

Orphen's eyelids fluttered and he mentally groaned. He felt like he had been run over by one of those new steam trains, and then dragged up and down the street a few times for good measure. And he was stiff in places he didn't even realize he had muscles to begin with. Shifting slightly on the mattress, Orphen started kicking the layers of blankets off him. Something was definitely wrong; he was warm, really warm, like he was sleeping abut of a coal furnace.

Dragging his eyelids open, he squinted in the dim lightness of the room and let his head flop over on his pillow, coming face to face with Cleao's nose. "What the hell-" he shouted, and bolted upright in bed, ignoring his complaining muscles and accidentally kicking Cleao in the process. Cleao's eyes flew open and she sat up as well, frantically drawing the covers up to her face and screaming at the top of her lungs.

"Orphen, you jerk!" she shrieked at the top of her lungs. Orphen, still trying to remember the events leading up to his current situation, had enough time to throw a puzzled look in Cleao's direction before his field of vision was filled with glowing green eyes and then complete blackness once more.

A very pleased Leki jumped down off the bed and sat demurely next to Orphen, who was still sprawled half on, half off the bed. Cleao untangled herself from the blankets and rushed over to join Leki on the floor. *Oh God, I completely forgot... and Leki blasted him too boot. If he wasn't too badly hurt before, I bet he is now. ...He's gonna kill me.* As Cleao smoothed his hair across his forehead and tried to assess any new damages, Orphen groaned and opened his eyes, and was greeted with a relieved looking Cleao.

His head still swimming, Orphen tried to focus his unsteady vision on Cleao. Wanting nothing more than to start raving, Orphen caught a glimpse of the wolf cub out of the corner of his eye, and decided maybe he should try and soften his tone. Well, just a little. "Forgetting about the most recent episode," Orphen began slowly and quietly, "could someone please explain to me what exactly is going on here and why I look like a used punching bag."

Cleao sat back and wrapped her arms around her knees and asked timidly, "You ...don't remember anything?"

Orphen scratched behind his ear and screwed up his eyebrows toward the ceiling. "Well, I remember a certain someone making life difficult in the rain, playing with some fire, breaking and entering..." Here he faltered and fell deeper in thought.

"It was during the storm. Yesterday," she supplied for him. "You decided to go back out and try and weaken the storm, I think is what you said. It sounded like you went up to the roof, and you were there for some time, but then there was a crash, ... and, ...and we found you outside on the ground. I tried my best, but I just didn't know what to do." Cleao grimaced and swallowed hard.

Orphen ran his fingers through his hair and let his palm rest on the back of his head. "I think I vaguely remember being up on the roof, and then something about an energy backlash. Most of it's just a random jumble though."

"Maybe that should teach you then to stay off of roofs," Cleao sniffed indignantly.

“After that remark, never again are you allowed to make fun of my alleged lack of sensitivity,” Orphen muttered and shakily rose to his feet. Cleao jumped up and grabbed his elbow as he teetered towards the door, blushing under the sudden contact. After helping him get seated in the lone chair in the living area, she surveyed the mess all over the floor. She and Leki had left the door open the night before in the mad dash outside, and water, mud, and bits of debris littered the floor - as well as their clothes. Her gaze shifted from the floor up to the wall to the window, where she gasped with delight. Orphen, who had been staring at his mage fire still alight in the fireplace, looked up at her, confused.

“Look, it’s clear outside! We can finally leave this dingy place !” she all but squealed. Forgetting Orphen’s condition momentarily, she hastily added, “Once you’re feeling up to traveling again that is...”

Orphen smiled softly and shook his hair. “I wish it were that simple. I do remember one thing I learned studying the storm last night. This isn’t any old thunderstorm – this one is a genuine monster.”

Cleao looked puzzled. “You mean was.”

“No, I mean is. Cleao, have you ever seen a tornado before?”

Cleao shrugged and walked over stand in front of his chair. “Yeah, once before. What’s that have to do with anything?”

“Well, you know how those are basically swirling winds, which an empty pocket in the center?” Waiting for her nod, he continued. “Think of this as the same thing, only 300 miles across.” Cleao’s mouth formed a silent ‘o’ and her eyes widened. “We’re sitting smack in the middle of that center now, and if I read the storm correctly, the strongest part hasn’t hit us yet. The part I don’t understand is that these things are usually found by the ocean, and if you haven’t noticed, we’re hundreds of miles from one. I can’t figure out what it’s doing out here, or how it’s gaining strength even.”

Cleao stopped chewing on the side of her lip and threw her arms out wide. “Well, we need to get out of here then! You weren’t awake last night, but trust me, it felt like the wind was about to tear this place down already. I don’t frankly want to sit through that again, or something even worse in this death trap. Teleport us out of here, magic man!”

Orphen looked guilty and dropped his eyes back to the mage fire. “Cleao, I’m – I’m really sorry. I ... can’t.”

She took a step back from him, more alarmed by his admission than what it actually meant. *Orphen never admits that he can’t do something. At best he’ll hedge around it, but never just come out and say it... I don’t like this.*

Oblivious to her reaction, he continued on. “I don’t – whatever happened last night, it’s drained me completely. I’d be surprised if I had enough left in me to heal my bruises, much less teleport this chair across the room. We’re going to have to ride it out, Cleao.”

Cleao sunk to the floor and Leki trotted over to curl up in her lap, nuzzling her hands for attention. Numbly scratching him behind the ears, she turned her round eyes to Orphen.

“If you really don’t think the house is going to stand another onslaught,” Orphen began - Cleao shook her head ‘no’ - “then we need to set up some supports and protections outside. There’s a shed out back, and I’m sure there’s some extra wood and

tools ..we can use to...” Orphen trailed off as his head slumped towards his chest. Waiting for him to finish, Cleao leaned forward, and could just make out the sounds of soft snoring.

Completely exasperated, she picked up Leki and held him up in front of her face. “Trust a man to fall asleep in the middle of a life or death conversation.” Sighing, she set the Wolfen cub down and stood up. Cleao raised a clenched fist and looked down at Leki. “Come on, Leki. Some one has to save our screwed butts.” Leki yipped in agreement, and trotted after her as she made her way outdoors.

Cleao found his shed out back, and in it, a hammer and some random boards and logs. She picked up the hammer and stuck it through the belt loops of the pair of pants she’d been wearing since yesterday. Leki tilted his head and cocked an ear in her direction, wagging his tail slowly.

She reached down and scratched him behind his ears. “I know boy, I sure hope I know what the hell I’m doing.” As she continued to pet the baby Wolfen, Cleao tried to think back to when she was a small girl, when a large storm like this one had threatened Totokonta. Her father had been around at the time, and helped to organize the city’s defenses. Running her fingers lightly over one of the spare boards, she recalled a fuzzy memory of her father nailing large, flat, wooden planks across all the windows. Thinking back to last night and how the windows already seemed weakened, Cleao didn’t relish the idea of random objects flying into the house that way. Picking up a few boards under her arm and a bucket of nails she found in the far corner, Cleao headed off to find her first window.

Wiping the sweat from her forehead, Cleao stood back to look at her handy-work. The shed didn’t have any boards large enough to cover one window on their own, so she had to improvise and use a few boards for one window, haphazardly aligned to cover the most area. Shrugging she looked down at Leki. “Well, it’s not the prettiest thing ever, but since when did I claim to be a carpenter. Thank god the window frames are made of wood and not brick or something. Alright, back for some more wood. Come on, Leki.”

Cleao started out for the shed but stopped and looked back for the Wolfen when she noticed he wasn’t following. “Leki?” Leki’s eyes flashed green, and next to him appeared a small pile of boards. Leki yipped and sat down proudly next to his pile.

Running over, Cleao scooped Leki up and rubbed his belly fur. “You are just too amazing! Thanks, Leki! This’ll make things go so much faster,” she added, looking up. The sky was devoid of any clouds, and sparkled a pale blue. In light of Orphen’s earlier warning, the effect was rather unnerving. Putting the cub down, Cleao grabbed another board and started on the next window.

Orphen's neck was killing him, and when he opened his eyes, he could figure out why. Apparently he had fallen asleep in the chair, and if the indication from his neck muscles meant anything, he'd been here for quite some time.

The room was dark, the mage fire providing a small amount of light and highlighting objects in a faint pinkish glow. He could just pick out the sounds of wind and rain coming from outside. *I wonder where Cleao is. Not used to it being this quiet with her around. Maybe she's sleeping.* Orphen tried to stand up to go search for his delinquent partner, and maybe find some food, when he groaned and leaned back in his chair. Those bruises were doing a number on him, and he wasn't moving anywhere quickly with them.

I did say I had enough to start healing these, might as well make myself useful, Orphen thought, and lifted up a hand to start healing. He grimaced as he slowly ran his hand over the left side of his body. Maybe he had stretched the truth a bit about his current magical capabilities to Cleao earlier. He'd be lucky to even finish this small job before running himself dry again. At least he had had the foresight to make the mage fire spell self regenerating. Sitting alone in the dark was last on the list of his priorities.

Stopping before he caused himself to pass out again, he left his bruises still on the slightly under-healed stage, and Orphen slowly stretched in his chair before venturing to stand up. He was immediately hit by a wave of dizziness, and his stomach made an untimely comment upon its lack of loving care. Making his way over to the kitchen in the dim lighting, he tripped over a random piece of clothing lying on the floor and muttered a string of curses under his breath. Growling, he teetered over to the counter and started searching through the pantries. *I guess the Brat couldn't be bothered to clean up a bit before heading off to bed.*

As he pulled random foodstuffs out and grabbed a knife to start cutting hunks off a block of cheese, Orphen heard a commotion rising over the wind and rain, and looked up just as the cottage door swung open. Cleao and Leki stumbled into the room, accompanied by a blast of wind and sheet of rain. Leki ran for the warmth of the fire as Cleao shut the door and leaned her weight against it, head bent down and dripping onto the floor.

Orphen could only stare, knife still raised in hand. A string of thoughts ran through his head as he watched her completely sodden, breathing in ragged gasps. Dropping the knife back onto the counter he finally managed a coherent sentence and burst out, "What the HELL did you think you were doing?!"

Cleao lifted her head a fraction and smiled softly at him and spoke so quietly he had to lean forward to hear her. "You said – stronger... needed support – windows..." Orphen could only blink at her. *She was out in that...boarding the windows?* His cheeks flushed slightly as he silently kicked himself for chiding her such a short while ago. Cleao's sudden coughing fit brought him back from his mental self-deprecation. He stalked over to her and grabbed her by the shoulders, and she blushed at the unexpected contact. Steering her over towards the mage fire, Orphen pushed her down into the chair and pointed a finger at her. "You. Sit." Shaking his head he changed his mind. "No. Go Change."

She looked up at him and brushed her wet bangs out of her face. Gesturing at the mess on the floor she croaked, "I might feel like crap, but I'm not changing into any of that stuff."

Orphen snarled and clenched his fists, evoking a startled yip from Leki. “If you don’t get out of those wet clothes on your own, I swear I’ll rip them off you.”

Cleao blushed and straightened in the chair, bringing up a hand to cover the clasp of her cloak.

He shifted his feet uncomfortably and mumbled, “You, you know what I mean.” Orphen cleared his throat and tried to regain some sort of outward composure after his unfortunate outburst. “Go wrap yourself in a blanket then or something. Remember, if you get sick, I can’t do anything to help you, there’s no one else around, and we can’t get anywhere else fast enough either.” Cleao just sighed and slowly stood up, making her way to the door to the bedroom. Satisfied that for once his orders were going to be obeyed without an argument, he headed back towards the kitchen to continue preparing the meal.

Cleao emerged from the back room just as Orphen was finishing up the plates, wrapped in layers of blankets, one hand clutching them closed in the front, and the other peeking out from the folds at her hips. She sunk to the floor in front of the fire, and Leki butted his head against her leg, mewling until reached her free hand around to scratch his ears. Orphen placed her plate down beside her, a small bowl of canned meat for Leki, and settled himself down next to the mage fire opposite her.

His fork paused halfway between his mouth he looked down at the glaring Wolfen pup. “What, what’s with you?” Leki’s ears drooped and he whined, then gave a disgusted look at the bowl in front of him. The ‘food’ was still holding the can shape, complete with tiny ribs and indentions. “Look pooch, it’s not gourmet, but it’s the only thing here that resembles protein. If you don’t like it, I can go open up one of those canned bread things for you instead.” In answer, Leki stuck his face into the cylindrical meat product.

“They make such a thing as canned BREAD?” Cleao quietly asked, appalled, her first show of life since coming in from outside. Orphen stuck his fork into his mouth and spoke around his chewed food. “Yeah, they do. ‘Course, I dunno why anyone in their right mind would buy it. Looks, and tastes like, wet cardboard.”

Cleao turned back towards the magefire and her eyes began to glaze over again. “That’s...repulsive.” Orphen grunted his acknowledgement and went back to his food, while Cleao slowly picked away at hers.

Pushing his empty plate away from him, Orphen stretched and eyed Cleao from the corner of his vision. She had stopped eating and had begun staring quietly into fire, her face lacking any thought or emotion. Turning his head to get a better look, he narrowed his eyes and studied her more closely. *This isn’t like her at all. Maybe she got hit in the head by a flying branch and turned into demure little Lady or something.*

Orphen contemplated asking her about any suspicious head bruises when he noticed the blanket covering her upper body started to slip, exposing her shoulder on its way down. His lips involuntarily parted as his eyes became glued to the soft glow of the fire on her bare skin. He must have made some small sound, because Cleao started and hastily grabbed for the blanket edge, pulling it up tight around her neck. She blushed profusely and turned to glare at him. “You’re as bad as Majic, you pervert.”

Orphen stood up and shrugged. “What, it’s like a carriage wreck; I couldn’t look away.” He bent down and picked up his plate. “Shut up and finish your food.” Cleao huffed unhappily and went back to work on her dish, grumbling obscenities under her

breath. Despite having wrinkled his nose at the preserved meat product, Leki had finished off the entire bowl and was now curled up into a tight ball, sleeping in front of the fire. Orphen picked up Leki's bowl as well and took them back to the kitchen, and as he washed them he watched Cleao attack her food. We winced as he saw her repeatedly stab a piece of carrot with her fork, glad she didn't have sharp objects pointed at him this time. *Looks like she's feeling better at least. ... I'm never cooking with carrots again.*

He finished up and walked back to stand in front of the fire, hooking his thumbs into his pockets. Cleao stood up as well, her dinner finished and forgotten. "Look you, I'm—" she began, as the house shook to its foundations, followed by a deafening sound of crashing and splintering. Cleao stood frozen in place, her mouth still open to say her next word. Orphen quickly surveyed the ceiling, and let out a held breath when he didn't feel a draft or rain. Whatever fell must have thankfully missed the cottage.

Looking over towards Cleao, Orphen grimaced. She was visibly shaking and was staring at the floor. Her knuckles were bone white and gripped tightly about her blankets. "We're...we're going to die here, aren't we?" she asked in a small, shaky voice. Orphen grit his teeth together and walked over to her, placing a hand on her head. He waited for her to look up at him. "No, we're not going to die here. We have your excellent protections you put up this afternoon, remember? Besides, you know Leki would stop any tree from falling on top of the house. He wouldn't let anything happen to you." Cleao glanced down at the ball of blue fur, and then back up at Orphen, tears beginning to fill her eyes.

"You half-brained magician, Leki slept threw that whole thing. He's still sleeping, in fact." Her voice broke. "Dammit, why can't you even lie well."

Orphen had the grace to look a little sheepish and dropped his hand from her head. "Well, that's 'cause he knew it wasn't ...going to do...anything and , ...anyway," he finished lamely, and averted his gaze to the far wall. A small sob escaped her, and Orphen looked back down at her and watched a tear slowly trickle down her cheek. Hesitating, he chewed the corner of his lip. He hadn't seen her looking this sad, defeated, or as his mind put it bluntly, this much like crap at any point he could remember. Orphen closed the distance between them and slowly brought his arms up, pausing once before letting them rest lightly on her shoulders. Waiting for her at any moment to either pull away or clock him one, he slowly pulled her towards him, until she rested her head against him and bawled into his chest. He stood stiffly for a second, but as she continued to cry into him, he slowly let one hand cradle the back of her head, and the other grip her across her back.

Man, what the hell am I doing? She's right; I am as bad as Majic. That boy's a bad influence I say. Oh well, no use bitching about it at this point, as she would say. As she continued to cry against him, he let his hand slowly massage her scalp and he rested his cheek lightly against her hair. Her scent wafted up at him, a mix of sweat from the day, rain, and a sort of 'Cleao muskiness' which while he couldn't put into words, seemed to do a number on his body anyway. Feeling a hot blush rising up his face, he tried to shift his lower body a little away from her, and hoped she was too busy crying to notice anything going on. *Dammit, now what's wrong with me? Oh crap, down boy.*

Cleao felt him shift awkwardly beside her, and she braced herself with a hand on his chest. She wouldn't admit it to him any day, but at this point she wasn't exactly crying anymore and had been faking it for a little while, if only so she wouldn't have to

move away quite yet. She hadn't planned on him however to start losing his balance and she brought her face up to see if there was anything wrong with him. Her lips brushed against his softly, and she squeaked, not realizing he had been so close.

She held her breath and stared up at him, waiting for him either to walk away or leave her with another sparkling jewel of insensitive Orphen flavored wit. A deep flush colored his cheeks and as shifted a bit to regain her balance, her hips brushed up against his and she felt her face heat to match his. *Well, this explained his behavior just now*, she thought.

Orphen inwardly cringed as she looked up at him, her eyes wide and lips slightly parted, and moved up against hard organ. He braced himself for what he was sure to follow, a scathing tongue lashing exploring new, uncharted realms of spoken language. And not that he didn't deserve it either. *She's my partner, for God's sake. My traveling companion, and a noisy, bratty, whiny, spoiled, stubborn, pig-headed one at that. And that's all, right? Right?* A tiny voice in the back of his head supplied a missing adjective: *Pretty. Well, yeah, I guess she's pretty, if you're into that sort of thing. And besides, isn't one of the prerequisites for being a rich, snotty girl being pretty? I'm sure I read that somewhere.*

Cleao continued to look up at him, the tears finally having dried up and only leaving small streaks down the side of her face. Orphen mentally shook himself. *Great, now she doesn't even have to say a word and she's got me arguing with myself! Come on, get a grip old man.* He had to admit though, with the way the mage fire cast tiny dancing lights into her blue eyes, she did look rather pretty despite being a complete mess otherwise. *Well, no backing down now, and no one's ever gotten away with saying I've backed down from a challenge.* Orphen swallowed hard and locked his gaze on her lips, safely away from her eyes. *Man, how does Majic do this? I gotta figure out how to get some pointers...Oh hell, I'm screwed anyway. Might as well.*

He brought his lips back down to meet hers, and paused when he felt her stiffen. *Aw, shit...* he thought and was about to think of some form of apology when she melted into him and pushed up against him. The firmness of her mouth and the way her body fit up against his both surprised and excited him. Whole-heartedly chucking caution out the nearest window, Orphen ran his along the inside of her lips and across her teeth, asking permission to enter. She granted it, and he felt more than heard her moan as he kissed her deeper. His entire body ached now and the hard bulge in his pants demanded some form of release.

His mind was immediately snapped away from his pants when she did...*something* with her tongue that made him involuntarily groan with pleasure and press her even tighter against him. Orphen snarled at the way the blankets wrapped around her bunched up between them, and decided it was time to liberate her skin from their scratchy surfaces.

Tilting her head backwards with his hand, he began tracing the curves of her face and neck with his lips and tongue, making a trail of tiny kisses towards the offensive blankets. Her eyes closed and a low sigh escaped her lips as he lingered for a moment on the nape of her neck.

Just as he was beginning to peel away the corner of a blanket from her shoulder, a crash of thunder shook the cottage, and Leki jumped up from sleep, yowling running around them in circles. *Well, that certainly ruined the mood.* Orphen thought sourly at

the terrified Wolfen cub. The pup calmed down some and wrapped himself around Cleao's feet, rubbing his head against her legs.

Orphen took a step back, and with a little reluctance, dropped his arms to his sides. He watched Cleao from under his brow readjust her wrappings and fidget a little in place. When he cleared his throat, she looked up expectantly at him, but then quickly began studying the floor boards again. "Look, Leki will protect you. See?" He paused and began to count the number of nail heads in the mantle piece. "We, uh, we should probably try and get some sleep. Probably have a lot to do tomorrow," he began, a little lamely. Cleao nodded once and continued to stare at the floor.

Mentally kicking himself again, he sighed and took his shirt off, holding it up in front of her face. "Here," he said when she finally looked up at him, confusion clouding her eyes. "You can sleep in this. It's at least mostly clean, unlike the rest of the stuff on the floor."

A small nod was her only sign of consent, and she gingerly took the offered shirt and headed for the bedroom, Leki trailing behind her. Orphen groaned and leaned against the wall once they had left the room, rubbing his face with his hands. After what he deemed a proper amount of waiting, he headed for the bedroom as well, preparing himself for what he was certain to be a long and awkward night.