

# To Steal a Soul

A Metamor Tale



Virmir

[www.virmir.com](http://www.virmir.com)

"Ah! My darling Vale! Come give your father a hug! Yes, I am so glad to see you too!"

"What is that? You want to be just like me when you grow up? Now, now, don't be silly! Proper ladies are to remain at home!"

"Women cannot wrap their minds around the concepts of war! You are too fragile! Here, put this dress on. Oh, you are so pretty!"

"No, no, no! You can't play with toy soldiers! Here now, dolls are so much nicer! Look at how adorable you are!"

"Glory and fame? No, no, silly! There are no women generals! Come now, there are rules a delicate flower like your self must adhere to! You will bring our house glory by being a proper lady!"

"You will wear your hair up, like this! Marvelous! And more powder! You are beautiful darling, but your breasts are a little small. Here, wear these. Much better! I'm afraid you're eating a bit much, my dear. This corset will fix that. Tight? Comfort is second to beauty!"

"VALE! What are you doing?! By Akkala, put that awful thing down! Where did you get a BOW? One of your father's men? Tell me his name! He will be punished! By the gods! Get off of that horse!!"

"Darling! I've found a wonderful husband for you! You will be so happy together! And this union will bring our house so much prestige!"

"My betrothed! I am honored that you will bare my children!"

Look! Look at all the shiny things I have brought you! You love jewelry because you are a woman! We shall be so very happy together!"

"... So..."

"... Very..."

"... Happy!!"

...

You ran away? You always run away...

It's time to run away again, isn't it?

Cold whiteness surrounds you. Here they come, the little green men... The stench of death hangs heavily in the air. It's all your fault. You failed again, trying to be something you're not. Flee for your life!

Flee!



Vale awoke with a start, the entire bed frame shaking with a jolt. The discomfort was there. She clasped her hands over her muzzle, trying to fight it. But it was too strong, and she felt as if she would suffocate and burn up. Finally she let her mouth gape and her tongue roll out. She panted heavily in short shallow gasps like a dog.

It was one of those quirks she despised about becoming an animal. The uncontrollable panting when she was warm. Some aspects she had gotten used to, but this one would always bother

her. It was so degrading, even in the presence of other canids. At least she was alone.

The dreams didn't happen often, but it was always like this when they did. The cold air was soothing. Soon she would stop and be able to return to sleep. But in the meantime her mind began to wander.

Every once in a while when she had a quiet moment to herself like this it would hit her. What on Earth was she doing?

It was better than home. That was here only consolation. She repeated it over and over in her mind, willing it to be true. But by the gods...

She rolled over onto her other side, shifting her tail, feeling the weight of the covers upon it. It was like a fantasy. Everyone trying to pretend they were living a normal life. And then there was the killing, the death... She shut her eyes as the chilling air brought memories of that past winter's living nightmare...



**October, 707 CR**

For a short time, things actually started to look up...

I'd found my grandfather's notes!

Like any other day, the pig man and hyena were busy nipping at each other and Lady Vale was too far ahead to notice anything. We'd been milling around the forests for hours when I suddenly recognized a grove of trees. I immediately wondered off-path and began beating around the bushes. It took some time but I finally

found my water-dampened pack wedged in between some branches along with a few discarded Lutin weapons. I claimed a jagged rusty knife, thinking I could perhaps sell it for a copper or two. It seemed fitting that I should obtain something from that miserable encounter that day. The other weapons were too large for me to carry.

Lady Vale was not pleased when she discovered I went off on my own. Good. Maybe she won't pet me anymore. At least she seemed more involved with the rest of the group lately.

Unfortunately the pages did suffer a bit of water damage around the edges that were facing the flap, but the majority of them were perfectly readable. Any significant rainstorm would have destroyed them, so I suppose I should have considered myself lucky for the relatively dry weather in the few weeks they'd sat out there. I bought a wooden chest with a lock to keep them next to my bed in my room. Together with my new door latch I thought they would be secure enough.

I found myself becoming somewhat used to all the walking required of a scout. At first my feet killed me every day, as the change to digitigrade paws was quite a shock. But it slowly became easier to balance on my toes as the muscles became stronger, and the pads on the bottom of my feet became rough and calloused. Of course it was nothing like walking flat-footed wearing boots, but at least it was bearable. Unfortunately the weather grew colder and colder with each passing week. I had my cloak refitted for my smaller form, so under that, my tunic, and my fur, I was plenty warm. Yet my exposed feet stung from the exposure to the frigid autumn air, especially in the mornings. I could not imagine what winters must be like this far north.

One particularly cold morning our unit trudged through the frost laden fields northeast of the keep. We were a good two hours

out and though I was glad for the new scenery, my freezing toes insisted otherwise. The sun would take a few more hours to burn the frost off, and that period of time increased every day. Claudia seemed warm and smug in her thick sheep-skinned boots or whatever she had. Blast her.

Claudia and I had formed a sort of unspoken pact to guard the rear each time we went out. Vale was always in the lead with her snooty noble attitude and Rufus and Vincent were constantly engaged in irksome banter. The human woman rarely spoke, so she was at least bearable. I suspect she felt the same way about the other three as well. Occasionally she would stop and point her bow at something rustling in the bushes. In darker reaches of the forest I had the better eyesight. Usually I would simply take a look and shake my head 'no'. She would purse her lips in a frown and we would move on.

In the fields that morning, I didn't know what it was...

Vale saw it as well, and had her shorter bow readied and aimed before even before the over-zealous Claudia. The pig and hyena dropped their bickering mid sentence, Vincent speaking for the both of them. "What the blood is that?"

We were fairly spaced out in a field of mostly low lying shrubs and the occasional taller bush. Something stirred from a particularly spindly leaved shrub a few paces to our right. It stood roughly lutin-sized, which unfortunately was my size as well, the vines of the bush clinging to it. No, rather the leaves seemed to protrude from the creature's arms and side, as if it were born from the bush itself. The rest of its body was a conglomeration of dirt and stone, looking much like dried clay. Its features became more distinguished as it took a step towards us, its body forming before our very eyes. Unlike a lutin it had a protruding muzzle and two small horns instead of ears, giving it a somewhat draconic

appearance.

Mouth gaping, it extended its claws and began trotting towards us with a screeching laugh.

"He he he he he!!"

In a heartbeat, two arrows bore into its dirt-like flesh. Claudia's stuck into its chest, Vale's directly into its right eye... The thing screamed, spewing forth some incomprehensible obscenities. Yet it did not bleed. It yanked the protrusion out of the socket, the speared eye crumbling to dust, and barred its fangs. I sent a ball of flame into its abdomen and blew it to pieces.

"Holy— blast it, Virmir!" Vincent snarled as he shielded his face from the superheated air. Everyone was taken by surprise by the fiery explosion, including myself. The sharp echo from the blast bounced off the mountains a couple of times. The little monster scared me, so naturally I had poured a bit too much energy into the hastily conjured spell than necessary.

Then it began to rain body parts. I gritted my teeth and folded my ears back as the dead lumps fell all around us. Most pieces shattered on impact with the ground, dissolving to mere piles of rock and dirt. Some retained their shape, however. A claw, a leg... Vincent prodded the half of the head that had fallen in front of him with the tip of his broadsword.

The jaw moved.

With wide eyes the hyena smashed it, turning it to a mound of unremarkable dirt. We did nothing but stare at the remaining pieces and each other for a few moments.

"What was that thing?" Rufus finally ventured.

All eyes turned towards me. Of course. Assume the mage knows everything. "No idea," I murmured.

"Think we should... report it?" Rufus surmised, staring at the bush where it emanated from.

Vale crouched, warily approaching one of claws lying upon the ground. It looked as if it were a piece of a broken statue.

"Yes," she finally answered after a moment's deliberation. "We should report this immediately."

Wonderful. We walk all the way out, kill one little monster that we've never seen before, and now we get to walk all the way back to report it. Probably end up waiting outside the Patrol Master's office for five hours while Vale describes how the thing's left nostril was a slightly darker shade of gray than its right.

"Uh... guys..." Claudia's voice faltered. She was to my right, facing the opposite direction, and slowly stepping backwards. I turned around and gasped.

Behind us, over a dozen of the vile creatures were making their way up the incline we had just traversed...

"Oh, blast it!"

"He he he he he!!!"

"RUN!"

We bolted in the opposite direction, which was unfortunately northward and away from the keep. Blast my short legs! I soon found myself trailing behind the others, despite my best attempt at



a sprint. I hated being cursed to a childish body.

"What are you waiting for, Virmir?" Vincent yelled over his shoulder. "Blast them away!"

I curled my lips in a snarl. The insipid hyena never missed an opportunity to demonstrate how little he knew about magic. Of course I had my hands outstretched to my sides, conjuring crimson energy within my palms. This had to be a real spell, not a poofy plume of flame like I threw at the Metamor guards weeks ago. But casting and running is extremely difficult, and near impossible when one is fleeing for his life. Not to mention the fact that I was being left behind. Non-mages constantly assume that we can pull unlimited power out of thin air. I suppose choosing not to study magic and stupidity fall hand-in-hand.

I stopped in my tracks and spun around, the fur on my neck and back rigid. Having a good start on the spell already in place, I cupped my claws on top of one another just above my right hip. The fireball appeared between at once, the warm soothing flame massaging the skin under my fur. Fire can never hurt me so long as it burns my own aura. Blast it, there were a lot of them... I thrust my hands forward, sending the burning orb slamming into the leading creature before shielding my face from the impending explosion. Once the flame leaves my hands, it is as deadly to me as it is to any other.

The rush of superheated air nearly knocked me on my tail. The little monsters shrieked in shrill voices, many of them flying skyward, wrapped in flame. I think I took out five or six, but I didn't have time to count. I turned and resumed my run as soon as I regained my balance.

By that point I was becoming exhausted. My tongue involuntarily hung out of my mouth as I took in short gasps of

cool air. I hated panting. I glanced up, expecting to have fallen far behind the rest of the squad, but much to my surprise Vale stood there waiting. Her gaze was fixed behind me as she coldly stared the surviving creatures down. In her right claw she wielded a long slender blade, though it was less slender than swords I've seen of eastern design. The mirror-like metal reflected the image of the dying flames behind me.

The russet-furred dhole waited for me to catch up, then ran by my side. I suppose she realized I was the only one capable of fending off the beasts, so thought it safer by me. A shallow ravine loomed ahead, and Vincent, Rufus, and Claudia disappeared down into it, perhaps thinking the forest on the other side would offer us the chance to loose the beasts. My eyes widened as Vale and I approached the edge before the decline and looked down. The three were surrounded by perhaps two dozen of the creatures... What were these things?!

Two creatures broke off of the group and began trotting up the hill to meet us. Six of our original pursuers caught up and the eight quickly formed a ring around Vale and I. Blast it! A rumbling growl emanated from my throat as I extended my claws, desperately trying to summon flame before they could close in. They were hideous things, like mounds of dirt held together by spindly plants. Some bore metal weapons, jagged swords and knives. Others seemed to have weapons comprised of the same materials as their earthy flesh.

We stood back-to-back, Vale with her gleaming sword held low, me with my burning hands outstretched. I took a few steps in reverse as the circle began to tighten, but jumped when my tail brushed against hers. (The creatures merely had me nervous.) Blast it! A near fatal distraction. A clay-and-plant monster thrust its spindly sword forward, barely clipping my left arm. I sidestepped to the right, nearly tumbling over, and grasped the

thing by its earthy arm for leverage. Got you. Close contact was enough, and I poured the flame into its body, setting it ablaze. It flailed around screaming as it withered and died. Motioning towards the next nearest creature, I discharged the magic stored within my other hand with similar results, and directed my attention to another after finding I had enough energy stored in both hands for one more.

And at this point I made an unnerving observation. Most sentient creatures become horrified upon seeing members of their party burned alive, screeching as their bodies twisted, trying to fight the flames. Humans are easy to scare. I've seen an entire goblin horde turn tail and run at a simple burning of their front line. Even lutins, in my limited experience with them, are terrified of flame. Some flee, some hesitate. In any case, the display allows me another chance to conjure more spells. Unfortunately, the monsters I fought that day weren't intimidated in the least.

Another one leapt over the bodies of its burning brethren, brandishing some sort of stone mace that should have been too heavy for its spindly arms to carry. My short sword was out in a flash and I clumsily deflected it. We began circling each other, and I caught a glimpse of how Vale was faring behind me. She was swinging her blade around in huge arcs, smacking the remaining four little monsters away one after another. She lunged forward, stabbing one right through its heart, or rather where it should have been. The creature merely shrieked once, then struggled to move forward, slashing at Vale's knees. Her sword was stuck, and she shook the thing around before she was able to free it just in time to sever the axe-wielding limb of another creature. The one with a gaping hole in its chest rose to its feet immediately.

I brought my blade up to deflect the heavy mace once more, but my sword was so small and flimsy... With a yelp I dropped the weapon, the painful vibrations from the block traveling up my

arms. I reeled for a moment before falling backwards on my tail. The monster wasted no time, smashing downwards with its mace. I fell backwards and rolled out of the way as it struck the ground, dust flying into my face. In front of me was a small weed. I plucked it out of the ground as I turned upright and threw it at the creature's foliage-laced chest, sending a plume of flame with it. The plant caught on fire as it hit the creature, and it frantically slapped at its leaves to put the fire out. The time bought was insufficient, however, and the monster quickly pressed its foot into my stomach as it hatefully leered at me. It had three clawed toes, two at the front and one at the heel, all digging into my flesh. I felt as if they would pierce my intestines... Then the creature raised its weapon high...

A flash of silver suddenly split the thing's head from above, the blade becoming lodged at the base of its neck. With a violent jerk Vale ripped her sword from the monster's head and delivered a firm kick to its side, sending it smashing into the ground. The remaining creatures became excited at seeing me lying there like a wounded animal, but the noble was quick to step over me, slashing them away. I simply lay there for a moment with my eyes wide, anxiety paralyzing me.

"Hurry, Virmir!"

Right. I snapped out of it and swapped fear for anger. Seething rage. I rose to one knee as I clenched my fists, crimson flame slowly beginning to flicker about them, traveling upwards to my body. All the while Vale danced frantic circles around me, narrowly keeping the little monsters at bay. They were relentless, insane little monsters. They kept coming even after the noblewoman had managed to sever some of their appendages. Biting, clawing, anything they could do to kill... It was a harrowing thirty seconds...

"Get down!" I screamed the instant the spell was ready.

Vale flashed back a frightened glance and hesitated for an instant, but complied by falling to one knee. Blast it, when a mage tells you to get down, you do it! I leapt towards her in a single bound and touched the back of her neck with my right claw to ensure that she would not be scorched. The delighted creatures swiftly descended upon our prone forms. I shut my eyes and slammed my left palm into the dirt.

The Feaular Tranj, or Fire Bomb, always hurt my ears. But performing it with the sensitive ears of a fox proved a hundred times worse. The white flash engulfed everything, and the violent BOOM bounced off of the distant mountain walls five or six times before fading. I held Vale in position for a moment just to be safe, then slowly opened my eyes.

We stood in the center of a fifteen foot diameter circle of charred ashes. The grasses and bushes fifty feet and out rustled as bits of burning bodies fell from the sky. I would have taken the chance to laugh maniacally had I been in a better mood. Instead I fell backwards in the soot and clamped my ears shut, trying to will away the horrible ringing. My entire body ached. Vale fell on her rear and did the same, additionally blinking her eyes over and over again. Probably should have told her to shut them.



"Are you all right?"

I felt a tender claw on my shoulder. I apparently zoned out for a moment. I was shocked to find myself curled in a fetal position, tail between my legs. I hurt in a bad way. Not from running or being nicked by weapons, but magical fatigue. Blast it, I wouldn't have had any trouble with such a string of spells with

the proper preparation. But the patrols were so eventless and boring I had begun to get lazy in preparing myself each morning.

"I'm fine," I muttered as I pushed her hand away. I sat up. A little dizzy, but I'd been through worse. Magical fatigue is a difficult thing to describe to non-mages. Normally it manifests as simple tiredness or soreness throughout the body. But in more extreme cases it can be a dull pain in the heart that spreads outward as it intensifies.

"You're injured," Vale observed, pulling back the fabric on my left arm. That was of course the least of my pains.

"It's nothing," I waved her off as I managed to get on two feet. I held my tail firmly against the ground to avoid falling over. But I reared forward as I lost my balance, and she caught me by my chest. On her knees she was eye level with me. Curse this form...

"Can you go on?" she asked as she handed me my sword.

"Yes."

"We need to find the others."

Oh, blast it!

"... Right."

She scampered off, and I limped after. Argh! What in blazes did I get myself into?

We made our way down into the ravine we saw the others get ambushed in a moment before we were trapped ourselves. The grasses were padded down and the shrubbery torn in a wide area,

but there was no trace of any living thing. Blast it, there were a lot more of them there than we faced ourselves. Vale's eyes were wide with concern, and she stooped down to sniff the ground like the canine she'd become. A little unexpected for a noble. I suppose she really did care about them. I could do nothing at that point but stand there with my mouth gaping like an idiot.

I only had a moment's rest before we were on the move again. "This way." She pointed, and I followed. She sniffed the air as she went along. How did she do that? My own sense of smell had been magnified with my transformation, but that only meant everything stunk a lot worse. I couldn't possibly conceive picking out an individual scent and tracking it. Perhaps with time.

After a few minutes of trotting along I gained enough of a handle on my exhaustion to resume rational thought.

"Lady Vale," I let skepticism drip into my voice, "we are tracking a small army..."

"Yes..." She slowed down, flicking her black tail back and forth.

"... of unholy demons that can only be killed with fire." I caught up and walked by her side, taking a deep breath so I could talk coherently between the panting. "We were barely able to kill a handful back there. I cannot throw many more spells..."

She stopped and slowly crouched down. I hated that. Did she think she needed to be at eye level with me? Maybe she was just tired.

"I know..." She pinched her sinuses with one claw, stabbing her sword into the mud with the other. We were in a peaceful grove. Brown-leaved trees high above, leaves rustling in the wind.

Her blade reflected the sunlight that crept through the branches. "I know..."

"What would you have us do? Turn back?" she asked sharply.

"And call for help. Yes."

"Help will never make it in time."

"They're going to kill us. There's no way we can fight them all."

I wasn't sure if she heard me or not. She stared ahead at something past the bushes. She rose, blade in hand, then darted off.

"Oh, gods... no!" She wailed as she leapt over a shrub.

"What?" I demanded as I pushed through the bush, unable to see. "What is it?" The foliage was taller than me, and I stumbled through it. Blast it! I fell straight forward to the other side, picking my head up just in time to avoid landing square on my nose. What was it? Vale knelt in front of something... a body?

I pushed myself off the ground. The dhole morph's ears hung low and her tail limp. She crouched next to a human female in leather armor. And a bloodied chest. It was Claudia.

"She's dead."

My ears perked so high I felt as if someone yanked them up. Oh, gods... no... I stumbled backwards, nearly falling over again, unable to believe what I saw.



My knees felt weak and the world began to spin. I felt a sharp pain in my tail, and suddenly realized I was wringing it in my claws. I will not describe Claudia's wound.

Vale turned, her tear-soaked eyes boring into me.

"Virmir, go." She stood, raising her mirror-like blade.

"What?"

"There's a Signal Tower to the southwest. Go get help. Hurry!"

"And what are you going to do?"

She bore her fangs now. "I'm going to find them."

"You're going to die."

"Go NOW! That's an order!"

Without another word she leapt over the body and disappeared into the bushes. Blast it! She was so reckless and stupid. She was sacrificing her life for a smelly pig man and a rude hyena who were probably already dead. Two cursed freaks that had never shown her an ounce of respect.

Bah! It wasn't my problem. I wasn't able to do much more anyway. I'd just do as I was told. Let the Long Scouts or the regular army handle it. I didn't belong at Metamor in the first place. Honestly, who cared if they all died? I'd probably just get assigned to another squad and finish out my term.

I looked at Claudia and shuddered.

"He he he he he!!" The voice echoed in the distance...

Then came another scream, then the repeated clanging of metal...

I shut my eyes and gritted my teeth.



Vale did not know fear. She would never experience that emotion again. She would much rather die.

She met the onslaught head on, slashing her father's blade into the neck and halfway down the chest of the impish creature. Her father's blade... why did she still think of it that way? It was hers, and hers alone. She made it hers when she bloodied it, and that would never change. It was a man's weapon, too long and heavy for a delicate woman. But she wasn't really a woman. She was a monster now.

She yanked the sword out, sending the creature reeling. Two more took its place, and she slashed again. Duck and weave, dance around their blades. The sword hummed as it cut the air. It held its silver gleam despite all the abuse. More of the plant-and-earth creatures came, their fanged muzzles snarling in glee.

She was going to die. She deserved it, as everything was her fault. If only someone competent had been leading in her place, none of this would have happened. She took slight comfort in the thought that at least one member of her squad had escaped with his life.

Hack and slash. Limbs flew from her opponents. Chunks of their clay-like flesh speckled the ground. They felt nothing, and got up again and again with mocking sneers. "He he he he he..."

They closed in, tightening the noose. Closer and closer with their poking, stabbing weapons...

The crimson flash nearly blinded her. Her head darted back and forth and she forced her ears against her skull to shut out the shrill screams of burning imps. A wall of fire circled her, the flames utterly consuming the dead leaves on the forest floor. Virmir dropped from the branch above, landing by her side.

"Plant your sword into the ground." He had that commanding tone again, like when he cast the other spell. A tone that she dare not disobey. He was frightening. His eyes nearly glowed crimson, his lips curled in a feral snarl. His right claw pointed towards the dirt between the two. His left was literally burning, and his black cloak waved upwards in an unfelt breeze.

She jammed the sword into the earth as told, nervously looking around as the circle of fire that protected them began to die. The silver furred fox clasped the blade just under the hilt and slowly ran his claws downward all the way to the ground. As he moved his hands, the metal that he touched turned a bright red, brilliant flames bursting from it. When he was done, her weapon was a glowing sword of fire.

"Take it."

At that moment the surrounding wall of flame disbursed, and the impish creatures who had not been scorched greedily stormed the two canids, brandishing their jagged weapons. Lady Vale took the burning blade and sliced through them like butter. Their plant-like protrusions withered and died under the force of the sword. They screamed as their bodies were cleaved in two, each half engulfed in flames. She killed all eight in less than a minute.

The sword flickered out just as the last one died, regaining its

normal mirror-like sheen, though Vale could still feel the heat emanating from the metal. She turned to see Virmir crouching low, doubled over as if his stomach ached. His triangular ears drooped and his eyes were shut. He blinked them open at the silence and stood upon noticing her gaze, any semblance of pain erased from his visage.

"If we are to save them, we'd best do it more carefully." His black tipped tail snaked in and out from under his cloak, and he folded his arms smugly, irritation plain in his eyes.

Vale scratched behind her ear, her heart still fluttering from the experience. "Right..."



Of all the stupid things I've done...

What was I to do? Leave her to die? My chest ached. The pain began to spread to my limbs. Stupid. To put myself at risk like that. Why should I care what happens to her? I didn't. Really.

I suppose I was merely doing my job. I was dedicated, a man of my word. Fox. Fox-child. Whatever.

I had convinced Vale to move more cautiously, thus allowing me to catch my wind. The pain would go away soon, I knew, and then I would be able to cast more. It always did before at least. Pushing oneself every once in awhile isn't a bad thing, but it is a good idea to stop when it hurts...

We tracked the little monsters for a few hours, moving cautiously through the thick underbrush. I began to wonder if I could convince Vale to return with me for help, but the look of determination in her eyes never faltered. And there was no arguing

that would mean many more hours of lost time. The entire trek I expected to stumble upon the hyena or boar's body like we did Claudia. I did not wish them dead, but if we had proof, then we could end this fruitless chase.

Instead we came to a cave.

Blast it.

Two monolithic boulders flanked the black opening, and smaller rocks piled all around. The brown-leaved trees provided a fair amount of shade, but it was still plain as day. We searched around the mouth, fully expecting some sort of ambush, but found none. Finally, we pressed our backs against the opposing boulders and peered into the blackness.

Nothing. I considered myself to have excellent vision in the dark, but looking into darkness from daylight was impossible.

Vale took a few whiffs. "They're definitely in there." She said in as close to a whisper as possible with a muzzle.

"The creatures too?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I don't know, I can't track those things. They smell like dirt, and I can't tell the difference. I've just been tracking Rufus and Vincent." She ended with a slight smile. "Rufus is very easy to track..."

I took a deep breath through my nose, trying to smell whatever it was she was smelling.

"No," she corrected me from the other side of the opening. "Take in short, strong sniffs."

I frowned, knowing that I would look silly. But she was serious, so I angled my nose to the darkness and gave it a shot. Indeed, I did detect the mixed stench of alcohol and filth. I grimaced, covering my nose with a claw.

"Told you." She smirked.

I merely narrowed my eyes. "So, we're going in?"

She nodded.

I was on the right side of the opening. I brought my left arm to my hip and bent my fingers like a claw, cupping my right hand over them and angling my right shoulder forward so my back was against the wall. I gathered energy just under visible levels. Blast it. Still hurt...

I nodded at Vale and she nodded back, her silver blade readied in two hands, her back and tail pressing against her wall. We stepped into the cave together and advanced with caution. The circular entryway was wide enough for two men to walk side by side, so we were by no means crowded. Blast the sharp rocks. I stepped on several on my way in before my eyes adjusted to the darkness.

A bland gray tunnel snaked before us, extending several hundred feet at a shallow decline before the variations in the crooked path bent the walls too much to see beyond. We pressed onward at a snail's pace. I resisted the urge to send a wave of flame down the tunnel and just be done with it.

What horrible surprises lurked in the darkness? Some sort of ambush? Another army of plant-and-earth monsters? Some new threat?

No, a dead end. Of course...

A rocky room greeted us, boulders from half-collapsed walls strewn about. Slate shifted under our footpaws as we tried to keep our balance. The floor was vaguely even, and in the center was a circle of stones that emanated a pale blue light. Crystals, perhaps?

"What is that?" Vale whispered.

I held up a claw and she stayed put. Some sort of magic, that was for sure. I inched closer, crouching down to examine them more closely. Five crystals jutted from the sandy cavern floor, circling an otherwise nondescript patch of ground some four feet in diameter. Each emanated just enough blue light to collectively illuminate the cavern.

"These are power sources." I pointed to the closest to my feet as I stood. Vale had neared by then, the outline of ears perked in curiosity visible in the pale light. "They're powering a spell." Couldn't put it much more simply than that to a non-mage.

"What does the spell do?"

"No idea," I replied, folding my arms and looking down at the circle. I wagged my tail back in forth, feeling the weight of my cloak upon it. What now?

"Their scent ends here," she informed me.

Well, obviously.

"Could they have backtracked?"

"Then I would have—"

"— picked them up again outside, right, right..." I cut her off. Blast it. I didn't like where this was going. "Back up," I asked as I waved her off again. I grabbed a rock and took a few steps back myself. I then tossed in into the circle.

Plunk.

The sand rippled like water. The stone was gone.

We leaned over the circle, our eyes wide and ears standing straight up. "Interesting," I muttered.

Vale waited until the ripples died down. "They're in there."

No, you think?

She waved her longsword over the sand, then stuck it in.

"DON'T!!" I screamed as quietly as possible, clenching my teeth. My fur and tail stood on end and the pain in my chest magnified as my heart throbbed.

The sand merely rippled around the blade like water. When she pulled it out, nothing clung to the silver metal.

"I'm going in," she declared as she stared down at me.

I shook my head and bent over. "These crystals are shot." I pointed to the one by my foot. Up close, each clearly displayed large cracks, distortions in their blue hue. "They're overstressed. They could go out at any time, closing the portal and trapping us on the other side. Furthermore, if one shatters when we're passing through, we will die instantly." I pointed a claw upward, nowhere near the end of my list. "Not to mention the fact that we have no idea where this leads. And—"



"Two of my men are on the other side, Virmir. I'm not going to abandon them. If I have to suffer their fate then so be it. I'm not making you come with me. If you want to turn back, you're free to do so. Go get help."

"Listen—"

She rose her blade and hopped right into the circle, disappearing as if she fell into a pool of water. The distorted pool of sand waved up and down but did not splash.

My mouth hung open.

"Blast it!" I curled my claws upwards and growled. Argh! What a fool! I will have no part in this madness! Yes, ignore the mage!! The blasted Keepers are all insane! Every last one of them!

I spun around and stormed towards the exit, tripping on a rock in the process. Blast it! I paused to lean on the cavern wall with one arm, glancing back at the still rippling circle.

And sighed.

I'm requesting to be transferred to a different squad once this is all over. That's for sure.

I stepped to the circle's edge, grabbed my tail so it would not catch, then jumped in.



As I fell through the blackness, a cool and almost refreshing wind blew through my fur. I looked down, hoping to see where I might land, but there was nothing. So I reached downwards with

tendrils of levitation magic and felt something hard coming up fast. Bracing myself, I managed a decent landing on two feet and one hand. At least I didn't fall on my tail for once.

"Virmir?" Vale's voice timidly called out through the darkness, echoing as if it bounced off of hard walls. Nothing at all was visible. And I mean nothing. My excellent night vision failed me utterly for the first time since I assumed this form. It was like we were shut in a coffin and buried deep beneath the earth...

I squinted in reaction to the blinding witchlight I cast above my head. We fell into some sort of cavern, the stone walls encircling us painted in an orange-red hue by the fireball floating above. Vale sat amongst a pile of rocks, her black tail draped around her front. She was nursing her right footpaw with her hands. Oh, blast it.

"Are you all right?" I asked, letting disapproval drip into my voice as I folded my arms under my cloak.

"Yeah... I'm fine." She said as she stood. She took a few tentative steps with only a slight limp, so she was either a good faker or mostly unharmed.

I glanced upward at the ceiling, watching the ripples in the stone made by my passage fade away. We did not actually pass through a portal, but rather the spell served to shift the phase of the rock, making it so we could move through it like air. Considering the fall took several seconds, we could have been hundreds of feet underground... Returning would be a challenge indeed.

"Well... let's get moving," Vale said as she pointed towards the only exit—a hole in the wall halfway closed up by fallen boulders. I found myself sniffing the air out of curiosity, and confirmed it was the right way to go. The remnants of another

scent lingered in the air. Burning torches perhaps? We certainly were not the first in the cavern...

"Thank you," she said suddenly after we climbed the top. The tunnel beyond was relatively easy walking, though my light failed to illuminate more than several feet beyond us.

"I was... I was really scared..." she continued. Wonderful. Now she was going to get emotional on me. Thank the gods the curses did not change me into a woman.

I did not look at her, instead merely angling an ear in her direction. The ears were difficult to control sometimes... What was I to say? You're welcome, moron? An awkward silence followed, which eventually lost its awkwardness as the minutes dragged on.

We continued onward through the twisting corridor for at least an hour, though it was impossible to tell the passage of time with the total absence of the sun or any indication of the world above. The dank air became difficult to breathe, and the passageway became tighter and more rugged as we pressed on. When we arrived in a larger room my heart skipped a beat as I thought we had just walked in circles, or perhaps backtracked somehow. But I soon recognized the room to be different than the one we first entered.

"Are you all right, Virmir? You don't look so good..."

She had caught me clutching my chest. Blast it. I wasn't. The pain had not subsided, and I was dead tired.

"I'm fine."

She knelt and tried to look me in the eye, but I averted my

gaze. Why must she insist on doing that? Her ruddy fur glowed vibrantly, cast in the sheen from the sphere of flame bobbing above my head. I tried to look alert, but my drooping ears probably gave me away.

"Are you sure? Maybe we should take a break. I could use a rest myself." She pointed to one of the piles of boulders building up to the walls on either side of the room. "If we sat up there, then we'd be able to get the jump if anyone walks by."

I nodded. She was using logic for once. "Very well."

I sluggishly followed her up the rocks and found a moderately comfortable spot to sit in between two large slates. Another boulder jutted up in front of me which obstructed my view of the path below. I rested my aching footpads on it. Vale found a seat to my right.

"I'm going to disperse the witchlight and try to recover some of my energy," I explained. "I may become unresponsive for a while. Don't go anywhere by yourself. Wake me in a half hour. Or especially if you hear anything." Fancy wizard-speak for a nap. They never figure it out.

Vale nodded and I let the fireball fizzle away. Much to my surprise, the red-orange walls of the cavern melted into a dim blue, rather than pitch black as I had expected. All along the walls were faint cracks which emanated a cerulean light, much like the crystals on the surface. They were simply too dim to be noticed under my witchlight, but now they were almost enough to properly illuminate the cavern. Interesting. I turned to see the blue reflected in Vale's wide eyes as she looked about. I would ponder this after my nap. I closed my eyes, the pain still welling in my chest. Sleep claimed me in a few short minutes.



Vale waited until Virmir's breathing steadied before she began rummaging around in her pack. After his breaths became deep and even she assumed he reached his meditative state. Or he was asleep. Whatever it was, she felt terribly guilty. She'd pushed him so hard, and he was too shy to complain.

Didn't mages get their magic from the gods? She whispered a silent prayer to Akkala that his energy would be restored. Perhaps she should ask Dokorath for strength as well? It had been too long since she'd attended services. She cursed herself again for always screwing up. Then she reminded herself that Virmir knew what he was doing, and would handle it himself.

She pulled a bit of wrapped jerky from her pack— trail rations meant for a single quick meal. She wondered how long she could draw it out. Rufus and Vincent's fate were entirely in his hands. Her fate too... She could do nothing against those monsters, and she hated it. She hated being so helpless. She curled her lush tail around her ankles as she pinched the bridge of her snout. Everything she had tried to do on her own ended in disaster. It was if the gods themselves were punishing her for trying to escape her fate. For trying to be something different. Maybe her parents were right... Oh, gods...

She tried to wipe the tears from her eyes, feeling the moisture soak into the fur on the back of her hand. She turned to make sure Virmir was still asleep. It would have been horrible for him to see her like this. She needed to be strong for her squad. Dignity was the only thing she had left... That and her name. Her name was from her parents, but she needed it. Without her name she was just another clod of dirt.

Kendo Virmir... he was a mystery himself. The odd lighting

cast his silver fur in a blue sheen as he slept. She had never heard of anyone afflicted with two of the three curses before. But she had heard tales of the Duke sentencing delinquent keepers to patrol duty. Once again she wondered what he had done.

She unwrapped her tail from her legs and let it softly tap the ground. It was so quiet. She pulled her ears forward and back, trying to pick up something, anything. But all she could hear was the ringing in her ears and the soft rasps of the fox's breaths. Somehow sitting next to him, she felt safe. She hadn't felt that way in a long time. It was like when her father cradled her in his arms, long before she had fur and a tail. Daddy the big strong general. She clutched the hilt of her sword. Long before things went to hell.

She glanced at the mage once more. He certainly was strong for being so small. Wait... was he... shrinking? Vale sat up straight and leaned over him, watching with wide eyes as Virmir's body grew smaller. What was going on? His folded arms straightened out and his furry hands melted into paws. He rolled over on his side, completely tangled in his ill-fitting clothing and looking very much like a simple juvenile fox.

Well that was strange. She supposed it was possible to shift in one's sleep, though she'd never done it before. The only other time she'd seen him fully an animal was that day he didn't show up at the bar. She'd never been able to get him to go. She wondered if he had problems shifting, or if it was perhaps involuntary for him. That would be bad... She watched his chest expand and contract. He seemed to be in a deeper sleep than before. Maybe this was just part of his magical rejuvenation process.

"He he he he he..."

Every muscle in her body tensed. She slowly turned her eyes

to the right and spotted it about ten feet away, silhouetted in the dull blue from the cracks on the wall. It stood on a rock, bent over on all fours as if ready to pounce. Oh, gods...

"Virmir..." she whispered through clenched teeth. "Virmir!"

She couldn't stir him, as the fox's head was just out of reach. She was paralyzed— too scared to move, lest she provoke the thing to attack. Its tail swayed back and forth and though the lighting prevented her from seeing it, she knew it was smiling.

Then it leapt at her, clearing the entire distance with ease. Vale fell back on the rock and delivered a sound kick to the monster's chest with her bare footpaw, causing her to yelp an animalistic cry of pain. Oh! The same foot she twisted when she jumped through the portal. The pain had mostly gone away and she had forgotten about it, but now it was back with a vengeance. The impish creature tumbled to the rocky floor before jumping to two feet and snarling. Vale sprung from her prone position and balanced on her left foot, producing her mirror-like blade in the same fluid motion. It seemed to glow blue in the cerulean lights. With a mighty cleave she brought it down on the thing's head.



I stretched and yawned. It was a pleasant nap.

Then something hard fell on me...

I rolled down the pile of rocks, caught in the tangled mess of my clothing. Blast it! As I peeked my head out from under my cloak, I suddenly realized I had four paws. Again.

Oh, confound it all! Ever since I tried to reverse the spell and ended up changing myself completely into a fox instead, I found

myself shifting back to that state in my sleep. Probably should get into the habit of remembering that... But it didn't make any sense! I constructed the spell so that it would fail after a set time! A one time casting! And then there was the matter that it did the exact opposite of what I intended!

Never mind the embarrassment. The clay creature that tumbled down the pile of boulders with me leered down with a menacing grin upon its draconic muzzle. I darted, leaving my clothing behind as its jagged blade struck stone. The thing was hot on my tail, and I leapt from rock to rock to avoid its blows. As a eight-pound fox I was much faster, and soon I was looking down at the thing from a higher perch as it struggled to catch up.

Vale slid down the rock pile and very nearly cleaved its head in half if it weren't for the falling pebbles alerting the little monster. It turned and tried to dodge, her silver blade planting itself into the creature's shoulder. It shrieked once, and the two began a tug-of-war.

Seeing my opening, I bore my fangs and growled. I don't appreciate being woken up.

I leapt off the boulder and bit the monster in its shin. It tasted like a mouthful of dirt. The thing squealed, but before it could bury its blade into my neck, I poured an ungainly amount of crimson energy into its body. It burst into flame like an oil-soaked rag. The cavern lit up in the fury of the fire. I bit harder, scorching it more and more until it withered and died, crumbling to lumps of blackened soot.

I released what was left and sat on my haunches, trying to spit out the vile ash. Disgusting! Vale stared at me with her mouth hanging open. What?



"Are you okay? Can you change back?" she asked as she bent down, balancing her weight on her blade. She seemed much larger now. Of course I could. I found I quickly had to master the art of shifting back before patrols each morning. I trotted back to my discarded garments and sat, waiting for her to get the message. "Oh," she finally said, turning around. Clothing. Every shapeshifter's bane.

Shifting back felt like stretching in bed after a long night's rest. My body grew back to its vaguely human-like shape, and my mass multiplied. Of course I would never be able to grow as large as I was when I was a man... It was only over a month ago, yet my true form seemed like such a foggy memory. After some ten seconds I once again had hands and proceeded to don my pants, struggling to slip my tail through that blasted hole. Once I was decent, I cast a bright witchlight above my head, replacing the dark blue tones of the self-luminescent cavern room with a vibrant orange.

"How long was I out?" I asked as I tried to figure out which end of my tunic was up.

"A couple hours at least," she replied, turning back towards me. I paused, shooting her a narrow glance and she hastily explained. "You were... a little difficult to rouse, and I thought you needed the rest."

I didn't say anything. I actually felt good. The pain was gone, and my energy seemed restored. I felt almost as rejuvenated as I did from a full night's sleep, so I wondered exactly how long a 'couple of hours' meant. She twiddled her thumbs as she watched me struggle with the tunic.

"Do you need help with—"

"No." I do not need help getting dressed! Like some child. Blast it. I threw the thing over my head.

"I think it's inside out..."

"Blasting..." I muttered under my breath, taking it off again. "Did you see any more of those... creatures?" With the tunic on correctly, I struggled to stuff errant strands of fur escaping from the neck back under the fabric.

"Yes, actually..." She pointed her blade to where she was formerly sitting on the pile of stones. My ears twitched up as I recognized two of the creatures lying dead amongst the rocks. She answered my question before I could ask it. "Their heads." She held her blade up. "Decapitating them doesn't work. The body will still move. But if you split the head down the middle, they die."

Interesting. I threw my cloak over my shoulders, climbing halfway up the rocks to the closest body. It was the first corpse I had the chance to examine that I didn't incinerate.

"They came down the tunnel, every half hour to an hour or so," she explained as she climbed up after me. "I can handle them so long as they come one at a time."

She certainly could if I slept through all that. The creature's gargoyle-esque head was split, though there was no trace of blood or any similar substance. It simply looked like a shattered statue with leafy vines crawling on it. I took its limp forearm in my claw and watched as it crumbled away, noting the root-like tubes that ran through the middle of its arm.

"They're plants," I realized. Vale leaned in closer. "Animated plants... Look." I began pulling the roots out of its

dirt-like flesh, following a cord all the way to the leafy vine-like protrusions that stuck out of its chest. "Their roots solidify the dirt, shaping it into this body. Then they pull it up out of the ground along with them." That explained why fire was so damaging. I imagined extreme cold would also be fatal.

Vale must have killed a core root or something when she split the head down the middle. I pulled the two halves of its head apart as they crumbled to dust in my claws. The roots were far more concentrated in the head. Sure enough, each half bore a large seed-like object from which a main root emanated. It was like a peach pit, sliced in two. I snapped the root off the nearest half and removed it, holding it up for Vale to see.

"And there's our culprit."

"A seed?"

I nodded. The anchor point for the spell that animated them. "They're grown from the ground." How long that took was anyone's guess. "Kill this and they die... You didn't let any escape, did you?"

She shook her head as she took her seat back on her rock. "No. As I said, they came one at a time every hour or so." That meant we had some time before the next, at least. "The first one caught me by surprise, but the second two I got the jump on... Do you still have your rations?"

"Yes."

"Good. I didn't know if we needed to split mine. We should eat, then get moving."

I wanted to continue on, as we'd already lost a fair amount of

time, but my stomach said the dhole was speaking sense. I climbed back up to my wedge between the rocks to retrieve my pack, which hadn't fallen down with me, when I noticed a vein of blue running through the rocks where I slept. I tapped a claw against the pale crystal, feeling a warmth within. Were these some sort of magic flows through the earth? I had heard Metamor was at a nexus of such underground streams of magic. Could this be why I recovered my strength so quickly?

I took a seat next to Vale and rummaged through my pack as my eyes pondered the blue veins in the rocks.

"Virmir, can I ask you something?"

Blast it. Rare is the traveling companion who will leave you alone to think.

"Yes?" I pulled out bit of wrapped jerky.

"When you cast that spell..."

"Which spell?" I'd cast at least a dozen that day alone, blast it.

"The explosion." She seemed a little nervous. I looked her in the eye. "The big one."

Ah, that one.

"When you touched the back of my neck—"

"That was my aura flowing through your body. Had I not done that, you would have burned with the rest of them. I apologize."

"Oh, no. It actually felt..." She rubbed her hands together. "...warm... and well, it was a wonderful feeling. I was just curious."

Well, obviously. It feels great to the recipient. That's how vampires and magic leeches get off. "You've no experience with magic at all, am I correct?" I bit into the jerky. Dried, salty meat. Disgusting.

"No."

It never ceased to amaze me how few bother to learn magic. It was like not bothering to learn to read or write. Like ignorant common farmers, so single minded in tilling their fields their entire life.

"Hold out your hand."

She did so. I dropped my jerky into my pack and held her wrist with my right hand. Her fur felt a bit courser than mine. I extended my pointer finger of my left hand and a wisp of flame burst to life upon my black nail, no bigger than that of a candle. I could feel her tense.

"Relax." I moved the flame over her open palm dropped it, where it burned a mere half inch over her pad. She smiled in wonderment, intoxicated by the light of the dancing plume.

"Right now this is my spell, linked to my aura which I'm channeling through your hand. Once I let go, it will become yours. It is real fire, but it will be a part of you. It will never hurt you so long as it burns from your aura. Are you ready?"

She nodded 'yes'. I released her hand, and she flinched slightly, probably noticing the draw from her spirit. "If you feel tired or dizzy, close your palm and it will go out." She brought her

palm closer to her face, smiling widely as the flicker danced in her eyes. "Go ahead. Touch it." She looked at me. By this time I drew a half smirk. She tentatively poked the flame with her nail, then started running her fingers through it, amazed as the fire licked them.

"It feels... so warm, but it doesn't hurt at all."

"Uh huh."

I removed the jerky from my pack as she continued playing with the fire.

There. THAT should shut her up for a while. I turned away and resumed my ponderings on the blue cracks in the walls.



The exit tunnel provided no new scenery, and we soon found ourselves navigating dark twisting passages once more. Vale said that the little monsters only came from the way we did, which would explain why we didn't run into any until we stopped. Still, I wasn't going to take any chances, and kept a charge of energy at the tips of my claws ready to eradicate any shadow that peered from around the corner. We hid the bodies of the slain creatures behind the large piles of rocks in the larger room before we left. Hopefully they did not have easy methods of detecting their dead...

Vale kept a hand on the sword strapped to her hip at all times as well. It was a beautiful weapon, even sheathed. When her claw was not covering it, I could make out the tiny red-jeweled eyes of a bird of prey shaped into the silver metal at the base. Typical noble fluff. I was sure it cost a fortune.

"What is your sword made of?" I asked, breaking the silence

in the tunnels. Her ears shot up at my unexpected voice, and she turned an eye down at me.

"Steel, with a two or three percent mithril alloy."

Mithril. I would have whistled had I still been able to. Even in such diluted amounts it was ungodly expensive. Of course, I was certain the noble had it all. It at least meant the blade was conductive to magic, and that I could enchant it easily when things got rough. I had been able to get it to burn for some sixty seconds, which was far longer than any rusty sword could handle.

"Where did you get it from?" I watched her expression change as I asked the question, her ears folding back on her head. It was such a strange thing to read the emotions of another sentient creature by watching her ears. She clearly did not like the topic. I hoped I wasn't that easy to read...

"My father..." she breathed out. "He was a general."

I nodded and faced forward once more. Of course. Some rich baron or lord or whatnot handing out trinkets to his children. I would have asked where but the answer likely would have been meaningless, as I wasn't all that familiar with the political geography of the Midlands. Or Galendor for that matter. And she apparently wasn't comfortable with it. Heaven forbid it is my questions that irritate others.

Twenty minutes later we received our scenery change.

I cut the witchlight when I noticed the blue glow ahead. The radiance from the cracks in the walls had grown so bright the additional light was not necessary. I could not see the details from as deep in the tunnel as we were, but the room beyond was certainly much larger than the opening we had rested in, and far

better illuminated. Vale and I took up our positions on either side of the tunnel wall, slowly creeping towards the mouth. I didn't like this one bit, but we were far beyond the point of no return.

Unlike the previous "room", which was likely little more than a natural widening of the tunnel, the rocky corridor ended abruptly where the yawning blue chamber began. I surmised it had been cut into the stone. The two of us cautiously stuck our heads out as we crept closer to the tunnel mouth, and my jaw dropped at what I saw.

Spires. Like a castle, stone spires radiated upwards through the center of the arena-sized cavern. Each brick of the winding towers shimmered a pale blue. The bottoms remained hidden by a mass of stalagmites obstructing my view just beyond the opening, and the tops by stalactites just over my head. I craned my neck and nearly took another step forward to gain a better view, but I noticed Vale waving her arm out of the corner of my eye. I turned to the left to see her clench her teeth and run her nail across her neck in a throat-slitting gesture. Huh? She pointed, and I turned to see one of the plant monsters standing guard mere feet where I was about to step out... Blast it!

Its back was turned to the wall and therefore mostly to us, although it certainly would have noticed had either one of us stepped into the open. If it was alive, that was. It seemed more a statue than a living creature, and it just stood there lifelessly as I watched it. We both slunk back into the tunnel as I mouthed curses.

And herein a new problem arose. Every time I killed these things with fire, they screamed like molested banshees. If we were to maintain any semblance of stealth, we'd have to find another way...



I pointed to Vale's sword, and she responded with a "Who? Me?" look. Yes, you. We traded spots, and she took up the position where I nearly stepped out, pressing her back to the wall and raising her blade. I walked to the center of the tunnel mouth, levitating a small stone to my open claw and fingering it for a moment. If she missed, I would be able to defend myself easily against this one. But if that provoked a hundred of the monsters, well then that was it. Ugh. What a miserable way to go...

I tossed the stone before me and watched it click atop the other rocks. I immediately heard the creature's claws tapping on rock and soon it rounded the corner. It took a second to see me, but when it did its glassy eyes lit up in delight as it smiled a toothy grin and stepped forward.

"He he—"

Splat.

At this point I was becoming thankful we were up against monsters that did not bleed. With a mighty cleave from behind, Vale spit its head in two, top to bottom, and it fell over like a defaced statue. I suppose it was a good thing she had practice. We waited several more agonizing seconds for more to come. None did.

I tiptoed out of the tunnel mouth, my ears and tail standing on end, my eyes darting every which way. The tunnel opened to the cavern beyond about one third of the way up, and a sort of natural ramp followed the wall to my left all the way down at a shallow decline. Pressing my claws against a pile of stone just before a sharp drop-off, I caught my first good glimpse of the spires in the center of the cavern.

Compared to any castle, like say the towers of Metamor, they

wouldn't have been remarkable. Maybe ten or fifteen stories high. But the fact that they were underground and glowing blue made them rather awe inspiring. The central one was the largest, its cylindrical base certainly wide enough to host a king's banquet. The other two, which flanked either side, seemed more like narrow support columns keeping the cavern from collapsing. The tops and bottoms of each disappeared into the rocky floor and uneven ceiling, so I supposed my initial guess at their true size was inaccurate. More luminescent veins of blue streaked the cavern walls all around, becoming more concentrated at the tops and bottoms of the stone structures. Looking down near the bases of the towers I could see several figures walking around.

By then Vale had joined my side and stood gawking as well. We briefly looked at each other before realizing how plainly in sight we were and ducked down next to the rock.

How in blazes were we supposed to get in there?! Blast it all! Just to save a pair of idiots! I could not believe I followed her!

"How are we supposed to get in there...?" Vale mused, rubbing the tip of her chin with a claw. My ears flattened and I rolled my eyes, fighting the urge to growl.

I peeked over the edge again. At least a dozen shapes darted back and forth below us. Many I recognized as the plant creatures, their stony forms walking around with leaves clinging to them like ivy. But there were other figures as well. Black cloaked humanoid shapes with cowls drawn over their heads. I could not tell what species they were, nor what most of them were doing. Many were concentrated at the far cavern wall to the right of the towers, seemingly picking apart the stones and dividing them into carts. Perhaps they were mining the glowing crystal? The cart contents certainly did not glow.

"Virmir," Vale whispered. My ears turned toward her as she pointed. "You see those guys in black?" I nodded and she turned her head to me. "Put your cowl up."

Why? She just stared at me, so I did so just to humor her. I hadn't worn my cowl since I changed, and my ears felt like they would stab through the fabric. I had to flatten them to get it completely over my head. My black cloak and cowl... She leaned back and brought her hand to her chin in contemplation.

Oh. Heck. No.

I shook my head violently. "It won't work."

"Virmir, listen—"

"Absolutely not!"

"At least hear me out!"

"They will see through it immediately! Look, it doesn't even cover my tail!" I swished it around indignantly for emphasis.

"Wrap it around your waist! Do you have a better idea?"

"And what about you? How do you plan on getting in?"

"Listen. I'm your prisoner. You lead me inside."

My mouth hung open for a moment. "You're suggesting we walk in the front door?!"

She clasped her paws before her chest. "Virmir, please..."

Blast it! I should have left the insane inbred noblewoman right there and stormed back the way we came. But those eyes. Oh, those eyes... They were twin emeralds boring into my soul, full of desperation, tears welling in the corners... Blast it again! There had to be another way! I clenched my teeth and thought. Think, blast it!

Nothing came.

Oh, gods. I had already signed my own death warrant by jumping into that blasted portal in the first place. Why bother resisting now? I sighed. There were just so many more things I wanted to accomplish in life...

I tucked my tail under my cloak and pulled the hood down farther. "Let's go."

She smiled and her eyes lit up. "Thank you, Kendo."

"Virmir."

She sheathed her blade and detached her belt. "You should take my weapons."

"I... cannot carry that." The blasted thing was as big as me!

"It won't look very convincing if I'm still armed..."

At this point I began muttering curses under my breath. The was no way I could wear the ungainly thing at my waist, so Vale strapped it over my shoulder like a bandoleer. The blade across my back still nearly touched the ground. Then she proceeded to pile on her bow and quiver half full of arrows. Oh, gods! My knees buckled under the crushing weight. I was forced to support myself by attempting to levitate the ridiculously heavy equipment,

but that only served to take off a few measly pounds.

She stood and turned around, placing her hands behind her back as if they were bound. I drew my own blade and yanked on her lush black tail. She yelped in surprise.

"We must make this convincing..." I sneered. She nodded and I stuck the tip of my short sword into the leather armor upon her back, just above her hands. Holding her tail like a chain, we began making our way down the decline...

My heart beat faster and faster as we descended. Were they looking? Would they notice? I did not dare turn my head to get a better glance, fearing that would expose my already protruding muzzle even more. I fought back the urge to pant from my exertion, carrying all the equipment. Bunched around my waist, my tail began to cramp... Of course they would notice. We were so dead...

Floor level. Vale turned and began walking towards the door of the largest tower. It was... working? The black robed creatures didn't even bother more than a second glance. Several walked in front of us. More of the plant creatures. Even working like slaves they giggled their screeches...

I jumped as I heard a raspy voice screaming. I chanced a look from under my cowl. One of the black robes on the far side of the cavern began yelling indignantly, spewing obscenities at the plant-and-dirt creatures near the mining carts. His back was turned to us. He rose an oak staff and struck one of the little monsters across the face, the others bursting out in mad laughter at the reproach. As he performed the strike I glimpsed a scaly green tail snake out from under his robes...

A few more black robes moved away from the door and

began walking towards the spectacle. Oh, gods! So close... The rectangular entryway was tall, narrow, and bland, except that it glowed blue much like the rest of the exterior. Darkness filled much of the rigid hallway beyond, though it was not completely without the blue light.

My knees shaking, we stepped onto the smooth stone floor. I could feel a warmth beneath my toes as they clicked on the hard surface. Click click click. We were in...

Vale boldly continued forward. What now? The enclosing walls were a dark brick, nearly black, and the blueness seemed to creep up from the cracks where the blocks met the floor on either side, fading a few inches up. Blast it! Straight. There were no other paths.

"Hold it!"

My heart sank. That same high pitched raspy voice that was yelling at the plant creatures... I gave Vale a push and we hurried on.

"You there! Stop!"

The clicking of toe claws on stone. The hollow thud of a staff on the floor. Wonderful. He was coming up behind us fast. I slowed my pace and turned my head slightly, acknowledging I had heard him. This was it...

"Identify yourself! Where did you find this prisoner?"

The black robed creature was by my side in a heartbeat. He was actually shorter than me. A green-brown scaled claw burst from the cloth and grabbed my shoulder, spinning me towards him. 'Speak!' he hissed. A reptilian muzzle erupted from under the

cowl, filled with fangs. I did not get a good look at his face, but he seemed to flinch at mine. "My Lord?" he muttered as he took a step back.

Huh?

He recovered instantly, shaking it off and pointing his staff at my face. "Who are you?" he demanded with more acid.

I smacked the staff out of the way with my blade and thrust my claw into his chest. I let loose a furious ball of flame and he flew backwards, soaring three feet and slamming into the wall. He remained planted there for an instant before crumbling forward and landing face first with a thud. Vale and I clenched our teeth. Ouch.

I looked up at Vale. "Run."

We bolted. After three steps I collapsed under the weight of the dhole's equipment. Blast it! She scooped her gear off my back and we high-tailed it down the hallway.



Empty hallways splayed in all directions. Blast it, what sort of mad tower was this? I followed Lady Vale as quickly as I was able, which admittedly wasn't very quick with my short legs. My calves ached and the pads of my feet became sore from slapping against the stone floor. She at least had the decency not to run at full speed. We rounded corner after corner, going this way and that, one perfectly square corridor after another. Ever since cursed to the miserable life of a scout, I had done nothing but follow that blasted waving tail of hers.

She slowed and pointed her nose downward. I had thought we were fleeing randomly, but I suddenly realized she was tracking

the whole way. I will admit I was impressed.

I knew I hadn't killed the lizard man I hit with the fireball. It would only be moments before he roused, and then there'd be a legion of screaming plant-things down our throats. And possibly the black robes. I didn't even have a clue what they were. Blast it, I hoped they could not track like us...

Vale stopped and scowled, stooping low to take in more of some odor. "What is it?" I whispered, out of breath.

"Blood."

Blood? Oh, blast it...

"Whose?"

She crouched on her haunches, letting her long black tail rest on the floor around her ankles. "It... it might be..."

Echoing somewhere down the hallway, a pig squealed.

My ears stood on end. Things began to click. A cult of mages. Animal sacrifices.

Rufus was a boar morph...

Vale took a few steps toward the cry after it died, her mouth gaping, her wide eyes stricken with terror... Then we froze and held our breath, our ears angled forward to pick up some sound—any sound.

Nothing.

I heard the blood rushing through my ears, my heart



pounding with each pulse. Vale's leather armor creaked as she shivered. Still nothing... By the gods... could they really be sacrificing Keepers? People that were animals? Animals that were people?

That's why they didn't need Claudia...

I gulped.

Scratch. Scratch.

We both caught the noise coming from beyond the stone, like a mouse trapped in the wall, only more metallic. Vale began moving towards a simple wooden door and I followed without thinking. My only thought was what I was going to do when we ran into these sick ceremonial daedra/demon worshipers or whatever they were. I nearly lost it. I had to fight to keep the energy swelling in my fists from bursting into flame. I was going to kill them, that was for sure.

No, just breathe... I shut my eyes and tried to calm down. If I began throwing spells left and right, our cover would be blown instantly. I'd put Vale in jeopardy. There was no way I was going to do something more stupid than her.

Vale slowly opened the creaking door. A single oil lamp hanging from the ceiling bathed the room beyond in a dim glow. A table and chairs stood in one corner of the cold stone chamber and several metal cages lined the walls, each resting on their own table. All were empty except the largest, which was barely big enough to contain the grayish-brown beast within. The ferocious hyena stopped clawing at the bars of his cage and looked up at us.

"Vincent?" Vale whispered to the animal from across the room.

The hyena's black ears folded and he shook his head up and down vigorously. I never thought I'd actually be relieved to see him alive. Vale ran over to the cage and shook the door a few times, finding it securely fastened. She drew her blade and slashed open the lock with a mighty cleave, sparks flying into the air as metal hit metal. The door fell open and the striped hyena leapt out. Vale's eyes continued to dart around the room from empty cage to empty cage, but Rufus was no where to be seen.

The hyena quickly grew into a larger humanoid shape and leapt up to hug a surprised Vale. He was of course clad only in his fur and I imagined the dhole morph was blushing under her own. "By Akkala, am I glad to see you!" He said as his massive arms wrapped around her frame and squeezed her tight. Yeah, ignore the short mage.

I would not have believed it, but the most irritating "tough guy" in the world was as terrified as a small child. The uncharacteristic behavior was frightening. They broke him... "They got Rufus... They got Rufus..." He murmured into Vale's shoulder plate.

Vale grabbed his shoulders, pushed him away, and looked into his eyes. He was at least a half foot taller than her. "Now listen..." she whispered in a commanding tone. She then began to calmly ask the overexerted hyena-man questions.

By then, something else in the room had stolen my attention.

It didn't look like anything in particular at first, just a cloth draped over the chair in the corner. But I was drawn to it, and I approached it slowly, cautiously... an odd sense of dread filling my heart. Perhaps it was the unnatural whiteness of the cloth. My heart began to thrash against my chest as the blazing red trim came

into view. Crimson flames danced around the edges of the fabric. Long forgotten memories flooded my mind as I ran my claws over those stitched flames, feeling their smoothness under the pads upon my fingertips.

By the gods. It was my grandfather's robe...

I was stunned. Paralyzed with my mouth gaping. I had not seen the man in thirteen years... The man who had taught me so much in but a few pages of scribbled notes... My mind was flooded with questions. Was he a victim of these travesties? Was he involved? What in blazes was he doing in Galendor? Perhaps this robe merely belonged to someone else?

"Wait!" Vale's voice broke my trance. I do not know how long I stood there staring at the robe, but by the time I turned around, the hyena was fully dressed in his leather armor and was strapping his broadsword to his back. Apparently his clothing had been conveniently tossed in the corner of the room.

"I'm going to go kill all of those things right now!" he growled.

Lady Vale held a claw in his face. "Do you want them to find us?" she fumed in hushed tones.

"They're going to skin Rufus!"

She slapped him across the muzzle and tried to shake him by the shoulders, but he was too large to budge. "Stop it, Vincent! Where is he? Where did they take him?"

He took a few steps back and dug his claws into the sides of his head, shaking it. "I don't know... I don't know..."

He shook his head a few times before his eyes fell on me, and he jumped, as if startled from not knowing I was there. I'm not that short, blast it. He strode across the room and crouched, his eyes wide with fear. He was really freaking me out now. "You... Virmir, please, you've got to help him!" He was nearly begging on his hands and knees, and I took a step back, realizing I was still clutching my grandfather's robe in my claws. The fabric draped to the floor and over my toes. It was so smooth and comforting... I just wanted to wrap myself in it.

"Vincent," Vale said as she put a claw on his back, "we'll find him... Come on, let's go. We'll need your nose."

"R-right," he stammered. He stood and took a deep breath. The two then strode towards the door, the dhole drawing her blade as she slowly opened it. I bunched the white robe up and tried to stuff it into the pack at my hip. There was no way I could leave it. It was too large to fit completely, but the cloth protruding from the top was not distracting.

Vale gave us the 'all clear' sign and we followed her into the hallway.

Ugh. One more to go.



I was convinced the pig was dead. Vale had a great deal of trouble picking up his scent and it seemed we were beginning to go in circles with all the dismal hallways looking the same. Vincent tried his hand at tracking, taking deep sniffs of the air whenever our squad leader did so, but never catching anything she didn't notice first. I don't think he knew what he was doing. What a moron.

But his enthusiasm was undying. I don't think he had heard the bone-chilling squeal right before we found him. Neither Vale or I could tell him. So we continued fruitlessly searching the empty halls. Ducking into doorways, dodging the occasional plant creature that roamed the dark-stoned corridors. We were going to find him one way or another... I never would have expected such a display of comradeship from the hyena. Could he not survive without his verbal punching bag? Was there something more to the nagging bickering those two constantly engaged in? I didn't quite understand it.

And the structure of the tower was infuriating. It didn't make any sense. It seemed more hallways than anything else, intersecting at odd angles and looping back on one another. The blue glow continued to permeate the bottom few rows of bricks lining either side of the floor. By then I didn't care what any of it possibly meant. I hated to see Rufus go, but we weren't getting anywhere fast. It was time to leave. We had done all that we could... I nearly mustered the courage to demand just that.

Then we heard another squeal.

All of our ears stood on end. This time it was much closer. We stood in a small corridor intersecting a larger hallway ahead. A brown boar dashed past the intersection, its hooves madly clattering on the stone floor. I had never seen Rufus in his fully animal form, but I didn't suppose it could have been anyone else. Go figure.

Vincent took a few steps forward. "Rufus!"

"Shhhh!" Vale grabbed him and threw him against the wall. A rumbling sound filled the air, as if a stampede were on the pig's wake. I thought it best to join the two against the wall.

"He he he he he!!" The shrill laughter echoed down the corridor, an entire symphony of screeching singers. My tail curled between my legs as I watched no less than a score of the vile plant-and-earth monsters surge past the intersection after the pig, screaming all the way. By the gods! They literally kicked up dust as they charged, bellowing their insane war cries with their rusty weapons held high. If any one of them turned to their left as they ran, they would have seen us standing there down the intersecting hall. But they were so fixated on chasing the pig, the entire army charged right past us. I was too paralyzed to move for a full minute afterward.

Before I realized it, the two were peeking down the hallway after the surging army.

"Let's follow..."

Oh, blast it!

Trailing an army of insane screaming imps down echoing corridors is not a difficult task. We could have ran directly behind them with our weapons scraping against the walls and they wouldn't have noticed. Still, we kept our distance and followed as quietly as possible. It wasn't long before the square corridors of the underground tower gave way to a long narrow tunnel of jagged stone, much like the one we originally traveled through. Had we left the underground tower completely? Indeed, the blue luminescence disappeared with the hallways, and I was forced to summon a witchlight. How the pig continued on through the darkness was beyond me, but it was evident he had, as the screaming voices of the plant creatures grew more and more distant down the tunnel. We could only follow and hope they did not turn around. Of course, they made so much noise we would have known it long before they arrived, but it was still a jarring thought.

And what in blazes were we going to do if we caught up to them? There was no way the three of us could fend off forty of the blasted things! Blast it!!

Heedlessly we followed the echoing screams down the corridor. They moved faster than the three of us, so the gap between us grew by the minute. As comforting a thought that was, it also meant that we would be left far behind if the creatures actually caught the boar.

Then the noise suddenly stopped. The silence was so unexpected we slowed our paces to a tiptoe as we became aware of the noise our own foot falls made. After a few bends, the tunnel opened up to a small room bathed in a familiar pale cerulean glow... It seemed a dead end at first, but the rock wall ahead contained a circle of blue crystals. Another portal... this one through the wall rather than the floor.

Vale recognized the crystals and immediately barged forward.

"Wait!" I demanded. I took a look at the crystals as I did before. These ones did not bare cracks like the others, so there was less of a risk of them breaking when we traveled through. Still, we had no idea what was on the other side of the rock... Could this be our ticket out of this subterranean nightmare, or did it lead further in?

"Let's wait a few moments for the plant creatures to gain some ground. We don't want to appear right in the middle of them..."

"But Rufus needs us!" Vincent snarled at me.

I folded my arms. "He needs us alive."

I could not get them to wait more than a minute. Blast it, here we go again... When we were ready, I sucked in my breath and the three of us stepped through the liquid stone wall together...



I felt the cool breeze flow through my entire body as I did when traveling through the last crystal portal. But this time the experience was doubly strange as I felt as if I were moving forward, yet my feet were still planted on the ground. In but a moment I was thrust out the other end, still standing upright, yet it felt as if I were atop a carriage that had stopped suddenly (or crashed), and fell forward on the ground.

Frigid night air welcomed me. The chirping sounds of the forest caressed my ears, and the scent of plant life filled my nostrils. Outside... we were outside! I clutched the sand in my claws and drank in the sounds and smells of nature. The night was freezing and I began to shiver. Certainly the coldest since my arrival in Metamor. It was a marvelous experience after being trapped in those horrible stuffy tunnels for so long. We were outside at last!

"He he he he he..."

Oh, blast it...

They had us utterly surrounded. Their eyes flashed in the moonlight and their earthy draconic muzzles turned upwards in maniacal grins. They formed a semicircle around us, our backs to a now solid stone wall.

My hackles rose and my lips curled in a reflexive snarl. I stood and spread my arms wide, spilling the energy I had gathered



out into my palms. A brilliant crimson orb appeared in each, bathing the dark forest in a bright orange glow. I wasn't going to die without a fight, blast it...

"This way!" I ordered, determining the left flank to be thinner than the right. I charged at the little monsters at full speed, Vale and Vincent on either side, brandishing their swords. Oddly, the creatures did not charge back, but simply stood there. I thrust both of my hands forward and fired both burning spheres.

"Eeeeeeee!!!" The explosion tore them apart, throwing their bodies into the air, wrapped in flame. The dhole and hyena morphs cut through the rest, hacking the vile little monsters out of our way. In but a few seconds we had smashed through their line and dashed like mad into the forest beyond. By the gods, I couldn't believe we were still alive...

After some five minutes of sprinting, we realized we weren't being followed.

"Why aren't... they following us...?" Vale tried to ask in gasps, fighting back her tongue as it tried to roll out of her muzzle. Vincent and I were in no better condition. Our run crumbled into a fast paced, limping walk.

"They... didn't get Rufus, did they?"

Vale shook her head. "No, I didn't see him." I didn't see him either.

The chill began to cut through my panting and I wrapped my cloak more tightly around my body. I wondered if I would grow a winter coat of fur? Being half animal was so strange... I watched my breath snake out of my muzzle in the October night air like a ghost. "Cold..." I realized. "They're plants. It's too cold. They're

dying..."

The triumphant moment was short lived. Vincent looked around. "But where is Rufus?"

We stopped and I looked up at the unfamiliar black outlines of the trees. The stars were mostly hidden by clouds, and the moon peeked in and out from behind them as well.

"... And where are we?"



Absolutely wonderful.

We wandered around aimlessly in the darkness for about an hour. There was no trace of Rufus anywhere and we were utterly lost. And freezing.

"Can't you cast some kinda heating spell on us or something, Virmir?" the hyena man asked, rubbing his furry shoulders with his hands.

"Heating spell?"

"Yeah, so we're like... not cold?" he said sarcastically.

I folded my arms. "I can light you on fire." I turned to look him in the eye and he flinched.

"Actually," Vale interrupted, "we should probably stop for the night. We're not getting anywhere fast. Virmir, could you build us a fire?"

"Are you sure that's wise? If those things are following us,

they'll see it immediately." I was actually more worried about the whatevers in black robes, seeing as the plant creatures were quite immobilized in the cold.

"We're gonna die out here if you don't do somethin', fire mage." Vincent was almost hopping from foot to foot. Who was he to complain? He was the only one wearing boots, blast it! My toes felt like they had fallen off.

"Not to mention Lutins," I retorted, rolling my eyes. And he better not go on that spiel about the Lutins being thin after last winter. If it weren't for that rouge tribe, I would still be human. Or an adult, at least.

"Yes, but..." it was Vale who spoke up, "if we're anywhere near the Keep, a scouting party will see it and rescue us."

My ears perked. Rescue? I liked the sound of that.

"Fair enough. We'll take our chances." I turned to the much larger hyena morph. "I'll need some wood. I'm afraid I don't have much energy left to burn."

Vincent took a few steps back and placed a hand behind his head. "Uh... my arm's really acting up. Wounded, ya know." He turned to the dhole. "Lady Vale, could you take a look at it?"

Vale looked at him for a moment, her muzzle partially opened. "... Yeah, I'll take a look at that. Come over here. Virmir, could you please get the firewood?" The two proceeded to make their way to a fallen tree.

What in blazes? They want me to get the wood? What kind of ungrateful, helpless, rejects are they? Seriously, send the man cursed with child-stick-arms who can barely lift ten pounds to

collect logs and then beg him to cast the spell to save our lives while we do nothing! Idiots! I swear I will not work with these buffoons again!

I grumbled and levitated a stick to my waiting hand.



"Now what is it that you want to keep so secret, Vincent?" Vale whispered as she sat on the log. Vincent had been acting so strange since they'd rescued him. Indeed one of his squad mates had been killed and another likely running around lost in a dark forest as a feral animal as they spoke, but there was obviously something else as well.

Vincent turned to look at the cursed child fox mage as he went about his task. Virmir had summoned a witchlight, and the bright orange glow erratically zipped around the trees like an angry wasp, as if the caster were throwing a tantrum. Occasionally a twig would fly from the bushes to the fox's waiting hand. The light cast a sheen on his silver fur, making it seem golden.

"... What kind of a fox is Virmir?"

"I don't know. Never asked... why?" Vale cocked one ear up and one halfway down, half expecting this to be some kind of a joke.

Vincent was dead serious. "When I was in there... with Rufus... I saw... I saw..."

Vale took his hand. "What did you see?" He was shivering.

"There was... Me and Rufus got free at the last minute... Before they put us in the cages." He grinned slightly. Sadly. "We

took a few of those monsters out. Put up a good fight. But then..." He looked at the ground.

"Then what? It's okay, Vince, it's okay..."

He let out a long sigh. "There was... there was another monster... No, it was a daedra. I swear it, Vale. By Akkala, I swear it!" His eyes burned with a wild intensity, and Vale found it hard to keep looking into them. "It was a daedra. I could not touch it with my sword. It was so fast..." He clenched his fists in to balls and shuddered, slowly unclasping them.

Vale put her arm around his shoulder. There were some horrible things in that underground tower, she knew that. She didn't quite believe he had actually seen a daedra, but she wasn't about to second guess his story. "It's all right, Vincent. You survived, that's all that matters. And we're going to find Rufus tomorrow." 'Daedra' was a very vague term. She had heard many stories of minor demons walking the realms of man, each with wildly varying shapes and abilities.

He shook his head. "No, no listen... The daedra... it... it..." He leaned in close and whispered, "it looked like Virmir."

"What?"

Vale's ears stood on end and her tail frazzled.

Vincent leaned back and spoke through clenched teeth. "I think Virmir is a daedra."



"That is absurd!" I heard Vale shout. The two morons were arguing about something. Wonderful. With the pig man out of the

picture, the hyena had apparently decided to dig into our exalted squad leader for his kicks. Better than me, I suppose.

They ceased their bickering and jumped as soon as they noticed I had returned. They watched me with wide eyes as I stood there with the witchlight bobbing around my head, weighed down with sticks under my arms and several more floating in the air above my shoulders. What was their problem? I tossed the offending wood down in a messy pile and proceeded to indignantly wipe the wet, cold dirt off my robes. "I'm afraid I'm no woodsman, so you'll have to arrange them." Vincent seemed to shrink back on the log while Vale stood, flashing him a glance with her ears folded. I could tell she was irritated about something.

Not that I cared. I plopped down and sat cross-legged in front of the pile Vale was building, draping my tail into my lap and then wrapping my robe tightly around my body. Once the dhole was finished arranging the wood into a pyramid shape I snapped my fingers and ignited the blaze.

My own flame was certainly capable of keeping me warm, but a natural fire did not draw on my reserves and wear me out. I had to maintain the blaze with a bit of my own energy for a few minutes as the wood was wet, but after that it grew to a healthy fire quite capable of living on its own. I allowed myself to become lost in the dancing flames as I thawed for a half hour or so. Vale even got up and collected more wood. How considerate.

Thankfully both the hyena and dhole were not talkative, and it did not take long for my eyes to grow heavy. Vincent had volunteered to stay up the whole night and keep watch, as he had already been unconscious for large portions of the day. He still held that fearful, rattled look in his eyes as he watched the blaze, and I doubted he would have been able to sleep anyway. It was fine by me. I needed privacy though, so I opted to step away from

the circle of warmth and inspect the nearest tree.

"Where are you going?" Vale asked.

"To bed."

It was an old twisted oak, its brown dead leaves swaying gently in the frigid night air. I ran my claws over the bark and found they had good purchase, so I climbed right up, wedging myself at the base of two branches. I loved climbing trees when I was young. It was a different world, with different rules. I could sit up there for hours and look down upon the world. Worries from the surface could not touch me up there. No one could.

I had a good view of Vale and Vincent right below, and they shot the occasional inquisitive glance in my direction. But soon they began murmuring to each other softly, and I had my privacy. I knew I was going to regress into a normal fox when I fell asleep, so I figured I might as well change then and get it over with. I hung my pack on a nearby branch and removed my grandfather's robe. It was so silky and its touch was almost electric. It would make a wonderful blanket during the night, along with my own cloak. I disrobed and hung my clothing on the same branch, then allowed the change to claim me. It was actually the first time I did it willingly, and was surprised at how easy it was to shift. In but a few moments my hands were gone, and I was a four-legged animal once more.

I nosed my way under my two blankets and stuck my head out the other end, curling up into a ball in the process. Burying my nose in my lush tail, I had no trouble falling asleep under those layers of warmth.



I heard a 'plop' as I stretched the next morning and turned to find my clothing had fallen off and landed in the bushes at the base of the tree. Blast it. As I contemplated how to get down and dressed without being seen by Vale or Vincent, I felt my covering slide off my back and tail and then watched my black cloak and my grandfather's white robe fall right next to them. Ugh. Not having hands was such a pain...

A dreary gray morning greeted me and the cold cut through my fur. Shivering, I scampered down the trunk like a squirrel and pulled my pants from the bush with my teeth. The coast was clear, so I shifted back to my bipedal form and slipped them on.

"Say, Virmir..."

Gah! I nearly fell face first in the mud. I really hate that hyena...

"... I was wondering," Vincent continued, "what kind of a fox are you, anyway?" He was directly behind me.

Tying up my belt, I clenched my teeth and resisted the urge to burn his facial fur off. "... Gray fox?"

"Are you sure?"

I rolled my eyes, removing my tunic from the bush. "I'm gray. And I'm a fox."

"Well, he does have the tree climbing down," Vale joined in. Oh, great. Let's all gather around now. I swear I will invent shifter friendly clothing one day.



"You mean you never went to the library and looked yourself up?" I folded my ears at the word 'library'. Ugh... "It's like tradition. All animal morphs do it. Some of us turn into really wild things." He pointed to the black and tan-gray stripes lacing his arm. "Striped heyna," he said with forced dignity, emphasizing the word 'striped'.

Real genius, that one.

"Right..."

"I've seen gray foxes around, and they're half red and half gray. You're all gray, and you've got some exotic fur patterns there on your back," Vincent pressed.

Huh? What in blazes was he talking about? I tried to crane my neck around to look, but was of course unable to see anything but my tail. "What sort of... patterns?"

Both the hyena and dhole hovered behind me. Blast it... "I dunno... you've got some black splotches here.. and some curvy lines..."

Lines? I turned around and tried to look the other way, without success. I flinched when I felt Vale run her claw through the fur between my shoulder blades. "That is kinda strange..." she said.

That's enough! I pulled away and began putting my tunic on. Blast it! "We do have the issue of wilderness survival to deal with here..." I said as I struggled to put the thing over my head.

"Do you need help with—"

"NO."

Vale shrunk away and returned to the log, Vincent following a moment later. After fully dressing and replacing my grandfather's robe in my pack, I made my way toward them, trying to repress my growling stomach.

"We're out of food, aren't we?" I said it more as a statement.

Vale smiled and set a bloodied arrow next to her bow resting on the log. Vincent sat next to it and was busy skinning a rabbit with his knife. Huh. Never mind then.

"Could you build us another fire?" she asked.

It was less disgusting than I would have imagined. Perhaps it was because I was starving, or perhaps because I was now half animal. Ripping through the tough meat was considerably easier with my sharp teeth, after all. Split three ways it was not much food, but it was even less to Vale and Vincent. I suppose being stuck in a child-like body had its advantages, few as they were.

"So, where are we?" Vincent asked after downing his share in one bite. I don't even think he bothered chewing it.

"We were north of the keep when we got separated, and we traveled north before finding the portal that lead underground," Vale reasoned. "I didn't have any sense of direction when we were in the tunnels, but I'd be willing to bet that we're still north of the keep. Giantdowns, maybe?"

Vincent shook his head. "Can't be that far north. Too many trees."

"But they're fairly thin, so we must be farther than Glen Avery."

Vincent nodded. I had no idea what they were talking about, so I just kept chewing.

"So we'll head south," Vale continued. "If the forest gets thicker, we know we're going in the right direction. If not..."

"We're screwed," Vincent finished the comment for her. I would have rolled my eyes, but the dhole was making sense. I had never heard of this Glen Avery, but the trees did seem to grow thicker the farther north we went from the keep. The forest must reach a threshold at this point, whatever it was, and then taper off from there.

"But what about Rufus?"

Vale sighed, her ears drooping. "I don't think there's anything more we can do... These are less than ideal tracking conditions. The frost is burning off the ground, and I can't smell a thing... Can you, Virmir?"

Yeah, right. I shook my head.

She replaced the arrow into her quiver. "The faster we get back, the faster a search can be sent out for him... At least we know he's alive."

"I would agree," I quickly interjected, "we are ill equipped and unprepared. Best call for help and leave his fate in more capable hands."

Vincent looked at us both and then slowly nodded, his ears folding back. "Yeah, I guess you're right..."

I nearly didn't believe it. We were headed back at last! By

the gods, I was going to stay in bed for a whole week. Confound anyone who tried to make me do otherwise.

In but a few minutes we were off, heading southwards and hopefully back to civilization. We soon came to a wide clearing in which we were able to see over the tree lines that surrounded us. I hoped to catch a glimpse of Metamor's majestic towers on the horizon, but of course we couldn't have been that lucky.

"What's that?" Vincent pointed behind us and to the left. A thick black column of smoke cut into the gray sky...

"Something's on fire..." Vale said ominously.

I took a few steps forward on our course, trying to coax the two to continue on. "We'd best get moving..."

Vale turned and looked at me. Not the Eyes of Urgency again... "We should check this out."

Oh, blast it!

I tagged behind the two as they trudged up an incline towards the smoke. We made it back into the forest again, sloughing through the dead leaves, the smoke just barely visible through the trees ahead. "We should be able to see what it is once we get over this ridge," Vincent guessed.

He had barely finished the sentence before the ground to his right exploded and something jumped out, latching onto his arm.

"He he he he he!"

"GAH!" Vincent kicked the plant creature off and it slammed into a tree. His sword was out in an instant. "You little

FREAK!" he screamed as he slashed the blade. The monster tried to dodge, but its right arm was cleaved half way up.

Bounding backwards on three limbs, it hissed, but then stood upright and laughed at the hyena, brown roots wiggling out of the stump of the severed limb like worms. It then turned and charged straight at me. My fireball was not ready, so I leapt sideways and it drove right past.

"Kill it!! It's gonna go get its friends!" Vincent yelled as he ran after. As if his incessant screaming wasn't enough to alert them... I thrust my claws forward and let loose a thundering ball of flame. Miss... It went right over the monster's head, clipping several bushes and tree limbs before exploding several hundred feet in the wrong direction. Blast it!

"Don't burn the forest down!" he said as we ran side-by-side. I really hate him...

The plant-and-earth creature disappeared into a thick grove of bushes. The hyena charged in madly, hacking away at the foliage with his sword. I simply crawled on my hands and knees under the bushes and slipped out the other end. Okay, so there were two advantages to being small...

With Vincent left in the dust, the kill was mine... I spread my arms and summoned crimson energy to my hands, feeling the warmth beneath my skin. Blast it, the thing was gaining ground on me, and I watched its head disappear as it leapt down a small ridge.

Jumping down after it, I landed on two feet and my left hand and froze, allowing my cloak to settle down on my back and raised tail. Blast it, where did it go? I perked my ears and listened, straining to pick up any disturbance in the dead leaves or foliage around me... There! My ears swiveled and my hackles rose at the

moving bush behind the elm to my right. I tiptoed to the base of the tree, then jumped out, thrusting my hand forward as a brilliant sphere of orange materialized before my palm, ready to blow the thing's head off.

"Eeeeeeeeeee!!!!"

A... little girl?

She couldn't have been more than eight or nine years old. The wind shifted and the scent of raw fear smacked me in the face. Her deep brown eyes regarded me with terror at first, but then melted away to child-like curiosity.

"He he he he he..." It slowly rose from behind her...

"Get down!"

She dropped immediately and I blasted the monster's head clear off. We were both covered with dust from the blast, and the creature's lifeless body fell over backwards.

The girl rose to her knees, smoothing out her tan dress. "You... saved me!" Her eyes lit up in delight and wonderment. "Are you my guardian?"

"What?"

"Mommy says everyone has a guardian. You saved me, so you're my guardian!"

I took a step back. "I'm no guardian, kid." She ignored that, and jumped up to embrace me in a tight hug, giggling. Oh, blast it... She stood an inch or two shorter than me, but she had a death grip. I could smell some sort of fruit in her hair as I tried to squirm

away. She released me suddenly and I fell on my rear. Blast it! My tail escaped my robe and hung to the side, and she kneeled over me.

"Are you a doggie? I love doggies!"

"I'm a fox."

"Nuh-uh. Foxes are red."

"Well, I'm gray."

"You're a silly fox, then." She giggled and gave me another hug. By the gods, she was going to smother me... "Thank you for saving me, Mr. Fox."

"He he he he he...." My ears turned... They were a good distance away, but coming closer.

"What is your name?" I whispered.

"Emile!" She shouted.

I brought a finger to the tip of my muzzle. "Shhhh... Emile, I need you to be very quiet. Can you do this for me?"

She gave an exaggerated nod. I dragged her to the base of the tree and pressed my back against it. She latched onto my left hand and would not let go. I would have preferred having two free hands to ready my spells, but I could not force her to release it.

Two or three creatures passed by a few hundred feet away, luckily not in the direction I left Vincent and Vale. Blast it, what was I to do with the girl? I couldn't just leave her...

"Come with me," I said as I stood, pulling her up.

She tugged back on my arm. "Uh-uh. Mommy says I should stay here."

"Those monsters will find you if you stay here."

She was torn. "But... but Mommy says..."

More shrieking laughter. Blast it, more were on the way... I let out a long sigh. I was going to pay for this... "Listen, Emile... I'm your guardian, and your mother sent me to come get you."

Her eyes lit up. "Really?"

"Uh-huh, and if I'm going to protect you, you need to do everything I say, okay?" I said through clenched teeth.

"Okay, Mr. Fox!" She gave me another hug, and then started pulling on my ears. Blast it!

I pulled her along back the way I came and we met Vale half way.

"Virmir!" She quietly scolded as she trotted over to us. "Don't run off by yourself like that!" She paused as she looked down at the human girl clutching my side. Emile shrunk away at the sight of the larger dhole morph, wrapping my cloak around her body. "Who is she?" a perplexed Vale asked.

I pushed Emile off of me. "I found her hiding back there." I turned back to the frightened girl. "Emile, this is Lady Vale. She's a friend."

Vale wagged her tail and smiled. I groaned inwardly. Teeth



baring canine grins don't exactly appear friendly to children, nimrod.

"Hello..." Emile managed, weakly.

Vale kneeled, trying to appear more pleasant. "Hello, Emile. Do you live around here?"

"Uh-huh," she nodded. "Mr. Fox saved me!" She clutched my arm.

"Oh, he did?" She flashed a smile at me this time. I rolled my eyes. "Where do you live?"

The girl pointed. Right at the column of smoke...

Vincent was running at us from that same direction. "Hey, guys!" he bellowed before he caught up, hanging over his knees for a moment to catch his breath. He looked at Emile for a second but then ignored her. "There's a whole mess of them right over there! They just torched an entire freaking vil—"

I clenched my teeth and ran a nail back and forth across my neck in a cutting motion. He got the picture at the last moment. "Oh... uh... hello, there..."

She really shrunk back at his ugly mug. Couldn't say I blamed her.

"There's a couple back there as well," I said, thumbing in the direction Emile and I had come.

"We need to get out of here..." Vale said, her eyes darting around.

"Right..." Vincent agreed. The two began making their way southward at a brisk pace. I pulled Emile along.

"Where are we going, Mr. Fox? I wanna see Mommy and Daddy..."

"Later, Emile... later..."



Trying to move stealthily through the woods, away from armies of evil animated plants and dirt, was made nigh impossible with a little girl in tow...

"Do you have more animal friends?"

Animal "friends"...? Ugh... "I know of other animal people..."

Blast it, I'd take the hyena and the pig man bickering any day... At least I could tune them out.

"What are we going to do with... her?" I motioned to Emile when she became distracted by a flurry of falling leaves.

"You mean you don't have a plan? You're the one that picked her up," Vincent grumbled with his arms folded.

Right. Obviously I decided this morning I desired the company of an overly talkative little brat and went into the forest in search of one.

"We'll have to take her the keep," Vale replied. "What else can we do? There were a lot of..." she glanced back at the girl, carefully choosing her words, "... children affected by the Yule

Attack put in a similar situation, so there are plenty of facilities set up to take care of her."

I looked back at Emile, who had finally let go of my hand. She marched at my side swinging her arms in over-exaggerated sweeps like a soldier, blissfully ignorant of what horrible things might have happened to her parents... or her entire village for that matter. All she cared about was that she was going on an "adventure" with her new "animal friends".

Partially because I had lied to her.

"Are we sure we want to subject her to the curses?"

"What's wrong with the curses?" Vincent glowered over me. A fair percentage of Keepers, particularly animal morphs, took immense pride in their conditions. Some went so far as to take any mention of their adversity as a personal insult. What a bunch of morons.

"The curse doesn't affect children," Vale interjected, "and we've been on improving terms with the towns to the north. It would probably be a temporary stay. We may be able to find her parents even, if we put the word out."

"Assuming we actually are north of the keep."

I felt a tugging on my tail and I stopped short, hackles standing on end. "Where are we going?" Emile asked as she pulled on it, "Mommy says there's monsters down south..."

"Monsters, huh?" Vincent said distastefully.

Vale smiled. "I think she knows where we are then." Vale kneeled and I clenched my teeth as the girl began hugging my tail.

"Do you know where these 'monsters' live?"

Emile nodded and pressed the tip of my tail to her cheek while I desperately fought back a growl. "In a big castle..."

Vale stood and nodded at Vincent, who just rolled his eyes. "That settles it, then," she said.

Vincent unfolded his arms and held them wide. "There's a freaking haunted forest northeast of the Keep, little green men infesting the Giantdowns, and a megalomaniacal wizard trying to take over the world up north. And we're the ones that get labeled as 'monsters'..."

Vale chuckled. "That's humanity for you," she said, wagging her tail.

The girl released me and began giggling for some reason. We continued on, but then the dhole and hyena gave me curious glances, fighting back smiles. Even the hyena's dour mood shifted.

"What?"

I turned to look at Emile, whose silky brown hair flowed down her shoulders. I could have sworn she had been wearing a ponytail up until then.

"That's not a bad look for you, Virmir." Vincent gibed.

"Huh?" I looked at Vale, but she just covered her mouth.

I flicked my tail indignantly and felt a weight on it. Flipping my robe to one side, I curled it around front and grabbed it, finding a bright green ribbon tied around the tip.

"Your tail's very pretty, Mr. Fox," Emile beamed.

Vincent burst out in obnoxious laughter.

I pinched my sinuses. Blast it! Would this infernal patrol never end?



It was like a nightmare. A horrible, never-ending walk through an abysmal forest. Blast it, how far from the Keep could we possibly have gone? We trudged southward all day, from daybreak to nightfall. Vale managed to kill one more rabbit, and the thing split four ways was all we ate for the day. I was utterly exhausted by the time the sun began to set. By the gods, what I would not give for my bed...

Emile remained enraptured most of the trip, but could take no more by the end of the day and Vincent had to carry her upon his back. She was afraid of the hyena man up until then, but quickly warmed up to him after a few minutes of riding. I took secret delight in watching him scowl as she played with his ears as she rode upon his back.

And then I envied her when she fell asleep. She was a real child, and no one thought anything of carrying her. I, on the other hand, could never allow myself to be carried like that, despite loosing my adulthood to the curse. I remembered my father carrying me. It felt so safe... so comforting... I was so tired. I wished he would pick me up... give me a turn...

What in blazes was I thinking? I was becoming delirious in my exhaustion, blast it...

We decided to continue into the night as long as possible,

hoping that that the forests would open and we would see the faint glimmer of Metamor torches in the distance. "Just one more ridge..." Vale said each time. I agreed for a while, but blast it, enough was enough.

"Who goes there?"

We froze. My heart sunk at the gravelly voice. I had no energy left to defend myself, let alone the child and two morons with swords.

But then I realized the plant-things or lutins don't ask before attacking.

"Glenners," Vincent whispered, his ears angled at the voice. They were good. Downwind and entirely hidden. I wouldn't have noticed the dark form knocking an arrow had he not announced his presence.

"Vale Restault and her squad," our leader replied. "Unit 41 of Metamor, Regular Patrol."

"Regular? From Metamor?" A lithe figure slinked from behind a bush and stepped into the moonlight. A ferret or something wearing green. "You guys lost?" A chuckle from a number of invisible sources emanated from the darkness.

"Yes. One of our party is dead. Another missing."

That shut them up.

Vale pointed to the sleeping figure on Vincent's back. "And we have a survivor from a razed village up north. We've quite a bit to report..."

The ferret nodded, scratching the fur under his muzzle.  
"Right. We'll take you to the Glen. I'm sure we can get a transport for you by the morning, or at least a night's rest."

A night's rest... Back amongst civilization... We were saved!

Of course, "civilization" was a stretch of the word...

Glen Avery was nothing more than a collection of tree houses. Tree houses! Blast it!

I enjoy trees dearly, but I needed four walls, a bed, clean linens and a glowing hearth, not some airy shack banged together in between two branches. Colossal trees surrounded us, the tops impossible to see in the darkness even with faint lights above, glowing from scattered windows. A good number of the trunks had doors at ground level, suggesting each had been hollowed out and converted into a sort of natural house. How they could do that without killing the tree was beyond me. The rest of the dwellings seemed to be built into hillsides and dug out of caverns in the rocks, and this included the inn. Blast it. Not a single proper building in sight. What sort of nature-tuned back-water hick town was this?

Our room in the inn was fairly cozy. For a dirty hole in the ground at least. Vale separated from the group to talk with some badger man who seemed quite irritated to be up at this hour, likely the authoritative figure for the local scouts, leaving the three of us to explore our room for the night. Of course the room only had two beds, which went to the ladies by default... Blast it again... I did not look forward to sleeping on the floor like a dog. Just one more night, I told myself.

I took a seat at the creaky wooden table in front of the woefully inadequate hearth, slipping my tail through the hole in the

chair. We had decided to wait for Vale to finish her official business before going to bed, and I rested my elbows on the table, massaging my eyes, muzzle, and forehead with my fingertips. I was unbelievably sore. My child-like body simply could not handle the exertion of trudging through forests and caves for two days straight. Forget Vale, I was going to sleep right there. Never mind the embarrassment of regressing into a fox kit before their eyes. I didn't care anymore.

Emile, having had quite the pleasant nap, was quite refreshed and energetic on the other hand. Oh, gods... By some stroke of luck (or misfortune), the previous occupants had left a half-full ink well, a few strips of parchment, and a quill at the table. The girl delightedly took up the writing utensils and began scribbling things on the paper, smearing black ink over her hands and dress. She was occupied, at least.

Vincent sat on one of the beds and watched us. I paid him no mind, and we all sat in silence for several moments. By the time I did glance in his direction, he had removed the heavier components of his armor and sat there picking at his claws with that ornate dagger of his. His face was contorted in that same wry grin he wore earlier when he started prying me with questions about the species of fox I had become.

"So, Virmir... where are you from?"

Blast it... I hated idle banter with a passion. Seriously, why is it impossible for two humans to sit and leave each other in peace?

"West," I waved him off, turning and pretending to be interested in what Emile was scribbling. She had two stick figures drawn. One in a dress and one with triangle ears and a bushy tail. "... across the ocean."



"Across the ocean, huh?" His voice carried a hint of sarcasm. "Where?"

"Valandair."

He nodded, pretending to understand. He sat there for a moment before finally asking. "Where's that? Whales?"

I sighed. "Fan Shoar."

His ears stood on end. "THAT far?"

"I did say across the ocean..."

"You speak pretty good Common, for a foreigner."

It never ceased to amuse me how the Suielish speaking nations simply referred to their language as "Common". True, it was a common language, and even a required one at the Academy, but to call it that was blatantly arrogant.

"Or is it your first language?" He continued the thought.

*"Tou est vrailen un sanslux-manhui,"* I rolled off my tongue in Landairish. He gave me a blank stare and I grinned. "My native tongue. Just a wish of good luck." Actually I said, 'You are a complete moron.'

Someone rapped softly at the door at that moment. Vincent went to check and I returned to rubbing my eyes.

"Yeah?"

"I heard you have injured children... I'm a healer, and I'd like

to check up on them." A woman's voice. Definitely not Vale.

Injured children? I looked up as Vincent backed away from the door, allowing her entry. "Uh... I don't think so."

In the doorway stood a rusty and gray furred vixen, who smiled upon turning her dark eyes down upon Emile and me.

"Well, hello there!"

"Hello!" Emile beamed, waving the inky quill through the air. "Are you a fox too?"

"Uh huh!" She responded in a child-alluring voice, kneeling down next to the girl as her tail wagged. "I'm Jo, what's your name?"

"Emile!"

"Oh, that's a lovely name. So Emile, how do you feel? Does anything hurt?"

"Nuh-uh. Mr. Fox took real good care of me!"

"Oh, he did?"

I couldn't stop staring at her face, which bore a striking resemblance to the one I saw whenever I gazed into the mirror. Her muzzle and ears were nearly identical to mine. And her tail had a similar black stripe edging from the tip and fading across the top, though mine was more pronounced. Was that what I was? A gray fox? I completely lacked the russet coloration that she wore on her flanks, though.

"And how about you? What's your name?"

I rolled my eyes as she stooped in front of me. "Virmir..." I grumbled.

"Oh, that's a—"

"I'm twenty-four."

Her ears perked. "Oh... sorry... There are a lot of children here born as animals, so I just assumed..."

"Pay it no mind." I waved my arm.

"But you're still injured. Let me dress that for you."

Huh? Oh blast, my left arm... I had completely forgotten about the plant-thing nicking me the previous day. I winced as she pulled back my sleeve, revealing matted, blood-dried fur.

"It's fine."

"No it's not. If that gets infected you'll lose it," she said as if reciting a line from memory. She opened her pack and proceeded to smear some vile stinging paste over it. I clenched my teeth as my entire arm burned.

"You can take it. Or are you not twenty-four right now?"

I folded my ears and shot her the vilest glance possible, which only made her chuckle. Blasted cocky healers...

After wrapping it in a white cloth she stood. "Make sure to have Coe look at it tomorrow when you return to the Keep." Yeah, yeah. I nodded and she turned to Vincent, who was leaning over on the bed looking dreamy-eyed.

"And how about you?"

The hyena shot up straight. "Well, actually..." he began rubbing his shoulder, moving his arm in a circle, "... my arm is kinda sore..."

She didn't bother getting within two feet of him, instead giving him a quick glance. "You're fine." His mouth dropped. She turned and waved to Emile. "Bye, Emile."

"Bye bye, Jo!"

Vincent punched the pillow as she walked out the door.



Emile begged me to sleep in the bed with her, citing a fear of "monsters". It was certainly large enough for two children, or rather a half-grown fox and a child, but I couldn't do it. It just didn't feel right. So I laid out my grandfather's robe and my cloak in the space between her bed and the wall and promised her I wouldn't move from that spot all night. I planned on waiting until the lantern was extinguished before disrobing and turning back into an animal.

Much to my surprise, Vale approached me when Vincent was out of earshot and offered to switch places, noting how awful I looked. Obviously I deserved the bed a lot more than her, but I refused. Blasted morals... She re-wrapped the bandage the healer placed on my arm after I shrunk into a fox, though. Embarrassing... if only I could keep my half-human form when I slept once more. The ground was wretchedly cold and hard, but that didn't keep me from curling into a ball and falling asleep almost instantly.

I awoke before dawn feeling much warmer and more comfortable than when I went to sleep. I was sprawled on my side, paws stretched before me and a human arm wrapped around my side and curling under my chest... Blast it! How did she do that? Emile had somehow scooped me off of the floor while I slept, dragged me into her bed, and clamped me in her death-grip like some stuffed animal. I became dead to the world when I slept as a full fox, and that frightened me. I struggled, but the sleeping girl only whimpered and held tighter.

Well, okay... maybe it wasn't that bad. I supposed playing along for the remainder of the night would not kill me... She wined once more and squeezed. Perhaps she was having a bad dream? I could feel her heart beat against my back and her soft breaths against my ear. Oddly, I felt safe and comforted by this...

The child loved me for no reason other than that I was a fox. Well, destroying that plant monster single handedly with a flash of light from my palm might also have had something to do with it. I wasn't sure what to make of this. Should I tell her I wasn't really her "guardian"? Would she understand that I wasn't really a child like her? How would she react when she found out I simply lied to her to get her out of danger?

I wondered if this was what it was like to have children. Some innocent soul clinging to you, dependant on your every move, worshiping your every word. How awful it would feel to screw something like that up... I couldn't imagine myself a father. I mean, the thought had crossed my mind on occasion, but I always chuckled and brushed it aside.

But then my heart sank as I realized for the first time that I had missed my chance. I would never be one.

The curse turned me physically into a child. I couldn't... well... I was prepubescent, that was for sure... And there was no way for me to ever change back.

Its not like I ever wanted children. It's just... well, not wanting and having the possibility removed forever were two very different things...

I shuddered. Emile held me closer.

Of course, I was nothing like a father to Emile. She saw me as a fantasy playmate come true. A "talking animal" her age who protects her from monsters. I had talking animal friends when I was very young— imaginary ones of course. I never really bothered to play with other kids. Another missed chance, I suppose. Not one that I particularly regretted.

But... I will admit I did wonder... Wonder what it would be like to play with another child as a child... To frolic in tall grass and mud, ignorant of all the troubles of the world. Just to embrace that carefree childish bliss I had left behind long ago... Perhaps Emile and I could, when no one was looking, sneak off by ourselves and play together. Just once. I could show her how to scale trees like I did when I was ten...

Blast it... Delirious... I was delirious. I sighed and looked at the outlines of my forepaws in the darkness. I didn't even know who or what I was anymore...

The sun eventually crept in through the short window placed inches below the ceiling, which was at ground level outside. I slinked out of Emile's arms and sat on my haunches, staring down at her face and tangled hair. Well... no one else was awake to see me... so I leaned over and gave her a little lick on the cheek. The corners of her mouth pulled up into a smile. I leapt off the bed

next to my clothing and began growing to my half-human form.

All right... I was probably going to miss her a little after we dropped her off at the orphanage.



I watched the mammoth trees pass overhead as I rested my head against my hand, gazing out the window. Perhaps I was too quick to judge the Glen in my exhausted and irritable state the previous night. It might have been the fox half of me, but the idea living so close to nature did have a certain appeal to it. Especially the tress... I would have liked to see what one of those tree houses looked like from the inside.

There were so many people at Metamor Keep, and I hated crowds with a passion. In fact, I never left my room unless absolutely necessary. Of course, Glen Avery had the opposite problem. It was so small, everyone knew each other and thus every resident was part of an extended family. Ugh... I could not live with random strangers constantly barging in on my life... They were the overly friendly type too, I observed as a group simply stopped what they were doing and waved as we passed. Weirdos, the lot of them...

This is how the village near my childhood home was like. Although we lived far enough away not to be constantly annoyed by their bothersome festivals, traditions and other nonsense. Perhaps this wouldn't be a bad idea. To live somewhere out in the forest, not too far away from civilization that necessities were impossible to acquire, but not too close that I would have to deal with irritating neighbors. Some place where I could perfect my spells in peace. I supposed it wouldn't hurt to think about things like this for the long run... I was now a permanent resident of Metamor Valley whether I liked it or not. I flicked my tail back

and forth and sighed, thinking of home. There wasn't much left for me there anymore... but still, home is home. If only I could reverse my self-induced animal-hood, I could return, even as a child...

But of course, that was impossible. I had deduced that the child curse of Metamor was laid on top of my spell, and the only way to reverse it would be to break the curse first. I knew that wasn't going to happen.

The Glenners lent us a covered carriage (or Vale paid for it; I'm not sure) for our trip back. The ride was dreadfully bumpy, and I nearly flew off my seat at several points from all the jarring. Of course, Emile loved it. She crossed back and forth from window to window, sticking her head out and gaping at the multicolored foliage on each side, the wide boughs that formed a tunnel's ceiling over the road, and the steep blue mountains on either side whenever the forest opened up. Ah, to be a child, and to gain such excitement from something as simple and meaningless as a trip from one point to another. But the valley was beautiful, I will give it that.

Vale tried to keep the girl in her seat, but she would not listen until I told her the plant monsters would grab her through the window if she didn't sit down. This worked too well, as it scared her to death and she took to cradling my tail like a stuffed animal. Ugh.

Emile was under the assumption that we were all one "big family" and we were all going to live together. Oh, dear... Using carefully selected words, Vale explained that she was going to go live with "lots of other kids her age" for a while until her parents came by to pick her up... Blast it, this was all going to come back and bite us, I knew it.

The Keep was a sight for sore eyes... despite having only



lived there over a month, and hating it... its spires soaring majestically skyward, the rooftops of Euper just barely visible in the shadow of the hill the castle rested upon. Our return from an eight-hour-scout two days late and missing two party members caused quite a stir.

Emile's parting was quick and painless. We explained her situation to two castellan aides who said they knew the perfect home for her and escorted the girl on her way. She clung to me at first and would not let go until I promised to visit her every single day... blast it... One of the aides was a dog, so luckily his appearance was able to enchant her long enough for me to make my escape.

Questions, reports, examinations... Vale, Vincent, and I were hounded to death. Vale's description of the plant creatures threw them in a tizzy. Of course, I had to fill in the technical magical details she left out. The three of us were given a week's break. Weather it was a vacation or suspension, I don't know, but I was grateful for it. We were given the task of separately writing down everything we saw— particularly underground.

As for what happened to Rufus, I have no idea. I can only assume he is still a feral boar, running around somewhere in the northern forest. A search and rescue team was formed immediately. The pig man irritated me to no end. He constantly stunk of alcohol, was fat, slow, and stupid. But what that mage cult— whatever it was— intended to do to him, and what happened to him, no one deserved.

And for that, they will pay.

That is all I can write. I am going to bed.



Grav ran his claws through the table again and again. Blast it! Curse those meddlesome Keepers... He tore the oak to shreds, wishing the flecks of sawdust caught under his nails were flesh from their faces. He hated them so much!

Hopping off the chair, he hobbled to the center of the room and tried to regain his composure. His head still throbbed, and his chest still burned... Blast it! No one but his master ever hit him like that! The impact actually cracked the wall! Curse that short one!

Grav only hesitated because the imposter resembled his master... Blast it! The short one was the same size as him. He should have known Master was not that small. Argh!!

Now what was he going to do? The last two souls had escaped! How in blazes was he supposed to find two more before Master returned?! Blast it! He was in so much trouble... Just before he left, Master had scolded him for having to round those same two up and specifically told him to give them special attention. Oh, gods...

And the Vegicid imps were becoming more useless every day. Soon they would not even be able to move outside at all, and they'd have to wait until spring to grow more.

He was so dead...

But wait! Grav grinned widely, his jagged teeth reflecting yellow in the lamp light. With Master gone, he was in charge... He was the highest rank... He owned everyone else... for now. All he had to do was order a subordinate to take the fall and then leave, claiming that he had to report back at the Keep for an emergency

and had nothing to do with it. Yes, that was so perfect!

Extending his claw, he levitated his staff to his hand and hobbled over to the door, the click-click-click of his toes echoing throughout his chamber. Oh, wait—he was getting too hasty. Obviously he could not go back to the Keep like this!

Casting aside his ebony robes, he donned the leather armor of a scout and the thick animal furs required for him to survive in the frigid fall weather. He hated the cold so much. Master said one day all the land would burn. He so looked forward to that.

He took the stool from the corner and placed it before the dresser, standing up upon it so he could get a good look at himself in the mirror. Blast it, Master said he'd make him taller if he did well. He hoped Master would never find out about his blunder...

Looking into the mirror, Grav gave a wide grin and admired his scores of sharp fangs, flicking his scaly brown-green tail behind him. He loved those gifts from Master dearly, as he did his claws, but he had to make them go away in order to fit in at the Keep. Reaching out to the four edges of the rectangular mirror—North, South, East, and West, he scratched out the runes of concealment with the tips of his claw. Any mirror would do, but he used this one so much that those points were marred. Once the runes glowed blue, he whispered the incantation and enjoyed the warmth that took his body.

Of course his reflection did not change. That was his true self, and he loved it. He simply had to avoid mirrors, which was quite easy to do considering how rare and expensive they were. But now he knew that outside of reflections he appeared as a simple salamander morph, his oversized teeth and claws invisible to even the finest of mages.

Chuckling to himself about the nefarious deed he was about to perform—and get away with, he took up his staff and strode out the door into the hallway lined with hazy blue light. One good thing had come out of this whole ordeal...

At least he had killed that idiot human girl that had fired her arrow at him.



Claudia had a family.

Young children clustered around a large bear morph and an old man, all wailing in agony. I could only assume they were her siblings, as she seemed rather young to have had children. So young...

Vale went over to offer her condolences, and they all broke down together.

I simply remained seated on the bench with Vincent like an idiot, my tail and legs dangling over, too short to reach the ground to sit with dignity.

Vale said Claudia was of the Patildor faith, and thus so was her funeral. There was no funeral pyre, but rather her body was placed in a box to be buried underground. I could not possibly imagine why they would do this to her. Was their heaven underground, instead of the sky? And not to mention the slow deterioration. It didn't make sense to me.

A child priest stood before an altar and went on at length about Yashua, who was apparently a half-god of some sort (they only worship one god, though they talk about the half-god a great deal more). I tuned him out a few minutes in. All religions are the

same. It is all about the afterlife. About living beyond one's mortal bounds. It is impossible for the human mind to grasp the concept of not existing any more.

It is a horrifying thought, simply ceasing to exist. I am sure that is why there are so few in the world that choose not to believe in something, anything. But it is not for me. I gave up the Teragran faith my first year in the Academy. I was truly alone sitting there amongst the Patildor and the Lothanasi.

But there was one thing that united us. A heavy heart saddened by the loss of a life. We were all cursed, and we all had a home to protect.

I guess I'm a Keeper now.

∞ END ∞