

# Whispers from Afar

December 25, 2006

*...And then Andraste NicTaranis, the daughter of the warriors of Tuonela, stepped into the armory, where only the heir to the throne was allowed to enter. Raven-haired, copper-skinned, and of medium height and powerfully muscular build, Andraste was a spitting image of her ancestors. Her deep brown eyes wandered the star-shaped chamber that was lit by what looked like moonlight and they fixated onto the dais in the center. Upon the dais was a suit of plate armor emblazoned with the royal crest: a single rose, a bearded unicorn stallion, and a wolf. In front of it was a mighty claymore sword that was inscribed with shining runes of inspiration and honor that glowed with a faint silver-blue light. Andraste stepped up to the armor and the sword and whispered, "The honor of my kin is my honor, and life and honor are one." Little did Andraste know that there was someone right behind her...*

Tarathorn fell out of her chair into a heap under her desk when her phone rang and shattered the near-silence. She attempted to leap onto her feet, but only succeeded in hitting her head on her desk and then she began to dig frantically through piles of papers and books to find the ringing monstrosity. One... two... three... four... BEEEEEP!

"You have reached Tarathorn Suttankankul at (323)343-3789. I can't reach the phone at the moment, so please leave a message and I'll get back to you as soon as possible," droned the answering machine in a very nasal and tinny rendition of her voice.

A nasal male voice replied, "Tara, this is Alexei Pevovaroff from organic chemistry class. I was wondering when would be good time to study for second midterm. Call me back at (626)225-5259. I would be honored to study with you."

"Ugh..." muttered Tarathorn to herself. "When will Alexei learn that I have no interest in him?" The phone then rang again. This time, she just sat there staring at the phone.

Again, the phone gave its usual nasal, droning greeting. This time, after the beep, was a deep male voice with scratchy notes. "Uhh... Tara, uhmm... it's Henri Ulrich. Uhhh... I read over your... uhhh... research proposal... uhhh... I think... uhhh... we need to discuss this... so... uhhh... make an appointment... uhhh... call me back at uhhh... extension uhhh.... 1413."

Ignoring the phone message, she merely climbed back onto her chair and stared at the notebook that she had been writing in until the phone started ringing. Then she glanced up at the clock next to her. It was five minutes before noon. "Holy crap!" she cried as she frantically packed in several notebooks and writing instruments. With a quick check to make sure she didn't forget anything in her backpack, she darted out of the room, closed the door, and ran as fast as she could across campus. Even in her panic, she moved with a fox-like grace that caused several people to stare at her in amazement.

"Excuse me, pardon me!" she mumbled as she ran past students and professor alike. Finally, just as she thought her legs and lungs were going to give out, she reached the chemistry building, a large, imposing building made of blood-red bricks. "Just a bit further," she wheezed as she

struggled down the labyrinth-like hallways past carts of chemicals and tanks of oxygen, helium, and argon. At the end of the hallway was Dr. Huang, an elderly woman with a pinched face so severe that it was said that she could curdle milk from a hundred meters away by staring at it.

Dr. Huang glared at Tarathorn as she meekly walked into the lab with her notebook. "Where are your goggles?" demanded Dr. Huang, noticing that she was not wearing her goggles. "And why are you wearing wrong shoes?" she continued. "And twenty points off for being late again!"

The rest of the class laughed as Tarathorn's face turned bright red in humiliation for being pointed at again. Then Dr. Huang began to thumb through her notebook. "And Tara, come prepared with the appropriate materials!" yelled Dr. Huang. It was then that she realized what was wrong – in her hurry, she had mistaken her doodling notebook for her chemistry notebook and now Dr. Huang saw her drawings, sketches, and writing. After another whole minute of berating from Dr. Huang, Tarathorn meekly stepped into the lab, where everyone else had already begun the lab for the day.

"This separation by distillation is going to be slow," complained Holly, a girl whose hair was in a mohawk and dyed bright blue.

"Yeah, not as slow as Tara though," laughed Joseph, a boy in a leather jacket with a black stripe in his blonde hair. Several others joined Joseph in his raucous laughter.

Tarathorn unlocked the drawer and was starting to assemble her apparatus when Dr. Huang stepped over and screeched, "No pre-lab, no start! Come back to either my night section or to someone else's section!" Disheartened, she bit her lip to keep herself from breaking down into tears and walked with her head hanging low out of the lab.

*Behind Andraste was a whisper of a figure in a soft grey cloak that blended in with the shadows. While Andraste was praying to her ancestors for guidance, Kit stood just outside of the vast chamber. "No, I cannot step in the sacred armory," thought Kit even as the dagger quivered in her tiny hand. "To step in there is death."*

*A voice rang in Kit's mind. "Do it, and I will let you and your wretched kindred live. Their fate is in your hands!"*

*Quietly and deftly, Kit crept up behind Andraste, who was still in rapt prayer. Her pointed ears perked up at every sound she made, and after a few nervous steps, she pulled her cloak closer, trying to conceal her long, bushy red-furred tail. Slowly and steadily, she continued onwards and once she drew close to Andraste, she raised her hand, ready to strike with the twisted, black dagger she had carried for several days.*

*Poised to strike, Kit shrieked and jumped at the sound of a metal clanking and a deep but still female voice drawing. "Hawld yar hosses! Ya aint gonna be travlin without me!" A smoky smell reminiscent of burning herbs mixed with the reek of stale whiskey also wound its way through the air.*

*Andraste, too, leaped up, sword in hand, and faced the two strangers who had followed her into the sacred chamber. One was the dagger-wielding grey-cloaked figure with fox-like ears, a fox's tail, and vaguely canine features on her face. The second almost caused Andraste to laugh wildly, had it not been for the fox-like figure behind her and the graveness of the violation. The second figure was a tall, hulking woman with a large, wide-brimmed hat, a burning cigarette in her mouth, knee-high leather boots with spurs near the heels, and a belt with a large, star-shaped buckle. She was also wearing thick, heavy pants and a leather jacket that was definitely outlandish to Andraste's eyes. To top off the odd character, she had a pair of odd-looking curved sticks on her side.*

*"Do you not know, that you have defiled this sacred chamber?" Her slightly icy voice rang through the chamber. "By the laws of the Tuonela, to step in here is death!"*

The sudden beeping from her watch brought Tarathorn back to reality from her writing. "Crap!" she squeaked as she frantically packed her books and notes. Sitting underneath the large oak tree in the small grove away from the hustle and bustle from the rest of campus had caused her to lose track of time... again. Mumbling grouchy to herself, she tried to stuff her books as quickly as possible into her backpack. Well, Ill have to continue later."

Again, racing through the crowds of students both familiar and unfamiliar, Tarathorn made it to the top of the life sciences building, where Dr. Henri Ulrich lurked. Just as she barely made it to his door, the very tall, balding, scarecrow-like man with a walrus-like brown beard and unwashed clothing designed for someone about a foot shorter walked over, cup of steaming coffee in hand. "Uhhh... Tarathorn, uhhh... good work so far," started Dr. Ulrich. "Uhh... but Ive got uhh... a few uhh... suggestions."

While he fumbled with his large keychain, Tarathorn winced inwardly. Anytime Dr. Ulrich said "suggestions", it meant a substantial amount of work. After he pried the door open, he motioned for Tara to come into his office, which reeked of used gym socks, stale coffee, and ancient manuscripts. As usual, she took her seat in the crowded, cluttered office that always seemed to be under the threat of a book and paper avalanche. Dr. Ulrich took the chair in front of his dusty computer and then pulled out a pile of papers from his battered backpack. "Uhh... so hows uhh... the quarter going? I uhh... havent heard from you in uhh... while."

Tarathorn replied, slightly downcast, "Not too good. Im just barely hanging in there in organic chemistry and its starting to hurt me in my other classes."

"Uhh... sorry to hear that... Uhh but the uhhmm... research proposal uhhh... has a very strong start. And Ive uhhh... nominated your uhh... proposal... for the upcoming Symposium next week. Uhh... I think uhh... you stand a very good chance of uhhh... doing well. You just need to uhh... add some more uhh... stuff about... uhh... the big picture and uhh... implications... uhh... about why its so uhh... important to uhh... study uhhh... effects of uhhh... changing carbon dioxide levels and uhhh... how we can track it using uhhh... satellite data," rambled Dr. Ulrich.

Not sure whether to breathe a sigh of relief or groan, Tarathorn said, "Symposium?"

"Uhh... yeah... the State Honors Symposium... uhh... you uhh... are up for it, right?"

Looking a bit concerned, she said, "Id love to do it, but I also desperately need to study for o-chem. When is the deadline to decide?"

Fumbling around in his calendar that was filled with purple ink marks, Dr. Ulrich replied, "Uhh... Friday. So you have uhh... three days to decide." While he was looking at the calendar, he was counting on his hairy, grubby fingers.

"Ill let you know for sure Friday morning," said Tarathorn a bit nervously.

"Uhh... I really want you to compete because uhh... you have uhh... cutting-edge research going on..." replied Dr. Ulrich as he reached out for another cup of stale coffee. "Uhh... By the way, whether or uhh... not you want to do the uhh... Symposium, let me know and uhh... just uhh... e-mail me the new uhhh... text pieces."

With that, she stood up and walked out of Dr. Ulrichs office, not sure what to think. She thought to herself, "It would be a great honor, but is it worth flunking a class? And Dr. Ulrich is putting himself on the line for me. But can I pull it off for him? I hardly have results!"

Confused and deep in reverie over what to do about the Symposium, Tarathorn walked straight into a large, matronly woman with upward-teased salt-and-pepper hair and thick trifocals and an elderly man on a walker who could just barely stand upright. The woman, Dr. Washington, was an ill-tempered, middle-aged woman whose glare could kill anything smaller than a cockroach. Many of the students were known to almost pass out at the thought earning

the ire of Dr. Washington if they ever got caught cheating. Dr. Keindaflatt, the fragile old man, looked like a tiny skeleton with a business suit hanging pathetically on him and a head that looked like it had been compressed under a steamroller. "Watch your step!" boomed Dr. Washington in a voice that was deeper than most females. Dr. Keindaflatt, in the meanwhile, put a hand on his heart to make sure it was still beating while he wheezed in terror.

Tarathorn leaped up straight into the air, startled. Nearby was a group of "popular" students in the bio-technology program, who laughed quietly but rudely at her. One of them whispered, "Its the girl who came in un-prepared for Dr. Huang's class!" Standing next to them was a slender yet muscular boy in a denim jacket and blue jeans. His short raven-black hair, suntanned complexion, and stylish sunglasses concealed the fact that he was a chemistry and math double-major. Her heart began to pump nervously when she saw Vincent Gahan smile at her before disappearing into the mob of bio-technology students. The two cranky professors merely moved on, leaving her stunned, although she could hear Dr. Washington ridiculing her and touting the superiority of molecular biology over ecology.

"Just one more class to go," muttered Tarathorn in a downcast voice. "Then I can look forward to studying organic chemistry and then maybe Dr. Huang or Dr. Razo will let me into their lab section tomorrow."

*Before anyone could respond, Kit suddenly lunged at Andraste, dagger aimed at her. The outlandish woman tried to grab onto Kit, but leaped back when Kits eyes suddenly glowed a flaming red and she sprouted dark, reptilian wings. Just as the dagger was about to strike Andraste, though, the glow from her eyes disappeared and Kit struck herself instead. Upon contact, the blade vaporized and Kit collapsed onto the ground.*

*"Noooo!" bellowed the large woman. "Kit!" She quickly dropped down to try to revive Kit by shaking her gently. Kits eyes slowly opened up, but her pupils were enlarged, and her breathing was slow, shallow and irregular.*

*Andraste, stunned, said, "By the Tuonela! What devilry is this?"*

*"Billie-Joanna, Im sorry," whispered Kit faintly. "I tried to warn... you..." She was gasping for air. The wings disappeared and a dark, fetid smoke escaped from Kits tiny body.*

*The smoke began to speak in a slow, hissing voice. "That is the price for failure, little one, and now, I shall claim you!" Then turning to Andraste, it sneered, "And you too, shall be mine, whether by this little traitors hand or by mine!" With that, it began to swirl about Andraste, intent on her throat as it solidified.*

*Billie-Joanna roared yet again, "Aint nothing gonna hurt ma friend and getting away!" She wrestled Andraste to the ground and then grabbed onto the semi-solid smoke, which kept slipping out of her hands. "Not no beastie not no Twuh-na-luh not no how!"*

While Tarathorn sat alone in the classroom in preparation for organic chemistry recitation, she continued to go through her notes in hopes of trying to gain new insights on the SN-2 backside attack mechanism. "Leaving groups..." she mumbled frustratedly. "What the hell is a tosylate group?"

As she continued to curse and swear, she heard loud, clumsy footsteps that signaled one of two people, neither of which she particularly felt like dealing with. One possibility was Alexei who left several messages on her answering machine and the other was Lee Kim, the androgynous and possibly transvestite recitation leader. Nervously, she looked up from her notes to see who it was. Just as she expected, it was Lee Kim, who was wearing a stained lab coat, orange pants, purple polo shirt and lab goggles. In Tarathorn's mind, Lee's long, limp hair, pale complexion, and slightly zombie-ish expression made him look like one of the most famous

celebrities from the last century Michael Jackson.

"Tara, I don't know how to put this to you, but you're right on the borderline between a D and an F," said Lee in a voice that was too deep to be female but too high to be male. Noting the distressed look on her face, Lee added, "But remember, you still have 75% of the points left."

For about ten minutes, she fired off questions about various reaction mechanisms at Lee, who answered patiently, although slightly off-hand and with several allusions to pop culture. "Yeah, tosylate ion gets booted off the molecule more easily 'cause it likes to take electrons with it," said Lee in reply to her question about tosylates.

All too soon, the rest of the class began to file in and Lee began his lecture on the dozens and dozens of mechanisms that were discussed in earlier in the week. At first, little Tarathorn listened intently, grateful that she had asked many questions, but as the hour and a half passed slowly, her mind began to wander back to her research and the opportunity that Dr. Ulrich had offered her. As her eyes began to wander in their tracks, she felt a poke from behind her, causing her to leap up slightly.

In a nasal voice, Alexei whispered, "What did Lee mean by groovy?"

Just as Tarathorn began to turn around, a harsh, deep voice boomed, "Lee! Can't you control your class?" And then the voice aimed at Tarathorn. "And you need to show respect for your instructors!" Without even looking up, she knew exactly who it was Dr. Washington, who enjoyed walking in on classes randomly to make sure they were properly taught.

Although she couldn't see it, she knew she flushed bright red at the embarrassment at having been singled out for just shifting the wrong way. Alexei made an apologetic face and resumed taking notes while Lee resumed lecturing. As soon as Dr. Washington stepped out of earshot, he said, "And no offense to anyone but that is why bio-tech sucks. They're beee-yot-ches!" With that comment, several students stood up, sniffed haughtily at Lee, and walked away. "And class is over! Good luck on the midterm!" laughed Lee. "And you too Tara, you need to rest!"

*Billie-Joanna stopped wrestling Andraste to the ground and turned her attention to Kit after deciding that Andraste was not the one to fight. "Ya can't jus leave me yet!" groaned Billie-Joanna as she lifted Kit's head. She held up a small flask from her belt, pulled the stopper out with her teeth, then waved the flask under Kit's nose. A pungent aroma that reeked of both cheap whiskey and tobacco emerged.*

*The wisp of smoke apparently sensed the smell of the contents of Billie-Joanna's flask as well when it began to move about, dazed. Andraste, having noticed the smoke's behavior, quickly shouted, "Get it!"*

*Not sure what Andraste meant, Billie-Joanna threw the contents of the flask in the general direction of the smoke-creature. When the brownish fluid struck the smoke, the smoke began to convulse and dissolve before their very eyes. Once the creature vanished, Kit began to stir. "Billie-Joanna, what is that stuff?! It could raise the dead and kill them again!" cried Kit as the color returned to her face.*

*"Special home brewin, Kit!" said Billie-Joanna, smiling. "What in tarnation was that?" she added.*

*Kit flushed, slightly ashamed. "I... meant to tell you... but I struck a deal with Lord Karolus while you were having your situation with that book you found. He offered me a chance to avenge my clan if I did in Andraste. I'm... really sorry," she finished, tears welling in her eyes. "Please... forgive me for the horrible thing I did in serving Lord Karolus... I just wanted to help my kin..."*

*Still slightly out of breath, Andraste said, "Your life is still forfeit, unless you also repent*

*and do penance, for you have still entered where only the heirs of Taranis may tread..."*

*Interrupting, Billie-Joanna roared, "Hold ya hosses! I dont go on this naw-bility thang. I live by the frawnteer code! It says that actions speak not blood or words or any durned pretty thing."*

*"Perhaps. You may indeed speak wisdom, frontier warrior," replied Andraste evenly after a long pause.*

That night, when Tarathorn trudged back to her room, she heard something stir near her desk. "Its the wind," she thought as she set her backpack down. With that, she sat at her desk and began to go over her notes for organic chemistry. "Oh hell, I need to find help or Ill go bonkers! I wish my story was real and that I could be as brave and strong as Andraste!"

An eerie womans voice with a strong, commanding tone called out, "Tarathorn Suttankankul na'Imladrien-Aiwë!"

Spinning around to find the source of the voice, Tarathorn shouted, "Who are you?" In the meanwhile, she managed to trip over a particularly large math book and fell flat on her face onto the carpet.

Groaning frustratedly, she tried to pick herself up from the ground. As she reached up to the chair to lift herself up, she felt a strong hand grab hers. Realizing what that meant, a very panicked Tarathorn screamed and tried to break free. However, all this resulted in was the tiny undergraduate landing back into a heap on the floor. The woman intoned, "Tarathorn, really, you must have more courage!" Then she felt herself getting lifted up and soon, she found herself back on her feet.

Standing face-to-face with her was a tall woman in plate armor that shone like the stars and was engraved with a single rose, a bearded unicorn stallion, and a wolf on the breastplate. She was wearing a shining helmet that had a single horn-like structure projecting from it, giving her the appearance of a rearing unicorn mare. The woman (at least Tarathorn was sure it was a woman, given her shape and voice) removed the helmet to reveal a face with strong, wind-chiseled features, long, raven hair and a dark copper complexion. On her back was a mighty sword that glistened in the faint light and had a faint bluish glow to it. Even the small part that was exposed showed runes that she couldnt identify she was certain they were not from any language she was aware of. It was hard for her to tell how old the woman was since her features were so rough and she was wearing her armor, but she guessed probably in her mid-thirties. Suddenly, Tarathorn felt tiny and insignificant before this warrior woman that stood before.

"My apologies for my rudeness," said the woman. Her voice, stern and strong, now seemed to be a lot less intimidating. "I am Andraste, Heir of Taranis of the Tuonela."

Extending a hand shyly, Tarathorn said, "I guess you already know my name somehow, but what's with the other part you added? Im a sophmore ecology major here at State College." She almost jumped at Andrastes powerful handshake. "No offense, but what brings you here?"

"As far as the name Imladrien-Aiwë goes, it is an ancient name that you have been associated with. It means Sparrow-Child of the Valley As for my presence, you brought me here. You see, when someone writes a story and creates a character with all of their spirit and believes in that character or wishes for them, they become real. I was brought into being by your hand, wit, and heart," replied Andraste.

At this point, Tarathorn gasped. "Then you mean... Billie-Joanna and Kit and... Lord Karolus are real too?"

"That, they all are," replied Andraste. "But urgent matters are at hand..."

Andraste was interrupted by a clap of lightning and Tarathorn let out a frightened shriek.

"Andraste! Help!" she called out. Turning to a huge blot of darkness vaguely shaped like a man, she screamed, "No, dont take me!"

Drawing her sword, Andraste shouted, "Lord Karolus! Harm her not, or you shall face the wrath of Andraste, daughter of Taranis of Tuonela!" She brandished her claymore at the blot of darkness.

The blot began to solidify into a gigantic upright, humanoid creature with the legs of a bull, the torso and arms of a mighty man, the head of a hyena, and multiple tentacles that extended from his chest and waist. He wore a black cloak that swirled about in the wind and in his hands was a huge mace that glowed blood-red and appeared to have a grimacing face on it. One of his numerous slimy grey tentacles held Tarathorn, who was now slightly aloft and covering her eyes in terror while screaming for Andraste to save her. With a bone-chilling laugh, Lord Karolus raised his mace in defiance at Andraste. "I have long waited to meet you," he sneered. "Whether it was in person or by the hands of that little traitor that savage saved with her poison." Still holding onto the frightened student, Lord Karolus charged at Andraste.

Metal on metal clashed and Tarathorn dared to open her eyes to see what had happened. Andraste was still standing, sword raised and blocking Karolus mace from striking her. Blue struck on red and vice versa with neither giving in. Then Karolus extended one of his free tentacles behind Andraste while keeping her on the defensive with her sword. Carefully, he kept an eye on Andrastes movement, which was surprisingly graceful considering the weight of the traditional armor of the Tuonela. Then there was a clanking sound as Andrastes sword struck Karolus hand. Purplish blood spurted everywhere and several blotches landed on Tarathorn. With a horrified cry, she could feel the ice-cold liquid on her skin and she felt faint.

Karolus merely smirked and faster than the blink of an eye, he shot his tentacle at Andraste, effectively pinning her to the ground face-first. He began to laugh insanely while Andraste struggled to break the pin, hindered by her heavy armor. The huge mace in his hand shrank into a small, needle like dagger that seemed to absorb light and drip some kind of purple fluid similar to the blood that came from the severed hand. Still keeping Andraste pinned and Tarathorn held, he approached Andraste and lightly touched the point of the dagger on her neck. After one last struggle, Andraste collapsed and he used his tentacle to pick her limp body up, armor, weapon and all.

"Noooo!" shrieked Tarathorn, unable to believe what had happened. She struggled violently, trying to break free of the tentacles grasp. Karolus, still completely relaxed, lifted the dagger to the tiny student.

"Oh, dont worry. It isnt fatal," said the purring, sneering voice. "Andraste is merely... under. And now, its time for you to take a nap after being up so late, we don't want you causing any explosions, now do we?" With that, Tarathorn could feel the chilling blade touch the back of her neck and she felt numbness running all through her body. She tried to fight it off to focus, but her mind emptied itself and darkness overtook her.

It felt like a thousand organic chemistry books landing on her head when Tarathorn opened her eyes. As she began to regain sensation, she found herself on cold stone in a cell about three meters by three meters and had some light coming in. She peeked out of the window to glance at the amber light that was fading away. On the other side, where the door was, there was only a tiny grate that seemed to feed into a dark tunnel. "Great, just great," she groaned as she rubbed her sore head. She then checked herself to find that her clothing was intact, albeit a bit scuffed and that she only sustained a few cuts and scratches. "Where the hell am I?" she shouted at nobody in particular. There was no immediate response, so she gazed out the window again, weeping.

A loud knock on the door startled Tarathorn out of her weeping. Hoarsely, she asked, "What?"

The door opened and before she could even think of bolting out, Lord Karolus was standing before her once again. On either side of him was a large scaly creature with a crocodile's face but its legs were more like that of a tiger or a panther in their structures. The reptilian creatures reminded Tarathorn of dragons and both of the creatures hissed menacingly at her. "So, I set out for the warrior-queen of the Tuonela and I also capture the one who brought her to life!" he laughed at her.

Instead of responding, she merely turned her face away from her captor. The two creatures next to Lord Karolus eyed her intently and one of them approached her and probed her with its forked tongue. Startled, Tarathorn shrieked and leaped back. Her heart pounded and she cried out something incoherent. All the while, Lord Karolus was laughing at the sight of the frightened girl. "Don't worry, they're harmless," he sneered. "But, I don't like to waste time. I've come here to let you know that I've given you two choices. The first is that you remain here and help me in my conquest over the Tuonela by revealing all that you know. The second is to have me extract the information from you. Obviously you will be of greater service to me than that little traitor Kit. If you give me the information willingly, I will grant you any wish."

Still unable to speak, Tarathorn's eyes merely widened in fear but she did nod "no".

"Not even the desire of being a strong warrior and possessing the heart of the one you want most, this boy named Vincent Gahan? Or at least of passing organic chemistry and presenting your research in your mundane world?" taunted Lord Karolus. The two creatures at his side continued to look at her intently. Seeing that she did not want to respond, he added, "I will give you until dawn. It would be foolish to pass up such an opportunity." With that, he and the creatures stepped back and the door slammed shut, leaving Tarathorn alone with only her thoughts.

The shutter in the door suddenly opened up and a nearly-spherical crystal fell at her feet. Out of curiosity, she picked it up and looked into the vast multitude of facets that seemed to sparkle and glow in every color of the rainbow. In one of the facets was a faint image of her defending her thesis before the committee, which by default included Dr. Washington regardless of emphasis. She saw herself dressed up in a crisp, clean black suit and she had just completed a round of difficult questions and had left Dr. Washington unable to say anything. Another facet showed her an image of herself walking hand-in-hand with Vincent on the beach and they were enjoying the warm, California sun. "Wow," breathed Tarathorn as she pondered over the facets that showed all of her wishes. "Maybe I should take that offer from Lord Karolus..."

As soon as she finished her thought, she felt a slight pang of nausea and the sensation of her ears getting longer, more pointed. Her hand ran up through her hair and she felt her ear had indeed become longer and tapered. "Nooo!" she screamed in terror. "This isn't supposed to happen... but what am I becoming?" she pondered. Out of curiosity, her eyes returned to the multi-faceted crystal in her hand.

There she was, four inches taller and with some muscles on her otherwise scrawny limbs and with a scalpful of healthy raven hair instead of a mess of split ends. She had Andraestes sword in her hands and she had just won a duel with the mysterious undefeatable masked entity. "Tarathorn... you can be this... the legendary warrior Imladrien-Aiwë" whispered a tantalizing voice. A second image showed up with Tarathorn hunched over a pile of books and her hair had gone prematurely thin and white. All the while she was writing, Dr. Washington was yelling at her, as well as Dr. Huang, and everyone from her organic chemistry lab was taunting her. She tried to stand up, but the weight of the books was too much and she fell onto the ground but everyone merely laughed and went their own way. "Or you can be that,"

continued the voice.

Fixated on the image, Tarathorn never noticed the ever-so-slight click on her door, nor did she notice the constant, rhythmic clanking of a pair of metal objects that seemed to be coming closer. Only when the door rattled and creaked open that Tarathorn's attention to the crystal broke. "What?" she cried, startled again.

"Andraste?" asked a meek female voice.

"Naw, that aint Andraste. At least I dun thank shed be a-squeakin so much!" grunted a second female voice that made Tara think of a stereotyped Texan. "Think its that Tarathorn girl that ya dun heard Lord Karolus talk about."

"W-who are you?" whispered Tarathorn.

The owner of the meek voice appeared from the shadows to reveal a short woman of extremely slender build and fox-like facial features. She was wearing a shadowy hooded cloak that seemed to help her blend in and also conceal her facial features, except her softly glowing eyes. "Its an outlander," she said to the second woman, now revealed as a husky, muscular woman that reminded Tarathorn of a stereotyped cowboy... er girl. "By the way, I am Kit and my companion here is Billie-Joanna Strong-Arm."

"I told ya," said the second woman. "We dun got the wrong cell! But ya can come with us if ya promise to be quiet."

Nodding in agreement, Tarathorn followed the woman that Kit had referred to as 'Billie-Joanna. As soon as she stepped out of the cell, she tripped on the uneven ground and fell flat on her face. "Ouch!" she groaned as she struggled up and followed both Kit and Billie-Joanna through the narrow, winding corridors.

"Kit, ya know whar ya goin?" whispered Billie-Joanna after passing by what looked like the same cell with the same skeleton dangling in the center for the twentieth time.

Kit merely grinned as she continued onwards, almost skipping. "Cant they see or hear us?" pondered Tarathorn nervously. Just as she pondered the question, she heard loud stomping footsteps that were consistent with heavy boots.

"Durned varmints," roared Billie-Joanna, having apparently heard the same thing. What was Billie-Joanna doing yelling when danger was just around the corner if she was aware of what could happen?

Confidently, Kit said, "Billie-Joanna, you keep them busy. Ill take this outlander with me." With that, Kit chanted some spidery words and gestured to Tarathorn, who looked puzzled at Kits motions. "Follow me and step only where I step." Unsure of the wisdom in Kits actions, Tarathorn hesitated, glancing back and forth between Billie-Joanna and the unseen but audible guards. "Come on! Just walk through the wall with me!"

Thump. Bump. She only felt a solid wall in her face when she tried to walk through the wall. "Feels funny, but ya gotta believe in yerself more," called out Billie-Joanna as she drew forth two objects from her belt that Tarathorn recognized as pistols. "Go on! Im a-fixin to teach them varmints some about the frawnteer code!"

"I can do it!" shouted Tarathorn, heedless of the incoming danger. She then took a large stride forward without looking back or hesitating and she felt as if she were walking through plain air.

"Finally!" whispered Kit. "Now, weve got to find Andraste and get her back to Tuonela before dawn."

"Do you have any idea where she is even?" asked the confused student, doubtful about Kits ability.

"I have a pretty good idea. Theres a cell that Lord Karolus likes to use for... torturing," replied Kit. "Oh, watch out for those cold iron bars in the walls, we cant quite go through..."

those." She had to pause when she heard a loud thud from Tarathorn, who had walked right into one of the iron bars. Giggling, Kit motioned to her to go under the bars to bypass the obstacle. Practically crouching down and crawling, she was able to move under the bars, although she did bump her head fairly hard when she tried to stand up.

While navigating through the labyrinth of walls and iron bars, Tarathorn thought, "Wow, this is really cool! I could live like this and always have an adventure. Maybe I really belong in this kind of life." With that thought, she suddenly froze and found herself outside of the wall, where the rhythmic thumping of the guards footsteps were distinctly audible, as was Billie-Joanna bellowing every curse word and phrase possible.

Kits face poked out of the wall in dismay at Tarathorn. "Tarathorn, whatever you just did, dont do it!" she hissed. "Now, come back into the wall, this isnt the time to be gawking!"

Confused, Tarathorn tried to walk back into the wall only to find herself with a slightly flatter nose and a slightly more bent pair of glasses. She continued to bash herself into the wall in frustration. "I cant do it again!" she cried out to Kit. As soon as she uttered that, she felt something sprout from her rear end and tear through the seat of her pants. Upon feeling it, she realized it was some kind of tail with a tuft on it. "Noo!" she screamed, heedless of the noise she made.

The thumping grew faster and louder, indicating that the guards were headed in her direction. "Quiet!" hissed Kit again. She motioned for Tarathorn to follow her back into the wall, but she hesitated, fearful of bashing herself yet again. "Come on, you have to believe in yourself!"

By the time Tarathorn mustered enough courage to try to walk into the wall again, Kit had already vanished. She also saw guards approaching a group of large but ghostly pale men in heavy armor and large clubs. The men reminded Tarathorn of American football players with their bulky builds and their dim, vacant expressions.

"There she is!" cried out the lead guard, a slightly smaller man with a sword and a more expressive, intelligent expression. For some reason, the voice sounded familiar to Tarathorn, but in her panic, she could not place where she had heard the voice.

Before the student could react, two of the guards grabbed her by an arm apiece, making sure that Tarathorn couldnt wiggle out. While she squirmed and struggled to escape their iron grip, the lead guard laughed and motioned for the guards to position both of her hands behind her back. "Since youre so eager to explore, we thought youd like to meet with the big boss!" he said, punctuating himself with a loud belly laugh. "Now, wheres that skulking little friend of yours? We already have your lumbering companion with the filthy mouth!" He then waved to another group of guards, who were standing on either side of Billie-Joanna, who was struggling as well and had a gag in her mouth.

The lead guard then began to rummage through his pockets. While he was rummaging through his pockets, a guard cried out, "Look! Theres that little skulker!"

Tarathorn looked up to see that Kit had emerged from the wall, trying to sneak behind the guards to free Billie-Joanna. "Kit! Watch out!" she shouted. Kit merely smirked as she drew a pair of shadowy daggers from an unseen pocket. With a deft motion, Kit was able to strike both of Billie-Joannas guards, who then collapsed into spastic seizures, and then she began to move towards Tarathorns guards. Before she could reach the tiny girl, the captain drew out some metallic objects from his pockets and threw them at Kit, who attempted to duck from the flying things. Kits fox-like face darkened as she realized that the flying things followed her movements. As they approached her, they exploded to form a net that surrounded her and her cloak suddenly went from a shadowy black to a bright orange. Inside the net, Kit looked more like a trapped fox than the cool and confident entity that Tarathorn had first met.

"Hah! Ive been waiting to finally use that one on you!" gloated the guard. Billie-Joanna, who had just punched one of the subordinate guards in the face, thrown another, and was ready to brawl her way through the rest of the guards, was pounced on by several of the remaining guards. "And now, lets take them to Lord Karolus himself. Ive been waiting for an opportunity for an overdue promotion... Ive always wanted to be a baron!"

While the lead guard was talking to himself about how he would be elevated to the level of a baron, Tarathorns eyes wandered to the net that held Kit. In the net was a now a large, red-furred fox with a hunted expression and haunting green eyes. Behind the net, which was now being carried by one of the lumbering guards, was Billie-Joanna, who was now handcuffed and gagged. "Shall we strip them of their stuff?" asked one of the guards.

"Yes. You take care of the peasant. Ill take care of this girl," said the leader, who grinned as the others protested at having to deal with Billie-Joanna. While the leader dug through Tarathorns pockets, he whispered, "Its not often I can handle such a cute lady like you." His search revealed a wallet, a package of chewing gum, several pens and pencils, and a small pack of index cards with her organic chemistry notes. The index cards and wallet seemed to intrigue him, as he murmured, "What spellcraft are these? Tell me now, or well have to extract it from you! Come on, dont be such a jackass!" He teasingly tugged at her ears and tail.

A subordinate guard approached the leader and said, "This is what we found on the peasant." Billie-Joanna glared angrily at the guard at the indignity of being referred to as a peasant and being stripped of her equipment. In the guards hands were her twin pistols, a club, her belt that had a huge buckle that seemed to be shaped like the state of Texas, several small pouches, and a large metal flask. The guard opened up one of the pouches and poured out the contents, causing Billie-Joanna to look even more flustered. He pinched up some of the parched leaves in his hands and sniffed at them. When he opened up a second pouch, there was a fine black powder in it. "Spell components, obviously," he said. He also opened up the flask, sniffed, and commented, "Concoction of some sort. This peasant is obviously a witch as well."

"Let us take them to Lord Karolus, then! On the double!" barked the leader. The walk out of the dungeon seemed to last forever, especially while being bound and listening to the leaders monologue about becoming a baron.

"Maybe coming here wasnt such a brilliant idea," thought Tarathorn glumly. Her ears seemed to grow another notch and she felt her toes beginning to fuse together. "Damn, I cant even think straight anymore!" Her toes fused together some more and she sensed that her shoes had vanished.

Up and up the stairs spiraled and the dark, grimy stone began to give way to finer building materials: black granite, grey granite, red brick, and finally, what looked like yellow marble with an occasional fleck of purple. All the while, the lead guard had been talking to himself. "Yes, and once I become baron, I can rule over my own little barony and then Ill be able to mingle with the nobility and I wont have to do any more stinking prison duty... and then I can hire the best to guard me and never have to worry about prisoners from hell like that peasant..."

The entourage then stopped when they reached a large chamber that was filled with frescoes and murals of some vast war, where knights, hunters, wolves, unicorns, and lions were being beaten down by a legion of men and women in business suits, girls in skimpy club-style dresses that barely covered the wearer, boys in striped baseball uniforms, and a large mob of misshapen reptilian creatures. "Yecch," thought Tarathorn instinctively. "Lord Karolus obviously has bad taste. Even I could decorate a room better than that!" Much to her relief, nothing seemed to happen. Suddenly, everyone halted and the lead guard began to tap slowly and rhythmically on the large iron door at the end of the chamber. She listened intently and realized that she

recognized the patterns he was tapping out Morse code. She took note of what he was tapping. Have fox, ogre and ass. Tarathorn almost laughed out loud when she realized what the guard had tapped.

A hissing, wheezing voice intoned, "You have done well, Captain. Bring them on in!" It certainly didn't sound like Lord Karolus to Tarathorn, but then again, she faintly remembered something she had once written about Lord Karolus. And the evil Lord Karolus was a master of deception...

"Yes sir!" said the guard as he tapped out more things on the door. 5 12 13 benzaldehyde. She noted the tapping again and tried to commit to memory.

As they passed through the door, Tarathorn felt a small zap of electricity going through her and she cringed slightly. The gaudy room gave way to a smaller chamber that was made entirely of white marble with multicolored veins that seemed to form a pattern reminiscent of blood vessels. In the center of the room was a white throne with gold veins and a reptilian motif. Sitting in the throne was a ghostly figure that alternated between the image of a gaunt, balding old man in a business suit and a robust but still old man in a well-tailored purple robe and a staff. At the foot of the throne were the two reptilian creatures that had accompanied Lord Karolus in the dungeon and between them stood Andraste, who was chained to the ground at the ankles and at the wrists. Even without her weapon and armor, Andraste maintained her stoic aura as she stood proudly and the rage burned in her deep brown eyes. Her armor and claymore were at her feet, just out of her reach, and in the oddly pulsating light, looked cheap and gaudy.

The image suddenly stopped shifting and fixed itself as the elderly, white-haired man in the purple robe. "Were my accommodations insufficient, Tarathorn, or shall I say, Imladrien-Aiwë?" he asked in a mocking voice. "And as for you, Kit, your treachery only reveals your true nature. And you, Billy-Joe, do you not miss your true form and your past memories?" Billie-Joanna tried to lash out at Lord Karolus, only to trip over herself and get kicked by the guards. Lord Karolus merely laughed wildly at Billie-Joanna's struggles before waving to the guards. "Guards, let me have some privacy with these... guests."

"Yes sir!" chanted the guards as they filed out.

Turning to Andraste, Lord Karolus said, "So, I now have in my hands the Heir of Taranis, as well the notorious anachronistic outlaw Billie-Joanna, or should I say, Billy-Joe Strongarm and the shape-shifting traitor Kit of the Deepwood. And best of all, I have Tarathorn Suttankankul, the one who first breathed life into this world!"

Kit, still trapped in the net as a large red fox, barked in defiance at Lord Karolus and began to chew on the net. A tiny flash of light exploded in her face and she yelped in pain and she curled up, cowering. Billie-Joanna, in the meanwhile, managed to chew through the cloth gag in her mouth and roared, "What in tarnation made ya make me associate with that thievin varmint and gave me that thar book!" Disgusted at Billie-Joanna's outburst, Andraste merely glared at her, then at Tarathorn.

"Really, Tarathorn, for one so... talented, could you not have at least provided me with a more tasteful choice of enemies?" sneered Lord Karolus. "And could you not have at least put a better curse on yourself than turning yourself into a jackass? And perhaps even given yourself a better fate?"

"Maybe..." began Tarathorn before she stopped suddenly when she realized that all but her middle toe on both of her feet were missing and that she was standing on that one remaining toe, which was now a hoof.

Andraste said in a calm, stoic voice, "Tarathorn, remember, honor above all. Believe and live that..."

Lord Karolus stepped down from his throne to approach Tarathorn. Running his hand up her donkey ears, he whispered, "Tara, you saw the crystal, did you not?"

"Yes, I did," she replied nervously.

"Then, how would you like your fantasies to become real instead of imaginary, to become the leader of the Tuonela or to be a much better student than you are now? Or how would you like to be just another worn out husk of a student with only a corporate job or the drudgery of a housewife in your future?" teased Lord Karolus. "All you have to do is reveal the secret of the Tuonela and of Andraste NicTaranis!"

Tarathorn merely nodded "no" to Lord Karolus.

"I really dont want the one who breathed life into everyone in here to suffer unnecessarily, so maybe a bit of persuasion may be in order!" sneered Lord Karolus. With a gesture of his hand, the crystal in Tarathorns pocket floated out and began to glow brightly in a huge, almost blinding rainbow. A purple ray broke free and struck Kit square in the nose, causing her to yelp in pain, while a pink ray hit Billie-Joanna square in the crotch and a very masculine bellow escaped. Billie-Joannas features flashed between masculine and feminine, but still remaining rough and muscular. A third ray, this time flashing every color, enveloped Andraste and she did her best to maintain her stoic calmness, but her features contorted in obvious pain.

"Whatever you do, live by your convictions and honor!" called out Andraste even as she involuntarily groaned in pain. "Or you will be trapped forever!"

The ray aimed at Kit intensified and the smell of burning hair rose up from the little fox. Howling and screaming in pain, Kit attempted to chew her way out of captivity. The sight of Kit burning slowly to death wrenched at Tarathorns heartstrings. For Billie-Joanna, her skin and clothes took on a mottled grey shade and her movement slowed down as she turned into a still male stone statue from the feet up. The last things that came from Billie-Joannas (or Billy-Joes) mouth was a string of swear words and the words, "I want to be myself again but I dont remember!" Lightning bolts surrounded Andraste and her youthful face began to become drawn and gaunt, as if from age and disease. Her coppery skin began to fade in color and took on a pale hue that reminded the young student of the powdered-covered, arsenic ingesting noble-women from post-Renaissance Europe. As Andrastes warrior frame became delicate, even weak, her skin then erupted into painful sores and boils and her breathing grew labored.

"Noo!" cried Tarathorn, not heeding the fact that she could feel the bones in her hands lengthening and fingers fusing into her middle finger. "Please, stop hurting them! I will cooperate with you."

"I knew youd see reason," said Lord Karolus, smirking at her. "So, do tell all about the secrets of the Heirs of Taranis, starting with how to get into the sacred chamber."

"Only one of the line of Taranis can open the door, but once opened, others may enter but with great peril," replied Tarathorn, racking her brains. "But to be honest, I havent fully thought that much out in the stories!"

"But surely, you could get in, since you did bring this world to life," said Lord Karolus after thinking for a moment. With that, he began to chant spidery words and Tarathorn felt dizzy and disoriented. "And dont worry, I will bring your friends with us! If you fail to keep your word, I think a party with barbequed fox, some stone-throwing, and a funeral to celebrate your future as an ass would be in order! Or would you rather be a burned out corporate zombie?"

The surroundings faded around her and after a walk through a forest of bright lights, she found herself at the mouth of a cave with a runed door illuminated by only moonlight. Lord Karolus was still with her, as were her companions. Billie-Joanna was still a male statue, while Kit was still wreathed in flames. Andraste, however, was whole again, aside from a heavy set of manacles across her wrists. "Please dont let me screw up too badly!" thought Tarathorn

nervously.

While she was thinking about her situation, Andraste whispered sadly, "All hope, then, is lost."

Lord Karolus thumped his staff on the ground and beckoned for the tiny student to go up to the door. "Open the door," he ordered.

Cautiously, Tarathorn stepped up to the runed door and began to concentrate. The moonlight grew brighter and took on a faint bluish tinge, while the runes began to flare with a silver light. Extending her hand, she traced her hoof on the runes before placing her fore-hoof into a small indentation. The glow suddenly faded and she was thrown across the cave right into Andraste, who merely looked down at the frightened student. "No, I cant do it," she said, tears welling up in her eyes. Standing upright suddenly became much more difficult for Tarathorn.

"Do it, or they die!" said Lord Karolus in a flat but commanding voice. "I will be the ruler of the Tuonela!"

"You cannot enter as long as I live," said Andraste in a bold voice. "The Tuonela will never accept you, Lord Karolus."

The little remaining color drained from Lord Karolus face and without any warning, he raised his staff and shouted some incoherent syllables. Andraste suddenly collapsed onto the ground into a helpless heap. He shouted a second syllable and gestured fluidly at Andrastes still form. With one last moan, her eyes closed and she completely ceased all movement. There were no marks on her at all, save for on her forehead, where a hexagon with a circle in it and what looked like a set of lines and letters extending from the top of the hexagon was inscribed.

"Now, open it!" demanded Lord Karolus. "Or Kit and Billie-Joanna will also die!"

Initially, Tarathorn walked up to the door and repeated her motions on the runes, but while Lord Karolus was gloating, she whirled about and shouted, "Youve gone too far, Lord Karolus! I shouldnt be afraid of you! Youre just a product of my own imagination, as is this world and everyone here!" As soon as she said that, she found herself more able to stand up straight. "And by that thinking pattern, you shouldnt be able to cause any real harm to me unless I let you, its all in my mind!" A small globe of green energy formed in Tarathorns hands and she hurled it at Lord Karolus, who stood petrified in surprise.

"Please, reconsider your action! I can change!" wailed Lord Karolus. "Just make me a villain capable of reforming! Ill even change my aspirations!"

Smiling, Tarathorn said, "Im afraid not. Just because I sprung you out of my imagination doesnt mean that you or anyone is a complete puppet under my thumb. I only brought you to life and you were the one who shaped yourself! And I dont need your promises!" With each statement, Tarathorn could feel the tail and ears shrinking. Another ball of energy formed in her hands, and she hurled it at Lord Karolus again.

His body began to jerk spastically and dissolve into smoke as she continued her onslaught of energy. "Yes, I am capable of fulfilling my dreams! I will pass organic chemistry! I will present that paper! And I will be my own person!" Gradually, Lord Karolus became little more than a small pile of dust that blew away with the breeze that passed through.

The net that held Kit captive gave way to her small but sharp canine teeth. Yipping in relief at no longer being slowly burned to death, she ran up to Tarathorn before the little fox became a black-cloaked girl with a foxs tail and foxs ears. The statue that was Billie-Joanna glowed with a soft pink light and resumed its natural colors as the stone faded back into flesh. With a loud groan, Billie-Joanna flexed her muscles and grinned. Both Kit and Billie-Joanna ran up to hug her, who knelt at Andrastes lifeless body.

"What about Andraste?" asked Kit and Billie-Joanna simultaneously. It was then that Billie-Joanna realized that her voice was about two octaves lower than it should be.

"What intarnation?! Im Billy-Joe Strongarm again!" roared Billie-Joanna, now restored to being Billy-Joe. "But Andraste, what about her?"

Tarathorn looked up at Kit and Billy-Joe and said tearfully, "Shes dead... I dont know what to do..."

"You can bring her back," whispered Kit. "But you have to believe in yourself to do that. We know you can Tarathorn Suttankankul na'Imladrien-Aiwë."

Lifting up Andrastes head slightly, Tarathorn whispered, "Andraste, please... return... your people need you... it is not time for you to return to your ancestors yet." A faint golden light surrounded Andraste, but she still did not stir.

Billy-Joe said, "Ya can do it. If ya can make me into this, then ya sure as hell can fix her up."

A soft androgynous voice in Tarathorns mind whispered, "Name the products of an Aldol condensation. Remember what comes out of a Reformatsky reaction. Where is the aromatic region of an H-NMR? What is the name of the chemical that I just drew on the board? Tell me all you remember from organic chemistry!" It was then that she noticed that the mark on Andrastes forehead began to glow.

"Benzaldehyde..." she muttered at the sight of the glowing mark. Without thinking, Tarathorn began to recite answers to the question with only brief pauses to catch her breath or to remember some odd, obscure detail. As she continued to chant and concentrate on Andraste, the last bit of her donkey tail and ears disappeared bit by bit. The halo around Andraste brightened while Tarathorn began to convulse wildly and soon the outline around her body began to fade. Even when she grew more and more transparent, she continued to concentrate on Andraste. "Andraste, live!" she breathed as darkness began to overtake her.

Even as she passed out and almost faded from existence, Andrastes eyes opened and the mark from Lord Karolus vanished. She sat up and put her arms around Tarathorn, who lay motionless. "Tarathorn," she said softly. "Youve freed us from Lord Karolus power. I am whole again, and Billie-Joanna, well, is back to being Billy-Joe and Kit is human once more." The exhausted little student sat up, shaking her head and looked disoriented.

During the spectacle, Billy-Joe had been digging around in his pouches and then he growled, "Dagnabit, dem varmints got my whiskey and my tobacky! Dagnabit, now I remember where intarnation I dun came from! I was the captain of the guard at the corral until I dun got drunk one too many times!"

Kit merely made faces at Billy-Joe and laughed, "You and that horrible stuff! No wonder you get arrested everywhere we go. Billy-Joe or Billie-Joanna, youre still the same! I was actually starting to really like Billie-Joanna too..."

Tarathorn added with a grin, "Youre too much like this character in this book I read a long time ago... Frontier Nights by Helen Claudio... youre just like this clueless vigilante named Tindariel Il-Kanan, whose battle cry was 'Frontier justice!... I only meant for you to have a passing resemblance to her, not be a spitting image of her! Heck, you even smoke like a chimney, swear like a sailor, and drink like a sponge!" The only noise that Billy-Joe made was a mixture between a snort, laugh, and groan. Even Andrastes normally serious face burst into a broad smile at Tarathorns comment about Billy-Joe.

Turning to Billy-Joe and Kit, Andraste said, "Kit and Billy-Joe, your lives are still forfeit by the law of the Tuonela for violating the sanctity of the ancestral armory. However, as the Queen of the Tuonela, I can grant exceptions for your deeds in trying to defend me and aiding Tarathorn at her darkest hour. Kit, for your courage in not carrying out the orders Lord Karolus gave you in exchange for your freedom, I will appoint you as the Chief Steward of all of the wilds within the borders of this land. That way, not only will you be free, but your kind

as well.” Then she looked at Billy-Joe and said, ”And you, Billy-Joe, I will appoint you as the High Sheriff over the land so that you may enforce the Frontier Code.” Kit curtsied before Andraste, while Billy-Joe blushed so much that he looked like a ripe tomato. ”And for you, Tarathorn, is there anything I can grant to you?”

Bowing modestly, Tarathorn replied, ”Before tonight, I would have wished to have been part of your court as one of your warriors, but now, I only wish to thank you for what you have already granted me. Without you, I probably would still be tearing out my hair over organic chemistry... or trapped here as a donkey under Lord Karolus service.”

”No, that you found yourself,” said Andraste, beaming. ”With just a gentle nudge from us.”

A loud rumbling from Billy-Joes stomach interrupted any further conversation. ”I dunno bout yall, but Im a-fixin to go eat something! I could eat two hosses now!”

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. Tarathorn looked around for the source of her beeping and realized that it was her watch, which read 5:00am. ”I dont really want to leave, but it is almost dawn where Im from and I have to be in class,” said Tarathorn with a slight tinge of sadness. Her form began to sparkle and fade slightly.

”Ya gotta leave us for... readin ritin and rithmetic?” roared Billy-Joe as he grabbed the young student in a strong hug.

”She doesnt want to be like you, I assume,” giggled Kit, who also hugged Tarathorn. Kit was one of the few people that she felt comfortable referring to as ”small”.

”Actually, I do have something for you, Tarathorn,” said Andraste as she disappeared into the sacred armory. Shortly afterwards, she came out with a simple silver necklace with a rose, lion, and unicorn engraved on a simple silver disc. Presenting it to Tarathorn, she continued, ”This will let you return whenever you wish, be it in fair or foul times.”

Bowing down yet again after putting the necklace on, Tarathorn replied, ”Thank you, Andraste. Im going to miss you guys! You can also visit me!” By now, the student was almost transparent and insubstantial.

The necklace began to glow and even as Kit, Andraste, and Billy-Joe waved ”goodbye” to Tarathorn, the surroundings faded into a jumble of colors. ”Good luck, Tarathorn! Remember, always believe in yourself!” shouted out Andraste. That was the last thing Tarathorn could recall before she passed out in the brightly flashing lights. When she opened her eyes, she found herself under her desk with her organic chemistry book in her arms and an old electronics book as her pillow.

”Uggggh. I dont want to get up yet, its so comfy in here and I like spending quality time with my books,” she mumbled to herself. At the same time, her phone was ringing, but she couldnt quite find the energy to move. Examining herself, she noticed that her clothes looked a bit more beat up than usual and that she had a new few cuts and bruises. ”Odd. I mustve had a really bad night last night and I think I need to be a lot more careful when I do my laundry.”

...Ring... Beep! ”You have reached Tarathorn Suttankankul at (323)343-3789. I can’t reach the phone at the moment, so please leave a message and I’ll get back to you as soon as possible,” droned the answering machine in a very nasal and tinny rendition of her voice.

Alexeis nasal voice promptly began to speak. ”Hi Tara, this is Alexei Pevovarov. Im calling to see if youre doing better. Also theres midterm review session from one of other instructors today. Hope to see you there.”

”Delightful. Maybe Ill be spared those horrible jokes about Michael Jackson and pop culture. Still, its another day to face,” thought Tarathorn. ”But this time, Im gonna kick some serious organic chemistry butt.” For the first time in several weeks, she didnt feel the usual dread whenever she even thought about organic chemistry. ”And I think I need to contact Dr. Ulrich

about that Symposium. I gotta jump on it!”

Logging onto her computer, she quickly went to her e-mail and wrote:

Dr. Ulrich,

I will be taking the opportunity to present at the Symposium. I will go over the materials with you on Friday after my organic chemistry exam.

-Tarathorn

Hastily, she packed for her classes, taking care to take her organic chemistry notebook with her. She whistled a cheerful song as she loaded all of her books into her backpack. With a light, agile step over all the papers on her floor, she ran out the door and onwards to class. Moving around campus felt much easier today, even if she carried the same number of books as usual with her. As she stepped into the chemistry building, one of the lab technicians ran into her. “You’re looking much better than usual today, Tara!” commented the technician, noting her smile and light stepping. “Let me guess... you either dropped the class or you finally figured out whatever was bugging you.”

“Let’s just say, I learned to use my gut instincts as well as my brains,” laughed Tarathorn as she stepped into the lecture hall. “And I had a pretty good study session last night!”

“By the way,” called out the technician. “Pretty necklace there! New boyfriend or something?”

Tarathorn then realized what the technician was talking about when she felt the metal pendant that was hanging on the silver chain she usually wore. The pendant was engraved with a single rose, a lion, and a unicorn stallion. “Odd,” she pondered. “But I’ll figure that out soon, it’s time for me to go kick some organic chemistry arse!”

*...Lady Andraste stood before the crowd of people who had come to witness her coronation. She stood regally in her shining armor on a dais in the town square, her eyes scanning the crowd. Next to her were Kit, who was wearing a well-made green robe with the emblem of the Tuonela and was holding a winged silver crown with a golden stone set in the center. Also next to her was Billy-Joe, who was wearing a suit of ceremonial armor that sparkled in the sun and also held the trinity of the rose, lion, and unicorn on it. He still retained his belt with the huge belt buckle and the two pistols, but in his hands was Andrastes ancestral claymore, which still glowed softly in the bright daylight. An old man from the audience approached the trio and motioned for Andraste to kneel down.*

*“Andraste, Heir of Taranis of the Tuonela, today, you make the transition from Heir to Ruler. Today, you will wear the crown of the Tuonela, symbolizing your authority over the people and the land. Remember, the ruler of the land is one with both the land and the people, so you must rule with a fair and just hand, as have your ancestors,” he said. He took the crown from Kit and gently placed it on Andrastes head. Once the crown was on Andrastes head, the old man motioned for Billy-Joe to stand before Andraste. Billy-Joe gently tapped Andrastes shoulders with the claymore, then presented the sword to Andraste, who reverently took the sword.*

*In a clear and resonant voice, Andraste said, “I take the sword and crown bequeathed to me by my ancestors and the people, as well as the responsibilities rule with justice and wisdom. I will uphold the honor of my kin, for honor is life. I will give my life to defend those within my jurisdiction and fulfill my obligation to do what is right.”*

*At the conclusion of her promise, Andraste knelt once more and bowed her head before the people. Following suit, Kit and Billy-Joe also knelt down before everyone, although a curse formed on Billy-Joes lips when he realized that he wasnt quite as flexible wearing the ceremonial armor. He bit his lip to refrain from swearing, then joined his companions. As soon as all three of them were kneeling respectfully, there was a loud cry among the people. "Long live Lady Andraste NicTaranis! And long live her companions! May her reign be long, peaceful and prosperous!"*