sheila to pack up his equipment. The Duke's party was leaving the keep that day to continue their journey to the capitol. The only change in plans was the addition of the Countess and her retinue. The Count had decided not to go. I didn't blame the guy. She had dug a hole and he didn't want to be anywhere near her when someone filled it in.

I couldn't help but notice the way people were now staring at me as I helped to pack Sheila's horse. Some were looking at me with a worried expression, like I'd bite their heads off. Others showed open disgust or hatred, while the remainder were either politely neutral or occasionally friendly. Lord only knew what kind of rumors the Countess had started passing around after my vanishing act.

"Lady Arden?" came a voice from behind me. It was one of the stable boys with my horse in tow. "Aren't you going to outfit your horse?" he asked, noting that I hadn't broken out an extra saddle.

"No, thank you," I said with a smile. "I'm afraid I'll have to rely on other methods of transportation to catch up with the caravan."

The young man nodded and led the horse back over to the stables. I made a mental note to see that it was given to him. I'd rather see the kid get his own horse than the Count or Countess repossessing the animal as being abandoned.

"Arden? You're not coming?" Sheila asked as he came around behind the horse.

I smiled as I cinched up the straps on the saddlebags. "No. I have to return to Lakash and continue my training," I replied. Satisfied that Sheila's horse was set to go, I turned and leaned against it. "I can use the portal you saw last night to catch up to you from his realm."

Sheila laughed and crossed his arms. "If that's true, then why not just use it to go to the Arcanum directly and skip all this road trip crap?"

"Good question," I admitted with a nod. "For one, I don't know if I could transport you that far, and I don't want to risk getting the Chro'nisphorum and then being forced to move on without you. Besides, I'll need to master these powers before I can enter the Arcanum."

Sheila got a concerned look on his face at that last comment. "Why's that? I thought you just needed to go, sign in or whatever and get that thing."

I sighed. I really didn't want to tell him about my bargain with Lakash. "There will be a challenge that I must overcome," I explained, skirting the truth. "I'm going to have to go head to head with a very powerful sorcerer in the Arcanum. In order to win, I'll need to master the powers that I've gotten from the dragon."

Sheila took me in his arms and gave me a light hug. "When will I be seeing you again, lover?" he asked quietly. I noticed several people were openly staring, but I didn't care.

I smiled and rested my muzzle on his chest as I looked up at him. "I'm not sure. Like I

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told you before, time doesn't work the same there." I laid my head on his chest sideways and listened to his breath for a few minutes. "I'll try to come back every couple of days, ok? That way we can try to get in a little quality time."

"OK, lover. You be careful with that bastard," he warned gently. "I don't want you making any promises you'll regret."

I inwardly winced, but kept it from my expression as I gave him a parting kiss. I was really beginning to feel like a heel, but unfortunately it was something that I had to do. Besides, it's not like I haven't killed in payment for training before. The only difference this time was the fact that I knew it was nothing more than a professional hit for revenge and not for an honorable reason.

I backed away from Sheila, bowed, turned and used the amulet to step into Lakash's realm only to be promptly knocked on my ass by a magical attack.

"What did I tell you about keeping your defenses up?" Lakash growled.

Rolling over and looking at him. He was in dragon form again as he spit another ball of energy at me. I tried to generate a shield of energy, but it shattered under the impact having not fully formed. Again I was knocked across the floor.

"Not good enough! You've got to be quicker than that. The next person you fight won't be tossing spit-wads at you!" Again Lakash spit a ball of energy, this time it was a lot brighter, indicating it was much more powerful.

I rolled to my feet and threw my barrier up, angling it to deflect the attack rather than countering it directly. The impact of the ball shoved me back a foot or so as the attack bounced harmlessly off my barrier. My arms ached with the feedback from the attack against my shield.

"Better! Let's see how you handle this," he said, this time rearing up and casting a spell with his talons. A huge sphere shot forward and exploded half-way between us, sending hundreds of smaller balls out in every direction. The little bastards were arcing around to attack from all directions.

I squatted down and expanded my shield into a sphere, concentrating all my power on reinforcing it so as to survive the barrage. The barrier held, though the feedback was painful. I did, however, take the opportunity to begin absorbing residual energy from his attacks. Lakash didn't let me borrow power during one of his drills. I had to fend for myself. With each new attack, I countered with a different type of barrier, each time absorbing a portion of his attack and building one of my own.

The final straw came when he fired off five high-powered balls at me in rapid succession. There was no way I could deflect them, so I did the next best thing and channeled them around me. By modifying my barrier into a scoop, I caught the balls and sent them into a kind of small orbit around me. I then dumped my energy into the attack, forcing them to merge into one large, cylindrical bolt that I then released at the dragon.

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Lakash had been readying a new attack when he saw mine coming back at him. He dropped the ball and raised his shields, but they weren't powerful enough to block the combined powers of his attack and what I had absorbed. The barrier imploded as the bolt drove squarely into the dragon's midsection and sending the enormous beast flying. He landed with a loud thump as I dropped exhausted to my knees.

For a moment he didn't move. Not even breathe. Then his body shook with a cough followed by laughter as he rolled over onto his stomach and looked at me. "Very good attack. And here I thought you were going to try to use those spheres as interceptors."

I smiled as I climbed wearily to my feet. "The best defense is a good offense. To defeat an attacker more powerful than yourself, you must take their power and turn it against them." I smiled as he nodded at the old aphorisms. "I may not have been using magic long, but I do know how to fight."

Lakash changed forms into a human again and walked over to meet me. Between us he generated a table with food and refreshments. "You did well recovering from my initial attacks, but you shouldn't have fallen for the first one," he lectured. "You knew you were entering a dangerous zone by coming here. You should have anticipated my attack and been prepared to counter it immediately."

I nodded in agreement. He was right. I still had Sheila on my brain. The memory of our time last night had definitely put me into a good mood. I had made the mistake of letting it influence my actions outside the bedroom. "I'll keep that in mind. I can't afford to make that mistake in the real world."

Lakash poured each of us a drink and reclined back in his chair. "You better not screw up in the real world. You get yourself killed, and you better hope that Lucifer gets his grubby mitts on you before I do."

Ouch! It had never occurred to me that Lakash could lay claim to my soul in the afterlife. "So what's the plan? More combat exercises?" I asked as I took a sip of the drink. It really was quite refreshing.

He shook his head as he set the empty cup down on the table. "No, you've mastered the basics of combat with the seven magics. Now its time for you to learn how to handle enchanted items." He stood and moved around to a neutral side of the table where he then placed several objects that he had been carrying in his pockets on the surface. "Each of these has a permanent enchantment of some sort on them. I'm going to teach you how to read that enchantment as well as to remove it safely without setting off any safeguards."

I drained my drink and moved to stand beside him. "Useful for removing magic traps and curses, I take it?" I asked, shifting my sight so I could see the magic that each item was imbued with.

Lakesh nodded. "Correct. It will also show you how to access the magic in an object. Always use someone else's power if possible rather than your own." He turned and smiled at me. "Waste not, want not." We both chuckled at his obsession for being miserly with power. He picked up the first amulet and held it out to me. "This is your basic thief

trap item....."

I was exhausted again. We had spent close to seven days in the realm, dividing my time between reading and disarming magic traps, enchanting non-magic items and the occasional surprise ambush assault. It had been two days since his last sneak attack. I think my response last time had convinced him that I was getting tired of playing that game. I had discovered a way to store a huge chunk of power within myself without effort. When he tried to nail me with a surprise attack, I was able to draw on more than just my base reserves. I easily deflected the shot then nailed his scaly hide to the wall, literally, with a multi-pronged attack. His surprise at my counterattack was total. I think that may have been my graduation exercise, at least for combat.

With the only breaks from study being to stop and eat or occasionally let me sleep (he kept forgetting I needed that little thing), it was a routine that had worn me down to a nub.

"Enough," Lakash said with a disgusted voice at my attempt to alter a complex enchantment. "You're doing worse than you did before you got some sleep. What's your problem?"

I looked at him with narrowed eyes. "I need to take a break from this, Master," I said wearily. "My mind is getting numb with trying to go over this crap without anything else to distract it. I am *only* mortal, you know!"

Lakash gave me a look like I had taken a dump on his good china. "Bah!" he said and cleared the room with a wave of his hand. "Get out of here. Go play with your mate for a couple of days. Come back when you feel you're ready to study for real again."

I nodded and bowed. "Thank you, Master. I shall return once I am rested." With that I let my mind wander to locate Sheila. They had progressed a fair pace in the real world and had crossed the southern plains and were nearing the southern edge of the Imperial Forestry Reserves. From the looks of the camp, they had been set up for some time. It was well after dark and people were still pretty active. I located Sheila eating dinner at a portable table under the stars with the Duke, Duchess, some other minor nobles, Yoseph and Dane. It pleased me to no end not to see the Countess there.

I had summoned a gate and was about to step through when Lakash's voice stopped me. "Ahem." I glanced over to see a transparent sphere floating over his hands. "What did I tell you about transporting into an area without protection?"

I shook my head. "Do you really expect them to attack me?" I asked incredulously.

"Never underestimate the capacity for random human violence," he replied.

I nodded and generated a shield around myself. Not satisfied with it being visible, I fine tuned the spell and forced it to fade away. A glance over at Lakash let me receive a nod of approval. I chuckled to myself about his paranoia and stepped through the portal.

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After passing through the portal I released the power maintaining it and was promptly hit by a serious bolt of mana that almost overwhelmed my defenses. Despite the fact that it didn't actually penetrate, the flare effect from it did manage to blind me. My reflexes from Lakash's training kicked in and I channeled a lightning bolt back down the trail my attackers' spell used to hit me. I was rewarded when I sensed his power fade.. Whoever had hit me was down and out.

I took a second to pump up the sphere that enveloped me and solidify it fully before I concentrated on trying to clear my sight. I felt someone banging on the shield, but it was a mundane attack and was no threat. Once my eyes had cleared enough to let me see I turned to look at some big, ugly guy wearing fancy armor who was staring stupidly at a battle-axe he was holding. I was about to nail him with a stun ball when I saw Sheila and Yoseph come tearing around the corner of a tent.

"What the *hell* do you people think you're doing?" I heard him demand. The big, ugly guy turned just in time to catch a body check from Sheila and go flying. His armor made a most satisfying crunch as he landed on the ground.

"Thanks, love," I said casually as I surveyed the people around us. Most were wearing the same style of fancy armor and had their weapons drawn, though they didn't look inclined to screw with me. I saw Yoseph standing over the guy I had nailed with the lightning bolt. I notice a couple of people on the ground writhing in pain who had apparently caught the edge of the spell.

I relaxed my defensive shields back down to a point where I could move freely and walked over to Yoseph. It occurred to me as I was walking that I had never bothered to draw my swords. I had relied entirely on magic.

Yoseph looked up from the smoldering body of the old geezer that had blasted me and frowned. "You killed him, Arden," he said quietly as he stood.

"He should have been more selective about who he tried to ambush," I replied off handedly.

"Arden!" Sheila exclaimed as he smacked my arm.

I gave him an annoyed look. "Hey! The son of a bitch attacked me with out warning or provocation. What was I supposed to do, shake his hand and thank him?" Sheila didn't answer my challenge. He just got a sad look in his eye, turned and walked away. I turned back to Yoseph. "You have any complaints?" I demanded shortly.

He shook his head also. "No, Arden, I don't," he said quietly as he put a hand on my shoulder. "You were just defending yourself. Just like I did with your squire. I'm the last person in the world to judge you for that." He gave my shoulder a squeeze before he walked over to the big guy who was still laid out on the ground.

I glanced at the other bodies scattered around the mage. They had caught the edge of the electrical strike and were stunned but not really harmed. I looked at the carnage for a second before I realized what was gnawing at me in the back of my mind. I didn't give a

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damn about the sorcerer I had just killed. I wasn't happy, sad, guilty or anything. It wasn't quite like wearing the mask. It was almost like he was just an obstacle that had gotten in my way.

I turned and followed Sheila. I knew I had upset him and wanted to make things right. This was going to take some serious work.

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Substitute Artillery

I followed Sheila back to his tent and entered hot on his heels. "Sheila, come on, babe," I pleaded.

Sheila spun about to face me so quickly I almost ran into him. "Don't give me that 'Come on, babe' crap. You killed a man out there!"

I felt my lips tighten as I started to get angry. "Don't you think I know that? What do you want me to do? Drop to my knees and cry to the heavens about what a travesty of justice it is that he's dead and I'm *not*!"

"No, I don't!" he replied venomously. "I expect you to at least show *some* sign that you regret taking a human life."

"The asshole tried to kill me, for God's sake!" I shouted back. "If I hadn't taken the precaution of having a defensive spell up, **I---would---be---dead---now!**" I lowered my voice to a growl. "Is that what you want? You want me dead?"

The shock of what I said hit Sheila like a slap in the face. "No!" he replied with disgust. "Good lord, Arden, what the hell has gotten into you?"

I took a step forward so I was only inches from him, staring up into his face. "Do you want to know what my problem is?" I asked in a low, dangerous voice. "My problem is that you're more worried about the son of a bitch that tried to kill me than you are about me. I haven't heard you asking if I'm all right. Nor do you seem concerned with the welfare of our child, who also would be dead now if I hadn't struck back. Just where the hell do your priorities lie?"

Sheila took a step back, looking down at me in horror for what I said. I don't know if it was my words or the simple fact that I had unconsciously begun to collect energy around me. Either way, he just backed away without saying anything.

I, on the other hand, was too pissed to notice or care. "You better make up your mind where your loyalties lie. If you're not going to back me up, then you had damn well better stay out of my way until we're ready to leave this place."

I turned and stormed out of the tent. Why the hell had I said that? Christ, I had gone after him to try to patch things up and I had completely lost it.

I looked around and headed for the edge of the clearing. There were some saplings about an inch or so in diameter that looked perfect for me to take some of my aggression out on. As I got near them, I drew my Katana and charged, slashing cleanly through each of the trees. I spun from tree to tree as they slowly fell, trimming branches and further dividing the trunks until no piece longer than four or five inches remained. I stood, sword held low and to the side, cocked to swing at targets no longer in existence. A leaf slowly floated down in front of me, and its graceful dance on the still air mesmerized me for a second. Then my training kicked in, and with several quick strokes I reduced the leave to

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confetti that quickly scattered on the breeze. I heard the sound of applause behind me.

"Very well done, Drijen," I heard a man's voice say.

I turned and saw a tall, dark skinned man with black hair pulled back in a ponytail. He almost looked like an American Indian but the eyes were wrong. If I had to guess, I'd say he was in his thirties, but there was something about him that said he was older. He wore the same fancy uniforms that the other warriors had been wearing. I shifted my sight and confirmed that he wasn't some peon. His armor had powerful defensive spells woven into the material and the sword he wore had an enchantment beyond my ability to read.

He took a step forward, making no move that would be considered offensive or defensive. "I had heard stories of your prowess with that weapon from the members of the Dukes' court, but I had dismissed them as having be the result of an enchanted blade," he said as he waved a casual hand toward my Katana. "But that blade's not enchanted, is it? The speed and power is all in you, isn't it, Drijen?"

What was he getting at? "Yes, it is," I replied cautiously. "I have a natural power that grants me extraordinary speed and strength."

He nodded and stopped about three feet away from me. "So I had surmised. If the tales are correct, you and your lord are the first arcane creatures to walk these lands in centuries. But I'm being rude." He removed the armored glove that he wore and held his hand out. "My name is General Maus Romero. I am in command of this detachment of Imperial Guardsmen"

I looked at the hand for a second before I sheathed the Katana and took it. His handshake was firm without him trying to overwhelm me. This was no test of strength with him. "It's good to meet you General. My name is Arden."

"Please, call me Maus," he said with a pleasant smile as he took his hand back. "Would you mind accompanying me as I tour the camp? I must show the flag as it were, and it will give us time to talk."

Taking my nod for acceptance, he led me around the perimeter of the encampment. "I must apologize for what happened back there. We had no warning of your arrival and were not expecting any portal, much less a demon gate." He stopped long enough to salute a pair of perimeter guards before continuing to walk. "Your reaction was quite impressive. To be able to target your spell at a caster while flash blinded came as quite a shock to the mage. According to his apprentice he hadn't even bothered to fully raises his defenses."

"And that's why the fool is dead now," I replied flatly. "That and his penchant for shooting first and asking questions later."

He placed a hand on my shoulder and stopped me. "Please, Drijen, understand what happened from our point of view," he implored quietly. "You opened a demon gate and stepped through haloed in an aura of flame. What was he to think? We had no warning of your arrival. He didn't know what to expect. He thought that you were simply another

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summoned creature sent to wreak havoc. That's why he put all his power into a banishing spell as opposed to using a spell designed to person to person combat."

He was trying to banish me? It felt like he was trying to obliterate me. Of course, how do you banish a demon but to obliterate it. I could see what he meant. I hadn't realized the side effects that my spell may have. The manner of my arrival along with the spell's pyrotechnics could have made me look like some kind of Creature from the Black Lagoon. "I guess I see what you mean," I said somewhat humbled. "I'm sorry about your sorcerer. I guess he didn't quite deserve to get toasted like that."

Maus nodded grimly. "Thank you, Drijen. I appreciate the apology, but that doesn't change the simple fact that right now we no longer have a Combat Magi with us," he said quietly as we passed a small cluster of people. "With the exception of yourself and the other Drijen, there is only one person of Sorcerer rank in the camp, and he's a healer."

I winced. My killing of the mage had done some serious damage here. "I can see your concern, but do you really think that you'll need a Combat Magi? Come to think of it," I said as an epiphany hit me, "just why are you here? I didn't see you back at the keep."

He shook his head. "We were sent from the palace to intercept the caravan. We had word that the Iced Landers may stage an attack. We're to escort the Duke and his retinue to the capitol and ensure their safety." He grimaced slightly as he saluted another set of guards. "Unfortunately, if we are attacked, we will most certainly need someone of that caliber of magic to aid in the defense." He looked over at me and smiled. It looked genuine. "Fortunately, we have you with us now. If your reflexive spell casting power is any indication, you should be able to fill in nicely for him. Besides, another Drijen is always welcome."

I put my paw out and stopped him. "Maus," I said, pausing for a breath. "There are two things you need to do. First, stop calling me Drijen. My name is Arden, OK?" I waited for him to nod before continuing. "Second, don't plan on my being here for the trip. I must return to my master and continue my training."

Maus got a concerned look on his face as he considered what I had just said. "Is there no way you can delay your training until after we return to the capitol, Drijen?"

I shook my head. "I'm sorry, but no," I replied in a tone that brooked no argument. "However, I will make arrangements so that my lord will be able to summon me at a moment's notice."

Maus nodded and turned to continue walking but stopped when I grabbed his arm, hard. "And Maus, it's Arden, ok?" I looked up at him and batted my eyes.

He laughed and nodded. "You know, Arden, you are quite an interesting and provocative creature. It's too bad about your eyes," he said through pursed lips. "You would be rather attractive but for them."

My eyes? I laughed as I remembered that as long as I was using the dragon's powers I would have his eyes. Since it didn't look like the guard was going to try to whack me

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again, I figured I could drop my shield. Once I had release the last of the dragon's powers, I opened my eyes and smiled back up at Maus, "Is that better?" I asked, again batting my eyes at him.

He laughed and smiled. "How did you do that?" Maus asked incredulously. "Is it an illusion or a true transformation?"

I slipped my arm in with his and prompted him to walk. "It's a true transformation," I replied without further explanation. Keep the sucker guessing was my motto.

Maus and I had continued to talk for a couple of hours before we decided it was time to take care of our respective responsibilities. I suddenly realized that I hadn't eaten yet and tracked down the cook's tent for a late night snack. Fortunately there was still plenty of cooked meat left over from dinner that was being kept piping hot in steamers. It didn't take me long to fill up on roast beef and hardtack bread.

Sated and drowsy, I headed back towards Sheila's tent. I still needed to try and work things out with him. I entered to find him sitting at a table with a book, writing. Next to him was a fancy lamp that illuminated the desk and surrounding area. He looked up, saw me and hastily blotted the sheets before closing the book.

"What were you working on, love?" I asked as I strolled over and sat in the chair opposite of him.

Sheila held the book in front of him with both hands, like he was afraid that I would snatch it. "It's a diary," he said nervously.

I cocked an ear and an eyebrow in his direction. "Oh," I replied somewhat stunned. "I didn't know you kept a diary. May I see?" I held my paw out to see if he'd hand it to me.

He just looked at my paw, at the book then back at me. "Um, I don't think you'll like what I've written in it," he said rather sheepishly.

I nodded, putting my paws down on the table and staring at them. "I can understand that. I have been a bit of an asshole lately," I said as I looked up at him. "I'm really sorry about what I said earlier. I was totally out of line." I shrugged and gave him kind of a hurt puppy dog look. "Can you forgive me?" I held my breath while he thought about what I had said and only released it when he finally nodded.

"Yah, I guess so," he said though it didn't sound like he was convinced. "But I just want you to know, you scared the hell out of me today." I could see a haunted look in his eyes as he stared at me. "I don't know what got into you, but I didn't know who you were earlier. Don't ever do that to me again. OK?"

I nodded. "All right, my love," I agreed. "I'll try to keep my attitude in check, ok?"

Sheila nodded and put the book back down. "I'm going to keep writing for a while, OK hon?"

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I smiled, stood and gave him a kiss across the small table. "Sure, love. Take as long as you need. You'll know where to find me." I flashed him a big toothy smile then turned and sashayed over to the portable bed while making a big production of stripping off my clothes. As I bent over to pull back the sheets I made sure to hold my tail up high, making the gesture as provocative as possible. Just as I started to climb under the covers I heard Sheila chuckle and blow out the lamp. I guess I still had it.

I smiled as I lay there waiting on Sheila to come to bed with my paw over my womb. We still were a family and would stay that way if I had any say about it.

I was standing at the edge of a small island with waves of odd-feeling water lapping up near my feet. On a pedestal at the center of the island sat a plain looking bronze lamp. On the far side of the island was a large stone archway that glowed with magic runes. Between the pedestal and myself appeared an angel, right out of the biblical texts.

A flaming sword appeared in his hand as he stepped towards me. "You will never reach the lamp. I can not allow it," he said, his voice echoing in my head.

"I must get the lamp," I replied drawing my Katana and Wakazashi. "It is my destiny."

The creature walked towards me, changing his form until the classic image of a devil remained. "Sometimes destiny isn't all its cracked up to be," Lucifer said. "Destiny has a way of turning out to be whatever you make of it."

"Fine," I replied, trying to ignore the illusion. "Then I'll make that lamp my destiny. Now get out of my way." I struck at him with my Katana and watched him fall. I stepped forward to stand over the bleeding body of Nanuk. "Nanuk!" I cried out and knelt by her.

"Be careful of what destiny you make, child," she said weakly. "You must not destroy that which you desire to save in your quest for the lamp."

I put my hand to the wounds, and tried to heal them, but the power wouldn't come. "Mother, no!" What had I done?

Nanuk reached up to me "My dear, sweet child," she said as her form changed to that of Lakesh. "Don't you realize that without the power of the dragon, you will never succeed? You must give yourself to the dragon." He pulled me down close to him. "You must give the dragon some sugar, lover."

I fought his embrace as he kissed me, struggling futilely to break away from him. Frantic to be freed I drew my Tanto and plunged it into his ribs. I pulled away, gasping for breath as his grip failed.

"Arden?" Sheila said as she lay before me, my Tanto buried deep in her chest. "Why?"

I sat up, gasping for breath. I looked over at Sheila and verified that he was sleeping,

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safe and sound. It had all just been a dream, and a pretty psychotic one at that. What the hell had all that been about?

I carefully slipped out of bed, doing my best to make sure I didn't wake Sheila. My dress lay on the ground where I had discarded it earlier in the night. I quickly slipped it over my shoulders and tied it off in the back. There was some dirt and grime on it from lying on the ground. With a chuckle, I used a spell that Lakash had shown me to displace the dirt and grime. I looked down at the now pristine skirt and smiled. I could make a fortune in the dry cleaning business back home with that trick.

I slipped out of the tent and began to wander the camp. I didn't have any destination in specific as I walked. I simply wanted get some air while I tried to figure out that weird dream. The thought of having killed Sheila, even as part of a nightmare, haunted me. Was this some kind of warning that I would be responsible for his death? My path took me to the central fire pit.

The fire was burning low, barely illuminating the immediate area. There was a pile of wood off to the side that was to be used to keep it burning. I sat down on a log near the fire and casually used a spell to add wood to the fire. I don't know, maybe I was being lazy. I liked to think I was practicing. I have to admit, casting spells was getting to be kind of fun. Plus it was good practice for casting spells without drawing on the dragon's power.

I was so involved in playing with the fire that I almost missed someone coming up behind me. I started to raise my defenses when I recognized the sound of their walk. It was Dane. I gave a sly smile as he sat down next to me and held his instrument in his lap. The scent of roses, honey and something else, something I couldn't name, followed him.

"Couldn't sleep?" he asked in a cheery voice.

I nodded and flashed him a smile. "Yah, I guess you could say that."

Dane started picking out a little ditty on his instrument. It wasn't anything particularly special, just a little something to lighten the mood. "That was some show you put on this evening," he said dropping the pitch of the tune a little.

I nodded and stared at the fire. "You could call it that."

"I guess you've been learning magic while I've been busy, eh?" he asked, kicking the song up an octave.

I smiled and concentrated on the dirt around the fire, working on a spell. Out of the ashes arose two small figures made of dirt and coal. They weren't anything lifelike in any way, but you could tell one was supposed to be female. My smile grew larger as I heard Dane laugh at their appearance. This was the most complicated manipulation I had ever tried. At first it was difficult, but eventually I got the figures to prance about the fire in a dance to Dane's music. As he picked up the pace of his playing, I, too, picked up the pace of their dancing. I'm not sure which one of us missed a beat first, but we both dissolved in laughter as my figures flew apart in a cloud of ash and dust.

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As our laughter faded Dane leaned over and gave me a kiss on the cheek. "That was wonderful, Arden," he said with a smile.

I stared at him, more than a little shocked at his actions. I had forgotten that he had put the moves on me before. I wasn't quite sure what to make of it. "Why did you do that?" I asked in a confused voice.

Dane smiled warmly at me and replied in a low voice, "Because I like you." He paused for a second and continued. "Because I find you fascinating. Because when I look into your eyes I can feel my heart beat faster. Just sitting here next to you makes me lose all sense of propriety and reason." He reached out and brushed the fur along the side of my muzzle. "Just your touch sends shockwaves through my entire body. Whenever I see you, all I think about is being with you."

I swallowed, unable to take my eyes off of him. I could feel the blood pounding in my chest as adrenaline hit my system. The last time I felt like this was when I was in heat, but there's no way that could be the reason. I tried to reply, but words just wouldn't come out of my mouth. Before I could do anything, he leaned forward and kissed me. The touch of his lips on my muzzle was electrifying. I wanted to resist, but instead felt myself relaxing into it. As we broke from the kiss, I looked up into those big brown eyes as the fire danced in their reflection.

Dane moved forwards to kiss me again when I managed to finally break the spell that held me. I turned my muzzle and pushed him gently away. "No," I whispered quietly. "I can't do this."

Dane ran his hand through the hair on my right side, brushing it past my ear. I wanted to lean into the physical contact, but resisted the urge. "Why do you fight it?" he asked in a low melodious voice. "I can see you struggling to maintain control." He leaned closer and brushed his lips over the fur on my cheek. "Let yourself go and join me in the ecstasy of the night."

I unsteadily forced myself to my feet and stepped away only to find him still behind me, his hands on my shoulders.

"Why do you resist?" he asked gently. "What's holding you back?"

I turned and faced him, again looking up into those huge brown pools of reflected firelight. "I must stay faithful to my lord, Dane," I stated, trying to force some tone of resolution behind it.

He took my paws in his hands and held them tightly to his chest. "What do you owe a man who barely acknowledges your existence?" he asked. "You yourself told me once he doesn't care for you. What could bind you so tightly that you won't let your feelings go for one night?" His eyes darted back and forth as they searched for an answer in mine.

I inhaled and summoned strength of the dragon, knowing that it would change me. As my vision shifted, I saw Dane's expression change slightly with the shock. "He's not just my lord, he's my mate," I explained. "I bear his child. Now do you understand?"

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Dane was speechless for a second. "You're carrying his child? But how? You're... He's...."

"We're both children of the dragon, Dane," I explained, interrupting his shock. "We are unique in this world. Soon we will finish our work here and leave this world for the next one in our quest. That's all I can say."

That left him completely speechless. I smiled, gave him a light peck on the cheek, turned and walked out towards the perimeter. I desperately wanted to just grab on to him and take him for the ride of his *and* my life, but I couldn't let that happen.

The big question on my mind at the moment was simply: *Why* am I so attracted to him?

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Sword of Omens, give me sight beyond sight.

I wandered about the camp after my encounter with Dane. I was still shaken by what had happened. There was no reasonable explanation for the way I had reacted by being near him. Even just remembering the encounter was enough to arouse me. Lakash had better not be behind this.

As I watched a cloud drift over the moon, I felt my hackles rise. There was a sound carried on the wind that I couldn't quite make out. The effect was as if someone had drawn fingernails across a blackboard. I looked around, searching with my senses for anything that was out of place or wrong, but found nothing.

I summoned power and brought up my defenses as I slowly patrolled the perimeter. Guards who were casually keeping watch at their station hastily backed away as I passed. Undoubtedly they could sense that I was on the hunt.

After completing a circuit of the camp twice without finding anything wrong I began to relax. Maybe it was just my imagination or an aftereffect of my encounter with Dane. Whatever it was, it wasn't anything I could sense as a threat. I was also burning myself out maintaining a combat mode so I allowed the power to slowly drain back to the dragon. It would be there again when I needed to call on it.

Again I stopped off at the cook's tent and saw his apprentice, Dickens. He had made up a batch of hot apple cider. I grabbed a mug of it as a nightcap and headed back to our tent. Once inside I sat down at the desk and leaned back in the chair to relax. The sharp bite of the cider coated my tongue. I guess it's true what they say: There's nothing quite like a hot Dickens' cider.

I took another drink and set the mug down on the table next to Sheila's journal. For a second I stared at the journal before glancing over to Sheila and verifying he was still asleep. The temptation to stick my snout into that book was a strong one, but I was stopped by my sense of honor. What right did I have to pry into his journal? He had told me he didn't want me reading the book. With all my demands about being able to trust each other, where did I get off sticking my snout where it didn't belong?

My curiosity got the better of me and I picked up the journal. Just a hair of power was enough to create a floating witch light that hovered in front of the book. I tried to open the book and got a small shock. It was protected with magic! Where the hell had he gotten a magic book to write in?

I shifted my sight and examined the spell. It was keyed to Sheila's aura and designed to only allow him to open it. Anyone else trying to open it would get a rude shock such as I had. The spell wasn't designed to keep anyone who was serious out, just snoopers. I bent the function of the spell slightly, opened the book to the first page and began to read.

I now know what Arden sees in Gwen. That woman has remarkable insight into people's lives. She heard about Arden disappearing before we left the keep and had a talk with me. She told me that Arden had explained what had happened to us and she understood some

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of my problem. As a fix, she gave me this book to use as a journal. Since I've never had a journal, I think I'll do like Arden was doing and just use it as kind of a sounding board to myself.

Now the trick is, where do I start? I suppose I could cover the accident, but that was so long ago, almost a lifetime. Gwen suggested that I just write about how I feel, so maybe I'll start with that.

Arden. How do I feel about him? Sure, I know he's in my body now, but I still think of him as being a guy. That big, overgrown, fluffy white bear that I fell in love with. He may have been fluffy and white, but he wasn't pure by any means. Every time I turned around I found out some other nasty surprise about him. He has a penchant for getting people killed while dodging the bullet. If that wasn't bad enough he's an egotistical, holier-than-thou, know-it-all who likes to lecture people. It wouldn't be so bad if he didn't have a talent for knowing what was wrong.

Ooof! Was I really that bad?

What I don't get is how the hell can someone be so driven as he is yet so laid back at the same time? He tries not to let anything bother him, but at the same time has this force of personality that drives him to a goal despite any obstacles. I remember when I told him what had happened between Bjorn and me. He was so pissed I was afraid he'd hit me again. But instead he took me in his arms, told me how disappointed he was and that he loved me. That made me feel worse than ever. I almost would have preferred him to have just smacked me but I'm glad he didn't; I don't think I could have stayed with him if he had hit me again. Then to find out that he had talked Bjorn in to proposing because he knew he had to leave, that was almost too much.

On the other hand, it made me wonder about him. He was ready to pass me off to someone else. What the hell kind of guy is willing to casually let go of the girl he loved? How could he just give me away like that? He never even discussed what I might want.

Just what was I supposed to say? "Hey hon, you want to join me as I risk my life to restore my totem's power?" What the hell did he expect from me?

Bjorn. My beautiful Bjorn. I'll never feel his caress on my fur, smell his scent, or hear the laughter of his voice. We'll never take off for destinations unknown again. I never knew how precious he was to me until I finally lost him. Now I can never let him know how much he truly meant to me.

And then there's the mess we're in now... I know it's my fault for making the wish, but he could have told me about the amulet. If he had just told me the whole truth, we wouldn't be in the situation we are now. Arden would never have been raped, nor would he have killed himself. I wouldn't have been put in the situation of having to lie to him about what was happening.

Oh no you don't! Don't blame that shit on me! You were there when I talked to the doctor. I know you snuck off with his book a couple of times because you didn't put it back right. And don't EVEN blame me for getting raped. You're the one who didn't warn

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me about being in heat and the effect it was having on people! How *DARE* you!

I definitely wouldn't have fought with that brat of his. Christ, how was I supposed to react? Arden almost turned his back on me ever since he took that damned kid in. It's like I was delegated to bed duty. Not that I didn't enjoy what time we had, but I don't want to share him with anyone, damn it! And then to have him sit there and try to goad me into talking nice about the brat? I don't think so.

Goad you? Good lord, man, all I wanted you to do is pay him a little respect. Even if you couldn't do that, you could have at least shown some support for me, but nooOOOoo. You had to go off and sulk in a corner.

I just don't know what to do. I see him sucking up to that bastard musician, Dane, who everyone tells me is some kind of Romeo looking for conquests. I've even heard rumors that he uses herbs and elixirs to seduce his women sometimes. If that's true, then I should probably warn Arden, but I'm afraid that he'll just see me as being jealous of the bastard.

What? Herbs? The smell... That rat bastard! I'll have to figure out what that smell was that I didn't recognize.

Of course there's that hunk he was wandering around with this evening. I think his name was Maus, or something like that. God, what a hunk! Now there's a man whose bones I would love to jump. You don't find bodies like that running around often with or without fur! Lord only knows what Arden has planned. That little bitch was walking around, arm in arm with the guy. There ain't no way in hell that was just some kind of casual warrior bonding crap, either!

Gee, I'm sorry I was acting like a civilized female. Cut me some damn slack already will you?

*But then there's our child. I can understand Arden getting upset for not telling him. I look back on what I did, and I know **why** I did it, but now I'm not so sure if it was the smart thing. I'm scared. What if Arden abandons me in the next world with our child? How will I live? What kind of skills do I have as a single woman raising a child in a fantasyland? The only job I can think of is as a prostitute, and that's no way to live, much less raise a kid. And even if we do get back to the real world, what guarantee is there that Arden will normal out and become a good father? I always thought that he was the strong, gentle, caring type, but now all I see around him is death and destruction.*

That stopped me. Could I go back to being the old Arden she knew? Once all this is said and done, would I find a way of integrating myself back into society? It had taken me almost a decade after I left the SDF before I felt fully comfortable around civilians again. God only knows how this will affect me.

I don't know... I know it's not his fault that this stuff keeps happening. It's almost like there's a conspiracy to keep us from reaching our goal or something. I sometimes watch him as he looks out at the world, not really paying attention, and in those times I can see in his expression all the pain that he's had to endure. When he lets his guard down you can see that this damn quest is destroying his spirit. I'm afraid that when it's all over,

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there won't be anything left for me to take back to the real world.

I'm so tired and confused. I'm sick and tired of having to play the macho male role. Having to strut my stuff with the other swinging dicks around here. I want to cuddle up with the girls around fireplace over at Mimi's, sip on wine coolers and gossip. I miss going to Philippe and getting a full body grooming and manicure. Most of all I miss my dull, comfortable life at the studio. I want to go shopping, damn it! I want to hit the mall and spend until my credit card melts! I want to hit the nightclubs and dance until I drop, and then dance some more. I want to climb on the back of Leon's motorcycle and let Bjorn set out for destination unknown! I want my life back!

I'm so sorry, love. I want you to have your life back. I'm doing all I can to make it happen.

Most importantly I want Arden back. Not the cold-blooded killer that he's become, but the man I fell in love with. The gentle soul that looked up at me in the hospital and told me that I was the reason he was here. The man that declared his undying love for me, and that he'd never let anything bad happen to me. I want to curl into a ball and feel him wrap himself around me like a big cocoon. I want to look up into those big blue eyes again and know that my life was finally going in the right direction.

Right now, I don't care if I'm ever human again. If I have any choice in the matter, when this is all over, we'll go back to your world and I'll stay there as your bear, if you'll have me.

But that can't happen. All th...

That was the end of the text. That must have been when I walked in earlier in the evening. I closed the book and restored the protection spell before I replaced it on the desk, then picked up my mug and took a drink of the lukewarm cider while I thought about what I had read.

I woke up to find my feet on the writing table and an empty mug in my lap. I guess I had fallen asleep in the chair. Sheila was nowhere to be seen, nor was his journal on the table. I had replaced it exactly where I'd found it, so it would be pure speculation on his part if I read it or not. It should be interesting to see if he has the balls to confront me on the subject.

I got up and stretched. I used to sleep in the chair when I was at home and would fall asleep in front of the computer, but this body wasn't used to it. Nor was this a good, ergonomic office chair, either. I pulled back the flap to the tent and found that it was just a little bit past dawn. People were starting to stir around the compound as the camp came alive.

I headed for the privy to take care of things, and then over to the mess tent for breakfast. They were having the usual variety of cold meats, pastries and other easily prepared foodstuffs. Nothing was hot except for their version of coffee, which tasted like road tar,

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but did have a good, strong kick to it. I dipped in for some lukewarm cider after gathering a plate of food. The cooks gave me an odd look until they saw me blow on the drink as I cast a spell, causing it to chill and frost. The head cook, simply known as Sarge, immediately asked if I'd do him the favor of chilling down the pot. I guess they don't get many mages willing to do stuff like that. Since I was in a relatively good mood I gave him a big smile and hit the kettle with the same spell, chilling it almost to the freezing point. I figure that should keep it nice and nippy for anyone wanting some for breakfast.

Outside, I again sat down on the log next to the fire. I saw Dane across the opening sitting next to one of the women in Gwen's retinue. As I watched, I saw her making eyes at him as he flirted with her. Sheila was right; he was a Romeo. Nobody plays me for a sucker. He was safe for now, but some day soon I would get my revenge.

I finished my breakfast and dumped the dirty dish and mug in the large tub by the cook's tent. I was about to go looking around for Sheila when I saw Maus walking purposefully towards me. He was dressed in the same immaculate armor as yesterday. I guess that was his usual *modus operandi*.

"Good morning, Maus," I said by way of a greeting.

Maus smiled back at me. "Good morning, Arden. Did you sleep well?"

I gave a bit of a noncommittal shrug. "I slept well enough but not as well as I would have liked."

Maus gave me a serious look as he nodded. Using his left hand he guided me away from the cook's tent and towards the perimeter. "Yes, I know. The watch last night reported you out looking for something to kill, but apparently you didn't find anything."

I nodded. It made sense that they would report something like that to the boss. "I thought I heard something, but it turned out to be a false alarm," I explained. "I don't quite know what it was. It was so faint, I could barely hear it."

Maus pursed his lips as he considered what I had told him. "Did you do any magical scrying to see what may have made the sound?"

Scrying? Uh-oh. I hadn't even thought of that. Not that the dragon had taught me how to do that yet. I gave Maus an embarrassed grin as I replied, "Um, I'm afraid I don't know how to scry, Maus."

That got his attention. He stopped and stared at me with one eyebrow cocked. "You don't know how to scry? That's one of the first things they teach mages at the academy."

I smiled and shrugged. "Sorry, but I didn't go to one of your academies. I've been learning this from a rather unique source."

Maus scowled at me for a second. "Ah yes, this mysterious master of yours," he said in a flat tone. "It's curious as to how you could find someone to teach you arcane magic when there haven't been any practitioners here for over a thousand years."

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The smile faded from my face as I laid my ears back, stepped forward and invaded his personal space. "You have a problem with that?" I challenged in a harsh voice.

Maus took a hasty step back, more because of his surprise at my reaction than fear. He blinked a couple of times before responding, "No... I guess not. I'm sorry if you took that wrong."

I forced myself to relax. The guy was right to be cautious about me. I was an unknown to him. All he knew about me was that I had blown his mage away and I was a close friend of the Duke and Duchess. I nodded at him. "That's all right," I replied. "I guess I'm just a little sensitive about that. It seems like all I ever do is fight to be accepted as a sentient creature and not just another animal."

He nodded. "I can understand your feelings," he said with a slight frown. "I, too, know what it's like to overcome prejudice in order to gain respect and be accepted. I apologize if you took it as an accusation. I am simply curious about how you found someone to teach you these arcane skills."

I nodded and considered the situation. I suppose I could tell him about the dragon, but I don't know if that would be a good idea. I'm already enough of a freak here now. If he found out that their equivalent of a god or demi-god was training me, who knows how he might react. But then again, it just might save me some time in the long run if they understood that I had some serious backing.

I heard the echo of Lakash's laugh in the back of my mind as I decided to take Maus for a ride. I gave him a pleasant smile as I stepped forward again and place my hand on his chest. With a simple twist of the amulets power, we were both standing in Lakash's realm. Maus' face dropped at the shock of the sudden change of venue. I could clearly see the enormous form of the dragon as it was reflected in his eyes.

Maus staggered back from me while drawing his sword. "By the gods! What is that thing?" he demanded as he looked around for a way out. The arena we were in held no exits, as none were needed for our kind.

I walked back to where Lakash's muzzle lay in the dirt and leaned against it. I felt the air whistling by as he inhaled. "Maus," I said casually, "this is my master, Lakash."

He blinked as if to clear his vision as his head rotated up to follow the outline of the dragon. "But, that's impossible," he stuttered out. "The last greater dragon was destroyed over a thousand years ago! Illialakeska was the last of the line!"

"FOOL!" the dragon's voice rang out in our heads. I stumbled as Lakash lifted his head high above us and looked back down. "I am Illialakeska! All your people managed to do was to banish me from your realm."

"What?" I said in harmony with Maus as we both asked the same question.

The dragon stepped forward and glared down at Maus. The dragon fear was overpowering to him, forcing Maus to his knees. "The greater dragons of your realm

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were my children," Lakash explained. "For hundreds of thousands of your years they had nurtured your kind and kept them safe, asking little in return. Then, when you were ready, they took you in and taught you the secrets of magic, allowing you to rule the lands. And how did your people repay us for our kindness?" His voice rose in pitch as well as volume. "They hunted down my children and slaughtered them with the very magic we had taught you!"

I moved quickly over to where Maus cringed in the sand. I was more afraid that Lakash might do something to him than anything else. "Back off, Lakash!" I ordered, bringing my defenses up around us. As the magic solidified, Maus regained some control as the fear faded.

Lakash roared and closed the space between us. "Don't get too confident, bitch," he said, as he looked down on us. "I may have been teaching you how to use my powers, but you are still no match for me in any way, shape or form."

He was right. He could close off the pipe at any time. There was no way I could compete with him in a true contest of power so I took the only other way out I had. I grabbed Maus' shoulder and willed us back into the real world.

"Vengeance will be mine!" Lakash roared in the back of my head as I helped a shaken Maus to stand.

"I'm sorry, Maus," I said apologetically. "I had no idea he was going to pull something like that."

Maus pulled away from my arm and took a step back. "You serve that monster?" he demanded. "How could you?"

I felt my temper rising, but I forced the feeling back down. "There are things about this that you have no clue," I said both as a warning and an explanation. "My service to him is temporary while I pursue my quest."

The look on his face got hard as he shook his head. "If that creature truly is Illialakeska, then you are a fool to trust it."

I laughed. "You think I trust him?" I challenged back. "Trust me when I say that I have no love for Lakash. Nor do I trust him as far as I could throw Bastion Keep."

Maus stared at me for a moment before he shook his head and walked off. I watched him as he threaded his way through the tents until he was out of sight. I had the feeling that I was going to regret introducing him to Lakash. That was another black mark against that bastard that I'd have to try and collect some day.

I found Sheila sitting by the fire, poking it idly with a stick. I sat down next to him and leaned on his arm. "Morning, love, how's it going?" I asked as I snuggled up to his arm.

"You read my diary didn't you," he said flatly. It wasn't a question, just a statement.

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I let out a sigh. "Yes, I did."

He looked down at me with a neutral expression and asked, "Why?"

I hugged his arm a little tighter and leaned my head on his shoulder. "Because I was worried about you," I said in a low voice. "I was worried that you were having problems and weren't willing to let me help. That maybe I was doing something wrong that you didn't want to talk about. Or, worst case, Lakash was toying with your head again, making you see things in the wrong light."

He didn't answer that, so I turned and looked up at him with a sad expression. "I'm sorry for all the pain I've caused." He didn't react to my statement. "You have no idea how much I want to get this quest over with so we can just go back to being ourselves again. I want to be normal so bad I can almost taste it."

Sheila looked down at me and frowned. "Did you really like being a human so much?" he asked.

I blinked. "Human?" I asked and then let out a small bark of laughter. "Who said anything about being human?" I let a big smile cover my face as Sheila's expression softened. "I just want to go back to being your big, cuddly bear that would hold you at night and keep you safe."

Sheila looked back at the fire, his expression one of contemplation. "But you told me you would have a chance to go home again. To go back and see all your friends and relatives."

I leaned back against his shoulder and relaxed. "I don't care about that any more, love. All I want to do is settle down with you in suburbia and raise a litter of kids."

Sheila looked back down at me and frowned. "You're not just saying that because of what I wrote in my journal, are you?"

I shook my head and sighed. "No, I'm not," I replied wearily. "Sheila, I got tired of killing a long time ago. All I've wanted since then was to be left alone." I sat back up and looked him in the eye. "That was until I saw you. You're the reason I'm here. You're the reason I wanted to go on living." I leaned forward so my arms rested on my knees. "I don't want to lose you now, Sheila. Not after all we've been through."

Sheila reached out, put his hand on my shoulder and gave it a squeeze. We sat like that, watching the fire for a while before I finally broke the silence. "What are you thinking about, love?" I asked quietly.

Sheila had a far away look to his eyes as he stared into the fire. "I was just thinking about the studio," he said finally. "I wonder what Zig and the others are doing right now."

I closed my eyes and let loose of my hold on this world, concentrating instead on Sheila's world. The studio was open for business as expected, but I didn't see Zig Zag there. She was probably out with James. I noticed that Sabrina wasn't in either. I guess she and Chris were off doing something. Or had she moved to Philly by now? I saw Leon

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and Melissa doing some filming, but it didn't look like things were going smoothly. I concentrated on Zig Zag to locate her and almost fell off the log when I did.

"What's wrong, Arden?" Sheila asked.

I blinked as I returned my sight to where we were. "Zig Zag's in jail," I said quietly.

"WHAT?" Sheila demanded.

I nodded remembering the vision. "Yah. I saw her sitting in a cell wearing a standard prison outfit, number and all."

"How the hell could you know that," he demanded angrily.

I shrugged and looked down. "Lakash is tied to every dragon in every realm, just like I'm tied to him. When I want to, I can use those strands to see things in other worlds." This was one talent I hadn't told Sheila about.

"Good lord, Arden," he said shocked. "Do you have any idea as to why she's there?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. Let me spend some time looking around and I'll see if I can find out."

This was bad news. And worse of all, I knew that somehow I was responsible.

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Talk about screwed.

My attention was pulled away from Zig Zag as the cook's wagon rolled to a stop. Curious about what was happening, I climbed out the back just in time to see half a dozen mounted guards riding at a gallop towards the front of the column. As I took a look around I realized they weren't heading towards the front of the column, but more like continuing on ahead while the rest of the entourage stopped in a large clearing. A glance at the sun told me that it was almost noon, time for lunch.

I lent a hand to the cook's crew as they opened up the back of the wagon and converted the gate into a ramp. It was only fair to help them since I had spent the morning riding around in the back of their wagon while scrying for information on Zig Zag. I just hoped there was some way I could do something about what I had discovered.

On a whim I twisted the amulet's power and stepped over into Lakash's realm. For once he didn't have any particularly grandiose spectacle prepared for me. He simply reclined against a tree as windows to other worlds floated in front of him. Amusingly enough, one world showed him leaning against a tree, viewing windows to other worlds. He had obviously been watching.

"Arden," he said abruptly as he stood. "What brings you here?"

"Zig Zag" I stated directly. "I need to return Sheila to our world so that we can clear her name."

Lakash summoned up a couple of chairs and gestured for me to sit. "I'm sorry, Arden, but you know I can't allow that."

I sat down in the chair despite my desire to stand and argue. "I know you can do that," I challenged back calmly. "The spell I use to gate between here and the real world must have some component that will allow it to cross the world barriers, otherwise Maus wouldn't have called it a Demon Gate."

Lakash nodded and crossed his legs. "You're right; I could give you the secret to crossing the world barriers, but I won't." I was about to argue when he calmly held up a hand to stop me. "Please understand, Arden. Getting Sheila back to your world is the strongest card I have to keep you on this quest. If you return with her, the only thing I'll have left is the geas, and to be frank, there's no guarantee that one of the other powers in the game wouldn't remove it from you."

Arrrgh! He was being so damn logical! "Look..." I said as I tried to desperately think of something. "I give my word, my sworn oath, that I'll return to you and finish up the quest. I promise."

He got a bit of a pained look on his face as he rubbed the bridge of his nose before looking back over at me. "And just what do you expect to accomplish?"

I shrugged. "What do you mean? I want to clear Zig Zag's name. Prove that Sheila and I

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aren't dead."

Lakash nodded. "Have you forgotten about your appearance?" he asked candidly. "You are now in Sheila's body, and Sheila is a human. You plan on taking a human back into your last realm?"

Erf! I hadn't thought about that. "Wouldn't the amulet change us to fit the realm?"

Lakash shook his head. "You can't use the amulet to return there, you know that." He stood and walked over to squat down in front of me and rested a hand on my knee. "I know how much Zig Zag means to you, but you can't help her."

I stood up suddenly, forcing him to back away. "Don't tell me that! If I can't take Sheila with me, then I'll go *as* Sheila. That should be enough."

He again shook his head. "It wouldn't work, Arden. Too many people know Sheila. You'd never pull it off."

He paused for a moment as he rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I really am trying to be patient here," he said in a low voice. "I know for a fact that just telling you 'no' doesn't work. Without a doubt, you'd run off and do something stupid just to spite me."

As painful as it was to admit, he was right. I always did have a problem with being told I couldn't do something.

Again he walked up to me, this time putting both hands on my shoulders. "I'll tell you what. If you don't believe me, go talk to Nanuk and see what she has to say about it. Then, if you still want to return, I'll show you how."

I nodded. Nanuk would have the answers I needed. "Thank you, master," I said before I bowed and stepped into Nanuk's realm again and was promptly bowled over as something slammed into me. I looked up into the smiling face of a small white fox with black tipped ears.

"Miss Arden!" he exclaimed with a smile as he gave me a hand up. "Sorry, I wasn't expecting you to drop in."

I shook my head and looked down at the small anthro fox that stood before me. The voice was definitely that of Thomas. He was pure white except for black on the lower half of his limbs, the tips of the ears and tail. "Thomas?" I asked confused. "What the heck happened to you?"

Thomas glanced down at himself and shrugged. "Miss Nanuk says that all the parts of my spirit have finally been reunited. When that happens in a totem realm, a person reverts to their natural totemic aspect."

I gave a little laugh until it suddenly occurred to me what he had said. "Wait a minute. How can all the parts of your spirit be here? You don't mean..." I let my voice trail off.

Thomas shrugged and nodded. "Yah, but it's not like I hadn't had a chance to get used to

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being dead," he said casually. "Though it was a bit of a shocker to suddenly be able to remember all of my lives when it happened. Nanuk helped me sort out my memories and what had happened." He glanced down at himself and shrugged again. "This is the result."

I had remembered her asking why he was in her realm since his spirit was fox. Now I understood what she had meant. It saddened me to think that my Thomas was now dead in every reality he had existed. I guess he just wasn't fated to have a long life.

I sat and visited with Thomas for a little bit, getting caught up on what had been happening while I was gone. From the looks of the realm, he was doing a bang up job of maintaining it. I could almost sense a hint of spring in the air as he slowly revitalized things. Nanuk had been instructing him on how to use the power I had shunted to him. He had been quite frugal with it considering how much he had accomplished. As we sat, I made it a point to recharge his stash of energy.

Once that was done I excused myself and went in to see Nanuk. She was lying on her cot as usual. Even though the room looked like new, I could see that Nanuk had gotten weaker. I took a stool and sat down beside the bed and took her hand. "Hello, mother."

She looked over at me and smiled. "Hello, my child," she said quietly. "So you have not forgotten about Nanuk quite yet, eh?"

I smiled again and shook my head. "There's no way I could forget about you, mother."

Nanuk sighed and closed her eyes. "Though Nanuk may be your mother, you now call Lakash master." Before I could reply, she continued, "Nanuk knows this must be, child, but do not fall into his trap. The power he gives you is tainted."

I nodded and gave her hand a squeeze. "I know that, mother," I replied. "But that's not why I've come. I need to ask for your guidance on something."

She simply nodded to me.

"My friend Zig Zag is in trouble and I wish to help her," I explained, pausing for a second. "The problem is that Lakash doesn't want to let me return and help her." I leaned close and squeezed her hand gently. "Mother, I must help her. She is a friend to me. If it weren't for me, she wouldn't be in this mess."

Nanuk shook her head. "If you return, all will be lost, child," she said in a whisper.

I blinked and sat up in surprise at that. "But, why?"

Nanuk gave a small snort of derision and cracked an eye at me. "After all this time, you still question Nanuk when she tells you something?" she scolded.

I nodded the affirmative. "Absolutely," I stated somewhat petulantly. "There's no reason I shouldn't go back, help Zig Zag and return. Not now that I have Lakash's spells."

Nanuk got a pained look on her face for a second. "Lakash should be telling this to you,

not Nanuk," she replied finally. "That realm has no magic. You won't be able to create a gate with the dragon's power and the amulet won't work for you there since you've already used it once."

I shook my head. "That wasn't me, that was Sheila."

Nanuk snorted again. "Oh? And what body do you wear now? Or have you forgotten that both of you were transported by the wish?" She gave a couple of dry coughs and then continued. "You must follow through on the quest. My time runs short, child. Although Thomas has taken much of the burden on his shoulders, he cannot stop the drain on my spirit. You must focus on your quest and complete the wish."

I nodded. Zig Zag would just have to hold on until I could get the lamp of Lakash. Once I had that in my hands, we would be able to restore Nanuk as well as return to help Zig Zag. I only hoped her lawyer could keep delaying any legal action long enough for us to ride in like the cavalry.

I sat on a stool by the cooking fire as I idly stirred the stew for Sarge. Sheila came up behind me and gave me a hug and a kiss. "Hey, lover. What are you doing over here?" he asked as he sat down on a stool nearby.

"Stirring the stew," I said solemnly.

Sheila shook his head. "That's not what I meant and you know it," he replied. "And from your expression, I take it you found out what happened to Zig Zag?"

I sighed and nodded. "I was right, I'm the cause of Zig Zag being in jail," I stated.

Sheila scooted his stool closer so that our conversation could be a little more intimate. "Just what happened after we left?" he asked quietly.

I concentrated on a spell that shut out the sounds around us. We could now talk privately without anyone hearing unless they broke the circle. "Zig Zag has been charged with obstruction of justice, armed criminal action, assault, kidnapping, felony murder and reckless driving."

Sheila blinked at the list. "Reckless driving?" she asked incredulously.

I nodded and looking up. "From when she hit me during the storm," I explained. "It's still on the books." I could tell he was stunned by the news. His slack jawed expression made it clear for anyone who bothered to look his way.

"I don't get it," he said after a moment. "How could that happen?"

I let out a sigh and tried to explain it. "Apparently when we were on top of the hill, Khansman recognized Zig Zag's voice while were talking. He used that along with the police investigation to have them do some digging on Zig Zag." I paused for a breath before continuing. "The real clincher is the pistol I gave to Zig Zag at the studio. It's

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ballistics matched up with one of the guys in the helicopter. To make matters worse, they've charged her with murder for our disappearance."

"WHAT?" Sheila demanded.

I nodded. "Yep. When we disappeared, Zig Zag decided to cover for us in case we made our way back. I guess she figured nobody would believe her if she said we vanished in a puff of smoke."

A glance at Sheila showed that he was taking the news hard. "From what I read on a report, Zig Zag ditched your car and purse at your house while hanging onto the keys, then told everyone that we had decided to go 'walkabout' like you had mentioned. The thing is, you didn't take out any money prior to our trip to the studio, and your purse with all your ID and stuff was at the house. Worse yet, they had Zig Zag's pawprints all over them."

Sheila let out a small choking sound. "Oh my god, Arden! We have to find a way to go back!" He grabbed me and shook me to make his point. "We have to go clear Zig Zag's name."

I put my paw on his hand and gave it a squeeze. "I've already talked to Lakash and Nanuk about this and it can't be done."

Sheila stood up with his hands clenched into fists. "I don't believe it! That son of a bitch is holding out on you!" he declared angrily.

"No," I said flatly, getting his attention. "The fact is that I could return and try to help Zig Zag, but I would have to leave you here." I held up a paw to stop his obvious objection. "AND there's no way I could return to this realm to complete the quest. You would be stuck here, Nanuk would perish and I would have lost everything precious to me."

He dropped bonelessly back onto his stool and stared at me. "So Zig Zag's screwed?" he asked in disbelief. "There's nothing we can do?"

I shook my head. "There's nothing we can do right now," I explained. "Once the quest is done, we'll be able to return and clear Zig Zag's name. Until then, I have to concentrate on finishing my quest. The sooner that's completed the sooner we can get back."

Sheila just sat and stared at the cooking fire as he thought about what I had said. When it became obvious that the discussion was, for all intent purposes over, I allowed the barrier of silence to drop. The sounds of conversations around us filled the silent void where we had talked, but couldn't do anything for the voice inside of me that kept accusing me of betraying Zig Zag.

I'm not quite sure how long I sat by the fire that evening after dinner while I looked for more information about what was happening with Zig Zag and James before the feel of cold steel against my neck rudely interrupted my musings. My attention snapped back as

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I resisted the urge to jerk away.

"Do you want to live?" I heard whispered in my ear.

I inhaled through my snout and realized that it was Yoseph. "Sure I do, Yoseph. Do you?" I asked back casually.

I heard him chuckle as he pulled the knife away from my neck. "Of course I do. Just like I want to see you survive this trip. But you're not going to do it while skulking around the camp fire."

I shot him a sideways glance before returning my attention to the fire. "I'll be fine," I replied lamely.

Yoseph laughed. "Sure you will. Considering that I called your name three times before I got your attention the hard way..." He let his statement trail off, his point made.

I nodded. He had definitely scored a point there. "I suppose you're right."

He sat down next to me, picked up a long, thin stick and began poking the fire with it. "So, is it anything you want to talk about?" he asked nonchalantly.

I shook my head. "A friend of mine is in trouble and I can't help her out," I replied with a sigh.

"Ahhh," he replied noncommittally. "And why can't you help this friend?"

I thought about how to answer and figured that I could fudge the facts a little. "She's in a realm that's out of my reach," I finally replied.

Yoseph nodded again. "I see," he replied as he continued to stir the embers. "That's pretty tough." We sat like that for a minute before he tossed his stick on the fire. "Can I make a suggestion, Arden?" he asked as he stood. "If you're going to mope about it, do it some place a little safer than the middle of a camp out in the wilderness."

I watched him walk away and realized he was right. This wasn't the place or time to be lamenting Zig Zag's situation.

I stood and headed for Sheila's tent to see if he was there. Sure enough, he was behind that desk, writing. I walked over to the table and sat down in on the stool as Sheila closed the book.

"You don't need to stop writing on my account," I said offhandedly.

Sheila frowned and began to clean the pin. "Good point," he said with a miffed voice. "It's not like you can't just stick your snout in and read it any time you want."

I winced at that and nodded. "True, but I don't think you really need to worry about me doing that again." I shrugged as Sheila shot me a querying look. "I don't need to read that book to tell me about you. I already knew what was going to be in it."

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Sheila frowned again and asked, "Am I that predictable?"

I shook my head and leaned on the table. "No, love, I am," I replied, taking him by surprise. "I knew most of what was in there to begin with, I just never wanted to admit it."

His expression softened a little as he continued to clean the pen. "That still doesn't excuse you from sticking your snout in when you knew I didn't want you reading it."

I just nodded and sat there for a minute before I got up. "You go back to writing. I'm going to go to bed," I instructed. Without any flair or teasing, I removed the dress I had been wearing and climbed into bed.

Sheila sat at the table for a minute and watched me before he decided to open his book and continue writing. I let a small smile cross my muzzle as I closed my eyes. Hopefully writing things down would help him deal with being in love with me.

You know, I have come to the realization that I hate dresses. No, that's too severe, I just don't feel right in them. Now I understand why Sheila was always running around in shorts and a T-shirt.

I thought about what to do for a bit and decided to take the cheap and easy way out. Using the amulet, I stepped over into Lakash's realm again, this time intentionally not looking to show up near him. I had no doubt that he was watching, but no sense on flaunting it.

I concentrated on summoning what I wanted and caused a couple of yards of silk to appear in my hands. The Imperial Gold coloration combined with the shimmering effect that silk naturally had, made it look quite exotic. A little more work with a spell and it had long, Chinese looking dragons running rampant over its surface.

Now I'd seen women do this before, so I was reasonably sure I'd be able to figure it out. By wrapping the cloth around my waist from the front then crossing the ends in front so they covered my breasts, I could then tie off the cloth behind my neck and have a serviceable if not provocative top. It took three tries before I was happy with the look as well as comfortable with the pressure. Once again I wondered why I had to fall in love with a vixen that wore a D cup.

Again I manifested some silk, this time putting a pattern of fire on the surface and used it to tie a modified breechcloth. By flaring out the wide fabric I completely covered the front while splitting the fabric in the back allowed it to hang over my tail while creating a provocative split. Not that anyone managing to sneak a peek would be able to see anything, of course.

I summoned up a mirror and checked out my appearance. Damn, I looked good. This was definitely going to turn some heads. The dragon embroidery on the chest piece was such that a dragon was running rampant up from my stomach to the shoulder on each

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side. The effect was perfect. Now I remembered why I had fallen in love with a vixen that wore a D cup!

A chuckle behind me got my attention. I turned and saw Lakash standing there, applauding. "Arden the Bimbarian, eh?" he said with a grin.

I laughed as I dismissed the mirror. "What can I say? It's me." I struck a little pose similar to some I'd seen Sheila do in the pictures she had shown me so long ago.

Lakash shook his head as he approached. A large smile still creased his face as he stood in front of me. "I take it that the entire purpose of this little exposition is to have something to wear in the real world?" he asked as he walked around me to check the outfit out from all sides.

I nodded. "Yep. I was just about to stabilize the manifested material so that it could exist outside of your realm."

Lakash gave another nod. "Very good work, Arden. You're coming along well in your training. When do you think you'll be back to continue it?" Lakash leaned back against an invisible wall with his arms crossed as he awaited my answer.

I shrugged. "I was planning on returning this morning, after breakfast," I replied. "My only concern is for Sheila's safety. I killed their one combat mage. Without me there, they are vulnerable."

Lakash again nodded and gestured to the amulet. "Give your mate the amulet. That way we can keep an eye on what's happening. Just have him call my name and we'll become aware of the situation."

That sounded reasonable. "Thank you, Master. I'll do that," I said with a small bow. "Now if you will excuse me, I must return to break fast with my mate."

Taking his nod as a dismissal I stepped back into the real world and out of the tent. The reactions were immediate. I don't think I'd seen so many stunned looks since the day I first walked into town. I made a great show of sashaying my way over to where the Duke and his retinue were having breakfast. Sheila had mentioned that we were invited to breakfast with them, and I was having a hard time keeping a full-toothed grin off my snout.

This was going to be very entertaining.

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Building a better mousetrap.

"Are you on drugs or what?" Sheila demanded once we got back to the tent.

I laughed at the question and replied, "No. Should I be?" Boy, Sheila sure could be a grouch in the morning. I knew he had been annoyed when I showed up for breakfast wearing my new outfit, but I thought he would have calmed down by now.

Sheila stepped in, towering over me and scowled. "What the hell has gotten into you, Arden?" he demanded in a loud voice. "Don't you have any decency?"

I blinked at that. "Decency? What the hell are you talking about?" I asked back. He wasn't making any sense.

"This!" he said, angrily as he waved towards my new outfit. "What were you thinking, showing up at breakfast in that outfit?"

I put my hands on my hips and stood my ground. "I was bored with that damn peasant dress. I just wanted something a little more comfortable to wear."

"Comfortable, yes. But not dressed like a tramp!" he challenged back. "You embarrassed me this morning!"

My jaw dropped in surprise. "Tramp?" I asked in shock. "This coming from the person who used to run around in public wearing tight T-shirts and cutoffs that left *nothing* to the imagination."

"Hey!" he spat out with a wounded look. "I may have teased the public occasionally, but I'd never show up to dine with royalty dressed like a two dollar whore."

A whore? I was stunned by what he had said. Had he really just call me a whore? I turned and walked slowly to the tent flap.

"Where are you going?" he said in a demanding tone of voice.

I paused to look back at him. My first instinct was to make some sarcastic remark about turning tricks, but I squashed that idea. As an afterthought, I removed the amulet and chucked it in his direction. Sheila caught it and looked up with a surprised expression. "I'm returning to my training. If you need me, call to Lakash and he'll send me back," I explained.

Without further comment I left the tent and made my way out of the camp. As I walked away, I heard Sheila call out to me a couple of times, but I ignored him. Where did he get off calling me a whore?

I wasn't quite ready to return to Lakash, nor did I feel like hanging around in the camp so I proceeded to walk out into the bush. The procession was almost half way across the wastes. With a few more days travel, this bush would turn into open range grasslands and then eventually into forest. For the moment, though, I almost felt like I was back home in

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the Arizona desert.

As I walked through the brush, the same thought kept running through my head: Where the hell did he get off calling me a whore?

Was it so wrong for me to shake things up a little? I mean really. The outfit wasn't that bad. In fact, I have no doubt that given the opportunity Sheila would have worn it had we been back in her home world. I don't know. Some times I just can't figure him out.

I came to a stop in a large clearing and realized that I had been walking for some time. A glance at the sun showed that it was almost noon. What caught my attention about the camp sight was the fact that the fire pit was dug deep into the earth with a high berm around it to hide the light from casual observers. It was also fresh.

From the size of the fire pit and the tracks in the vicinity around it, I got the idea that there were maybe half a dozen people at most who had been camped here. The curious thing was that the pit wasn't central to the clearing like you'd expect. It was set well off to one end. A quick investigation of the other end showed the reason why. They had some rather large beasts that must have been used like horses. From the marks in the dirt and sand, I would have to say they were some kind of over grown lizard. That thought reminded me of the Dewbacks from Star Wars that the Storm Troopers rode. Oddly enough, their spoor seemed familiar to me somehow.

I was about to set out and follow the track when I felt more than heard Lakash summon me. I filed the information about the lizards away to ask Maus about later and cast a gate to Lakash's realm.

"Have we been having fun?" he asked sarcastically. "I don't mind you taking time off, but wandering around aimlessly in the desert is a bit too much of a break from the routine for me."

I winced. Of course he had been watching. I was now his pet project. I bowed my head and replied contritely, "I'm sorry, Master. I needed a little time to myself."

Lakash grunted and shook his head. Obviously my personal time wasn't of much concern to him. With a snap of his finger we were in what appeared to be some sort of medieval looking lab. "All right. Back to work," he commented as he led me over to a table. "We've gone over how to read and modify an existing enchantment as well as how to cast an enchantment on an object. You've got the basics down for that so it's time to move on to the next step."

He reached out and removed the Katana my belt and placed it on the table. Holding his hand over the sword, I saw its shape blur, melt and shrink into a cube of ore.

"NO!" I cried out. "My sword!"

Lakash gave me another derisive snort and tossed the ingot to me. "Ok, smart ass. What will happen to that ingot if you take it back into the real world without stabilizing it?" he asked, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

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I looked at the ingot that had been my sword. "It will revert to its original state," I replied dejectedly. "That's not my problem. That sword is over two hundred years old. I'd appreciate you not screwing around with it."

Lakash snatched back the ingot and tossed it on the table. "Give it a rest," he snarled. "I've got *socks* older than that." He reached out and dragged me over so I stood in front of the ingot. "Today you're going to learn how to enchant an item during its creation phase...."

I was exhausted, physically, mentally and emotionally from Lakash's training. The only thing that had made it all worth the effort was that I now held my sword again, renewed to its pristine state, as if it had just been forged. The big difference now were the spells that had been woven into the sword.

Lakash had explained during the enchanting of the blade that at some point I was bound to get into a fight with a magical creature and I would need more than just my spell casting ability to kick some ass. The sword now had a couple of nice defensive features built into it to help me deflect magical attacks. It also had a very nasty offensive surprise for the person I used it on. The only drawback was that it was a one shot spell. I'd have to spend time back in the spirit realm to rearm it.

I sheathed the Katana and drew my Wakazashi. I winced internally as I manipulated the energy to regress it back to its original form as an ingot. On a conscious level I knew that the sword wasn't really being changed, but my subconscious was screaming bloody murder because I was destroying a two hundred year old sword.

I glanced over at Lakash before starting on the first spell. I was going to have to do this one all on my own and he would be watching. If I screwed this up....

Toast didn't even begin to describe my current state of being. After completely rebuilding and enchanting two swords from scratch without rest, I was totally wiped out. Fortunately for me, I could relax in style, floating in the air as if gravity didn't exist. Those NASA astronauts definitely were living the good life when they were in orbit.

I felt a tap on my shoulder and looked up to see Illiam. "Hey," I said not entirely awake. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm concerned, Arden," he said as he sat down next to where I was floating. "I think something's happening over on the other side, but I can't nail it down."

I sat up and rubbed the sleep out of my eyes. "What are you talking about, Illiam?"

"I've been keeping an eye on that parade that your mate's part of," he explained. "As you know, I'm fairly limited on how I can interact with the real world."

He was preaching to the choir. I had spent time trying to scry around by using him as a

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focal point, but he just wasn't designed to interface with the mundane world. "Yah, Illiam. I get the idea. What's the problem?"

Illiam looked about nervously, as if he'd get in trouble for talking to me before he leaned closer. "I think there are dragons about, Arden."

Dragons? I knew there weren't supposed to be any dragons in the empire. Lakash had told me how the empire hunted them down without mercy. That would, however, explain the tracks I saw in the desert. But where the hell had they come from? "Any idea what they're doing inside the empire?" I asked distractedly.

Illiam just shook his head. "I don't know, Arden," he replied. "I do know that the Iced Landers have dragons that they raise from hatchlings as ally mounts. Then there are the black legions of Ceilon."

"Huh?" I said and started paying attention. "Celion?"

Illiam nodded. "Celion is a high ranking demigod who is essentially just another name for Lucifer," he explained. "They are a cult who are dedicated to overthrowing the rule of man to place the world back under the rule of dragons." He paused again as if he was worried about Lakash before continuing. "The problem is that the remaining dragons aren't very bright. At best a few of them have intelligence superior to a human. Most of them are pretty stupid though."

Sounded like something Lucifer would do. It would piss Lakash off to have Lucifer using dragons to take over a realm. I winced and laid back. "OK. Keep an eye on the situation. If you think anything immediate is brewing, come and get me, ok?"

Illiam stood and nodded. "As you command, Arden," he replied with a bow and vanished.

That's all I needed. Lucifer was up to something and he obviously didn't want to let me in on it. Once I was rested, I'd have to pay that son of a bitch a visit and find out what he was up to.

I let out a small string of curses as I tried to relax. How the hell was someone supposed to get any rest after news like that?

It was done. The Tanto floated in front of me, finally complete. It was the only weapon that Sheila felt comfortable with. Since Illiam had told me that there might be dragons about, I decided to give him something to defend himself with.

Occasionally, while I was enchanting the blade, Lakash would walk by and scowl down on me while making some odd sound of disapproval. I guess he didn't like the idea of a dragon being on the short end of the stick.

None of that mattered now. The Tanto was complete. I had woven layer after layer of defensive spells into it. Whoever held the weapon would be virtually immune to dragon's

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breath. It would also help protect against mundane magical attacks of a similar nature, though not to the same extent. With all the defensive stuff I had crammed onto the blade, I hadn't been able to do much in the way of any offensive spells. The only thing I could embed was a spell to ensure that the blade would always remain free of any damage as well as razor sharp. Beyond that, Sheila would have to rely on his personal prowess and strength to do damage.

I stood and plucked the Tanto from the air and sheathed it. I was about to portal out when Illiam showed up again. "What's up?" I asked worried at his expression.

Illiam walked over and spoke in a conspiratorial voice. "I've located some dragons, Arden," he explained. "They're about half a days ride *ahead* of your mate's group."

I thought about it for a minute. "Half a day, eh?" I said in my musings. "Do you think they're going to try an ambush tomorrow?"

Illiam shook his head. "You don't understand. It's half a day by horse, but only an hour or so by air," he explained, enlightening me. "I don't like it Arden. They may be planning an ambush tonight."

I groaned. The camp would be virtually undefended without a good combat mage. "What kind of intelligence can you give me about them?"

Illiam shrugged and shook his head. "Not much, really," he admitted reluctantly. "Without someone to focus on, I can't see very well into the real world. The fact that they have a mage casting a masking spell didn't help either. If I hadn't gotten lucky and caught a glimpse of a dragon flying towards their camp, I never would have found it."

I let out a low growl. We needed hard and solid evidence. "Can you gate me to a secluded location near the camp?"

Illiam thought about it for a second and nodded. "There's a dry ravine not too far from their camp. I could put you down inside of it. That should hide the spell effects."

I nodded. "All right," I said as I gathered power to bring my defenses up. "Let's do it."

"What about *him*?" Illiam asked nervously.

"What about him?" I challenged back. "It's none of his business."

"That's easy for you to say. He won't blast you out of existence," Illiam muttered as he opened the gate.

I chose to ignore the remark and brought my protection spells as I stepped through. True to Illiam's word, I was standing down in a ravine and slightly under an overhang created by some tree roots.

I looked around and saw that it was just now getting to be dusk. That made me wonder just how long I had been gone. I hadn't bothered to ask. I tended to lose track of time in the real world while I'm under Lakash's tutorage.

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I sat down and waited for the last of the sun's rays to vanish, leaving a bright panorama of stars. The rabbit moon was making its way quickly across the sky and was almost at its apex. Give it another two hours and it would be on the horizon. That would leave nothing but starlight for the defending humans to try and spot the enemy by.

I gathered the shadows around me and made my way out of the ravine. Once clear of the riverbed I paused long enough to rearrange my swords and ensure that they wouldn't rattle against each other. If I had taken the time and preplanned, I would have mounted the Katana and Wakazashi across my back to make creeping easier. I had gotten sloppy again, but it shouldn't matter, this time anyway. I'd have to take care not to let it happen again.

Again I paused to survey the surroundings. There was still a lot of desert style brush around, but there were also sporadic spots of grass growing between the cacti. We must be getting close to the plains. I had been gone for several days.

A sound caught my attention and caused my hackles to stand on end. It was a sound like satin on satin that had been carried on the breeze. I took a deep breath to try and identify any scents. I could barely make out the deep musk of dragons. I was on the right track.

I proceeded at a quick trot through the brush, taking great care not to make any noise. Part of my concealment spell was designed to suppress the sound of my footfalls, but wouldn't do much if I caught the edge of a branch.

After about ten minutes I slowed and dropped into a low crouch. I could see the heads of guards patrolling a clearing a couple of hundred yards away. I approached the encampment with all my senses alerted. I counted six guards on duty as I circled the camp. I also got my first good look at one of the dragons. They were classic western style dragons. Their charcoal gray coloration almost made them look like ghosts as they slept.

There were four dragons and about a dozen men in the camp. The big question for me at the moment was the wizard. There had to be a high level mage in the camp to keep it safe from prying eyes. The thing was, I didn't see any tents. There wasn't any place for a mage to be hiding.

I noted that the guards patrolling the perimeter didn't go too close to the dragons. I presume they didn't want to risk waking them up. Besides, who would be dumb enough to try and sneak up on a dragon?

I took great care in sneaking up on the smallest of the dragons. His tail extended straight out into the shrubs as opposed to being wrapped around his feet like the others. I stopped behind a large bush right next to the tip of the tail. A few seconds modifying my camouflage spell and I now resembled an extension of the bush.

Now to find out what these guys were up too. I reached out and touched the tip of his tail and projected myself into his dream.

We were flying over a small human town. The rider on our back gave the order for us to stoop and attack. We dove towards an undamaged portion of the city and breathed fire on

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it as we skimmed over the roofs, pulling up into a climb at the end of our run. I could feel his anticipation at making more strafing runs against the people. It was time to change the tempo of his dream.

I separated myself from him and summoned forth the body of a greater dragon to represent myself. I watched as he turned to make another run on the city and roared my anger at his impudence. His head snapped around in my direction at the sound of my voice. I could see the terror in his eyes as he watched me leisurely turn in his direction. Another challenging roar sent him into a complete panic.

I beat my wings in long, powerful strokes and closed the gap as he frantically tried to escape. His rider was beating on him ineffectually with a baton, trying to regain control, but it wasn't going to happen. The last thing I saw on his riders face was a look of utter horror as my breath enveloped the two of them.

The young dragon screamed in agony and rolled away in order to escape my attack. I let him go and again casually turned to reengage. His back and wings had been severely burned by my breath. Obviously his natural resistance to dragons breath wasn't working quite as well as he had hoped.

Again I cried out my challenge as I stooped on him. He tried to twist and turn, to evade my attack, but it didn't help. As I shot past him, I flicked out with my tail and snapped it across his right wing. The thunderclap of bones shattering was echoed in his scream as he spun out of control into the ground far below.

I landed next to his beaten and battered body and smiled as I listen to him whimper, "It's only a dream. This is only a dream."

"You wish it were only a dream," I said with a deep, rumbling laugh.

He lifted his head and looked up at me in terror. "This can't be real. Your kind was destroyed by the humans. There are no more of your kind."

I reached out with a foot-hand and stepped on the shattered bones of his wing. His scream echoed off of the surrounding terrain. "Does this feel like a dream?" I asked as I continued to grind the bones together.

"Enough!" he cried out. "I beg you! Please! No more!" He clinched his eyes shut as if to deny the pain that wracked his body.

I backed off a few steps and settled down in such a way as to recline against a hill. With a wave of my hand, I changed the dreamscape to mimic that of the desert where I found him. All round us were the dead bodies of the humans and the other dragons. "Well now, what's a shrimp like you doing out in the desert like this, and why are you running around in such bad company?"

He opened his eyes and looked around. "No! This is impossible!" he again denied.

I casually ripped a leg off of the corpse of the largest dragon and began to chew on it. "If you insist. Shall I give your wing another workout?" I almost laughed at the look on

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his face.

"No," he replied completely defeated. "Ask what you will, ancient one."

I smiled. "That's more like it. Now, what were you and these other truants doing here?" I demanded in a cold tone of voice.

"We were sent to capture a stranger."

"What stranger," I demanded quietly.

"I don't know. I was only brought as an extra show of force to inflate our patron's ego." He winced as I took another bite from the phantom leg.

"And who was your patron?" I asked casually, confident that I had him completely cowed.

Before he could answer, the dream shattered and I found myself back in my body. I looked over at the small dragon and found its head crushed under the foot of the largest dragon. The tail quivered under my hand with the echoes of his death throws.

"Show yourself, human," the large dragon rumbled as he scanned the surrounding terrain.

I strengthened the power of my illusion as I slowly withdrew the Tanto. I didn't want to use too much power by trying to both camouflage myself and bringing my protective spells up to maximum. I would have to rely on the spells in the Tanto to help defend myself should he penetrate my spells.

"Come now, human," the dragon said. "I can hear you breathing and I smell your scent. It is a most intriguing one too. I've not smelled the likes of your subspecies before."

Damn. I didn't think to mask my scent. That wasn't something I had thought about. Damn it all to hell.

The dragon continued to scan the area. I could feel the power of his sight as he augmented it with a scrying spell. Each time his vision passed over me, I felt the illusion weaken. Rather than wait for it to fail, I decided to bite the bullet.

I released the illusion and brought up my defensive spells to full power. "All right, dragon. Here I am," I said as I stepped away from the corpse.

I saw his head recoil in surprise as he spotted me. "What is this?" he asked as he spotted my Tanto.

"I am Arden, daughter of the greater dragon, Illialakeska," I stated proudly.

"That's impossible," the dragon replied. "I watched the demon Lakash die under the heel of her human destroyers."

He knew that Lakash and Illialakeska were the same. I hadn't known that any creature in

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this world other than Sheila and myself were aware of that fact. I boldly approached the dragon. "Look into my eyes and tell me it can't be," I challenged. "Look deep and hard at them and tell me you don't see an echo of Lakash."

The dragon backed away from me. "NO!" he shouted in defiance. "I watched him be destroyed! I lead the humans to him and watched as he was banished!"

I lost control of my body at that point. Lakash moved in and took over. "So it was you, Ras'palendak," I heard him say in a low gravely voice. "You should never have opened your big mouth. Now your ass is mine."

At this point the dragon turned and fled. Lakash laughed as he watched the large, lumbering form take flight. Next thing I knew, I once again had control of my body as Lakash shot from my chest as the summoned spirit of the dragon.

Bereft of Lakash's power, I dropped to my paws and knees. That son of a bitch left me hanging.

"Excellent," I heard a voice from my left say.

I turned to see a small, thin human form emerge from the shadows, cloaked in a black robe. On the front was an emblem of a stiletto pointing downwards as it pierced five silver rings.

"Who the hell are you?" I asked weakly.

"That is none of your concern at the moment," he replied.

He waved to someone behind me and I felt myself lifted into the air as several sets of hands began to bind me. I tried to summon power, but found that Lakash had left me in a bind, literally.

"Damn you, Lakash," I shouted. "It's a trap, you idiot!"

The guy in the robe cursed and gestured in my direction. My skull exploded with light, which was quickly swallowed by darkness as everything faded to black.

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An old enemy returns.

I awoke to a numbing sensation over my entire body. I could feel everything below my neck, but it felt oddly detached, as if in a dream. The giddy feeling of detachment extended to my surroundings as I realized that I had been strapped to the back of a dragon which was now flying high over the darkened landscape. My arms and legs were bound to the dragon on the saddle in such a way that made me laugh. It reminded me of the old western movies where a bad guy would be brought into town dead, dumped over the back of his horse and tied there, only I wasn't dead. Was I?

I tried to reach out for the power, but found that I was still screwed. Lakash had taken the bait and I was left without his power. I turned my sight inwards to seek my own power and was shocked to realize that I couldn't reach it. Something was blocking my access to all magic. It figured. They would have been nuts to have tried to capture a warrior mage without some way to block their access to magic.

I shivered from the cold wind blowing over the back of the dragon as its icy tendrils drew tears from my eyes. I had relied on the dragon's power to keep me warm and now I was paying for it. My fur wasn't thick enough for this crap and I was slowly freezing.

I closed my eyes and let myself fall asleep again. If I was going to freeze to death, I didn't want to be awake for it.

I awoke to the sudden feeling of falling as I slid from the back of the dragon. The bastards had simply cut the cords that bound me to the saddle. My body screamed in agony as I landed hard on the cold ground. I'm not sure what hurt more, the landing, or the fact that my muscles which had been stretched for so long, could now move. I wasn't in any mood to judge the contest, so I simply curled up into a ball in the tall grass and shivered.

"You fools!" I heard the voice of the magician say. "Look at it. The damn thing is half frozen." There was the sound of something hard hitting something soft, followed by a body hitting the ground. "By the gods, it's no wonder your kind have never mounted a successful campaign against the Empire. Don't you realize that if it dies, none of us will get paid?"

There was the sound of muttering around me, as nobody seemed willing to answer his last question. "Get a fire started, we need to warm it up."

After a few minutes, I was roughly lifted and dragged over by a fire. The pit was the same style that I had found before, with a high berm around the outside to shield it from prying eyes.

As I slowly thawed out, I took inventory of myself and saw that I was wearing some form of manacles with very intricate carving engraved on it. Although there was a loop for a chain or lock, they were unbound. I also found that I had a fancy collar that zapped

the hell out of me when I tried to take it off. This amused my captors to no end.

One of the guards came over and shoved a tankard of low-grade ale and a chunk of hardtack into my hand. My old training took over and I began to eat. You never turn down food, as you never know when your next meal will come from, or if they'll even bother feeding you again.

A little while later the mage came by with a bowl of stew and handed it to me as he sat down. "Are you feeling better?" he asked casually.

I looked over at him and nodded. He was a small man who probably didn't stand over five feet tall. He had a shock of bright red curly hair on his head that would have made him look like a child if it hadn't been for the scars that covered his face. At some point in time he had been horribly burned, the scars ran down his neck and under his cloak. His hands also showed signs of having been damaged at one time. He wore no obvious jewelry though I did notice that he had earrings on other than, and of course, the robe with its emblem on it. A gold dagger plunging downwards through five silver rings. It reminded me vaguely of the Elite badge with its silver sword pointing up, piercing three gold rings.

"What's the significance of the emblem?" I asked as I pointed to it with the spoon.

He looked down and sighed. "It's too bad we didn't find out more about you before taking this commission," he said longingly, "otherwise we probably would have recruited you rather than kidnapping you."

He had me confused and knew it as he continued. "Unlike the Elitist," he said with a derisive snort, "we don't suppress magic. We're all for the learning and usage of magic, all magic. Where they only have three golden circles representing the three sanctioned arts, we embrace all five of the known magics." He gently caressed the emblem. "If we had recruited you to teach us the lost art of arcane magic, we would have added a sixth ring to our emblem."

I took a bite of the stew and forced myself to eat it. It wasn't all that bad, but it wasn't very good either. About the quality you'd expect to get from McPuck's or something. "I take it you and the Elite don't get along."

He shook his head as he watched me eat. "No. Not by a long shot."

That surprised me. "I thought the Elite just enforced the law. Nobody said anything about suppressing magic," I commented between bites.

He nodded. "Of course not. They wanted you to join," he explained. "You must understand that if any magician uses his powers against any non magician, no matter the provocation, it's a capital offense." He paused to let that sink in before continuing. "On the other hand, if you join his Arcanum, then you become part of his military, and that law doesn't apply to you."

I nodded as I ate. I could see his point. You could get burned for being a witch or you

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could defend yourself and get hanged for using magic. Either that or join the Emperor's forces and become untouchable by the masses. It was a pretty sweet way to control the use of magic.

"Unfortunately," he continued without prompting, "my masters took the contract for your abduction before we knew enough about you--otherwise we would have met under different circumstances."

"Tell me about it," I quipped back. "So who's this patron that's paying for my capture?"

He shrugged. "I'm afraid I'm not allowed to say," he replied honestly. "All I can say is that he's going to have to pay a hell of a lot more for you now than he had anticipated." The look of confusion on my face prompted him to continue. "You cost us two dragons, one was an elder wyrm. No, he's going to pay a heavy toll if he wants you."

I finished up the stew and handed the empty bowl back to him. "Well," I said drawing the word out. "I can't say as I would have accepted or turned down your proposal, but I must admit that I wouldn't be too keen on wearing any black robes. That's just not my style." I flashed him a big smile as I posed in my somewhat dirty outfit.

He laughed for a second and then shook his head. "You know, that's the last thing I expected from you. A woman maybe, but not you" he said between chuckles.

I blinked in surprise at that. "I beg your pardon," I said, as I propped my breasts up in my paws for emphasis, "but where I come from, only women have these, honey."

He nodded. "True, but I know for a fact that you weren't originally born to that body and in fact were a man before you came to our world."

How in the hell did he know that?

He stood and brushed off his robe. "I suggest you rest and warm up. We'll be taking off again in a few hours," he said while pointing to an empty bedroll. "This time, though, I'll make sure you're properly warmed."

I watched him as he left and wondered how the hell he knew so much about me. He must be getting inside information, but from whom? There was an extremely short list of folk who knew that I hadn't been female until I came to this world. Just who had been talking?

The dragons were pissed at me. I was the reason that two of their numbers were now dead, and one of them had been an ancient wyrm. Ras'palendak had been the head of the dragon clan that was allied with the Alliance of Free Mages. I had almost taunted one of the dragons into removing my collar so we could prove just who was the most powerful, but that mage intervened. I was cursed with bad luck like that. Without that collar I would have at least been able to gate out.

I will admit that riding on the back of a dragon was exhilarating. Even with four riders

on its back, the beat of the dragon's wings ate up the miles like candy.

Towards the end of the day we were approaching the western rim of the Basin Mountains that line the northwest edge of the Empire. At first I thought that they were going to fly over the mountains, but instead we descended into a rather inhospitable looking portion of the foothills that was filled with jagged rocks and spires. Or so it appeared. As we got close to a rather large outcropping of rock, we passed through the illusion spell that hid the tower revealing a mirror of the Arcanum in the capital city.

I compared the image to Gwen's memory of the original and found them virtually identical. A large central tower surrounded by clusters of lower buildings, guarded by a ring of six lesser towers, each topped with a large crystal that I couldn't identify.

The dragons flew directly for the center tower and a slit opening near the top that apparently served as a landing bay for them. What I had taken to be a narrow opening turned out to be a huge gap measuring easily eighty feet in height and over one hundred feet wide. With practiced boredom they stalled out just as they entered the opening, folding their wings and quickly moving out of the way for the next wyrm behind them.

The riders lowered me to the hands of waiting guards who quickly attached chains between the ankle and wristbands to hobble me. They also put a muzzle on my face that was a perfect fit. Someone definitely had the inside dope on me.

"Well, if it isn't the bitch," I heard a familiar voice say from behind.

I spun around and saw Marduke standing there, plain as the muzzle on my face. "Marduke," I said surprised. "What are you doing here?"

He laughed as he walked up to me. "I'm here for round two, bitch," he replied as he pulled out a knife. For a second I thought he was going to stab me, but instead he cut the silks I had used to clothe myself and discarded them to the side. "There we go, bitch. Now you look just like the play toy you were meant to be." A malicious grin made itself known on his face as he raised the dagger to the base of my neck.

"Marduke," the sorcerer barked. "Your master wants her in good health and undamaged. You will refrain from abusing her until he arrives."

Marduke looked over at the sorcerer and growled before he put his blade away. "You will be mine again, bitch, and when you are, you'll pay for what you did to my face!"

I smiled with false bravado and laughed. "Tell me, Marduke. How are the family jewels?"

He roared with rage and slugged me. I fell back into the guards and caused us to domino to the floor. After I cleared the stars from my head I saw Marduke on the ground writhing in pain. The sorcerer stood over him, a sadistic smile on his face.

"I warned you, Marduke. She's worth a hell of a lot more to us than you are," he explained after he stopped the spell. "One cut. One bruise. One piece of fur out of place, and I promise that you'll be feeling the effects of that spell for a long time."

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Christ! This guy was like Charles Manson. He almost had me convinced that the Emperor was wrong to control the mages. After seeing that little display, I could suddenly see hundreds of little Darth Vaders running around using malicious spells to get their way.

The sorcerer looked over at the guards. "Take her to the sphere. We'll deal with her later."

Guards on either side of me grasped my arms and forced me along a series of corridors that led to an elevator. We rode down into the lowest of the sub basement levels. They then led me down a cold and dark passageway to an odd looking set of doors. They were bowed out, as if part of a huge sphere. When the outer doors were opened, it showed an egg white colored room about five by five in diameter with inner doors that were closed. Both sets of doors were intricately inlaid with runes and glyphs that created a mosaic that left no part of the stone untouched.

As the outer doors closed behind us, the tingling sensation faded from my body. I still couldn't access any magic, but now I didn't have that constant tickling sensation. They opened the inner doors to reveal a room that did indeed appear to be the upper half of a sphere. Within the room were a bed, pillows, table with food and drink on it as well as a basic squat privy with flowing water. There was also a basin with a tap that would run cold water. Illumination was created by a series glowing spheres that were hung around the room. The air circulated through a series of tiny vents, each of which was covered again with those runes.

One of the guards removed my muzzle and chains and then shoved me into the room before he backed out. Two guards remained and took up positions next to the door as it was sealed.

"OK then," I said more to myself than anyone else as I started to examine the room. I recognized the symbols and glyphs as being some sort of blocking and protective wards. Without being able to call on the sight, I wouldn't be able to figure it out any time soon so I concentrated on other things.

The only other points of interest in the room were the vents near the doorway, and the guards wouldn't let me get near them. I went over to the table and poured myself a drink. The wine was of a far better quality than the crap we had put up with on the trail. I downed a chalice of that and then climbed into bed. I wanted to be rested for whatever was to come.

One of the things I had learned in my training with the SDF was that you could easily lose track of time in a room where the illumination didn't change. The only thing I had to measure time with was the changing of the guard and delivery of my meals. I guessed that they were rotated out about every four hours or so. Given that fact, I estimated that I had been in the room for the better part of two days before I had visitors.

Marduke entered the room, flanked by the sorcerer and two more guards. I noticed that

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the sorcerer was wearing a light gray robe that was embroidered with gold and silver colored thread creating a tapestry of symbols and runes.

"Get up, bitch," Marduke ordered as he strode into the room. "It's time to get you ready to meet your new master."

I climbed out of the bed and casually stretched my muscles. "Give it a rest, dickless. I serve no human," I replied in a derisive tone.

I could see that my taunt had hit home from the expression on his face. Marduke balled his fists as he approached me. "I think it's high time you had another lesson in discipline."

I laughed as I moved away from the bed and the table to get some room. "And a child like you is going to teach me?" I asked with a quirky grin on my face. "I don't think so."

"You may have gotten a lucky shot in on me at the mews," Marduke replied as he cracked the knuckles of his fists to intimidate me, "but you'll find I'm not one to trifle with. Without the strength you got from the demon, you're just another whore

Whore? Did he call me a whore? "I was just going to kick your ass, Marduke," I replied in a low voice. "Now you're going to die."

Marduke smiled as I dropped into a fighting crouch and began to maneuver towards him. He fell into his own version of a defensive posture, but I wasn't impressed. His leading leg was too far out and he was off balance to the right. This was going to be easy.

We circled each other, probing defenses. He was painfully slow and tended to telegraph his punches. The fool should have stuck to being a stable master and stayed out of the warrior business. Then again, when all you deal with are helpless creatures that have been beaten and cowed, I could see where his swollen head came from.

Once I got his timing down, I lashed out with a quick heel kick to his chest that drove him back a couple of feet. I had intentionally aimed high so as not to knock the wind out of him. I didn't want him to feel discouraged too fast.

"What's the mater, Marduke, can't you block a simple kick?" I taunted while laughing.

Marduke grunted. "Your blow didn't even hurt, bitch. Now I'll show you what pain means."

He stepped forwards and feigned a punch combo then dropped to a spin kick designed to sweep my feet out from under me. I lightly hopped over his kick and danced around him as he recovered. Now he gave up all pretense of being fancy. Moving in, he lashed out hard with his fists, forcing me to back off while trying to deflect them. He finished his attack with a quick sidekick that I would have dodged had it not been for the chair that I tripped over.

I landed on my side and rolled away as he proceeded to land a couple of kicks to my ribs. Fortunately I was able to roll under the table and out the other side before he could do any serious damage. I stood and grabbed the lip of the table, flipping it over onto him.

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Marduke cursed as the table slammed into his head and forced him away.

I decided that it was time to stop playing around. I moved forward, running up the underside of the table as Marduke was pushing it off of himself and reached the edge just as it began to drop freely to the floor. A quick scissor kick nailed him in the middle of the forehead and drove him backwards. I landed with the table as it hit the floor with an explosive crack and charged forwards as he regained his balance.

Marduke saw my charge and managed to lash out a kick that caught me in the ribs. Rather than try to roll away from the hit, I trapped his calf between my arm and ribs and proceeded to do my best to break his knee with a palm strike. I was rewarded with a rather loud crunch followed by Marduke screaming as he twisted away.

Hobbled, Marduke tried to distance himself from me, but he couldn't move fast enough. A spinning back kick to the chest slammed him against the wall and stunned him as his head bounced off of the ornately engraved surface. I didn't give him any chance to recover. I stepped forward and put everything behind a solid shot to the solar plexus, knocking the wind out of him and dropping him to the floor.

I stood there for a second and looked down on his prone form as he gasped for breath. I was breathing harder than I had expected after our little tussle. Marduke glared up at me and spit. I lost it and began to kick the hell out of him. The next thing I knew I was flying backwards as some unseen force held me high in the air.

The sorcerer stepped forwards while holding a fist in the air. "That will be enough," he said to both of us. "I don't think our patron would appreciate it if I let you kill each other."

"Then why did you let us fight in the first place?" I managed to gasp.

He lowered his hand and opened it, releasing me from the spell. "I wanted to see if the rumors of your combat abilities were true," he replied as he looked down on Marduke. "If this fool was stupid enough to challenge you, I had no objections. Just as long as you weren't permanently damaged."

"What about me?" Marduke coughed. "The bitch broke my knee!"

"So?" the sorcerer said with a sarcastic chuckle. "Your master isn't paying me to keep you healthy or intact. You should be grateful that I stopped her when I did." He turned and looked me over to make sure I hadn't been injured. "Our patron will soon be here. I suggest that you clean yourself up so that you will make a good impression."

I put my hands on my hips and scowled at him. "You've got to be kidding!" I said in disbelief. "I don't give a damn about your patron. In fact he better pray to the gods that I don't manage to get free, or his ass is going to be mine, big time!"

The sorcerer glanced towards the inner doors as they began to open. "I believe it is now a moot point," he commented, glancing back at me. "Your new master is here."

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Betrayed by a friend.

After having seen Marduke, I shouldn't have been surprised at the entrance of my "new master." He strode into the room like he owned the place and yelled, "What the hell is going on around here?" It was the little Prince Rapes-A-Lot, Hiram. That bastard was responsible for my kidnapping.

"What the hell is he doing on the floor?" Hiram demanded of the sorcerer, then looked over at me. "If she's been harmed there's going to be hell to pay!"

The sorcerer gave a small nod of acknowledgement to Hiram. "She is fine, Your Highness," he stated pleasantly. "Your man, Marduke, needed a bit of a lesson on how to treat a lady." He smiled as he looked down at Marduke, who was trying to make himself invisible against the wall. "I assure you, Your Highness, there was never any risk of damage to the lady."

"There better not be, Morgan, or I'll have your ass for a new pair of boots," the prince grumbled.

That name rang a bell. I thought about it for a second and suddenly realized that I knew him, or rather Gwen had. He was the Emperor's younger brother. Everyone thought that he had been killed almost twenty years ago during a wizards' battle at the Arcanum. Obviously he not only had survived, he had gone underground and become a very important cog in an organization designed to undermine the Arcanum. He had always been at odds with his brother about continuing Imperial dominance of magic. The pieces were starting to fall into place.

Morgan's face got hard as he took a step towards the prince. "Be careful with whom you threaten, Your Highness. We aren't your servants here to be abused at a whim." I saw a dark glow slowly grow around Morgan as he spoke, forcing the ashen-faced prince to back up. "Overstep your bounds and I promise you'll regret it for the rest of your short-lived life."

Hiram fought to swallow a couple of times before steeling himself. "You dare to threaten me?" he said in a shaky voice.

"Not a threat," Morgan replied causing Hiram to flinch away, "a promise. You are here by my master's generosity. Don't ever forget that." As he spoke, the aura faded and with it Hiram's fear dissipated as well.

He nodded to Morgan as he tidied up his clothing. "Of course, Morgan. As long as we understand each other, I don't see why we can't have a long and profitable relationship." Satisfied that he had dealt with Morgan, Hiram turned towards me and smiled. "And there's my prize," he said as he walked towards me.

"I'm no prize, asshole," I responded. I tried to shift my weight so as to get of a snap kick when he got close, but once again found myself unable to move. A glance at Morgan confirmed why.

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Hiram reached out and stroked the fur under my neck. I would have bit him, but I couldn't even move my head. He trailed his hand down over one breast, tweaking a nipple as he reached it. "Oh yes, you are a prize indeed," he said with a smile. "Kidnapping you has solved so very many of my problems. Without you or Marduke to testify, there will be nobody to accuse me of any crimes." He continued to run his hands over my body while he talked. "And as an added bonus, I get to have you here as a play toy."

"I'll never be your play toy," I responded through clenched fangs. "The first opportunity I get, you'll be dead."

Hiram laughed and took a step back while snapping a finger. Behind him, a figure cloaked in a dark robe and hood that shadowed his face stepped forward holding a box. As he got next to Hiram, the man undid the silver latches and opened the case to reveal a choker and four bracers. "I think you'll find these will change your tune."

The man in the robe reached down and turned the table back over and then set the box down on top. He then turned and began to undo the latch on the collar I wore. There was something familiar about his scent despite the heavy musks and perfumes he used to try and mask it.

"What do you think you're doing?" Morgan asked. "Leave that collar alone."

Hiram turned to Morgan and waved him off. "Relax, Morgan. She's trapped inside the sphere. There's no way she can have any contact with arcane magic in here."

Morgan made a gesture which pushed the robed man away from me. "You have no idea what you're playing with here, Hiram," he said. "Removing the Binders of Aramas may allow it access to magic again."

The prince let out a sigh of exasperation. "True or false: Is this not the room that you trapped Lakash in?" Taking Morgan's nod as an affirmative, he continued, "And was Lakash not totally cut off from magic by these walls?" Again, Morgan nodded. "Then I don't see what your problem is. She gets her power directly from Lakash. If he had no power here back then, I don't see why he'd be able to funnel power in here now."

The sorcerer shook his head. "That was Lakash. We don't know the capabilities of this creature," he explained. "Removal of the collar could give it access to the lesser magics."

Prince Hiram had an annoyed expression on his face as he rolled his eyes. "Our sources have told us that the only access to magic she has is through Lakash," he lectured with a bored voice. "Even then, it's quite obvious to see when she has access to magic as her eyes change." He looked over at the hooded man who had brought in the box. "Isn't that right, Danedajin?"

The name should have surprised me, but it didn't. Not after what I had read in Sheila's journal.

Dane sighed and pulled the hood back from over his head. "What's the point of my trying to keep my identity hidden if you insist on blabbing my name out," he inquired

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from exasperation.

The prince just waved him off. "Oh, give it a rest, Danedajin," he replied offhandedly. "It's not like she'll ever get out of here."

"You may have faith in these losers," Dane stated with a scowl as he crossed his arms, "but it's my life on the line for helping you with this if she does get away."

I closed my eyes and sighed quietly. I had trusted him. He had seemed such a decent bloke. It only goes to show that you can never afford to let your guard down. My biggest concern, second to escape, was to wonder if he had spilled the beans about Gwen and I sharing memories. I prayed for her sake that he hadn't. Hiram would surely use it to blackmail her into supporting him.

"Be that as it may," Hiram said, brushing off his remark. "We know for a fact that she had never cast a spell until coming to this world. According to the Elite that she battled with at the keep, she didn't have any magical abilities at all until he witnessed her making a deal with the demon, Lakash. It was only after that point that she ever showed any magical abilities. I have no doubt the sphere will suffice." He waved to Dane and indicated that he should continue.

"I still don't like it," Morgan declared. His reservations were obviously not enough for him to override the prince since he did nothing to stop the bard.

Dane spent a few minutes taking apart the choker and bracers I wore before replacing them with a heavier pair. I saw that the ones he had removed were ornately carved in a metal that resembled silver or platinum and inlaid with a golden scrollwork of symbols. The new collar he used was much heavier, being made of silver and gold, but was also heavily studded with different types of gems creating an odd pattern on the surface.

Once I had been restrained in with the new collar and bracers, Hiram instructed Morgan to release the spell. I almost fell as I tried to recover my balance. My feet felt like they were stuck in mud as I tried to move them. I found that I had the same problem with my hands. A little experimentation revealed that it was based on speed. The faster I tried to move them, the greater the resistance.

Hiram watched as I figured out his new toy. "Now you see. I no longer have anything to fear from you, bitch. You've had your one and only shot at me. You'll find that this ring," he said, holding up his right hand to display an ornate gold and platinum ring, "will keep me utterly safe from any ill tempered acts of violence you may wish to inflict."

With that he strode quickly over to me. As he got close, I felt my hands snap up to the collar around my neck as if they had been reeled in. The prince backhanded me and sent me to the ground.

"That collar has many uses, bitch. And I intend to show them all to you." He turned and reached back towards where Dane stood. I saw Dane hesitate a moment before handing him a whip. "And now I think it's time to teach you some discipline."

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Without the use of my arms or legs I was unable to avoid the lashes that fell. It took all my resolve not to cry out during the whipping. I think that pissed him off because the strokes became vicious towards the end before he dropped the whip from exhaustion. It was a small victory. One that was heavily overshadowed by the pain that ran the length of my back, tail and legs, but a victory nonetheless.

Everyone except the two guards left the room once Hiram was done with me. They just left me lying on the floor. It was all I could do to drag myself up onto the bed without passing out. A quick look at the floor behind me showed a trail of blood that had been smeared by my fur like some sort of obscene paintbrush in a crimson trail to mark my path. I closed my eyes and tried to ignore the pain.

I awoke to the painful sensation of something being painted onto one of the wounds on my back. I reflexively tried to roll away, but a firm hand on my shoulder prevented.

"Don't try to move," Morgan directed. "This will help with the pain and speed the healing."

I turned my head and looked at him. The gentle way he was tending to my wounds made me think he was almost human. "You know, you almost had me convinced for a while," I said finally.

His brow furrowed as he thought about my statement. "Convinced about what?" he asked while scooping out more ointment.

"That you were working for the better of the empire." I winced as he hit a particularly tender wound. "But now I see that your evil is the reason the Elite was created."

Morgan gave a small snort and smiled at my statement. "You may call us evil, but we've done nothing that the Arcanum hasn't done in the name of the emperor," he replied.

"When was the last time the emperor had someone kidnapped and ... ugh... turned into his personal slave?" There were so many wounds. I'm glad I couldn't see what my back looked like.

"Actually," Morgan said as he paused to think, "the emperor's current head concubine was taken against her will from her parents. I think that counts as kidnapping. Of course, if she doesn't perform for him, she'll be killed, so I think that counts as slavery." He continued to paint the wounds as he talked. "And Prince Hiram is the next in line to be emperor. So if you think about it, we're simply following the orders of the future emperor, just as a mage in the Arcanum would."

"And does the emperor flog them with a bullwhip?" I asked as he resumed treating the wounds.

Morgan shrugged. "I am not privy to the emperor's taste in entertainment."

Man, this guy was one cold fish, but I guess that was to be expected. All this stuff was

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old hat to him. Despite everything that had happened to me, I still tended to want to see these people through rose-tinted glasses.

"Morgan," I said after a little bit. "Are you still interested in having my arcane magic on your side?"

He looked down at me and cocked an eyebrow. "Of course we would," he said as he returned to tending my wounds.

I reached out and stopped him from working on me. "Then release me," I said quietly. "I'll swear my oath to your group in exchange for my freedom and a chance to kill Hiram. If you want to defeat the Arcanum, then I'll put my magic behind it."

Morgan's eyes broke contact as he hung his head. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly before he spoke, "You have no idea how much I wish I could." He looked back over at me with a pained expression. "I have already discussed this my master, and he has decided to maintain our bargain with Hiram. You are more valuable to us alive and well here, than free even if you really would join us."

"What?" I asked in shock. "How the hell can you say that? I thought you guys were hard up for an arcane mage to shift the power in your favor."

Again Morgan frowned and paused before speaking. "We will have an arcane mage, though it will be decades before he will be ready to take his place by our side," he explained and paused for it to sink in.

"No!" I shouted. I tried to roll away, but was unable to move because of a simple spell that held me firm against the bed. "I won't let you touch my child, damn it!"

He shushed me as he stroked the hair on my head. "Hush now. There's no need for that," he said to soothe me. "We're not going to touch your son. You'll raise your son for us willingly."

"Never!" I denied viciously as I tried unsuccessfully to pull my head away from him. "I'll never cooperate!"

"But of course you will, my dear. Even now there are spells that I have woven into your mind while you slept." He trailed his fingers across the top of my head, sending shivers painfully down my spine. "The longer they work, the more detached your memories of your old life will become. Soon, you won't care about Lakash, Zig Zag or anyone else from your past. They will just be passing memories, without any importance to your future."

"You bastard!" I sobbed out. "Why are you telling me this? Why?"

A thin smile graced his face. "Because I need to break your spirit, and the best way to do that is to show you how hopeless your situation is," he explained, enjoying my torment. "Soon, you'll no longer even wish to escape. Once the prince is bored with you, he will give you to us permanently, at which point your programming will continue. You will once again wear the Binders of Aramas to ensure that Lakash won't be able to

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channel through you, and you will finally leave this room to take your place by our side." He got a far away look in his eyes as a glorious future unfolded before him. "Your son will be trained in the martial and magical arts. He will become the champion of our cause. His power will destroy the Emperor's Arcanum and allow practitioners of magic the freedom they deserve at last."

I closed my eyes in defeat. He was right. With all the magic at their command and my being cut off from Lakash, I was trapped. In my arrogance I had tried to play Rambo and take care of the dragons alone. As a result, I had destroyed any chance at completing my quest, and I condemned Nanuk. I could almost feel the spell as it chewed up my memories. I really had screwed the pooch this time, and I was the pooch.

"There, all done," he announced as he finished painting my wounds with the salve. "Now to accelerate your healing and get you ready for your next visit by the prince. He wants you in good condition for his next encounter."

Great. Little Lord Rapes-A-Lot was going to be back for another run. I was about to tell Morgan what he could do with the little bastard when I realized that I could feel the magic of his spell. Not just the healing, mind you, but also the magic itself. I turned my sight inward and realized that my spirit was still part of the Great Dragon and Nanuk. Nanuk's power was healing and that's what Morgan was doing. The dragon took a small percentage of the power from change. This was healing magic and it was definitely changing me. I smiled as I concentrated on harvesting what I could of his power. It wasn't a lot, but I was slowly building up my reserves the same way I had with Lakash during my training.

If I could build up enough magic, I might be able to blow this Popsicle stand. At the rate I was absorbing power, it would be days, maybe even weeks before I'd be able to make my move. In the meantime, I should be able to deflect that spell he put on me to screw with my memories. Of course, I'd have to ensure that Morgan had a reason to keep healing me. That meant I would have to taunt Hiram into whipping me more. Maybe even breaking bones. God, this was going to hurt, but it would be nothing compared to the pain I was going to dish out once I'd made my escape.

I smiled as I relaxed and let the power trickle in. I had a plan now. It was just a matter of time and they would pay. I would make them all pay. Hiram, Marduke, Dane, Morgan and all their black-hearted friends, they would all feel the wrath of the dragon once I had been released. The world as they knew it was about to end.

I tried not to cough. I was pretty sure he had punctured a lung as I was coughing up blood. My second encounter with Hiram had gone pretty much the way I had expected. He had enjoyed using his little toy to control me. I was an overgrown puppet for him to control whenever he decided to make me do something. I also found out that trying to resist was futile. The more I fought the collar's power, the more pain it inflicted. I also found that Hiram could inflict pain through the collar directly, too, which was a bad thing. I needed him to lose control and beat me, so I bided my time. Soon he got tired of

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making me dance around for him and decided to get down to business.

Being prepared for it this time, I was able to keep my wits about me. After a minute or so of his humping I had quipped something to the effect of "Mind getting started already? You're beginning to bore me." He didn't take my comment well and I paid for it with a small beating. Each time he would get on a roll, I would make a snide comment and earn another beating. The last straw came when I said that the stable hands were a better lay than he was. That set him off completely. The guards had to drag him away for fear that he would hurt my child.

In the end, I had managed to get him to give me numerous cracked and broken ribs, another broken arm and I believe a broken jaw. At least it felt like it was broken. I wasn't too sure about the condition of my right hand and wrist, as they had been kicked repeatedly. The overall pain in that arm made it impossible for me to inventory the damage.

I heard the inner door to the room open and peeked through swollen eyelids to see who it was. Morgan came in and scowled at me as I lay on the floor. I smiled and closed my eyes.

"What the hell are you smiling for?" he asked as he bent down to examine the damage.

"I won," I quietly replied and looked back up at him.

"From where I'm standing, it looks like you got the shit kicked out of you," he observed as he probed my broken arm. "What the hell did you think you were doing?"

"This is war," I replied in a whisper, "and I won the battle."

He stopped and rocked back on his heels and frowned. "And just how in the hell did you win anything?" he demanded.

I smiled up at him. "He never got off," I replied. "I gave him no satisfaction."

He gave a snort and shook his head. "You're insane, you realize that?"

I closed my eyes again and relaxed. The Japanese have a saying that life is a dream. When you have a nightmare, you tell yourself, "This is only a dream, I can wake up from it." If you look at life the same way, then this shit wasn't so bad.

"Your wounds are beyond my ability to heal," Morgan said as he stood. "I'll send a couple of healers in to take care of you."

I listened to him walk over to the doors and wait for them to open. He paused before stepping through and muttered something about me being crazy before he left. Yah, I was crazy all right. Crazy like a fox. That though brought a smile to my face. Crazy like a vixen would have been more appropriate.

After a little while the inner doors opened again and three men entered. Two were wearing robes while the third was dressed casually. The odd man stood back and watched

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as the healers moved me from the floor back onto the bed. It was only after they had entered a trance and began to heal me did he come over and kneel down by me.

"You sure got yourself into a mess this time, my dear," he said to me.

I knew that voice. "Lucifer?" I asked shocked at the possibility.

He smiled down at me and winked. "In the flesh, borrowed though it may be," he replied lightly.

"You've got some cojones coming in here," I said impressed at his gall. "I'm surprised that you would even allow yourself to be cut off from your power."

He chuckled a little and shook his head. "They worship me here. If it wasn't for me, they'd be hard pressed to keep their activities hidden."

Oh, man. I remembered that Illiam had talked about the Black Legion of Celion. Great. These turkeys were all followers of Satan. I wondered if they knew who they were really dealing with. "So what brings you in here, Luci?"

"Are you kidding?" he asked in mock surprise. "I'm just checking up on my favorite project."

I nodded. "How about doing me a favor and getting me out of here. I've got a score to settle with Hiram and would really like to take care of it."

He shook his head as he sat down. "I don't think so," he said, smiling at my reaction. "I think you'll be much better off in here than out there running around."

"What?" I said in shock. "But what about the quest?"

Lucifer laughed. "Are you kidding?" he asked between guffaws. "Lakash has dumped so much power into you he's almost turned you into an avatar. This is the best way I can think of to screw Lakash right now. Without you to complete the quest, he's just flat fucked."

Christ on a crutch. "What about Nanuk? You said you'd help me restore her," I argued, knowing the answer.

He shrugged. "I lied."

It was as simple as that. He was going to screw Lakash any way he could, and if that meant destroying Nanuk, then so be it.

"Is there anything I can get you to make your stay a little more comfortable?" he asked cheerfully.

"Yah," I replied with a sarcastic tone. "How about Hiram's head on a platter?"

He shook his head again. "Nope. Sorry. That boy is too important to me. He's going to be ruler of this empire. I need him alive so I can ultimately control the balance of this

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world." Lucifer stood and straightened up his clothes. "Seriously, anything you need? Anything to make the time pass a little faster?"

I was going to get snotty again but decided better. "Not unless you can get me a big screen TV with cable," I replied dejectedly.

He frowned for a second and nodded. "Well, I can't do a TV, but I will see about sending up some books that you should be able to read. Anything else?"

I shook my head. I really didn't want anything from him. I had been uncertain about whether he was an ally or not. That question had now been answered.

Once the door closed behind him I turned my sight inward and began harvesting power. With him involved I couldn't afford to screw around.

I must escape.

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Hell hath no fury

OK. So Hiram isn't a total idiot. The first thing he had done on his second visit was to gag me so I couldn't taunt him. He had won that round though I didn't give him the satisfaction of responding. For all practical purposes he could have been screwing a carcass.

Afterwards he had a disappointed look on his face. The last time he had successfully raped me I had been in heat and it had affected us both. This time around there was nothing to enhance the experience. Once I figured that out I started laughing, which was just the wrong thing to do to him. He went ballistic thinking that I was laughing at his performance, and he proceeded to beat the hell out of me. I may have lost that battle, but not by much.

The last round of healing had been a bonanza. If I could keep taunting these twits into beating the hell out of me, it would only be a matter of days before I could get out of here. I had actually been able to draw off healing magic before it affected me. The healers had given no indication that they had noticed the added drain on their resources.

I hadn't really expected anyone for the rest of the day. Oh sure, Luci or Morgan might come by to gloat, but I think I scared them a little. How often do you find someone masochistic enough to take a severe beating just so she can get some satisfaction from denying someone else some personal satisfactions? On the surface, Morgan was right; I was insane. My only concern was that someone would figure out the real reason behind my antagonistic tendencies.

A cold shiver shot down my spine as the inner doors started to open. Had the healers caught onto what I was doing? I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw that it was only Marduke, limping along with a heavy cane. Apparently neither Morgan nor Hiram had bothered to have the schmuck healed.

I closed the book I had been perusing and stood up. "Well, if it isn't numb nuts himself," I quipped. "Back for another round?"

Marduke held up his hand to show off Hiram's ring. "That's right, bitch," he spit out vehemently. "I'm back and its time to play."

I rolled my eyes and shook my head. "Fine. Let's get it over with, but I'll warn you, you'd be better off finding some bar wench that will at least pretend to enjoy it."

He smiled and gestured, forcing me to walk towards him. "No, I don't think you quite have a grasp on the situation," he said. He stopped me just as I was about run into him. "In fact, I think you're going to be quite receptive."

With a snort of derision, I started to make a smart comment when I suddenly felt flush. I took a deep breath and shook my head to clear it, but that only made the feeling worse. It was a disconnected feeling, like I was in some kind of dream.

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Marduke reached out and caressed my breasts, eliciting a moan from me. "Feels nice, eh bitch?" he asked.

"Yessssss," I hissed out between clenched fangs. It felt wonderful. My entire body was alive with sexual energy.

He stepped back. "Or maybe I should just go now," he teased sadistically.

"No, please," I begged in a low voice, still entranced by the high I was feeling.

Marduke chuckled. "Dane was right," he commented to himself. "Separated from the dragon's power you're no different from any other female."

His mention of Dane intruded on the feeling, but it didn't quite register. I was busy concentrating on the feel of his touch as he ran his fingers through the fur along my face and up to my ears. I inhaled again, this time noticing a familiar smell. I almost dismissed it until I remembered where I had smelled it before. It was the same smell that I had picked up on Dane the night he tried to seduce me by the fire.

I tried to fight the feeling and was only partially successful. While Marduke was busy manhandling me, I closed my eyes and concentrated on a simple spell that should block the effects of any herb or pheromone. While I waited for the effects to dissipate, I pretended to give into the feelings. I wrapped my arms around Marduke and began to gently nip at his neck and ear.

"Oh yah," he moaned in a low voice.

I pulled my head back, opened my jaws wide and clamped down on his throat. Marduke's eyes flew open in terror as I clenched my jaws---or rather I *tried* to. As far as I could figure, that damned collar was keeping me from ripping his throat out. I thought for a second and released both my jaws and my grip on his back, causing him to stumble away.

He looked up at me warily and rubbed his throat. "What the hell?" he asked.

I smiled and stepped towards him. "Did that get your heart pumping?" I asked in a deep husky voice. "Did that....*excite* you?"

Marduke blinked and swallowed. "What?" he asked, confused.

"Did that excite you?" I repeated as I slowly moved towards him, undulating in a provocative manner. "Tell me the thought that I could have ripped your throat out hasn't increased your desire for me."

Marduke was like a trapped animal under my gaze as he tried to figure out what was going on. He flinched as I reached out to touch him, but stopped and eyed me cautiously. I gently caressed his face as I stepped up to him. Convinced that I wasn't trying to kill him, Marduke smiled and straightened up from a defensive posture. "Damn," he said excitedly. "You sure had me going there for a second."

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I smiled as I began to undo his shirt. Once it was open I made a big show of running my paws around his skin. After removing his shirt, I trailed my claws lightly over his body, tickling him lightly for a minute or so before undoing his pants. "I've got a secret," I whispered in his ear as I reached inside his undergarment.

"What's that," he asked, distracted, while running his hands down my back.

"Your herbs aren't doing shit for me, asshole," I replied quietly. I watched the expression on his face as my words sank in. Before he could pull away, I grabbed his balls in my claws and squeezed as hard as I could.

Marduke let out a small, high-pitched squeak as the pain hit. For a second he looked into my eyes in utter confusion at this sudden turn of events. His brow furrowed and the next thing I knew he was curled into a ball on the floor in front of me, holding himself.

I glanced down at my paw and saw blood. It didn't appear that I had actually taken any meat with me when he had exerted control with the collar. That was unfortunate, though not unexpected. I laughed out loud at him, knowing he was going to lose control as soon as he made sure everything was still attached. A glance at the guards verified that they were thinking the same thing since they had moved away from their posts just in case he got too overzealous with his punishment.

"You BITCH!" he shouted as he looked up at me. Before the guards could intercede he snatched his cane from the floor behind him and swung it at me, catching me in the shoulder. The guards charged, but not fast enough to prevent him from swinging it again, this time catching me in the neck.

My head snapped to the side from the blow, dropping me to the floor as the guards grabbed him. It was as if a puppeteer had cut the strings that held me. At first I thought he had simply lost concentration, but I suddenly realized that my movements weren't restricted. The idiot had damaged the collar that bound me, breaking the spell.

I concentrated for a second to make sure he hadn't done any real physical damage before I unsteadily stood up. I made a great show of moving slowly, as if still restricted by the collar.

Marduke shook himself free of the guards and re-secured his pants. Some words were exchanged between him and the guards before they started to back off. Marduke nodded, then spun around and clobbered one of the guards across the temple with his cane, dropping the man to the ground. The other guard started to draw his sword, but he got the same treatment from Marduke. He then stood there and pounded on both of them for a few seconds before turning to face me. "Now, bitch," he said between heavy breaths, "it's your turn, and there won't be any fucking guards to stop me this time."

I smiled at him and just shook my head. "You want to know another secret, numb nuts?"

He snarled as he picked up the fallen guard's sword. "Sure," he replied with an offhand sneer. "The condemned is allowed a last request."

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I beamed a large, toothy grin at him as I held out my hand and summoned a ball of fire in it. "I've been playing possum!"

Marduke's jaw dropped as he saw the fiery globe appear. "Oh, shit," were the last coherent words he spoke before he was engulfed in flames. He stumbled around the room for close to half a minute, screaming and banging into things before he dropped to the ground. The flames went out with a small pop as I released the spell, leaving only the rising smoke from the smoldering corpse that was once my tormenter.

I stared at the body for a few seconds. He was the second person I had killed with magic, and the first one I had done intentionally. It had been a total power rush, and I had felt like a god as I watched him burn for his crimes. I could guarantee that he'd never rape anyone or anything again.

It occurred to me that all the activity in here might be noticed by someone, so I started working on the collar to get it off. Now that I could actually grab on to the thing without the bracers screwing with me it was pretty simple to break the catch on it. I tossed the ruined collar and four bracers onto the bed. It was tempting to reduce them to absolute rubble, but that would take time and effort I didn't want to spend.

I walked over and picked up the sword Marduke had dropped, then went to the doors and examined them. There was a single rune on each door that I had observed them touching to cause it to open. I was about to touch the rune when the door started to swing inwards, forcing me to back off to the side in order to conceal myself from whoever was coming in.

"Marduke!" I heard a voice shout. "What in...the...?"

The voice trailed off as its owner saw the carnage. I stepped around and brought the sword point up under his chin. It was Lucifer.

"Hello, Luci," I said in a mocking Ricky Ricardo voice.

"Arden," he said with a big smile. "I'm glad I'm not too late. I was just coming down here to let you out."

I used the tip of the sword to back him into the room. "Now why don't I believe you?" I asked as I backed away to a relatively safe distance. I didn't trust him. He probably had that body pumped up with spells. No sense in taking any chances.

"Come on, Arden," he whined. "Why can't you be reasonable about this? As soon as I heard that Hiram gave that idiot Marduke the ring I came down here."

I nodded. "Of course. You had to protect your investment," I countered.

Lucifer darted over to the guard that still had a sword and drew the weapon. "I've tried to be reasonable with you, Arden, but no matter what happens, I'm not about to let you walk out that door."

I was right. He was so fast that it was obvious he had pumped that body full of

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augmentation spells. You could do a lot with that kind of magic, but you couldn't build in magic defenses, and that was where I had him. I leaned casually on my sword and chuckled. "I don't think you're quite grasping the situation here." I gestured over to the still smoldering body of Marduke. "Tell me, Luci. How did he get fried?"

Lucifer peered at the corpse for a second before glancing around to see what could have done it. He looked back at me, obviously confused. "No," he said with a weak smile and a nervous shake of his head. "That's impossible."

A simple telekinetic spell ripped the sword from his hand and sent it flying. Another simple binding spell had him at my mercy. "Still think it's impossible?" I asked as I casually approached him.

"You know, Arden," he said nonchalantly, "You continue to amaze me at every turn. How about we work out a deal that will make us both happy?"

I narrowed my eyes as I glowered at him. "And just what are you going to offer me?" I asked sarcastically. "Are you going to let me raise my son in peace? Maybe you're going to let me keep my memories, is that it? Just what the hell do you have to bargain with? Give me one good reason not to kill you right here and now!" I could smell his fear. He was trapped in that mortal body. He couldn't use his magic to escape back to hell. I had him just like they had trapped Lakash all those years ago.

"You wouldn't dare."

I smiled and stuck my snout within an inch of his nose and grinned. "Try me."

"All right," he said, shaking. "If you release me and allow my avatar to live, I'll personally grant you three wishes. As long as it's within my powers, you'll have it."

Now *that's* what I called a tempting offer. "No more trying to block me from my quest in any way?" I appended to the bargain.

"Done."

I nodded and release the spell holding him.

Lucifer staggered for a second before regaining his balance. "You see," he said, all cheerful and light, "we can both be most reasonable when we want to."

I nodded and walked towards the door with Lucifer behind me. "One last question, if you don't mind," I said over my shoulder as I pressed the rune to open the door. "Did you have anything to do with Lakash's avatar getting trapped and killed in here?"

He laughed as he straightened up his outfit. "Are you kidding? I planned it all."

"That's what I thought." I replied as I thrust my sword backwards into his stomach.

Lucifer grabbed the blade out of reflex and looked up at me with an astonished look on his face. "But...we had a bargain," he croaked.

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I twisted the sword a couple of times before pulling it out. He dropped slowly to his knees as his life's blood poured out onto the stones. "I lied."

He groaned something I couldn't make out and finally collapsed. I stood over the body for a few seconds thinking about what I had done. If I had kept the bargain, I would have been assured that he wouldn't try to interfere again. But then again, who's to say he would have kept his side of the bargain? I shrugged off the question since it had become a moot point. The deed had been done and now would have to live with it.

I stepped into the antechamber and pressed the rune on the outer doors and waited for them to open. There were two robed healers standing outside the door chatting. After it opened they turned towards me and one spoke, "That was quick..." His words trailed off as he realized that it wasn't Marduke or Lucifer leaving.

"Surprise!" I said as I leapt forward, swinging the sword. Both healers went down without defending themselves. I almost felt guilty for having killed them, but I scolded myself for that. I couldn't leave anyone behind me that might interfere in some way.

I took a second to assess the corridor and verify that there wasn't anyone else around to deal with. It was at that point that I realized that I was still cut off from Lakash. Without the amulet my only choice was to open a demon's gate to his realm. I only hoped that I had enough power in reserve to accomplish it.

I concentrated on summoning the gate and felt the energy flow from me at an alarming rate. This wasn't as easy when I had to do it on my own. The gate had barely formed when something from it slammed me in the chest, knocking me on my ass. I lost control of the gate as the power of the dragon flooded back into me. The blur I had seen was the link to the dragon that Lakash had taken control of and forced to manifest in order to get his revenge. Again the power of the dragon was mine!

I stood and reveled in the glory of the dragon's energy as it filled every nook and cranny of my body. I was totally revitalized now and I brought up my defensive shields as I prepared for combat.

"Kill them all, Arden!" I hear Lakash's voice say. *"Slaughter every last one of them!"*

"Yes, Master," I replied and set off down the corridor. Somewhere in this building Morgan and Hiram were lurking. They probably had no clue that death was stalking them at this moment, but I had no doubt that the shit would hit the fan soon and let them in on that little secret.

I proceeded down the hallway to the door for the elevator. I hadn't seen any stairs around, so I presume that the elevator was the only way out. So be it. I noticed a pull cord dangling from a hole in the ceiling. A couple of tugs to summon the elevator and then I'd just have to wait.

After a minute or so I heard the carriage come to a stop on the other side of the door. As the door opened, I gave it a helping paw, surprising the young man who stood inside. I backed him up against the wall at sword point as I made sure there was no one else in the

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boxy structure.

"Do you want to live?" I asked with a snarl.

The boy just nodded.

"Do you know where Morgan is?"

Again he nodded.

"Take me there and I will let you live."

I withdrew the sword and watched as the kid closed the door. He then spoke into a tube, telling someone "top floor." A couple of seconds later the elevator began its rise. While we rode the kid just stood in the corner and watched me. I made a point of not obviously paying attention to him while watching him out of the corner of my eye. After several minutes, the elevator lurched to a stop.

"Are we there yet?" I asked.

The kid glanced at a counter on the wall. "No. We're still a couple of floors shy of the top level."

Damn! They had to be onto us. I grabbed the door and yanked it open. We were between floors, and they were thick, too. There was about two feet of space between the roof of the elevator and the next floor. A simple force spell blew the shaft door out and gave me a clear path into the tower. I clamped the sword between my fangs and jumped up to grab the edge with both hands. The claws on my feet scraped against the rough stone as I pulled myself out of the shaft and into a hallway.

A loud snap caused me to turn back just in time to watch the elevator plummet down the shaft with the boy's scream of terror echoing its fall from grace. The severed cables that had supported the elevator passed by the doorway a few seconds before the box hit the bottom of the shaft. Someone had figured out I was on the loose. Oh well, it had to happen sooner or later. This just made things a little more inconvenient.

I examined the interior of the shaft to see if I could climb it. It was relatively smooth with the exception of structural bracing that I could see every ten feet or so. I could climb the bracing, but if I did I would be vulnerable to attack. The shaft was out of the question for now.

A quick look around showed that I was at the T intersection of two corridors. One was a circular corridor that led around the inner circumference of the tower, the other led outwards directly from the elevator shaft.

"*Left*," I heard Lakash say in my head.

Ok, the boss says left, I go left. I turned and ran down the hallway. There were doors on either side of the corridor but I couldn't worry about them. I wouldn't have much time before the alarm went out, and then I would have to deal with the magi.

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The sound of running feet echoed faintly down the corridor from ahead, giving me warning that someone was coming from the other direction. I stopped next to a support pillar and began to wrap an illusion around myself. Anyone who wasn't paying very close attention shouldn't see anything out of the usual. Just in case though, I held my acquired sword at the ready. A few seconds later a squad of four guards ran past my position. The two in the rear were scanning the sides of the hall as they ran, but failed to penetrate my illusion. I stepped away from the wall, breaking the spell and continued running, only now I took the precaution of silencing my footsteps against the floor. Sound had saved me from a run-in with the enemy, and I didn't intend to give them that advantage in return.

Lakash had me pass up several minor cross-corridors by simply telling me to continue on at each one without explanation. After several hundred meters and a couple more close calls with patrols, I heard the sound of a large group of people moving around.

I slowed my advance and kept a wary eye ahead to see what all the commotion was about. As the corridor curved, I could see another, much larger intersection ahead. This one was a main thoroughfare, and from the number of people running around I'd say this is where Lakash wanted me to be.

A red-robed wizard was giving directions while numerous squads in armor kept entering and leaving the area. I was still trying to get an idea of what I would be up against when I noticed a black robed mage glance down the corridor and freeze. I silently cursed and fired a single mana-dart that struck him squarely in the chest, dropping him like a rag. The others around him looked at his body in confusion until the red robed wizard began shouting directions.

As I watched, a good dozen or so armed men charged towards my position. Thanks to the curvature of the corridor I was a good hundred or so meters away from the intersection. That gave me plenty of time. I stepped out of sight so they wouldn't be able to nail me with a spell and summoned a fireball. I counted to five as I pumped power into it, then turned and fired it down the hallway. The sphere rapidly grew in size as it shot down the corridor, catching most of the guards in its path. A couple of guards, however, had managed to avoid the attack by diving out of its path. I steered the fireball around the curve and into the center of the intersection before I detonated it.

The explosion was tremendous, sending flames shooting back down the corridor well beyond my current position. Maybe I used a little too much mana. Fortunately, my defenses had held, though it had gotten a bit hot even for me. I made a mental note to be careful about pumping up spells. In the spirit realm it's pretty hard to kill yourself accidentally. That's not true about screwing up in the real world.

Once the flames cleared, I set off at a trot towards the intersection while keeping an eye out for any movement. That wasn't an easy thing to do since there was a lot of smoke floating around. I had to be careful not to trip over any bodies as I proceeded.

The fur on my back ruffled as a wind sucking the air from behind me and towards the intersection. While I watched, the smoke streamed around the corner and down the hallway to the right. Someone had set up some ventilation to clear the air.

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I picked up the pace and stopped at the corner of the intersection. A quick glance around the corner showed the two mages still standing, but they were the only ones. They were about ten feet down the hallway to the right, the same way the wind was blowing. I double checked my defenses and charged around the corner. One of the mages had obviously been expecting me and I got nailed by a very powerful electrical attack that set up a spider web pattern over my shield as it was deflected. Three steps took me to within striking range. My first blow bounced off his shield. The second swing I augmented with magic and penetrated, striking down the red robed mage.

The other mage backed away, holding his hands up. "I yield and swear non-allegiance."

Huh? What the hell did that mean? I didn't have time to figure it out. "Sorry, but the boss says everyone dies." The look of betrayal on his face bothered me as I took his life. What kind of rule had I just broken here?

There was no time to worry about that. I looked further down the corridor and saw daylight. It was then that I realized that this corridor lead to the hangar area of the building. I started off in that direction, but Lakash ordered me back. There were people he wanted dead inside.

I started down the hallway at a trot and came to a set of stairs that lead up in a broad, three-cornered rise that would make it easy for any porters carrying a heavy load. I paused before stepping on the stairs and listened. I could hear the distant rustle of armor. Someone was setting up an ambush.

Worried that someone might dump something on me as I passed through the opening, I summoned a shield of force overhead and then proceeded onto the stairs. No such attack came. I looked up at the balcony and couldn't see anyone. Apparently they had decided to set their ambush up a ways back from the stairs. That would be wise. It would allow their mages more time to try and counter my magic.

I quickly made my way up the stairs, stopping just shy of the top. Quickly, I poked my head over the edge and glanced down the hallway before ducking again. There were at least a dozen archers at the ready about thirty meters down the hallway. Behind them were mages in various robes as magical defense and possibly offense. Damn, this was going to be hard.

"Arden!" That was Morgan's voice. "I know you're there. Let's try and settle this like reasonable sentient beings."

I shook my head. "How about I act like an unreasonable female who's had someone try to steal her memories and manipulate her and her unborn child against her will!"

"Come on, Arden," he pleaded back. "That was all Celion's idea, though I must admit it sounded pretty good to me at the time."

I laughed. "You want to know a couple of interesting facts about your boy, Celion?" I asked cheerfully.

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"Such as?" Morgan asked back cautiously.

"Such as the bastard's real name is Nalboljia!"

"That's not true!" he shouted back defiantly. "They're two entirely different creatures!"

I chuckled. "You want to hear the other little secret about your boy, Celion?"

"Sure! Why not?" They way he said it lent no illusion to the fact that he thought I was crazy.

I felt a large grin grace my face. "Your buddy Celion made the mistake of coming into the chamber after I had freed myself from Hiram's collar." I paused for a second to let that sink in. "You know where I'm going with this, don't you?" There was no answer. "OK, Morgan! I'll spell it out for you. I killed his avatar! Slaughtered the bastard just like your people did Lakash. Your buddy Celion is history, Morgan, *HISTORY!*"

"No!" It was barely a horse whisper. "That can't be."

"That's right, asshole! I banished his ass. So now it looks like you're up the creek without a demigod, eh?" God, I was enjoying this way too much.

"Hold this position. Make sure she doesn't get by," Morgan said to someone near him.

"Yes, sir," came the answer.

Morgan wasn't about to get away now that I knew where he was. I summoned up another fireball and stoked it like I had before, this time for a full ten count. Once again I popped up for a second and lobbed the ball down the hall and then maximized my shields. The sphere reached their lines and detonated. I smiled as I waited for the flames to clear. That smile vanished as I peeked over the upper step and saw their line intact and unscathed. The mages were protecting the line. OK, so this wasn't going to be that easy.

I shifted my sight and looked at the magic that supported the barrier. It was an ingenious spell. It would stop anything coming from my direction while allowing the archers to fire unhindered by the barrier. Each of the mage was responsible for supporting a section of the barrier. It was ingenious, but not foolproof. They didn't have enough full sorcerers to do the trick so they had conscripted some of the younger magi. I could see where the other magi had tried to cover for their lack of ability, but not quite managing. I would concentrate on the weak spots.

I summoned another fireball, but didn't bother pumping it up and left it floating beside me. I then prepared two mana-darts of normal strength and a third one that I pumped. Once the preparations were done I lobbed the fireball down the corridor and watched as it detonated against the shield. I then took that opportunity to blind-fire the two normal darts at a younger magi on the left side of the barrier. As soon as I could see my target on the opposite end I slammed the remaining dart with all my strength at the third mage from the right. As expected, they had almost all concentrated on reinforcing the mage to the left, leaving my real target on the right exposed. The dart shattered his shield and blew a hole through his chest. That side of the shield collapsed.

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I summoned another fireball, stood and hurled it down the corridor. Bowstrings twanged as several archers took a shot of opportunity. I twisted to the side, more out of reflex than any concern for getting hit. All the arrows passed harmlessly by my shield except for one, which passed through as if it wasn't there and nailed me in the left thigh.

I cried out and fell back, sliding painfully down the stairs as I clutched my leg. How the hell had *that* thing penetrated my shield? The arrow had passed all the way through the thigh, leaving the head sticking out the back. I reached back and snapped the shaft and looked at the head. It was made of a pewter-colored metal and inlaid with gold and silver.

"*That's a dragon slayer. Your magic can't stop it!*" I heard Lakash say in my head.

"Now you tell me," I replied sarcastically.

I yanked out the shaft while cursing at the pain. That hurt! The sound of running feet got my attention. Where there was one bad-assed arrow, there surely were more. But that meant that they had left their magic protection behind.

It was time for a change of tactics so I summoned a ball of electricity and pumped it while I listened to the feet getting closer. After four seconds I fired the ball up the stairs and detonated it at the top. Arcs of electricity shot from the sphere, striking the stone and ricocheting off of it and down the hall in a spiderweb of pyrotechnics. The incoherent sound of screams echoed as the unprotected warriors felt the bite of my magic.

I climbed unsteadily to my feet. That leg *hurt*, damn it! That was another thing I would have to thank Lakash for not mentioning. I checked the bleeding and saw that it wasn't severe. The dragon's regenerative ability had kicked in already, though it would still be quite some time before the wound was totally healed.

Cautiously I made my way up the stairs and peeked over the top. I had been right. The warriors couldn't resist the chance to take me out and had charged. Their corpses littered the hallway leading to the stairs. One had actually fallen less than two feet from the first step. It had to have sucked to be him.

I didn't see any signs of the mages. They must have fallen back to where Morgan waited. I stopped at an ornamental weapons display on the wall and took down a halberd. It would make a serviceable walking stick as well as a decent weapon.

Painfully limping, I continued to make my way down the corridor while listening for voices. Someone could be heard giving orders, but I wasn't quite sure where it was coming from. I stopped at each intersection and listened until I finally found the right one. They were down the last intersection on the left. Past that, the corridor went on another fifty feet where it terminated at a balcony that overlooked the hangar area.

I peeked my head around the corner and ducked back as a mana-dart shot past where my head had been and smacked the far wall, putting a fairly large hole in it. Damn, someone big was down that corridor; they were fast and they were good.

Paranoid about taking more damage, I reinforced my shield and peeked my head back

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around the corner while preparing a mana-bolt. There were three mages, and the one in the middle fired a dart at me, causing me to tighten up my defenses even more. The bolt struck my shield, and rather than being deflected it detonated, knocking me on my ass.

"What the hell?" I muttered as I shook my head to clear it.

"That was a necromancer," Lakash said.

"Christ!" I responded vehemently as I got back up. "How the hell did he nail me so hard? I had my defenses up at maximum."

"A necromancer's magic is dynamically opposed to arcane magic. Your magic and his will react violently whenever they meet. You are both screwed for defense against each other."

I rubbed the bridge of my snout and took a deep breath to clear my head. "Great, so I can just nail the guy with a mana-ball and be done with it?" I asked knowing it wouldn't be that easy.

"Not with the other two mages protecting him, no."

Oh man, this is NOT what I needed to hear. "So I'm going to have to find some way to take out the two sorcerers protecting him first while not getting my ass kicked by him then?"

"I'm afraid so," Lakash replied solemnly. *"Unless....."*

"Unless what?" Anything would be useful now.

"Did Nanuk teach you her song of harmony?"

I thought about it for a second. "Yah, she did. Why?"

"That song can act as a barrier between your magic and his. Nanuk's magic isn't quite the same as the rest of the arcane."

I nodded. "OK. So I use that to augment my shield and that will protect me," I said to confirm his logic.

"No," he responded. *"The force of the bolt would penetrate the song. However, you could use the song to augment the spell you used to capture my mana-darts when we were sparing in the spirit realm, and do the same with his."*

Now I was confused. "What's the point?"

"Trust me."

He sounded like Joe Isuzu, but I didn't have much choice in the matter. I systematically began setting up the spells that would capture the bolts, slow them down and merge them together while I was singing Nanuk's song. It was slow going, but I soon got the hang of combining the two magics and completed the spell. The pisser was that Nanuk's song was

draining my native reserves. If I got captured again, I was screwed for sure.

Satisfied with my work I layered my defenses to give me some protection if I got nailed again with one of his spells, and then I got ready for action. I began summoning mana-balls and hurling them down the corridor at odd intervals. The mages managed to counter the first few I threw before the mage on the left fell. Meanwhile, the necromancer had good reflexes, and was returning fire and getting pretty damned close. I hurriedly formed the next mana-ball and popped around the corner to toss it while the one mage was down, but saw that another had moved in to replace him. I cursed as I let go of my spell as I realized that the necromancer had anticipated my reaction. His spell slammed into my outer defenses and detonated, throwing me backwards against the wall on the far side.

Dazed for a second, I slid down to the floor as my knees buckled beneath me. I shook my head to clear it and saw the necromancer throwing another spell my way. I smiled as I extended the catcher field and watched the bolt get sucked off to the side and stored with the other mana. The necromancer got a confused look for a moment and fired off another spell which also got diverted into my catcher. For the first time, he could see his spells being diverted. I smiled and rolled out of the way. I didn't want him to catch on too quickly.

"That's enough mana. Now I want you to use Nanuk's song as a buffer between his magic and your own as you encapsulate it in a mana sphere."

Ok, he's the boss. I collapsed the catcher spell while singing Nanuk's song. The necromancer's mana hung suspended in front of me as I slowly layered in more and more arcane energies, until it had almost doubled in size.

"Enough! Now, gently throw it so that it will just miss the left wall. You want it to go as far as possible before detonating."

"Why?" I asked confused. "If I miss the mages then they'll have a chance to deflect the blast." Now I was really confused.

"Stop asking stupid questions and do what I said."

"Yes, Master. Whatever you say, Master. Right away, *Master*," I continued griping as I maneuvered myself so as to be able to launch the ball. I lobbed a fireball down the hallway to act as a distraction without actually looking at where it would hit. Before it even detonated, I stuck my head out and slung the combination ball towards the far end of the hallway and was rewarded to see it slow down to a speed not much better than a fast walk.

"What the hell?" I asked, too confused to do more than stare.

"I suggest you get to cover, Arden!" Lakash directed.

I ducked back just as a mana-bolt went tearing by where my head had been.

"Actually, I would suggest that you exit the building." he said as an afterthought.

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"*Exit the building?* How the hell am I supposed to get out of here?" I asked as I tried to remember if I had seen any other staircases.

"*I would suggest that you jump out the opening in front of you,*" he replied in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Are you NUTS?" I responded at the thought of jumping out the hangar door. We had to be several hundred feet up.

"*No, I'm not nuts. And if you value your life, I suggest you get your tail in gear and get out of there before that sphere hits something!*"

I thought about the sphere for a second and cursed. I didn't even bother trying to dodge anything the necromancer might throw as I sprinted across the intersection while trying to ignore the throbbing pain in my leg. Fortunately he had assumed that I was going to snipe him again and missed me by a large margin.

Once I reached the railing I leapt over it without slowing down. The landing was hard, but I hit and rolled to absorb the shock. Unfortunately my left thigh wasn't up to the strain and my attempt to hop up from the roll failed miserably as I fell flat on my face. Cursing and struggling back to my feet, I favored that left leg. Fortunately there wasn't anyone in the large open area to bother me as I made tracks for the exit.

"You do realize that you never bothered to teach me how to fly, right?" I asked as I approached the opening.

"*Yes, I am well aware.*" The son of a bitch actually sounded annoyed that I would ask.

He had better know what he was doing, I thought grimly. Squinting against the sunlight as I reached the edge of the opening I shoved off for all I was worth, praying that Lakash wasn't going to get me killed.

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From hell's heart I spit at thee!

"Oh *SHIT!*" I cried out, seeing just how high I was. It wasn't just a couple of hundred meters, but rather easily half a *kilometer* from the ledge to the ground. I hadn't really paid attention to just how tall that damn building was when the dragon landed. Now that little detail had suddenly become a priority. I had been forced to learn how to parachute from an aircraft in the military and had hated it. This time I had jumped out the door without the safety of silk on my back. To make things more interesting, I had leapt out into a battle zone.

I now knew why there weren't any dragons left in the tower. They were all outside fighting another group of dragons. The sleek black wyrms that had been part of the Black Cabal were fighting a motley assortment elder wyrms of various breeds. Blue, white, gold, silver, green, all different color dragons, all were ancient and all were fighting with the blacks for control of the air. Although the younger dragons were more nimble in the air than the older wyrms, they lacked the experience that came from a lifetime of combat. I was just glad that they were too busy fighting to notice me.

Or rather, that's what I thought. I was about to start bitching at Lakash to hurry up and tell me how I was supposed to survive a one-kilometer fall without a parachute when I heard a huge roar behind me. I rolled over on my back and got an eyeful of bronze dragon that was stooping on me with his clawed hand extended I hadn't just fought my way out of that snake pit to become some lizard's lunch, so I began to summon up an attack spell to deter him from dining on doggy.

"Don't! He's your ride out of here," I heard Lakash say.

"Great," I quipped to myself, "Welcome aboard Air Draconis. Please fasten your seatbelts. This is going to be one hell of a ride!"

I enhanced the shielding around myself to act as a buffer. He was going considerably faster than I was and this looked like it was going to hurt. Needless to say, I wasn't disappointed. At the last minute he dodged to the side and snatched me out of the air as a black dragon blew through the space he had been headed for. I thought he had avoided the attack completely but saw the black's tail slash down, catching the bronze in the side, wounding him.

"Protect him! He can't fight properly while carrying you!"

Oh yah! Like I was going to be able to shield something the size of a B52? "The best defense is a good offense," I mumbled to myself. If he couldn't fight with me in his claws, then maybe I could keep the other dragons off his ass a little, though that would be more literal than I had intended. Being held close to his body, about all I could see was his ass, tail and wings. His body blocked a majority of the sky.

"Hey! You!" I shouted while banging on one of his talons. "I need a target! Give me something to shoot at!"

I suppose he heard me since he did a quick barrel roll. It was too fast for me to really target anything, much less shoot at them. If anything, all he had accomplished was to make me dizzy and nauseous.

"Yo! A little slower if you please!" I shouted back up to him.

"**PREPARE. ONE ATTACKS FROM ABOVE,**" I heard resonate in my head. It felt like he had used a bullhorn at point blank range.

Taking advantage of his warning, I began to summon a ball of electrical energy. I didn't trust anything fire-based and wasn't sure how well-protected they were from mana. If nothing else, maybe it would act kind of like a big *Tazer* and stun them.

The wyrm snap-rolled over so hard I almost lost concentration on the ball. As I got my wits back, I saw a large black stooping on us with his talons out to rake the bronze. I gave the spell one last goose of power and fired it away, flying it like a remote-controlled missile. The black spotted the spell and twisted far harder than I had believed possible, causing my spell to slip by him. I detonated the spell just behind him, catching his flank and tail in the explosion of electricity. The black roared as he tried to recover from the sudden deviation in flight caused by the muscle spasms in his tail.

I summoned another sphere of electricity as the bronze began to roll back over again. The black pulled out of his dive below us and began to pump his wings to climb back up to our altitude. Once again I fired off the spell, but this time I was better prepared for his agility. Although I missed the main body, I managed to bring the sphere up into the shoulder joint and detonate it there. As I watched, the powerful muscles in the wing convulsed, snapping the hollow bone and sending the dragon in an uncontrolled spin towards the ground below.

I was too busy gloating over my victory to notice that we were approaching the perimeter of the guardian towers. Liquid fire invaded every cell of my body, forcing a scream from my muzzle. The bronze dragon convulsed, squeezing me dangerously as we passed through the barrier spell that had been erected between the towers. I gasped for breath as I looked back and marveled at the sheer amount of power they could generate to support such a huge spell.

I was even more amazed when I saw the top of the tower obliterated by a huge explosion. As I watched, a shockwave swept outwards from the complex towards the guardian towers, battering dragons with the force of its power. To my amazement, the shockwave rebounded from the guardian towers back towards the complex in the center, again smiting the wyrms with its impact. After a few seconds I saw the central tower begin to lean and fall in slow motion. It shattered into huge fragments, which scattered out towards one of the towers, striking the crystal on top and destroying it. In a flash of feedback, the energy in the shield snapped away from the destroyed tower, causing a chain reaction in each crystal it encountered as the uncontrolled power fed back to the opposite side, finally detonating in a flash that blinded me.

All I could see was a bright orange spot in front of my eyes as we were hit by the shockwave. I'll give that bronze credit. Although we went on one hell of a roller coaster

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ride as he tried to ride out the blast, he never dropped me, for which I'll be eternally grateful.

After a few seconds, I started to get my sight back and saw that we were dangerously low. The dragon wasn't pumping for altitude any more. I don't blame the guy; he had been through a hell of a lot.

From the rate of decent, I figured that he was going for a landing on the far side of a small lake. As we came in low over the water near the shore, he began to slow down and pull into a stall. I just figured that he was going to land and set me down, but got quite a surprise when he dropped me into the water from about fifty feet up without warning.

I surfaced, sputtering for air as I coughed up a lung full of water I had swallowed. "You stupid son of a..." I let the rant trail off as I spotted where the dragon had landed. Actually, landed wouldn't be the right word, it was more like crash-landed. There was a trench in the dirt and loam for about twenty meters behind the dragon as it lay, sprawled out in the high grasses.

It only took me a couple of minutes to swim to shore from where he had dropped me. I shivered, trying to shake the water out of my fur after reaching dry ground. Sometimes I really missed having a full-body fur dryer, or being human.

Once I had shaken off most of the water I made my way along the prone body of the dragon, amazed at the amount of damage he had taken and survived. As I watched, he took in a ragged breath, releasing it noisily. I could see a huge sliver of stone imbedded in his back just below the shoulder blades. No wonder he hadn't been able to fly properly. Just the fact that he had made it this far at all was incredible.

I quickly worked my way around the outstretched wing and cautiously approached his head. For a moment, I thought he might have been unconscious, but the huge eye opened and looked out at me.

"AHH. SO YOU SURVIVED. GOOD."

I didn't know what to say. I wanted to remove the stone and heal the wound, but I knew that was beyond my powers. Maybe, if I had Nanuk's help and was able to tap her power I might be able to do something, but not now, not like this.

"Thank you for rescuing me," I finally said rather lamely.

He took another long, rattling breath. **"SUCH A SMALL CREATURE. SUCH A LARGE...DESTINY..."** He closed his eyes as the breath wheezed out of him.

"Destiny?" I asked. "What destiny?"

The eye opened again, but didn't focus on me. **"THE PROPHECY."**

"Prophecy?" I repeated. "What prophecy?" Nobody had said anything to me about a prophecy!

"YOU WILL RESTORE THE GREAT DRAGON TO HIS FORMER GLORY." I could almost see the light go out in the huge eye as his spirit passed from this world.

I walked back over to his wing as I thought about what he had said. Apparently there was some kind of prophecy that I was going to restore the great dragon, which confused the hell out of me since the great dragon looked pretty damned good. It's not like Lakash was short of power or anything, so I didn't think that's what he was talking about.

I climbed up on to the leading edge of the wing and leaned back against the joint as I thought about what had happened. I had been stunned by the destruction of the tower. I knew that mana ball that Lakash had me fashion would be powerful, but it shouldn't have been able to do that. Not all by itself anyway.

"It didn't," came Lakash's voice in my head.

"Damn it Lakash!" I complained. "Would you quit listening in on my thoughts."

"Stop thinking about me and I'll stop listening in," came the response.

I let out a sigh of exasperation and rubbed the bridge of my snout. It was times like these that I really missed ibuprofen. "Ok, if the spell didn't do it, then what did?" I asked aloud.

"That's kind of complicated."

I scowled and replied, "I seem to have plenty of time now."

I could hear Lakash getting annoyed. *"If you must know, Morgan had opened a gate to Lucifer's realm and was in the process of summoning a couple of heavy hitters to capture you. I simply made sure that the mana ball came in contact with the gate."*

"How did you do that?" I asked confused. "There's no way you could direct the ball without manifesting."

"Correct. I didn't manifest. Illiam did. He controlled the ball all the way to the circle, then fought with the magi to prevent them from stopping it before it could contact the gate."

Oh no. I had a bad feeling about this. "What happened to Illiam?"

"He was destroyed, of course."

Son of a bitch! He had thrown away Illiam's life like it was nothing. Used him as a pawn in the game.

"I don't see what you're getting all worked up for. It's not like he was a living creature. In fact, I've already created a replacement for him."

I pushed myself upright and paused to look at my left paw. It was covered with blood that was trickling down from the wound in the dragons back. Thinking back, I realized that Lakash had thrown away the lives of all the dragons he had sent to raid the tower

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when the bomb detonated. There was no way any of them could have survived that explosion.

With a casual wave of my hand, I summoned a gate and stepped into Lakash's realm. The bastard gave me a cheerful smile, so I nailed him with a mana bolt. Unfortunately he had been prepared for it. The bolt reflected harmlessly off of his defenses.

"Come, come now, Arden," he said "With all the people you've sacrificed over the years for one reason or another. You don't seriously think that they could make a dent in all the beings I've had to sacrifice over the ages, do you?"

I was about to argue, but he continued talking. "Besides, you have other matters that are more pressing." With a wave of his hand, a large window into the real world appeared. Through it, I could see Sheila standing with a couple of guards behind him. In the distance, through the haze of the scrying spell, I saw a large circular room that almost resembled a coliseum.

A small man was standing a short distance in front of Sheila, talking. "Withholding the location of someone wanted for sedition is a treasonous offense," he said.

"Arden has committed no sedition," Sheila replied steadfast.

The small man approached a couple of steps and shook an ornate stick at him. "We have the testimony of William tu Shodan ri Aleska, a member of the Imperial Personal Guard that she tried to attack and kill the Crown Prince while at the Duke's castle during the time you were a guest there."

"The little bastard raped her!" he shouted back in defiance.

The small man turned to face someone we couldn't see. "You see, my liege? He shows contempt for the crown just as his bitch did. I demand that he be charged with sedition, also!"

Lakash dismissed the image. "Just what do you plan on doing about this?" he asked with a knowing smirk.

I frowned at him and thought for a second. "Where are they keeping him?"

His smirk changed into a smile, possibly of approval. "At the Arcanum in the capital city."

I nodded. "Well, it's not like I didn't need to go there anyway," I replied thoughtfully. "I guess I'll just have to go and make an appearance."

Lakash gave a little chuckle. "Looking like that?" he said as he waved to me.

He had a point. I looked like a mess. Fortunately that was easily corrected. In a matter of seconds I had my fur cleaned, groomed and looking like new. I summoned up the same pattern of silks I had started out with last time, and donned them.

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"Nice fashion statement," Lakash commented. "However, I think that you would look better wearing this." At his gesture, a manikin appeared with some armor on it. I examined the texture and found that it felt like some sort of cured silk. It was tough and resilient while still light and flexible. The surface was embroidered with rampaging dragons.

"Very nice," I commented as I ran my fingers over the surface, "but why the fancy duds?"

"You are my Paladin, and as such you should be properly outfitted," he replied walking over to the armor. "This armor has been fashioned to match your eastern martial arts fighting style. I have woven spells into it that will help protect you from magical and non-magical attacks alike. It will also enhance your speed, strength and stealth. It will serve you well in combat."

I took off the top and slipped it on. Once I got it on, I could hardly tell that it was there. With a smile, I began to don the rest of the outfit. "What about swords?" I asked as I put on the leggings.

"Swords?" Lakash echoed. "Where are your swords?"

I looked up at him with an expression that shouted *'DUH!'* "Do you see my swords anywhere?" I asked sarcastically. "They were taken from me when I was captured."

Lakash began to rub his chin. "I hadn't taken that into account. After all the time you spent remaking your swords, I had expected you to keep them."

Giving the last tie a hard yank, I strode angrily over to Lakash and spun him around. "Look, asshole. I wouldn't have been captured if you hadn't screwed me over and left me in a lurch."

He blinked and realized that I had him at a disadvantage. "You had better go take care of your mate," he replied, changing the subject.

Damn him. I wanted to kick his ass, but Sheila was in trouble. I summoned up my defenses and prepared for the possibility for battle. "This isn't over," I said angrily and started to summon a gate.

"Arden," he said, interrupting my spell. "Remember, you're entering the central chamber of the Arcanum. There will be hundreds of mages there. You can't win if you start a fight."

He was right, of course. I had managed to pull off a few tricks and get the better of a dozen or so. There was no way I would stand a chance against the combined might of a hundred or more magi.

"Once you've crossed over, I want you to leave the gate open," he directed. "No matter what happens, you must anchor that side of the gate and keep it open."

I gave him a look that mirrored my confusion. "Why?"

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"The Arcanum has defenses that prevent such gates from being opened," he explained as he turned back to the image of Sheila. "It's only because your mate wears my amulet that you can channel through it and create a gate. If he were not there, you would have to appear somewhere outside their shields and make your way inside."

I nodded with understanding. "And if I let the gate collapse, I won't be able to summon up another one," I said, completing his explanation. "You're not going to do anything stupid, are you? No sending the dragon through, or something similar that's going to leave me screwed, are you?"

He laughed and shook his head. "No. I have other help that can be sent through if needed. And it will provide you and your mate an escape route if needed."

That was an aspect that hadn't occurred to me. If the feces hit the oscillating rotary atmospheric motivator, it would behoove us to have an escape route that the Arcanum couldn't block.

"Remember," he said approaching me, "your purpose there is to get the Chro'nisphorum. Without it, your ability to complete your quest will be in doubt."

I pinched the bridge of my snout again. I could feel a real tension headache starting to work its way up the back of my neck. I had completely forgotten about that damn trinket.

"All right," I replied as I adjusted my outfit. "I'll try to be a good, calm little vixen and not start any wars."

Lakash nodded and summoned up the image of Sheila and his surroundings again. "Good. I'll keep an eye on you from here in case you need backup."

Hmm. For a second there, I almost got the feeling that his concern for me was a kind of apology for screwing up so bad until I realized just how bad off he would be at this juncture if I died. Lucifer had nailed it right on the head when he said that Lakash had a huge amount of time and energy invested in me. My death now would cost him dearly. That would also explain his investment of mana in the creation of protective armor.

I derailed that train of thought and shoved it away where I wouldn't worry about it. One thing I couldn't afford while dealing with the Arcanum was the distraction of worrying about his motivations. With a deep breath I centered myself, summoned a gate and stepped through it and into the Arcanum.

The room was a large, circular affair about 75 meters or so in diameter. Directly in front of where Sheila stood, on the other side of the room, was a podium similar to what you would see a council or panel sitting on. Behind them on a fancy, raised chair sat Hiram, all gussied up in his official trappings as prince regent and heir to the thrown. Around the central ring were rows and rows of seats that rose in concentric rings away from the center. A good third of the peanut gallery was populated.

Half a dozen guards crawled out of the woodwork and clustered around me with polearms aimed in my direction. The small man with the bad haircut backed hastily away

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from my general vicinity. I guess he hadn't been expecting me.

"I understand you folks have been looking for me?" I commented in a theatric voice to make sure everyone in the room could hear it. "You'll have to excuse my tardiness, but I was unavoidably delayed."

Hiram's knuckles turned white as he gripped the arms of his chair. There was a brief look of horror and amazement on his face before he got his emotions under control. There was no way he could know what I had done to his buddies yet.

The little man regained his composure and returned to his small stand near where Sheila was being held. "Are you the creature known as Arden?" he asked in an officious tone.

I gave a derisive snort. "What do you think?" I asked sarcastically.

"Just answer the question," he replied in an annoyed tone of voice.

"I am that very creature," I said with a toothy smile and a shallow bow. "And just who may you be?"

He gave his on snort of derision, as if I should know who he was. "I am the High Judicial Prosecutor."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. High Judicial Prosecutor," I replied politely. "Now, care to explain what the hell my lord is doing in chains?"

"This is an official inquiry into whether or not you should be charged with sedition and making an attempt on the life of the crown," he replied. "Your lord is to stand trial as your accomplice."

I glanced over at Sheila then back at the prosecutor. "My actions are my own. Release him." My voice was hard as steel and brooked no argument. Unfortunately he either didn't recognize it or decided to ignore it.

"Absolutely not," he emphatically replied. "And I suggest that you make things easier on yourself and don't try to resist arrest."

I heard a jingle off to the side. It was another guard carrying a set of manacles. "No way in hell am I letting him put those on me," I said with a low growl, backing the little man up with my anger. "Twice I have been captured and put in chains. Both times as a result of the orders of *that* man." I pointed up to the prince and noticed that he was sweating. "Each time I was beaten and raped by him." I looked back over at the small man and snarled. "So you can take your god damned chains and shove them where the sun doesn't shine!"

"This is an outrage!" Hiram shouted out as he stood. "I will not sit here and be accused of such heinous acts by that---that---*thing*! I demand that it be destroyed at once!" The robe he was wearing flapped open for a second, giving me a glimpse of the hilt for my Katana as it stuck out of his belt. The little shit had my sword!

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"Please, your Highness," the sorcerer in the center of the bench pleaded. "There are forms which must be followed, even with a case such as this."

"That's right, Hiram," I said, mocking his name. "You aren't going to get rid of me that easily! You're going to pay for your crimes!"

He sat back down on his throne and tried to wave off my accusations. "I have no idea what this creature is talking about. I had nothing to do with anything that has happened to it. The thing is obviously delusional."

"No, you just gave the orders," I replied sarcastically. "First time around you had Marduke do your dirty work. This time you conspired with the Black Cabal to abduct me. Too bad you have a history of hiring losers, otherwise you might have gotten away with it."

The prosecutor looked shocked at my last statement. "You have had dealings with the Black Cabal?"

I stared at the idiot for a second in disbelief. "If you consider being attacked, knocked out, shackled and held captive against your will, as well as made available for his hornyness over there to rape as dealings with the Black Cabal, then I would have to say yes."

He narrowed his gaze and scowled at me. "And just what kind of bargain did you make with them in order to buy your freedom?"

"Bargain?" I asked back. "No bargain. Unless you consider sending every last one of them to hell any kind of a bargain." I thought about it for a second. "Well. I guess that would make it a bargain for you guys since you didn't have to lift a finger."

"This is insane!" Hiram yelled. He was sweating profusely now. "Do you hear it? The damned thing is claiming to have destroyed the Black Cabal single handedly."

"I never said that!" I replied angrily.

I took a step forward and hastily dodged a pike that had been thrust into my path. The guard with the pike feinted with it again to drive me back. I grabbed the shaft and held it firm as he tried to pull it away. "If you try to stick me with that thing again, I'm going to break it over your head," I said in a low, quiet and angry voice. "Do you understand me?"

I watched as the guard's eyes widened as he swallowed before I let go of it. The man staggered out of my way, making sure that the weapon point wasn't near me, though he still kept it at the ready.

I looked back over at Hiram and continued my rant. "I never said I did it alone. I had a lot of help. Over thirty elder wyrms gave their life in the fight that ultimately destroyed the Black Cabal's tower." Ok, so it wasn't quite the truth. It was close enough for government work.

"You have had dealings with *dragons*?" the little man asked incredulously.

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Who was this guy? Forrest Gump? "Are you stupid or something?" I almost expected him to come back with 'stupid is as stupid does' but it didn't happen. "I happen to be Lakash's Paladin. I represent the embodiment of the spirit of the Dragon Eternal."

There was a loud banging as the central sorcerer banged a gavel. "There will be order in this courtroom. These outbursts will end right now." He gave me a hard look and then glanced up at Hiram to see if he was going to object. Hiram didn't bother to notice.

"You, madam, are accused of sedition against the state. How do you plead?" He was definitely taking a no nonsense approach to this.

"You have not told me exactly what acts that I have committed which constitute sedition." Let's see just what I had put my foot in.

The sorcerer glanced at a parchment then removed his specs. "The attempted murder of the Prince Regent as well as the slander of the crown. Both of which are considered sedition against the crown, punishable by death."

I smiled and shrugged. "Well, to be honest, I wasn't trying to kill him. I was just going to castrate him," I said it like it was a good thing, which it was to me. However it got a gasp from the crowd as well as a shocked look from the sorcerers behind the bench along with another round of banging on the gavel.

"As for slander, if you people use the same definition of slander, then what I say about Little Lord Rapes-A-Lot up there would have to be untrue." Again I shrugged. "Since they are all true, then I guess the charge of slander is out."

"And just what proof do you bring us that his highness has committed these crimes," he asked, spreading his hands towards the empty bench. "You claim that he conspired with the Black Cabal. You also claim that they have been destroyed. How convenient for you that there are none left who can be interrogated to determine the voracity of your statement. Still, if you can show some proof, this council is willing to listen."

I smiled. "You want proof. Look behind you," I said pointing to Hiram. "That little twit is wearing my sword. Ask him how he got it. I would love to hear that tale."

Hiram's hand went to the hilt of the sword as the sorcerers turned to look. "The explanation is quite simple," he said stalling for a second. "They were given to me by... the bard Danedajin when he arrived. I had no idea where he got the weapons. I simply assumed they were a gift to the new regent."

The sorcerers talked excitedly amongst themselves for a second while Hiram sweated. The lead sorcerer spoke again. "Guards. Find the bard, Danedajin and bring him forth."

A couple of the guards hightailed it out the door behind me. From the looks of the council, they weren't paying much attention to me so I decided to talk to Sheila. I walked up to him, giving the guards the evil eye when they started to interfere.

I put my paw on his chest and looked up at him. "Are you ok?" I asked in a low voice for privacy.

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He nodded and glanced around before answering. "Yah, but I wish they'd take these damned chains off. They make my entire body itch."

I looked closely at the manacles and collar. They were the same style that the cabal had used when they captured me to block my access to magic. They were of a heavy-duty construction and would be almost impossible for anyone to break. Fortunately, they were only designed to thwart someone inside the chains.

"You see the portal I came through?" I whispered into Sheila's ear and waited for his nod. "I'm going to remove these. If things get hairy, make a dash for the portal. You'll be safe on the other side."

I waited for Sheila's nod again before I shifted my sight and looked around the room. There were extremely powerful barriers in place around the perimeter between the peanut gallery and the floor. There was also a barrier between the council and where we stood, though it wasn't nearly as powerful. A look at the guards showed that they wore magic armor to help protect them, and they wielded enchanted weapons, but they didn't appear to have any active spells on them. The only person near us with any magic ability appeared to be the prosecutor.

"Showtime," I said and began to cast the spell.

"Stop that!" the prosecutor ordered as soon as he noticed my casting.

Another second and the spell was completed. With a flick of my fingers, the rings of force I had summoned expanded, shattering Sheila's bonds. I then turned to the prosecutor. "I told you before. He had nothing to do with my actions. I will not allow harm to come to him."

My actions hadn't gone unnoticed by the council. They were heatedly discussing something when the guard brought Dane in. Or rather they escorted him in. The way they walked respectfully behind him along with the fact that he was still armed told me that something funky was going on here.

The council settled down as he stopped a respectful distance from their bench. "Are you Danedajin ra Atole?" the lead sorcerer asked.

"Yes, I am," Dane answered back sharply.

"We have some questions we need to ask of you."

"As the representative of K'Mar Dynasty, I remind you that I have immunity and may not be magically probed in accordance with the treaty between our two empires." Dane rattled it off as if it were something he had memorized from childhood. "Given those restrictions, you may ask your questions."

What the hell? He was some kind of ambassador?

The sorcerer nodded. "That is understood, Danedajin ra Atole. Our question is about the swords that are currently in the possession of the regent. Do you know where those

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swords came from?"

Dane nodded. "Yes I do. They belong to her," he replied, pointing to me.

"And did you give them to the regent?"

I knew in that moment that I was screwed. I could almost feel Hiram at my back with an impact wrench driving it in.

Dane shook his head. "I did not."

"*What?*" That one word came not only from myself, but also from the sorcerer as well as Hiram. Dane's testimony set the room abuzz.

"I did not give those swords to his highness, Prince Regent Hiram te Shodan ra Aleska." Dane turned his stone cold face to me and stared me in the eye for a second. Then, for the briefest of moments, I saw a sly smile appear on his face before the mask of impartiality returned.

The central sorcerer banged his gavel for silence. "Do you know how he obtained the swords?"

I could see Hiram, and he was sweating bullets. I bet he regretted having blown Dane's cover while at the cabal's tower.

Dane nodded. "Yes I do."

I could tell the sorcerer was getting annoyed with the answers. "Would you please care to enlighten us?"

Dane again nodded. "He obtained them from Morgan te Shodan ra Aleska, leader of the Black Cabal during his visit, to pay them for having captured the female for him."

The room almost exploded with the sound of voices screaming. Not unexpectedly, one of them was the voice of Hiram as he drew my Katana then leapt over the bench and charged Dane. Dane drew his sword and parried Hiram's blows as he fell back under the onslaught. The spell on my sword that helped to increase the attackers speed proved to be Danes undoing as Hiram first disarmed him and then ran him through. Dane dropped to his knees, clutching his stomach as Hiram prepared to make the final cut.

"No!" I shouted and cast a spell, snatching Dane from where he knelt and sent him skidding across the floor away from Hiram. He may have betrayed me to the prince, but he had paid his dues by telling the truth and screwing Hiram in return.

Movement out of the corner of my eye warned me of a guard's attack. I leaned back as a spear point passed through the space my head had just occupied. My training kicked in as I grabbed the spear. By reflex I sent a bolt of lightning down the shaft and frying my attacker. I then brought the spear to the ready in case someone else decided to attack.

Imperial guards began to flood into the room from the entrances. "Kill them!" Hiram

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shouted, while pointing to me.

I turned, grabbed Sheila by the arm and started to drag him towards the gate. I was almost to the threshold when they started to emerge. Dragons. Not the big ones mind you, but the smaller, guardian dragons like Illiam had been.

"I have drawn the guardian dragons from other realms to fight for you. Let them take care of the guards. Kill the Arch Magi. He is the target that you swore to kill for me."

Damn. Lakash had given me a small army. Well, since there were only about thirty, it wasn't a big army, but considering their power it would certainly do for the moment. I looked at the Arch Mage as he made for the exit then Hiram.

"All right. Just as soon as I off Hiram," I replied and started towards the prince.

I could hear Sheila yelling at me, but I ignored him. He was safe and Hiram wasn't. It was time to finish off the little bastard once and for all.

Hiram saw me charging and charged in return. I threw up the spear to parry a downward slash only to have the spear sliced in two. Damn, that enhanced edge was going to be a problem unless I got something steel to fight with.

I backed up while using both halves of the spear to parry while striking at him. The enhanced speed of the sword, along with the defensive combat spells I put on it, gave him a slight advantage. Right now there was no way I could win in melee combat. I leapt back and threw the spear at him as a distraction. He paused long enough to dodge the spear and giving me enough time to get a spell off. The force spell struck him squarely in the chest, sending him flying backwards.

Now I could concentrate. I summoned up a ball of electricity and tossed it to him as he got up. Hiram spotted the ball and drew my Tanto, wincing as the sphere contacted the short blade and exploded, leaving him untouched.

Hiram laughed. "He was right. The sword can stop your spells."

"Let's see it stop this," I replied as I cast a different spell. The same spell I had used to capture Lucifer now enveloped Hiram, holding him immobile. He shouted his rage as he tried to free himself from the magical bonds. "Don't you think I would know how to defeat my own weapons?"

I reached down and picked up a sword from one of the fallen guards as I heard a dragon scream in agony. I turned and watched as his form crumbled and dissipate.

"What the hell?" I asked, more to myself than anything. I then saw crossbowmen taking shots at the dragons. They were using those damn dragon slayer arrowheads that the cabal had. I fired off three rapid mana darts, killing each of the archers. Nobody killed my dragons and got away with it.

I turned, raised the blade and charged Hiram. I was going to end this now. No more pussy footing around. I got all of three steps when something hit me hard in the back. I

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stumbled forward, barely keeping my balance as I was hit two more times. I looked down and saw a bloody arrowhead protruding from my chest, just over where my heart would be.

I was screwed.

A glance over my shoulder showed Dane kneeling next to the fallen body of a crossbowman I had shot, holding one of their repeating crossbows. The son of a bitch had a predatory grin on his face. I had saved his life, and he repaid me by shooting me in the back. A simple mana dart insured me of the fact that he would never betray anyone again.

I looked back at Hiram. The little bastard was laughing at me. I lifted my sword and aimed for his heart as I staggered the remaining few steps towards him and drove the blade in.

Hiram looked down at the sword and then back up at me with a look of disbelief in his eyes. He tried to speak, but nothing would come out as I yanked the blade from his chest. A few seconds later, his eyes rolled up in his head, and he slumped against the magical bonds.

I looked down on him. He was dead, but then again so was I.

"Get to the gate, Arden! Cross back over now, before it's too late!"

The gate? I was feeling light headed from the adrenaline and shock. It was getting hard to think clearly. The gate. I turned and looked for it but saw Sheila instead as he grabbed me before I could fall.

I looked up at him as the world spun around me. "We've got to get to the gate." I tried to stand, but the strength had fled my limbs.

He glanced over to where the gate was. "The gate's gone, Arden. It just collapsed."

Aw, hell.