

Razia: A Vivarium Tale

Part One: Impatient Creatures

In the outer fringes of the Vivarium, far from Exul and his machinations, existed a world called Lorn. "Forgive and give. Forsake and sake. Forlorn and Lorn."

The leylines flowed strong here, but not freely. They filtered through seven lenses that closely bound them to elemental forces.

The lenses were, of course, metaphysical, existing beyond the senses of mortal beings. But by their effects on the world, it was summarized that they possessed crystalline properties. The flow of the mana leylines caused them to vibrate. Each Lens corresponded to a crystal lattice system, and pure specimens of each structure resonated with the Lenses, allowing for the storing and release of this elemental energy. The magic was primal and raw, a thing of open flames and crashing waves.

By evolution or design, many of the creatures of Lorn were able to synthesize their own crystals, growing a gemheart in a special gizzard-like gland.

But enough of lore. I sense you're here for a different purpose. Not to worry, the smut will arrive momentarily.

Her name was Razia, no doubt derived from the word "Raze": To burn something to the ground. Like her name, she razed me, burning down my walls of propriety to leave naught but a smoldering passion; a passion for her. I never considered myself a hopeless romantic like so many of my kind, but I could not deny the strange emotions that set my heart racing that day. It may very well have been love at first sight. At the time such an idea would have seemed ludicrous. But now, looking back all these years later, I cannot help but wonder.

It was the year 53 A.V.. A time of great achievement, and great violence. The scars of the Void's ravage had scarcely faded before the scourge known as Pyrroth emerged. The dragon possessed both the Firewill's blessing as the Great Wyrms, and the prime foci of the Fire Lense, effectively making him a god in his own right. Four years into his war of conquest, nearly a quarter of The Agglomeration burned. The kingdoms of the north spoke of fire dragons with hate and fear.

The elves of The Deepmarch, ever the diplomats, maintained a reluctant alliance with their suddenly violent neighbors.

Today was but a simple diplomatic visit to Shiza's Peak. Named for the race's first Great Wyrms, it still served as the seat of the fire dragon's power. Over a hundred of the temperamental beasts resided within, alongside countless thralls and servants of all manner. It lay near the eastern border of the Blasted Lands, its cratered top belching out the occasional ash cloud.

A small twinge of trepidation intruded on his stoicism as he followed his kobold guide down one of the twisting passages that wormed through the mountain. His unshakable fortitude, earned from years as a soldier and ambassador, allowed none of his fear to mar his graceful stride or tranquil expression. He sought the audience of one of Pyrroth's younger sons: Magmus. Allegedly kidnapped and raised for several years by a cult, he held a healthy respect for those not of draconian descent. His mother had further tempered him from the normal blind pride inherent in most red dragons. Her cunning had single handedly held the temperamental species together in a cohesive society during the years of war, and apparently Magmus inherited much of her sly intelligence.

According to Verden's sources, while the young dragon possessed many of his parents' traits, he had failed to receive his sire's villainous nature. Still, he held a healthy caution for any entity capable of destroying an entire village with a single breath.

The kobold servant led Verden still deeper into the volcano, his stubby legs a blur as he tried to imitate a normal walking pace. They passed one of his kin, overseeing a pair of lesser elementals attempting to seal a hole in the cavern wall. The trapezoidal wedge of rock, slightly wider at the bottom, almost appeared carved by a giant blade. The magical wards protecting his fair skin from the searing heat drew heavily from the chunk of corundum about his neck, indicating that they approached the heart of the Peak. He was just running through a list of appropriate greetings when a scene glimpsed out of the very corner of his eye caused him to stop dead and turn.

Verden was a difficult elf to surprise. Still, he was without word or thought as he found his gaze locked raptly to the alluring creature before him.

When the mages of the Fifth Spire delved into magic beyond the Lenses, it enraged the Architects. Great chasms ripped themselves in the land, sea, and sky. The twisted things that emerged from the gray Void beyond slew all life in their path, for the first time uniting all of Lorn in a single instinctive motivation: To survive.

Despite the horrors unleashed by the tapping of element-devoid magic, much good ultimately came of its knowledge. Sluggish, complex and alien, it proved difficult to control. Those who mastered it discovered new fields of magics. Among them included Transmutation: the distortion of matter, including living flesh. Ever prideful and unfearing, many dragons adopted the magic, using it to take bipedal forms similar to those of their favored servants, the dravir, while keeping their distinctive markings and features. The practice spread like wildfire, making it commonplace for members of the order to walk around in bipedal forms.

The dragoness before Verden now was clearly taking advantage of her magical abilities as she bathed nude in a pool of lava.

Verden felt a heat that had nothing to do with being in a volcano begin to creep up his cheeks. Public sexuality was almost nonexistent in the culture of the surface elves, and the sight of her nude body was far outside of his sensibilities. Still, he found himself drinking in every detail. Her scales were a deep cerise, with cloud-like swirls of pink running down her arms and sides. The pattern continued along her tail, and two streaks of the same shade etched each cheekbone. Her abdomen bore the same color, as did the pads of each slender fingertip just beneath her delicate claws. A thick mane of maroon hair framed her perfect face before cascading down her back. Her ears appeared almost like a fawn's. The large tufted lobes curved backwards, high on either side of her head, their interior the same shade as her stomach. Above them, twin horns sprouted from her brow and curled backwards and slightly outwards, closely mimicking the natural curve of the ears.

The magma of the Fire Caves bore heavy enchantments, keeping it in liquid form and preventing the buildup of residue on its surface. Often called liquid fire, the mixture remained almost translucent. Verden found his treacherous eyes trying to rove lower, searching the magma below the dragoness's gorgeous waist for still more indecent sights. Every time he managed to will them away, they were instead drawn upwards to fixate on her generous bosom.

The dragoness apparently noticed her ogling audience, because she turned her large, piercing jade eyes to the elf. Their black sclera enhanced the brilliant green of her corneas, making them shine like resonating emeralds. Her mouth opened slightly in a smile, revealing her perfect needle-like teeth. Her long forked tongue slowly uncoiled from its den and undulated suggestively towards the elf.

The heat he felt on his face became a blistering mask of embarrassment. He tugged at the collar of his light chain link coif. With an effort that took nearly all of his considerable willpower, he at last turned away from the ravishing sight.

The kobold guide seemed equally transfixed. It took Verden clearing his throat to finally stir the creature. "Whoops!" he squeaked, nearly falling over backwards in his haste as he circled behind the elf and pushed him past the pool. His breath came in ragged gasps by the time the chamber vanished. "Thought that was a shortcut." He stared up at Verden. "Uh, did you enjoy the view?"

The elf didn't dignify the question with a response. His mind still raced from the short encounter. He suspected stories of the ogling buffoon of a diplomat would quickly spread among the servants of the Peak. He shuddered to think of the consequences of returning to his family bearing such a reputation. Worse still if

the rumors reached Magnus before the end of their conference. Other thoughts kept intruding on the worrying ideas; images of the luscious dragoness viewed in the pool. He had only glimpsed a side profile in the rapturous few seconds he had viewed her, yet his mind seemed intent of conjuring wild fantasies of her from every conceivable angle.

Was she wearing some sort of hex? He thought numbly, shocked at how totally she captured him in those few seconds of viewing. Spellcraft would certainly explain his sudden obsession and total lapse of conduct, but normally elves were quite sensitive to any form of magic, particularly when it directly affected them. Perhaps her appearance was another of Amelia's games. She enjoyed toying with people, particularly outsiders. He briefly considered mentioning it in the impending meeting, but quickly laid the thought to rest. Acknowledging it may play into her hand.

He forced his thoughts back into some semblance of order as the kobold at last led him through the doorway into the throne room.

Even after several visits, it still was a magnificent sight. A life-sized mosaic of the First Wyrn spanned its length. Her unfurled wings extended to the far boundaries of the 500-meter cylinder, much of it buried beneath the treasure hoard her descendents had gathered in the millenia since. Silver, gold, and precious gems lay in piles dozens of meters high in some places.

The chamber had once been the shaft of the volcano, and the glow of molten lava still emanated from deep fissures occasionally visible between the massive heaps of treasure. The enormous space extended upwards for kilometers, its tiered walls dotted with hundreds more tunnel entrances like the one the pair had just entered through. Verden could just make out the familiar darkness of the night sky high above through the acrid wisps of smoke that drifted upward.

In the center of the chamber sat a large throne, intricately carved from the same red igneous stone of the rest of the mountain. In it sat a muscular form. Like the dragoness he had seen earlier and whose perfect body was permanently etched into his mind, Pyrroth's chosen heir was using his anthro form. And like the dragoness, he was painfully nude, save for a gold-chased loincloth seemingly thrown on as an afterthought.

Does anyone have the slightest shred of decency around here?! Verden screamed mentally as Magnus rose in greeting. The elf still managed an elegant bow despite his annoyance. "Greetings Lord Magnus, Son of Pyrroth," he said, at last meeting the dragon's burning yellow eyes. His shoulders and muscular arms bore the same marks as his father: glowing flame-like swirls that seemed to shine with the light of the sun itself, though patches of midnight scales bedecked his shoulders, back, and snout; inherited from his mother's line.

"Greetings Verden Feyn, Ambassador of the Forest Elves," Magnus replied. "I know your kind enjoys small talk, but would I prefer to move straight to business."

Verden had anticipated his forwardness and planned accordingly. Fire dragons were rarely known for their patience. "Not a problem. I have with me a writ of our current trade agreement as well as the new amendments my queen wishes to add to it." He indicated the mahogany tube slung across his back just beneath his longsword. Like his own persona, it was warded against the temperatures of the caves so as to protect its flammable cargo.

"Excellent," Magnus replied. "Then let's move this conversation to a more appropriate spot. I just finished reviewing the pacts myself and have a few changes of my own I would like to run by you."

Verden was somewhat surprised at the young dragon's obvious interest in politics. He had expected to be met with boredom and disgust when the trade agreements were brought up.

If he remains as enthusiastic as he sounds now, everything should go swimmingly, Verden thought happily. *Ah... swimming.* His expression melted into a blissful smile as he imagined the dragoness glimpsed earlier doing the breaststroke towards him through her pool of lava. *What...? No!* He physically shook his head, trying to clear them of the treacherous thoughts. It was only then that he realized with horror that Magnus had still been talking.

"No?" asked the mighty dragon, sounding slightly hurt. "I thought the new amendment I proposed benefited both parties. None of my advisors could find any fault with it. What makes you dislike it?"

"My apologies, my lord," Verden replied, thinking fast. "It's been a long day, and I was merely trying to clear the cobwebs. Your proposed changes sound nothing short of excellent." In truth, he had absolutely no idea what the dragon's amendments entailed. However, he could not afford to show any further disrespect, not when his life and the lives of thousands of other sentient creatures could hang in the balance. No doubt they placed the elves in a still stronger trade position. As the war progressed, the Pyrroth's forces relied ever more heavily on the Deepmarch's supply lines.

"I see," Magmus said. "Well then perhaps we should hold off any further talk of politics until you're properly rested. We have a number of chambers suited to your kind's needs available if you wish. In the meantime, can I offer you dinner?"

Again, the dragon shocked Verden with his manner and poise. To offer such hospitality in the face of insult showed a level of control rarely seen in any dragon, let alone one less than twenty turns of age. Still, Verden found himself pondering the offer. The longer he remained in the Peak, the more likely it was that Magmus would learn of the episode near the lava pool. On the other hand, he could not afford to continue the negotiations in his current mindset. He would no doubt slip up again and cause further damage. Besides, refusing the dragon's generosity would be insult enough.

Verden's eventual reply dripped with gratitude. "That would be wonderful. I would be happy to stay for a bit longer and better experience your glorious kingdom."

Magmus waved his praise away. "It's the least I can do."

Verden noted with some displeasure that the same kobold returned to guide him to his guest chambers. Fortunately, the pudgy creature refrained from leading him on a second bath tour. The jaunt passed without incident, and they soon arrived before a nondescript stone door. He breathed a sigh of relief as the magical ward that protected him from the oppressive heat of the caves stopped draining his reserves.

A small spring welled from the far wall and cascaded to the floor. The carved channel guided the water about the room's perimeter in a nearly perfect square before it vanished through a grate in the floor. The resulting clash of heated rocks and cold water left the room somewhat foggy but bearably cool.

Verden piled his scabbarded longsword and other supplies on the room's thick stone table and sat cross-legged on the pile of furs that served as its bed. He closed his eyes and began a series of deep breathing exercises designed to instill tranquility.

His fair brows furrowed slightly as thoughts of the dragoness continued to intrude on the calm void of his mind.

He'd served two tours of Tanglewood, followed by ten long, desperate, *brutal* years in the Void Incursion. It took nearly having his leg ripped off by one of the abominations to finally convince him to give up the life. Thus he joined the diplomacy corps. Only Glyphslinger, the mighty longsword, had followed from his former life. In all that time he'd been in control and all but unshakeable. Unshakable until now, of course.

What the Void is happening to me.

As calmly as he could, he laid out the facts. His seeming madness had started the second he laid eyes on the dragoness. The encounter had sparked alien feelings. Dark, lustful urges that should not exist. They had quickly overwhelmed him until he could scarcely think of anything else.

I have to find her again, he decided at last. Perhaps she would appear at dinner. If not, he could ask some discreet questions and hopefully locate her before he left the next morning.

He arrived at the appointed location and found himself a mouse among giants. The enormous chamber was filled with fire dragons, many in their natural forms. They ranged from hatchlings to ancient lizards dozens of meters long.

Verden began to mingle with the creatures, ever wary of descending claws and swishing tails as he conversed with them in their native draconian language. He spoke with several of the Cave's more important denizens. Magmus's mother remained pointedly absent, likely somewhere on the front lines.

He had wandered over to one of the heavily-laden feast tables when he spotted her. The dragoness whose form dominated his thoughts stood several meters down at the very same table. Verden was both

relieved and dismayed to see that she had donned a blouse and leather pants. A hole had been cut in the back to allow nearly the entire length of her intricate tail to fall free.

Verden felt a blissful smile stretch his face as he stared fixedly at the girl.

His blood ran cold as he heard Magmus's voice behind him. "Enjoying the view?" The dragon asked in the same sly tone the kobold servant used.

He turned slowly to meet the eyes of the dragon. Magmus was in his natural form, and the nest of spikes on his chin nearly brushed the floor as he lowered his colossal head to the elf's eye level. "I... that is..." Verden stammered. Finally he sighed, accepting his fated reputation as an ogling buffoon. "I admit, such perfection is rare."

Magus nodded sagely. "Indeed. Razia's definitely the looker."

"Agreed," Verden said, somewhat relieved.

"She's also my sister."

If Verden's blood had run cold before, now it turned to ice. He was dead. His family was dead. His entire species was probably dead. His eyes winced shut, preparing for the killing fire.

"You should go talk to her," Magmus continued.

Verden could only stare incredulously at him for a moment. The young dragon never ceased to amaze him.

Magus noted his hesitation and gently prodded him with the tip of his snout. At last the elf turned and made his way down the table towards the dragoness. He fought down the growing lump in his throat as he met her inquisitive green gaze. "Greetings," he said with a sweeping bow. "I am Verden Feyn, ambassador of the forest elves and her Royal Highness Lady Litanya."

"Well met. I'm Razia," the dragoness replied, offering her clawed hand for him to kiss. His own hands nearly trembled as he took it. He found himself marveling at how soft her skin felt. Dragon hide was usually rough and hard, but her tiny scales were as smooth and soft to the touch as fine silk. He could make out each perfect little overlapping plate as he gently brushed the back of her hand with his lips.

Razia. Even the name radiated beauty.

"So, did you enjoy the view?" she asked slyly.

Verden again felt his face burning with embarrassment. *Why does everyone keep asking that?* "Forgive me. I did not mean to stare as I did."

She giggled slightly. "No, no, it was my fault. I didn't know we had a visitor with such strong sensibilities coming, else I would have bathed elsewhere."

Verden's heart twitched. *Strong sensibilities?* She probably thought him a typical stuffy old fart. He quickly moved the conversation in a new direction. "I see many of the other dragons have reverted to their natural forms to feast. Do you not wish to join them?"

Now it was Razia's turn to look slightly embarrassed. "I... it's complicated."

Verden arched a narrow eyebrow. "Oh?"

"I'm not particularly magically inclined. My gemheart shattered when I was a girl. Amelia thinks it's from my mixed heritage."

Of course, she was not Magmus's full sister. Pyrroth possessed a strong reputation for proclivities. Indeed, many of the denizens gathered in the chamber were his offspring from various mates. As he looked closer, he saw evidence of Razia's claim. The mane of hair, the tufted ears, and the unusually delicate claws all pointed towards the graceful forms of the wind dragons. "I see. Well, it certainly appears that you inherited your mother's beauty."

"Thank you, although I wouldn't know. I've never actually met her. My father brought me here as an egg. I don't even remember her."

"Oh, I see. I've never been particularly close with my parents either. We elves have very weak parental bonds, and my parents paid little attention to me beyond seeing that my basic needs were taken care of. My father serves in the queen's personal guard, so he was often gone for long periods escorting Her Highness on her travels."

The two continued to trade and compare stories. Razia spoke of her rather pampered life growing up in the Peak while Verden told of his worldly travels. They laughed, they reminisced, and Verden found himself opening up, more than he had in years.

The pair talked long into the night. The huge chamber was nearly empty of feasters as Verden found himself describing one of his favorite spots in Deepmarch. Razia seemed to show a special interest in the ancient forest.

"To think you live in such a place," she sighed dreamily as he finished painting the picture of the secluded glade. "To think such a place even exists."

An idea suddenly came to Verden. He knew it was impossible; knew that even asking would violate several protocols and probably get him dismissed from the diplomacy corps. But like the images of Razia bathing that had compelled him earlier, the thought refused to leave his mind. "I could show it to you," he suddenly blurted.

The dragoness's face brightened, but she seemed hesitant. "I would love that, but I could never ask you to go through that much trouble for me. We are at war after all."

But Verden was now committed to the plan. He seized Razia's delicate hand in both of his. Her tiny claws dug into his calloused palms, but he paid them no mind. "Then don't say it's about you or me. Say it's about diplomacy and strengthening ties. You said you've never left the Blasted Lands. Let me guide you through Deepmarch and show you the side of your heritage that you've never known."

She looked deep into his eyes, weighing the truth of his words. Her face broke into a wide grin, displaying her perfect little incisors. "Alright, it's a date."

Verden felt butterflies in his stomach at her response. *'It's a date'! That word choice... could she be...?* He quickly buried the optimistic line of reasoning as he replied. "Excellent. Your brother and I have a meeting tomorrow morning. Could you be ready to depart by noon, assuming he approves your leaving?"

Razia's snout wrinkled in annoyance. "Bah, I don't need that little runt's permission for anything. I'm five years his elder. I can do whatever I please."

Verden hardly slept at all that night. Instead he lay staring up at the stalagmite-studded ceiling, planning out the coming journey. He drew a mental map of the route they would take. They would travel on foot, taking advantage of some of the more rugged paths through Deepmarch that offered the best views.

The proceedings went surprisingly smoothly the next day. Verden and Magnus muddled out a new trade agreement and were just wrapping up when Razia strolled in, a large knapsack slung across her shoulders. She again wore a simple white blouse and tight leather pants. "Oi Maggie, I'm stealing your ambassador," she announced.

"I thought we agreed you wouldn't call me that in front of people," he grumbled, but the dragoness had already seized Verden by the shoulder and was hauling him from the room. She noticed the elf's disgruntled look and flashed a mischievous grin. "What? You said we were leaving at noon. It's nearly an hour past now."

Verden could only shake his head helplessly. *Such impatient creatures.*

The pair soon left the Fire Caves far behind. Verden remained an avid believer in self-reliance, and chose to run cross country rather than secure a mount. Razia easily kept pace. Verden glanced over at his running partner and couldn't help but be mesmerized by the site of her chest as it jiggled slightly with every step.

They passed a trio of snails in the distance, their shells the size of wagons and glowing with an inner heat. Fortunately, the creatures chose not to pursue them.

Their brisk pace saw them out the Blasted Lands by the end of the day. Its exposed basalt and sparse scrub gave way to prairie, the soil growing richer as the volcano receded in the distance.

The pair slowed their pace considerably the next day as they continued through the farmland and scattered villages of the Peak's outer holdings. They avoided the settlements as much as possible, which

further slowed their progress. Pyrroth's grip on the region remained tentative, and the presence of one of his offspring could easily spark violence. The sun had nearly set on the second day when they at last reached the edge of Deepmarch. The huge trees of the ancient forest closed around them, broken occasionally by meadows, bluffs, and streams. Razia seemed to take every new sight in with the same joyful awe.

Their journey passed without any mishap, save for a run-in with a grizzly bear. The beast snuck into their campsite to plunder the remnants of the three rabbits they had eaten for dinner, but Razia sent it scurrying away with several patches of its fur on fire.

It was nearly noon on the third day when they at last reached the glade of Verden's story.

A butterfly alighted on Razia's outstretched talon. Her beautiful green eyes widened as she admired it. The tiny creature opened and closed its wings a few times, basking in the warmth of the dappled patch of sunlight before fluttering off to a nearby clump of purple flowers.

"That's a butterfly bush," Verden said, pointing to the flowers in question. "It's a favorite food source for many species, including the swallowtail you just saw." And indeed there were many of the beautiful insects flitting about the conical purple flowers.

Razia turned in a slow circle, her eyes leaving the crowded bush to take in all the natural wonders of the secluded glade. From the countless wildflowers, to the squirrels and brightly colored songbirds nestled in the towering maples above, to the elderly box tortoise sampling the wild strawberries growing at the base of an ancient toadstool-covered stump. She seemed almost childlike in her awe as she witnessed the splendors of the forest for the first time. He wanted to tell her about everything, to share his years of knowledge of the forest and its denizens with her. He could have spent hours talking about nature with her, content simply knowing he was making her life slightly brighter.

Razia completed her slow rotation and brought her melting green gaze back to him.

"It's all so beautiful, just as you described," she murmured. "I never knew nature could be so..."

"So perfect?" Verden offered. "I have lived here for decades, yet it still takes my breath away."

Their attention was momentarily diverted to a fence lizard as it scurried to the top of the old stump. Reaching its apex, he rapidly bobbed up and down, his azure underbelly flashing in the small patch of sunlight in an attempt to impress a nearby female.

There was a wistful note in Razia's voice as she looked on at the lizard's antics. "This place truly is stunning."

Verden slowly moved closer and tentatively brushed her hand with his. "Indeed. And it is but one setting. There are many other equally exquisite places in The Deepmarch I could show you. There is a spring-fed waterfall a few clicks from here. Every morning, a rainbow is created by the rays of the dawn striking its mists."

"I'd love to see that," Razia replied, her hand taking hold of his. Verden again found himself marveling at the softness of her scales. "I just wish I knew why you're treating me so nicely."

There it was, hovering like an ultimatum. She wanted to know the truth of his motives.

For just a moment, Verden considered continuing his deception about wanting to build stronger ties between their races. But that first small twisting of the truth had nearly broken him. He could not bring himself to lie to the perfect creature again. Besides, taking risks had so far proved nothing but beneficial. It was time for one last gamble. He slowly placed his other hand over hers and lifted both his arms, almost in a pleading motion. "Because, since I first saw you in that pool of lava, I haven't been able to get you out of my mind. Your eyes, your smile, your perfection, it's been in every conscious thought and dream-induced fantasy. I don't know if it's love, lust, or just a desperate elf's ravings. Whatever it is, being with you these past few days has made me feel..."

"Completed?" Razia offered in a whisper.

Verden nodded numbly. "Exactly. When you expressed interest in Deepmarch and your heritage beyond Shiza's Peak, I saw it as a chance to make you happy. That's all I really wanted." He searched her deep green eyes for some hint; some sign of the dragoness's reaction. His heart plummeted as he saw Razia's shocked expression. "But now I've made you uncomfortable with these insane words," he sighed, crestfallen.

He began to release her hand, his eyes downcast. He was so busy staring at the ground that he almost failed to notice Razia's face breaking out into her most dazzling smile yet. "No," she said. "All you've done is confirmed that your feelings match mine."

Now it was Verden's face who twisted in disbelief. "What?"

"You're not the only one to feel something that evening in the caves."

Before he could falter and perhaps lose the single best chance of his life, Verden stepped forward. His mouth met Razia's.

He felt her tense, and for a moment feared she would recoil. But then her maw parted slightly and she returned the kiss. Her clawed finger gripped his shoulders even as his arms encircled her waist, pulling them together as they passionately kissed. Verden felt the tip of Razia's forked tongue gently brush his own, and suddenly they were exploring one another's mouths. He was overwhelmed by her ravishing smell: the hint of lavender from her hair, the mint leaves offered after their lunch, the slight musk of raw meat dancing just beneath it.

They breathlessly made out for another few minutes before Razia pulled back slightly. Her eyes again shifted to the antics of the two fence lizards, still in the throes of their courting ritual. "It seems our little friends are setting the mood," she said coyly. Before Verden could question her, her delicate claws found the clasp of his forest cloak and expertly undid it. Her hands moved to his arm bracers as she continued to undress him.

The diplomat in Verden wanted to take it slow. Perhaps take her to an expensive restaurant and slowly woo her over the course of months, or even years. Verden savagely suppressed the protesting voice. Dragons were rarely known for their patience.

Verden's fingers, so dexterous with sword and pen, seemed cumbersome as he fumbled with the buttons of Razia's blouse. He at last undid the final clasp and continued down to the buckle of her tight leather pants. Next went her panties. The skimpy bit of silk slid smoothly over the soft scales of her shapely legs.

The pair continued to undress each other until both were fully nude. Verden had only a moment to admire the way her scales glittered in the dappled sunlight before they closed again. He felt electrified as their bare flesh pressed together. He closed his eyes and lost himself in the heat of their kisses, his hands tangling in her rich mane of hair. He felt every point of contact, from the soft scales of her belly rubbing slightly against his own rigid abdominal muscles, to her thigh pressing insistently between his, to her padded fingertips trailing seductively across his back.

They held their intense embrace for another few seconds before Verden felt the dragoness shift her stance slightly. Her tail flicked in, sweeping his ankles from beneath him even as she pushed him backwards. His fighter's instincts kicked in for an instant and he managed to catch himself, but Razia's own lithe body pushed him firmly into the thick ferns that blanketed the ground.

With a small feral growl of triumph she leaned down from her straddling position and began gently nipping his face and neck, ravishing her fallen victim. But Verden was not so easily conquered. With a slight kick, the elf twisted his body into a roll. He caught Razia's slender wrists as he did so, bringing her with him. A moment later, it was he who sat triumphantly on top. He pinned her arms above her head and they resumed their passionate embrace in their new horizontal position. They were in the throes of another lustful kiss when Razia pulled back again. There was a need in her searching eyes; an instinctive, almost primal hunger that needed sating. "Take me," she pleaded.

"Not just yet," he said, and now it was his turn to be coy. "There's a small matter I have to attend to first."

Razia opened her mouth to protest, but he quickly silenced it with one last kiss on her lips before moving downwards. He trailed his mouth across her chin and neck, pausing to kiss the single diamond-shaped splotch at its nape before resuming his descending path. His lips glided over the twin mounds of her glorious breasts, down across her navel until they at last reached her crotch. Gently, reverently, he tasted her. She must have foreseen their coupling and cleaned herself. He slowly ran his tongue from the bottom of her slit to the tip of her hardening clitoris. He swirled his tongue around the pleasure center once before plunging

inwards. He pressed the muscle forward, wriggling it deep within her. Razia let out a stifled moan as the probing tongue found her G-spot. Verden smiled slightly and pressed relentlessly on, working the flat of his tongue up and down, back and forth, repeatedly massaging the pleasure point. His mouth was now firmly pressed against the labia of her pussy. He remembered to run his lips over her clitoris, further moistening it even as he rolled his tongue within her.

Verden remembered something he had read about dragons and decided to test the information. He brought his left middle finger to his mouth and quickly wetted it without slowing his machinations. He then lifted the hand and ran it along the dragoness's gorgeous thigh, down until it disappeared below and behind his working mouth. He at last found what he was searching for as his still-moist finger brushed her anal bud. Experimentally, he twirled his middle finger in a small circle about the little hole. It seemed to pucker slightly. He took this as an invitation and began slowly working the tip of the offending finger in and out of the tight little hole, triggering her sphincter muscles and hopefully setting off the huge cluster of nerve endings that lay there.

Razia let-out a quick gasp followed another long, arousing moan and began working her hips up and down in little involuntary thrusts. Her lovely legs spread wider, offering him better access. One clawed hand reached down and gripped the back of his head, urging him on.

He could feel she was close as the walls of her vagina began to contract around his wriggling tongue. He redoubled his efforts, working the muscle like a lash and plunging his finger in and out almost to the knuckle. He was at last rewarded with a passionate cry of release and a sudden flood of vaginal juices. The world grew suddenly muted as her thighs clamped around his head. He lapped up the delicious liquid eagerly. When the small flood stopped and Razia cries of ecstasy had faded to shallow pants, she at last raised his head. For a moment, she simply stared at him, newfound respect evident in her eyes. "That was pretty good," she said, finally having regained her breath. "Now let me show you how it's really done."

At her urging, Verden laid down on his back. She leapt forward, lightly landing with her legs straddling his torso. She quickly turned, positioning her beautiful face over his now rock-hard member ever as she held her own glorious and still-wet crotch over his face. "Why don't you keep doing what you were doing and we'll see who finishes first," she said with a wink. Verden was all too happy to comply, though his tongue felt thick and leaden from its previous workout.

Razia slowly lowered herself until her face was lost from sight between the twin mounds of her breasts. Verden could certainly *feel* what was happening though. The dragoness's long forked tongue led the way, moistening his tip before slowly beginning to wind about his shaft. He felt her hot breath as her mouth followed close behind. Her thin draconic lips caressed the head of his phallus, guiding its length into her slightly parted maw. Six inches. Seven. Eight. He felt her chin lightly brush his stomach as she took his full length in her mouth. Verden could not even begin to describe the pleasure it brought.

One of the dragoness's delicate clawed hands cupped his testicles. Cradling them. Fondling them. Massaging them until he could scarcely concentrate on his own work. Determinately he continued to kiss and caress Razia's own crotch.

The dragoness flicked the tip of her tongue back and forth across the slit of his penis, driving him wild. Her head began to bob up and down as she worked her mouth over his member, lubricating his entire length. Meanwhile, Verden had halted his oral work to instead pleasure Razia's gorgeous damp pussy with two fingers. He dexterously worked his index and middle finger in and out in a curling motion, each time dragging his fingertips across her inner walls to emerge against her firm little clit.

Suddenly, Razia's mouth parted further, revealing twin rows of needle-sharp teeth. For one terrifying moment, Verden thought she meant to bite down. But no. With a small growl, she pressed her head down further than she ever had before, somehow taking his balls into her mouth as well. He felt the tip of his penis reach the back of her throat. The dragoness held the entirety of his manhood within for a moment, her tongue slathering it with a savage vigor. Then, without warning, she began to suckle it.

Verden squeezed his eyes shut as the vacuum effect at last brought him over the edge. "I'm—" he began to warn her, but trailed off as he realized she had no intention of pulling back. His phallus began to twitch, releasing its load in spurts. Verden let out a small moan of release of his own. Years of pent up semen

went splashing down Razia's throat in thick ropes. She drank it greedily, continuing to suck his pulsing member even as it squirted. Her long forked tongue still worked about him, catching the sperm and swirling it down her gullet. Not a single drop escaped her. The erotic act apparently brought her to climax again as well, for Verden felt her come hard against his probing fingers.

The mind-blowing orgasm at last began to fade and Verden felt his fount of semen slowing until it at last ended with a few dry twitches. Razia waited for it to cease entirely before she released his manhood and rolled off of him. She turned on her hands and knees and lay down on her side next to him. Verden quickly propped himself with one hand and leaned in to kiss her. He could still faintly taste his own flavor as he explored her mouth again. He suspected it was the same for her, as the taste of her delicious pussy was still fresh in his own mouth.

After a few minutes, Razia broke off the tender smooching. "Ready for round two?" she asked, the burning lust in her eyes undimmed.

"Well, technically it would be round three for you," Verden replied with a breathless chuckle.

"I'll take that as a yes." Razia spread her legs invitingly. Her tail undulated back and forth between them, its motions drawing Verden's eyes upwards to her ravishing hips. At her slight urging, he rolled atop her. He was careful to hold his weight on his elbows to prevent flattening the dragoness's magnificent melons.

For a moment he held himself above her, letting his still-erect dick lay gently against her navel. He raised his hips a bit further, allowing the tip of his shaft to skim across the fine scales of her belly until it rested against the folds of her vagina. Then, ever so slowly, he began to lower himself.

Both sexual organs were still quite lubricated from the earlier attention, and his phallus slipped into her effortlessly. Where her outer hide was warm to the touch, her pussy was hot, almost uncomfortably so, and deliciously tight. Tight enough to actually require a small amount of force to enter. His rocky abdominal muscles strained slightly as he passed the halfway point. There he paused, pulled back, and thrust again, this time slightly faster. Again and again he drove into her, accelerating with each jab and working slightly deeper within her. Razia worked her own body in counterpoint to his, rising slightly to meet him with every thrust until at last their hips met. Soon Verden's testicles were slapping wetly against her inner thighs with each powerful plunge.

The elf lowered his head to resume their kissing. They went into a frenzy of writhing bodies and grappling limbs. Verden began to feel another orgasm rapidly approaching. "I'm close," he managed to whisper as he gently bit her tufted ear.

"Don't worry," Razia replied between grunts. "Transforming may be too much for me, but I can easily regulate this form." To underscore her point, she wrapped her shapely legs about him, pulling their bodies firmly together. She began a series of rapid little thrusts, almost seeming to vibrate her hips. Verden tried to match her speed, and the resulting feeling at last drove them both over the edge. He felt the muscles of Razia's pussy begin to constrict about him as her own wave of ecstasy struck, milking his phallus with rolling contractions.

Verden had thought the earlier release had drained him, but somehow his body found new reserves. A fresh spurt of semen nearly as large as the first gushed from him, filling the depths of Razia's inner cavity. The torrent was large enough to fill her completely and begin to dribble out.

The dragoness still had her limbs wrapped tightly about him, and she held him against her until both their convulsions subsided.

When they at last rolled apart, Verden did not collapse heavily, but instead knelt beside her. He could tell by Razia's still-lucid gaze that she desired yet more. He placed his arms beneath her shoulders and the backs of her knees and lifted her from the fern-littered ground. The dragoness raised one narrow eyebrow at him and brushed a frazzled, slightly damp piece of hair from her eyes. Her unspoken question was answered as Verden sat down on the old stump, much to the two fence lizards' displeasure. His tone dripped with irony and mirth. "Ready for round three?"

Razia smiled seductively and moved to stand above him, her delicious thighs on either side of his closed knees.

"Well, technically," she began, imitating his voice with a giggle.

Verden rolled his eyes.

Their mouths met again. She pressed herself against him and slowly began to lower her body. Verden winced slightly as his lance entered her again. The arousal caused by the phenomenal sex coupled with the powerful hormones in Razia's juices left him bigger than he had ever been before. The increased tightness of his larger girth combined with his phallus still being tender from its previous usage made the entry hurt. If anything, the pain only increased the high though.

Razia continued to lower herself until all of her weight rested in his lap. She lifted her legs from the ground and hooked each ankle over one of his knees. Her torso slowly began to move back and forth, working Verden's penis within her. Eventually she began punctuating the pleasurable rolling motion by lifting herself several inches from his lap and dropping back down. She would raise her hips until only the tip of his shaft remained within her hole before slamming home.

Verden began to thrust back, lifting his hips toward hers. The movements disrupted the dragoness's rhythm, and as both their gyrations grew more frantic, his dick actually slid fully from her several times. Razia let out a small cry of shock and pain once when the heavily lubricated shaft slipped free and moved down a few inches, penetrating her anus as she lowered herself. She quickly rectified the situation, but not before nearly half the length of the lance had entered the tight little hole.

Razia continued to rock, twist, and thrust against him until Verden again found himself panting in rapture. His phallus continued to swell throughout her ravishing performance, and he began feeling the tip strike something hard each time Razia lowered herself fully. He realized with shock that he was bottoming out against her cervix. The erotic knowledge pushed him over for the third time that day. Again the two lovers' ejaculations were almost perfectly synchronized as Razia's body began to orgasm in response to the renewed flow of sperm.

Razia continued to put him through his paces for another two hours. They coupled in nearly every position imaginable. The glade was cast in the slanted shadows of the enormous tree trunks when the lovers collapsed for the final time. For a few minutes Verden simply lay there, staring up at the clouds above. Never had he felt so exhausted or so fulfilled.

They washed off in the small stream that wound about the edge of the clearing, though Verden suspected the odor of their coupling would take more than a single bath to remove. His thoughts were interrupted by a cold splash of water to his backside. He spun just in time to receive another spray right to the face. Through the icy trickles falling from his hair, he caught Razia, her clawed hands already cupped just beneath the surface in preparation for another attack. The elf responded in kind with a laugh. Soon both were shivering from the chill of the spring.

They returned to the shore and lay down in one of the few remaining patches of sunlight while they waited to dry. Verden sat cross-legged with the dragoness's head in his lap. He softly stroked her thick mane of hair, admiring the glossy texture of the wet strands.

It was Razia who finally broke the silence. "Not bad. I can see you've had quite a bit of experience."

"What, me?" Verden said, his face reddening slightly in embarrassment. "Nothing like that. When I was younger, my mercenary comrades got me drunk and talked me into bedding a few serving wenches, but that's the extent of my experience. Sadly, most of what I know came from my friend Grark the orc. He had a bad habit of bragging of his exploits in explicit detail to everyone he met. He was also cursed with one of the loudest voices I've ever heard. You can imagine the results."

Razia's snout wrinkled as she tried to keep herself from laughing. "Sounds like quite the character. I bet that caused a bit of trouble once or twice."

"You... could say that. The band was chased out of a fair number of towns because of him. I remember once we were in Swordhaven and he was describing what he and the daughter of the captain of the guard had done together. The guard captain himself walked in halfway through the story, and before you knew it we had the whole garrison at our heels."

Razia truly did laugh at that.

"So... what about you?" Verden asked after their chuckles had subsided.

Her eyes turned downcast. "Nothing I care to speak of. My weakness made it difficult to fend off advances."

The sky had already darkened to dusk when the pair began building their campsite. Verden managed to noodle several bass from the small stream, and with Razia's fire the two were soon feasting on the spoils.

Verden took the remains of the fish out into the woods and returned to set the magical wards about their campsite. Once finished, he turned his attention back to the campfire. He smiled as he saw that Razia had placed their bedrolls next to each other. Every night before they had slept on either side of the small fire.

The dragoness caught him staring and wagged her tongue beckoningly at him from her bedroll, just as she had in the pool of lava. This time, Verden answered the summons. He slipped beneath the covers and snuggled up behind her. He wrapped his arms around her just beneath the underside of her breasts. They were still both quite naked from their earlier festivities, and the hair of Razia's mane tickled his chest as he pulled her against him. Verden closed his eyes and smiled blissfully, the smell of lavender from Razia's hair filling his nose. For the first time in his life, he felt truly complete.

The trill of whippoorwills sang the lovers softly to sleep.

Part Two: The Journey East

With gems serving as the sole connection to Lorn's magic, it came as no surprise that currency evolved around them. A value system emerged based on rarity, elemental type, and where they fell on the hardness scale. Gems with wide applicability like earth, water, and fire commanded a higher value as any adept can utilize them for mundane things. Aiding crops, safe illumination, and production of textiles drove the demand. Thus diamonds, garnets, Topaz, and aquamarine, rarest and hardest of their respective elements, often commanded the highest prices. Value is measured in carats. Various nations have tried to build a standard using bank notes, but none bear enough influence for it to take. Thus straight cut gems remain the vehicle of day to day trade. Diamond is almost universally used as the standard against which other gems' value is set, thanks to its hardness, rarity, and long-held association with the divine. Its exchange rate varied by region, of course, each nation's mining capacity and environment adjusting the internal value of other elements. A single carat might buy a fine horse or cuirasse. Smaller denominations were utilized for most trades. Ten specs made a sliver. Ten slivers made a full carat. Anything requiring a smaller division mandated the use of slivers or specs of a less valuable gem group.

As civilization blossomed, the currency system grew ever more robust. The variance of uncut gems made skilled appraisers a critical commodity for any who regularly dealt in money. A simple attunement revealed a gem's size and purity, but with less than one in ten children born with any elemental affinity in most races, adepts willing to verify transactions were hard to come by. Mundane appraisers became the norm. They soon realized their power and began to unionize, becoming a juggernaut in politics. Throughout Lorn's modern history, appraiser guilds across the known world commanded immense influence.

Verden's placid dreams eventually gave way to the waking world. His eyes blinked blearily open.

The world remained dark.

What on Lorn...?

Something soft and pleasantly hot pressed firmly on his head from all sides, folding both ears down. He tentatively raised one hand to feel his prison. Smooth scales greeted fingertips. He soon found a tail and accompanying backside. Somehow his travel companion had curled herself around him in the night. Her abdomen smushed against the top of his head.

This isn't the worst thing I've awoken to.

He slowly shifted the thigh planted on his face.

...Actually, it's probably in the top five best.

His movements stirred his companion awake. She yawned wide enough to envelope his entire head, her entire body arching. Blinking free the last vestiges of slumber, she smiled down at him. "Mornin'." Her tail slid over to brush a stray lock of hair from his face.

The elf's brow furrowed. Something seemed different about her demeanor. "Everything alright?"

"Fat chance. I'm bloody starving!"

She rolled to her feet and stalked towards the hanging bag containing the leftover fish. She froze as she caught Verden's expression. Her stance shifted almost imperceptibly, reverting to the aura of meek aloofness exuded before. "Right. Apologies." She retrieved the food without another word and began to prepare it. Each movement was meticulously polite and efficient. Verden studied them as he approached. He took a seat across from her, staring intently at her face.

She glanced up several times, her ears wilting more and more each time she met his intense gaze. "What?"

"What was that just now?"

"I'm not sure what you mean."

He continued to stare.

"I'm... not much of a morning person."

He scrutinized each and every detail of her face.

"I... um..."

He took one of her hands in both of his. "Hey, you can talk to me. Never be afraid to be yourself around me."

Finally she met his gaze in honest, searching his expression for the truth of his words. The barely-contained dread marring her scales melted away, and she visibly slumped back. "Well that's a weight off my shoulders. I'm not sure how much longer I could've kept that up." Her highborn air vanished, replaced by something far more welcoming, if not a bit sarcastic.

Verden sighed heavily. "I take it the Razia I've known up until now has been a lie, then?" *If this ends up being another of Amelia's games after all, I swear on The Lenses.*

"Bits and pieces, perhaps. My interest in the outside world, and *you*, are very, very real though. Think of the personality as a facade. You ever heard the term 'taking the piss'? Apparently that's all I ever do. I have to consciously fight every time I open my mouth. If people's tongues are flippant, then mine's a damned fish out of water.

I wasn't good for much past visual delights back in the Peak, and abrasiveness is unbecoming, or something stupid like that. I had to play up the meekness. Plus you're just so *stoic*. I knew if you saw my spicy side, you'd run right back to your woods. Ever heard that tale with the frog in a pot of water? You've got to raise the temperature reeeeeeeal slowwwwwww." Razia angled her claw slightly upwards and inched it forward. "I planned to lead you in bit by bit, but it turns out all it takes is an empty stomach to break character." Now it was she who took his hand in both palms. "I don't want to lose whatever it is we have, but I haven't exactly been entirely honest with you, I won't think any less of you if you do decide to leave."

Verden's gaze wandered across the glade, eventually finding the fence lizards from the previous afternoon. "You want the honest truth?"

"Always."

"I've been utterly captivated by you from the moment we met. But for a while, I feared you were more form than substance, which obviously was perfectly fine, but it left me seeing you almost as a trophy, despite my best efforts otherwise. This feels more real. I think I would like to get to know the real Razia."

Her hands clapped together gleefully. "Perfect! You gave me food and showed me a good time. By dragon law, you're now stuck with me. Forever."

"Oh no, what god could be so cruel as to shackle me with this fate? Truly I am cursed." Verden slid backwards off the log, the back of his hand to his temple, hamming up the bit to the fullest. He found his pack, pulled free the pan pipes stored within, and began mournfully recounting the saddest melody he knew.

"It's far worse than you could ever know, my poor innocent elf. This dragon likes to sing."

He froze in horror. "Gods above and below, *no*."

The sun was high in the sky by time their bantering finally lulled. After a very pregnant pause, Verden broached a more serious subject. "I suppose now might be a good time to discuss where we go from here."

"Anywhere you want to. I'm just happy to be free of those caves for a spell."

Verden pursed his lips. "You said your motivations were true. I don't see a reason not to continue with our previous plans. I would certainly be honored to have you accompany me on my diplomatic missions. And the sight of a red dragon in the homeland might help reinforce our alliance. Of course, we could tour all the amazing sights along the way, just as discussed."

"Ooh, a political setpiece. I do love feeling important," she said primly, preening her hair. Her smile betrayed the mirth. "Are you sure I'm the sort of girl you want to take home to your parents though, mister elf?"

"Oh, I am sure they are quite numb to my frivolity by now. They should warm up to you quickly."

"If they're half as good at puns as you, we'll get along swimmingly."

Razia grew serious for a moment, her eyes downcast, her hands fidgeting absently. "There is one place I'd like to visit. It doesn't have to be now, or even soon, but I if could see my mother's homeland just once... I always wanted to go, but with my condition, and then the war, there was never a chance."

Verden once again clasped her hand. "I will find a way. Even if we have to sail to the ends of the world."

She blushed. "You know, you're quite dangerous with that romantic intensity of yours. If you're not careful, I might just end up properly falling for you."

Verden didn't respond, but his beaming expression never once faltered as they broke camp and continued South.

The next two days passed relatively uneventfully. They journeyed deeper into Deepmarch, meandering slightly to tour some of Verden's other favored locations. He didn't lament the slow pace. He was simply happy for the companionship, and, of course, the sex. Razia was insatiable. They made love beneath a waterfall, in a willow grove, and even once while trying to use the bathroom.

Eventually, further signs of elven civilization emerged. Verden pointed out a few solitary outposts and homes. They artfully blended into the terrain, often little more than mossy bulges in the earth or large gnarls in the canopy. Towards the end of the second day, they entered Silis'Thrya, the first proper township. Though primarily elven, it saw enough outsiders to have the typical range of amenities common to the less civilized societies, including one that immediately caught the dragon's attention.

"What is that?" Razia whispered breathlessly. Verden followed her gaze. A vendor stood beside a brightly painted cart-mounted stove along the root-woven road. Above it, three glistening chickens slowly rotated on skewers.

"Rotisserie chicken, basted in lemon and black pepper. These beauties were hand-raised and freshly killed this morning," the man said proudly.

Razia slowly stepped closer until her face was inches from the meat, utterly transfixed. With shaking fingers, she reached into her coin pouch and produced a full Carat. "Please."

"Lady, I don't have enough change for this," the shopkeeper began, but Razia had already bundled the chickens and walked off with them, cradling them as if they were a child.

"I will love you for the rest of your short and delicious lives," she crooned to the roasted fowl.

"There's a nice pavilion over by--" but Razia had already lifted the first chicken to her ravenous maw.

"Don't worry," she managed to get out between bites. "I can eat while we walk."

The sky grew overcast as they walked the streets, Verden alternating between tour guide and shopper as he restocked on a few minor supplies. It seemed to rip open as they traversed its Eastern outskirts. A scant few seconds from the fall of the first drop, a veritable downpour struck the two lovers.

"So, this is the rain phenomenon I've heard so much about," she mused, equal parts curious and disgusted.

Verden's eyebrows hiked into his sodden hair. "Wait, you've never seen rain before?"

"Look, I didn't get out of the mountain much, alright? You could tell me the seas are made of wine and I might honestly believe you." There was a quiver in her voice at the last few words. "Anyway, is there any way to deal with this nonsense? I'm freezing."

"I can channel water, but only enough for a few minutes of respite at most. We will need shelter."

"Hmm... I wonder." Razia's eyes closed and she took in a deep breath. The air around her began to brighten. The temperature rose until the water droplets flashed into steam in a radius around her. Verden felt himself dry an instant before every pore on his body prickled and began to sweat. The chunk of corundum drew magic as if he were back in the Peak. "Nope, nope, that's somehow even worse," the dragon muttered, trying to clear the thick cloud of steam from her face. "Shelter?"

A crack of lightning flashed almost directly overhead.

"Shelter."

Razia broke the resonance, causing the thick cloud of humidity to quickly dissipate. She wavered, clutching at her chest in pain. Verden felt an immediate pang of concern. He reached for her, but her raised hand stayed him. "I'm fine," she managed through gritted teeth. "Sometimes the shards shift when they shed."

Verden wiped his brow and scanned the surrounding landscape. The nearest inn lay a kilometer behind. Just off the road, an elven barn, crafted from four trees grown together in a wide circular dome,

loomed in the rainfall. He took his partner's hand and rushed towards its door. The familiar faint smell of hay and animals greeted them as he threw it open.

The roar of water faded to near silence as he barred the heavy door behind them. For a moment, all was dark, save for Razia's unnaturally bright green eyes.

Heat vision. Dragons really are unfair.

With a snap of her fingers, a small flame winked into existence above her palm, seeded by the sparks from the traces of quarts in her talons. She soon transferred it to several candles mounted around the structure, revealing more of its contents. Stalls dominated the southern side, several occupied by horses, though a fair share of goats grazed placidly at mounds of hay as well. The rest of the barn seemed used for storage. More hay bales stretched off into the gloom, along with several derelict carriages and various plows.

Razia slowly made the circuit, stopping to pet each animal that would allow her. She lingered on the goats long enough to make Verden uneasy. "You're lucky I just ate," she said, stroking a particularly fat one. Finally, she returned and flopped belly-first onto a wooden bench. "Now what?"

"We are pretty well stranded here until this rain lets up. Nothing to do but wait, I fear."

"Are you sure you can't think of *anything* to pass the time?" she asked, wagging her tongue suggestively.

"Well, when you word it like that, a few things come to mind." Verden flashed her his most seductive gaze. His hands went to the lace of his shirt, slowly undoing it loop by loop. He made as if to take it off, but paused, his eyes bright with feigned excitement. "We could talk about the geopolitical climate of Deepmarch! Nothing better to get you acclimated than a rousing rundown of trade laws and political parties!"

Razia groaned. "You're incorrigible. I'm going to dry off before I get scale rot."

"Actually, hold off on that. I might have an idea." Verden made his way to a cabinet mounted beside the hanging tack and saddles and began rummaging through the assorted supplies therein. "If memory serves, most saddle oils use olives as a base. With any luck--" his eyes alit on a metal flask. "AHA!" He pulled back, unstopping the flask to confirm his suspicions. "Perfect." He turned back to Razia, still idly watching with her chin in her hands. Her ankles and tail waved counterpoint in the air. "Take your clothes off."

Her snout wrinkled in a grimace. "You sounded a lot more romantic last time."

"Please?"

"There's your famous magical charm!"

Verden beamed. He tried unsuccessfully to hide his rising excitement as the dragoness rolled off the bench and began stripping. He was rewarded with a bra to the face. By the time he untangled himself from the lacey devilry, Razia once again stood fully unclothed before him, save for a set for a few choice exceptions. She wore a pair of silken navy stockings, complete with a neat little bow on each outer thigh. The deep blue contrasted the rose quartz of belly and inner legs.

She knew.

"Those are new."

"I slipped across the street to a boutique while you were trying to decide on rice balls. What do you think?"

"I think you somehow managed to look even better. I could look for eternity and never get bored," he murmured appreciatively.

She stalked forward, wearing an air of playful menace. "You better have something more in mind than staring, or I might decide you look better without eyebrows."

Verden ducked away, pulling free his bedroll and hastily unrolled it over the freshly vacated bench. "You can't rush perfection. Mind lying back down for me?"

"You certainly are bossy tonight. Not sure how I feel about this new assertive Verden." despite her protests, she acquiesced, prostrating herself on the freshly unfurled cloth. She rested a cheek on twined fingers and twisted to regard him with one emerald eye.

Verden took her arms and gently lowered them to her sides before assuming a kneeling position on the bench. One knee nosed between her thighs and rubbed against the silken stockings. He took a moment to

gaze raptly once again as he coated both hands with the warm oil. Reverently, he pressed them to her dimples of Venus.

"What are you... oh. *Oh.*"

Razia purred and stretched beneath his masterful hands. He worked in small circles just above her buttox before climbing to her shoulders in a single long, fluid stroke. He worked the tender muscles there for a moment before performing several more effleurage passes, lathering her scales in an even coating until they gleamed. His fingers glided over her flesh, deftly identifying her skelature and places of tension like a cartographer teasing free the outline of a map. A strategy began to form. He shifted over her and pressed down firmly into the softness of her lower back with both thumbs, massaging the deep tissue. He slowly worked his way upward, kneading her back while she sighed needily below.

"You're certain you're not a mage, with magic like that?" She demurred as his hands found her shoulders again.

"Just a trick I picked up in my service. They used to treat the soldiers to this the night before battle. It worked wonders."

His fingers worked deep into the back of her neck before plunging into the mass of hair to massage the scales behind her horns. He marveled at the unseen bumps and ridges of her skull. Her arms received similar treatment. He worked his way down her back a final time to pause at the base of her tail. Razia's eyelids drooped low, her body mistaking relaxation for weariness. She seemed ready to doze off. And yet... moving the appendage aside, he could practically feel the heat of her lust. Grinning impishly, he let the tip of a digit just brush the swollen outer folds of her labia, eliciting a throaty moan.

"I bet that wasn't part of your soldier's experience."

"Alas, I was not so lucky. You, on the other hand, are a lucky warrior indeed, oh mighty conqueror of my heart."

Razia tried to snort in derision, but her breath caught midway as he stroked her sex again. "Would you like some crackers with that cheese?"

Verden lathered his hands with oil once more. "I'd much prefer some sweet dragon nectar. Luckily I know a local vendor." He prowled her upper thighs, each time stopping his palms dangerously close to her flower. He teased her several times before dancing over her stockings to massage her ankles. His departure earned an irritated growl. Razia's tail lifted, its tip coiling around his wrist to drag it back towards her nethers just as he reached the exposed bottoms of her feet.

He pressed the restrained hand firmly against her, allowing the oil to soak in for a moment before drawing it back between the glorious mounds of her rump. He slid it forward again, allowing his index and middle finger to splay slightly to glide on either side of her clitoris. He glided forward until his fingertips just tickled the tiny patch of abdominal fur above Razia's pussy. While he worked over her lovebud and labia with one hand, the other crept up to begin stroking her anus with a thumb, thoroughly oiling it until he could easily slip its tip in.

Razia moaned and undulated beneath his tender touch. At his guidance, she spread her legs wider, granting better access to her hidden fruit.

Verden closed his eyes, committing her folds and curves to memory. He overlaid his brief romance with the guitar over it. Then, he began to play. He rapidly pinched and flicked the dragon's clitoris while his other hand rubbed over her tail hole, yielding an aria of gasps and moans.

The soft patter of rain scarcely softened the reptile's cries. The savory aroma of her pheromones rose to tickle his nostrils. He leaned down to bask in it as he fanned her pleasure spot. Two fingers sank into the hot confines of her behind even as his thumb glided down to gently nestle among her plump outer folds. He made sure not to penetrate further. His unerring assault on her clit reached a crescendo, and soon earned an orgasm from the hapless dragon. A visible shiver raced up her body, making the cloud markings lining her sides dance and swirl. As it faded, Razia slumped visibly, at last totally relaxed. Her sides rose in deep, sighing breaths. Without missing a beat, Verden resumed his descent down her lovely form, gently sliding free her lingerie before thoroughly oiling and massaging the backs of her legs and tail.

"Finished in there so soon?"

"Not to worry, my greedy little dragoness. I'll service you properly once I finish your front. Now, if you'd be so kind?"

Her eyes narrowed, but she complied once more. Verden let a small smirk crack his stoic gaze. *It seems she's having too much fun to protest my nonsense.* He nearly licked his lips as Razia's rotation revealed the soft pink of her belly. Greasing his palms once more, he pressed them firmly to her abdomen, just above her pelvis. He worked upwards in small counterclockwise circles to her sternum, then up to her breasts, pausing to plant a kiss on each before moving still higher. He drew her arms over her head as he worked, nearly completely covering her with his own body as he applied tender pressure and oil all the way up the pads of her fingers. Once satisfied, he retreated downwards, leaving a parting peck on Razia's snout. Having explored her northern territories, he turned his sights below the equator. Thighs, calves, ankles, and feet received the same expert care as the rest of her body.

He pulled back, a painter admiring his completed work. Every visible scale shone and glistened in lamplight. Then, an elf of his word, he returned to her needy sex. His hands, now a familiar presence, wasted no time in enveloping her nethers. He expertly wormed into both holes even as he stimulated her clitoral hood once more, and soon had the dragoness twisting and folding like a pretzel. Her legs instinctively pulled towards her torso at the powerful sensations. With a firm hand, he coaxed her back into a prone position, the other still massaging her G-spot.

"Shhhh, just let it all out. Let all that stress melt away. Be at peace, mind, body, and soul."

Soon, he felt the dragoness approaching another climax. He redoubled his efforts, his fingers all but vibrating as they worked her over. He watched on in satisfaction as her toes curled. Every muscle tensed and strained. Razia's emitted a powerful cry as the waves of pleasure overcame her. On and on they went, until at last the dragon melted against the bench, her tongue lolling out to the side. "That... was... wonderful..." she managed to pant out.

Verden nuzzled against her shoulder. "Glad you enjoyed." His heart sank as he noticed the perturbed expression marring her brow. "Something wrong?"

She didn't reply immediately, first rising to a sitting position to stare down at him. "Based on your comments, it seems there was some miscommunication on the dynamic of our relationship. Plus, I need to return the favor."

"I could definitely go for a massage myself."

"That's not quite what I had in mind. Take your clothes off and have a seat against that post."

Reluctantly, he rose and approached the indicated support. "It seems the assertiveness tables have turned." He began to undress. "Mind telling me what you have in mind?"

"You'll see." She fixed him with a stern gaze, drawing forth memories of being chastised as a child. He found himself meekly complying. The cool wood pressed against his spine, worn to a glossy sheen by decades of man and beast passing against it.

Razia allowed him to sit in silence for a spell as she took her own turn at rummaging through the barn's treasures. When at last she returned, her arms bore a number of leather instruments and instruments. Looming from the gloom, she appeared larger, more intimidating. She slowly circled the post, hands clasped behind her back; appraising him like a mount or morsel of meat. Verden craned to keep her in view as she began her second pass. She paused directly behind the post. Soft hands caressed down his arms, raising gooseflesh despite their warmth. Their grip firmed as they approached his wrists, drawing both limbs around the support. Their presence soon bowed out for a new sensation: The constricting wrap of a length of leather. It creaked softly as the dragoness bound his wrist snugly together.

"Let's see how well your camping lessons apply here." Her claws dug into his ribs in a devastating tickle assault. Verden jolted, instinctively straining against his binds. They held firm. "*Perfect.*"

"You're sure this is necessary?" Verden asked, the words sounding small beneath his rising trepidation. "I can take back what I said about--"

SNAP. The tip of her tail whipped into the ground, leaving a welt in the dust scant millimeters from his cock. Its owner followed a moment later, circling around to stand over him once more. After no further protestations emerged, she smiled, revealing her full set of razory fangs, and flopped down between his legs.

“Shhhh, let your ‘greedy little dragoness’ have her fun.”

Note for future reference: Be more careful with word choice.

She propped her head on her elbows and stared deep into his eyes. He was so lost in the emerald abysses that he almost failed to notice the tongue slowly unfurling. It bridged the gap to lick across the region of skin connecting the glans to the main shaft. Verden's eyes squeezed shut at the stimulation, preparing for more. Her tongue dragged maddeningly against the same small area again. Then a third time. He dared a glance down. Razia's predatory gaze hadn't wavered. Her eyes remained locked on his as she methodically licked near the tip of his cock at a steady moderate pace.

Seconds dragged to minutes. Verden expected the monotonous attention to lose its edge, or perhaps even that his skin would begin to chafe under the organ. But to his dismay, his arousal only continued to rise. His dick quivered and twitched, millimeters from her lips. Finally, her rhythm changed. Sensing her partner's impending release, her tongue slowed expertly bringing him back down to a manageable level. Verden let out his own frustrated growl at her knowing smile.

Her tongue intensified, bringing him back towards orgasm before slowing at the last possible second. Again and again she edged him, bringing his need for release to a boil. She was an expert, effortlessly reading his body and walking the razor edge of release. Verden found himself twisting and writhing against his bonds, panting heavily. Time seemed to blur. There was nothing but the eyes below, judging his very soul, and the endless onslaught of pleasure from her tongue. It consumed his mind, until he threatened to burst with each and every movement. He almost failed to notice the cerise tail dip into the lidless oil pot.

Finally, Razia fully flexed her tongue, slathering him from base to head in a single powerful stroke. All of the need bottled up over the past hour came frothing forth. Verden's entire body tensed, his hips bucking involuntarily.

Quick as a whip, the tip of the dragon's tail wrapped around the bottom of his shaft, squeezing off the approaching flood. His vision blurred and swam. A low, agonized moan escaped his lips. His cock continued to twitch and shake, though not so much as a drop of seed escaped the constricting tail. The dry, empty orgasm only seemed to heighten his need for release as it subsided. He could almost feel the sperm churning in their swollen prisons.

“You didn't say please,” Razia chided.

He had no time for the reptile's games. A single instinct dominated his mind. “Please.” The word rang hollow in his ears. With a start, he realized it emerged from his own mouth. The shackles slid free of his wrists, letting his arms dangle at his sides. Instinctively he reached for his sensitive nethers.

“Not so fast.” Her tone froze him in his tracks. “On all fours.”

He fell forward into a crawling position. He felt warm, wet scales on his back as Razia enveloped him. Her thighs straddled her hips. Her ankles hooked over his, locking his legs in place. Her chin settled onto his crown as she bore down with her full weight. One hand rose to caress his throat. The other began to glide down his abdomen. “What are you--” Verden's sentence was cut short by his own gasp as something thin and slimy violated his asshole. It slid several inches deep with ease, wiggling slightly, feeling him out, stimulating unexplored regions. His cock twinged again at the unexpected pleasure it yielded.

“I could send you over the edge with even touching you right now, but my little elf deserves a proper reward.”

Her fingers finished their journey and wrapped gently around his phallus even as her tail forced its way still deeper. It pierced him until its widening base stretched him to discomfort before withdrawing. Her hand slowly played up his length, diving back down just as her tail began to thrust into him once more. The two limbs worked at the same pace, forming a languid rhythm. Verden's arousal remained as high as ever, and, despite the brief respite as they changed position, he felt his climax building almost immediately. Again, Razia sensed his impending release, for as soon as he began to twitch, she accelerated. Her tail rammed forward repeatedly, filling him completely, even as her hand rapidly fanned his genitals. His legs grew weak, his vision dark, as the need denied for so long finally came to an end. On and on it went, his seed spraying across the hay-strewn floor.

“Shhh, just let it all out. Good boy,” Razia mocked. She playfully took his scruff between her teeth. Her arm never slowed, draining every ounce of fluid earned by the eternity of edging.

Finally, the seemingly endless flow gave way to dry spasms. Verden’s knees buckled and he collapsed beneath the dragoness’s weight, utterly spent. She kicked sideways and pulled him into a fetal position, cuddling tightly around him. She stroked his hair affectionately even as she continued to massage his spent, rapidly shrinking member. “I hope that cleared things up a bit,” she murmured, nuzzling one of his ears.

“Indeed. I need to goad you more often.”

Razia growled in mock frustration and tickled his exposed sides. Verden yelped and tried to jab her with an elbow. She deftly dodged and launched into a counterattack, and soon they were tangled in one another’s limbs, targeting every bit of ticklish flesh they could reach.

Their revelry masked the approaching lantern-wielding figure until they were nearly atop them.

Part Three: Love in a Time of Dragons

When mages first teased free the surface secrets of void magic, we knew so little of transmutation. Early explorations were primitive and raw, so much like the traditional elements. Only by converting it from one form to another could organic matter be manipulated. For most dragons, the cost of mass gain was so astronomical that transmuting their bodies to a humanoid figure was a one way street. Earth dragons, with their dominion over living things, could return to their natural feral forms, albeit at a still incredibly steep magical investment. Animal cells were preferred, as their similarity invoked a smaller mana tax, but using plants had the added benefit of providing extra energy from photosynthesis right up until the ritual was completed.

This gave earth dragons an immense and immediate advantage. The budding kingdom forged by Great Wyrms Lenora went on a war of conquest, leading to the first large-scale war since the fall of Desol and paving the way for Pyrroth's own conflagration.

The war dragged on until the discovery of the Fraysian Method. It combined techniques from three fields of Void magic.

From transmutation came the crafting of an avatar from the caster's own flesh. Whereas traditional methods shed additional mass to wholly inhabit a smaller body, the user of Fraysian retained their initial vessel. The key factor was implanting the avatar with the caster's original brain stem and upper spine.

Next came a rather ingenious use of Enchantment, the distortion of the mind. Rather than assaulting or bewitching another conscious, the caster converted their own nerve impulses into high-frequency resonance signals and back into impulses in the puppet's nerves. Thanks to the lack of mental wards and matched brain matter, this allowed for perfect and instantaneous motor control, which in turn allowed the same connection to be formed in the other direction, allowing for full sensory reception.

Finally came a contribution from Cosmoturgy, the distortion of reality. Following the advent of spatial folding, using the reality-tearing nature of the Void rifts themselves, it became possible to form a pocket dimension tethered to a particular gem. Interweaving the telepathic signals used to pilot the puppet with this magical tether allowed them to pierce the pockets of reality. Thus enabling higher beings to store their main body in a suspended state within a fold, tethered to their avatar. Like all magics, it required the use of a foci. Most dragons utilized their gem sack, transferring it to their avatars to employ it to full effectiveness.

Of course, this still had its drawbacks. If the enchantment was fully severed, the avatar killed, or the brain stem destroyed, it would cut the mana flow sustaining the wielder's stasis. This resulted in a slow, inevitable death by starvation and dehydration trapped within a prison of their own making, entirely inaccessible from the world beyond.

A flick of Razia's wrist extinguished the light within its protective glass. Another produced a similar flame directly behind the figure on a small mound of hay. They froze for a moment, looming scant paces from the tangled lovers, before spinning with baritone curse and pulling off their jacket to beat at the growing pyre.

In the ensuing chaos, the dragoness dragged Verden to his feet and they stealthily gathered their discarded gear. The elf cast about for the entrance their intruder used. It proved undetectable among the flames and frantic flair of flaxen hair of the farmer. Steeling himself, he instead forced open the heavy main door.

"Oi! Thieves!" the intruder barked, likely catching a flash of their bare torsos scurrying out.

Verden never spared so much as a backwards glance, too intent on closing the door behind him. To his surprise, the unwieldy oaken slab moved of its own accord as a powerful tempest whipped across the building, slamming shut on their heels.

The rain let up sometime during their session, returned to a dreary drizzle. Its presence was enough to keep the road relatively clear, only a pair of deer witnessed their streaking forms as they sprinted for a clump of bushes.

"Did you just commit arson to try to mask our escape?" Verden asked, trying with mixed success to pull his shirt on.

"I took a calculated risk." She pointedly noted the not-burning building. "Math isn't my strong suit, but it looks like it paid off."

"We might've tried diplomacy."

"That option went out the window the second you took your pants off," she said.

They managed to fully reclothe themselves and make an innocuous return to the main road without further hitches. By the time Verden's ears picked out the telltale sound of slamming doors and elven expletives, they were well out of sight.

"So, how did you fancy your first exposure to elven culture?" Verden teased.

"It gets a pass on the food alone. Hospitality could use some work, though I can't say I'd react better to uninvited guests myself. And of course, the service is to die for." She leaned in to lick his cheek. "I hope you kept that oil," she whispered.

Onward they pressed, crossing the wide Ronhallahan as it circled the highlands, into the very heart of the great forest. Despite their rising altitude, the air grew noticeably warmer as they progressed. Verden, ever enthusiastic about nature, kept up his animated diatribe on the region's history and climate. How the gulf carving the March's eastern fringe propelled its tropical breezes west, bathing the central region in a humid balm. True to his word, it grew warm so warm in the floodplains of the river that Razia adopted the local attire, stripping down to maroon undergarments when they stopped for lunch on its banks. Verden caught the glint of more than a few spyglasses turned her way from the vessels wending up and down the channel.

She proved distrusting of the large body of water, but Verden was able to coax her into the shallows where the river meandered about a stand of palms for a bit of swimming, and, when no other travelers could be seen, lazy water sex.

"Why don't we see how long you can hold your breath?" the red reptile demurred, her legs wrapped tightly about his waist, her breasts bobbing gently at the surface. "If I like the answer, I may just return the favor."

As it turned out, Razia seemed to enjoy the answer very much, though Verden ended up with more river water than dragon nectar coating his tongue. Their reduced weight in the water made it unnervingly easy for the buxom lass to sit fully on his face.

It also turned out she could hold her breath far longer than he, to the point where the elf began to worry. Her confident movements never slowed though, and it wasn't long before his submerged assailant had his toes curling in the sandy river bottom. The familiar warm, silky gullet eagerly accepted his token of gratitude before its owner burst from the waves and flung her arms around his neck once more.

They had returned to the shore, refreshed yet thoroughly exhausted, by the time the next boat rounded the bend they occupied.

"What an odd design," Razia murmured as she watched it pass. The ship was nearly a hundred paces long, yet little more than five wide. It seemed carved of a single enormous piece of tan segmented wood, split down the center and hollowed out. The entirety of its length was laden with cargo, with a half dozen elven sailors working along its edges. They'd occasionally use an oar to augment the pair of sails propelling the craft.

"Trade barge, likely bound for Vollan on the coast," he said, absently stroking her back mane.

"Yes, but what's it made of?"

"You'll see."

His flippancy earned a playful tail flick to the face, but he refused to yield his secrets, taking the abuse in mirthful silence.

The left river as it turned Southward again, instead climbing into the forested hills of the core. Beginning to feel self-conscious about his wilderness prattle, Verden angled the conversation back towards Razia, trying to coax out more of the dragoness's past. The girl remained a marble maze puzzle, filled with pitfalls ready to plunge their journey into excruciating silence. True to his training, Verden navigated the

conversation with all the grace and dexterity of a diplomat, and soon Razia was gushing about her more scrupulous friends and family.

"You've got Masoth, of course. Absolute saint. You know about magma dragons right? Rock, fire, all that? He's basically a walking talking pressure cooker. He can pop out gems--" Razia punctuated her words with a sharp snap of claws "--like that. Of course they're rubbish as foci. Supposedly, since he's using resonance to produce them, they're out of phase with the lenses and crumble the second you try to use them.

"Anyway, they still sell well. He's more pimp than proper dragon. Once the war began, he started strutting around in one of those human noblemen suits all crusted with diamonds. His hatch mate is a right piece of shit though. Took after dad too much.

Then there's Amelia. Gods she's so nice. If it weren't for the hard facts I'd swear she was my real mum. Same face marks and everything. She's the most dreadful tease you'll ever meet. By your expression, you know exactly what I'm talking about."

Verden realized his brow had crinkled into an exasperated frown. He quickly returned to his statuesque demeanour and continued nodding along to the animated dragon's words.

"There's also my full sister, Scarlett. Now she's a proper warrior. Or she was, until that day with the tentacles. She's been a bit weird ever since." Razia leaned in conspiratorially. "Real kinky stuff, if you know what I mean. We dragons don't normally produce milk, but with the right back alley void magic, anything's possible.

"Then there was Eris. She had the best voice I've ever heard. Made you feel like you were the only thing that mattered in the world whenever she spoke to you. Great tits too. On top of all that, she was a goddess with a sword; one of the strongest I've ever seen. Light and fire do some wild things when paired together. She could convert her body to pure energy for short bursts. She's what kept the lechers off me for the most part.

"When the Fabled came after Shadow, she was right there leading the defense. It... didn't go well. Things have been rough without her. Worse, the Dry Sea used her death as an excuse to pull their support. Without a figurative horse in the race for succession, their leadership didn't see a point in staying in Pyrroth's good graces. Apparently Eris had a hatchmate, but I've never met him. The light wyrm Sorraria kept the egg.

"I'm rambling, aren't I?"

"Honestly I just like hearing your voice."

Razia's chin tilted upwards in imperious indignance. "This answer does not please Her Royal Majesty."

Verden smirked. "Is Her Majesty finished reciting the royal lineage?"

"Not by a long shot," she said. "We fire dragons breed like rabbits. Supposedly ever since we harnessed the Void and started sculpting puppets after you two-legged beings, population growth kicked into overdrive. We've always been horny, but slamming multi-ton bodies together took too much energy to regularly partake in. But now... the sky's the limit."

"Speaking of sculpting puppets, this isn't your real body, right? I know most beings use the Fraysian method these days."

Razia froze in her tracks.

Verden felt the marble drop through the pitfall.

"I..." she began, her face a mask of pain. "It might as well be, at this point. It was crafted just before the accident. Afterwards, the connection was too unstable. I haven't seen my real body in almost 20 years. I... I don't even know what I look like any more."

Verden felt the tears coming before he saw them. He quickly folded the dragoness into his arms and cradled her head against his shoulder.

They hiked onward in one another's arms. Verden kept his eyes low, tracking the ground for evidence of the capital's presence. After several minutes, he spotted it. "Stop for a moment, I want to show you something," he murmured to Razia. He took her hand and guided her into a sitting position beside a small vine-choked boulder. He brushed aside the growth to reveal a single conical sprout. It stood rigidly strayed, tan segments overlapping almost like a smooth pinecone, their edges darkening to red.

Razia stared in fascination at it for several long seconds before blinking and turning to him expectantly. "What is it?"

"This," he began, swelling with pride, "is the border of my home, and a sign that it continues to flourish. It's a bamboo sprout. Given time, and nurturing, it will grow into something truly grand, perhaps even as large as the husk we saw on the river." He cupped the shoot with his hand, attuning to the vibrations of its life force with the topaz set on his brow. A brilliant green line blossomed through its lense, spiderwebbing out from the shoot southward, tangling with other lines into a beautiful network of roots before reaching another hub. "There," he whispered, pointing out the small cluster of segmented jade shafts rising from it, their leaves tangling into a dense canopy above their heads. "The next stage." His fingers lingered on the budding bamboo. Even here, kilometers yet from core, he swore he could feel the familiar beat. The lifeblood of the forest flowed even at its extremities. "Each is its own entity, yet a node of the greater whole. A gift from the Earthwill himself, and nearly as old. If you listen long enough, you can hear its thoughts."

The stands grew larger and more frequent with each passing hour, slowly replacing the kapok and espave trees that dominated so much of the region. Verden detoured them from their route to a final favored spot. The treeline thinned before breaking over a granite ridge, revealing the unabashed skyline of the forest heart. Razia let loose an audible gasp as she joined him on the overlook. A sea of bamboo spread before them, broken only by the occasional island of rock, open water, or blemish of void-ravaged earth. The tree-like grass network grew ever larger towards the center of the basin. The orderly trees seemed to march up into the sky, until the largest lost themselves in the clouds above.

Razia pulled him into a one-armed embrace, still drinking in the marvel. "Your secrecy was well worth the reveal."

The trail they followed became a tributary before flowing into a proper road. Bamboo crowded its borders in throngs, casting the wide hard-packed highway in pleasant dapples. They helped to hush the steady flow of traffic in either direction. Here, Azalan merchants of the southwestest in their brilliantly colored ponchos met refugees fleeing the Coalition from the north in a veritable tide. More than a few of the latter shot haunted glares at the red dragon in their mix. Verden held her close as they neared the city proper.

It was there, among trees tall enough to rival lesser mountains, they at last came to the seat of Marche's power: Silis'Cambium. Like its name implied, it tied so closely to nature as to form a part of it, its own layer bound beneath the bark. It took the techniques of Silis'Thrya and elevated them to impossible heights. Bamboo stalks sung into horizontal zig zags formed suspended highways teeming with elves and animals. Structures were expertly carved into the still-living trunks and enormous mushrooms that thrived in the perpetual twilight of the thicket floor. Many were indistinguishable from nature save for the occasional emission of smoke or sound.

Like the architecture, the fashion of the capital incorporated nature at every turn. Dresses and shirts woven from still-living vines and heavier gear made of cured Leatherleaf featured prominently on the busy streets and walkways to mix with the thousand fashions of the outside world. Verden drank in the welcoming visage of his home. The sights, sounds, and smells were just the same as he'd left them. It was as though he stepped into a beloved memory, though scant weeks passed since his departure. Here at the core, Cambium itself thrummed, their consciousness pulsing out across the Deep March in waves of earth magic. His own foci hummed to its beat.

He shook himself from his nostalgia to find Razia turning in slow circles, alternating between ogling at people around them and craning up topeless bamboo stalks.

"You're probably tired of me saying this by now, but the stories really don't do it justice," the dragoness murmured. "Thank you again for bringing me with you. You've made my life so much brighter in this single week."

"And you mine."

They locked eyes. Verden felt a kiss brewing, but a very brisk street vendor cart interrupted his plans with a devastating blow to the ankle.

"Yip!" he exclaimed, hopping out of the main thoroughfare. Razia seemed to find the situation utterly hilarious, for every few seconds she fought to contain a fit of giggles, usually unsuccessfully. This lasted their entire walk to Verden's own abode, interspersed with a healthy smattering of questions about the city. Verden did his best to answer as he tried to walk off the minor bruise. The pain faded, though the wound to his pride remained. It yet lingered when he at least stopped their stroll before one of the colossal canes.

Here, a smaller stalk had been shaped to spiral about its larger brethren, its leaves curling from the outside to form a railguard for the ascent. "Well, here we are, give or take fifty meters.

Razia whistled softly. "It turns out the stick was never up your butt; Rather, you were up the stick's."

"Vivid and eloquent poetry as always,"

"A mastermind of our generation. Heralds will sing of my wondrous wordcraft for centuries."

"Well, let's find you some quarters as lofty as your accolades."

The spiraling living ramp pushed the boundaries of floral manipulation, each segment of its length expertly shaped and spaced to mimic a staircase. The rough bark provided easy footing, letting the couple focus on the view of the city as it sprawled out around them, each turn of the stair providing a better vista.

Just as Verden's legs began to tire he saw the familiar marking of his door. Smooth black lines carved by domesticated giant aphids spiraled and criss crossed on its surface in a nearly symmetrical tangle. "Here we are," he announced, pushing it open with some effort. After several weeks unattended, the entrance had begun to heal closed.

"No lock?" Razia noted.

"No need. What elf would dare intrude on another's abode?"

"Some lovestruck diplomatic looking to shag in their barn, most likely."

"Touche," Verden replied wryly. "Now, care for the grand tour?"

Verden's status netted him an entire segment to himself. Nearly thirty feet in both height and diameter, its main floor was neatly divided in three segments. A sitting area dominated the largest portion, cozily strewn with heavy leather chairs and couches from his former mercenary headquarters. A privy nook sat secluded behind thickly draped fronds. "It's fueled by rainwater collected at the top and piped down to each level," he confided as they stepped into the smaller space. "No heated water, sadly."

"That's what I'm here for."

Verden beamed before continuing on. "Over here, this chute drops all the way to the roots. If you hear someone say they have to 'feed the tree', this is what they mean."

He showed her the kitchen area before ascending a woven ladder to the lower of two lofts. A wide mattress was sunken into the living wood. Various banners and mementos adorned the walls and shelves around, the largest spanning the open vault of the entire room. "And here's my little corner of the world. There's a guest loft up that ladder to the side that you're more than welcome to, but--" he placed his hand on a chunk of lolite embedded beside the bed. The bamboo split with a groan and widened, forming a porthole to the world beyond nearly 10 feet wide. All of Silis' Cambium seemed laid bare in its vista. "--I think I can persuade you to share this one."

"I think you might be onto something," Razia replied coyly, shuffling up to him on her knees. "Of course, I'll need to test the bed. Make sure it's up to standards. Fortunately I know just the individual to assist in my research."

"I think that can be arranged. But first, I propose we resupply our 'research materials'. I happen to know all the finest eateries in Cambium, and it simply wouldn't be proper to perform such high-stakes work on an empty stomach."

"Your proposal has been noted and accepted. The Institution looks forward to your findings. Razia stroked her chin. "Hmm, the Institution. I may have to make that my new title."

"What was your old one?"

"Find me some good food and I'll show you."

What followed can only be described as the happiest time of my life. Razia chose to stay with me. I showed her the city, and she showed me myself; parts I never expected to find. She proved an excellent

diplomat, able to tailor her wit to any situation. She met the queen, and, more terrifying still, my parents. I also had my first threesome, as odd as it seems to mention right after discussing my parents. In the days that followed I found it difficult to keep that naga's haunting flexibility out of my mind.

I made several diplomatic pilgrimages back to The Peak, though each time Razia abstained, choosing instead to remain within Cambium. I feared my returning without may cause anger, even violence, though most of the royal family I interacted with seemed to take it in stride. I earned the humorous title 'The Dragon-Napper'.

Through it all, our love continued to blossom. Ever the impatient one, she proposed to me on the anniversary of our first meeting, and I wholeheartedly accepted.

Not long after, we began to try for a child. It was ridiculous, impossible. Those who followed the ancient world theorem claimed two hundred million years separated our species. Yet something compelled us against the odds.

Part Four: The Shark

The main mechanism of mana transfer on Lorn is piezoelectricity: Electric charge that accumulates in crystals as a result of applied mechanical stress, or the converse; deformation caused by application of electromagnetic fields. The lenses themselves generate mana fields of a similar nature. By tuning a given crystal focus to its corresponding lense, it can manipulate elemental magic. The greater the amount of mana utilized, the more deformation is caused. As piezoelectricity is a reversible process, a crystal naturally sheds energy, allowing it to reverse deformation at a rate based on its size and purity. Channeling too much energy in a short period of time may cause the focus to deform to the point of shattering.

Below are the seven elemental lenses, the crystal systems they correspond to, and several of the most common types of minerals in each.

Water: Triclinic (turquoise, plagioclase, microcline, rhodonite, Kyanite, Labradorite, Amblygonite)

Darkness: Monoclinic (Lazulite, Mica, Diopside, Epidote, Moonstone, Chrysocolla)

Earth: Orthorhombic (Chrysoberyl, Topaz, Olivine, Dumortierite, Iolite, Zoisite)

Stone: Tetragonal (Zircon, Rutile, Cristobalite, Anatase, Apophyllite, Scapolite)

Fire: Trigonal (Quartz [Amethyst, prasiolite,], Corundum [Ruby, Sapphire], Agate, Carnelian)

Wind: Hexagonal (Beryl [Emerald, Aquamarine, Goshenite, Morganite], Apatite, Zincite, Sugilite, Phenakite, Moissanite, more Quartz [citrine, rose, aventurine, ametrine, agate])

Light: Cubic (Diamond, Zirconia, Garnet, Pyrite, Spinel)

Specific crystals have their own strengths and specializations within their respective elements, but that's a story better experienced than told.

An individual's ability to manipulate a given type of crystal is called their resonance. Some beings resonate more strongly with particular elements. Elves have long held a close tie to Olivine, and earth in general. Humans are praised for their generalist nature, with slight leanings towards light and wind. Individual human houses and bloodlines often have strong affinities for a particular element or group thereof. Dragons, being bound most closely to the lenses themselves, have evolved immense resonances to the point of diverging into distinct species.

Dovetailing off that last point, we arrive at a rather irksome conundrum. Like donkeys and horses, two members of separate dragon species can interbreed, producing an offspring with a powerful, if somewhat unstable, dual-system gemheart. This has led to some truly terrifying hybrids. But, like the mules of our analogy, these children of two species are woefully sterile. I'm sure you see the implications of this to our tale.

Razia's claws drummed nervously on the table, her cinnamon rolls untouched. Like the bench, the floor, and every other piece of furniture in sight, the eating surface was constructed of bamboo slats. Even here, on the far Eastern edge of the continent where the forest marched down to the coast, the versatile material remained ubiquitous.

A shadow fell across her, deep gray scales seeming to absorb the surrounding light.

Razia tried not to stare. She'd heard stories of the size many sharkfolk reached, but as always, reality exceeded imagination. Well over two meters of muscle topped with a mop of red hair loomed above her.

Tiburia took her seat across from Razia, a predatory smile revealing her razory rows of teeth as she eyed the other female up and down. "So, I understand you might be interested in my... services," she said.

Razia glanced around the small café, making sure no one was eavesdropping. "If you must put it so bluntly, then yes."

"What could a pretty little thing like you possibly need with my skills? Surely you could have your pick of anyone --or anything-- you desired."

Razia sighed. "It's not that. It's... well... for the past few months, my husband and I have been trying to conceive. We've tried everything, from timing, to potions, to spells. Nothing has worked. It seems that we're simply not compatible. Me being a halfbreed, fertilization may not be possible at all. But I understand that one of your 'abilities' can get around that."

Tiburia nodded. "Yup. That's what I advertise. So, has your hubby agreed to this?"

"He wasn't happy, but I talked him into it. We both realize this is likely the only way."

Tiburia nodded again. "Alright then. How would you like it done?"

Razia grimaced. "I'd like to enjoy this as little as possible."

Tiburia's predatory smile widened further. "Honey, you're with me. You're guaranteed to enjoy it. Now, let's retreat to a more fitting location."

Razia followed the shark out of the main room of the café down a narrow hidden hall to a bedroom. Razia couldn't help but notice that its shadowy walls were unusually thick. Soundproofed, most likely. A feeling of trepidation crept up her spine as Tiburia locked and barred the heavy oaken door behind them. The room beyond was red. The walls, carpet, bed drapings, and even the pillows, were a ruddy hue.

Razia opened her mouth, a half-formed question at the tip of her tongue, but Tiburia had already begun stripping off her clothes. She sighed and began to do the same, but the shark halted her with a quick protest. "Leave those, please. I'd like to remove them myself. Gets me in the mood and whatnot."

"Very well."

Tiburia finished removing her own clothes moments later, all except her panties. Razia noticed a large, mysterious bulge in the crotch of the black cloth. Rather than stalking slowly over to Razia, her powerful muscles coiled and she *leapt*, colliding with the dragoness and knocking her backwards onto the bed. She seized Razia's blouse in her clawed hands and strained, tearing away the garment's buttons in a single savage pull. Razia couldn't help but feel exhilarated at the shark's ferocity. Her pupils dilated, and she felt herself growing moist as Tiburia grabbed her pants around her waist and violently tugged them down her legs, taking her undies with them.

"Oh my, that's quite the body you have there," Tiburia crooned as she got her first look at Razia's fully exposed figure. She leaned forward on her knees for a kiss even as one of her clawed hand moved between the dragoness's legs to tenderly stroke her sex with two fingers. Razia tasted fresh fish and brine on the beast's excited breath.

Razia managed to pull back from Tiburia's ministrations. "What are you doing? As I said, I want to enjoy this as little as possible. Please get on with the mating."

"It's like I said," Tiburia replied. "You're guaranteed to enjoy it. This is all part of the package honey. But, if you're really so eager, I guess we can move things along a bit faster."

Tiburia rose and gripped her own panties. She yanked them down, revealing a pair of neat testicles between her muscular legs. A member rose from a horizontal slit above them immediately after being exposed, free at last to react to the sight of Razia's luscious body. Like its owner's hair, it glistened a deep crimson. The dragoness's eyes nearly crossed as Tiburia stepped forward, shoving the hardening phallus into her face, a bulbous knot just beginning to form at its base. "Blow," she commanded huskily.

Razia simply stared at her.

"Or would you prefer I went in dry? That can be painful with a rod this size."

Razia gave her one last dirty look before obediently parting her maw to begin suckling the mammoth phallus. She wetted it nearly to its base, feeling its slightly pointed tip brush the back of her throat. She began to withdraw, but Tiburia's soft, menacing question caused her to halt.

"Did I tell you to stop?"

Razia eyes narrowed to slits. *This bitch*. She raised both hands to fondle the shark's testicles, inciting a low groan as her claws dug deep and hard into the tangerine-sized bulges. She gripped them only long enough to send a warning before settling in to properly care for the rod. She continued to lick and suck at it, quickly developing a steady rhythm. Imagining it was Verden's, she deployed her arsenal of techniques, though the sheer size of it belied the fantasy. Despite the situation, she began to lose herself in the erotic act, purring softly as she suckled it.

Tiburia's hands grabbing her horns was the only warning she had. The shark pulled her head forward, forcing the enormous dick painfully down her throat and stretching her jaws with its knot. Razia gagged as the phallus seemed to explode, filling her esophagus with semen. She tried to pull away, but Tiburia's powerful grip held her firm. "Shh," Tiburia crooned. "Don't struggle. Just enjoy the little snack I'm giving you, my pet." The tight seal of its bulb left only one place for the phallus's discharge to go.

Still retching weakly, Razia began to gulp down the cum being pumped into her neck. The flow went on and on, and soon the dragoness felt a warm tingling as her tummy filled with the hot liquid. At last, Tiburia released her. Razia fell backwards onto the bed, gasping for air. She lay on her back, legs folded to one side, lungs heaving. The shark was upon her almost immediately, holding her, massaging her now slightly more pronounced belly. Razia noticed the black calligraphy of a curse mark beginning to form beneath her roving claw. She felt a wrongness, lurking beneath the warm drowsiness of her belly full of cum. An uneasy twisting in her gut, as if her entrails themselves were altered.

"Very good," Tiburia said softly even as she turned Razia to lay on her stomach. "You've completed the first of the three parts."

"Three?" Razia panted.

"Indeed. You see, to complete the seal, I must fill all three orifices. Three is a powerful number." Tiburia brought the dragoness's slender arms together behind her back and connected them with a pair of fur-lined handcuffs. Razia began to protest, but as she opened her mouth, Tiburia pressed a ball gag to her muzzle and buckled it neatly behind her head. "It has Dragonsbane in the core to keep your powers nice and subdued while we have our fun," she informed the wide-eyed reptile.

Razia tried to fight off the shark, but she found herself suddenly weak and helpless as the Dragonsbane took effect. All she could do was scream as Tiburia's roving fingers found the bud of her anus.

Tiburia lifted the dragoness's tail to better inspect the tight little hole. "Ah, very nice. Tight, yet supple, and *oh* so deliciously warm. I could certainly have some fun with you." she praised,, slipping a second clawed finger into the tunnel beside the first. She slowly rubbed her other hand up and down the dragoness's firm ass. A third finger squeezed in with its siblings, stretching her painfully.

Suddenly, the fingers withdrew. Razia craned her neck to see what was happening just in time to see Tiburia rise up and place one hand on each buttock. She slowly drew the glorious mounds apart, revealing the splendor of Razia's anus and vagina. Then she reverently lowered her head between them, just beneath the base of her tail and pressed her lips to the bud.

Razia experienced the oddest sensation as she felt Tiburia's tongue begin to worm into the cavity. It slithered deep within her, its cool, slimy length lubricating her innards in a way that sent shivers racing down the dragoness's scales. Deeper and deeper she wormed, each delicious centimeter causing Razia to wriggle with mixed pleasure and nausea. Finally, just as Razia felt herself begin to moisten anew at the strange sensation, Tiburia withdrew, spitting twice on the bud to further lubricate it. Then the shark rose and moved upwards until her powerful legs straddled the dragoness's lovely hips. Razia let out a small squeak as she felt the tip of Tiburia's rocky phallus press firmly against the entrance to her anus.

"Here we go," Tiburia whispered, nipping at Razia's tufted ear. She began pressing her hips forward.

Razia's muscles contracted, desperately trying to ward off the enormous intruder. She was no match for the slippery spear though. The dragoness whimpered as her anus was stretched wider than it had ever been before. It felt as though her insides were being squashed aside as Tiburia's enormous shaft slowly entered her. The pain only grew with each passing second as the shark pressed deeper inside of her. The shark made small, slow thrusting motions, each push slipping another centimeter into her.

"Yesss," Tiburia cooed as her knot pressed against Razia's entrance. "You took that like a champ. Now we can begin the real fun."

She lifted her hips, withdrawing until only the head of her cock remained inside, then pressed forward in one long, smooth motion. Razia moaned softly as she felt every inch of the rigid shaft slide into her all at once. Despite the excruciating pain, she felt her crotch grow still more moist with arousal. Her pupils widened, and her nostrils flared as her breath quickened. Her muffled screams died, slowly replaced by grunts and groans. More soft croons and compliments flowed from the shark as she gently stroked the dragon's neck and hair. She continued her long slow series of thrusts, and gradually the pain of the enormous member subsided, leaving behind only an exotic new kind of pleasure. Tiburia seemed to notice her growing enjoyment of the perversion, for she suddenly tangled her legs about the dragoness's and rolled to the side, pulling Razia with her. Her hand slipped down to explore the dampness between her victim's legs. The shark's fingers made soft squishing sounds as they delved into the dragon's sex.

"Mmm, having fun are we?" she asked, massaging Razia's clitoris. She brought the wetted fingers up and slipped them beneath the dragoness's gag. Razia tasted her own sex on her tongue. "I guess we can speed things up a little then." Tiburia's toned calves tightened about her, and she thrust forward violently. One arm held the dragoness just beneath her breasts, pinning her tightly, while the other returned to her crotch.

she lowered the dragoness back to the ground and sank atop her once more. Razia felt two of the shark's fingers sink deep within her. They wormed and groped about within until they struck a particularly pleasurable spot, enticing a throaty moan of enjoyment from the dragoness.

"Ah, there we are," Tiburia purred. She began to mercilessly rub and tap at the rough patch of Razia's vaginal wall, extracting more muffled moans and whimpers from the gagged dragoness. She matched rhythm with her thrusting hips, stroking Razia's G-spot each time her testicles slapped against her buttocks. Razia's vision swam, her eyes teary from the mixed pleasure and pain of the herm's actions. She felt a pressure building deep within her vagina. It was accompanied by another pressure: The knot slapping against her stretched hole with each thrust. With one last mighty heave, Tiburia forced it past the sphincter. The dragon's toes curled reflexively as she was unwillingly brought to orgasm. Wave after wave of pleasure rocked her body. Female ejaculate squirted from her glands, coating the shark's probing fingers even as her pussy clamped tightly about the invaders, milking them instinctively. Tiburia's groping fingers accelerated, rapidly feathering the orgasming dragon's G spot and eliciting fresh muffled shrieks from her. The first wave of pleasure scarcely finished ravaging her when Razia's body was rocked by a second orgasm. The shark pressed on, unrelenting. The reptile's eyes squeezed shut. She tried to curl into a fetal position, but Tiburia held her in place, a hand still working ruthlessly between her spasming legs. The dragon's vision began to darken under the relentless sensations. She barely noticed that Tiburia too had found release, filling her depths with another hot creamy eruption, distending her belly still more.

It felt like an eternity later that the last vestiges finally faded away. Razia's breath came in ragged gasps as she lay in the shark's embrace. Her half-lidded eyes barely perceived Tiburia's hands raising to loosen her gag. It drooped around her neck, still near enough to weaken. Again the shark kissed her. The intense intercourse had dulled Razia's senses and emotions, awaking more primitive, carnal thoughts within her. She readily returned the herm's passion, allowing the other's tongue to freely explore her mouth. The bed creaked softly as Tiburia shifted, pulling herself free of the dragon's tailhole. Her hand remained between the dragoness's thighs, continuing to gently stroke her drenched sex. Without breaking their kiss, she reached back and undid the handcuffs binding Razia's wrists. The dragonsbane left her with barely enough energy to resist at all, and Tiburia easily brought her arms above her head and bound them once more, this time around the bed's headboard.

"Why... why are you doing this?" Razia managed through the haze clouding her mind.

"This is what you wanted, remember?" The shark smirked. "You wanna be able to have a kid. Curse magic works in mysterious ways." And indeed, Razia clearly noticed the black swirl of lines on her belly growing more intricate.

Before she could respond, Tiburia's head dipped between her legs and began lapping up the ejaculate still moistening her sex. Razia let loose a whimper as the long tongue wormed into her once more, exploring a new region. Her hips involuntarily bucked at the strained pleasure.

Once she had been fully cleaned, Tiburia pulled back, smacking her lips. "*Delicious*. I could definitely get used to that taste." She slowly trailed kisses up the dragoness's abdomen, pausing momentarily to daintily suckle each of her breasts before reaching her mouth once more. She felt the herm's girthy cock rub against her gorged belly, its curve sliding between her swollen labia. For a few minutes there was only the sounds of mouths moving against one another as the shark teased her. Finally, Razia felt something against her throat. She looked down to find a wide silken red scarf wrapped about her neck. She raised an eyebrow at the shark.

"This is so that gorgeous neck of yours doesn't get bruised. Have you ever experienced erotic asphyxiation before?" Tiburia asked. Razia shook her head. "Well then, you're in for quite a treat. Breath play, when done properly, can massively increase the effects of an orgasm. You may be frightened at first, but it won't do you any permanent harm."

Razia opened her mouth to protest, but with a twist of her hand Tiburia tightened the choker, cutting off the dragon's oxygen.

"Now now, I wasn't finished. We're going into the last leg of our little magic trip. If you enjoyed the last part, this one will be at least twice as fun," Tiburia smirked.

A red spot appeared at the bottom of Razia's vision. She craned to see its cause, but barely budged under the herm's iron grip on her choker. Still, she managed to glimpse the source of Tiburia's mirth. A *second* phallus was quickly emerging for her slit directly above its brethren. The shark allowed it to come to full attention. She wiggled her hips slightly, seeming to admire the way both members danced in the soft lamplight. Razia opened her muzzle futilely to moan as Tiburia rubbed both cocks through the puffy slit of her labia, each one dragging across her clitoris. The herm repeated this motion several times before sliding one hand down to position both dicks with splayed fingers, aligning them with the dragoness's sex and still slightly gaping anus. She held them there for a moment, slowly mounting pressure with an arch of her back until they slid in, filling the dragoness as nothing had before. After so much stimulation, her loins readily accepted the girth, and soon Tiburia resumed her rhythmic pounding. It offered counterpoint to the pounding of Razia's heartbeat in her skull, growing louder with each beat as her heart futilely tried to pump oxygen up her constricted arteries. Her vision darkened at the edge until only Tiburia's face remained. Just as Razia felt herself begin to slip into unconsciousness, the scarf slackened. The fish's mouth was there an instant later. Razia readily accepted her hot breath. Her leadened legs lifted seemingly of their own accord, wrapping around the shark, further encouraging her.

The cycle continued, Tiburia loosening her silken collar just enough to drag her back from the abyss each time, keeping her on the razor edge of consciousness. Razia soon lost track of the orgasms as they wracked her one after another, until, with another mighty thrust, Tiburia knotted her for the final time. The twin lumps of flesh pressed against one another through her canals, eliciting a feeling of complete fullness. The feeling only intensified as another warm load of cream flowed from the shark into her waiting womb and rectum. Razia let loose a rapturous moan against Tiburia's eager maw. For that single instant, she wholly belonged to the herm; mind, body and soul.

The two beasts remained locked together for several minutes, huffing softly. At last, Tiburia pulled away, shifting down to rest her face on Razia's gorged abdomen beside the now completed curse mark. "Well old girl, looks like we pulled it off again." She reached up to full free the dragonsbane gag, and Razia felt a sudden surge of strength.

The shark's hand lingered on Razia's face, softly stroking her jaw with a thumb before invading her mouth. The dragon absently suckled it, still basking in the afterglow. Finally, she gathered her thoughts enough to pull away and whisper "Did it work?"

"Sure looks that way. Barring death or a particularly powerful magical cleansing, your womb will remain enhanced and readily accept whatever you happen to dump into it."

"Th... thank you."

"Right," Tiburia replied, bustling to remove the restraints, her tone suddenly brisk and businesslike. "Now, that will be 20 carats. We do offer an installment plan in addition to direct deposit."

"Wh..." clarity returned in full force as Razia's natural treasure hoarding instincts kicked in. "20 CARATS? ARE YOU FOOKIN' KIDDING ME? WHAT SORT OF SCAM ARE YOU RUNNING HERE?!? I SWEAR ON ME MUM--"

Part Five: The River

But of course, an obvious piece of the puzzle yet remains. Void magic. The catalyst for so much of this wondrous romp. Nature, or at least Lorn's nature, seeks a balance. Light and darkness, fire and water, earth and air. But what of nature itself? The magic of life itself seems to lack an opposite. Some philosophers claim this is where the Void comes in.

Nearly every being on the planet knows of that evil that so briefly united us, but so few know what lies beyond the silvery rips in the sky. The veil that seems to refract the world in impossible hues. And indeed, refraction is the crux of its effect upon the world. Light, matter, thoughts, even space itself, Void magic operates on the basis of distortion; of taking a thing and changing it fundamentally. For its place of origin, this resulted in a nightmarish gray hellscape of twisted flora and fauna. At some point in its history, an entity was created with the sole purpose of merging with all other entities, creating a sort of hive mind. Thralls of the collective, twisted alien creatures with a litany of random body parts, seem mindless and feral, but their overall actions betray a shrewd puppetmaster. Those who venture through the breach walk a perilous path: A smarter enemy with a far more intimate knowledge of the battlefield. Still, the defense is far from lacking in volunteers, spearheaded by the Nova Knights, the force guarding the gateway stands thousands strong, hoping to prevent another catastrophe with their blood and sweat.

Verden and Razia reunited in the local inn. The dragon was too bruised, bloated, and bleary for much conversation. They simply lay in one another's arms. The soothing, electrifying contact of skin against scales, the warmth of her body, and the soft pulse of her heartbeat so close to his own allayed his worries. If he concentrated, he thought he could hear the tiny buzzing of her fragmented gemheart setting a beat to its rhythm. Each breath tickled the magenta locks splayed across his chin and neck. He absently stroked the mane running down her back.

In the moonless night, the room was pitch black save for the occasional glint of green of his mate's eyes, peeking down to make sure she wasn't crushing him. Her weight settled comfortably across his chest, one claw cupping his cheek.

He lay silently for several minutes, simply basking in the sound of Razia's breathing, before finally uttering the question that weighted his mind. "Do you think it worked?"

"We'll know soon enough," she whispered.

He awoke to find himself immured once more in the hot silken confines of the dragoness's mouth. Her teasing tongue and succulent suction drew him from the deep slumber.

She smiled as she felt him stirring, shifting one hand to cup his balls while the other played in reassuring circles across his abdomen. Gradually, her efforts intensified.

In their year together, they'd become experts in one another's needs. She effortlessly found the perfect rhythm, reading his body language like an open book. It didn't take long for her expert claws and maw to draw him over the edge.

She clambered up him until her hips straddled his own, still swallowing down the last vestiges of his seed. She ground her hips against his still-tender member as she leaned over him. "Now that you're properly warmed up, let's answer last night's question."

Razia's tongue curled its forked tip closed against his skin, showering his cheeks and chin with tiny kisses before slipping between his parted lips. She sank deeper to share an intimate kiss. As she explored him, she mischievously snuck a few residual strands of his own sperm down his throat. Her rolling hips maneuvered his cock between her folds before sinking against him, sending it into her warm sinuous depths.

Their lovemaking was slow, tantric, exquisite; their entwined bodies the closest two souls could hope to be. It suffused Verden with soft, heady, aching pleasure.

As always, Razia seemed almost supernaturally attuned to his body, for as he approached apotheosis once more, she broke from her soft moans to whisper in his ear.

"You're going to make a great father."

Her legs threaded tightly through his would accept no other outcome. And so, by the orgasm-induced milking of her silken tunnel, he came in her.

It wasn't his strongest climax, nor his hardest. Rather, it felt warm, almost comforting. The sight of home after a long journey. The first rays of dawn after a winter night. And indeed, an air of finality seemed to hang over it. Though it seemed ridiculous given his limited knowledge of biology, he felt he could sense their essences coming to union within her.

When at last they uncoupled to lay happily side by side, he glanced down at her abdomen. The curse mark stood out starkly against the pale scales, so black it almost seemed to warp the light around it.

"Do you think...?"

She took his hand in hers and squeezed it. "Yes, yes I do."

The changes over the next month were subtle yet undeniable. Razia gained several pounds, much to her displeasure. She began craving unusual foods. Mostly exotic meats, some he wasn't sure were even edible. Horseshoe crab, magma snails, bear meat, and at least a dozen types of Rotisserie chicken basted in various flavors joined the list.

The preparations seemed daunting. What would their child, or children, look like? How would they be born? He imagined solemn little elves hatching from eggs, using their chins as chisels. It took all his considerable willpower to stifle a laugh as they considered different swaddling blanket options.

Amidst the happy chaos, summons arrived once more from Shiza's Peak. There was talk of setting up a formal, permanent embassy for Deepmarch within the mountain. Pyrroth's forces moved ever closer to Trinity, the heartlands of the Agglo. Their fall would establish the Peak as the greatest power in the north, and it seemed the queen wished to further cement their relations in preparation.

Despite Razia's condition, or perhaps because of it, she decided to accompany him.

Summer cast off its final waves of heat as they set out. A cooler breeze blew at their backs for the first leg of the journey, seeming to urge them onwards towards the fringe of the Deepmarch. They angled slightly north of their previous crossing, giving Verden a chance to show off a few more unexplored natural wonders.

On the fifth day, as they trekked along a tributary of the Ronhallahan, Razia heard a noise.

She'd grown fond of water, despite its inferiority to magma-- you could hardly float on it properly!-- and the sound of rushing water was a soothing symphony. At first she mistook the low rumblings for a precariously balanced boulder somewhere in the flow, its rockings producing deep rumblings as they sometimes did. But they persisted, growing louder with each passing moment.

She halted her juicy boytoy with a raised hand and knelt to press her ear to the ground. The bluestem grass tickled maddeningly but she shouldered through, focusing on the rumbling. The vibrations traveled more strongly through the silty earth, and she could pick out individual beats.

Not rocks, she realized. *Hooves*.

"Did you smell a rabbit again?" Verden asked.

"I wish. No. Riders. Sounds like quite a few of them, coming from behind. What do you want to do?"

"We're still in the homeland, if barely. We should be fine. Unless..." he raised his hand, making an L with thumb and index finger as a makeshift scope. He pointed it behind them, then angled it slightly northeast. The color drained from his face.

"What's wrong?" inquired Razia, sensing his fear.

"We should hide." He took her hand and urged her into a run towards the treeline. "It's just a hunch, but the logistics make too much sense. This was the fastest discreet route from the Roan Wastes to the Peak.

The realization struck hard. "Not riders. Runners." Razia wracked her brain for history knowledge. The enormous prairie dominated much of the eastern northlands. Since time immemorial, it was ruled by the equid clans. She'd seen a few of them in Cambium. Most were hulking, musclebound nomads sporting hooves in place of feet or talons.

Roan had officially abstained from the war, but it was a fractured and factionous territory.

"Mercenaries?"

"Aye," Verden replied. "Likely trying to raid Pyrroth's supply lines."

"And if they're on the payroll of the enemy...." With the influx of Agglomeration refugees, hatred of Pyrroth and his kind ran high in Silis'Cambium. Razia was no stranger to discrimination. But they were far from the safety of the city now.

Another sound broke the rising thunder of hoofbeats. A sharp, excited braying.

Hounds.

"Voidblight," Verden swore. "We have to break our scent trail. There should be a crossing a few clicks up." He managed a grin, though his heart clearly wasn't in it. "Think you're still up for sprinting?"

"Are you calling me fat?"

"No, but--"

"We dragons were built for speed. You don't stand a chance, pretty boy." With that, Razia broke into a full run. Verden stayed hot on her heels.

The river twisted and turned through low hills, the foliage thick enough to obscure vision beyond thirty meters. Their pursuers remained out of sight, their presence marked only by the terrifying pounding of hooves, growing louder with each passing minute. Razia dodged through nettles and fallen trees, channeling as much as she dared through her gemheart to augment her speed. Puffs of flame flared beneath her heels with every step, propelling her forward.

It began to rain as they wove among the trees. A light, mean rain that dampened spirits more than earth. The unpleasant chafing damp did little for her nerves. *Damned sky water, showing up at the most inopportune moments as usual.*

They broke from the woods, coming upon a small field marking a sharp bend in the river.

"Alright we should be able to--" Verden skidded to a stop. "No," he said, mortified. "No!!!"

A large boulder sat in the center of the channel. Its presence altered the eddies around it, creating a wide, deep furrow in the gravel downstream, making crossing impossible without swimming.

"Maybe we can..." the words died Razia's throat as she looked behind them.

Too late.

A horde emerged from the trees behind them. Sunlight glinted off steely axes and buckles. Razia counted at least thirty warriors. Most stood well over six feet tall, bare-chested save for straps and bits of armor crisscrossing them, muscles glistening from their prolonged run and the rain. They sported heads reminiscent of bulls and horses, many with uncut gems woven into their manes. Each of them bore the same armband: A silver demonic skull set on black. Though she'd never seen it in the flesh, its description was whispered in fearful tones all through Cambium. They spoke of the endless legions of undead that sacked Gavantret. The crest of Nightfall.

A particularly tall one, her build and dappled hair reminiscent of a clydesdale, gave a small hand signal. They began to fan out.

They don't seem to be from any one particular clan. Verden was likely right about then being mercenaries.

Verden drew Glyphslinger. They spared him a glance, but they seemed far more focused on her.

"Gentlemen, ladies," Verden said, trying to sound casual. "A fine morning, isn't it?"

"Sure is, now that we've found you," the mercenary who gave the signal said. "They said you elves were traitors, and I guess seeing is believing."

"We're just diplomats passing through. We don't want any trouble."

"Oh I think we're well passed the point of diplomacy. 'Sides, my folks here could use a little warmup. Don't go dying on us too quick now." She turned to the other warriors. "Try to take Red alive. They're worth more that way."

The Roanians finished their half-circle, pinning them with their backs to the riverbend.

"Stay behind me," Verden commanded. "You shouldn't fight in your condition."

"Like Hells. We don't have a choice here."

They moved in languidly, some chuckling or hissing threats. They seemed casual, confident, though they tensed each time Razia moved.

They're worried I'm a full fledged dragon. How can I use this? Her own shortsword dangled loose in one hand. Many Peak dwellers thought swordplay a pointless hobby outside of penis fencing. Claws could be shaped to be stronger, sharper, and far more conveniently on hand. Fortunately, Eris had shown her the basic forms.

She raised it, channeling enough fire to ignite the blade for an instant. Though she used a different foci, the fragments of amethyst in her chest buzzed in warning, still close enough to pick up stray mana.

Several of the mercenaries paused, raising their weapons in alarm.

"Back the fuck off," Razia shouted. "Or I'll turn the lot of you to dust."

"Remember your training, y'all," their leader replied from her position in the center of the arc. "Ain't no thing but a thing."

They closed the gap. The lead two bore down on Verden, their axes swinging in wide arcs. He narrowly sidestepped the first and slashed forward with a two-handed form at the other. His swing shifted at the last possible instant, dipping down to catch the axe where the handle met the blade. With a sharp crack, the head sheared free and went spinning past, grazing his hair as it flew into the river.

He stepped into the swing, pressing the attack before the horse could recover. But his first foe had already rebounded from his missed swing. He hacked at Verden's exposed flank, forcing the elf to dance backwards.

Verden let out a low growl of effort. The olivine stone on his forehead glowed a sharp green. His hand contorted into a twisted hook as it guided the magic.

The kneehigh grass around his attackers wove to mimic his movements, tying themselves around their ankles. The axe-wielding bull's momentum carried him forward and he fell with a bellow. Glyphslinger rose to meet him. The blade sheared into his neck muscles. Razia winced as she heard it strike a vertebrae. Verden yanked it free and spun towards his other incapacitated assailant, who had managed to draw a knife.

Before he could engage, a blast of sand struck and sent him staggering back.

Razia cast about, searching for the source. Most of the remaining mercenaries had ignored Verden, instead trying to close around her. Over their shoulder, she caught a glimpse of a black stallion in the back, holding a large pouch in one palm, trails of sand rising from it to swirl around him.

Wills. They have channelers too.

The Roanians that approached closest wielded shields alongside clubs and hammers; weapons better suited to break and incapacitate rather than cut. *Better against my scales, too. They can turn away a blade no problem, but blunt trauma....*

Behind them trailed several warriors wielding chains.

Getting a bit ahead of themselves.

She foined forward at one, causing her to skip back a pace. As she did, the others sidestepped, trying to fully surround her.

Razia backed up towards the low cliff bordering the river, swinging her blade in lazy arcs to keep them somewhat at bay. They seemed intent on corralling more than attacking, wanting to gain every possible advantage before making their move. She spared a glance to Verden.

Her lover had rubbed the worst of the grit from his eyes and was furiously parrying two mercenaries. His bound foe had extricated himself from the grass and retrieved his fallen companion's axe. The troupe leader herself fought alongside him, wielding a pair of handaxes. Glyphsinger spun in a constant flurry, its wielder using its superior reach to keep them at bay. As she watched, the leader managed to catch the blade in her axe head's groove and lunge in to deliver a powerful kick to his side. Verden tumbled back with a cry, narrowly regaining his footing before the two horses re-engaged.

A club swung at her leg. Razia crouched, just enough to deflect the weapon. Her leg still numbed from its impact. She leapt forward towards her surprised assailant. A chain flew in from the side, but its trajectory was wide, aimed at where she stood a moment before. Her sword opened a deep slit across the tan bull's belly; large enough to be fatal, though not immediately.

She twisted towards her next nearest opponent, her sword held horizontal over her head in anticipation of a downward swing.

Her prediction proved accurate, but the blow still sent her staggering back, her arm ringing from the blows force. Another chain snaked for her ankles. She channeled again, sending agony through her chest, and leapt with explosive force.

Her jump took her momentarily above the hulking mercenaries. She saw Verden again. He fought one on one against their leader, sparks dancing from their clashing weapons. He limped with each step, a red stain marring his left hip where her hoof broke the skin. Both fighters sported half a dozen small nicks and bruises.

With a primal yell, Verden caught her swinging axe with his hilt. Glyphslinger spun in his hands down towards her exposed side. She was off-balance, her other axe too far to block.

A flash of sunlight caught Razia's eye as she seemed to hang suspended in the air. The mare dropped to the ground. Verden staggered back, looking confused. He looked down. Crimson blossomed in his chest around the metal spike embedded there. He grasped feebly at it before looking at Razia.

Both lovers struck the ground at the same time.

Razia sat in a heap, staring numbly at Verden's body between forest of legs. She willed him with every fiber of her being to get up. But he lay, unmoving. In her heat sight, he had already begun to cool.

Verden was dead. Her world was dead.

Slowly she looked up at her attackers. *No*, she thought. *His murderers.*

Her vision reddened until it matched the pool on her husband's chest. Her gemheart vibrated a clear, harsh tone. Its peal lingered in the air, growing sharper and sharper until it cut silent without warning.

A swallowtail alighted on her trembling hand.

Something took over. It was raw and primal, seething with a rage she couldn't express. Her body acted almost of its own accord.

Her arm shot out. A small explosion beneath Glyphslinger launched it into her waiting palm, fully severing a pair of legs at the knee as it passed. In her fugue state, she barely felt the pain in her chest.

She leapt to her feet. Wind swirled about her, lending force to her movements. She dove headfirst at a mottled gray mare. The mercenary moved to block with her shield, too slow. Razia's jump carried her high, and she spun the greatsword over the barrier to ram its pommel into the woman's skull. Bone cracked beneath steel. The weapon's weight barely registered, the magic coursing through her veins making it feel feather-light to her enhanced muscles.

Vents, dormant since before the accident, flared wide to connect her gem sack to her stomach. She felt the gases within ignite. A gout of fire erupted from her maw towards a pair of hammer wielders. Her leap placed her at an unexpected angle, and the flames licked around their shields to ignite fur and hair. They screamed. The further one's hand worked frantically and a lense of sand began to coalesce before him, but it was a pointless effort. A bucket of water before a firestorm. The hungry flames consumed their cries before engulfing them completely, leaving a pair of charred corpses in their wake.

A chain looped around her ankle. The piece of Razia that fought concentrated her magic on the scales there. The iron *melted*, turning white before dissolving. Her toes curled around the liquid as it fell to the ground and she kicked out her leg to send it spraying into another approaching foe. He cursed as it fell across his chest to smoke and sizzle like branding irons.

Another trio dared enter her range. One of them danced behind her, trusting his allies to keep her busy.

She bit him.

Her fangs sank into shoulder meat. Warm, coppery blood flooded her senses. He tasted exactly like undercooked steak.

She felt her chops curl into a savage rictus. *Not warriors*, she thought. *Prey.*

A giddy need to feast overwhelmed her. Her lips pulled back in a savage grin even as she pulled back from the stallion, ripping flesh and muscle free in her wake. Streamers of blood cascaded from her maw as she spun away from the reeling foe back to his two companions.

The air around her grew hotter with each passing moment. Finally, it ignited, wreathing her in a halo of flame and destroying most of her untreated clothing. From within the maelstrom, the entire world appeared conflagrated. She would make that a reality.

As she prepared to leap, a bolt whizzed towards her leg. She caught the unmistakable glint of amber at its tip.

Whatever rational part of her mind that remained recoiled in horror. *Dragonsbane*.

The troupes' casual confidence suddenly made sense.

She ducked past a swinging axe and dropped into a defensive crouch, searching for the source. No twang of a bowstring had registered over the din of battle, which meant....

Her eyes locked with the mage's. The despicable creature that had dealt the killing blow seconds earlier. The source of her rage.

Too late.

The second bolt took her in the thigh.

Scales magically tempered to turn aside all but the strongest blade seemed to shred like paper. The impact registered before the pain. A sharp force driving her back, the sharp ringing jolt of rock on bone, and the sudden horrific cold of shrapnel burrowing through flesh overtook her. The agony followed an instant later, along with something far worse. Crippling weakness sucked the life from her limbs. The fire died from her skin and lungs as a deep chill rippled through her scales. Her gem heart, abuzz with the fuel of her fury, halted as if clotheslined. Its shards dug hard into their casing, producing fresh agony in tandem with her tattered leg. She felt several of the shards further splinter from the strain.

She fell limp in the thick grass. Her body tried to spasm, tried to constrict her lungs with a groan. Even that felt an insurmountable task beneath the crippling disruption of the amorphous fragments coursing through her body.

Terror replaced rage. She was back in the red room, helpless beneath Tiburia's sadistic claws.

But reality was far more terrifying than nightmare.

A shadow fell over her. A hoof landed on her back, driving the wind for her. Hands seized her arms as she struggled to regain it, yanking them behind her back. Cold biting chains encircled her forearms, pinning them tightly in place. The same powerful grip bent each leg back and tied them ankle to thigh. Her leg screamed anew at the movement. Her own attempted scream only earned a mouthful of weeds.

They trussed her like a hog for slaughter, leaving little leeway for movement. One final length of chain wrapped twice about her snout to lock her jaw firmly closed.

Finally, the hand tangled in her hair and hoisted her skyward by the scalp. She writhed against the grip.

"Woo! Feisty one!" the mercenary leader's voice boomed out beside her ear. "What did I say about that warmup, huh?" Her voice dropped to a husky menace. The same tone Tiburia had used months before. "A shame about Husk, Marly, Laura, and Gale. A damn, *damn* shame." Her voice resumed its normal roar. "This hot piece should fetch a nice little sum, but first, how 'bout show her some good old fashioned Waste hospitality."

Razia heard the drawing of a knife.

Little remained of her clothing after the fighting and flames. The charred cloth came free easily, leaving her fully bare, dangling in the clearing like a piece of meat.

The sound of opening buckles and creaking leather rang loud in the sudden ominous silence. She felt something flop against her dangling tail before it was unceremoniously shoved aside. A moment later, a rapidly hardening schlong sprang to attention, slapping against her slit. It was massive, curling down between her thighs, its slightly flared head spanning to her navel. Razia thrashed again to no avail.

The Clydesdale roughly hoisted her still higher to line up her waving cock with its target. There was none of Molokai's dominant inevitability, nor Verden's tender brushes, nor Tiburia's predatory teasing. The horse treated her like a sack of grain, each casual movement seemed designed to cause as much discomfort as possible.

The inconceivably large cockhead pressed hard against her dry folds. The mercenary leader shifted her grip on Razia's legs, pulling her down as much as supporting her. A terrible pressure built against her entrance. She tensed her muscles to their limit, tried to draw her legs closed, tried to wriggle away. The pain was unbearable. She had to get away. Had too--

Squelch.

Stars flashed across her vision. Her toes flexed and curled. The horse was *inside her*. The medial ring nudged at her entrance, a full 6 inches of the massive rod already passed. It filled her to the brim and beyond. Muscles not meant to stretch sounded their protest as they strained around the girth.

The clydesdale bucked hard against her, sending her shaft jolting against Razia's cervix. She gasped in pain once again, the field vanishing beneath a film of tears.

"Tight little bitch," the mercenary said approvingly, patting her rump. She lifted Razia again and let her bounce down hard on her cock. Her vaginal walls, already strained taught, dragged painfully against the shaft with each motion.

The horse bucked again; hard, short bursts that sent pain lancing through Razia's cunt. The grip held her thighs wide on display for the troupe, and she could hear a few hungry chuckles over her own muffled cries.

"Alright, that should be enough warmup. Donahue, I'd say the honor's all yours. Get on up here."

The channeler approached, his black coat shining from exertion. An insufferably confident, knowing smile plastered his long face. "'Preciate it, chief," he muttered. "How you wanna do this?"

"I reckon she's all wet and raring to go now. Lord knows she slicked me up real good." To accent her point, she lifted Razia high once more, letting her phallus flop free. It glistened wetly with Razia's juices. Her face burned with rage and humiliation. "You go on and hold her for a minute. Me--"

Razia's heart leapt into her throat, her eyes bulged and rolled madly, as she felt the flared head trail up her slit to press firm and true against her tailhole.

"I reckon I'll have a bit more fun 'round back." Her hand massaged at Razia's sphincter, lubricating it with her own stolen juices.

The war dragon fought for her life. She snarled, she thrashed, she strained until the chains cut bloody furrows into her scales. But nothing slowed the equines. Her husband's killer pressed up against her naked body and gripped her firmly around the buttocks. He leaned back to thrust his long, slender member into her entrance, parted slightly yet from its previous filling. At the same time the pressure began to mount in her rear. She clenched as hard as she could, desperately trying to rebut the veritable battering ram of a cock. Its wide head spread against the bud, its edges tickling the inner borders of her cheeks. She could feel each bump adorning its flat top as it pressed insistently against her. Second by second she could feel herself caving inwards, her sphincter no match for the four powerful arms dragging her down upon it. She spread painfully, then agonizingly, her behind fighting for all its worth even as it unwillingly began to swallow the tip. It deformed and stretched until she hardly recognized the sensations emerging from it. It bowed inwards until she was certain it would tear. Finally, with a sickening lurch, the head slipped past her ring.

"Got damn, her pooper's even tighter," the clydesdale crowed, releasing her prey momentarily to wipe her brow. Razia's toes spasmed and curled as she slipped a few inches lower, driving both shafts deeper.

In Tiburia's bedroom, she thought she learned what it was to be completely and utterly filled. That experience seemed a warm gentle fingering in comparison. The twin shafts *became* her, leaving no room physically or mentally; Her body little more than a stretched sleeve for their amusement. Each tiny jolt threatened to split her in two. Her torso seemed wrapped by invisible iron bands. Her legs hung leaden and useless.

Bile rose in her throat as the chief's grip returned and began to ease her down further. "Ahhhhh, that's the way," she crooned. She felt the telltale bump of the median ring slide past her entrance. Up and up she went, contorting Razia's rectum to fit her member, plumbing depths never before explored. A deep, nauseating ache grew from the unnatural penetration, rising over the drone of her agonized entrances and leg. Finally, she felt the woman's rocky abdomen bump against the base of her tail. The chieftain gave a few sharp shallow bucks to make sure she was well seated. "Just like training fillies back home."

Her mind was so consumed by the horror unleashed behind her that Donahue's actions barely registered. The stallion idly groped at her breast, his huge hands kneading it roughly, as he continued his own assault. What he lacked in the Clydesdales girth, he made up for in length, and each cautious thrust pushed worryingly at her cervix.

"She ain't much one for depth," he complained.

"Some girls get deeper when they're proper riled up. Just gotta hit it right is all," the chief replied. "Let's you and me get a good rhythm going. That should help." The aching receded, sent off by a painful tugging, as the clydesdale withdrew all but the head of her cock. "Just try not to break her just yet. The others have earned a go at her as well."

The chief slammed home.

There was nothing left to scream with. The crushing tightness of two massive cocks had driven the last vestiges of fight from her, compressing her organs until it was all she could do to remain conscious. She fell limp as the fleshy obelisk crashed deep into her rectum.

As the chief entered, the channeler withdrew. Just as she bottomed Razia out and began to retreat, he slammed back once more, matching his leader's heartless vigor. Her stomach seemed to bow inward from the power of it.

They plowed into her. Hard, deep, pistoning thrusts, alternating like a team of skilled rowers. The chieftain's balls slapped against her ass with each impact. Their huge bodies squeezed close, threatening to crush her amongst their rocky walls of flesh. Her head lulled helplessly to the side as she fought to stay lucid.

Beneath the grunting, braying beasts mutilating her innards, beneath the litany of pain sensors crowding her brain, beneath even the horror at losing everything, lurked something she could not confront: Her body was enjoying it. The explosive sensations against her tingling tunnels coupled with the feeling of complete and utter helplessness left her all but salivating as only one thing could.

Just as they'd taken everything else from her, the horses dragged her unwillingly to orgasm.

It was weak, little more than a shudder passing through her abused body; an extra film of incoherence on her oily mind. But against her taut pussy, even the slightest tremor felt amplified, and Donahue took careful note of the sudden flood of juices. "Dang," he panted. "She really is warming up. You weren't kidding about dragons being freaks."

Please... just let me die.

"I'm getting mighty close myself. You good with wrapping this up?" Donahue's breath fell hot and putrid across her face.

"Sure. On three?"

"Reckon so."

Their assault became a frenzy. They besieged with a speed and fervor that should've been impossible. Her lower half grew terrifyingly numb. On and on it went, until with a last gut-wrenching thrust, both horses slammed home.

Finally, the pain caught up. She scarcely noticed the accompanying tight hot stretching of the clydesdale flooding her rear, nor the pair whooping and hollering in victory. A new fire swathed her body, one of boundless affliction. Its source lay somewhere in her lower belly: A deep, profound ache that seemed to radiate agony, branding heat, and the cold of decay all at once. The ubiquitous chill deepened and set into her bones. Her fatigued muscles tried to shake.

A dog barked somewhere in the distance.

The dicks withdrew, relieving some of the pressure on her lungs. "Well, I reckon it's someone else's go. Elijah, get on up-- hey, what's that?"

A pulsing, first of air, then something far deeper. A crawling on the skin, a twisting of the abdomen: Void magic.

The horses discarded Razia's broken body on the ground. Her sprawl left her head angled back towards the forest. Her hazy sideways gaze picked out a figure swathed in a gray traveling cloak. Its deep hood failed to fully hide the red and silver glow leaking forth. It had the shape of a man, yet the proportions were

off from any creature she'd seen even from this distance. It stalked forth, and mercenaries died, their bodies twisting and breaking from within.

The sudden bizarre chaos left Razia momentarily forgotten. Her fading gaze alit on a distant mound. Verden's hair buffeted around his waxy skin in the tempest.

Razia had long since resigned herself to death. Passing in her husband's arms seemed the last small gift the world could offer. She sucked in a shuddering breath, gritted her teeth, and began to move. The chains remained locked around her arms and legs. All she could do was writhe forward shoulder over shoulder. Her body fought her at every turn, her leg never ceasing its throbbing, but she doggedly coaxed forth nonexistent reserves, dragging herself across the coarse grass.

Screams, metal, and blood fell around her. Ten strides separated them, then five, then three. She could almost touch him.

The grass hid the riverbank cliff quite well. Her only warning was a sudden crumbling of earth beneath her. She pitched forward. Her shoulder slipped over the edge. Suddenly she was tumbling down slick silt. Icy water enveloped her, dragging her into its depths. The bank and the sounds of battle were lost to the tumbling water.

Part Six: Brushes with Divinity

Little is certain of the afterlife on Lorn, save the uncertainty itself. The veil between the mortal life and whatever lies beyond has proven insurmountable by all known means. Those who have dwelt in limbo, reaching a state of death for some seconds before being dragged back, have mixed visions. A feeling of floating up and away from their body as the world fades to nothingness, a crackling tunnel of energy rushing around them, and a view of a great crystal sphere holding all the stars in creation occur most frequently.

All attempts to ask the Wills and other higher beings on the nature of death and beyond meet with stony silence and cryptic nonsense. Those who cling to the need for a greater purpose are forced to invent their own idea of The Beyond. The most common, The Adularescent Church, believe that souls return to the great Lenses to join in the world in perfect blissful harmony. They further believe that the dead can occasionally communicate via certain foci, pointing to the ghostly glow found in some opals and moonstones as proof. Those of the Deepmarch seek to fully bridge the gap between flora and fauna to join with their beloved forests, worshipping the various deific plants in hopes of being named worthy. The Roan Waste denizens hold the wind above all else, believing our last breath joins the endless gales sweeping across its dusty expanse in perfect freedom for the worthy. Across the sea, the teachings of Titari, that the lifelight of those who live free of sin will be reflected off the lenses and born again in New bodies hold sway.

Perhaps you wonder how I, the hero and supposed narrator of this heart-rending tale, continue to dispense wisdom from beyond the grave. To those who do, I say this: The world is full of surprises. After all, little is certain beyond uncertainty itself.

The icy choking darkness gave way to a more blissful void. Images flitted lazily around her, flashes of her life, winding inexorably back. The river, her wedding night, adulthood in The Peak, Eris, Julia, a being composed of pure fire holding her hand.

Her eyes snapped open.

Pain's gone. Must be dead. Thank the Wills. The thoughts came impossibly sluggish, each word lingering and slurring into a mush of incomprehensibility.

Not gone, she realized, heart sinking. *Numb*. Cold seemed much too soft a word. Her entire body had surely been replaced by an ice sculpture replica. Neither nerves nor muscles responded. Too numb even to shiver. Too numb to notice that the handholding of her vision had a counterpart in the waking world. Impossibly delicate fingers swathed in short downy brown fur that was broken by rings of white entwined her own, lifting her from the debris-tangled shallows of the riverbend. The rushing torrent that swept her away had slowed to a deep placid blue pool behind the vigilant efforts of a beaver.

Even her eyes felt lethargic as Razia dragged her gaze up the arm to look upon the face of her rescuer. She would've started had her faculties been her own. Eyes as deep and placid as the pool below looked down upon her, their corneas set with a ring of tiny runes. They peered concernedly from the head of a doe. Features as beauteous and delicate as the outstretched hand and small antlers festooned in a dozen bobbing gold trinkets framed them. She was dressed in a scant garb as pale and filmy as spider silk.

She carefully laid Razia on her stomach. Something long and solid dug dully into her ribs. Looking down again, Razia found metal glinting in her offhand. Glyphsinger's pommel, clutched in her clammy grip.

The doe's expression seemed equal parts concerned and fond as she looked over Razia's sorry state, poking lightly at her thigh, head, and chain-wrapped snout. Mercifully, her arm and leg bindings had come undone in the river. "You must be in terrible pain, but I need you to hold very still for just a moment." She spoke in a mellifluous rendition of the trade language, sporting a similar accent to the elves of Cambium. Razia winced as she worked at the chain, undoing the crude knot at its top. She sucked in a deep ragged breath as the pressure relieved from her sinus. She saw more than felt the deep dents in her snout scales.

"Thanks," she tried to say, but all that emerged was a gurgling croak.

"Shhhh, it's okay, take your time," the cervid said, stroking a horn before stooping to wrap one of Razia's arms around her shoulder. "In the meantime, let's get you somewhere warmer. I have some hot mulled cider with your name on it."

Their going was slow, every other step a precarious affair as the doe maneuvered her to avoid putting weight on the mangled leg. The shore gave way to misty woods dominated by tangled mats of roots and towering trunks. The sun disappeared in the canopied fog, leaving them in twilight. The call of songbirds and frogs punctuated by the occasional sharp hoot of an owl filled the silence.

The numbness gradually faded. A symphony of pains rushed to fill the void. Fresh bruises from her fall and subsequent river ride joined the chorus, but they played a soft accompaniment to her rump, leg, and abdomen. Her claw fumbled at her belly, but there was nothing there. The pleasant bump just beginning to form was replaced by a hollow pit, as if she hasn't eaten in days. Whatever miracle she and Verden created was lost somewhere in the rushing water.

Fresh tears welled, and her head lolled onto the deer's. She stood half a head shorter than the dragoness, and her fine pale locks proved the perfect resting place for her sorrow-wearied cheek.

The trees thinned until the deer run they followed broke from the underbrush into a wide grass-blanketed hollow. At its bottom sprouted one of the largest trees Razia had ever seen. Its trunk rivaled that of the largest stalks in Cambium. Its branches spread over the misty glade in a protective dome, softly glowing golden orbs festooning its branches like lanterns. The leaves and strange fruit reminded her of the Osage orange trees scattered along the western fringes of the March.

The doe helped her down among mossy roots larger than wagons to a place where they tangled together to form a sheltered space. Wisteria vines in full bloom grew thick across them, creating a roof with their lattice. The deer ducked through a vine-shrouded opening and gingerly drew the dragon in behind her. Within was a perfect little cozy room. Carved wooden cups and platters lined a root shelf. A chunk of agate embedded in a raised knot pulsed softly, emitting the occasional billow of warmth. A huge hollow gnarl sat in one corner, lined with the thickest moss Razia had ever seen.

Bree wasted no time in bustling her to a cozy looking chair of shaped wood directly next to the magical heater and easing her down into it. A thick woolen blanket settled around her shoulders.

Razia's rescuer gracefully moved about the room, tossing various herbs and liquids into a kettle and placing it on a thin stone slab balanced above the heating gem before taking a seat across from her.

"I'm sure you're quite confused, if not outright disoriented. I'll try to take things slow and simple, though you'll have to excuse my excitement!"

Those few who call on me use the name Bree. This is my home. And this--" her gesture swept wider, encompassing the glowing tree above them "--is my ward. Can you speak?"

Razia opened her mouth, paused, and projectile vomited across the floor. It came out a deep bloody burgundy and stank of brimstone. Where it touched the lichen covering the floor, it hissed and smoked. "Oh deer," Bree exclaimed, hurrying over to pat her on the back. Razia doubled over and dry heaved several more times while the cervine tutted to herself. At her beckoning, the wilting moss pulled back and began to grow over the acidic puddle. "Oh my poor thing! They certainly did a number and a half on you. Do you want water to wash it down? I have tea as well."

Tea. The one obsession of Verden's she'd never enjoyed. *Bloody nasty leaf sauce*. Nonetheless she gratefully accepted the proffered cup and began scarfing it down, swirling the first few mouthfuls to cleanse her maw of the bile. It tasted earthy, though not altogether unpleasant. *Better than that Earl Gray, certainly. I don't know how Gray earned the title of earl, but he should've lost it the instant he invented that wretched swill.*

The absurdity of the train of thought almost made her laugh hysterically.

Here I am, three quarters dead, Verden... Verden. Her mind reeled from the thought like a whipped dog. *Best not to think on that just yet. All that and I'm complaining about tea, of all things.*

She hacked weakly a few times, cradled the steaming cup, and managed to mumble "Name's Razia. Thanks fer savin' me." The words rolled about oddly in her still-numb mouth.

"Of course. I could hardly call myself a guardian of the forest if I didn't protect all its denizens, however unexpected they may be." She leaned forward eagerly. "Speaking of which, if you don't mind me asking, how did you find your way to my humble abode? She shook her hands before her. "Of course, don't answer if you're not ready! Goodness knows it must've been traumatic."

The memories of the riverbank played out again, fresh and raw. She managed a watery smile. "Fell in."

Bree looked shocked, then grinned sympathetically. "Well, at least your sense of humor didn't wash away," she replied, tenderly brushing a damp lock from Razia's cheek. "Never you worry, love. You're safe with me. We'll get you back on your feet in no time."

The tree creaked above them; a long, low, chorus of clicks and groans. Bree glanced upwards. It was slight, perhaps a mere trick of the room's unusual lighting, but Razia thought the doe paled slightly beneath her dun coat. She shrugged it off and continued nursing her tea. Her body had at last recovered enough to begin properly shivering again. Despite the blanket and the toasty fire gem, the last few dregs in her cup danced fitfully from her quaking.

"My goodness, you drained that fast! Let's get you that cider I promised."

Verden had spoken of the druids that warded the boundless forests of the March. Secluded and solitary, their order served the various forces of nature that in turn nourished the forest. Bree fully lived up to the legends. Elegant, mystical, endearingly kind, disarmingly bubbly, and nurturing almost to a fault. She received little in the way of visitors and took the opportunity to gush about all manner of things to the bemused dragoness. She praised the Sage Tree (the sentient, mythical plant under whose roots they resided), prattled about poetry, and speculated on the mysteries of her quiet guest.

Razia tried her best to answer, but just couldn't form the thoughts or words quick enough. She resigned to slip the occasional response into her host's torrent, an arrangement she grew more and more content with as the day dragged to evening and the cider flowed.

It seemed Razia was far from the only stray the amiable doe took in. Their conversation was interrupted by a coyote pausing balefully in the cottage doorway. It awkwardly held aloft a bloodied paw.

Bree paused mid sentence, hurried to her hooves, and quickly yet calmly strode around Razia's outstretched leg and up to the injured creature.

The whole ordeal was over in mere minutes. A few sticks, a roll of hempen twine, the soft glow of nature magic, and the creature bounded back out into the woods as though never injured at all. She brushed herself off and sat back beside Razia. "I'll make you something similar once you've rested up a bit."

Bree showed her the same measure of efficient fondness. Every few words were punctuated by a soft pat on the shoulder or touch to the leg. She even brushed the dragoness's hair and mane before helping her into the curved pit of her moss bed. The luxurious greenery was deliciously cool on her warm and tingly scales. Humming softly, the druid soon had her nestled in its center and tucked snugly into her woolen cover. The fermented apple juice gave her world an extra layer of cozy softness and seemed to pull her eyelids down. Yet the second Bree quieted, her mind returned to its restless dance. She felt the mask of her smile slip off. She stared woodenly at the wall. Sleep was slow and fitful in its arrival.

Thunk.

The arrow slammed into Verden's chest. His eyes met hers, pleading, before they turned cold and lifeless. He toppled forward and vanished behind the wall of horses.

Thunk.

The scene played out again. She ran through molasses. The towering faceless assailants blocked her every move.

Thunk.

Again and again she watched helplessly as her world was snatched away. For all her fighting and groveling, the reel played on; its sting just as raw as the real experience each time.

Thunk.

Flames climbed around her. The smell of cooking flesh, of sizzling meat and onions--

Her eyes blinked blearily open to find a short fluffy white tail bobbing happily a few feet from her face. It's accompanying rump leaned over a counter busily working at something.

Thunk.

A slice of a concerningly large carrot came free and was slid neatly onto a platter littered with its brethren. Its exterior was a warm golden brown, and the glaze oozed down across the brighter interior as they were arrayed. "There," cooed Bree. "That should be more than enough." Without so much as turning, she murmured "Good morning, love."

A sixth sense, or a silent informant? Razia was still pondering her host's uncanny perception when she backed up and sank into the bed beside her. A soft hand slipped behind her head and helped ease her into a sitting position. Battered ligaments creaked in protest. Her lower back crackled and released a series of sharp twinges.

"Carrot fried with wild chives and honey. I'm afraid this is the best I had on hand. My vows prevent the killing of animals even for sustenance." She artfully arranged the orange disks with a wooden spoon. Razia's stomach rumbled at the sight. "There are mushrooms that feel and taste almost exactly like white meat, aptly named chicken of the woods. I'll try to track some down when I have a moment free. I believe dragons are hypercarnivores, but you should be able to digest these without much trouble. I can't vouch for the taste though! They're among my favorite treats, but meat eaters have such unusual palates."

Razia tried to contain her ravenousness as she plucked a piece of root and nibbled at it. The sugary and spicy tang of the glaze struck first, followed by a sweet earthy crunch with a faint cinnamon-like kick that teased her taste buds. She resisted the urge to shovel the entire platter down her throat as she took another.

"My my, looks like there are no complaints to be had." Bree glanced at the rapidly dwindling spread. "I'll go fetch another."

Two more thick roots soon joined their kin in her belly. Razia likely would've gorged herself back to unconsciousness without Bree's motherly hand to stay her. Her body still felt hollow and stretched, but the feeling had faded from its earlier ruckus to an uncomfortable echo.

She rubbed her abdominal scales, wincing as it brushed the lingering pit at its bottom. The platelets almost seemed to double back on themselves in the void where her pleasantly bulging belly had nestled just two days before.

"Thanks, they were delicious. You have quite the knack for cooking," she finally replied, long years of polite manners taking over, though her heart wasn't quite in it. "You've been so incredibly kind and generous. Is there anything I can do in return?"

Bree hands settled firmly on her undamaged thigh. Her ocean-like eyes were deadly serious. "Yes. There's something you absolutely have to do. I want you to promise me you'll do it no matter what, no questions asked."

"I..." Razia faltered under the intensity. A small pit of dread began to form. "Sure?"

"You have to focus on getting better! Speaking of which, it's time we patched you up with that splint I promised. She hopped back to her cloven hooves and began bustling around the room once more, leaving the dragoness slightly bemused in her wake. She tutted softly, occasionally muttering to herself as she pulled various bits and bobs from the myriad shelves. A deep brown gauzy lichen, a hemp twine ball, several slender willow branches, and a pot filled with a gray-green paste that smelled of fresh-cut grass found their way into her arms.

"I checked your condition while you slept. It's easier gage the state of things that way. I hope you don't mind.

"My healing works by twining in among a creature's life force growing it in the right directions. Those evil fragments in your leg are disrupting your entire field though! I can barely even see your life force, let alone manipulate it. As best I can tell there are five fragments still embedded in your thigh." Her fingers, light as a pianist's, traced out a crude map of them over her scales. "I hope that didn't hurt too much.. I'm not much for surgery, and would do far more harm than good if I tried digging them out! Luckily your body sees them as a foreign invader and is doing everything it can to work them out. As long as none are embedded in bone, they should come free over the next few months."

She took a scoop of the paste and began dabbing it into the tattered scales around the arrow hole. "It's going to be a very rough time though. Aside from the constant lethargy, your fortitude will be compromised the entire time. Even a seasonal cold could be more than it can handle!" The puffy lichen covered the mess like a bandage. Her leg went pleasantly numb as Bree tied it snug with twine. The willow branches formed a brace on either side. "We'll need to exercise and stretch it every day to prevent atrophy, but for the most part you'll want to keep it straight and preferably elevated. There's enough muscle damage that it could easily heal wrong."

The tree above them creaked once more.

Bree's deft movements slowed. The same pale nervousness as the night before returned. "I have to be frank with you though. It will be an incredibly long journey, and you may never fully recover. In your current state, if anything were to happen.... There is one thing we could try to hedge our bets though. The Sage tree's sap is almost pure concentrated divine nature magic. My powers can't suffuse finely enough to bypass the dragonsbane, but ingesting the healing directly should work. Divine blood tends to get around a lot of impossibilities.

"It would come at a price though. What it will be I cannot say."

Razia focused on the cold pulse of the evil substance in her leg. *If it means I can get at those shit stains faster, there's really no question at all.* Her mouth slowly split into a grin, some of the old fierce confidence creeping back. "Well, I already owe you my life and then some. Give me your wood sauce, O Guardian of the Forest."

Bree looked shocked before her own coy smile spread. "If you only knew what a dangerous choice of words you've made, my red lovely. Very well."

From a hidden compartment beneath the bed, she produced a small silver spigot. She carried it to the largest root making up the north wall of the dwelling. A ring of runes were raised as little ridges in the bark itself. At their center was a small divot. Bree lightly kissed the mark before setting the spigot's bit against it and gently pressing forward. Wood groaned and crackled as it shifted to accommodate her. Once seated, she set a vial beneath its mouth, placed her hands wide on the root, and began to sing. Green glow radiated from her fingertips, spreading outwards like veins. The runes seemed to absorb the light as it reached them, flaring a sharp shamrock. The spigot began to drip, then flow. Viscous silvery sap flowing into the waiting container. As it neared the brim, the deer struck a caesura, and the flow tapered off.

With a final fond pat, the doe scooped up the vial. "To your health," she said, raising it in mock toast before profering it.

Razia's tongue darted out to test it. It tasted of unprocessed sugar maple sap, and something more. She suddenly became acutely aware of every living thing in the cabin. The bright spark of Bree, the firm vastness of the tree, the hundred pinpricks of various bugs in and beneath the region lit up in a way much like her heat vision, though in shades of white and green. Her gemheart grumbled at the intrusion of magic.

A voice like splitting bark sounded around her, *through* her. *Partake of my blood and be healed, little drake.*

The effect lasted only a moment before fading like an after image. Her body seemed a reservoir with the dragonsbane wound acting as the drain. The tepid energy settled in her stomach, radiated outwards, and concentrated on the throbbing pain there before gradually dissipating. She curled her toes experimentally. The pain yet lingered, though ever so slightly lessened.

"That should be enough for the day. Any more and your horns are liable to turn into branches!" Bree leaned into to wipe a lingering drop from her lower lip. "You'll drink it once a day in the morning. We'll have you back to your old self in no time. Until then, I'll get you a pair of crutches so you're not cooped up constantly."

A memory returned, of an impossibly kind elf in a forest glade. Razia's eyes stung with tears. "How... how are you this nice," she managed. "I didn't do anything to deserve this kindness." She took Bree's hand. "There has to be things I can do to repay you. I don't want to be a burden."

Now it was the deer's turn to falter under her fiery intensity. "Well, I can certainly keep you busy with chores if you're set on it. A druid's work is never done." She rose and began to move away, but paused, her

head turning to shoot Razia a sly sideways glance. "I could also use a bed warmer, once your leg is mended enough not get ruined by me accidentally rolling on top of it.

Razia blushed furiously, her cheeks darkening to maroon. She took in the deer's aphroditic curves, her sumptuous face, her deep blue eyes. "You mean...?"

"Just space sharing, though I can't promise you won't end up with a face full of deer elbow! I only have the one bed after all, and my back can't take too many more nights sleeping in a chair."

"Oh. Of course, anything for you." *Dammit girl, not everything is about sex. The Peak was the exception, not the norm. Hasn't living with elves for two bloody years taught you anything?*

Razia's life fell into a new odd yet pleasant pattern. She washed and mended clothes, prepared food, tended the countless animal familiars, and, once two of the fragments had worked themselves free and restored some measure of magic, provided fire, all under the careful eye of Bree. As she learned to walk on the sturdy pair of crutches provided, they gradually ranged farther and farther into the forest. The vapors that gave Kirimori its Elven name were pervasive, never thinning in the hottest noon nor coolest night. They seemed a living thing unto themselves, blanketing the quiet woods in a protective if unsettling murk. I

They swirled around the pair wherever they went, leaving dewdrops on hair and fur.

If Verden had been an expert on plants, Bree was a master. Every living thing had a name, history, and purpose. The doe provided an almost constant stream of information if no other conversation was forthcoming, explaining the preferred habitats of wild mustard, lamenting the encroachment of an invasive crayfish species, and teaching little rhymes to identify venomous snakes from their harmless counterparts.

Razia, meanwhile, shared all she knew of the current goings-on in the wider world. Aside from trappers, rangers, and the occasional traveling merchant, Bree had little contact with civilization. Her close ties to the Sage Tree prevented extended leaves of absence. She listened with rapt attention to the happenings of Pyrroth's war, of The Fabled's ongoing conflict with The Black World to assemble the seven Prime Shards, of the rebellions in Azula and the inexplicable migration of the sea elves from their cities. Bree gradually coaxed out the dragon's own life story. She was especially distraught at the miscarriage.

"If I had only known. Perhaps... if those beasts ever dare set foot here, I'll turn them to compost one inch at a time."

All the while, Razia found herself growing ever more fond of Bree. She'd expected the deer's attentiveness to wane as they grew complacent with one another. If anything, the druid became even more affectionate. Impossibly kind and motherly, she slowly replaced the ragged hole in Razia's emotions.

Her pain from the riverbank manifested itself in unexpected ways. A creek wended its way among the mat of roots a scant hundred meters from the hollow. The first time she heard its merry chortling, she nearly fainted. One moment she resolutely shambling forward with a basket of berries hooked over one crutch. The next the world was dimming and tilting wildly, blood pounding in her temples. The feel of icy, crushing water enveloped her. She was drowning again, the sky and screams vanishing beneath--

The world returned to normal in a single blink; the only signs of the vision's passing the berries littering the ground and her uncontrollable shaking.

Bree was by her side before she could recover, guided by that same uncanny perception, tenderly helping her back to her feet.

Though the steady draught of Sage Tree sap did little for her psyche, it worked wonders for her body. Beyond her healing leg, her mutilated holes stitched themselves back together as well, until it no hurt to relieve herself. Her libido returned not long after that.

Bree had ventured out to tend to one of the Sage Tree's "Lighthouses", smaller saplings that served as sentinels and nodes of power around the fringes of Their domain, and would likely not return for several hours.

The dragoness surreptitiously checked that there were no innocent animals about to witness her crimes before unwrapping her skirt and settling back on the edge of the bed. She carefully shimied the spider silk panties provided by her host down over the splint, revealing her long-neglected sex. It seemed

equally eager and nervous, its pink outer lips already wet and plump with arousal. She cautiously brushed them with her fingers. When no pain bells sounded, she stroked them again, harder. Her claws pushed them in slow circles, drawing a soft gasp at their pleasurable friction over one another, as well around the hard little nub at their zenith. She pressed her clit with thumb and nearly doubled over as the forgotten pleasure center exploded with sensation. She took a deep, calming breath and began to toy with her entrance. One finger squeezed in, wriggling and curling softly just beyond its mouth before tentatively traveling deeper.

She closed her eyes, imagining Bree's body. She'd awoken several times in the deer's arms, the firm lump of her erection pressed beneath Razia's tail. She imagined the doe pressing harder, soft lips licking and nibbling her sensitive ears. A second digit joined the first. She fantasized about those delicate, nurturing fingers as her own predatory talons did their work. Hot shame and self disgust at imagining Bree in such a light rose up her neck, somehow making the almost taboo act feel all the better.

A soft rustling broke the distant ambiance of birdsong. She opened her eyes to find the object of her fantasies in the doorway.

Razia started and nearly rolled over backwards. Her knees drew together in sudden contrition. With a soft gasp she realized her hand was still there, and the motion drove her probing digits deeper. "You're b-back early," she stammered.

Bree's face locked in an odd expression. While her mouth was open in surprise, her eyes stared at Razia's crotch like they might a particularly delicious shepherd's pie.

"I'm glad to see your recovery is coming along so nicely. You shouldn't exert yourself so much though." She stalked towards the bed. "Here, let me help."

She settled in beside Razia. Ignoring her protests, she firmly drew her knees apart and lifted her hand aside. She turned to face the dragon and hooked her leg over Razia's undamaged one, holding her wide. "Masturbation is excellent for one's health," she continued, her fingers walking down Razia's belly. She lightly skimmed a single finger through her slit. Lightning rocked Razia's brain at the delicate touch of another on her aching sex. "Hmm, looks like the glands have healed nicely based on the moisture. You're becoming quite the healthy little drake." Her finger rubbed back and forth, thoroughly coating itself in dragon nectar before pushing in to replace Razia's earlier insertion. She gasped again and fought down a moan.

"I've heard that fire dragons were particularly, ah, sensual, so I hoped it was only a matter of time until your sex drive returned." She wiggled in deeper, and this time Razia couldn't contain the resulting squeak of ecstasy. "Hmm, no scar tissue or seams. We'll have to check the cervical condition later. For now--"

A second finger joined the first. Bree set in with prim efficiency, as if scooping cantaloupe seeds. She found a smooth rhythm and held it unwavering. Her soft, gentle digits hit all the right spots. Her other arm reached up to cradle Razia's head. The dragon lost all pretense of modesty, a menagerie of pleased sounds escaping her throat.

"No, don't tense," the doe chided. "You'll get a cramp. Just relax. Focus on my fingers." The deep rhythmic probing quickly became more than her starved sex could handle. Her mouth split wide in a long keen. "Ah, ah, theeeeeeeeere we go." Bree's fingers never slowed, making a soft *schlk* as they worked through the sudden flood of juices. She held the dragon snug as she shook in orgasm. "Good girl." She let the last few convulsions work their way through before easing Razia back into the moss.

Razia tried to raise her head, but it felt as though she'd just run a marathon. She simply lay panting, staring up at the deer with mixed humiliation and longing.

"Good temperature and release volume. A healthy little drake indeed," Bree cooed, leaning down to plant a kiss on her forehead before rising. There was a distinct hill in the front of her garment. "We might have to add this to your rehab routine!"

Razia was still too shaken to reply by the time she'd departed the den. All she could do was pant and stare incredulously at the bobbing white tail as it vanished through the vines.

Neither woman mentioned the events on the edge of the bed in the following days. However, Razia found herself even more attracted to the deer, and each passing day left her hungrier for more.

Nearly three months had passed since she first washed up on the beaver dam. The fangs of winter lay fully bared, though they dared not nip into the Sage Tree's hollow. Its glow left the secluded glade a pleasant balm; a pocket of warmth in the frigid snow-laden woods. On nights when the wind quieted, the omnipresent tendrils of mist dissipated like a puff of breath, leaving the air almost eerily clear and revealing all of Kirimori in its frosty beauty.

The familiar rustle of vines broke the silence. Razia rose to her feet, feeling a pleasant pang at the site of Bree. Fresh fluffy flakes coated her wooly coat and heaped in a small pile on her head. She shook them free in the entryway, her eyes bright with excitement. "Guess what?"

The enthusiasm was infectious. "Is the mulberry wine ready?!"

The doe's response was to produce a small clay jug.

Razia all but leapt into her arms with a gleeful giggle. They hopped together in place for a moment before her leg got the better of her and she dropped into a table seat.

Bree soon joined her with two flagons of the twilight liquid. "You're not forming a habit, are you?" She asked, teasingly poking the dragon's ribs with her elbow.

"Everything you make is addictingly good, alcoholic or not."

"Not half as addicting as staring into those emerald windows of yours, I should hope!"

"Flattery will get you everywhere." Her claws wrapped around the chilled mug. "As will delicious tributes."

The liquid within was almost frigid from its long aging in an artfully hollowed oak tree. The smooth liquid tingled her lips, equal parts sweet and tart, perfectly enhanced by the heady warmth of fermentation. She took a long draught and smacked her lips. "Nearly as divine as its creator."

Bree giggled. "Nearly as tricksome as well."

"What?"

"Your teeth are purple!"

Razia hung her head. "Their pearly sacrifice will be remembered." She raised her mug, which already felt tragically light. "To their memory."

There was a slight unsteadiness in her arm as she planted the drained flagon for more. She blinked slowly. The wine must've splattered, for the entire room seemed to be taking on the same murky hue. Bree's face swam at its center, looking all the more beautiful for the light. That same wan look from the day they met flashed across her features as she refilled Razia's cup. Their fingers met over it. A jolt raced up her arm. Vivid memories of their illicit encounter intruded unprovoked. She stared at the tan hand, her thumb gently stroked its back.

As the night progressed, the thoughts persisted. Their bacchanal wove on. There was singing, reminiscing, and hilarious escapades with woodland creatures that drifted through the home. One moment she was hopping on one foot, a half dozen ferrets laden across her outstretched arms. The next she was trying to hang from the ceiling. All the while Razia found herself fixated on the doe. The world gradually melted away save for the clarity of her mouth. Perfect ivory stones set in a delicate jaw. So riveting, so kissable. As they wove in a clumsy parody of The Twelve Isles' Ralla Ver, a slow and intimate partner dance, she became acutely aware of the other woman's warmth. She dipped Bree low, their eyes locked, their lips all but touching. Her tongue flicked over the doe's velvety nose. Bree countered with a lick of her own.

They rose, yet Razia found herself slipping down once again, whether by instinct or accident she couldn't tell. Shaky extemporaneous hands found silk and tugged downwards. Her need to please was overwhelming. Film hissed over flesh and fur. A large member flopped free. Its base shared Bree's tawny colors, quickly deepening to a rich chestnut well before the medial ring marking its midpoint.

It resembled those of the Waste Mercenaries, though far more gracefully slender. She'd seen it enough that the resemblance no longer terrified her. Bree was her own entity; A beautiful, wonderful, heavenly entity. Razia's hands petted their way around her soft thighs as she took a deep whiff of her earthy scent. She kissed the phallus's top, her lips parting to trail her forked tongue in soft independent circles around the divot of her urethra. She osculated upwards. Her mouth found the heavy belly of the cock, her tight little balls, the downy patch of her gooch.

An ornate cock ring adorned her base. It seemed almost woven of basket reeds of solid gold. The wide, textured blades twined around her girth, dipping down to cinch and cup her fluffy sack. Razia let it rest on her snout, feeling a pleasant mix of warm supple down and cool metal. One hand curled back to stroke the hardening shaft. She gazed fondly up into Bree's eyes. She slowly licked her way down once more, admiring the doe's texture: smooth, unblemished, sacrosanct. She lapped greedily at its wide head once more, gaining a taste for her salty pre. Her hand continued its tantric care, rubbing the gradually lengthening shaft. She parted her maw still wider. Her lips curled daintily over rows of fangs. She gently took the penis in her mouth. She closed around the flared glans, gently suckling it, working her tongue in spirals over its face. Her hand reverently cupped her balls while the other acted as both a guide and masseuse for the meaty shaft. Her head inched forward, taking a few more inches into her. Bree seemed the most delicious meal she'd ever tasted, and her body constantly betrayed her, trying to nibble on the succulent spire. She sucked her cheeks in to embrace the head with their silky walls. Deeper she suckled, letting the ring of bumps trundle across the ridges of her maw roof, her eyes riveted on Bree's beautiful face. Her tongue never slowed, employing every trick in its arsenal to pleasure its cherished visitor. It encircled and squeezed, playfully lashed, and occasionally snuck out to pull at the smooth shaft to usher it in. Deeper still, the cock easing beneath her uvula into the tightness of her throat. She saw a tear in the deer's beam. Moisture welled in her own eyes from her girthy guest. She savagely blinked them away. She desperately desired this. If she could repay even the tiniest sliver of the druid's kindness--

Her teeth grazed the golden girdle. Razia's eyes slipped closed in elated bliss. She bemusedly realized her chest was rumbling with a deep, guttural purr. Still cupping the doe's effervescent little balls, her other hand teased upwards to stroke her sensitive tuft of tail. Her pleased vibrations continued as she began to ease off the cock, letting it slide free to its medial before pushing forward to fully envelope it once more. Her throat strained around it, and she was acutely aware of every minute contour against the taught tunnel. She could feel Bree's heartbeat in its soft pulses.

"Ah! Razia, you're too... hhhhhh," Bree's words were lost to a long exhale of pleasure. Her fingers found the dragon's head, stroking her horns, running through her hair, scritching the sensitive bases of her ears. She did nothing to slow Razia's determined bobbing. Her own comfort was inconsequential, though the wine and erotic acts were driving her arousal into a delirium. Bree was so silky, so warm, so *perfect*.

She sensed a blossoming beneath her assiduous attentions; A tensing in the nuts beneath her stroking fingers. Before she could coax the doe over the brink, the fingers delighting her scalp tensed. They drew her back and up until she once again stood. Velveteen lips pressed insistently between hers. The world shifted, then tilted as Bree guided her back onto the waiting bed. Moss tickled her mane.

Bree maintained their smooch, following her down until they were both propped on their elbows. Her free hand caressed Razia's cheek. It drifted down, and soon they were exploring one another in earnest. Once again Bree's leg slipped over hers, ever mindful of her injuries, and drew her in.

The Sage Tree's glow returned. Warm green spiderwebbed across the mighty roots, spreading outwards around the pair until every wall glittered. It flowed into the streaming Wisteria vines, highlighting every leaf. As it reached each flower, it glowed a brilliant lilac, gradually suffusing the room in purple from a thousand gently dancing petals. The vines trailed over skin drunk with passion.

Bree eased atop her in the periwinkle half-light. Her weight pressed her gently to the foliage. Her hardness, still wetted from Razia's lips, pressed between their prone figures. As the deer worked lower to ravish her neck, so too did it descend, sparking joy wherever it brushed her scales. It settled across the curves of her womanhood, issuing a back-arching gasp.

The same feeling of connectedness at first tasting the Sage Tree's sap overcame her once more, stronger than ever. The world became a field of multicolored stars. Chains of twinkling lights trailed across their intertwined forms from the draping wisteria. Bree's heart was an emerald sun burning hot and close. As her member slipped through Razia's estuary, their two lights seemed to become one.

In the rosy twilight of her stupor, their coupling seemed the most beautiful thing in the world. Profound warmth suffused her wherever their bodies touched. Each contact seemed paltry in comparison to the presence moving within though. As with all things, Bree was impossibly tender and attentive as a lover,

each gentle movement of her hips crafted to bring Razia cherubic denouement. And bring her they did. Counting was impossible in her current state, and the climaxes soon blended into the lavender haze that gradually overtook her. The last coherent vision was Bree's smiling face, silhouetted in the glow of the Tree's fruit, and a final blossoming of warmth deep between her legs.

Winter's pale sun was slow in its rising. Its dappled light was still an unwelcome intrusion. Razia blinked through a grainy film of sleep, her head pounding. The hangover was unlike any she'd ever felt before, as if someone had used her skull for crushing quarry stones. She tried to raise a hand to her throbbing temples, only to find both snugly wrapped around Bree.

The memories of the previous night slowly trickled back in.

Stirred by her rustling, Bree's large pale eyes blinked open to find hers. "Mmm, good morning my beauty." She nuzzled in for a kiss to the cheek.

Sudden embarrassment at the night's events flooded her. "Sorry that I forced myself upon you like that. The wine..."

"Oh, nonsense dearie. It was entirely expected." Bree planted another kiss on her forehead before rolling out of bed to begin her usual bustling.

Razia lingered in the mossy nest, idly touching the kissed scales. The doe's words seemed to echo in tempo with her pounding skull. An icy knot formed in the pit of her stomach. The hammering began to feel less than natural and far, far more potent than what a few glasses of wine should cause. "What exactly do you mean 'Entirely expected'?"

The druid froze at the edge in her question. She turned slowly. Her usual cheery expression seemed plastered on. Her color betrayed her for a fourth and final time, draining down her neck. "Well, we've been growing quite close. It seemed only natural." She wilted under Razia's continued frown.

"Bree," she said, snagging her hand. "What did you do? What was in that wine?"

The doe's lower lip trembled. Her eyes darted between the hand and the glare several times before she sighed and took a seat across from her.

"The war turns sour in the north. The Deepmarch has cast its lot with your kind in the peak, but the forest is not unanimous in this decision. Cambium leads The March, but she does not speak for all. The Sage Tree fears the worst. As the matriarch of the northwest, we will feel the Agglomeration's ire first and hardest should they best your kin." Her tone and mannerisms felt rehearsed, as if reading off a script.

"I serve Sage's will in all matters, but I'm no warrior. When they come with their steel, or worse, if your father grows dissatisfied with his conquests and turns his attention east, this grove will vanish. We need defenders if we're to weather the tide."

Bree brushed an offending lock from Razia's cheek. The familiar motion felt sickening now. "I'm afraid that's where you come in, my love. A hybrid of flame and wind, traditionally two of the mightiest elements in war. The Void's touch overcoming what nature could not, allowing seeds to flourish in an otherwise fallow field. A nomad presently without home or purpose by your own admission, owing a life debt to the tree. You're the answer to our prayers."

Razia fixed her with a flat, dead stare. "I suppose 'too weak to resist' was the icing on the cake."

Bree's face fell. "We both know this wasn't my idea. I begged and pleaded with Sage, but I must follow her will."

"Just following orders," Razia echoed tiredly. "Funny how much that mindset has cost me." Bree grasped her hand anxiously. Razia didn't pull away. She simply stared at the limp limb. "Four months," she finally muttered. "I don't care what you do with the eggs once they're out." She expected tears, yet they never came. She only felt hollow. "Bree, you've been kind to me up till now. For your sake, I'll pretend to enjoy them."

"Please," she pleaded. "I didn't do anything that wouldn't have happened on its own. I care about you deeply, and I hope you feel the same. I just hastened the process a bit."

"I guess we'll never know now."

The silence that followed could've smothered an infant.

Finally, Razia spoke again. "You never actually answered my question. What exactly did you drug me with?"

"It was... a special concoction of Sage's design. A few mushroom based aphrodisiacs and the Tree's own essence, highly concentrated and laced with an altered distillation of their pollen. They want the offspring to be of the forest itself, not just a product of our own love."

Razia stared in incredulously. A giggle escaped. She laughed, shrill and desperate. She laughed until tears came and she doubled over on her knotted stomach.

Bree placed a concerned hand on her shoulder. "What...?"

"Me, Bree, and the Tree!" Razia managed hoarsely before falling back in a fresh fit.

Winter's grip gradually lessened over the Kirimori. Green returned, accompanied by a cacophony of other colors. Reds, blues, and yellow blanketed the ground, born by countless species of plants. Razia bore her new fate and gracefully as she could. She and Bree continued to share the bed, but there remained a distance between them. A distance that, despite her best efforts, gradually lessened as the deer's impossibly kind disposition wormed itself back into her good graces. Her hatred of the Tree lingered though, its calculating use of her body the latest in a long line of abusive authority figures. A depressing hopelessness fell over her. The hollow began to feel like The Peak in all the worst ways.

On a cool spring evening, Razia felt a pull; A distant yet insistent tug at her heart. It seemed to flow into her until it settled heavily in the fragments of her gem. She found herself rising, more from curiosity than compulsion, her gaze beckoned north. A solitary firefly emerged from the misty treeline. With each pulse of its body, it drifted closer, until it alit on her snout. It paused there for a moment, glowing in a complex rhythm. Two short, one long, four short, another long, and a final two short. It cycled through its message several times before taking flight once more, its meandering path marking the same direction as her spiritual pull. She glanced to where Bree slumbered in her deep mossy nest before gingerly rolling to her feet. The splint creaked at her shifting weight as she fished for the crutch. She breathed a sigh of relief as the familiar curve of the wood settled in her armpit to alleviate the weight from her healing leg. A single fragment yet lingered, leaving only a moderate twinge with each step. This was largely offset by the weight of the four eggs growing in her belly.

With a final look back at the deer, she set off into the cool night in pursuit of the strange visitor. Its occasional light illuminated the hints of a trail. The lightest of breezes rustled the ferns and dogwoods crowding its edges as she hobbled along it, her eyes ever trained on the firefly. Though it flitted and flickered, the insect guide never wavered in its course. Minutes stretched on, the path ever meandering up a soft incline through a small field of crocuses nestled among the mighty tree roots, their sharp orange buds closed. Rocky outcroppings broke the foliage cover, growing more frequent as they pressed on.

At last, the lightning bug's beckoning halted as it slowed. It doubled back and orbited the dragoness. Others of its kind winked in the trees. One by one, they joined their brethren. Razia let out a small gasp of awe as one became hundreds, swirling around her in a great scintillating yellow cloud. They slowly rose, their tiny sparks combining to bathe her surroundings in a soft luminescence, not unlike starlight.

She stood in a hollow ringed by sycamore trees. A dozen boulders, blanketed in patchworks of green and white lichen, littered the clearing in a loose circle around an especially tall stone embedded at its core. The forest path she walked meandered among them before terminating at a patch of the same moss Bree used for bedding. By its circular shape and placement, it seemed deliberately cultivated.

Razia found herself moving to the natural mat. She felt she should kneel, though the splint prevented it. She settled for an awkward sprawl. A warmth, independent of the cool evening air, pervaded her. It felt familiar, reminiscent of the hot breath of the fire caves.

The fireflies moved lower once again, their whirlwind of movement honing in on the central stone. In the shifting light, she picked out patterns, weathered by time and obscured by moss, etching its face. She reached out a claw to brush the growths free. Swirling lines of stylized fire coalesced into a female figure; a depiction Razia had seen a thousand times. Avati: The Firewill. One of the seven elemental deities.

She recoiled slightly, the likeness stirring unpleasant memories: The fresco over her father's bed. A hanging on the wall in a white polished room. Her body strapped to an operating table surrounded by half a dozen robed figures, Pyrroth looming in the shadows. A terrible pain in her lower abdomen. The peal of shattering glass.

She focused on the last image, trying to recall its origin. It slipped through her fingers like water, leaving only the shadow of an ache in her chest and an odd sense of loss. She followed the fleeting memory, down, down, into the depths of her own mind. Deeper and deeper, to a plane of translucent violet glass. It was the same construct she imagined each time she Resonated. Beyond it, tiny globes of white fire floated in place.

She pressed against the barrier.

Sconces long reclaimed by nature flared to life, bathing the hollow in firelight. They pushed back the ubiquitous mist to restore the shrine to its full glory.

In the recesses of her mind's eye, a hand pressed against the other side of the barrier, perfectly aligning with Razia's own splayed claw. It danced and wavered, composed entirely of flames. The rest of the divinity's figure coalesced.

A voice, as warm and rich as the heat that still enveloped Razia's scales, vibrated through her entire being: Body, mind, and soul. It was of the Sage Tree, yet more so, speaking with the power of the cosmos itself. "Greetings, child of the old blood. I have waited a long, long time for your awakening."

The mental construct seemed to sharpen and solidify, until Razia truly felt as though she stood in Avati's presence. "Lady of the flames," she whispered, falling to her knees. Her hand remained raised to the barrier. "I am not worthy."

"My child, you are as worthy as any who have walked my halls. Now, rise, that we may properly converse. I sense you have much on your mind. Let's start with why you sought me."

"I followed your firefly."

"My servants guided you, but they sensed something burning within you. I live within all fires, even those of the ethereal varieties. Even now I can see your desire irradiating this forest. Now tell me, what is it you want?"

"I..." the rage returned, as fresh as the day it was wrought. "I want to kill the monsters that murdered my mate. I want them to feel everything they made me feel."

"Vengeance is a noble passion. But the men and women who hurt you are gone, killed a creature from beyond the veil. Search yourself, you know this to be true. No, you seek something else."

Hearing Ivati confirm their deaths cooled her anger, but did not heal over it. Instead, an empty pit grew in its place; purposeless, hopeless, unfeeling. She looked further. "I want to be free of my contract with the tree." She looked further still, giving voice to anguish she'd felt since a child. She paced slowly in the cognitive space, unable to meet the god's gaze. "People have been using my body for as long as I can remember. Like I'm a doll to be picked up and tossed aside."

"Autonomy is a powerful desire as well. But it is an end, not a means. Unearned, it feels hollow. I sense you're close, but there's something yet deeper; a root to the root. Search the deepest corners of your being, my child."

One of the floating lights drifted towards the violet wall. As it met the crystal, it melted, a rainbow of other colors blossoming from the glow. It resolved into a moving image. Her own memories played out on the expanse: Her father seizing her by the wrists and dragging her down the hall. Tiburia shackling her arms behind her back. The mercenaries' black chains binding her torso as Verden fell. Bree's draught overpowering her senses. Razia, too weak, always too weak.

"Power," she whispered. "I want the strength to defend myself and the people I love. I'm tired of being weak." Since her gem broke, she had accepted her fate, perhaps even basked in it. She was a cripple among titans. No one expected anything of her. She remembered Eris, perhaps the mightiest of Pyrroth's children, resplendent in her shining armor.

Ivati's hand melded through the wall. The flame-wrought fingers moved to caress Razia's cheek. "At last," the omnipresent voice murmured. "You've arrived. I will mark you as one of my champions. In return,

you will wield the power to carry out my Will upon the world. But be warned: If you take this oath, you will be a being of three magics. You bear the mark of the Void, and the rhythms of the elements dance in your soul, fragmented though it may be. By accepting my divine blessings, yours will be a perilous balance."

"My life lost all meaning two months ago. If devoting myself to you fills it, I'll be happy. I do have one concern though."

"Oh?" The goddess sounded almost amused.

"You support my father."

"To an extent. I gave him my blessing as the Primal Wyrn, and guided him on the path to acquiring The Fire Shard. I do not condone his home life, though. He is a necessary evil."

"What about the war?" Razia asked.

"Sadly I am not the only council your father consults these days. That particular event is not part of our Our symphony.

"But enough of this. Not thirty seconds as my champion and you already question my Will. A fiery tongue indeed.

"How familiar are you with the workings of divine magic?"

"Not terribly. It's not a particularly popular career path in the Peak."

There was a mirthful note in the crackling voice. "Good, this next part should be quite amusing. Most acolytes work for years before they receive their Wisp, but you're a special case."

"I have many plans for you, Razia of the old blood. But for now, my Will is that you journey to Highfurl, the lands of your other kin. Half of your heritage remains woefully untapped. That must be rectified if you're to face what's to come." At her beckoning, Razia turned.

Behind her stretched another wall, ethereal emerald, perfectly parallel to the first and meeting at infinity on either end.

The vision began to fracture. It came apart at the peripherals, the cracks working there way in towards Ivati.

The room within her mind fully splintered into darkness. The flame-made-form of Ivati faded until only a single pale yellow mote lingered at her heart.

Razia eyes opened, leaving the vision in memory. Yet the spark remained, flitting hesitantly in the air. A voice spoke within her, tapping that same inner ear as the Tree and Ivati's avatar, yet smaller and higher, almost childlike. *Lady paladin?*

For a moment, Razia stood still as a statue, the weight of the events fully striking her. She'd met a god-- a real, certified, venerated god-- in a forest clearing. Now one of Her children was speaking to her. *I suppose that's me, isn't it?* she finally responded, extending her hand palm up towards it. After a moment, the mote drifted forward and settled over it. It felt like holding her hand a few inches over a candle. *And I take it you're the Wisp Ivati mentioned.*

Yes! I'm your connection to the Divine facet of Fire, here to give voice to Ivati's will! It chirped, as if reading off a script. It whizzed around her several times before coming to rest over one shoulder.

Connection. So you're like a gem?

Kinda! I'm both the source of power and the foci all in one. Or, rather, I draw on Ivati's power siphoned by the prayers of the faithful, then give it to you to carry out her Will. It's complicated.

Razia reached up to stroke the top of the flame. Though it should only be light and heat, her fingers found a hint of feathery solidity. *I see. And do you have a name?*

My last paladin called me Rymsh, but you can call me whatever you'd like!

Well Rymsh, my last paladin called me Razia, but you too can call me whatever you'd like. She glanced at the large scone at the foot of Ivati's relief, extinguished after the vision. *You mentioned giving me Ivati's powers. Is that something we could test out now? I understand completely if not.*

Of course! It's yours for the taking, unless it's use actively contradicts the Firewill. You need only reach out and touch it.

Back her mind rushed, back to the same wall of amethyst. The mote returned, now perfectly identical to Rymsh. This time it floated beside her. She sensed a depth to it, as if it was the visible tip of a mountainous

presence. Or, perhaps more appropriately, a tiny spigot on an infinite reservoir. In her mind's eye, she touched it.

She snapped her claws, and the scone erupted once again. She waited for telltale strain in her chest or the coldness in her thigh, but neither came.

The warmth of fire magic suffused her, exotic and familiar all at once. It was like finding a new room in her den.

Rynsh, I think you and I are going to get along splendidly.

The final month of her term passed without incident. The last fragment worked itself free of her thigh a scant week before her due date, leaving her feeling better than she had in decades. They held a small ceremony to burn the wretched pieces of amber.

Rymsh's presence helped the days pass quickly. Between constant questions, her normal stream of sarcastic diatribe, and endless training, she'd soon bullied the hapless elemental into bemused acceptance. Bree seemed to take its presence in stride, evening offering pointers on divine magic use.

The laying itself was a blur of pain. She remembered squatting in a basin of herb-treated water prepared by the druid, making a terrible joke about egg drop soup, and blacking out from the agonizing pressure. When she came to, she was back in the moss bed with four silver-green eggs peeping from a pit of moist sand beneath the agate cooking gem.

She rolled out of bed and quietly began dressing.

Despite Bree's pleas to stay, she'd acquiesced her sartorial requests: A sturdy bodice and trousers cinched with slightly more belts than strictly necessary beneath a heavy woolen traveling cloak. An extra article threaded around its hood: A thick pine-green scarf. Razia ran her hand down it. Its downy weave felt comfortably like Bree's fur.

Glyphslinger found its home in a back scabbard, its crossguard resting like a familiar hand on her shoulder

"Are you sure I can't convince you to stay?" Bree whispered, her big eyes watery with emotion. "You could be happy here. And they need their mother. Both of them."

Razia stared wistfully at the eggs. She pondered the druid's request, as she had every moment since the night they made love.

Finally, she approached Bree, scooped her into her arms, and planted a soft kiss on her forehead as the doe had done to her so many times. "My debt is paid. It's best we both forget this whole affair." By some miracle she kept her voice from breaking beneath the strange mix of emotions. She couldn't stop the tears from falling into Bree's hair though.

"I can't do that. I'm going to tell them stories of their strong, incredible mother out making the world a better place."

As she moved to set the doe down, their hands met, and Razia felt something settle into her palm.

"At least take this parting gift. You healed faster than expected, and I still had Sage Salve left. Hopefully you'll never need it. But if nothing else you can barter it."

Razia reluctantly slipped it into her pack. She wanted nothing further to do with the tree, but her travel gold had fallen by the river, no doubt long since picked over by scavengers or the victors of the fight. The rest of her inheritance was in Cambium, and she dared not return to face Verden's parents yet.

Vowing to sell it, she took one last forlorn look at her children, settled her pack, and jogged off into the mists. The hollow and the lanterns of the Sage Tree's fruit were soon lost to the gloom.

Part Seven: Of Pirates and Paternity

For the next leg of our journey, a wider knowledge of the world of Lorn is required. Much of Razia's early life was contained to Deepmarch and the city-state of Shiza's Peak. But her horizons expand, and larger forces bring their influences to bear.

In the center of the continent lies The Agglomerate of Cities. Often shortened to Agglom, or even Agg, TAoC stood as the strongest nation in the known world from shortly after its unification to the height of the Void Incursion. Spiremount served as the epicenter of the Void's presence, and Agglom suffered the most rifts of any land. The war took a terrible toll, leaving entire districts of the three capitals gray husks.

Those of old blood still call it The Timberlands. Some believe this name comes from the fractured dynasty of timber wolves that ruled the nation for centuries. They trace their lineage back to Lonin the Large, who came down from the Moonlands and conquered much of the territory now held by Agglom. Others say it's because of the massive deciduous forests that occupy much of its land. Whatever the case, both physically and politically the nation often found itself enflamed.

Lonin settled on the northern shores of Lake Seensenni with his tribe. He left a daughter and two sons in his passing, and each craved to carry on his legacy. The sons broke the clan with their followers, founding new settlements along the seemingly endless lake coast. Their feud grew with the generations, fracturing ever further until nearly a hundred wolf lords fought over scraps of lands. It took a far gentler touch to reunite them. With none of the three factions holding a clear advantage, they agreed to rule jointly, and split the role of capital across the three cities of the lake. Thus Trinity was born. It boasts the widest species diversity of any nation, though the main demographic are canines and vulpines. It's unique in being the only nation to hold neither a major elf population nor Great Wyrms.

Directly south of Agglo lies its bitterest rival: Azula. A land of lush impenetrable jungles, orderly high-walled cities, and enough spice trade to rival the rest of the world combined. Lonin's initial conquest carried all the way to the Gulf of Gahara and displaced many natives living there. The two nations have tussled over the verdant swath between the gulf and Shiza's Peak ever since. Deer, rabbits, and other woodland creatures make up the bulk of its population.

Zakat Mori borders Azula's Eastern fringes. In the early days, Tenebri and Lumati fought bitterly for every scrap of earth the other coveted. Zakat was the seat of dark magic's might; a vast region of swamp cloaked in perpetual clouds. Lumati entered in a pact with Molari, raising the Stormbreak mountains and blasting the land in merciless magical brightness. The magic lingers to this day, a faint shimmering in the air marking the boundary of the land. The region became a vast desert of golden dunes, earning its new name: The Sea of Sunset. Its primary inhabitants now are snakes, lizards, and other species well acclimated to the constant dry heat.

East of Agglo and north of Zakat Mori sits a place especially near and dear to me: The Deepmarch. A seemingly endless expanse of foliage, both normal sized and otherwise. Extraordinarily virid, it would far outstrip The Agglomerate's timber production if the bulk of its denizens didn't have an almost holy regard for nature. Aside from elves, the largest demographic of the March are felines.

East of Agglom are the Roan Wastes, a vast nearly featureless prairie thinning to scrubland in the east beneath the shadow of the Pegasi peaks. It's a hard land, prone to long droughts broken by devastating storms. It yet sits unclaimed by what many consider civilization. Each attempt by Agglo to expand eastward is met with blood curdling howls and vicious raids. Bovines and equines call the Waste home, scattered across it in an ever-shifting dance of clans. It has little in the way of trade, though their warriors are prized for their immense strength and stamina. Many make pilgrimages out into the wider world, both to claim what wealth they may and to earn status for their return home.

West of Agglom sits Anemphos. It lies almost entirely separate from the wider continent, connected to its neighbor by a mountainous bridge barely 50 kilometers across. It remains as aloof geopolitically as it does physically, its only interaction being trade. Much of its landscape is mountainous, resulting in a cool arid climate ideal for a unique selection of crops. The high peaks' constant wind proves the perfect habitat for the many species of avians making up the majority of its population. Its relative isolation left it the new power in the north once the dust of the Void settled, to the shared bitterness of the rest of the known world. With so much of Trinity's architecture destroyed or warped, Cumulus became the defacto cultural mecca.

North of Agglo sits Kaldurún: A land of frosty pines and perpetual shade. With the alliance of darkness and earth shattered during the elemental wars, Tenebri forged a new pact with the Waterwill,

specifically her aspect of ice. Though inhospitable to many, it boasts a deceptively large population, much of it concentrated in the vast array of caverns snaking in and under the Verdenskrones.

Last of the great nations of Lorn are the Twelve Isles. The name is somewhat misleading, as well over a hundred bits of land make up the sprawling archipelago. Rather, the name comes from the twelve watchtowers placed on the largest outer islands. Each holds an enormous crystalline spire of unknown composition, Architect artifacts from the world's birth. A complex series of runes marks the face of each of them, their function inscrutable to any save the secretive order Sentinels who man them. They allow pinpoint aiming of the unstoppable lances of energy ejected from their tops. It's hypothesized that they pull raw piezoelectricity from the lenses themselves. If not used, once precisely each hour between dawn and dusk, they discharge their stored energy, sending 12 multicolored lances of light into space that can be seen across the face of the continent on a clear day.

Twelve Isles itself is a carefree tropical paradise, home to a plethora of species, both aquatic and land dwelling. As one of Undati's domains, it's blessed with incredibly still crystalline seas, all but removing the boundary between land and water.

Razia had interacted with elementals frequently, including a few blessed with enough Will for sapience. Rymsh was the first to share her thoughts directly, and it remained a constant foreign experience. His mind was just similar enough to a humanoid's to highlight the differences. Each idea was as sharp and clear as the crystals he preferred to dwell in. He left no room for uncertainty or self-doubt. Presently, his sole focus was to make it to Highfurl in one piece after stopping in Fane. Fortunately he was receptive to her proposed detour.

Her mind shied back from the memories in terror, trying to shove them into the same fog that choked her early childhood. Despite the dread, she resolutely marched on. Some things simply had to be done.

The clearing was much as she remembered it. Spring had brought a fresh green growth to the high grass. The small river grumbled and splashed against its silty banks. Life moved on, oblivious of the carnage wrought a scant six months before. Indeed, there wasn't a single trace of the battle. She silently came to a stop in the spot Verden had lain.

Nothing. No bone or stain or scrap of cloth, only a lazily shimmering field of green. It was as if the best thing to ever happen to her had never existed at all. All the pain she'd carefully smothered flared up at once, stoked by the stinging thought.

The river burbled. The wind sighed. Razia cried.

Mourning was a rare thing for dragonkind. Proud, solitary, and often narcissistic, many never developed the emotional bonds needed to trigger it. For true pain, the vents to their gem sack opened as if preparing to expel elemental energy. Instead, the gem vibrated at a high frequency, mixing with their voice to form an unearthly keen. It was this haunting, warbling wail that rose over the fjord.

She couldn't say precisely how long she stood there. As it so often did in times of anguish, her body moved of its own accord.

She finished it with the last rays of sun.

It was rough. The proportions were slightly off, the clothing a hodgepodge of half-remembered outfits shaped from stone melted to putty, the face still needing work even after five attempts. He deserved more, so much more. More than she could ever offer in a hundred lifetimes. But it was hers.

She sculpted him facing the river. He stood firm and proud, one arm raised outstretched before him. She'd wanted to place something in it: Blade, scroll, harp, magic, wedding ring. None fully captured his being though. He was all those things and more.

His other arm was swept out behind him, as if reaching back for--

Her eyes stung fiercely again. Her hand slipped into his. Just enough heat lingered in the stone to make it feel lifelike. She could almost feel the malleability of flesh in the rough digits when she concentrated.

She lingered there for a moment, willing the lifelike stone to curl around her hand, for the figure she knew as well as her own to turn and hold her close and whisper everything was alright. But the rock remained still. The river rushed onwards, ever onwards, and there was no fighting its flow.

A heated claw etched an inscription in the memorial's plaque in the neatest calligraphy she could manage.

Here lies Verden Feyn, the greatest man I ever knew. May he Shelter in harmony in Verari's forest for all eternity.

As with the rest of her offerings, it seemed lacking. He deserved the best words ever written by man or beast; a vast shrine and a thousand gilt-leaf scrolls heralding his life for all to read. But that wouldn't be what he wanted. He was an unobtrusive elf, far more content with the quiet, subtle beauty. A dappled glade. A statue in a grassy riverbend.

As a final gesture, she withdrew a pale shoot from her satchel. Its acquisition had added a full two days to their quest. She planted the budding bamboo just in front of Verden, as if fallen from his raised hand. They were well West of Cambium's reach, but by Their will, the tiny fragment of the demigod may yet blossom into a grove.

With a last misty look at the tiny monument, she resaddled her gear and trotted off into the night, leaving Verden's Crossing behind. Had she lingered a moment longer, she might've seen the swallowtail alight on his outstretched finger.

"I'm telling you, we're well off," Mart started angrily for what felt like the tenth time. "Ain't none of this looks like last year."

His father sighed obligingly from his seat on the wagon, also for what felt like the tenth time. "We came out the hills right by Tonn's Mill, didn't we?"

"Aye."

"And we passed that rock that looked like a horse's arse not two hours back, right?" Martlin Senior continued with his same insufferable patience. His tone stirred unpleasant memories of being lectured as a child.

"Aye," Mart said again, his annoyance rising.

"Then this is surely the old Bridge Road here."

"Then where in Tenebri's balls is the bloody bridge?" Mart all but shouted, gesturing wildly at the chasm behind him. The gray stone of the far cliff seemed to leer at them, so close yet so unreachable, featureless save for a slight darkened patch directly across, almost like an old campfire. A weed-choked pair of wagon ruts were just visible beyond.

"Well now, I dunno. Maybe you scared it off." Martlin Senior's whiskers had long since begun to droop and gray with age, though his eyes remained as lively as ever.

A slight rustling came from the foliage, barely audible above the wind. A moment later, a red streak ripped from the treeline. It hurtled towards the chasm lip, warped low to the ground, and leapt. Mart had a single glimpse of a heavy traveling cloak and a determined, breathtaking reptilian face as the blur hung there, seeming to defy physics in its sail, before it landed clear of the far side and continued its harrying speed.

"Well, I suppose that's one way to do it," Martlin said after a shocked pause. A bit of twinkle crept back, and his weathered hand clapped heavy on Mart's shoulder as he continued. "Think we could get old Beth to do that with a good run-up?"

Mart barely paid him any mind. The color and ferocious intensity of the strange passerby evoked harsh memories of the beast that had descended upon their village. Their farm on the outskirts had afforded them a firsthand view of its reign of fire and terror.

It was a pleasure to run. Green and brown blurred beneath her pounding feet. An endless shifting vista of countryside sifted past, offering fresh wonders each time she blinked. She raced the wind just as she

had years ago across the crags of the Peak. Her bond with Rymsh seemed to restore some of that boundless energy of her of early childhood, and she took full advantage of it. The first week carried her to the outer fringes of the colossal forest, nearly a thousand clicks to the northwest.

She camped there in one of the last great trees, the slight bowl of the Roan Wastes clearing the horizon save for a thin green strip marking the border of Agglom. A line of watchtowers marched off into pinpricks, though only one bore a light at its top. Even from this distance many appeared damaged, likely during the Void incursion. The engineers and soldiers needed to maintain them had no doubt been called away to help with the new war.

She'd resolved to journey by night and sleep for the better part of the day while in Agglo, suspecting fire dragons might be slightly less than welcome currently.

Just as he'd feared, there'd been teeth behind the growls. Tw'iik willed his confoundingly short legs to still greater speeds in spite of how shaky they'd grown in the few minutes of careening through the underbrush. Some wild part of him thought he must look comical, his heavy pack all but lifting him off the ground each time it bounced off his back.

A howl came from the right. No, from the front. No, from both directions at once. He veered left just in time to feel a great mass of fur hurtle past.

His downfall was a fearful glance over his shoulder. The glowing gem of his staff seemed muted in the oppressive gloom, leaving little time to react to the things that loomed out of the night. By the time he saw the tree branch, it had taken him fully in the face. It stopped him in his tracks and sent him plopping hard on his back. He felt suddenly like a turtle as he floundered atop his pack, claws and tail failing to find ground.

The wolves began to emerge from the underbrush, all oily black fur and misshapen tooth-studded snarls. The faint purple taint of Void glowed in their eyes. They moved languidly, well-assured of their prey's helplessness.

Twiiik tried desperately to call on Lumati's will. He silently begged his staff to do anything more than flicker weakly, but whatever control he had was lost beneath bone-chilling terror. His father's voice came unbidden, the steady highborn Zakat Mori tone sounding brutally sardonic.

It was then that Twiiik came to terms with his string of reckless decisions. Having decided to push on through the night in hopes of finding some measure of decent accommodations, he found himself hopelessly lost in the Wailwoods of Timberland, surrounded on all sides by thoroughly unsavory beasts. Nasty place, woods. Far too green and cluttered. But such is the lot of the arrogant fool.

The jagged dripping maw stalked ever closer, until he could smell the stench of fetid meat on its breath. He resigned himself to his fate. The Psalm of Sunset sounded especially frail and squeaky in his panicked voice as he muttered it out.

A pair of jaws snapped beside his head close enough to graze his ear. He whimpered and closed his eyes, his prayers growing faster. He noticed through the lids that the light had begun to change, shifting from the white-gold of midday to a tangerine sunset hue. A delirious pang of anger shot through him. *Of all the magic to still work...*

But it was not his meager stick that illuminated the clearing. A tiny contained wildfire raced directly towards Twiiik's little patch of ground at an alarming speed. His confusion only mounted as a large blade appeared beside the fire and neatly lopped off the head of his tormentor. The other four beasts uttered a strange discordant bark and tried to form a defensive circle around him. Up close the fire distinctly lit the crimson and pink palm it balanced over. It leapt into their midst, its companion blade deftly sliding around one of the canine's thrashing fangs and sinking deep into the space where shoulder met neck. A third howled fearfully as the fire arced to its fur. The creature burned far more easily than Twiiik expected. Soon it was little more than an oddly shaped bonfire, careening wildly through the thicket and screaming a piercing scream.

The remaining two shared a quick look and bolted. The fireball hurled its sword after them. It severed a few inches of the trailing beast's tail, earning another eerie wail and spurring it still faster.

The fire died, and Twiiik started for what felt like the tenth time in as many minutes. Its departure revealed the form of a goddess: A ruby red dragon dressed in a slightly singed traveling cloak.

"Slow and sloppy," she muttered, walking over to retrieve her sword. "Should've gone for the--" her eyes fell on Twiik. "Oh, hello. Didn't realize those nasties were after a person."

She acknowledged me.

The dragon stooped over him. He expected a helping hand, but instead she grabbed him around the waist and gingerly set him on his feet. His indignance at being handled like a child was wholly offset by the thrill of contact.

His father's voice came maddeningly again. *And so, by a combination of rescue syndrome and sheer attraction, Twiik found himself hopelessly smitten with his knight in scaly armor. What fresh foolishness would come of this new fixation remained to be seen.*

The dragoness's claws hovered concernedly near his face. "Are you alright? Looks like they got you in the snout pretty hard."

"I. Um. Ah..." he stammered. His claws fidgeted and his knees drew bashfully together. His brain remained an embarrassed puddle that showed no interest in producing coherent thought.

The woman knelt beside him and lightly patted his head. "Don't worry. Take your time."

Over the course of his 20-odd years, Twiik had been beaten, burned, and nearly frozen to death. He'd fallen off a balcony, took a tumble down the longest staircase in the kingdom, and stubbed his toe on the mantle enough to worry one toe might be shorter. None of it had prepared him for the social agony of trying to wrestle his thoughts under control while a tall woman stared accommodatingly at him. Finally, the glimmer of an idea appeared in the puddle's murky depths. "Oh! Healing! I have healing!"

Remarkably some measure of resonance with Lumati had returned, and a familiar warmth spread from his staff's zirconia cap up through his arm where it tingled across his face and ear.

It took only a few minutes to heal the minor cuts, though the exertion left him drained and panting anew. Through it all, the dragon seemed genuinely impressed.

"Well, it looks like you have a few tricks up your sleeve," she said, rising to her feet. "I would recommend maybe sticking to daytime travels. The Void-touched have been getting bolder recently."

His motives for pushing on into the night suddenly felt shamefully inadequate; The question he was about to ask more shameful still. He steeled himself before blurting "Do you think you could... ah... that is... um... are you going north as well? I saw you come out of the trees from the south."

"Aye, for now at least. I've got business in Fane. I take it you're headed that way as well?"

He gulped and nodded.

The dragoness's gaze went distant, as though listening for something. "One moment please."

Rymsh, are you going to throw a fit if I adopt this kobold?

Nope! I sensed one of my cousins of light when he healed. He might be a good source of knowledge on our bond. I can only relate so much on my end. The horse telling the rider how to ride, or something.

You're not worried he'll slow us down?

The spark wavered uncertainly beside Razia's head, seen only by her. *I figured you'd just put him in your backpack.*

Most strangers I've met aren't too keen on being carried like a baby, but I'll see what I can do. He is concerningly adorable, so he might be used to it. She glanced over her shoulder at the timid reptile. His scales were the rich golden-brown of salted caramel, tipped with swirling white at every visible extremity. He wore a set of sunset-red robes etched with white in what appeared to be Morien eld-script, with a large 7-rayed sun in the same color splashed across his chest. A similar shape capped his cute little scepter, a chunk of polished clear zirconia set in its center. She wondered idly how much of dragons' fascination with kobolds came from them resembling hatchlings their entire lives. *I'd feel terrible just leaving him here after what happened. Plus he has healing magic, and you never know when that will come in handy. This was one of the easiest decisions we've ever made.*

"If you'd like a travel companion, I'd be happy to stick with you at least to Fane. I'll be heading west all the way to Highfurl after that."

She had to stifle a giggle as the tiny priest all but jumped for joy. "Yes, that would be wonderful! That is, ah." He cleared his throat, sounding almost like a dove's coo. "I'm on my Final Trial, tasked with bringing light to the darkest places! I'm traveling all the way to Kaldurún to spread the Good Word." The intensity immediately faded from his expression as he finished the spiel. "But there's not really a time limit on it. I could probably take a detour. Highfurl is pretty close to Kaldurún, right?"

"Depends on what part of it you're trying to get to. It's a 7,000 kilometer-long strip of cold and death." She saw the kobold's fear and immediately regretted her words.

"The Deacon wasn't too specific, so I guess... whatever is closest?"

"Then it's a sight closer than a southern Agglo border town, that's for sure." She extended a hand, utterly enveloping the claw he offered in turn. She could feel him trembling slightly. "Razia, by the way."

The kobold stared at his feet and murmured something that sounded vaguely like "Twig".

"Come again?"

"T... Tw'iik."

"You're probably going to have to write it out for me at some point. Must've cooked my ears at some point. Regardless, well met." She gave him a light squeeze and rose to gather her bearings. Even without Rymsh's flits, she could feel a slight pull on the wind. It sent her hair and scarf billowing northwest, knowing as well as she where her destiny lay.

Razia had always had a way of conveying her desires without uttering a word. She'd never honed the skill, nor even acknowledged it, yet it had grown increasingly more pronounced with the years. Whether by physical allure or force of personality, people always seemed to warp to her will by proximity alone. Tw'iik was no exception, timidly asking if it might be easier if she carried him within hours of setting out. By the time they reached the Fane, he was snoring happily by her ear, the tip of his snout just peeking from the flap of her pack. His own bag nestled beneath, and proved the greater burden of the two. It seemed at least twice the weight of the waspish kobold.

The Deepmarch rejected roads, allowing them only at its very heart where too many trampling feet would actively damage nature. The only other exception was the trade road forged between Cambium and The Peak forged as part of their accords, though the forest denizens avoided even that wherever possible. The simplest deer trails lasted scant days before shifting branches subtly discouraged them and underbrush grew to erase all traces. The power and superstition surrounding the phenomenon was enough to carry it into the southeast territories of Agglo. Fane, the only city of note in the region, marked the edge of it, such that it seemed to bloom abruptly out of the woods with no blemish of civilization surrounding it. Only an archer field of about a hundred paces separated its southern gate from the sycamores and pines, an array of rapidly fading wagon wheel ruts radiating from its heavy timbers.

She'd spent much of the journey through the Agglomerate considering how to enter. Rymsh was as insistent on the destination as he was vague on its purpose. So close to Pyrroth's warpath, the city remained under constant vigil. A dozen bobbing torches lit the stockade of massive sharpened logs.

Now would be a great time to tell me that whatever I'm doing here also includes an easy way into the city, Razia thought from her hiding spot at the forest edge.

Best I can do is a motivating speech on the importance of trial and hardship to a Paladin of Ivati!

You're getting awfully sarcastic for a ball of energy.

She made a slow circuit of the city in what she hoped was a stealthy manner. She encountered another two gates marking the North and West sides of it respectively, each with a hard-packed earth road stretching off into the night. A few dozen dwellings huddled close to the walls, lightless and derelict, no doubt abandoned at the start of the war.

Her inner lenses flicked closed. The world turned a muted indigo, save for the bright red-white blooms of torches and the green blobs of patrolling guards. The stockade remained an impassive midnight. Its girth blocked any inkling of what lay on the far side.

You want to watch me do something incredibly stupid?

Without waiting for a response, she called upon Ivati's Fire. Her magic reached a dozen slender tendrils through space. Warmth bloomed in her chest as, with a slight twitch, she snuffed every flame in a hundred-meter radius. The moment they died, she was on the move, a low shadow against the ground. She kept her heat vision up as long as she could in an effort to track the suddenly frantic movements of the guards above. As a hazy lump of a building loomed before her, she leapt. A quick blast of flame beneath her talon carried her to its thatched gable. A second sent her skimming just above the nest of sharp crenelations. She hoped the flap of her cloak was lost into the burst of fearful shouting.

Hard cobbles rushed up to greet her. She fell into a roll upon contact and immediately crashed into a stack of chicken coops. The sleeping occupants were somewhat less than pleased by this development.

She sprang to her feet, silently swearing and trying to clear the sudden storm of feathers from her face. The disorienting cacophony slowed her, and by the time she'd found her bearings, lights were appearing in the surrounding buildings. Tw'iik stirred to life as well, though his squawks were lost among the poultry.

So this is how it ends. Done in by my favorite food. The bitterest of irony.

She kicked free of the coop that she inexplicably put her foot through and raced for a shadowed gap between two of the buildings. She paused in her hiding spot to take in the scene she'd left.

A warning bell rang across the city. Its cry was taken up by others, sounding oddly small in the darkness. A handful of watchmen ushered a very frazzled looking fox in ornate armored robes onto the parapets and began gesturing chaotically. After a few confused seconds of staring and running his hand through his hair, he lifted a heavy-looking necklace which immediately began to glow. Either he wielded an element other than air or fire, or he masked their use extremely well. Either way, Razia took her cue and skulked deeper into the alley.

"I, uhh, seemed to have missed a few things," Tw'iik whispered fearfully. "Is this Fane?"

"Aye. Had to make an executive decision on ingress." The shouts from the wall were spreading to the streets below. Several sets of heavy boots pounded past the alley entrance. *Rymsh, you do at least know where we're going, right?*

The elemental's response sounded almost reverent. *Surely you feel it too?*

She closed her eyes in exasperation. She found that, in the darkness, she could indeed feel something; like the crackling warmth of a hearth fire. She tried to locate whatever currents the strange sensation rode and gradually settled on a direction.

With her hood up and tail tucked in close, she could pass for any other citizen of Fane. Unfortunately, either minimal night life existed in the city or some sort of curfew was in effect, as the streets seemed utterly deserted beyond the occasional trio of guards rushing about. She kept to the deepest shadows lining the earthen side streets, slinking from cart to post to stack of barrels. Her winding path gradually enticed her towards the city's center.

Through a combination of stealth, clever light magic subterfuge from Tw'iik, and raw unadulterated luck, they reached the wrought iron gates of a regal-looking kirk. Though the structure itself rose straight and true, every detail from the masonry to the shrubberies evoked the wavy, dancing nature of flames.

"You there! What are you doing out and about?"

Razia's gawping was shattered by the loud demanding intrusion of another gaggle of guards. She pivoted on her heel and printed the opposite direction. The high wall of the church grounds curved slightly with the road, and the instant her pursuers fell out of sight, she sprang high once more. A low clump of hydrangeas served as their hiding spot. She waited only the pounding of feet faded before returning her attention to the building.

A pedestal split the main path leading to the wide double doors, though its top sat bare. Similar signs of vandalism showed on the stonework and mosaic of brilliant-orange glass adorning the steeped face of the structure.

Seems fire in general isn't too popular here right now.

The warmth felt stronger here, and it enticed her up the stairs to the miraculously unlocked doors. Their slow creak echoed in the cavernous space beyond.

Fire dragon pride took many forms. Many scorned Ivati, considering themselves to be all but gods in their own right. Others constructed elaborate shrines to her, choosing to flaunt their elevated status with the divine. Beyond that, plenty of kobolds and dravir possessed their own little ceremonies to The Firewill. Still, seeing the institutionalized religion built around her in all its glory inspired its own flavor of awe.

Despite the hour, candles burned in every nook of the huge rectangular hall. Hundreds upon hundreds of them, all looking as fresh as though someone had lit them seconds before, burning in every color imaginable. They cast every other feature of the room into stunning detail. The granite floor polished to a bright sheen by constant use; the long rows of pews facing the altar, another wall of ruby glass cast in the flitting form of The Firewill herself staring down from on high above it; the countless portraits and wood burnings lining the walls, depicting key notes in the Faith's history.

Though the warmth had spread to a comforting blanket around her, she sensed her destination was not yet reached. She gingerly set Tw'iik on the ground and padded across the chamber, drawn ineluctably to a doorway set behind the altar. Down into the depths of the church she marched, public areas giving way to living quarters, and, eventually, to crypts.

She at last found what she sought on a low stone table at the very bottom of the church's silent catacombs. It lay neatly on a scarlet spread, clearly ancient, yet polished to brilliance once more: A set of silver half plate chased in gold, complete with a matching shield and charcoal-gray chain mail. A broad heater shield leaned against the dais beside it.

She opened her mouth to chastise Rymsh for rousing an entire city to panic for fashion, but it died on her lips. She lifted a vambrace. There was a weight to it far beyond the physical. Its mass seemed to settle around her very soul.

Is this what it means to be a flame knight?

I don't remember much of my last partner, but one thing he always said, 'It's the armor that holds my honor. More than the oaths, more than the magic, more than anything else'.

Eris's plate had been burned with her body at her request. Still, Razia had trained with her sister enough to know the rough order of operations for donning it.

Tw'iik trying almost painfully hard to avert his gaze kept them both distracted. Razia was halfway through the operations when a figure appeared in the doorway. He appeared to be a Morian sphynx cat. The deep wrinkled texture of his skin made it impossible to tell where natural left off and age began. He wore robes vaguely reminiscent of Tw'iik's, replacing orange for brilliant scarlet. He held one of the temple's countless ever-burning candles, and for a moment he seemed intent on calling forth an inferno from it.

His face filled with an odd mix of emotion at the sight of her carmine scales. Fear? Reverence? Embarrassment? Finally he bowed his head. "I received a vision asking that I make ready our last surviving set of high plate, but I had no idea..."

Razia bowed in turn. "Thank you. This is strange for all of us." The priest turned to leave. Before he crossed the threshold, she blurted, "We're not all monsters, you know."

"Our Lady chose you. That's good enough for me."

Their escape from Fane proved far easier than their entry. Dawn crept into the brightening sky by the time they left the church, though the shadows remained deep enough to hide her hooded face amidst the growing crowd of citizens bustling in the early morning. When the opportunity presented itself, she simply clambered on a roof and left the same way she entered.

The armor fit terrifyingly well, to the point where its added weight seemed to vanish entirely, and she easily cleared the wall again, scant meters from her initial crossing. Fresh shouts, a handful of arrows, and even what looked alarmingly like a bolt of pure blackness followed her to the treeline.

Tw'iik gradually released his death grip around her neck as Fane disappeared behind them. His voice sounded oddly amplified by the shield affixed directly behind him. "That went way better than it should have! We could've been killed!"

"Have you considered the possibility that I'm just that good?" she replied with a wink.

"Well, I, um..."

“That was a joke.” She reached back to pat the kobold’s head. Her efforts were rewarded with a strangled cross between a squeak and a grumble.

The signs of civilization grew denser as the next two days progressed, and with them the signs of destruction. She’d received the gist of Pyrroth’s plan when the war began: Burn anything that offered the slightest hint of resistance to the ground as a warning to others, lightly occupy those who surrendered. Based on what remained, the Agglomerate seemed a stubborn bunch. Hints of pitched battles lingered in the burnt husks of every village they encountered, many still littered with picked-through remains. The forces of the Peak collected their dead save for the elementals, leaving piles of rubble and melted wax amidst the charred bones and steel of Agglo’s army.

The battlefields grew progressively older as they went, until new growth blotted out all but the bones of stone and metal. These oldest remnants of war were the largest, sometimes encompassing 50 kilometers or more of expended wildfire.

Nearly six years of this nonsense.

She smelled the char long before the gap in the trees drew into sight.

Were it not for tales heard in Cambium, she might have thought it was a river during their approach, so wide and uniform was the break. Inky, scorched earth stretched at least a quarter mile wide, perfectly straight and uniform, both ends stretching off like the walls of her mind. It seemed to split the entire world, as though someone had taken the globe and scrawled an inky line with a colossal quill.

A hollow wind rolled across the expanse, sending a cloud of soot billowing north.

Chiza Huwarazda: The Black Path. Its edges marked the full extension of Pyrroth’s wingspan where he glided low over the countryside. He cauterized the earth in his passing, and his forces maintained it both as a supply route and effective wedge between the two halves of the nation.

A quick appraisal via heat vision revealed a perfectly uniform dull yellow. Any deviation in heat or light would be unmissable to any who surveyed the path. What’s more, she detected the faint whispers of magic maintaining the ubiquitous heat, though she sensed no channeling nearby. A network of tiny filaments trickled southward. She wondered if the army had waystations set up, or if the wrym’s power somehow maintained the impossible spell from hundreds of kilometers away.

The inexorably lengthening scar had gained a plethora of myths and legends in its five years. However wild the tale, they all agreed on a single point: The Path was all but impossible to cross.

She dropped to her belly and wriggled through the underbrush right up to the brink of the path. A thick tree sat on the border, its eastern side clinging to life with sickly green leaves. Its western face was a smooth black pole, every branch extending over the path incinerated to dust.

Razia ever so slowly crept her hand out until her claw brushed the line. It bore a sharp, gritty texture like finely crushed glass. She called upon Ivati’s will and gingerly lowered the temperature on her scales’ surface until they blended with the Path. She did the same with the tip of her scarf, gradually wrapping her entire body in a lukewarm shroud. She concentrated hard on keeping the frail balance of temperature as she crept backward and extended it to Tw’iik and the rest of their belongings before suiting up.

She gathered herself at the forest edge, drew in a sharp breath, and launched into the hardest sprint of her life.

They made it all of a hundred meters before heavy wingbeats broke the silence. A crimson shape dropped from the clouds with terrifying speed. Fire licked at his parted lips.

Razia felt the fireball before she saw it. That telltale *wump* of sudden massive shifts in temperature and pressure rattled her bones just as a blinding orb exploded from blackened fangs. It curved through the air with an evil whistle, leaving no chance of predicting its path, let alone avoiding it.

She put every scrap of energy she possessed into a heat shield around Tw’iik and braced against the imminent impact.

The heat was a pleasant reminder of home. The explosion that drove the wind from her body and sent her tumbling through the air, not so much. She landed hard and rolled clumsily to her feet, disoriented, ears ringing.

Her attacker struck the ground with a heavy thud scant meters away. He stood a solid three meters at the shoulder in feral form and sported mottled orange diamond patterns running down both shoulders and flanks. The unfamiliar fire dragon's frenzied expression turned to confusion, then recognition, and finally horror. "Princess Razia?"

When did we start using northern nobility titles? "If I say yes, will you stop with the attacks?"

His head dipped. "Apologies. It's standard protocol." There was a long, awkward pause while Razia continued to try to regain her breath before, "What are you doing out here anyway?"

"Oh, just enjoying the sights. Yourself?"

She searched for a twinkle of mirth, but the dragon's expression remained stony, if somewhat embarrassed. "Would you mind coming with me back to camp? I'm sure there are a few who'd like to see you."

Camp. Pyrroth. She felt sudden overwhelming nausea. "I don't suppose I have a choice?"

Her interlocutor looked genuinely taken aback by her reluctance. "I think it would be easiest for both of us if you came along," he finally said.

She glanced over her shoulder at Glyphsinger's hilt, pondering if she could fend the man off. Her eyes slid past to Tw'iik, still carefully checking over his robes for burns. It told her all she needed. Dashing off might be feasible; Dashing off with a significantly more flammable compatriot weighing her down far less so. She sighed and hopped onto male's back. "Do what you must."

Either he knew of her condition or had no intention of waiting for her to manifest her own wings, for he made no comment on her clambering into the divot where neck and wings met. He simply launched skyward with the same vigorous force as his landing. Razia's gear creaked with the sudden increase in gravity. Tw'iik's shriek was all but lost to the winds.

The dragon kept low to the ground, sweeping a wedge of roiling black in his wake, barely dipping above the treeline, not that Razia cared about the view. Her thoughts bent ever inward, straying towards the burned hole that was Pyrroth yet never quite touching the subject, each pass adding a few more chips to the mound of ice pressing the walls of her stomach. She realized wryly that she'd never asked her ride's name.

The minutes dragged on. The rushing wind and rhythmic thud of heavy wingbeats interdicted any hope of conversation, and Razia was left to her own increasingly sour cogitations. By the end of the 100 kilometer-odd ride, her knees were firmly pressed to her chest.

A handful of caravans and platoons padded their way up and down the black path. Their abundance hinted at the numbers that lay ahead, yet she was still awed by the sheer scope of the warcamp. Smog from ten thousand open flames hung heavy in the air. The countless tents, pickets and elemental pens stretched off into obscurity beneath it.

Despite its breadth, His presence was unmissable. Her gaze pulled towards it no matter how hard she tried to avert it. The colossal cocoon of sparks leered down over the camp, looking for all the world like some sort of perverse flower bud. She wished desperately not to see the monster that bloomed from it, but that chance had evaporated the instant she crossed the path.

The drake touched down at some sort of checkpoint and exchanged a few terse words with the two dravir manning it before gesturing for Razia to follow one of them. The four horizontal slivers of carnelian adorning the collar of his cuirass marked him as a grohban in the hastily organized military of the Peak; A middling officer in the mage's division.

"Tw'iik," she whispered over her shoulder. "You might be better off waiting here. Pyrroth is both sadistic and wildly unpredictable."

He gave a timid, shaking nod and she lifted him out of the sack. She felt a pang of shame at dragging the poor boy into the viper's den.

The march through the organized chaos of the camp passed in a blur. The more she dreaded the impending meeting, the faster the minutes seemed to slip by. Faces melted past, some of them familiar. Many wore the same hard, manic expression, no doubt hungry for the final push after months trapped by snowfall. The rows of tents and pickets curved with the same shifting waviness of an open flame. Her guide kept up a steady stream of reverent babble on her good fortune in receiving an audience with the lord of flame himself

throughout their navigating the massive camp. His words fell on distracted ears. She barely even caught the man's name.

Then, she was there. The orange shroud fell away at her escort's touch, and she blinked in the sudden dimness.

Two sparks lingered; huge, distant, glaring down at her with the same contempt he'd shown for the past fifteen years. The head they burned in swung down, impossibly large, its mass of sweeping horns each capped with a glow like heated iron. Yet more fire licked behind the bars of his fangs as they split into a too-wide predatory grin. "Well, if it isn't my favorite little cripple, fallen out of the nest."

All the weight of emotion crashed down all at once at the familiar thunderous, mocking voice until she thought her knees would buckle. It left her even more dazed and winded than her earlier assailant's fireplace. The world spun sickeningly.

Fighting down her rising panic, she replied in what she hoped was a level tone. "Dad."

His sickening grin fissured yet wider in the granite of his face. "You're quite a long way from home, little drake. Either of them, for that matter. Did you finally grow tired of cavorting with those tree dwellers?"

She didn't dignify the barb with an answer. How could she? Love and empathy were utterly alien concepts to him.

Pyrroth's glistening orange tongue rolled out to slap against his upper snout.. She shuddered. She'd felt the bloated organ where none ever should, and its presence stirred phantom sensations.

She looked down with a start to find glyphsinger drawn and poised in her hand. It was, of course, an utterly pointless gesture; a toothpick before a God. Her instincts cared little for such logic though.

Pyrroth chuckled again. The deep, crushing rumble set her bones rattling in their sockets. "You've grown prickly in your sabbatical. Going to poke me like one of those little dogs in the woods?"

Her eyes widened.

His mirth continued, acting as a bass to his already painfully deep voice. "Yes, I see your every move. You are of fire, and you are of me. I expected you to go scurrying home after your little trip down the river, but it seems I raised you better than that."

Bile boiled up the back of her throat. She savagely suppressed the urge to retch and gathered what she hoped was a cool demeanor. She felt a spark of that wild, savage fervor that had overtaken her in the glade. Glyphsinger moved again, rising to point at the vile beast.

"You want so badly to throw yourself at me, I can see it plain on your face. Do it. Show me the tricks you learned crawling among the two-legged beasts. Prove you have something resembling a spine in that pretty little body. I'll even summon a suitable punching bag if you'd like."

In her mind Glyphsinger plunged into his gloating eye a hundred times over. Her body coiled like a spring, aching to make her dreams a reality, impossible as they were.

No. He's just manipulating me as usual.

Slowly, agonizingly, Razia prodded the beast back into its cage. A wave of lethargy struck as she returned her blade to its sheath.

"I don't have time for your games. Anything else?"

Pyrroth's eyes narrowed to slits. The glow capping each horn flared in bright anger. The heat rolling off the colossus sharpened until her eyes stung with their supernatural intensity. The surrounding tents, despite being heavily fireproofed, began to smoke and smolder. For a moment she thought he intended to attack regardless.

A dozen battleplans took shape only to be instantly discarded, utterly useless in the face of the wyrm.

After a tense pause, Pyrroth seemed to rein himself in. "No, I suppose not. I don't particularly care where you go. Just try to keep yourself in one piece."

Razia squinted in turn, trying to ascertain if this was another jab of some sort, or if, for the first time in memory, the wyrm was expressing some sort of positive emotion. She eventually settled on the former and silently walked off. She expected more parting taunts, but her father simply stared after her.

She gathered up Tw'iik on the camp outskirts. The adorable little scamp had once again attracted unwanted attention, this time from a pair of very hungry looking wyverns. A few witticisms at his expense sprang to mind, but they crashed against the wall of strange emotion left in the reunion's wake.

It was not until the camp was a distant smudge of smoke on the horizon that some degree of feeling returned.

"Sorry for dragging you into this nonsense," she murmured. "I haven't been particularly considerate to your--"

Rymsh buzzed a shrill warning. Without thinking, Razia flung herself prone.

Heat as she'd never felt before blossomed across tail. The trees all around erupted with sudden conflagration in a broad, vicious line. If Tw'iik screamed, the sound was lost in the crackling popping foliage.

She rolled through the smoke, drawing her shield and blade in one fluid motion.

She found her assailant amidst the destruction readily enough. He marched almost leisurely forward, flames still dancing at his raised fingertips, the insignia of his office glinting in the flickering light: Duul, her guide through the warcamp. "You held the highest honor any could ever hope to achieve. You shared the company of the lord himself and all his infinite wisdom, and you scorned his hospitality."

His raised arm swept to the side. Another arc of fire roared forth and hurtled towards her. Razia managed to raise her shield just as the blast hit. Her talons left long furrows in the earth from its passing. She winced as her scorched tail planted itself to keep her upright. It was barely a spark compared to the forces of nature she'd witnessed in The Peak, yet its intensity all but overwhelmed her.

Duul's hand moved in a juggling motion. Six motes sprang to life one after the other and began to float in a slow, foreboding ring. "Your heresy will not, *can* not go unpunished."

Razia hastily lowered her pack to the ground, wearily circling with the dravir. "Pyrroth made it pretty clear he wanted me alive, or are you as deaf as you are stupid?"

"Can a mistake like you really be called alive, when your very existence is a stain on The House? This is nothing more than burning out blight."

Her eyes stung with rage as this stranger parroted the same phrases drilled into her over and over for the past fifteen years. Every drop of apoplexy contained during her encounter with Pyrroth ripped forth all at once.

No more weakness.

Rymsh, give me all of it.

The surge of magic fueled the beast. It felt much like the fugue state felt six months ago, but in place of the righteous fury, there was delicious malice at its heart.

The first of Duul's bolts launched at her chest, zipping and curving through the air in a dizzying arc.

Her veins flowed with divine heat. The tones of the dravir's spell became clear in all their detail. The lines, the force, the countermeasures.

She caught the bolt.

A savage smile at Duul's shock split her face. She crushed the mote of energy in her fist. Its flames licked up her arm. Higher and higher it crept, until it wreathed her entire body.

"I know your plight, little lizard. You're following what you think is a god, trying so desperately to earn his favor, chasing something you can never hope to touch and envying those who have. You remind me of myself, trying to find validation in someone else's opinions."

The flames surged brighter and brighter, until her face fell fully into darkness, leaving only a pair of malicious emeralds and a rictus of pearls shining from the blackness. "Do you want to know what the difference is? My god *loves* me."

Duul faltered. Her vicious glee surged still higher upon seeing the terror mounting in his eyes.

She swept in low, her longsword all but parting the curling grass in its wake. She leapt sideways to avoid his second bolt, letting its small explosion propel her forward. She drew in a deep breath. Ivati's blessing filled the role of her shattered gemheart, rippling the air with a merciless heat. A column of gold-laced flame erupted from her maw, forcing Duul into a hasty dodge mid-cast and sending his third shot veering wildly off-course. She took the fourth as a glancing blow to the shoulder, too close to dodge or block.

The fifth never left his claws, the limb flopping limp to the smoking earth. Glyphslinger took it cleanly just above the elbow, shearing through chain and scale and bone, the arc of its passing branded into Razia's corneas.

Duul howled and staggered back. His remaining arm flung high, a wall of flame so hot that it seemed to gain physical weight exploding into the thin gap between them. Razia recoiled with a growl of her own. Her malevolence was far from sated. It had tasted blood and craved more.

Razia, this is wrong.

Despite Rymsh's admonishment, the violence felt right. Losing herself to its whims provided a release she'd never before experienced. She drew every scrap of Ivati's blessing she could hold, until her veins all but sang with the divine might.

She gathered herself behind her shield and launched into the roiling slab. It offered a moment of agonizing resistance before she punched through.

Duul waited for her on the far side. A wickedly curved short sword spun towards her exposed face. A flash of instinctive panic took her before she remembered. *They're outfitted to northerners, not dragons.*

The blade stalled harmlessly against her scales, not so much as denting her depraved grin. Her fingers curled around the naked blade and pried it away with assured slowness. A casual kick sent him staggering back.

She charged after him before he could recover, Glyphslinger a blur of flames. She saw Pyrroth's face in the dravir's snarl, and she tried to shatter its wretched visage with each swipe. Blow after devastating blow rained down on the shortsword until its dented length at last slipped from deadened fingers, the body that wielded it falling heavily to the ground.

She was almost disgusted by the wave of disappointment she felt at seeing the focus adorning Duul's neck. The crack splitting vertically marked the crystal as overdrawn, rendering her foe tragically helpless. The game couldn't be done yet. She had so much rage left to rip from his bloodied hide.

Duul scrambled and kicked backwards, his hand still gesturing wildly. A few flares spurted towards her. She didn't even deign to wave them away. With a last anguished roar she leapt forward and plunged her blade into the man's chest. The fire wreathing it spread downwards, *inwards*, until the dravir's eyes and mouth erupted with the same cleansing fire.

Her malignity died with Duul. A sense of uncleanness that had nothing to do with the soot and dirt settled over her until her scales crawled. The longer she looked at the corpse, the stronger it grew.

Razia... Rymsh's tone mirrored her own mortification.

Before she could respond, Duul shifted. Lungs and throat that could no longer possibly function began to move. It wasn't the manic tenor of the dravir that chuckled raspily at her. Instead, she heard the voice of her father. "Looks like you do have a spine after all." Eyes lit with an orange glow met her mortified stare.

The full realization of her actions rocked her. She barely made it five steps before she vomited in the grass. The sounds of heaving failed to drown out the corpse's laughter.

Part Nine: A Whirlwind Return

Claws clicked hollowly on polished basalt. Scintillating motes of flame leapt free of their braziers to drift lazily to their demise, creating a soft cascade reminiscent of fireflies down each wall at regular intervals. Silken banners adorned the ceiling and columns. Each crease of the garnet hangings was familiar; each gilt arabesque relief, each twist of the declivitous tributary vent, was etched in her mind, as clear as the day she first strolled it. The ghost of her childhood yet lingered in the halls. Razia's wandering mind illustrated her younger self's passing. There, a wide-bottomed indigo vase squatting on a plinth, an imperceptibly different hue from the one she'd knocked over chasing Scarlett. Beyond, the favored alcove, deceptively deep, where she'd hide away to read or, later, escape her father.

An odd mix of emotions churned her gut: Regret, longing, nostalgia, disgust. Despite all that had happened, the Caves still wore the trappings of home. And now, it was in danger. She could feel the barely-contained chaos. The Peak froze with baited breath, a predator at silent attention, straining to pounce, to set the halls awash in fire and blood. No servants hovered about, no young drakes scampered underfoot. There was only the soft ubiquitous crackle of the sconces. Unseen eyes seemed to bore into her from every shadow.

A degree of normalcy returned as her introspective stroll took her to the heart of the Peak. The familiar sea of mosaic glittered before her, laid bare in its near entirety by the absence of the red dragons' hoard. Razia started slightly at the barrenness. *The war took this much?*

In the magma chamber's center loomed the accustomed form of Pyrroth's throne. Banners displaying the wyrm's crimson Visage on a field of gold draped heavily across the behemoth of stone and precious metals; cerements of a fading legacy. In its seat lounged an equally familiar figure: Amelia. Ever the epitome of casual regality, the curvy red and black dragoness had a leg slung over one scoria armrest as she conversed with a pair of robed dignitaries. A silver tiara dangled jauntily from one curled horn. Though she seemed animate and her omnipresent playful half-smile still turned the corners of her maw, even from this distance Razia sensed her strain and exhaustion.

Amelia noted her approach with a sagacious glance. A soft word and a casual flick sent her interlocutors into a bowing retreat. She rolled to her feet with feigned lethargy. Razia felt a momentary pang of dread as the queen regnant of the fire dragons rose to her full height and affixed her with an imperious stare. She padded down the tiered dais and picked her away across the tessellated floor until she stood scant inches from the younger dragoness.

All consternation vanished as she wrapped Razia in a crushing embrace. She couldn't help but melt in relief as the varior dragoness tucked her beneath her chin.

The two dragons found a mutual understanding in the embrace. It transcended the need for words. Of course, that didn't stop Razia for an instant. "This is nice," she murmured.

Amelia snorted and pulled back. Up close, her smirk was even more dazzling. "Well?"

Razia's snout crinkled in confusion. "Well what?"

"That's all you have to say? After two years without so much as a letter? You'll need deeper wisdom than that if you want back in *my* good graces."

"Sadly I didn't pack my sage robes. I'll see what I can do though." Razia's eyes narrowed to wizened slits as one hand raised to ponderously stroke an imaginary beard. She took a deep drag of a nonexistent pipe and gave her raspiest oration: "Man who knock over dragon, tip the scales."

Amelia's playful shove sent her staggering a full three meters back. "Close enough."

Razia's mirth died as she turned reflective again. "It's... been an eventful few years. A lot happened out there."

"Indeed. I hardly recognized you."

Amelia strolled in a slow circle about her, golden gaze analyzing every scale, pausing occasionally to lift a limb or poke at a stretch of exposed lamina. Parallels to horse appraisers flitted uncomfortably through her mind. *If she starts examining my teeth, I swear on The Wills...*

"Defined muscles, added dew claws for greater maneuverability, and increased height. You've chosen function over form. Unfortunate, but necessary given the circumstances." Razia yelped as a teasing smack fell across her rump. "Looks like you kept a few things the same though."

Massaging her behind and glowering at the offending double-finned tail, she replied "Yeah, I've had to toughen up a bit."

"Clearly not enough," Amelia said wryly, her tail darting out to spank the other cheek. This time Razia was able to dodge the brunt of it. "Still, we can definitely make good use of you. I take it you're here for this foolish tournament?"

Razia nodded warily, eyes keen for any further rear abuse.

"And you think you've got a shot?"

"I... think so. Like I said, a lot has happened."

Amelia finished her circuitous pacing and stopped before the younger dragon again. She took Razia's face in both hands, searching the emerald depths of her eyes. "You can tell me as much as you'd like."

Razia once again found herself spilling her story. The words tumbled over one another, sometimes rushed, sometimes halting. The highs and lows, the triumphs and defeats, blending together in a tangled mess of emotions. To her credit, Amelia listened raptly.

"...And so I decided to return," Razia finished somewhat lamely. With a start, she realized they'd wended their way about the entire chamber while they conversed, only to stop directly before the throne once more.

Amelia's expression was distant, calculating. Her head bobbed almost imperceptibly. The motion repeated, gradually growing into a proper nod. "Yes... we can *definitely* make good use of you."

A shadow of her earlier trepidation returned as Amelia affixed her with a predatory stare. She cleared her throat and tried to steer the conversation elsewhere. "Enough about me. How have you been?"

"Oh... I've had my hands full keeping this place from tearing itself apart. Every fire dragon with half a chance has come to stake their claim, and the rest are waiting in the wings to pick up the pieces. Tensions are high, tempers are higher. We've had at least a dozen skirmishes break out this week. The one upside is that, with everyone at each other's throats, none have dared moved against me directly yet."

"That sounds utterly exhausting," Razia said sympathetically.

"Indeed. But enough of politics. you must be tired from your journey. Plus I still need to finish exploring that new body of yours."

"Yeah, I'm definitely a bit-- wait *what!?*"

Amelia stepped closer, and Razia felt nostrils tickle her neck as she took a long drag of the younger dragon's magenta curls. "I don't recall stuttering. Now, are you going to take those clothes off yourself, or will I have to do it for you?"

The hybrid's mind churned, working through the political ramifications of what Amelia suggested. "But, if we--"

"Yes, my claiming you sends a clear message on where my favor lies. One which I intend you to back up wholeheartedly. Plus I need your mind clear for what's to come."

Razia could only stare in incredulously. "I thought you said no more politics?"

"I lied. Come now." She took Razia's hand and led her towards the throne.

Razia cocked an inquisitive eyebrow. "I'm always down for good horizontal tango, but, *here?*"

"Oh, don't worry. Much, much worse has been done in that chair. Dignitaries, rivals, servants, I'm pretty sure even a goat once. If you shone a moonstone on it, we'd have a second sun in here. At this point it's almost a right of passage." She must've sensed Razia's continued reluctance, for she finally sighed and altered their course. "You're lucky you're so cute."

"You're not a half bad sight yourself," Razia replied coyly, admiring her vantage of the curvy dragoness's swaying rump as she led them from the throne room. Its motion was hypnotic, mesmerizing, tantalizing. She found herself reaching out to give it a firm squeeze.

She had scarcely an instant to enjoy its delicious texture before Amelia spun on her, returning the gesture in kind. Her claws found Razia's waste, drawing her in tight. She lifted a leg to crush Razia against her with one thigh. The hybrid let out a small squeak of surprise as the black and red maw turned sideways and foined forward toward her own open muzzle, locking them together in a passionate kiss. Razia's lungs filled with the other dragon's hot, needful breath. Amelia's tongue confidently invaded her mouth, exploring her gums, strumming her frenulum, rimming her palette. Razia eagerly welcomed the visitor, her own tongue coiling and tasting the other organ even as her hands slid up Amelia's silky scales to tangle in her hair. One claw found firm purchase on her ram-like horn. Razia closed her eyes and lost herself in the other's heat, relishing in the sensation of Amelia's hands exploring her body. Her world became a blur of mouths, claws, and tails.

Somehow the entwined dragons managed to stay on their feet as they stumbled from the throne room. Amelia continued to expertly guide them through halls and chambers to a secluded lair. They whirled through the open archway to a murky chamber. Bulky shadows loomed from the dim, silhouetted in a soft

azul glow from the depths. Without missing a beat in their makeout, Amelia snapped her fingers. A series of olivine latches raised with a soft rumble, allowing molten magma to spill forth down the walls in narrow rivulets to hidden grates. Their light revealed the chosen den. Rich rugs and furniture-- hoarded plunder from around the world-- scattered the room. On the far end of the room, seated on velvet in a glass case, rested a slender spear, its gray head adorned with glowing blue runes. The dark vesicular walls and ceiling were artfully carved to resemble inset columns and arches. The porous stone seemed to absorb noise, making the squelching of her partner's wandering tongue all the louder. At Amelia's beckoning, a fist-sized glob of fire diverged from one of the streams and alighted in an Eastern lamp near the center of the room. It illuminated a divan couch of an odd blocky design, like a limelight for a stage performance.

Another snap caused an unseen bard to strike up a sensual serenade. Razia pulled away from the smooch. "You really know how to treat a girl," she panted breathlessly.

Amelia's wicked grin returned. "You have no idea."

Another push sent Razia tumbling onto the couch. A curvaceous bulk landed heavily atop her a moment later. The two grappled, all grunts and protesting furniture, until the red and black dragoness gained the upper hand. She seized one of Razia's arms and roughly yanked it behind her back. With her victim partially immobilized, she settled in behind her. A hard, slightly damp lump pressed against Razia's buttocks.

Amelia raised one leg until her knee brushed her chin. Razia felt talons dig into the small of her back. Amelia raked downward with all her might, pulling free her captive's armor and shredding the cloth beneath. A second powerful slash dragged the ruined pants and undergarments free, exposing the entirety of her lower half. Razia's trapped arm went slack as Amelia raised both limbs to the collar of Razia's armor and *pried*. With the sound of snapping leather and tearing cloth, the entire breastplate fell away, leaving both dragonesses fully exposed.

Amelia languidly glided a palm down Razia's naked scales, pausing to pinch a nipple before spreading her labia wide. She nosed forward to examine her revealed prize. Her tongue darted out to lick the younger dragon's tufted ear. "Much better," she crooned. Her thumb played in slow, soft circles around her guest's clitoris, sending waves of arousal shooting up her spine. The hand moved north to plunder her mouth. Razia obediently suckled the intruding digits, swirling her tongue around each down to the web. She tasted the faintest hint of her own musk.

Seemingly satisfied, Amelia returned her attention to her victim's sex. She played her splayed hand over it, massaging the vulva before plunging first one digit, then a second, into the depths of Razia's channel. Razia writhed, and humped against the fingers, basking in the gratification. Her neck craned to share another deep French with the other dragon. She moaned against Amelia's mouth as the delving fingers struck a particularly erogenous spot. Amelia pressed on heedlessly, wiggling and thrusting, driving her plaything wild.

Suddenly, her dancing fingers froze, the nectar-coated tips just resting inside Razia's folds. Amelia pulled back to whisper headily in her ear again. "I think you're ready." She shifted, allowing the hard lump pressed against Razia's behind to slide free. The pointed tip of a gorgeous scarlett shaft peeked from between the hybrid's thighs. Amelia eased forward, letting it glide between Razia's lower lips to lightly kiss against her clitoris. A gossamer thread of precum marked their joining. The member flexed and pulsed, lightly caressing her needy sex. Butterflies of anticipation fluttered in her belly.

Amelia splayed her again and pressed its head against her opening. It held for a moment, the uppermost ridge on its inner curve catching against the pale pink entrance, before Amelia delicately slid it home. The most wonderful feeling of fullness washed over her as the varior's cock crept deeper, slowly and inevitably vanishing within to widen her depths. Its rigid length proved stronger than her confines, and it molded her vagina around its delightfully ridged form. The pressure of its arrival triggered something deep within.

Like a garter snake emerging from its den in spring, the head of Razia's own penis poked free of its slit. It almost seemed to taste the air before uncoilong. Inch after luxurious inch emerged, its exodus matching the slow pace of Amelia's penetration, the soft plate-like textures lining its sides sliding gently over her scales. It rose to its full ten inches to twitch softly in the warm trophy room air. A few wisps of steam drifted free as it shed her inner heat

"Well, that's certainly new." With fingers still wet with Razia's honey, Amelia gripped the shaft, turning and lifting it for a full inspection. The head, plated length, and barely-formed knot at its base all received her admiration before she set to properly fondling it. Her own cock finished its plodding plunge, its still-hardening length just managing to bottom out the younger dragoness. With a slight shift of her hips, she began to rut. Long, elegant strokes send a litany of pleasurable sensations radiating from Razia's vagina. Her thrusts were matched simultaneously by her affection to Razia's own cock. Each massaging flourish stimulated its entire length.

Perhaps Amelia gave an unseen command, or perhaps her planning was so flawless that she had their lovemaking on a choreographed timetable. Whatever the case, the sequestered minstrel accelerated his tune. The cozy chords took on a more frantic lilt. Her own pace quickened in response while she slathered her victim's neck in kisses. Lips and tongue turned to nibbles. Nibbles turned to an outright bite. The older dragoness's fangs dominantly sank into Razia's scruff, leaving the smaller dragon helpless to her ministrations.

Despite Amelia's playful roughness, despite the needles digging into her neck, despite the black memories haunting the Peak, Razia felt safe, warm, *loved*. Amelia was not her biological mother, though their nearly identical facial markings had often made her wonder. Still, she had diligently played the role during those critical formative years. Even now, Razia swore she could feel a maternal tenderness mingled with the dragon's primal lust as she fucked her with all the force of a charging horse.

For the first time in months, she relaxed fully. Her shoulders slumped and she breathed a deep sigh of contentment; a breath that caught halfway in her throat as Amelia's pounding phallus struck particularly deep. The varior rutted her to her limits, each ball-slapping thrust sending the crimson speartip railing against her outer cervix in a way that made her toes curl.

Time lost all meaning. There was only the powerful dragoness behind her, her pounding thrusts and pumping hand twining with the swelling violin chords. The hybrid endured as long as she could against the inferno of stimulation, her lilting moans drowning out the music. Amelia stretched, adjusted her angle slightly for maximum penetration, and hilted the cerine dragon fully. Razia cried out in ecstasy as the tip cleaved into her partially dilated endocervix, utterly filling her. The feminine roar was choked off as Amelia's jaw tightened on her neck nearly enough to pierce the scales, throttling her windpipe fully closed.

The orgasm washed over her with the inexorable might of a tidal wave. Her entire body turned to stone, every muscle contracting and spasming, her eyes squeezing shut. Molten pleasure welled within her inner testes. She instinctively thrust into Amelia's powerful grip until ropes of silvery seed sprayed across her belly and the floor below. Her vaginal walls contracted in rolling waves to milk Amelia for all she was worth. Through the euphoria, she felt her reward arrive as her innards grew warm and wet from the other dragon's ejaculant. Razia's chest heaved, suddenly desperate for air that would not come. The couch began to singe and smoke from the sheer heat rolling off the mating pair.

She rode out the climax to its last shuddering wave. At last, after what felt like an eternity, she slumped back against Amelia. The other's cock still snugly stuffed her now imperceptibly pronounced belly. Her now slightly reduced obsidian balls rested neatly against the soft pink of her inner thighs.

Amelia at last released her grip on her partner's scruff. "Mmm, you're right, this *is* nice," she demurred, still idly working Razia's pole. Her head lowered to rest comfortably on the hybrid's neck.

Razia lay in her arms until her breath returned, simply enjoying the other's company. Finally, she rolled off the divan into a kneeling position.

"Hey you butt, where do you think you're going? I'm not done cuddling."

"Ohhhh just getting an early start on round two," Razia replied slyly. "I intend to have as much fun as possible while I have you alone."

"You're playing a dangerous game down there my lovely. I've been known to send more than cum down pretty little necks like yours."

"I know what I'm about. Now, just sit back and let me return the favor." Flashing a smirk, Razia set to her task. She worked her mouth around Amelia's loins, trailing kisses across the soft red of her inner thighs. She blew gently against the varior's balls, letting the warm air tickle over the exposed scales. She augmented the motion with a hint of wind magic, sending air currents wending across the dragoness's entire body,

slipping tendrils into her nose and mouth to literally steal her breath away. Razia's tongue languidly unfurled from its lair, inch after inch snaking free, until the entirety of its glistening length undulated in the light of the liquid fire. She nuzzled forward until the heavy onyx spheres rested against her nose before licking upwards. She tasted the entirety of the older dragon from anus to sheath. Trailing across her partner's pussy, her writhing muscle parted and teased the delicate black petals to expose the crimson bloom within. Razia relished in the salty taste before pressing onward, pausing again to wrap around Amelia's dangling testicles, girdling and squeezing the soft scales there. Finally, her tongue entered the dragoness to explore the tight cavern of her sheath, still wet from their coupling. Razia's predatory grin sharpened as her probing organ felt the treasure within. With a few careful caresses, it began to engorge anew. She guided the growing cock free with her tongue. Its pointed tip emerged for just an instant before she spiraled the muscle around it and dragged it into her waiting maw to properly enjoy the feast. A delicious mix of their mingled juices coated the hardening flesh. Razia eagerly lapped it up, polishing every bit of the rising rod. One hand began to knead and caress the dangling sack below. Her coiled tongue continued to writhe about its prey, and soon she felt its tip brush her uvula as Amelia came to full attention once more.

Amelia's hands found her hair. She stroked through the raspberry locks, crooning soft encouragements, all the while staring fondly into Razia's half-lidded eyes.

Razia leaned into the caresses, letting her host set the pace. Her head bobbed idly over the scarlet mast, occasionally withdrawing to allow access with her hand. Her other continued to tease at Amelia's testicles. It wasn't long before they began tense and contract within the attentive claws in signal of the impending flood.

Amelia's sudden grip on her horn stalled her. "As much as I'd love to give you a meal to go with this little show right now, we still have lots to cover; and you still have a hole just begging to be explored. Why don't you bend over the couch and let me take care of that real quick?"

Razia's annoyance at the interruption transformed immediately to excitement. She all but leapt onto the couch and assumed a kneeling position. Her tail lashed from side to side in anticipation. *When on Lorn did I get this excited about butt stuff?*

Strong hands gripped the rambunctious appendage and lifted it to inspect the hindquarters beneath. Razia felt hot breath on her tailhole followed quickly by slimy contact. Amelia's tongue swirled several times around the tight little bud before beginning to worm its way inside her. She stifled a pleased gasp by biting her lip. It took every ounce of willpower to keep from wriggling each time the invader wagged against her prostate. Warm wetness permeated up her rectum. The feeling of breath on her nethers returned as Amelia's snout worked steadily nearer. She started slightly as the other dragon's teeth brushed her perineum. The fangs dragged playfully across the soft scales before retreating along with her tongue. She heard Amelia spit. A moment later, her saliva coated thumb rubbed across, and *into*, her anus, finishing its preparation. The next touch she felt was far larger and more insistent. She took a deep breath and relaxed the sphincter as best she could, welcoming the peak of Amelia cock into her. Her toes curled again as the girthy rod acted as a wedge, spreading her insides wide as the varior pressed forward. She surreptitiously swept the tip of her tail around to wet with her lips before threading it down the couch between Amelia's legs. She probed over her voluptuous derriere, to the deep crevasse between. There, she found her target.

Several inches of well-lubed dragon tail pierced the varior's own bud. Razia's efforts were rewarded with a surprised inhale.

Their coupling continued long into the night. Amelia knew an astonishing number of positions, to the point where the hybrid was soon overwhelmed by the sheer quantity. She countered by bringing to bear her own sexpertise. Copious amounts of knowledge and fluids were exchanged. The floor, chairs, tables, and once even the ceiling itself, served as habitats for their wild lovemaking. When at last they collapsed in a heap for the final time, the entrance of the room was aglow with the first warmth of the rising sun piercing the mirrored main shaft of the volcano.

Amelia gave her cheek a last lick, clearing a bit of vaginal discharge that had somehow found its way there. "I haven't had that much fun since Nebula stopped in. We'll have to do this again sometime. Unfortunately, I have another meeting to attend. I had your old rooms prepared for your use, though of

course you're welcome to share mine instead." Another snap of her fingers brought a servant bearing a thick indigo robe scurrying forward. Amelia turned away to begin donning it.

Razia glanced to her own garments-- utterly destroyed by the varior's earlier ferocity-- sighed regretfully, and copied the action.

Nothing.

"Um... I don't suppose I could get one of those?" she asked hopefully.

"Nah, I like you better naked. Besides, if there was any doubts of what transpired here, your walking out of here marked by my seed will clear them right up. Bye now!"

Cackling madly, Amelia dashed out of the room. Razia was hot on her heels, her mouth awash in a string of explicatives.

Part Twelve: Sacramental Summons

Nawfa apprehensively placed his palm against the towering stone door. For all his boundless bloodshed and killing, Pyrroth's most heinous acts by far were committed here, in this very bedroom. Those stains would take eons to properly wash from the Peak.

Probably for the best. History repeating itself and whatnot.

And now here he was, standing before the imposing portal, poised at the precipice of a new chapter for their kind, all but salivating at what lay beyond.

He'd utterly lost himself in the heat following the battle, the heady concoction of pheromones, sweat, and adrenaline driving him into his opponent's arms in an entirely different sort of grapple. They'd left quite the spectacle as they departed the arena, though few seemed surprised. The energy was palpable. The fire dragons had new leadership, and every beast in the mountain felt it.

The insensate passion had cooled considerably when Razia pulled away, affixed him with a smirk contemptuous enough to kill a man, and strode off. By the time he'd finished gawping, her cerise tail had vanished around a corner. He tracked her trail through the halls easily enough. The immense energies unleashed through their gems had forced them into harmony. Even now, he felt a powerful thrum emanating from beyond the granite slab. Whether it was his instincts or the Wills themselves, something summoned him forth.

Three thin rivulets of molten rock, golden-white, flowed hissing and steaming *up* the walls, meeting in the vaulted ceiling zenith to form a grand array of patterns. Their constantly shifting ribbons illuminated the sea of turquoise silk sheets beneath. Adrift in their center like an aphroditic vignette was the object of his desires: Razia. She still wore her imperious grin as she lazily acknowledged his arrival with one brilliant eye.

She'd traded her melted slag of armor for a black leather bustier. The way it hugged and accentuated her bosom quickened his breath as effectively as her lips scant minutes before. A ring clasped the piece together and networked to a matching choker and skimpy thong.

Memories stirred of a leave from the Void. A night drinking had found his group in a hazy brothel famed for a group of women known as The Taskmistresses. Razia's outfit bore a concerning resemblance to their attire.

"Come to give fealty to your new queen?" she called, not even deigning to raise her head.

Ah, so this was your strategy. As wily as you are fierce, I see. He smiled wryly. "Indeed. I understand the ceremony for it is quite rigorous."

Seeing her there, spread wide in invitation, rekindled his primal urges. They surged as fresh and raw as ever. In a blink he found himself standing at the foot of the bed. Another blink and he was crouching down before her, taking one talon in reverent hands and kissing it lightly. His lips trailed up her calf, knee, and thigh. He tasted her inner legs, tongue gliding slowly over the armor-like plates that chased their length. He planted a soft smooch on the strip of black leather concealing her garden.

"You have my permission to remove--"

Nawfa focused on the offending article. Blinding white fire traced his gaze, scoring cleanly through the strap to leave it in two smoking pieces. Its departure left him a clear view of his ultimate objective, pink

and puffy, glistening softly with her own arousal. He started slightly as he noticed what lay above. An erection to rival his own. Lamina that mirrored her thigh scales marched up its long thick underbelly, capped by a lightly flared and pointed head. They terminated near the base between the curves of a rosy knot. A trail of precum held to the sliced thong for a moment before breaking to fall across the glorious phallus.

“--It carefully,” she finished. “I like this outfit.” If his actions annoyed her, she hid it flawlessly.

He had little patience left to bandy words. His body ached with a mix of longing and genuine fatigue. Each wound healed all but instantly, yet the abuse wore him down like an axle under constant use. His scales felt frayed, threadbare. He wondered briefly if she felt the same. She’d gone well beyond where her limit surely lay. As always, she remained felicitously unreadable. The mystery was riveting. He needed desperately to breed her.

Already he was lunging forward to return to his work. He admired her size as he moved in close. He’d spent two decades perfecting his own height for his craft, eventually settling on an even 6 feet; Tall enough to outreach moist voidspawn without being unwieldy in the cramped catacombs that wormed the plane. Razia, it seemed, had built herself to compliment her greatsword. She lounged a good half-head taller, all rippling muscle disguised beneath a thin veneer of curvacious perfection. He trailed his maw up thighs powerful enough to crush his skull with a simple flex, kissing the broad scales once more. He ravished one, then the other, before nosing in to take a long draught of her. Sweat and arousal mingled in his faculties, belied by the lightest fragrance of strawberries. He held her knees wide and dove deeper until his mouth met soft petals of flesh. The wide knot of her cock settled comfortably in the divot of his snout.

Even in that regard she outstripped him. A quick cross-eyed appraisal placed the member at a sizable 10 inches.

Nawfa licked her long and deep. He lapped up every drop of nectar, swirled his fork about the tiny hard nub at the slit’s zenith, and finally plunged into her. He unfurled fully within and began pumping his tongue repeatedly down the pleasingly tight tunnel. He felt her every groove and contour even as he sought to extract more of her delicious feminine juices. It was like water in the desert to his feral hunger.

Finally, he managed to shake Razia’s composure. His writhing earned a slight intake of breath, mistakable for the whisper of scales against silk. He grinned ferociously as he withdrew. Rather than pull away, he meted out the same degree of idolatry to her cock. He licked up its underbelly, sending the salty streamers of precum swirling between his fangs before planting a firm, suckling kiss on its head. Higher still he went, his claws guiding the way. As he kissed her navel, they slid roughly beneath Razia’s top to fondle her breasts. They had already worked the garment free with their massaging by the time his mouth caught up. He busied each of them in turn, treating her teats much the same as her cockhead. He nibbled his way up her neck, her cheek, her ear, and finally, her mouth. She leaned up into the osculation, sucking and biting at his lower lip. His hands found hers and drew them above her head as he deepened their kiss. He held her there for a moment before rising to stand once more. He drew one perfect leg to him and used it to leverage the dragoness onto her side.

Muscles and tendons stood at rigid attention, itching to pound the ravishing creature beneath him senseless. His mouth watered in anticipation. Claws firmly gripped her thigh. His cock glided forward, its bioluminescent length pulsing softly to his heartbeat like a giant firefly drawn to her flame. He lined it up with her entrance. Its head grazed her. At long last, he--

Razia tensed, halting his thrust. “I’m afraid they’ll be none of that,” she said sternly. “You’ve earned your queen’s ire, and a night in a cell.”

For an instant he considered denying her and forging onward; forcing himself upon her. His body demanded gratification as it never had before.

I’d be no better than Pyrrh. Worse, I’d be committing the same acts in the very same room, perhaps on the very same girl. The thought disgusted him enough to calm his libido. He froze mid-push and let forth a deep, grumbling growl of anger; a dog given a treat only to have it snatched away at the last moment.

The meaning of Razia’s words soon became apparent. A surgically aimed wind tugged free the Nova Knight insignia from his horn and suspended it in midair. It wobbled there for a moment before beginning to

glow a bright orange. The gold melted and twisted into a curved tube, its transformation directed by indolent waggles of Razia's fingers.

Replicating earth magic with nothing but air and fire. Wind dragons really are unfair.

The tube became a cage of vertical bars, meeting to form a dome at one end. The other side remained open with what appeared to be two bars and a latch connected to the bottom of its curve. A small emerald flitted up to crown the odd contraction. He couldn't help but notice the finished product's uncanny resemblance to a flaccid penis.

As if sensing his concern, the device flitted towards his manhood. He moved to bat it away, but Razia's stare galled him to stillness. The bottom ring pressed against the tip of his cock, much too small for the swollen flesh. A strange discomforting draining sensation washed into his abdomen as the cool metal forced down his erection. Its worked itself further onto his shaft, shrinking and softening it to fit, until its end squished over the pitiful remnants of his knot and butted against his abs. The entire cage swung down, dragging his manhood into full submission while the two bars cinched his ballsack and locked together with a soft click.

"If my little jester king wants his freedom, he'll need to earn it," Razia purred. "Fortunately, I know just the performance to commence your trial. I have a certain friend who's taken quite the liking to you. You should grant her a private show." She thrust her hips suggestively. "But first, your new outfit is missing something. Kneel."

With a final flourish, she undid the clasp of her collar and transferred it to his own neck. The strip of leather that bound it to the rest of her alluring garb became a leash. "First the arena, now this. You look great being brought to heel, no matter the setting."

His expression darkened, and with it the room. The chandelier of living flame dimmed to a faint glow. "I'll play along with you tonight; however, tomorrow may find our situations reversed."

"We shall see. Now, your mouth has more pressing duties than words." She tugged lightly at his leash.

Their mockery of formal speech felt ludicrously out of place before the tower of ladydick looming over him.

He glared up at Razia before allowing the insistent pulls to draw him in. He took another long whiff of her heady scent and went to work. His tongue rolled out to polish her knot. He roved upwards, exploring each line and curve of the glorious member. Shaft and veins, glans and head, frenulum and tip, all received his affection. At the same time, his fingers formed a peace sign and slid upwards to lightly pinch her clitoral hood. He gave the soft flesh a quick squeeze and began working it up and down in tiny strokes. His thumb followed, stealthily hiding in the rhythm until his claw met her entrance. He eased it into her even as he eased onto the phallus. Her faint musk grew more intoxicating as his lips sealed around the tip. He suckled it idly, drawing out a few more morsels of precum, senses straining for any signals from his partner. A loving caress of fingertips across his brow was all the encouragement he needed. His tongue began to swirl in elaborate circles around her. With each revolution, his head dipped lower, slowly swallowing the tower whole. He relished the feel of her silken flesh against his own. His cheeks sucked in to cradle her. His teeth gave the lightest nibbles over her grooves. His other hand lifted to support her base just beneath the now fully-hardened knot.

Through it all, he felt a pleasant vibrating in his own loins, soft at first, but growing more insistent with each movement. As he switched to pleasuring Razia's rod with his hand, he spared a glance downward. The emerald chip that crowned his chastity cage scintillated almost imperceptibly, rapidly giving off tiny flutters of wind like a bumblebee in flight. The entire apparatus vibrated with its force, suffusing his dick in constant stimulation. The caged beast pulsed sullenly against its restraints.

Neat trick. It's better than nothing I suppose.

Nawfa shrugged slightly and returned to his toils. He engulfed a full seven inches, letting the cock's tip tickle the back of his throat, before gradually retreating. He let Razia flop free to only lap up and down the glistening shaft in long strokes, each one causing her to wave gently. He slobbered her length and carefully took it in his maw once more.

He felt a tautening of muscles as his thumb grazed her upper wall. He honed in on the spot, stroking over the rough little patch, in time to his bobbing head.

He soon lost himself in the rhythms. His ears filled with the melody of wet sucking.

Four powerful talons curled around the base of his skull, just beneath his forest of horns. A few short hours ago they were intent on ripping him limb from limb. Now they seemed almost protective as they pressed him down.

The knot loomed before him, glaring, enormous, inevitable. Thin lips met the fleshy bulb as Razia ground him against her. He felt his jawbones shift and pop as it strained him wide. A final platelet slid over his tongue, smooth and silky. He winced as his teeth grazed the globular mass. If it caused the dragoness any pain, her lusty smirk masked it completely.

A tightening of toes around his head was the final warning. With a slight twitch of her thigh muscles, Razia brought him fully to her. His snout pressed to her abdomen as the enormous knot settled inside. His tongue became a snake beneath a settling boulder, writhing, straining, yet hopelessly trapped. Her rigid cock slipped almost painfully down his throat, its head coming to nestle in the tight circlet of his collar. He managed a low growl of mixed annoyance and triumph.

"Such a good king. Enjoy this feast in your honor," she crooned, reaching down to scratch the sensitive scales behind his ears as she fed him.

Hot, thick ropes pumped down his gullet. His lunch had not survived the earlier destruction and, despite the humiliation, his stomach eagerly accepted the gift. Razia's cum left him feeling warm and full even as it sent tingles of contentment racing across his body.

Razia's other foot rasped against his cage, her toes effortlessly curling and massaging about their hapless prisoner. As if on cue, the buzzing of the gem crowning it grew louder. Its maddening vibrations against his cock left little room for rational thought. Worries and distractions gradually faded beneath it, leaving only delectation and reality. Razia's savory seed continued to pump into him, each pulse causing her cockhead to stir pleasantly in his throat.

He managed to meet her gaze. She gave no heated pants, no eyes squeezed in bliss, no lolling tongue, just the same unchanging regal regard. Were it not for the shaft twitching in his gullet, she might've been holding court.

A sudden vision of him kneeling unseen beneath a desk, servicing her as she conducted state affairs flashed unbidden through his sodden mind. His own cock twitched hard against its confines at the fantasy, pressing it ever harder against the vibrating gem.

She's good. Far, far, too good.

Their battle hadn't ended, it simply took a subtler form. *We traded one form of swordplay for another, though I seem to have been temporarily disarmed.* The stakes remained much the same. The lust and whatever lay beneath it guided the dance, but it merely served as the drum of war. A war of attrition, of dominance, of control. A war he was losing quite spectacularly.

Razia barely contained a blissful moan. She focused every fiber of her being on maintaining her calm demeanor. It was like trying to plug a leaky dam with her fingers. Her teeth strained to bite at her lip. Her fingers and toes ached to curl into the silken spread. The base of her tail all but vibrated with tiny twinges, wanting to wag like a happy puppy's. She met treachery from every corner of her body and weathered it to the best of her ability. She could barely spare a thought for the handsome maw wrapped so willingly around her.

Nawfa himself was good, almost terrifyingly so. Every movement was calculated and confident. Not the brash confidence of nobility, but the certainty of a tested leader. Every decision he made was the correct one because *he made it*, and, once made, he committed fully to it. And oh what moves they were! Each dart of his tongue, every gentle caress of his claws, was a burglar in the night intent on stealing her breath away.

She played a dangerous game, with a dangerous man. The Sun of the South, perhaps the most powerful fire dragon alive, wedged snug between her thighs. His pure gold-white eyes seemed to bore into her, weighing her soul in merciless judgment. Keeping her composure beneath his onslaught mentally taxed

her just as much as their earlier clash. Keeping up the air of dominant confidence proved harder still. The persona felt flimsy and counterfeit. Using it to toy with what her libido screamed was the mate of her dreams seemed beyond criminal. She dared not let up though. However warm she might feel in his embrace, she dared not trust him. Not yet. Not with all she had left of a home.

She basked in the savage irony of the situation. Since a teen, others had used her body for their own ends. Now she wielded it as a weapon herself.

Her internal testes churned and throbbed happily as they drained into their willing prey. She continued to pet him and coo sweet nothings as her foot and leash kept him locked tight around her knot. The grooves lining the roof of his mouth felt utterly heavenly against its sensitive flesh.

She held him firm until she detected his trembling, the telltale sign that his oxygen supply was dwindling. Of course, the newly minted great wyrm didn't need to breathe. She'd dealt him a dozen killing blows without so much as phasing him. Still, he was far too cute to cause unnecessary discomfort. With an inward sigh she allowed herself to deflate and began extracting the dragon from her waist.

She took a moment to steel herself, ran through her battle plans yet again, and prepared for the final assault.

After what felt like an eternity, the wedge of flesh stretching him wide gradually lessened. The veritable firehose slid back over his tongue before finally pulling free. A slender strand of cum and saliva bridged the gap and seemed to hang unnaturally long in the air before breaking to fall into the puddle of feminine juices now soaking the sheets beneath Razia's hips

He refrained from gasping, instead ducking low to lap up the delicious ejaculant coating her lower lips and the base of her tail. Once finished, he made an elegant flourish as if rising from a bow. "Was Her August Majesty pleased with my humble pageant?" His voice dripped with every ounce of irony he could muster.

"It was a most exquisite start, though your audience remains hungry for more. After all, jesters must be skilled in all manner of entertainment. We've seen your mouth in action, but what of the rest of your body?" She slowly rose to her feet. He moved to join, but a foot planted on his snout put the notion to rest. "I quite like you down there actually."

He was forced to follow on hands and knees as the dragoness padded to the center of the area rug, tugging him along by the makeshift leash. She halted there and moved behind him, lifting his tail to inspect what lay beneath. His tailhole clenched as her fingers traced it. "Perfect."

As so many times before, he considered stopping her. If his body was a temple, his butt was his most private sanctum. No sinner had yet dared desecrate it. The blasphemy of it made it all the more exhilarating. His curiosity ultimately overpowered the dread, and he simply sat placidly as Razia knelt and began to lick him. Agile and firm, her wet tongue slithered across his balls and rimmed his anus repeatedly. His dread seemed to amplify the sensations, for each movement caused his entire lower half to tingle. Again and again she lapped across him, the forked tip darting against the virgin hole. Gradually he felt himself relaxing against the warm pleasant touch. Deeper and deeper went the tongue. Its slimy tip rounded a curve in his tunnel he never knew existed. Its pressure against his wall released a burst of pleasure behind his loins. He felt a flutter of hot breath as she chuckled against him.

Finally, she reared back, placed a talon right next to his chest, and took a position over him. The grip tightened on his leash. He felt a tepid probing, like the dragoness's tongue but far larger. It dipped low to grind against its trapped brethren before aligning with his bud. He felt himself clenching again and tried to relax as it pushed against him.

He allowed a small grunt when it dug into his anus. It pushed his sphincter inwards, stretching the surrounding flesh worryingly until at last it poked through with a faint squelch. Pain and pleasure blossomed in him. His legs quivered slightly, both from the sensation and the mass of dragoness settling atop him. The same contours now intimately familiar to his mouth eased into him. Segment after segment slid home, stretching his abused hole until the ominous curve of her knot brushed his tail. They both knew what was to

come, however impossible it seemed now. Already his sphincter strained to accept the veritable log entering his flume. He dared not imagine what the knot would feel like.

In perfect imitation of his earlier fellating, she slowly withdrew only to thrust forward slightly faster. His toes curled into the carpet as the hefty dragoncock filled him a second time. She nuzzled against him and nibbled at his ear. "You're doing great so far."

The thrusting grew gradually more intense as he acclimated to being stretched. It heightened to a constant flurry, each crash of her hips sending him bouncing wildly in his cage. Its jostling masked Razia's next ploy. It was only after the shaking stilled that he noticed her intentions. He glanced down to find his mistress's tail coiling hungrily about it. Smooth scales molested him, releasing a soft chorus of clicks as they slid over the bars.

"Nawfa Sal Soraria: Sun of the South, Hero of the Void, The Breaking Dawn, The Immortal, Lumati's Lantern. A dragon allegedly of unquestionable morals and unshakable resolve. What could a living legend like you possibly have left to desire? You have more power than almost anyone alive." Despite the exertion, Razia sounded not the slightest bit out of breath.

The phallus pounding into him left little room for reply.

"We shared something far closer than words in the arena. I know your soul, little drake. You want nothing more than a big strong woman to tell you what to do. And right now she's telling you to take it all."

Fuck.

Her mouth swallowed his protests. Fangs met fangs as they locked together in a deep osculation. Her tongue invaded him, wrestling his own bemused muscle into submission and exploring its newly conquered domain. It left no peak or valley unsurveyed. He meekly trailed it, wrapping his own tongue about hers until she pushed back into his last frontier. His eyes widened as he felt it brush his uvula. It paused briefly at the precipice before wriggling down his throat. Cool green eyes stared down into his as she dominated him.

He felt it building. The constant sawing of plates against his prostate, the fullness of her cock stuffing him to his limit, and the merciless tag team of vibrator and tail against his trapped manhood herded him to the brink. The same divine exaltation at meeting Lumati washed over him. His balls tensed and throbbed in eager preparation.

Razia too seemed to sense his blossoming climax. Her tail, ever lashing at his cage, tightened suddenly. Quick as a viper, it lunged forward. It darted between the nest of bars to sink its oiled tip a full inch into his urethra. A dazzling burst of cold, pain, and pleasure erupted from a nerve bundle he never knew existed.

He saw red. The unholy pressure in his loins built to a crescendo only to crash against an immovable plug. His cock twitched frantically, desperately trying to release its load. His testicles churned in frustration. They felt suddenly swollen and heavy. He glanced down to see his cock darken slightly and strain yet harder against its cell. Just as the full brunt of denial struck him, she knotted him.

He truly did whimper then. A long, low kean against his queen's mouth.

A sharp prickling of muscles never before stretched overwhelmed his anus, as euphoric as it was painful. The knot strained his virgin bud wide, caving him inward in a way that made his tail stiffen. His body unwillingly swallowed the behemoth invader. It crushed against the same pleasure centers primed by her tongue and shaft to further overwhelm him. Its girth seemed to displace his innards and leave room for little else. His breath came in short fluttering pants against the dragoness's mouth. They were made doubly ineffective by the tongue still exploring his throat. Razia let out a throaty hum of bliss that sent hot air racing down his neck. He felt an accompanying heat blossom deep in his rectum; at first a dribble, then a veritable cascade that further tightened his abdomen. He felt like a mold being filled with molten iron. The rutting dragoness was a hammer, the floor an anvil, the room a sweltering forge. The seed seemed to sap his stamina as it filled him, leaving him bloated and lethargic.

His prick redoubled its inefficacious efforts at the intense overstimulation. It twitched and pulsed hard enough to make his eyes water, demanding, *begging* release. All it earned was another quarter inch of tail working its way in.

Razia at last broke the hypnosis of her kiss. "Ah ah, can't go wasting any of those precious heirs," she admonished.

The breasts on his back became a crushing weight. His whole body tingled and crawled. He wanted to curl into a ball and howl, but the dragoness pinned him firm and forced him to ride out every last exquisite eddy of her orgasm.

She left him little more than a puddle on the floor.

She let him quiver beneath her for a few terse seconds. To his inflamed senses they seemed hours. Finally, she shifted. Firm hands fitted behind his knees and lifted. She casually rose to her full height, cradling him in her arms, her cock still tied tightly in his ass.

"That was quite the performance, little jester. I think we yet have time for one last encore though." She shifted her grip and wrapped one forearm beneath his legs while the other eased them on the bed. She spooned him, her warm scales contouring round his body. Her jaw settled comfortably between his thorns. One hand trailed down his belly to toy at his aching cock. Her own shaft pulsed reassuringly deep within him. "Why don't you sing us a lullaby?"

He let forth another weary growl, but the point was moot. They both knew the winner of tonight's games. All he could do was close his eyes and let the gentle thrum of their gemhearts guide him to much-needed sleep.

Quotes and Snippets

Xenoda Musings

Razia lounged beside the lava bath, basking in the warmth bubbling up from its depths. She'd intended only a quick dip, but the curved basalt divot had looked far too inviting. Minutes stretched to hours as she lay snared in her favorite trap, and the heat of the baths had settled comfortably into her bones.

She idly watched the comings and goings through the bathing chamber as she pondered Eris's final words to her.

Only you can decide what you sacrifice.

She'd said it as they discussed rope tying techniques, of all things. The older dragon was prone to such solemn, dramatic lines. She'd always been obsessed with the concept of honor, believing it to be what truly set fire dragons apart from their brethren.

Razia absentmindedly slipped into the pool and began to bathe in earnest.

Perhaps Eris had sensed her own impending end. Razia herself occasionally received premonitions; tiny snippets of conversations and scenes yet to come.

Two weeks had passed since The Fabled's infiltration. The scars remained agonizingly fresh. She'd lost her sister and her friend. The memories cut deep, but she refused to push them aside. Thinking of Eris seemed the best way to honor her.

Razia was stirred from her musings by fresh arrivals. A kobold servant rounded the corridor with a second figure in tow. An elf, tall and broad shouldered, his shoulder-length hair tied back from a rugged, hawkish face in a simple braid. Overall one of the more attractive mortals she'd laid eyes on. He was dressed in an odd hybrid of light armor and formal attire.

Their eyes locked. His skin, already in a scarlet cast from the molten rock, reddened further. Razia wagged her tongue at him, grinning inwardly at his flustered reaction before the kobold towed him away.

She watched them depart until they rounded another turn, making no secret of ogling his rump.

Fascinating, she thought. I'll have to hunt him down later.

NarwhalIV Art Excerpt

Razia stripped what little remained of her clothing away and fell heavily to the cushions of her room. The soft, ubiquitous breeze rolling off the sea-tossed cliffs permeated through the columns to stir the litany of plants arrayed about her. After living in a bamboo stalk for more than a year, any room not flooded in greenery felt barren and unnatural. She'd considered asking the steward to have still more potted shrubberies brought in, but ultimately thought better of it.

The feather filled bedding seemed to leach her lethargy, and soon she returned to a healthy wakefulness. With it came renewed excitement. The possibilities of the day's breakthroughs raced through her mind once more. Tentatively she channeled into the emerald bangle. The jewelry was a gift, though she had no idea who the donor was. Several wind dragons seemed to regard it as a game, sneaking treasures onto her like reverse pickpockets. A bangle and intricately wrought golden armband had joined the growing gaud during the day's activities.

The chunk of beryl resonated, and the world responded to its call. Clumps of air solidified, formless at first. At her coaxing they became hollow shells.

Next came the amethyst. It buzzed soft and familiar. Flames sprang to life within the atmospheric constructs. Air flowed into the bottom, surging the magic-wrought whisps into tiny concentrated infernos. The feeding winds stirred the decorative arum plants, pulling free the copper sulfate fungicide coating their leaves and turning the flames a brilliant green.

Razia watched the dancing flames for a moment, the first complex union of her two affinities. She sent them whizzing around the room, set one to pirouette on her palm, and even allowed one to sizzle through a vase, leaving a hole oozing pale ceramic like melting wax. Then, she did what any self-respecting dragon mage confronted with a new spell would do; she pleased herself with it. Shapeless flames, hot enough to melt stone, became hands and a pointed phallus. She puppetted the manifested appengages with a few lazy fingers while her other hand toyed its way down her torso. Two fingers sank between her folds and spread them wide, guiding in the flickering rod home. The concentrated air felt slick and insubstantial. It glided inwards without the slightest hint of friction. Her concentration wavered, causing the manifestation filling her to wriggle maddeningly, pushing and blowing against her inner walls..

Despite its strange texture, the construct felt familiar. With a start, she realized she'd modeled it after the shark from months before.

An ethereal emerald hand touched her knee. Another played lightly with her air. Her fingers shifted to toy with her hardening clit as she settled deeper into cushions, retiring to an evening of tantric self-care.

O.Z.Y. Art Excerpt

Many fire dragons deployed the same passionate, self-destructive mindset to their entertainment as the rest of their lives. Perhaps the most hedonistic of all their activities were their burn parties: Social events in enclosed chambers, sometimes entire vents, where heady concoctions of incense and drugs were artfully burned.

This particular event was in celebration of Pyrroth launching his campaign against Agglo. Despite the speeches, the promises, and the propaganda, the invasion remained a controversial topic, though even the fieriest dragons dared not voice their objections against the great wyrm. It left a somber tension over the festivities

Razia sprawled out on a chaise. The world seemed to move in slow motion. Forms, some familiar, some not, loomed from the haze of smoke that crowded the air. An alchemist somewhere beyond its effects expertly controlled the burning of the heady concoction: A mix of half a dozen different plants, fungi, and other aphrodisiacs. They suffused the cordoned off chambers, bathing the partygoers in a calming euphoria. Maqam drifted in wavering notes from somewhere deeper in the halls.

Her heart seemed impossibly slow and loud in her eardrums, all other noises a muted buzz. She'd lain there an hour, or perhaps a day, or perhaps only a few minutes. Time ceased to operate in a coherent manner.

She had no particular interest in such celebrations, but Pyrroth made it abundantly clear she was expected at each and every one of them. She was a pretty ornament to be put on display and, to a chosen few, picked up and played with.

One such lucky individual swam into view: Molokai, a war dragon of fire and earth. Though he wore an anthro form, he chose to retain more bulk than most, towering well north of 10 feet and all but casting Razia in darkness as he loomed over her. He was every inch the specimen of both elements, all rocky muscles and plates interspersed with glowing orange. His spikes, hair, and wings bore the luminescence of fresh lava, a shifting mire of orange and red.

He reached out to caress her cheek with one massive digit. Neither spoke. They both knew the purpose of this exchange. Any protest would've been meaningless. His hand traced down, across the richly brocaded aquamarine silk dress that left her arms bare below the shoulder, to catch her wrist. He slowly turned her hand over, stroking the scales of its back. Finally he helped her to her feet with a salacious wink.

Ever the model of feminine grace, Razia rose fluidly despite the effects of the burn. Together they left the room and its effects and began navigating the opulent warren of The Peak. The tunnels and halls twisted and branched at odd angles, making bearings a difficult thing to maintain. Razia had the vague inkling of walking southward. The rough passages seemed to bow in deference to Molokai. Passages that she had no memory of appeared before them, hastening their journey.

The Golden Sea stretched away to the south. Its shining dunes met the Peak's foothills in narrowing rivulets, as if the mountain was the estuary of a river of sand spilling out into the endless expanse. The fine grains mixed with the iron of the Peak's ashfalls, producing brilliant orange and red sandy crags and occasional paprika billows. They fell among the bones of the city that once stood upon the slopes. Razia knew little of the broken arches and walls, some still bearing half-melted faces; a civilization that stood before Shiza claimed the land. A last testament to the absolute power of the great wyrm. Despite their history, they remained deserted more out of convenience than reverence. Most modern denizens preferred the balmy slopes to the North and East, far more accessible to outside visitors.

It was down amidst these ancient, inscrutable ruins that Molokai led her. Towering obelisks and intricate scrollwork rose from the sandy ravines. The gray dragon plodded through an archway heavy with their triangular ornamentations. Perhaps once a great temple, whatever stood above had melted away, leaving only a great yawning mouth back into the mountain's belly. Even that seemed reduced by the sheer size of the male as he stepped through.

The air beyond had the slight must of a space used far less than intended. The rough-hewn walls spread out into a massive rectangular grotto. Tarnished sconces lined the wall, interspersed by row after row of backless stone benches, further confirming her suspicions of a church. At Molokai's beckoning, several of the braziers sputtered to life, giving a flickering orange glow to the hall.

They wended between the rows and back into a deeper recess past the great stone slab of what might've once been a stage. The walls and ceiling became artificial once more here, all tightly fitted stones marked with the same geometric patterns reminiscent of Earth Will creeds. The tunnel-- now more a hallway-- widened again, this time into what Razia assumed were once the quarters of whatever priest conducted affairs here in ancient times. A wide stone slab, devoid of any trappings, stood at knee height against one wall.

Sleeping on a literal rock. That seems like something a dirt worshipper would do, she thought blearily.

Whether Molokai kept the faith was unknown, but he seemed to fully embrace their practices, for he eased onto the basalt bed. Razia found herself drawn down after him, her hand still enveloped by his meaty claw. He carefully perched her on one massive thigh.

The rock might actually be softer.

Molokai was of the nudist persuasion, and he seemed quite intent on converting Razia to his religion.

Probably why he carried me off to a church.

Claws found dress straps and clasps with delicacy that belied their size, and soon she sat in nothing but her undergarments. These quickly followed, forming a neat little stack beside the slab.

Molokai leaned in to plant a kiss on her cheek and nuzzle her hair. The smell of brimstone lingered in his wake.

His snout moved down. Or, rather, *she* moved *up*, the gray dragon's powerful claws cupping beneath her thighs and hoisting. He kissed the nape of her neck, her shoulder, and on down her back, tickling her mane with each snuffling buss. He slowly leaned back, steely abs flexing beneath her torso, until he lay prone with her rear planted firmly on his collarbone. At his coaxing, her tail lifted, and his kisses continued down the soft curve of her rear. Despite her apathy, she shivered at his efforts, her body instinctively responding to the salacious attention.

Razia felt another stirring directly beneath her. Her new prone position offered front row seats to Molokai's reaction. A fissure opened in the slit of his crotch, revealing the citrine glow of unseen fires. A wide gray head soon emerged from its volcanic den. Her eyes crossed as it grew, impossibly tall and thick to her appraising gaze. She was forced to crane away as it all but lunged towards her, growing to the size of her forearm and beyond. Like much of his body, its underside was lit by a series of glowing orange grooves.

Molokai's meandering maw delved inwards, stirring her pudendum with deep inhalation of her scent an instant before his snout brushed it. He pressed harder, his lips drawing across the folds of her nethers.

Deciding to make the best of the situation, Razia settled in, her hands caressing his lines. Hips, thighs, and iliac furrows seemingly sculpted of heated marble met her fingertips.

The same odor of brimstone clung heavily to his loins, churning with the unmistakable musk of male dragon into a heady concoction. Hesitantly, she sank still lower, letting her lips just brush the slate shaft head. The taste was delightfully at odds with the smell and not altogether unpleasant. With all the considerable grace she could muster, she kissed him again, slower and deeper. Her lips left a little wet mark that quickly vanished beneath the waves of heat rolling from the beast.

Her next contact drew the entirety of its head into her maw. It was massive, forcing her maw wide just to fit her lips over the glans. It was deceptively rigid, its soft exterior belying a firm core.

Her deep kiss masked her moan as Molokai's own mouth pressed home. Razia shivered as his warm, wet, and deliciously rough tongue stroked her slit; a languid lap that seemed to encompass the entirety of her womanhood. A second even slower lick had her all but squirming. His arms wrapping around her thighs barred any further struggles, leaving his prey captive to his whims.

More licks fell upon her: Quick, spiraling contacts that traced the rim of her entrance; sharp lunges that bore down upon the hardening bead just above it; yet more lavish drags across her petals. Each further quickened her breath until she was all but panting around his rod.

She returned focus to her own ministrations, rapidly retreating from his length only to slowly sink down upon it once more, each fresh movement consuming another bit of the python between his legs. Soon the first ridge passed her lips, a band of sharp heat on the otherwise warm length. She teased at it with her tongue, stealing away the pre that lingered along its edge.

Molokai's own oral muscle grew progressively bolder, honing in on her vagina until, with a final roll, he slipped inside her. The massive organ seemed to fill her completely, leaving little room for breath or rationale though. A second moan escaped her, higher than the first. More joined, an aria to the heavy bass accompaniment of Molokai's grunts and huffs of pleasure.

If the head was large, the shaft proved more than she could handle. Nearly the diameter of her snout itself, properly pleasuring it was a conundrum. She began alternating her deep suckling pulls, releasing it from the embrace of her mouth to lick across its entirety in curling waggles. She felt a shift in his demeanor, the stony stillness gradually melting into little bucks and wiggles of his own. The occasional throbs of his cock grew in both frequency and insistence, leaving him stiffer than ever.

His tongue matched hers stroke for stroke, twisting and curling against her sensitive walls, sending veritable explosions ripping through her body. Her legs remained locked in his grasp, and he slowly drew them wider to gain yet deeper access to her inner treasures.

Satisfied that Razia wasn't going anywhere, one hand began to rove. The massive claw teased up her back, ruffling her mane as it went, until it settled over the curve of her skull. It scritched her scalp reassuringly, its fingers splaying between her horns. Then, with a slight tightening, it began to press her down. She spluttered into the twitching cock and tried to push back, but her efforts met with an iron wall. Molokai's forearm was far thicker than her neck, and it moved with the slow inevitability of shifting mountains. She gagged softly as the massive obelisk rammed into the entrance of her throat, forcing her mouth yet wider. Molokai's ball contracted, drawing up against her fingers. He bucked lightly into her as he came. The ridges in the underbelly in his cock brightened one after another, marking the passage of his cum. Thick spurts the color and temperature of fresh coals gushed down her gullet, rapidly overwhelming her ability to swallow. It flowed back towards her cheeks until her face all but glowed and thick rivulets ran down the pulsating cock.

Almost simultaneously, the rough scintillating tongue struck a particularly devastating note and sent her crashing over. Her legs spasmed and curled behind the spirals of his horns.

They rode out their respective climaxes tangled tight against one another. Razia slumped heavily upon him as the last waves of heat dissipated

Molokai rigorously put her through her paces before at last letting sleep overtake him. Razia made certain of his slumber before carefully extracting herself from his arms and carefully slipped away.

There was no tender aftercare or conversation, nor shame or sadness in her demeanor. She'd long since grown numb to such ordeals.

Night had fallen across the Peak, and its cool breezes greeted her upon emerging from the temple ruins. She let them guide her. Not back to the stifling vents of the Peak, but up. She began to climb. The ruins grew sparse before vanishing into unblemished sand and stone. She ascended until they were a distant blemish on the horizon below her. The memories seemed to lose their fresh raw focus and clarity as well, as though they too were being swallowed up by the scouring sand.

The ashclouds of the Peak receded for a rare clear night. All of Lorn seemed laid out beneath her. To the south, an endless expanse of sand twinkled softly in the moonlight, mimicking the field of stars above. To the east, the green-black expanse of the March dashed against the broken highlands. Far, far to the southwest, the filigree light spires of the Twelve Isles bathed the heavens.

She drank in the world from her little outcropping. She sat until the stars winked out and a rosy blush began to creep up the world's eastern curve.

Heavy wingbeats broke the pre-dawn silence. A titanic crimson form crested the Peak's crater and rocketed off to the north.

She watched the object of so much of her fear and hatred vanish over the mountain before finally rising to her feet.

I have to get out of here.