

## Attacked in the Night

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The tower looms out of the darkness and mist. It won't be long, now. The creature's smooth, flowing lines are silhouetted against a crescent moon as it swoops silently towards its target. Its wings flap powerfully, the muscles that drive them rippling beneath a feathery hide. Past its wings, the feathers turn to tawny fur, and its muscular, mammalian toes and tufted tail streak through the air, along for the ride. The creature's talons glint in the moonlight. Its alert eyes narrow as it adjusts its course ever-so-subtly, his avian head and sharp beak slicing silently through the night.

Isn't he...majestic? A creature purpose-built for murder. If not with its talons, then with its beak. If not with its beak, then a powerful swat from its tail would render all but the most stalwart person unconscious.

And its target is anything but stalwart.

Behold, through the window, the sleeping visage of Ord, the mage. It *is* a pity: the old fool is well-wizened, yet he lacks wisdom. Surely only a fool would cast off a talented pupil just to take on a new apprentice! Look at him: his chest rises and falls without a care in the world, without a glimmer of the danger he's in.

The tower is large now, and moving fast! The gryphon heaves on his wings, brings his back legs forward, and kicks out hard as he swoops into the window. The sound of breaking glass shatters the silence, but before the old man can react, the gryphon is on him. His talons rake hard into the mage's head, drawing ugly, bleeding gashes.

The man yells and instinctively rolls out of bed. The space is cramped; the creature, powerful though he is, struggles to turn around. By the time he finally does, the man has disappeared. The gryphon sniffs the air, his eyes narrowed suspiciously. Suddenly his pupils constrict, and he lets out a deafening roar of satisfaction: he's caught the old man's scent.

Kicking like a horse behind him, he easily knocks a hole in the stone and mortar wall, whirls, and charges into the laboratory. Glassware full of multicolored liquids shatters, sending broken glass flying. Preserved specimens explode from their formaldehyde-filled jars and splat noisily onto the brick floor. The gryphon steps on them, completely unfazed by the bits of glass.

And why shouldn't he be unfazed? He is, of course, impervious to injury. Physical attacks bounce off. Magic attacks—

There's a blinding flash, and a firebolt explodes, enveloping the gryphon. He blinks and then whirls to face his attacker, letting out a roar of disapproval.

And *there* is the old man, there in the doorway. His hands still glow slightly from having cast the fireball. He's looking down at the ground as if he misplaced something. An unusual look comes over the gryphon, and then he opens his mouth. The man's eyebrows rise, and he bends down to pick something up. An equally powerful fireball shoots over his head, through the doorway, and explodes against the wall on the other side of the spiral staircase.

"Master Ord! What the devil is going on?!" cries a voice.

Enter Ord's new apprentice, Ary. What she lacks in power, she makes up for in adolescent pluckiness. And wits. And enthusiasm.

"I found my amulet," Ord says in a craggy, old voice as he holds something up. "It was here all along. I must've dropped it."

"Master Ord...you're bleeding!" Ary says.

At a minimum, one can say that Ary has a firm grasp on the obvious.

"Wha? Oh, that. Mosquitoes must have gotten in again. I'll cook up a potion in the morning to drive them out."

...Which is more than can be said for Ord.

He pats her on the head. "We must go back to bed, young apprentice," he says. "Big day tomorrow!"

"But, there was breaking glass, and a fireball, and—"

A shriek from the gryphon interrupts her as the gryphon swoops forward, talons extended and heading straight for Ord's eye sockets.

"Master Ord!" Ary cries, tackling him and knocking them both to the ground as the gryphon sails over the top of them. "What *is* that thing?!"

"Huh? Oh, that." Ord shrugs. "Must be some kind of construct. Gryphons don't really exist, you know."

"It's a *gryphon*?!" Ary cries. "But how did it get here? And why does it—"

They both duck as the gryphon sails overhead once more.

"—keep attacking you?"

"I wonder if I forgot to feed it yesterday," Ord murmurs.

"Augh!" Ary yelps.

The gryphon has landed and is charging headlong towards them both, its sharp beak leveled at their necks and his whole body rippling as powerful haunches tense, compress, and unleash their stored energy in leaps and bounds. Any moment now...

It slams into the wall and grunts, then looks around and lets out a roar of frustration.

The mage and his apprentice have vanished.

"Master Ord, *focus*!" Ary urges, grasping her mentor by the shoulders and shaking him.

"Wha? Oh! Ary, what are you doing here? It's not appropriate for an apprentice to be in her master's bedchambers!"

"Master, we're not in your bedchambers; we're under attack by a gryphon! Think, Master! What should we do?!"

Suffering from a brief moment of lucidity, the tottering old fool actually looks concerned.

"I think..." he says slowly as a roar echoes throughout the tower, followed by the sound of breaking glass and splintering wood.

"Master, your research!" Ary urges. "*Our* research!"

"I think..."

A bookcase crashes through the ceiling and explodes into a million pieces at their feet.

"I think we'd better get out of here!" Ord says abruptly, grabbing Ary, holding up his robed arm, and muttering something under his breath.

The gryphon's eyes light up as it sees its quarry. It hops up to the edge of the hole it created in the floor a level above and then swoops down, letting out a screech of triumph.

It slams into masonry, picks itself up, and kicks the wall—as if it's the wall's fault the mages disappeared.

"So, it's a construct, you say?" Ord asks, cocking his head at Ary. "How do you know?"

"*You* said it was a construct, Master. How do we get rid of it?"

"Well, we *could* summon a meteor..." Ord suggests.

"*Without* killing ourselves, too, or destroying all of our work?"

"Oh! Well, you should be more specific, lad."

"Lass."

"Eh? Oh, whatever. If it *is* a construct, then us shooting magic at it won't work so well."

"Then what can we do?"

"Do—?"

A giant hole appears in the wall three feet from the mages.

“—Well, I’d suggest teleporting again.”

There’s a flash of light, and the mages appear three floors above in the middle of a well-wrecked lab. Shredded parchment flies through the air like blizzard-driven snow, and various chemicals have painted the floor in a rainbow of bright colors and periodically go off with miniature explosions or puffs of smoke as they touch each other or reanimate a once-dead and well-preserved specimen.

“Why, that’s most fascinating!” Ord says, his eyes lighting up as he observes a frog whose body has been completely dissected reach out with its tongue, snatch a fly, and swallow it, the bulge of the fly clearly visible as it moves through the frog’s digestive tract. “Ary, bring me my notebook!”

“I can’t, Master,” Ary says dejectedly.

“What? Why not?”

Ary holds up a few pieces of singed paper.

“Hmm. I’m going to have to tell the housekeeper to go easy on the spring cleaning,” Ord says, nonplussed.

“Master? What about the gryphon?” Ary asks urgently.

“Oh! Right. We’ll have to find its magic port. All constructs have one.”

“Its what?”

“Are you deaf, lad?”

“Lass.”

“Whatever. I said, ‘its magic port.’ It’s like the mouth of a flask, where you pour the magic in. Find the port, drain the magic, and the construct *should*—”

A deafening roar interrupts the mages as the gryphon sails up through the hole in the floor and lands right in front of them. Wasting no time this time, it lunges forward and narrowly misses Ary’s neck, slashing her arm instead. Ary cries out in pain, snarls, and offhandedly casts a stone missile spell. Rocks from pebble-sized up to fist-sized begin pelting the gryphon mercilessly, yet it doesn’t even flinch. Its tail twitches with feline mischief as it gets ready to pounce.

But before it can, a quizzical look comes over its face, and its back suddenly arches as if caught in a convulsion. It stretches out its neck, revealing its underside: a mix of red feathers and tawny fur with a little bulge for a sheath and a couple of cantaloupe-sized bulges side-by-side below it. Its throat seems to ripple, and then abruptly it opens its mouth.

Ary opens her mouth to yell. “Oh, sh—”

A torrent of rocks from pebble-sized to fist-sized comes pouring out of the creature’s mouth, aimed at the wall where the mages were standing only a split-second before. The volley chips away at the stone, reducing it to rubble. The gryphon grimaces but looks relieved. As the dust clears, he sucks in a breath, slightly lifting his orange-sized balls as his massive, feathery chest expands and lets out another irritated screech, the muscles rippling and bulging as they forcibly exhale beneath a sea of crimson feathers.

“So, *where* is the magic port?” Ary asks urgently.

“It’s a secret!” Ord says conspiratorially.

“Master, he’s *destroying* your life’s work! Now is not the time for silly secrets!” Ary protests.

“Now, now...no reason to say ‘he’. Maybe it’s a girl gryphon? Did you think of that? Females are getting more and more empowered these days, you know. I mean, of *all* people, Ary...” Ord says, reproachfully shaking his head.

“Master, he has a sheath. And balls. And a distinct absence of cleavage,” Ary replies flatly.

“But maybe he *identifies* as female, hmm?” Ord persists.

Ary sighs. “Okay, he, she, they, whatever, Master. *It* has male genitalia, so I’m going to call it—”

“That’s terribly insensitive, Ary,” Ord says, frowning. “You know, you remind me a bit of my former pupil. He was a good mage but an *awful* male chauvinist. I wonder how he’s getting on...”

“Master, the secret! Where is the magic port?!”

“I *told* you it’s a secret!” Ord replies. “How should I know?”

Ary hesitates. “What do you mean? Do you mean it’s a secret that even *you* don’t know?!”

“There’s a girl!” Ord says, patting Ary on the forehead. “Now you’re getting it!”

The wall behind them erupts into rubble, and they turn just in time to see the gryphon’s tail hurtling through the air like a whip.

“Waugh!” Ary yelps as she’s knocked off her feet and thrown hard against the wall.

“What did I tell you about practicing your levitation spell?” Ord asks airily as he floats cross-legged in the air just above where he had been standing a second ago.

He takes a sip of tea from a floating teacup, puts it down on a floating saucer, and then both vanish.

Ary groans and climbs quickly back to her feet, her hands already glowing whitish-blue with a new spell.

“Bad idea,” Ord says from his floating seat.

The glow on Ary’s hands doesn’t lessen.

“I hope you brought your rubber suit,” Ord says, and then vanishes.

Lightning shoots out of Ary’s fingers, surrounding the gryphon and striking it over and over. The gryphon rears up, his bowling-ball-sized testes swinging pendulously as he bats at the lightning bolts he can see with both talons, as if shooing away an annoying insect.

With the brief electrical storm over, the gryphon seems to grin as it advances once more on Ary. A talon flashes out, pinning her to the wall.

*Think of another place; think of another place; think of another place!* Ary wills herself. *Oh, shit, why didn’t I study teleportation better?!*

The gryphon hesitates, blinking its eyes and shriveling its nose. Ary peeks out from between squeezed-closed eyes and sees his whole body shuddering, as if about to—

The gryphon sneezes, and lightning shoots out of its nose, aimed right at its talon.

Ary yelps as a piece of wood whacks her on the head.

“How many times have I told you that you need to practice teleportation?” Ord chides her.

From their new vantage point, they see the gryphon finish his lightning-sneezing-fit and then rear back with its other talon to impale his captive. He abruptly shrieks irritably and whirls around, looking for the mages. As it turns towards them and gets airborne, it sucks its apple-sized balls up against its sheath—for aerodynamics, Ary supposes—as its rippling wing muscles take it to the air.

“Time to go!”

Ary blinks, and now they’re in the basement.

“It ought to take him a while to find us down here,” Ord mutters as he goes rummaging through ancient wooden crates and old barrels.

“What are you looking for?” Ary asks.

“What else would I be looking for in a cellar?” Ord asks. “A drink, of course!”

“But...the gryphon?” Ary asks weakly.

"Eh, things like this have a way of sorting themselves out," Ord replies as he pops the cork out of a wine bottle and upends it in his mouth.

"So, this, um, magic port," Ary persists. "If we *could* find it, what would we do with it?"

"Oh, well, that's the easy part," Ord replies. "You just drain the magic out."

"But *how*?"

"Much like draining the wine out of this bottle," Ord replies, sticking his tongue up into the neck of the bottle as far as it will go and lapping at the few remaining drops. "Oh, *my*, this was a good year!"

Ary shakes her head in disbelief. "I have to suck it out?" she asks.

"No, of course not!" Ord scoffs absent-mindedly. "You just put a magic flask near it, and the magic will drain out on its own. The challenge, of course, is to keep the flask close enough to draw the magic."

"Do we *have* a magic flask?" Ary asks, exasperated.

Ord tosses the now-empty wine bottle at her. She ducks but catches it in her hands.

"This is a wine bottle," she says.

Again, firm grasp on the obvious.

"And also, a magic flask. You just have to say the incantation."

"Which is...?"

"O mighty bottle, so small yet so stout, I grant thee the power to suck magic out."

Ary is not impressed, but the bottle *does* glow faintly orange for a split-second.

"You'll need this," Ord says, tossing something else.

Ary catches it and rolls her eyes. It's the cork.

"So, uh, I guess I'm gonna go find the magic port," Ary says uncertainly, glancing at Ord, who has just popped open another bottle. "What are you going to do?"

"Oh, I'll just empty you some more magic flasks," Ord says helpfully.

"Ugh." Ary rolls her eyes. "Any *other* words of wisdom?"

"Yes. Don't die."

Ary is beginning to wonder whether today is eye-workout day and raises her eyebrows instead. "Anything else?"

"Yes, actually. If you find the magic tank, the port will probably be nearby."

Ary deflates. "Magic tank?! *What* magic tank?"

"Oh, you'll notice it if you look carefully," Ord replies. "It's part of the creature's defense against magic. Anytime a magical attack is made against the creature, the tank stores the magic until the creature can expel it. That explains the gravel hairball, the lightning sneezes, and so forth: the creature is just getting rid of the excess magic. But between the time the magic hits him and the time he disperses it, it has to go somewhere. Look for something that changes."

"Like what?"

"Something that changes color, something that grows and shrinks, something that rises up and down, something that gets denser and thinner... Watch carefully, and you'll see it; it's the one major weakness of a construct: no matter how much the creator tries to conceal it, the magic tank will *always* be visible, and the magic port will *always* be close-by."

Love him or hate him—and sometimes both—Ary has to admit that when Ord is lucid, he *really* knows his stuff.

Armed with her wine—er, magic—bottle, its cork, and a vague idea of what to look for, Ary climbs up the steps, cautiously watching for the gryphon as she ascends the in some places crumbling staircase.

She hears him long before she sees him. She creeps up the last few stairs and peers into the doorway of the kitchen. The gryphon seems oddly preoccupied with a pot, batting it back and forth between its talons while its tail twitches curiously.

*Something that changes when there's magic...geez, Ord, what am I supposed to do with that? Ary grumbles to herself. Okay, think: if it has to change to hold magic, then holding more magic probably makes it change more, right?*

Ary nods to herself and then hesitates. *But that means it also unleashes that much more magic...right at me...* She cringes and takes a few cautious steps back down the stairs before tiptoeing onto the floor below.

Lights flash dimly as she enchants herself with every fire-protection spell she knows. Then she puts her invisibility spell on the magic equivalent of speed-dial and creeps back up the stairs.

The gryphon's attention is still focused on rolling the pot around, and by the look of his tail, he's even *more* preoccupied now than he was before. Ary ducks behind the doorway and focuses on the biggest fireball she can muster. A light appears in her palms, getting bigger, brighter, and hotter, from red to orange to yellow to blue to white.

*I sure hope this works...*

She steps around from behind the doorway, unleashes the white-hot firebolt, immediately casts her invisibility spell, and hides, peeking out just enough to see what happens.

The gryphon turns at just the last minute as the searing ball of fire slams into him. He gets knocked back a few feet, sending his pot crashing into other hanging cookware and knocking them all onto the ground in a deafening cacophony. Ary cringes but determinedly keeps her eyes peeled, looking for changes.

The brilliant white light going out has made it hard to see, but *something* is different about the gryphon. In the dim light, Ary can't see anything physically different about him, but it's the way he *moves* that gives it away. It's as if his back legs are paralyzed; he practically drags himself along by his talons, with great effort, it seems. Ary cocks her head curiously.

But there's no time to contemplate it.

Almost immediately, there's a new glow in the room. Ary can't quite tell where it's coming from, but it's as if the creature stood on an upward-pointing light; his underside begins to glow red, then orange, then yellow, then blue.

Ary's eyes widen.

Abruptly, a blinding white light appears underneath the creature. Ary barely ducks out of the way as a white sphere of plasma shoots past her, melts a hole in the far wall of the tower, and continues hurtling across the sky like a meteor.

THAT'S IT!

Ary gasps. *Ord?*

YES.

*How...are you doing that?*

TELEPATHY, BUT THAT'S NOT IMPORTANT. HIS DICK!

*Yes, I told you he had a sheath...*

NO, HIS DICK! THAT'S THE PORT!

*It is? How do you know?*

TO DISCHARGE THAT MUCH MAGIC, HE *HAD* TO HAVE SENT IT RIGHT OUT THE PORT ITSELF!

*Okay, great! So...how do I drain it?*

MIGHT I SUGGEST FELLATIO?

*What?!*

A HAND JOB?

*Master!*

HMM?

There's a pregnant pause in the conversation as master and apprentice try to figure out what to do.

YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO GET HIS MEMBER EXPOSED ONE WAY OR ANOTHER. I DOUBT THAT HE WOULD RESPOND TO ANY KIND OF EROTIC STIMULATION, SO YOU'RE PROBABLY JUST GOING TO HAVE TO GO DRAG IT OUT OF HIM, AS IT WERE.

*What?!*

LURE HIM DOWN TO THE MENAGERIE. I'LL MEET YOU THERE.

A light goes on in Ary's mind. *Of course, the menagerie is perfect!*

YES, I KNOW.

*I wasn't talking to—* Ary sighs.

"Hey, you big lug!" she calls, blasting a minor fireball at the gryphon. "Come get me!"

The gryphon whips around far faster than she expected, and she scurries down the stairs.

TOO SLOW. I'LL HELP.

There's a series of flashes, and Ary feels nauseous. One second, she's on the tenth floor, then on the eighth, then the fourth, then the sixth, then the fifth, then the ninth, each time staring at the dizzying, empty space in the center of the tower and the seemingly endless fall to the ground below, all from different heights. Frustrated, the gryphon follows along, like a giant cat chasing an intermittent laser pointer. At last, the transitions stop, and Ary sways a little, reeling from vertigo and motion sickness.

COME ON, HURRY UP, UNLESS YOU WANT TO BE A MIDNIGHT SNACK!

Ary comes to and charges down a hallway. The gryphon sees the movement and swoops down after her. She races towards a large, open area surrounded by cages.

"To the left!" Ord yells, and Ary dives to her left.

The gryphon, carried by his momentum, slams his head through the bars of one of the menagerie enclosures, and Ord quickly slides another bar in place, trapping him there. The gryphon struggles and kicks, furiously trying to get free and letting out a deafening assortment of frustrated and angry noises.

"Come over here. Time to get your hands dirty," he says.

Ary hesitates but does as told, standing on the other side of the bars and watching his deadly talons trying to reach through and cut her to ribbons.

"Now, we just take this chain here, wrap it around there, and..." Ord trails off, talking to himself as he secures a thick chain around the creature's back and passes it through the bars, attaching it to a large winch mounted to the floor.

"Get cranking," he says.

"Why don't we just use magic?" Ary asks.

"Do you *want* him to destroy the whole menagerie, too?" Ord retorts.

Ary goes to the crank and begins cranking, tightening the chain and slowly squishing the gryphon against the bars.

“Just a little more...ah, yes! Stop,” Ord says, then beckons for Ary to come over. “It’s quite safe—well, insofar as a magic, non-existent gryphon can be safe,” he says. “Now, just reach in there, and pull out his dong.”

Ary stares. “Have you lost your mind—again?” she asks.

“I’ve got the chain to hold it in place once you get it out, but this takes a team effort!” Ord replies.

“But I don’t *want* to grab his—”

“You *do* want him to go away, don’t you? Go on, reach down in there, give it a big hug, and pull it out.

Ary grimaces, reconsiders for the hundredth time whether she really wants to be a mage apprentice, and then pushes her hand against the lightly closed flaps of the gryphon’s sheath. It’s incredibly hot inside, and damp, and it reeks of gaminess. It’s big enough that she can reach both arms inside, though it’s a snug fit. She feels the creature’s penis and shudders in distaste. It’s about two feet in diameter and gently tapered. She reaches in as far as she can without sticking her head into the sheath, hugs the large member to her chest, and pulls it out. Ord quickly wraps a chain tightly around it.

“Is that all?” he asks, seemingly disappointed.

Ary stares at him in disbelief. “I—”

“Surely there must be more to it,” Ord says, giving Ary a significant look.

She rolls her eyes, grasps the penis just below the chain, and heaves backwards.

“Ahh, now *that’s* more like it!” Ord says, nodding. He shakes his head and chuckles. “He did a good job on it, I must say.”

Ary looks around. “Who?”

“Nance, my last apprentice.”

“How do you know it was him?”

“The size of the dick—and the color.”

“Really?”

“Think about it: the dick serves absolutely no purpose on a creature that cannot reproduce and has no need to relieve itself. It takes flesh and blood and magic to hold it together, so why make it big, boldly blue, and scintillating with iridescence unless you have a bad case of penis envy? Sheesh, it practically *glows*! And, I tell you, *nobody* had a bigger case of penis envy than Nance.”

Hmph. It is a *beautiful* penis, envy or not! It looks as though it should be carved out of marble, that penis, its color somewhere between cobalt and cerulean, with tiny flecks of lighter, almost metallic glints of magic mixed into it. Look at how the light hits it! That opalescent sheen, the way even the moonlight makes its colors sparkle vividly, and the way the magic flows through it: you can practically see the magic’s influence in how muscular, how solid and stout, and yet how graceful it flows from his sheath, ending in a tapered, canine-like glans—well, if canines were as endowed as elephants, that is. More conjurers should spend time making the details really pop like that!

...

So, the old man knows who created the gryphon. A fine bunch of good it will do him! What does he think he’s going to do? Ary may be young and impressionable, but even she won’t degrade herself by draining the gryphon of his—hey, wait!

Ary takes the empty wine bottle from her robe, takes a deep breath, and jams it into the gryphon’s urethra. The gryphon screeches and glowers at her, but the chain around his cock has ensured that he can’t pull it free.

Almost instantly, the bottle glows light blue.

“Next one,” Ord says, making a dismissive motion of his hand.



Ary pulls the bottle out, jams its cork in it, and puts it down.

"Now what?"

"Do it again," Ord replies, gesturing to a long line of empty wine bottles.

Ary gasps. "Did you drink—?"

"Treachery makes me thirsty," Ord says lightly as he downs yet another bottle.

Over and over, Ary jams a bottle into the gryphon's prick, waits a second or two, and then pulls it back out and corks it.

"How do we know when we're done?" she asks exasperatedly after corking the hundredth bottle.

"Oh, you'll *know*," Ord says, a faint smile on his lips.

Ary frowns as she starts to insert the next bottle. She's certain that something seems...off. The bright, bold color of the gryphon's dick seems to have lessened. It's still the same color, only muted, as if viewed in shadow.

She shrugs and inserts the bottle anyway. What does it matter? She's trying to kill this thing anyway, isn't she?

Something catches her attention out of the corner of her eye as the bottle begins to fill. Sure enough, she can see the gryphon's penis losing its color. A squawk of protest from him startles her. She looks up to see an uncomfortable look come over his face. The faint tinkling sound of magic passing through a narrow urethra is replaced by the slightly louder tinkling sound of blood passing through a narrow urethra, and the gryphon practically grits his teeth and tries to pull his dick back away from the bloodthirsty bottle.

"That's about it," Ord says, smiling as he manifests a wooden bench and sits on it. "Get a cork in that, and then you can do the honors."

Ary corks the bottle and looks at him curiously. "The honors?"

"You see, as a construct, his body is flesh and bone, but nobody was meant to exist in that particular...er...arrangement. It took magic—over 100 bottles of it, in fact—to keep him...organized. Now that all of that magical rigging and support structure is gone, his body is just waiting for a little push, the slightest imbalance to bring it all tumbling down."

The bastard...he knew all along!

"Suffice to say, the result is rather spectacular, though I might advise a protection from rain spell before you start," he chuckles.

The poor gryphon has no idea what is about to happen. Yet he feels a little differently now. He feels the bite of the chain in his back and around his prick. Unlike before, where it was just the principle of him being immobilized to which he objected, now his struggling is more subdued as each attempt to pull himself free results in substantial pain. Ary is pretty sure she even hears him yelp at one point.

"How much imbalance do I need to create?" she asks.

Ord shrugs. "As much or as little as you want. Even a faint poke would be enough to set things in motion."

Ary purses her lips, thinking to hit him with a sledgehammer. But as she glances at his increasingly graying penis, she hesitates, sighs, then grabs a piece of parchment, rolls it up, and swats the gryphon on the tip of the dick.

"Bad gryphon!" she scolds him.

The gryphon stops struggling and looks at her, dumbfounded for a moment before unleashing a roar of indignation. Ary glances at Ord, who chuckles and slaps his knee.

"I reckon it might take a bit if that's the worst you're gonna do to him," he says.

"Should I smack him harder?" Ary asks.

Ord shrugs again. "Only if you're in a hurry; the transformation has already begun."

Ary frowns. "It has?"

Ord gestures to the tip of the gryphon's dick, which has turned a sickly greenish-black.

The gryphon's face contorts into what looks like a distasteful grimace as the awful, *ugly* color begins to spread, very slowly, back towards his balls, which seem to be deflating before her eyes, slowly shrinking and growing increasingly wrinkly while lumps appear under his skin, move around, and then disappear. The gryphon lets out a frantic squawk as it struggles to get free, not only from its prison, but from its very skin!

"I could go for some cracklins," Ord says wistfully.

A plate of fried pork skins appears in the air beside him and floats within easy reach of his hand. He grabs a handful and jams them into his mouth, his eyes glinting with amusement and intrigue.

A brilliant flash momentarily blinds the mages. Before their eyes even adjust, they hear a blood-curdling shriek. The menagerie comes back into focus, and every one of the gryphon's wings is on fire, smoke billowing into the air as lightning crackles from each hair on his lower body.

BOOM!

The sound shakes the cobblestones. The mages look, and the gryphon is now featherless and hairless. The fire and lightning have gone, but his skin is charred and almost as cooked as the pork rinds the elder mage is still eagerly shoving into his mouth.

"My! How spectacular!" he says with his mouth full. "Quite the show indeed! Bring on the fireworks, you!" he says to the gryphon. "Fireworks! Fireworks!"

Ary looks from her master to the gryphon and back again. The gryphon lets out a beleaguered, exhausted croak as its naked and cooked chest heaves in pain. Even without its feathers, it is still a beautiful—albeit sad—sight. Without his feathers to conceal them, his muscles strain and tense in pain. Ary cringes as she sees the creature's balls—which seem to have stopped shriveling at about the size of tennis balls—nearly black with soot and trembling with exertion.

"Come on, come on!" Ord says impatiently, gesturing at the gryphon.

Something shifts subtly on the creature's skin, and then abruptly it cracks open. Ugly splits appear all over its skin, revealing the blood, muscle, fat, and sinew beneath. It appears at first as a sticky paste, but drop by drop, the blood begins to collect, then to seep, then to run out of the cracks, smearing on the gryphon's cooked flesh, crawling down his body, and beginning to pool under him.

The gryphon holds perfectly still. One might think the worst had passed if it weren't for the agonized, fearful look in its eyes.

A particularly big droplet of blood oozes out of a crack on the gryphon's chest. The skin moves with it and then slides off, carried by the blood until it gets stuck on another patch of skin. This begins to happen all over the gryphon's body: increasingly thick patches of skin sluff off, ride as far as they can, and get stuck on other skin until the creature is a patchwork of glistening blood and stacks of dammed-up skin.

Where the skin pulls away, the tissue beneath it begins to sizzle as if roasting over a fire, puff into smoke, or dissolve as if in acid. Some of these things happen right next to each other. The gryphon starts to squawk, but its voice gets caught in its throat.

Then a chunk of its throat falls onto the ground, and all that the gryphon can do now is hiss airily, which it does constantly: a never-ending wheeze of anguish nonpareil. As the various subcutaneous tissues find innovative ways to self-destruct, those dams of skin begin to break and splatter to the ground, a disgusting rain of flesh and blood, like October rains taking the autumn leaves down with them.

The gryphon turns its head painfully slowly towards the mages, his eyes rolling in his head as if begging to be put out of his misery. His patchy body looks like a reanimated corpse.

It smells like one, too.

The rot and decay reach his balls, and a crack appears in the skin. Without warning, the bottom half of his scrotum falls off, unleashing the tubules of one of his testicles. It unravels and flashes out, slapping into the wall like a bullwhip and chipping off a chunk of masonry. Blood spurts out the end of it, painting the area with angry, red streaks.

“Waugh!” Ary cries, falling to the ground just as the supersonic testicular contents fly past her, slice through one of the solid iron bars of the menagerie, and then wrap around the next one.

Ord shoves another handful of cracklins into his mouth, rocking forward and backward on his chair, his face red with laughter.

There’s a loud series of pops, like firecrackers, and the tubule explodes. The bar it had wrapped around seems to hesitate and then crumbles into blackened dust.

The sickly green that started everything off has reached the base of the gryphon’s dick, and it abruptly shoots a stream of blood and pus across the menagerie in a high arc, splattering some hundred yards away. Ary looks up just in time to see the color break, mottling into beige, pink, pea green, and that same black-green color as the skin begins to dissolve. The gryphon’s eyes and body are frozen in anguish; his chest doesn’t even heave anymore.

There’s a sudden sound of a water droplet hitting a pool of water, but amplified a thousand times. The gryphon’s remaining testicle abruptly vanishes. The sound repeats itself, and the testicle appears in the gryphon’s beak. His eyes finally move as he briefly contemplates this bizarre and excruciating turn of events.

Then his beak explodes.

Fragments of beak-shrapnel pelt Ary while Ord writhes back and forth in mirth-induced stitches on his bench. A particularly nasty fragment lodges itself in the gryphon’s eye, and he lets out a particularly breathy wheeze.

“Oh, oh, stop! I ca—I can’t!” Ord laughs, holding his sides. “Oh, my gosh, it’s just too funny!”

Ary gapes. “Funny?” she cries over the various noises of exploding, wheezing, popping, crackling, and disintegrating as she gets back to her feet. “This poor creature!”

“Serves him right for being born!” Ord replies, wiping a tear from his eye. “Now, hurry up, already! I wanna see the fireworks!”

Ary looks at him like he’s crazy as he gesticulates impatiently at the gryphon.

“Oh, fine; I guess I have to help it along,” he says, setting the tip of the gryphon’s cock alight with a tiny fireball.

The flesh—for there’s no skin left on the tip of the gryphon’s penis—blisters, sizzles, and hisses angrily before burning away entirely as the little flame probes the gryphon’s urethra. Finding the sinewy lining quite satisfying, it begins a leisurely descent, leaving a stream of smoke lazily wafting out of the creature’s ravaged member, blistering, searing, and practically tanning the flesh as it goes.

Ord huffs impatiently.

As if on cue, the last of the skin on the gryphon’s penis dissolves, and the penis flies off like a bottle rocket, soars into the sky, and explodes.

“Eh, not *too* bad,” Ord says, a little crestfallen.

Bits of corpora spongiosum and cavernosa fly through the air. An umbrella appears over Ord as he cranes his neck to watch. But just before they land, they suddenly crackle, catch fire, and disappear in a million puffs of smoke.

Ord gasps. His face lights up, and then he’s on his feet, applauding.

“Oh, bra-vo! Marvelous!” he cheers loudly.

Ary blinks and turns her head to look at him. He winks at her and gives her a knowing smile, eliciting a puzzled look in response.

There's a noise like the sound of a train whistle, and flames shoot out the gryphon's ass, curve in a great arc like a massive tail, and then come full circle to shoot back inside the way they came. Most intrigued, Ord teleports himself, his bench, and his cracklins behind the gryphon for a better view, leaving his umbrella where it was, floating in mid-air.

As if being consumed by a million ants, the gryphon's anus begins to dissolve, leaving an ever-growing hole in his body. A sudden light appears through him: the hole where his penis used to be. Flames wreath the ever-widening hole, and his organs begin to pop like popcorn inside of him, blowing the occasional hole in what's left of his skin.

Suddenly, a thick, syrupy white liquid begins to drip into the pool of blood, like a bit of cheesecake being mixed into strawberry swirl. Ary gasps to see thick beads of the white liquid dripping down the gryphon's ribcage, off the lobes of his hips, and down the tip of his baculum, which is slowly shrinking.

His very bones are liquefying before her eyes.

Ary turns her head away, overcome with compassion for the poor creature, but just as she does, she sees his head cave in. Smoke pours out of his eye sockets as his head dribbles down his spine to join the puddle on the floor, revealing chunks of smoldering brains.

Stripped of his flesh and reduced to melting bones, the gryphon's tattered body collapses to the ground, splattering the puddle of fluids it created. The noises die down. Suddenly it is deathly silent. Noisome fetors of burnt flesh, acid, putrid decay, and internal organs assault Ary's nose, making her retch while Ord chews on a pig skin thoughtfully.

There's a subtle shift in the carcass.

BOOM!

The thing explodes, flinging blood and bits of stinking flesh all over the menagerie. Then all is silent again.

"Augh!" Ary cries. "It's so disgusting!"

Ord curiously samples the taste of flesh that splattered on the back of his hand.

"Hmm...could do with some paprika," he murmurs.

Abruptly, all of the splattered remains dissolve and disappear in a flash of light accompanied by a loud crackle, dissolving the bits of stone and metal they happened to be clinging to.

Ord coughs and grimaces.

"Now *that's* spicy!" he says sheepishly. "Ary, go get me a glass of milk."

The apprentice blinks, suddenly realizes that the stench and mess are all gone, and then huffs and leaves, shaking her head.

"I like a glass of milk after a failed assassination, after all," he murmurs, a shrewd smile creeping over his face.

*Damn you, old man! You may have bested my gryphon, but mark my words: you will not survive my next creation!*

Ord looks straight at you, gives a faint smirk, and mouths, "Better luck next time." With that, he pinches his first two fingers and thumb together. As he does, the crystal ball goes dark.