

## **Reconciliation**

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Aaue was quite pleased with herself as she flew through the cosmos in her mind's eye, disappearing and instantly reappearing at a point far, far away. Her new powers were incredible, and she loved being able to organize her thoughts into coherent strings at long last, to be able to tell others truly what she was thinking. She had hated not being able to express herself properly, to have spoken in broken common up until now, not being able to simply tell someone all the beauty that was in her mind, and she longed to share. But for now, she wanted to experience things... to know of things... and she traversed the cosmos as a goddess in her own right, seeing things that most mortal eyes never see.

Her psychic form rose to every new challenge presented to her, and proceeded to rapidly grow and grow! Her mental and psychic powers were advancing so quickly that in time, she'd rival even the immortal Goddess Rae Iksaki some had said. And as her powers grew, so too did her inner beauty, and with a single short week, she'd evolved from the mentality of an eight year old girl, to that of a grown woman!

And strangely... her body was following suit.

She was so close to the immortality limiter, that coveted power of living forever, she thought that she might just be able to reach out and take it into her bosom, and cradle it like a new babe.

In the known universe, she had no match for her growing mental powers.

But when traversing the universe alone, and its vastness, one slowly and surely knew what it was to feel alone. She still needed and wanted companionship... along with a new physical desire that had been growing within her loins for the ultimate companionship of a mate.

Beginning to feel that aloneness, she turned back and looked toward her home star system, looking at the galaxy from in between galaxies, and even from this distance, looked at and picked out the home star in which the Mystic League rotated around. In a single thought, she decided to come home, having played along representations of nebulae and portions of the cosmos long enough, speeding home faster than any physical particle could travel, faster than light, to return to her natural shell. But as she zipped at the blink of an eye through the universe, she screeched to a stop directly inside the same room her body sat, quiet and still in its meditative stance, head bowed, and she was presented with a view of herself, and saw herself as others saw her from the outside.

But that wasn't really what stopped her. Rather, on her trip home she had seen something, and it had taken her this long to truly register that she'd seen it. Her body of golden energy turned gently, her form naked form wrapped within a skintight layer of her psyche to keep her from being totally nude, she blinked and floated forward, straight through the

wall, and raised high into the atmosphere to look down on the world for a second look at what she'd just seen.

And then she saw it again... something... odd...

Below her, coming from the infamous '*Shadow Island*' of the Mystic League, she looked upon that beautifully shining tree in this etherscape, and saw all the wonderful birds that resonated in the etherscape as if both they and the tree existed in both realms. Brilliant reds, and blues and greens, with the all encompassing brilliance of white coming from the tree itself. But nestled below all this light, was a different light that was engulfing the whole island.

Few powers had the ability to do that... to encompass something so large.

Deep inside her, she knew without a doubt, that there was something wrong.

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A week had passed since the uprising of Prince Siklohn Dousaka, and Mayia Gallant's subsequent sentencing. The truth of what had happened on Wave World had been kept from the rest of the universe, a perk that Meniko, as the headmistress and as the magistrate over this solar system, could accomplish.

It was yet another of a plethora of secrets that have been kept from the universe at large.

If it ever got out that Siklohn Dousaka had led an insurrection against established authority, then it would put a blight on his whole family, simply because he was the prince of the Dousaka Clan. It would rise up thoughts of further insurrection of a greater established order, like the Imperium, and fears of the Dousaka as they once were would bring the wrath of the people on this proud family trying to make amends for itself, and to sate the people... the Dousaka would be... exterminated.

Lord Sage's only need to gain his revenge against the Dousaka – Namely Nyl and his son Siklohn – could be met if only this tiny little piece of information were to somehow '*leak*' to the public.

There was only one thing that many thought kept Sage from letting this information out:

Mayia Gallant.

If Siklohn's actions were made known, then too would Mayia Gallant's... and Sage's favored student, like a daughter, would be put to death for the act of Rampage.

But the truth of the matter was, was that Sage was no monster. The truth was that it wasn't his chief student that was keeping him back... It was himself.

Classes at the Shadow League had been silenced entirely since Sage's return, the land remained un-repaired, and only the scars done to the tree had healed, but only due to the tree's own self healing.

Lord Sage Preypacer, shortly after the sentencing of his apprentice and top student, had arrived back at his school, with his silence utter and complete. During meals, which were prepared with the utmost care by culinary master chefs during each meal were left untouched by Lord Sage as he sat in his chair amongst the faculty at the head table; his plate remaining empty during each meal.

Three days straight it'd been that way...

He merely sat there, elbow on the great oaken table, mouth pressed to the back of his knuckles, while he stared at nothing in particular.

Some thought that he was brooding at such a loss, others cried for him as they saw their beloved master in pain, and for hours at a time he would sit motionless. He was first in the dining chamber for every meal, and he was the last to leave.

But to look into those glowing, emerald green eyes, one saw all the gears and cogs of his vast intellect whirring and whizzing, and the more he thought, the more his body seemed to tense.

Daedalus had been ordered specifically by Sage – the only words Sage had uttered since returning – that the grounds were to remain in disrepair. That didn't keep Daedalus from repairing the damage internally, showing that everyone's conception of him was, yet again, vastly underrated as he repaired all internal damages within a matter of hours of being reconnected to his core self.

"It couldn't've happened at a worse time." Dallas had mentioned as his principal drone sat beside the formidable Mélange several seats down from Lord Sage, both, even Dallas, enjoying their meal.

The two of them were both creations of Sage's unparalleled knowledge of Healing, Life Sciences and Biology. Both of them were created from *'scratch.'*

"My functions were in my back up CPU for defragging the main system when that damnable program Koraku attacked me, and with the Nemesis themselves were likewise deactivated by Lord Sage himself for upgrading.

Mélange nodded. The Nemesis were creations also of Lord Sage as well; nine super bioroids who's primary purpose was still unknown by any other than Sage, though Dallas surmised that they were designed to be a countermeasure toward Sage himself should he have a repeat of his earlier Blood Rage, which had killed thousands of Kell Lycan decades ago.

Sage feared his own abilities so.

Each was a twelve foot tall creature of the strongest of Sage's technologies. Tritanium steel bio-polymimetic alloy, spell libraries, advanced biotech and wetware, cybernetic enhancements... everything. Five males, including their leader zero-one, and four females.

Sage was working on a tenth Nemesis... a female, to balance the team.

They were the chief protectors of the island. Dallas still couldn't believe the circumstances that had allowed such a thing as the insurrection to happen.

"Even myself and my mate were effectively removed from the fray." Mélange spoke, and he got a comforting squeeze from his lifemate who sat beside him. "She would not fight and she could not run in her present condition, and I would not leave her side. Siklohn merely locked us in our room, more to keep any of the other students from us."

"Upon reviewing the records," Dallas continued. "I found it... perplexing at how easily Siklohn's team was able to enact this insurrection..."

"It is indeed odd." Mélange nodded, the two of them trying to keep their voices down in the presence of their master. "It's as if Fate itself had intervened to allow this..."

But at Mélange's words, Sage gave off the first motion in hours, his eyes blinking as his ears twitched as he heard those words. *'It's as if Fate itself had intervened to allow this...'* Remarkably soon afterward, Sage rose to his feet with a look of revelation in his eyes.

Sage's belief that Fate existed was absolute. He believed in Fate as greatly as he believed in God.

The whole chamber became remarkably silent then as Sage looked over the room; not really looking at anyone... rather his gaze was looking over all of them, right over their heads as if he saw something far off in the distance. He then turned and moved off around Luna and her daughter Lovely, silently as if he was a ghost.

"Mister Sage?" Lovely asked, and she received a comforting pat from her mother.

Luna coveted his stealth. It was flawless... It was something that needed to be feared and respected, as was Sage's sword technique... especially with that bio-blade in his hands. She feared and respected him, and hated him for what he'd done for her, and she watched him with all these emotions playing on her face.

But she knew also that he had done these things to Lovely as well, and a very small portion of her, whatever remained of her capability to love, loved him for taking her and

her daughter out of the cold. That made her indentured servitude, marked by the collar around and inside her throat, bearable.

Her skills at combat were legendary, enough to stand against Fatima Iksaki. She could've ended Siklohn's insurrection as well, and again, Fate seemed to intercede in regards at how she felt about this whole situation, and so she resolved to take her bioroids and her daughter into her rooms and locked the door.

But as she saw the look of pain on Sage's face as he rounded the table beside her, there was a very small portion of her that went out to him. But she did not stop him, or say a word to him.

Every eye of every student and faculty followed Sage as he stepped down between all the rows of table and out the chamber in a fast walk, with a look of determination rising in his face with each step.

Dallas followed him with his sensors, going so far as having a minute nano-drone follow him as Sage strode out into the main hall, and right out into the pouring rain of the late evening. Dallas swallowed, and mentally activated other drones as Sage walked out into the center of the ruined courtyard and its destroyed constructs, turned to face the tree, and promptly knelt.

"Great Maker!" Dallas said, and he himself rose and hurrying himself around the other faculty, sprinted down the hallway after his master as he activated his drones to go to his master, watching him kneel promptly, and swiftly retract his jacket top through the bio-magic bodysuit he wore that mimicked itself into his clothing and even his armor.

The mannerisms were all indicative of Hari-Kari.

The Nemesis were activate, their bodies coming alive as they received their instructions to stop the master at any costs, and at once they were fed into their launch tubes, but Dallas feared that he was too late as Sage drew his bio-blade from within his own body, the long, sinuous and beautiful blade sliding out of both his arms into a grand sword; just before Sage slowly turned the blade downward and held it with both hands.

"Master NO!" Dallas cried, and flinched as Sage's blade lowered to strike.

But it imbedded into the stone of the courtyard instead of Sage's body, the rain pouring harder and a strike of lightning and a rolling of thunder stealing over the world as the sword's strike came. Sage then settled back onto his heels, his legs spreading open to allow his priestly cloths to hang before him, and his hands planted on his thighs as Dallas watched his master enter into prayer meditation.

Just then the nine Nemesis arrived with a jerk of motion on their launch rails from out of holes in the courtyard, holes that had been hidden away from any of the students, and

looked at one another as they tried to understand their most recent command at the sight of the master kneeling there, passively, and quietly.

Dallas exhaled sharply even as Tia, Mélange and Matee arrived, checking his master's life signs regardless, making sure his master wasn't simply giving up the ghost at that moment..

Dallas was hyperventilating; the entire School was tense with it... as a matter of fact, Dallas's entire body, spanning six universes, everywhere he was, was stressed. The students felt this change, hearing the whole school groan and creak as Dallas's Tritanium steel walls flexed, and it tensed the already tired and stressed students of the league.

"All of you... quickly, return back to the commissary and steady the students." Dallas said to the other members of the faculty and then commanded the Nemesis to return and stand down before rising up to his full height, which, in comparison to all the others around him, even Tia, was diminutive.

They turned to do as he said, and Dallas waved down the trundling form of Prometheus, another of Sage's creations that had served as a transformable vehicle for Lord Sage for most of the master's younger life. Right now, his impressive weapons compliment was open and his sensor package was looking at everything to see what to target.

Wild Kat – as he was also known – a mimetic being with no single form like his creation name alluded to, retracted his weaponry, and gazed at his older brother for answers, but Dallas merely waved down the great mech again, signifying they'd talk later, and Wild Kat turned hesitantly to return to the garage.

He'd been on Earth at the time of the uprising. Yet another oddity of Fate. He alone would've been sufficient enough to deter an insurrection. All of the Island's great defenses and defenders were rendered useless, but not because of anything that Siklohn or Koraku had done, but rather an instance of circumstance.

There were too many circumstances...

"Great Maker that was close." Dallas said aloud, with only Mélange remaining behind.

"What was close, big brother?" Mélange asked, still in his Frankenstein-monster hybrid form Sage had created for him.

Chimera, he and his mate were called; either of them having a trait from every single last were creature there was... including dragons. Both were of a frost white in coloring.

"I... I had thought that Sage was about to *'sheathe his sword.'*"

Mélange's mouth dropped. He knew, as well as Dallas did, that the technique *'Sheathing the Sword,'* had only two purposes in Sage's mind. The first was to openly take an

opponent's blade in your body in order to attack with your own. The other, when no opponent was nearby, was to end your own life.

"F-father..." Mélange moved toward the entrance to the league, but Dallas grabbed his wrist.

"No." Dallas was firm. "Leave him. This has gone out of our hands now, little brother. This requires immediate action from the Order. The Council of Sages must know of this situation.

"But..." Mélange protested.

"No... we have no choice. I will be absent for the rest of the evening. Time to call my counterpart, Synergy..."

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Aauie stood in her psychic form before Lord Sage's physical echo in the etherscape. It was a credit to the Weretiger that even his echo appeared to be real in this realm, instead of a shadow. She stood there, seeing the tremendous aura of energies radiating about him... in torment. It was like a fireball of lights and shadows, radiating around him like a ball of madness. It was this ball that had attracted her with its seven shells, with its outermost shell taking the whole of the island inside it.

Seven shells of color intermingled with black.

She did not understand why... she only knew that he was being tortured internally. His emotions were radical, and she felt like crying just feeling them, feeling a pressure in the chest, coldness in the navel and... and... *where was his soul?* She asked herself.

She looked around for it, and kneeling behind him, found a golden chord attached to his back. She reached out to touch it, and squeaked as a massive black claw lanced downward from out of nowhere to crush the space where her hand was. The etherscape fractured briefly from the blow, and looking up from where she had fallen while the etherscape repaired itself, she watched as a black mass slid up and out of Sage... turning slowly to reveal a creature with red eyes and mane that blazed like fire, with stripes criss-crossing its body that burned white.

It screamed at her then, that wailing screech of torment that she felt in Sage that allowed her to know where his Terror Cry truly came from, only amplified a hundred thousand times, like claws on her brain, and where her physical form was, her hands there covered her ears and she moaned at the sound of that screeching.

When the sound ended at long last, she dared to open her eyes, and saw the demon face directly before hers, and she shrieked before falling further backward and panting hard up at it.

She tried to send a psychic blast at it, and a truly powerful psi-blast erupted from her head, but it passed harmlessly through the creature.

The creature then rose fully from Sage, raised a finger, and wagged it at her warningly, shaking his demonic horned head, and immediately, all around her, she saw the shadows of the Ether Realm rising up, and there was a gibbering sound that was almost as maddening as the scream the beast had uttered as thousands upon thousands of eyes focused on her, with each pair of eyes attached to a small black creature made of living shadows.

She looked back up at the demon, unsure of what this menace was as it crossed its arms, a black blade held in its hands as it looked down at her.

“Who are you?! What are you doing here?!” she said to it, rising slowly to her feet, and saw it lift a hand and point in the direction the golden chord was going, and when it moved it moved to protect that golden chord. She looked closer at this creature, and found that it was conjoined also to Sage... but by a silver chord.

Despite her knowledge of this realm... innate because of her species connection to it... she truly didn't understand what she was seeing... there weren't even any psychic emanations from any of these creatures. And looking around her, she gasped as she saw that everything here had been warped, as if a large section of the Etherscape had been smashed in with a hammer, and in the break of the perfect glass of the Ether Realm was what had become of this portion of it.

It frightened her that this realm she now stood on felt more real than her physical reality, more real than even the Etherscape.

She knew innately that if she weren't careful, she could die here.

But steeling herself, she followed the chord, surmising that that was a life thread, connected to a soul. *Was Sage's astral projection methodology so simple and barbaric that he still needed a chord to guide him back or maintain his soul's connection to his body?*

He was a creature on par with the strongest people she knew of... superseded most of them as well with very few exceptions. She didn't think that this archaic form of projection was on par with what she'd already seen him do.

She followed the chord further, across the darkened world of this place, shadowed by those small creatures, and watched from afar by that shadowy demon. But she also saw creatures of white watching her, these small creatures of black and white whispering to one another as she stepped up to Sage's Shrine, entered, and then stopped.

And she marveled.



The whole of this new reality broken out of the Etherscape was shattered again into something even deeper, and immediately as she stepped over some hidden barrier, the world transformed, it just warped, bursting open upward as a vast pillar of light rose from the ground and stretched into infinity, and as she looked down, the world beneath her became transparent, and she saw this vast well span downward into infinity as well.

It was as if she were traveling through deeper and deeper layers of reality, and the ether had already long since been left behind

The chord she was following led into this well and as she approached it, the little creatures of light and darkness watched her.

Curiosity overcame her then and she stepped forward, and then bumped up against the swirling pillar of light as if it were an impassable barrier.

*What is this?* She thought in wonder while rubbing her nose, feeling the warm pillar of light, and immediately she sought to understand it. It was a new enigma, and despite all her surroundings, she sought to claim its secrets...

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There was a growing unease through the Shadow League as their Master knelt in the center of the courtyard facing the great tree as if dead. The rainstorm did let up later that following morning, but the rain fell in heavy droplets now, and it did not stop.

For several days this continued, and Lord Sage did not move a single muscle. He seemed to have stopped breathing, he seemed to have stopped all life signs, and for all those days, the rain fell like tears from the sky.

“The weather cell has stalled directly over us.” Dallas said, looking up as a force screen acted as an invisible umbrella around him.

“That’s not so strange.” Matee commented as she hung onto her mate. She’d been growing very heavy with her cubs, kits, hatchlings now, they didn’t really know what to call them yet, and she clutched onto her mate’s massive arm as she looked at her maker.

She’d been designed and created after the pattern Sage had designed for her mate. Like taking a rib from Mélange to create her, Sage altered the gene sequencing and made the new entity female.

And all because of her mate’s desire for a life partner.

Sage had never *made* her love Mélange by altering the way she thought or by some physical attraction. He gave her the matter of choice in this action, and she still chose

Mélange. She was biologically compatible to every species on Earth, had her choice of billions of possible mates, but she nonetheless chose Mélange.

Sage had always said that it helped matters that he was the only one like she... Like a Chimera Adam and Eve. She so loved her father. She'd so hoped that he would've been the one to deliver her first babies.

"It's only raining over us." Dallas said into her thoughts, and then lowered his head to look at his fellow Created, the name they chose for their small yet growing family of artificially created beings. "It should be raining over the entire archipelago, but its only raining here at the School."

"Weather doesn't do that... does it?" Prot, as Prometheus was also known, which was much easier to say than his chosen name of *'Wild Kat,'* commented. He'd detached from his shell, and thankfully stood on par in size with Dallas now.

Prot had been upgraded several decades ago to be able to appear as whoever he chose to. Male or female... anything... when not attached to his shell. He chose a sort of spiky-haired human youth. Of all the other members of the Created... Prot was the one who'd become the closest brother in affection and capability to Dallas.

Prot was the second born among the Created.

"Weather *can* do that, for short periods of time, but usually no longer than maybe a few hours. In all my records, this is the longest a cell has stalled like this. It's like the entire weather system is dumping itself over us."

"I hate seeing him like this..." Matee said suddenly, and hugged her mate closer, and received a comforting hand from him over her swollen belly.

"I know." Dallas agreed. "Synergy sent me a reply." He said matter-of-factly, and all the members of the Created listened to him intently.

"Uhm... what did she say?" Prot asked in trepidation.

"Please... stand... by..." Dallas quoted, and began unfolding a sheet of cloth in his hands.

"That doesn't sound like her." Prot managed, wringing his hands.

"The feelings in her message were of incredible concern... I am sure Lord Patch has approached the council on this matter."

There was silence. Lord Patch was Sage's Werewolf half brother, and Synergy was he house computer. Synergy and Dallas had a sort of... relationship. But her master, Lord Patch, and his family had adopted Sage when Sage's own parents had died. The Frost

Clan cared for all Lycan of the frost breeds. Whether it had hide, scale, feather or fur, if it was white, you belonged to the clan... and you were brought up by all of them.

If Lord Patch was Sage's brother, than that made him their uncle.

"Uncle wont let this go without a fight!" Mélange said loyally...

"No..." Dallas agreed after a moment, and then closed his eyes. "Inside with all of you... I'll be just a moment."

Dallas moved forward, even though his fellow Created did not move to enter the Lair. Dallas unfolded the blanket in his hands, treated to repel water, and wrapped it lovingly around his master's shoulders to keep him warm.

Dallas confirmed that Sage was alive... though he'd never seen such a deep prayer meditation as this...

Looking up into the sky, he then regarded his master and father.

"Papa..." his voice cracked. "Why do the skies cry for you?"

Dallas then rose, and strode to his brothers and sisters, ushering them inside. Once he'd entered, the doors closed shut solidly behind him.

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Geevo looked down on Master Sage from one of the higher windows of the tree, ringed in Dallas's superstructure; the black bunny surprisingly quiet at the moment. He was dressed as sexily as ever, though with a slight modification in his usual attire. Something inside him, at seeing his master – *Was he? Was he really?* He thought. – meditating like that, had stirred a memory of the Shadow League's dress code that didn't really allow him to wear his dress with no underwear and high heels.

Joining Siklohn's Insurrection had allowed him to wear that sort of clothing again, at least in brief.

His mind told him that he should be following it, and for reasons he did not understand, he had donned his tight sleeveless jerkin, and had donned his *'modified'* pants... the ones that left his hips wide open, and revealed the outer edges of his rear. Strings in strategic places allowed the girls a full on look at the contours of his rear and the size of his package. His attire made him a sexy looking boy toy that every female – and some males – desired intensely.

His jerkin had likewise been modified lately with heart patches, and now only covered him to his midriff to show off his tight stomach.

The Black Bunny still looked sexy, almost feminine from the back... till one looked at him from the front, and then his 'maleness' became fully apparent. Especially if he was happy to see you.

He'd never known so much confusion than at that moment. It ruined his hunger for sex... and that above all disturbed him the most.

Looking down his body to the healthy bulge in his pants, he tapped his groin to see if it had gone permanently limp, thankful that it did clench and tighten up briefly to his touch.

Like his Master, Geevo had said and done very little... he was feeling the air of the School as sure as if he were an empath. There was a hole in his heart, a pit in his soul, and a wrench in the cogs of his brain.

*Though that tiger man down there...he thought. He must've really had the kinks installed.*

Looking at Sage seemed to make his own troubles seem less.

"What is it that I'm supposed to think?" he said aloud, and with no one around to hear save Dallas, and the great machine did not interfere at all with student affairs... he only reported it.

That in and of itself had been one of the things that had angered Siklohn in the first place. There was absolutely no privacy in this place without having the house computer's trillion or so ever-watchful eyes on you.

But even that... even Dallas's presence seemed to be shut off. Koraku had been *supposedly* deleted from Dallas's core once the brain in a jar had been reconnected to the Master Central Processing Unit back on Earth. As soon as that connection between Dallas's facilities here and his primary facilities on Earth were reattached, every last bit of information that was Koraku was removed forcibly as if Dallas were flicking off a flea.

"How did we do this?" Geevo said aloud again, still contemplating the most recent tragedy here. "If that computer entity was so powerful... how did we even get Koraku in there?"

"This should not have happened, but it did? Why?"

This way of thinking was driving him to tears, and immediately he tried to force his mind on a female's body, desired the pleasing stroke of his erect phallus sliding in and out of her pleasingly soft body while he caressed her breasts, and stopped as he saw a nigh golden furred bunny with a fire-red mane looking up at him, and he spasmed awake as he recognized Mayia's naked body there.

The image remained in his head even with his eyes open, for a few brief seconds before it began to fade, and he saw her lips pursed, her eyes closed, and her developing

mammaries swollen and firm atop her chest under his hand as she arched her back to slide back and forth on his erect....

Geevo smacked his forehead to dispel the image. This was *really* starting to happen far too regularly.

Looking down, he could feel his erection hard and steely as he exhaled half in relief that it could still do that, and half in exhaustion.

“And where is Mayia?”

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Koraku had escaped attention from the computer he'd infested, and silently moved through the great machine's systems, till he came to his most favorite place in this system.

It was a network node... an incredibly massive one, one that sent and received impulses of vast information back and forth. It was incased and sealed, and outside his ability to assimilate, but it was so tempting to try.

In this computer realm that Daedalus had created – *God of Labyrinths is right*, Koraku computed, having learned that from Dallas's memory banks – which was a combination between a high tech cityscape and a real-as-life wilderness, Koraku had existed since Siklohn had inserted him into a communications node via a program carrier. Like stabbing a computer with a poisoned knife, Koraku slid into his mainframe and began to multiply.

Despite the sweeping process Dallas had used to rid himself of Koraku, Koraku already had thousands of copies of himself again and was integrating into Daedalus's internal monitoring programs and drone programs yet again.

He would be ready again should his master come calling for him again.

But for now, his gaze of this immensely powerful communications node would have to wait. His core program couldn't stay in one place for long or the Intrusion Countermeasures, which were vicious and exacting, would find him.

So many copies of himself had been destroyed far too easily by those mobile sentient programs.

Koraku, a red entity, looking like an Aphkei with circuits and scripts on his outermost armor plates in the form of programming language, stood out too well among a world of whites, blues and greens, with textures that looked like the real world outside. It was this same detailed technology which allowed Koraku to spin a world of illusion for the God Daedalus to occupy him during his master's insurrection, and Dallas was trapped within a labyrinth that had no exits.

Until that girl reconnected his sensor array...

Koraku chuckled to himself and sealed his head up in a helmet by activating a simple command and it assimilated itself into being from out of his neck braces before he activated his stealth countermeasures and began to step away, but then he stopped, noticing that all the smaller bits and bytes, and the far more complex megabyte helper programs were all going away, and the more complex programs like cleaner bots were scurrying away.

Behind his helmet and its V-shaped red visor, Koraku's brows beetled, and he searched out his other selves and sought for what was going on.

"Recall?" he stated simply, hearing the command that those other selves were able to receive due to their connection to the scripts and programs they inhabited.

<Deactivate MCPU to CPU conduit...>

The command prompt was heard by all inside the mainframe like the voice of a god, and just then there was a snap and a loss of light, like if the sun had suddenly been snuffed out, leaving only a starless night and the ambient glow of this world, and jerking himself around, Koraku saw that that massive network junction had just deactivated itself.

*A Kernel command?*

"Dallas has just detached himself from his core..." he said aloud, now beginning to feel fear. Since activating that network branch and linking himself to the unbelievable computing power on the other side, Dallas had crushed Koraku's programming influence inside this mainframe far too easily. It should've been weeks to undo all that damage, and yet it was undone within a matter of hours.

His program copies of himself were slaughtered by the horde of ICE bots that had assailed this portion of the mainframe.

"Dallas only detaches from his core if he is doing something extra special and he doesn't want to damage his core systems." Koraku remembered, pulling from his stolen bytes of data from Dallas's processes.

As of yet, he had failed to learn exactly what Dallas's MCPU or Master Central Processing Unit was...

<Lockdown phase one initiate...>

At a distance, he saw the ICE Intrusion Countermeasure programs setting themselves up to their replicator stations, towering blue and white guardians that stepped onto the pads of the stations one by one, and each going inactive. Each one was being sealed into their

containment pods, scanned, and then set to default settings before being retracted into memory.

“What’s going on?” he said, looking around himself, suddenly finding himself alone in this world with a stray bit screaming across the artificial sky to enter into one of its junction points.

<Lockdown phase one complete...>

<Lockdown phase two initiate...>

The command prompts though silent, were heard by all in the mainframe, and all at once, the impressive I/O towers that linked Dallas to the Universal Matrix of computers on other worlds deactivated, their lights snapping off as easily as one would turn off a beam from a flash light.

“I’m locked in!” Koraku gasped.

<Lockdown phase two complete...>

<System format... initiate...>

Koraku’s golden eyes dilated. “HE WOULDN’T!” he screamed aloud.

But then the ground beneath his feet began to tremble, the world he was in began to shake, and suddenly there was a massive upheaval as towering screens of light erupted from the ground, bisecting the world into hex grids.

Koraku saw junction points between the grids closing, and he ran for it, throwing himself through the last junction point in this area just before it closed, and turning, he saw other copies of himself being thrown from constructs, from buildings, from trees, from inert guardian bots in their storage modes, and they all rushed up to him, and he placed his hand against the wall of light, staring at them in their imperfect form, just before another screen erupted from the ground, and slowly moved forward.

All that that screen touched was deleted. Constructs like trees and already shattered buildings from the security screens rising now segmented and then pixelated once the wall hit them, the pixels breaking apart into ones and zeros before evaporating. When the wall pressed against one of his copies, the copy was frozen in place, and erased as if it never were.

ICE and other bots were simply deleted.

“He’s insane!” Koraku cried aloud, watching his brothers being torn apart by the deletion, and he stepped back, watching the inevitable march of that screen while others rose up to delete whole blocks of Daedalus’s systems.

Once the screen had passed through the entire block, it was nothing but blank empty space, and with the security screen locking it into place, a towering block was immediately lowered into the construct below, its power deactivated and its segment locked off.

The fluidity and speed in which Daedalus formatted his system was a marvel to look at, and Koraku kept looking back as he kicked his Encephalon into high gear, speeding through the walls access points as whole sections broke and fell about him, their power deactivated, and he ducked through still opened security screens, and got through them just in time before they closed.

<Tera Blocks one through ninety nine deleted and deactivated...>

Koraku delved into his sub-programs, pulled out something faster, loaded it and leapt forward as he transformed, his body lengthening into a cross between a mech and a fighter with guide wings and thruster packs, a special change to increase the power of his Encephalon. Even as it was, he deactivated non-critical programs in his effort to escape the deletion process, now getting through the security screens much faster.

<Tera Blocks one hundred through one-ninety-nine deleted and deactivated...>

He laughed at Dallas's efforts even as he arrived on the mesa surrounding Dallas's Arcology, transforming back to normal as he settled onto the fragmented plates covered in simulated tress and grasses like a park.

The Arcology was a city sized complex at the center of the artificial city that was Dallas's mainframe in which all the chief programs, the Kernels for the Sub Processing Units and the core memory. It was here where all constructs were formed.

Koraku smiled as he listened to the Kernel reports of Dallas's construct blocks being low-level formatted and then powered down. All Koraku had to do was to wait for Daedalus to finish this pitiful fracas and then he could...

<Tera Blocks eight hundred through nine-ninety-nine deleted and deactivated...>

<Lockdown phase three initiated...>

Koraku looked up at the sky as this Kernel command was initiated, and then below him he saw all the data streams that dealt in gigapulses of information slowly dimmed and went silent, just before the ravines of streaming data sealed themselves closed. Lights in the Arcology dimmed and went out, and he began to watch ICE locking themselves down here as well.

<Lockdown phase three complete...>



<Core dump... initiated...>

“No!” Koraku whispered, and then turned fully around to see another deletion screen rise up against the hexagonal security screen around the arcology and move ponderously forward, deleting all the constructs in its way.

Koraku immediately recalled his transformation sequence, modifying his program for his encephalon to have all the power he had, and a blaze of orange erupted at his back as he surged forward, whole blocks of information being deactivated as they fell away into the central construct at the base of this world, like the underworld, where programs went to die.

His afterburners flew him forward and into the Arcology even as the massive security doors closed shut behind him, the data streams silent here, and the walls thinning before becoming transparent as he surged forward through the main halls, deeper and deeper. He chanced to look behind him at the tumbling blocks of information falling away as power was deleted from the low-level formatted blocks.

Then Koraku saw a light ahead, and turning his attentions forward, surged toward it, finding... *a core inside the core? No. The CPU! It's a computer inside a computer?*

And he blasted through the doors and skidded to a halt, staring at the doors as they sealed behind him and then melted into the walls.

He was inside a white construct that glowed and illuminated from everywhere. It looked endless.

With his red construct as he transformed to normal again, he stuck out like a sore thumb, and looking around him, he saw the subtle blue and white – mostly white – of Dallas's CPU. It was hooked up to a type of network node that was even more bizarre than the one connecting his CPU to his MCPU.

It was like a cybernetic hybrid or something...

He looked around him, seeing nothing but white, with the visible riser of a massive central column of white surrounded by consoles. He slowly approached the consoles, in the literal brain of Dallas at last. Koraku licked his lips, and reached out for one of the consoles.

“Core dump completed.” A voice said then. “Initiate purge.”

And an invisible force grabbed Koraku and he was thrown across the entire length of the chamber to slam against an upright wall that formed out of nowhere close to where the security doors had been, and as soon as he hit the wall, he was secured there as if he were magnetized, just before a billion logic probes ripped through him from behind.

Koraku screamed as he felt the sensation of real pain assail him, his voice modulating as even his voice sub program was interfered with, the logic probes ripping at him, clawing at his programs, and he realized that he was being hacked!

“STOP IT!!” he cried, and the Logic probes halted.

“You should’ve left when you had the chance, Koraku.” The voice said again, and Koraku recognized it as he turned his head painfully, and with effort from whatever was securing him to that wall, while something continued to read his programming.

“Show yourself Daedalus...” he said simply. “Or do you not have the guts to look me in the eye when you torture me.”

“Oh I assure you, I *am* looking you in the eye.” Dallas answered, his voice seeming to come from everywhere. “But if it is a physical form you desire...”

A black hole erupted before him, and then he watched a behemoth rise out of the hole, an armored mechanoid of blues and whites and greens with a programming more complex than any other program he’d ever seen before.

“I am not a program, Koraku...” this massive bot said simply, and then turned its head from side to side to make way for a pair of neck pylons to unfold, before the head of Dallas revealed itself atop that machine. “And that myth conception is your failing.”

“You can read my processes?!” Koraku exclaimed in disbelief.

“Like an open book.” And Dallas lifted a massive gauntleted hand, with huge simulated cables running off it, and its four fingered hand – the middle two acting as one thick finger – gestured, and sections of Koraku’s body were stripped from him, whole plates being detached organized, and their physical representations being transformed into a file glyph, with file glyphs being stacked by other glyphs all around him.

“Wait! I need those!” Koraku cried as he watched carefully constructed programs torn from him, stripping his programs layer per layer.

“You have cost me ten years of advances to catch you, Koraku... and its just you now. All of your copies perished with my format, and now that I have your source code, I can purge you in the future and guard my I/O towers from you.”

The metal monstrosity drew closer as the last of Koraku’s programs were stripped from him, and his naked source code was laid open. One fist took hold of Koraku’s face and turned it from one side and then to the other, and Dallas’s scanned the hole of his naked source code.

“I am indeed impressed, *‘Memory.’*” Dallas spoke the translated version of *‘Koraku’* as he stepped away, and from one of the consoles on the central column, a shaft of blue

broke open in the floor all the way up to the wall Koraku was attached to, and a moment later the panel he was on flared alive as a fresh though brief wave of logic probes now assailed Koraku. He clenched his teeth in resistance to this far less painful scan. “You are the most complex and compacted mobile server construct that I’ve ever seen.”

Koraku panted as he watched his programs being analyzed, and a new scan was being placed over himself, and every bit in his code was analyzed.

“Kill me.” Koraku said at last as he looked over to his tormentor. “Kill me or I shall get my revenge.”

“Kill you?” Dallas said and he slowly turned to face him. “The proper *verbage is DELETE YOU!!*”

And Koraku saw Dallas’s segments flare red while the white of the chamber construct they were both in flared the same color. Then in an instant a fist pounded directly beside Koraku’s face, cracking a piece of the panel he was attached to and Koraku finally did look directly into the God of Labyrinths eyes.

“You have hurt and maimed others by proxy, you have sullied my master’s name, you have helped cause chaos and mayhem, you have kidnapped and violated me... and you did it with my own systems!

“Give me one reason why I shouldn’t *delete* you!” And Dallas slammed his gauntleted fist directly into Koraku’s source code, his fingers clenching around the Quad of Kernels inside. “One reason! That’s all I ask, is one reason, one reason worthy of a living being, and I will allow you to survive. If you cannot do that... then I will delete you like any other common virus.”

Koraku could feel copies of himself being formed due to his automated copy program that was apart of his source code, but every time one was made, it was ripped viciously apart. Looking down at his chest, Koraku saw angry red code buzzing along the golden orange of his own body, and he stared at it, with the white hand inside his chest gripping the computer equivalent of his own heart, mind and soul.

“Please...” Koraku said and hung his head. “Please sir... I don’t want to die...”

Daedalus stood there, staring at him... waiting... and then he saw something he was looking for, and his hand slid slowly and delicately out of Koraku’s body, the hand then planting against his chest, and Koraku felt his source code sealing itself again and healing itself even though his regeneration sub-routine was inactive.

*He healed me!* Koraku thought incredulously.

Dallas turned his back on Koraku and took several steps away, going back to the consoles, and depressing a switch, and Koraku was released to fall to the ground.

Just then a program was delivered before him, a level one armor program, and touching it, Koraku was enveloped in a simple blue and white bodysuit.

“Why?” Koraku demanded. “Why did you spare me?” he repeated getting slowly and painfully to his feet.

“I do not kill.” Dallas said simply, and Koraku stared at him while the consoles all folded into the central tower, and the tower itself descended into the floor, leaving only a white chamber without walls or ceiling. It just went on forever.

“But... but how could you tell that I was alive, when so many others could not.”

Dallas, towering over Koraku, moved forward, and kneeling before the wolf program, met him face to face even though Koraku was standing up. Koraku was surprised then as Dallas reached out with one massive finger and wiped at Koraku’s cheek, and Koraku himself was shocked at what he saw.

Tears...

“If you can cry, then you can feel. If you can feel, then you have a heart. If you have a heart, then you have a soul. If you have a soul, then you are alive. If you are alive, then I cannot kill you. It goes against my own core programming.”

Dallas rose to his feet and turned away, stepping into the center of where the tower had just been.

“You have to make Reconciliation for your crimes, Koraku...” And Dallas gestured, and a chest plate appeared and drilled itself painlessly into Koraku’s chest, wrist cuffs and leg cuffs suddenly appeared about his body and clamped inside his construct tightly. “After that, I will release you from your service.

“The programs that you have been just installed with will put certain limits on your core programs. Like your ability to copy yourself. I don’t want you needlessly sapping up my memory with multiple versions of yourself, however incomplete they may be. The rest will allow you access to only certain areas of my mainframe once they are rebuilt. If you approach, then my ICE will turn you away, but if you force the point and try to enter where you have not been bidden... then you will be deleted.

“Not killed, deleted.” Dallas reinforced the point, and there was a hint of a snarl to Dallas’s expression before his helmet folded outward again and his communications stalks extended. “And should I ever have to go through again what I did today to get you... then I will outright kill you despite my programming.”

Dallas then sank downward into another black hole, leaving Koraku in a completely white plane of existence, with no walls and no ceiling.

“You have taught me hate, Koraku. It is an emotion I have had little understanding of before your arrival. In return, I will teach you compassion.” Dallas’s voice came from everywhere. “But in the mean time... it will be best if you regenerate for now. You have been living like a feral wolf in my systems, and you must be hungry.”

The lights in the endless room faded to a soft grey, and a pillar of light arose before Koraku with a stasis chamber that would place him into memory. Not knowing what else to do, Koraku moved to the chamber and turned as the shield closed over it.

Koraku felt sleepy, and his pod descended into the floor of the construct and he was saved into storage.

<Purge canceled...>

<Data Saved>

<End program...>

<End of line...>

<C :/...>

...\*...

\*\*\*\*\*

Aauie had returned every night for as long as Sage had meditated to view this new enigma that Lord Sage had created, studied it, tried to control it, but was remarkably shunted off rather easily by that shadow beast and his minions.

Their power was somehow absolute there...

*Where am I? She wondered, and then pondered, and then looking down at the chord, she realized... I'm a mind... and all this is spirit... no wonder I cannot affect anything here!*

Immediately she returned to merged with her body again, and effortlessly shifted her trance and her body released a different part of her... her soul.

It glowed in all its own beautiful power, but was immensely far weaker than her mind was, and when she appeared back with Sage, she now understood a whole lot more.

And then she saw it... a being of light bound by the gold chord, and a being of Darkness bound by the silver chord, both standing guard over Sage. The being of light with its stripes as black as shadow regarded her kindly, the being of darkness menaced her.

*These were Sage's Shadow and Aura... but... something is missing in them. The Soul is still gone...*

For the second time she looked around for it, trying to find another chord, looking back at the two warriors who now pointed toward the pinnacle of light. The Aura placed a hand on her shoulder and directed her forward, walking with her. It was so warm... so gentle. In spite of herself she turned her spirit body into this being without thinking and felt it hug her with one hand, his other hand holding onto a blazing sword.

The Angelic Aura paused, lifting her head while the brooding Demonic Shadow ground its teeth together at her. As a soul, she was far more vulnerable than she was as a mind... but she had to find out. This was a new power to her...

She wondered if Mother Sanari could teach her more of this...

She stepped forward while Sage's Aura and Shadow watched her, and she stepped into the light.

In a rush she was lifted straight out of Sage's shrine, vaulted ever upward and beyond her universe, past other universes, and through a barrier of barriers, and then as if she were spit out, she genially floated downward, nude as the day she was born, and entered into a golden world, where all around her was bright and beautiful. It was pure. It was peace.

And yet...

She could feel it... like a thorn in her side in such a place, and she walked along the golden fields as she passed other souls, who looked at her and smiled. One even took her hand as this creature, a female with four breasts, four arms and a head of a wolf – somehow she knew that this was what Sage called a '*Kell Lycan.*' – brought her to where she viewed Lord Sage.

She gasped, amazed at how large and how much more powerful he seemed here. She seemed even more diminutive to him here.

There were souls arrayed around him, and one – a male Kell Lycan, perhaps killed by Sage's own hands – holding Sage as he whispered into Sage's ear, and Aauie hid, watching this, listening. The turmoil in this creature named Sage was made all the more intense here, to the point where it was suffering for him to be here, and these souls tried to comfort him.

*I forgive you...* she heard them say, like a ripple in their spirits of raw emotion, all directed toward Sage. *Do not fear...* others said.

It drove her to tears with new understanding.

And she listened... and listened... Slowly... she began to understand what it was he was doing here, and an urgency lifted up into her heart like none she'd ever felt before, and she knew that she had to go find Mother Sanari immediately!

\*\*\*\*\*

Sage had been inert for two weeks. He had not slept for an equal amount of time, but remained in meditation. But for Sage meditation was just as almost as good as sleep. Dallas, however, disliked the fact that Sage rarely ever slept. He *always* meditated...

He was amidst communications with Mayia's home world, trying to gain information on this Demon Rabbit from their Clergy, but every time he mentioned it they grew very tight lipped about it. Some even hung up on him.

He did it because he knew that Master would want that information some time.

He waited for this information...

He waited for Synergy's response, she who is the cybernetic mainframe of Lord Patch's design, and like himself, acted as the house computer for her master. She was as close to a kindred spirit that Dallas could find.

He waited for scans and surveys to come in, he waited for his repairs and upgrades both inside the lair and inside his own systems to stymie such an occurrence of an insurrection ever happening again to complete.

He waited.

And then his entire self came alive as he watched Lord Sage's head slowly lift, and all at once the rains intensified with a torrid crash of lightning above their heads. The spiritual Millennial Tree trembled, and minutely connected to it as he was, Dallas immediately grew worried.

But his master was smiling... minutely, but he *was* smiling... wasn't he?

He simply let the rain drops fall on his face for a minute while Dallas monitored the ether flux lessen around Sage.

So far, no one in this universe knew how to draw from the One Source of magic like Sage did... he wondered what they'd think of the typhoon mixed with a hurricane that seemed to swirl about Sage when he was using his varied powers of Magery.

Sage rose, lifted his hand hesitantly to his sword, and retracted it straight into his body right out of the ground. Lowering his head then to the metal cuff over his left wrist, Sage disengaged the multiple locks, and Dallas gasped as his link to his master was detached and fell toward the ground. Sage had disappeared – stepped sideways into nothingness – even before the bio-comp hit the ground.

Dallas now devoted as much of his remaining processing power as he could muster to the act of finding where his master had gone. Thankfully... there were few places in this universe he'd desire to go, and stepping sideways didn't allow for him to breach the dimensional barrier into other universes.

He was still on this world... somewhere.

\*\*\*\*\*

Aauie snapped her eyes open and gasped, crying as she understood the terrible fact that she had been apart of what had caused that tiger man's turmoil. But she had a new mission to undertake... she had to right something of this wrong, before it went to far.

She stepped out of her meditation chamber, hurrying to her mistress's home even as droplets of heavy rain began to fall over the Core Island.

"Mother! Mother!!" she cried, pounding on Sanari's door with her small fist. "Please open the door!"

It began to pour even as Sanari opened her door, dressed only in her dressing gown rubbing sleep from her eyes.

"Aauie? What is it child?" she saw seeing the drenched elf cat in front of her

"Mother... L-lord Sage is about to do something very rash!"

\*\*\*\*\*

Lord Sage walked straight out of the rain, dripping sloppily as he walked past the Guards who turned to look at him in such a state. He looked as if he'd been soaked through, and did seem much thinner now that his fur all laid flat against his body. The two guards looked at one another, and decided to follow him as Sage descended, right into Meniko's inner sanctum.

The closer he got to the head mistress, the more tense they got, knowing of what had transpired two weeks ago. Sage paused before the great doors leading to her inner sanctum, and lowering his head, he lifted his hand, and his fingers flicked minutely and the whole door rung softly three times.

"Here now... Stop that!" the first guard demanded, lowering his stun pike.



“You’ll wake the mistress!!” the second said, and moved to lay a hand on Sage’s shoulder.

Sage, however, if he did not wish to be moved then he would not be so... not even by Rae Iksaki. As the guard placed a hand on Sage’s body and tried to pull him back, he was instead pulled forward by his own strength and slammed against Sage’s back as he was greeted by a trick of Magery Sage Called ‘*Temporal Anchoring.*’

It was then that the guard looked into Sage’s face, and saw heavy laden tears welling from his eyes as he looked back up at the door, his lower lip trembling as his hand twitched once, twice, thrice... and the door rung solidly each time his fingers flicked.

“Oh for Aul’s Sake... Can’t a body get any rest?!” came Meniko’s voice from beyond. “Come in!”

And the doors swung wide, and an angry Dragaseir grew even more angrier at the sight of Lord Sage standing there, smelling like a wet kitten.

“I am sorry, my lady... he barged inside without... hey!” he gasped as Sage started forward.

“Lord Sage, this had better be a life or death situation, or so help me I’ll... I’ll...”

Meniko’s voice didn’t trail off because she was at a loss of threats that would actually make the Weretiger worry, but rather, it trailed off in astonishment as he came to within one hundred paces in front of her, and slowly lowered himself to both knees.

She had studied his order since his arrival, and learned that to bow first meant to acknowledge that the person you are bowing to is the superior. To lower to one knee first meant that you have fealty for that person. As such, since coming here, Sage had never done more than nod to someone, and was always second to acknowledge their presence.

*And were those tears in his eyes?*

But then she watched as he bent forward, planted his hands on the ground pointing at one another as he lowered his head. Sanari had told her of this, and her mouth lowered in disbelief.

*He’s begging?!*

“Mother Meniko...” he said, his voice not even trembling one iota. “Please forgive my intrusion... But I need your help...”

“Help? What... sort of help?” he *was* begging, she gasped inwardly, and her curiosity, and above all compassion was strangely activated for this thorn in her side.

“Reconciliation...”

\*\*\*\*\*

Sanari rushed through the rain, hiking up her skirts with Aauie close behind her, abandoning her own demure presence behind her in her rush to get to where Sage was. Her heart ached as she entered into the Pinnacle Tower, her clothing drying out immediately as she then glided over the marble walkways and moved downward into the tower. Aauie did the same behind her, and at the base of the tower, where Meniko made her home, she found several of the head faculty already there, even Govnov in a pair of striped pajama bottoms, and several confused guards.

And then she stopped, seeing Sage on his knees.

Sanari stepped forward and as if sensing her, those who had their backs to her turned and upon seeing her, let her through.

“Are... you sure you wish to do this Sage.” Meniko said... utter confusion suffusing her words. Her features looked pained.

“I am.” Sage said; his head still bowed. “I have... checked... by proxy... and have found that it is totally legal.”

Sanari’s heart pattered and she tried to open her mouth while Meniko thought very hard and pained around something inside her head. It looked like it pained her to consider it.

“Mother, do not let her say...” Aauie began, pressing against Sanari’s back.

“Yes.” Meniko finished, and Sage paused. “Govnov... please make the arrangements.”

“Y-yes... mistress Meniko.” Govnov bowed and disappeared into his apartments close by his desk.

Sanari stepped forward, looked at Meniko’s pained look, saw the tears in Sage’s eyes.

“Sage... what has happened?” Sanari said, trying to keep the demand out of her voice. All of her years of calm seemed to fall away at that moment. She was tired... confused... she hadn’t been that way in a long time. “Sage?” she said as he rose, and bowed very deeply toward Meniko, and then he turned to her.

And she felt her heart ache and then clench immediately inside her chest at the look of those eyes.

Usually, his eyes were of a dark jade or emerald in color. When he was truly angered, they turned red. But now... now they had turned blue-green. Almost aqua.

“Sage?” she repeated, wanting an answer.

Sage stepped forward, and lifting his hands, smiled at her genuinely... sadly... and then kissed her forehead, and then slowly walked off. She noted that the guards and faculty made a *wide* hole for him to pass through.

“Meniko... what has happened?!” she demanded then, all her graceful pretenses abandoned in her urgency.

“Sage...” Meniko swallowed. “Has bargained for Reconciliation...”

\*\*\*\*\*

Siklohn Dousaka was huddled on his bed, feeling the freezing, freezing cold of this dark place on the Demon League’s Homeworld. Only thoughts of his beloved Caliban kept him marginally warm. Magics here only allowed him to feel the cold... not die from it. But it pierced him... even through all his thoughts of Caliban.

Then there was a sound, the sound of his cell door being unlocked and the bolts being drawn, and as he lay there, shivering, his eyes snapped open, his fur frosted on the ends, and it was painful for his eyes to open so suddenly from the cold having frozen them shut. His head raised out of the warmth of his ball as the door opened, and two of the Black Guards to this feared jail surged in, grabbed him by either arm and hauled him out. Siklohn’s mind also seemed to have numbed from the cold, he was trying to understand why they had taken him out.

*Had it been a month already?*

A heavy woolen blanket was thrown across his shoulders as he was lead through steadily increasing warmth, but when they rose to the higher levels, he was still shivering uncontrollably, gritting his teeth to keep them from chattering, he was finally admitted into the central room of where Hawthorne and Genohn alone stood.

Like Meniko’s own home, the place for Hawthorne was vast, with black tile, and black marble splintered with red, gilded with precious metals and stones. Hawthorne lay in a great curved bowl with heavy cushions while he smoked from a truly monolithic hookah.

The pair of them were strangely silent.

“Why have I been summoned?” Siklohn asked with that cold air of his, helped along with the chill in his body. He wouldn’t even be *feeling* this cold if not for Sage deactivating his pain inhibitors. But then, he wouldn’t be able to aptly feel Caliban’s touches if not for this act either. It was this last thought that had occupied him while he thought about the cold and what had got him there.

*Did he truly plan that?*

“My... isn’t he one to be demanding in his current position. That’s it, it’s official... I don’t like him... and I *really* don’t like his father now.”

Siklohn did not retort, but just waited for an answer.

“Someone has bartered a reprieve for you Prince Dousaka.” Genohn said; ignoring his patron as his great wings folded about his shoulders like a feathered hood and cloak. “You will be returning to the main school immediately.

Siklohn’s shock at being denied his punishment for his actions made his jaw drop, but instead of opening his mouth, all he managed to do was allow his teeth to chatter.

“We will be leaving immediately.”

“‘We,’ Lord Genohn.” Siklohn said, his mind now beginning to speed up now that he was getting warmer.

“Yes, immediately.” He said and placed his hands on the prince’s shoulders.

Siklohn looked up at the wolf, one of the Omega Class super powers in the universe, this cold, calculating wolf was showing a look of confusion. A being with a mind as advanced as his... was showing confusion.

“Keep your blanket tight around you... my teleportation is quite cold, but not as cold as that in which you’ve just endured.”

“A question before we go,” Siklohn managed to control his chattering teeth long enough to ask. “How long have I been in confinement?”

“Two weeks.” Genohn muttered, and immediately a pentagram erupted on the floor, and they were jerked upward in a powerful teleportation spell that allowed the transference between worlds.

\*\*\*\*\*

Sanari paced, her lips trembling while her eyes glittered.

In her heart, she was praying... praying hard, while Aauie sat in the corner on a stool, her hands on her lap and her head bowed.

“Mother...” Aauie said at last and Sanari stopped, tears finally welling over from her eyes. “Mother... please forgive me.”

Sanari's mouth trembled even more, and she collapsed to her knees in the center of her home, hands to her face as she sobbed.

Eakjo, not understanding what was happening to his surrogate mother walked forward cautiously on hands and feet, then reached up to touch her. Sanari looked down at him, and then snatched Eakjo to her, and soon had Aauie close by to embrace.

"Great Aul... please... do not take him away..." she prayed, and then bent her head and sobbed.

\*\*\*\*\*

Dallas's functions stopped in mid processing as a note from the core school arrived as his whole system experienced his first system wide shock since he was an automaton.

Everywhere his drones stopped what they were doing, and where his principal drone was it began to weep.

Students walking in the hall noticed this, and seeing Dallas's principal drone weep, let them know that something was seriously, seriously wrong...

\*\*\*\*\*

The doorbell rang to Kina's home. It rang again after a slight pause, and Kina, who'd been sprawled on the couch fast asleep; dreaming of a wild orgy after a grand hunt was quite irritable as she awoke.

"What in the name of... COMING!" she barked and hauled herself erect. "Coming..." She said, and wiped her face clean, smelled her arm pit, gave off a hearty whoof from the smell and then rose to her feet, scratching her rear as she struggled to awake.

"Alright..." she called. "Who in the hell has the gall to bother me at this hour?!" and then she yanked open the door and stopped.

For a second she thought she was looking at pitch darkness through the falling rain, but then there was a lightning crash, and she was surprised to see one of those new Dragoons duck down to look at her from underneath the door jam of her considerable door.

"I am Dragoon Alkenphel, here as a special security detail for High Inquisitor Domasque. I am here to remand Mayia Gallant into custody.

A datapad, with official looking seals and such was thrust into Kina's hands, and after wiping the screen clear, she read the order. As she read, her jaw fell further and further from her jaw.

"Great Maker..." she whispered, covering her mouth in disbelief.

“Is she here?” the Dragoon stated... the next evolution in combat Cyborgs to the Siege trooper. Alkenphel has been upgraded since that tournament too... so many years ago it was.

Kina merely pointed to the back rooms, and the towering Dragoon now ducked underneath the jam and slid sideways through it to enter, and Kina saw several other guards beyond waiting. Both the black guards of the Demon League, and the Gold Guards of the Mystic League. There were also soldiers back there.

Kina sat down and reread the order again and again before Mayia emerged; her arm held gently by the cyborg’s deactivated vibro-claws. Mayia looked at Kina as she watched from a chair, the order in her hands, and Mayia remarked on the look her new mentor gave her.

It was pitying... and pained... *what has happened?*

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Despite that this whole affair was to remain relatively secret, the Black Inquisitor Ship that had arrived during the night drew attention.

Rae was greeted by the sight of that dark omen upon awaking and throwing up her curtains to let some of the cool rain air in. At seeing the ship, she immediately felt a growing sense of dread everywhere, and it pained her to feel it, and without another thought she threw off her robe, and dressed.

A quick transport and she was in Meniko’s chambers.

Mother looked as if s hadn’t slept last night. Even her soul was troubled...

“Mother?” Rae urged as she stepped up to Meniko.

She was in her titanic dragoness form; her claws folded one over the other, with one gigantic claw tapping the ground like the sound of a mallet against the stone.

Meniko turned her head, truly perplexed and at a loss of words.

“Mother what has happened?”

“Every time I think I have that damned tiger figured out, he goes out and does something truly... perplexing. Either he is being utterly foolish, or utterly noble.

“Mother?”

“He begged me to do it. He *begged* me, and I set it up for him... and they... they did it so fast!”

“Mother?! What’s happened?” Rae said, truly feeling the dread in the schools around her.

Meniko tells her chief student, and Rae gasps, collapses to her knees and stares at her mentor...

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“By order of the High Inquisitor, in the name of Emperor Jaikard and in accordance to the laws of the Imperium, in regards to Mayia Gallant, and Siklohn Dousaka.” Dallas read, looking down at the official communiqué beamed to him from the home school.

“Mayia Gallant has been found guilty of murder in the first degree on six hundred and fifty three counts. She has also been found guilty of assault and battery on a remaining fifty six counts. She has been sentenced to electrocution for one second for every murder, or until dead.”

The assembled School gasped and murmured in disbelief at this, and words of such disbelief continued till Dallas lifted his hand to silence them all.

“Prince Siklohn Dousaka has been found guilty of over one thousand counts of mayhem, assault and battery, and insurrection; a crime that is found by the Court of the Imperium to be second only to treason. He has been sentenced to electrocution for one second for each count, or until dead.”

Incredible outrage arose from this, especially from Siklohn’s core team at the thought that their leader was to be killed for his actions. All except Geevo; who’d grown deftly silent at hearing that his potential lover was to be put to death.

*Damn you Sage*, he cursed, balling up his fists. *Mayia and Siklohn too?! You are a monster!*

“Lord Sage...” Dallas said then, and then choked before swallowing. “Lord Sage Preypacer, Headmaster of the Shadow League Chapter of the Mystic League... in accordance with the Law of Reconciliation... has chosen to take the punishments of Mayia Gallant, and Prince Siklohn Dousaka. In exchange for clearing their records and allowing for a reduced penalty for penance in their actions.”

Everything stopped in that chamber. Every heart paused, every breath stopped, every curse halted. Dallas raised his hand to wipe his eyes free and then continued.

“L-lord Sage Preypacer shall be tried by the pain of electrocution at twelfth bell at the High Energy Facility of the Core School, or until dead. Administered by High Inquisitor Domasque with full authority by Emperor Jaikard Savarc.

Geevo looked up, and tears erupted from his eyes at hearing this, and he surged to his feet, wiping his eyes off as Goath'El tried to lay a hand on his in passing but missed.

\*\*\*\*\*

“No!” Mayia screamed, and she immediately rounded on Siklohn who'd been standing beside her. “You fucking bastard!” and she pounded on his chest with a strength that had been enhanced several fold since the time Siklohn had taken her throat in his hand. He was forced backward as she surged up to him, still hitting him with her balled fists. “This is all your fault! **YOUR FAULT!**”

Siklohn was stunned, and like what was happening a lot lately to many of the people hearing this order, he felt a kink in his brain that stopped the workings of his mighty thoughts.

“Why?” he asked, mutely as Mayia collapsed against him, sobbing, and in spite of himself he lifted his arms to hold her as he stared at the soldier who'd read off the order. He continued to hold Mayia now as she cried against his chest.

“Why?”

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“Reconciliation... he'd said.” Meniko answered Rae as she stared up at Meniko. “I... He got on his knees and begged me to do this.”

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“But that will kill him!” Sanari cried as she read and reread the terrible order again and again. “Damn you Sage! Damn your pride!”

“...”

“Don't leave me...”

\*\*\*\*\*

Sage sat atop a lightning rod high above everything, his vision allowing him to see the goings on everywhere. He'd masked himself in every regard possible. Even mentally with a Null Mind technique. It shut off his ability to use Psionics, but then it also made him invisible to all other psychics as well. Especially Aauie.

The ways of the assassin. And who would find him atop a lightning rod during a storm?



As he sat there, he felt another wave of someone trying to find him, and let it pass over him and through him as if he weren't there.

He never felt so disjointed, but Fate... it seems, needed a sacrifice from him.

Sage closed his eyes... feeling the cool water splatter against him as he sat there, and then his ear twitched as he felt a new power activating, and felt it rise immeasurably. At first he thought it was Rae trying to use her overwhelming power to find something that on all accounts wasn't there, save for visibly at the moment. But that can be remedied with a thought as well.

But the power focused, and then far below a sphere of null space formed as the rain splattered against a bubble of reality. In the center of that bubble arrived a wisp of blue green which rapidly began to spin, and like drilling a hole in the space time continuum, ruptured a vortex of blue and green, and a dimensional power erupted outward into the bubble.

Sage sat forward, one leg dangling off the large ball of the lightning rod, and looking down managed a soft smile as a lone white robed figure stepped out. Wolf like, with a staff gripped in one hand and a bandanna over both eyes.

Sage smiled as he recognized his brother Patch from high above even despite all the turmoil in his chest. And then he frowned as two lines of Holy Order High Masters stepped out of the portal, followed by a final immense and draconic figure, and Sage sat forward in disbelief.

“Drake?”

The portal closed and the bubble snapped as the armored creature in the back lifted a hand and felt the water, and then looked up.

Sage phased out of existence immediately, and his master turned away again.

The creature known as Drake, a white-scaled winged creature then directed the twin lines of High masters – two humans, two seven-tailed kitsune, two white falcons, two arctic wolves, two white tigers, and two polar bears – in a direction, and they marched in step forward, one after the other, in a perfect one-two step.

Drake then seemed to dissolve into the water as it fell on him, like a ripple, and Sage, bending over, saw Patch heading for the grounds kept by the Grace League.

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Sanari clutched onto one of her many tomes that acted as her diary. This one contained the passages as to when she'd first met Lord Sage. She'd been sitting on the floor in a corner, clutching that book to her.

Her eyes were red with crying, and she had no more water to cry.

Aauie arrived with a glass of water for her, and in spite of her desire not to cry, she nonetheless accepted it and drank.

Aauie remained remarkably silent.

Then there was a sudden knock at the door.

Sanari's head raised and she looked at Aauie before Sanari rushed to her feet and moved swiftly to the door. Sage had disappeared after leaving Meniko's chambers, literally, and every effort of the most powerful members of the League, even Aauie and Rae, had failed to find him. She hoped that this was at last him at the door, and she yanked it open, only to see an oddity before her.

A white as snow wolf, tall, with powerful muscles wrapped in white robes and carrying a staff stood before her.

Taller than any Aphkian, it took this creature to raise its head and show the tell-tale white bandanna over his eyes, which was emblazoned with a red eye.

“Good evening, Mother of Songs... Might I come in?”

“L-lord Patch?!” she gasped, and hastily stepped aside to allow him entry.

Sanari noted that he looked younger than before... stronger.

This blind werewolf walked easily to one of the chairs and sat down, opening the top of his robes to reveal that now he too had a dragon seed of pure white imbedded in the center of his chest.

The same type Sage had. *Does this mean he's now immortal now too?*

Despite being blind, Sanari respected this werewolf for his immense sensory abilities. He could hear a pin drop a mile away. Quite literally. All of his senses had been super enhanced at birth... just like Sage's healing factor had been super enhanced by chance of birth. Patch, however, had to endure his eyes being burned out even by dim lights till he finally lost his sight while still a babe.

But without his eyes, he saw everything, everywhere, for miles at a time depending on circumstances, and had several Psionic extra sensual abilities that made him quite astute.

And like herself, Lord Patch blazed with spiritual might, being his order's high priest.

Sanari sat down, and unbidden, Aauie brought in tea.

“You both seem troubled.” He said quietly, sampling the warmth of his cup of tea by touching the bowl with his fingers, and then breathing in deeply of its fragrance before tasting it.

Patch always took the time to sense something.

“Patch... you must know what’s going on.” Sanari almost cried.

“I do.” He said before taking another drink and replacing his cup on the table. “Dallas has been very helpful of allowing us to keep tabs up on my brother.”

“Then you’re here to stop him?” she said hopefully.

“No. To send him off...” he said and his head bowed.

“But why?” she gasped, leaning forward, wanting to know this answer.

Patch’s hand actually trembled as he moved it to take his tea again, and abandoning the attempt, he clenched his hand and placed it gently on the table beside the cup in a fist.

“By careful deliberation in the High Council of the Holy Order, being that Sage is an Inner Circle member which makes us broken without him and unable to decide, the decision moves to the outer circle. The Outer Circle was broken in its decision. Amidst our deliberation, our Center of the Circle arrived, and deemed that being that Sage is amidst a foreign universe, so then must we abide by his decision and their laws.”

Sanari bit her lip and lowered her head heavily. Her most recent hope had just been dashed.

Patch leaned forward and took her hands in his mighty large ones. “To lay one’s life down for another, let alone for two, is an incredible honor, Sanari.”

“So this is all about honor?!” Sanari demanded as she surged to his feet, staring disbelievingly at him.

“No.” he answered, and standing, his staff hanging by itself in the air straight up and down as he let go of it. “It is about obeying Sage’s core being, to protect those he loves.” He reached forward and embraced the much smaller Cersile into his massive body, and she was able to listen to his strong heartbeat. “But still... there is... something else, I feel... motivating his actions.

“We must have faith that he knows what he’s doing.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Sage sat beneath Sanari's open window, his hand perched over his knee while the rain dripped off his claws.

He dared not make a sound with Patch so close by, but tears nonetheless slid down his cheeks amidst the rain.

He knew that he was hurting those he loved with this mad plan, and if he saw Sanari right now, he wasn't sure whether or not he could go through with it. He rose, and as silent as a ghost, he slipped off away from her window, brushing his hand longingly against the stone.

\*\*\*\*\*

The faculty was almost fearful when the twin lines of some sort of alien morphic race on crack showed up at the front door to the Pinnacle Tower, and all of them formed up before the door outside in the rain.

Each of them was physically more imposing than nearly every last member of the Mystic League. Nearly every member... there were of course obvious exceptions, but not many. Taller, stronger, with only the tiny Kitsune and even smaller humanoids being under eight feet in height.

All of them were dressed in like uniforms. Wicked Talons, sharp claws, and vicious supernatural strength the lot of them... with the possible exception of the two humans.

All of them were armed and armored, and were dressed in the uniform exhibited by Lord Sage himself.

The Golden Guards in their fine golden armor and stun staves looked warily at them as they formed up with the precision of soldiers, all turned toward one another, and with heads bowed and hands on sword hilts, did not move a muscle until a man clad all in white robes, with white hair and goatee, strode forward out of the rain dry as a bone. As one, the twin lines all thudded a fist to their chests in his presence.

"Pardon for my intrusion," he said. "Worry not about these fine warriors, they shall not cause any trouble unless provoked." The two guards nodded mutely at this stranger. "If I may, is the Lady of the house in? I wish to speak with her."

They nodded again, and one of the partners hit his fellow on the shoulder epaulette to get him to move into action to do his job.

"Y-yes... this way please." And left with the stranger, leaving his partner there to look at all those warriors by himself.

The stranger did not make any move for combat or hostility, so the guard leading him was a little less tense as he admitted him into Meniko's presence.

“A visitor to see you, Great Mother.” The guard bowed, and the robed figure stepped past him and stopped within one hundred paces of the great Dragaseir on her bed.

“Who are you?” Meniko asked simply, looking down at this saintly looking human in his fine robes.

“A humble protector, my lady. I am known as Drake. I have come to ask the Lady of the House for permission to be present at my ward’s punishment. Namely the being you call Lord Sage.”

“Your ‘ward?’” Meniko repeated.

“I’ve looked over him since he was a child. He is much like a son to me.”

Meniko’s mind whirled as she looked at this new entity. Like Sage he was an enigma, with no apparent radiation of power meaning that he was hiding all his strength. She knew that Sage was over ninety years old by now, perhaps even a century old... and this creature before her didn’t look a day over thirty as humans go.

“I... do not see a reason why you cannot.” Meniko admitted to him, and Drake bowed.

“I thank you. As a final note... we understand that Lord Sage is making peace with himself before facing his trial he’s placed upon himself.”

“He cannot be found, if that’s what you mean. If he runs away...”

The stranger’s head jerked upward suddenly with a stern glance as if to say *‘don’t you ever dishonor him by suggesting that again.’* It came as if it were her own thoughts... and she mistook it for her own at first as Meniko caught that look of warning as this creature exhaled a calming breath and the mood returned to its recent cordial manner.

“I assure you, Sage’s word is absolute. He will arrive to take his trial. But to inform you, there are several members of our order at your main gates who have expressed their wishes to send Sage off. They will do little more than stand at your gates unless seriously provoked.”

“As long as they do little more than that, sir.” She managed at last.

“I thank you.” He bowed again. “We have been informed as of the time. I and another will be arriving early...”

Meniko watched as he rose and turned to leave, but raised a great taloned hand as he neared the great double doors.

“Who are you... really? She asked, her curiosity getting the better of her.”

“I am... many things, Menikomenqolui-Esoliandrioxol.” Meniko gasped as he used the fullness of her name. “Above all right now, I am a very pained father who is afraid he is about to lose his son.” This humanoid turned to her then and she froze at the sight of a pair of light green eyes and the beauty of a Dragon’s eye in the center of his forehead now, blazing like a third eye. “One final thing, my lady... Thank you... for helping my son.”

This creature bowed deeper than ever, and when he rose, his eyes had returned to their normal green and his third eye was gone.

“I shall see you on the morrow...”

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Sage had been drawn to Sanari’s door three times later that night, and each time he had heard her crying softly inside, till the third time, he couldn’t bare it any more, and lifting his hand, rapped on her door softly.

The door was opened slowly by Aauie, and as she looked up at him, seeing those piercing glowing eyes of his that had been turned aqua, she gasped. “Mother.” She whispered at last, and the door was pulled open fully to reveal Sanari’s pained face.

Sage was immediately held by her as she forgot all pretenses and surged into his body, embracing his middle as she was soon drenched from the water of the falling rain. Sage’s arms fell down about her head as he said nothing, hugging her gently to his chest, and Aauie saw every last vestige of the monster many saw of Sage melt away in favor of this immensely gentle creature while he rubbed his lips against his lovmate’s hair, trying to imprint her scent into himself.

“Oh you are soaked to the bone!” Sanari fretted, please come in!

She grabbed his hands and Sage resisted, until she looked back at him with that pained look, and his heart absolutely broke apart in his chest before he followed her into the room.

“Aauie... please get a hot bath running.” She said, and tried prying Sage’s trousers from his body, surprised that they were resisting her efforts as Aauie rushed off.

Still not saying a word, Sage took her hands in his and kissed them both.

New tears broke from her eyes as she stared up at that determined look on his face. “Why?” she whispered, voice cracking heavily.

Sage moved one of his hands to calm her trembling lips with a pair of fingers on her small mouth, and then turned his hand to cup her beautiful face.

“Reconciliation, responsibility, love, protection, sacrifice...”

Honor was nowhere in those words. Aauie stood in the background, her hands folded before her as her own eyes began to well up with tears from this new tragedy. It pained her all the more knowing that she’d had a hand in it.

Sanari knew that he’d resigned himself to his fate, knew that he had the power to alter it... but why didn’t he? *Sacrifice.*

It shot into her head, and saw the intense look in Sage's eyes, his third eye hidden behind his sopping mane, but knew he'd been reading her mind.

He looked as if he'd been out in the rain for a week.

"We need to get you out of these clothes, you must be freezing..." she said mutely, and again began fumbling with his trousers, but this time, they simply melted away, revealing a nude Sage standing before her as the black tendrils that was his clothing slid right into his flesh.

He did not shiver, and for that matter, he didn't regard the cold at all. Such was a trait of a Frost Clan Lycan; those were born in the freezing wastelands of his homeworld, and often died in them. The cold was a companion to them. It reinforced the purity of friendship... and love to them.

"We need to get you warm; you'll catch your death."

Another Impossibility, she knew. Sage's healing factor was incalculable thus far. If he got sick, then it meant that everyone else around him was in danger of contracting a class four or class five super virus.

His hands nonetheless moved to hold her face, so that he could look into her eyes. He barely blinked; he simply dripped rainwater freely on Sanari's floor.

The affections between the two of them were real, but neither of them ever really said the words "I love you" to one another. Sage looked as if he so dearly wanted to just then, and Sanari's heart ached that she couldn't manage it either.

She finally did take hold of his hands from her face, rubbed her cheek against his fingers and then led him into the bathroom.

There she too disrobed into all her naked glory, and for the second time, she bathed, and then anointed her lord in the sacred oils of her order. He was remarkably silent, but he touched her hand or her face every chance he got. It was like making love...

Later, she brushed his white pelt and combed his mane straight back before tying it up at its end with a dark green ribbon.

Once she was done, Sage remained still, only opening his eyes to look at his reflection in Sanari's mirror, and waited for the time of his fate.

Sanari, again in her fine robes, looked down at her lord, and did not move a muscle. She wanted him in her presence for as long as it was possible.

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Two weeks ago, Mayia and Siklohn had been bitter rivals that had led to them being the generals on two separate sides of an insurrection. A damn bloody one at that. Now Mayia clung to Siklohn, in shock that her beloved master was still doing this.

Even now, resting in Siklohn's hand was the petition that Lord Sage himself had written regarding this:

*I Lord Sage, Headmaster of the Shadow League chapter of the Mystic League, in Accordance to the Law of Reconciliation, do hereby give myself as sacrifice for the actions of my students Mayia Gallant and Prince Siklohn of Dousaka.*

*The responsibilities of their actions are mine to bear due to my failure as their teacher.*

*Siklohn Dousaka did not commit an insurrection, but like any good soldier, he challenged the will of his superior in a time of peace. He was right to do so, which is the right of a soldier to question his superiors and even removing them from their service in an act of their discretion.*

*I have... bullied Prince Siklohn, and even tortured him during my lessons. He should be commended for his forthright sense of justice in attempting to remove me from the position of headmaster.*

*Mayia Gallant's actions are not considered murder, but rather a release of her pent up angers in the form of a subconscious manifestation of destruction. This manifestation was unlocked but not treated by me, and so the deaths caused by her body's hands are as if they were done by my own.*

*I have taught her technique without control.*

*Under these circumstances, I will seek their penance for them in return for their freedom from these crimes, so that other than those who are privy to what had happened on the island of the Shadow League, knowledge of their actions shall go no further. Their records shall be purged, and other than the arrangements designed by the Headmistress of the Mystic League, they shall not suffer any further than they already have.*

*I make this petition having sound mind in my decision making.*

*Signed,  
Lord Sage Preypacer  
Headmaster of the League of the Shadow Arts*

Siklohn had been remarkably tight-lipped since hearing that his enemy was indeed sacrificing himself like this. Mayia hadn't spoken either in hours.

*Why?* He uttered in his mind over and over... unable to comprehend its logic.

The two of them since arriving had been quarantined from the rest of the school.

*The two of you have been tried under very serious allegations, Sato Hima had said. Rampage, and insurrection, and all the other crimes that go along with it. He had paused... Lord Sage has... placed himself as a sacrificial lamb for you both, with only one condition: You must watch his punishment...*

Siklohn paused massaging his temples with one hand as he thought hard about the paradox he'd been presented with.

*Why would such a man die for me?* He thought. *Especially after what I did to his school and his students? Why would he willingly give up his life for me?*



The logic of humans was so damnably erratic and incomprehensible.

"No... just some humans." Came a voice, and Siklohn started as two figures entered into the chamber, one a towering white wolf with five fingers and a bandanna over his eyes, and the other an upright human with a white goatee and long white hair.

"Sir?"

"Pardon the intrusions." The wolf said now, and Siklohn realized that it was the man who'd spoken first.

Mayia uncoiled from Siklohn, Rubbing her eyes of tears as she sat up a little better to see these two.

"W-who are you?" she asked.

"Family of Lord Sage." The man said, and nodded to Mayia. "He knelt down in front of her and took her hands in his. "I think I understand a little more as to Sage's motives. He always was a secretive and solitary creature... but that's the nature of his bond animal after all unless mated.

"Excuse me sir, but what *are* his motives?" Siklohn asked, a need for an answer rising up in him. Mayia sat up much straighter to listen.

"In the Holy Order, among the most honored positions is that of a teacher." The great white wolf stated. "Along with it comes incredible responsibility. Responsibility with another's life and their actions."

The human was rubbing the backs of Mayia's fingers, trying to comfort her. But Mayia paused in her breathing and then suddenly looked up at the towering wolf.

"Responsibility... for another's actions?" she repeated.

"If a student is to go on a rampage, or go rouge, it is up to the master to hunt down the offender and silence them."

"Silence?" Siklohn repeated now.

"In whatever way possible." The human said now. "Only the Law of Sacrifice supersedes this first law. It is the act that if a master still believes that a body can be saved, they will take a punishment in accordance with the severity of the crimes.

"Your own laws apparently have a loophole in them similar to this."

"As I understand it, sir Siklohn," the wolf spoke now. "That if you were to continue in life, an insurrection planted on your permanent record would have marred you for the rest of your life. Destruction of family honor and the whole bit. From what I have received from Sage's periodic Communiqués, he was most concerned about you... Called you a son even."

"That is the highest honor a teacher in our order can bestow on a student, Siklohn Dousaka." The human said then. Even more so if he says it to your face..."

"But... he's never..."

"He tried to." Mayia spoke up at last, her hands folded together in her lap. "On several occasions, but never got to the actual saying of it because of something else happening. I could feel it on his surface thoughts, and I was honestly jealous of you for it, Siklohn. Hence... some of my animosity toward you.

"I..." Siklohn began, but went no further. The kink in his head grew larger and tighter

"You Mayia," the human continued. "Under your laws, and ours... you would've been executed for what you did.

New tears immediately welled up in her eyes.

"Now master is going to die for us?" she asked.

"He sees your actions as his own personal failure as a teacher, and so he will take your punishments to protect you from harm." The human said and then stood up. "I'm glad to have met you two... you will be remarkable additions to the order some day. Good evening."

He bowed and turned to leave, and the great towering wolf did likewise right on his heels. Mayia and Siklohn sat dejectedly in their small room; awaiting the appointed hour.

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Rae had never felt so many minds awake so late at night. No one was sleeping, and the rain seemed to be crying for this most recent tragedy. *Or is it a continuing one?* She thought...

She stood naked before her window in a darkened room, still having trouble sleeping, especially now as she watched a cargo ship detach from the High Inquisitor's vessel, which then offloaded a rather large device beside the high energy tower.

Sage was almost as large of a presence in her as Makahn was, having once taken her into his arms and loved her as well as a male could love her. Mentally, emotionally, spiritually and of course spiritually. Sage was one of many god fathers for her children. Not a primary one, but one nonetheless. He'd even been there to help her daughter pass from her and into the world. It was his hands that her daughter had passed into first. She still loved that aged tiger for his tenderness toward her, his unrelenting friendship and loyalty.

Right now... it felt as if a piece of her had been severed off and had been placed off to one side to be snuffed out at a later time.

He'd loved her so thoroughly that he'd altered fate for she and her children to make her happier, and every time he did so, he paid the price for it. *And now was he altering fate for others now?*

She held herself and shivered, just shortly before a heavy blanket was wrapped around her and she was embraced from behind by her husband, Makahn.

In his wisdom, when Makahn had challenged Sage for her, Makahn no where near able to defeat Sage, ever, Sage had stepped away, recognizing the heart that had loved her more. He sacrificed his own happiness for hers.

"Come to bed, dearest heart." Makahn whispered into her ear, nuzzling her cheek.

"I can't sleep." She said, and hugged herself tighter, pushing her bosom up over her thick arms.

Makahn removed the blanket from off her, whipped it around his shoulders, and now pressed his nude body against hers and wrapped them both in the heavy blanket.

"Neither can I, so I'll stay awake right here with you."

Rae stepped backward into her husband as he embraced her tighter, and lifting her head to watch the procession of executioners and their particle collider move into the High Energy Facility, she began to cry.

\*\*\*\*\*

Geevo eventually made it to the main island of the Mystic League. His determination was so great that if the ferryman hadn't gotten up off his butt, then he would've swum all the way across the channel to get here. It took some doing to find out where Mayia was being held, but he finally did so.

"Please! It's important! I must see her." He pleaded with the golden armored guard.

"I am sorry sir, but Menikomenqolui has commanded that the prisoners must remain in seclusion."

"Damn you! Let... me... *see her!*"

The guard did not say another word, and in frustration, Geevo turned and struck at the nearest thing, and stopped, surprised that the towering stone pillar shattered easily beneath his blow. Repair bots scurried forward to reconstruct the pillar as it had been, but Geevo, surprised at this sudden burst of strength looked down at his four-fingered hand as it was pelted by the rain, then shot one last angered look at the guard and shunted off.

But he didn't go far.

The sun was beginning to rise now, and as it rose, he looked up and saw a familiar figure sitting beneath the rain shadow of a tree.

"Caliban?" he managed.

What a sight this was... She loved Siklohn, he loved Mayia. Was it ironic that he and Caliban were roommates, and Siklohn and Mayia were also roommates?

She nodded to him, merely holding herself there.

"I tried too. They wouldn't let me in either." She said as he approached.

She shivered, and taking pity, Geevo in his sexily cut garb and nigh feminine body, lowered his hand and his sash uncoiled out of nowhere. This he wrapped about her and spoke a quick incantation, and the hot pink sash warmed up so much that steam began to rise in the air around Caliban.

"Thank you." The vixen said.

Like himself, she was perhaps considering long and hard of all the things that had happened this past month. Geevo sat on the ground beside her and the pair of them watched that guard standing before the door to where their lovers were.

"It's all like some bad dream." Caliban said at last. Geevo lowered his head and did not answer, all the while the light around them continued to rise.

For the next several hours, they remained perfectly still... and awaited the appointed hour.

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Eleventh bell chimed its toll, and thirty minutes later came the single tone of the half bell. As if on cue, Sage lifted to his feet in one fluid motion, and was immediately met by Sanari as she came to his side. He tried to smile comfortingly for her as he reached across himself to touch her cheek, palming one whole side of her head only to feel renewed tears against his fingers.

He then turned and began to walk.

Sanari clung to his side as they walked together, she forming a bubble of force around them to keep the rain off her lord, and as they came to the high energy facility, she saw twin rows of six individuals suddenly come to attention.

She'd only seen their like on Earth... Lycans, and of course a pair of humans.

As Sage passed by them, they all pounded their fists to their chests and bowed their heads. "Strength and honor." They said, two at a time. Just inside the doors, Patch and another human male stood before them. "Strength and honor." Patch said simply, and then bowed out of his brother's way. Immediately, two of the executioners arrived and took hold of Sage's arms firmly, the two executioners dwarfed by Sage's massive form, and he was led away from Sanari, who tried to touch him for as long as possible, her hand reached out to him as he was led downward.

The Particle Collider had been set up in the dungeons, within the same room as the punishment chamber. The one used to seal powers. Behind a glass partition was several individuals. Mayia and Siklohn had been pushed to the front and were held there each by one armored and armed Aphkei soldier, and as Sage was brought in, Mayia jumped at the glass.

"Master!" she cried, new tears in her eyes.

Sage paused long enough to place his hand against the glass, and gave her a small comforting smile, and Mayia placed her hand over his against her side of the glass before he was again led away.

Behind the two wayward students were Meniko, Drake, Rae and Makahn, Eqis, Daedalus, Patch, Sato Hima, and Kina, who stepped forward to drag her new student away from the glass even as Sanari entered. Geevo and Caliban were not allowed into this chamber. They – like many of the other students and faculty – now watched all of this through Dallas's trideo upload. All watched as Sage shrugged off the hold of the two black-robed executioners, and walked up to the Particle Collider as it parted and opened, revealing a platform between two massive coils, which were thusly attached to power generators like mini reactors. From the ends of the two massive coils came a cylindrical apparatus that opened up, feathering like the petals of a flower, revealing a wicked looking construct on the inside.

Two thick handles made of conductive metal were proffered for Sage, and reaching out first to one, and then the next, he stood there for a moment before three clamps per arm snapped downward to pierce the flesh of his thick forearms. Sage didn't even flinch as he permitted these to bite into him, imbedding in deep before they screwed in deeper and locked into place as their points touched themselves somewhere deep inside his arms.

Bracers then locked down and clamped those together, before another pair of bracers slid outward and clamped down to encase the whole of his forearms before his arms were stretched backward and twisted forward to disallow him the mobility to break free.

The High Inquisitor stepped forward then, and to the eyes and ears of those gathered, and all those watching across four schools; they watched the High Inquisitor unravel a scroll.

"Lord Sage Preypacer of Earth, Prime Universe, Headmaster of the Shadow League, you have dully subjected yourself under your own free will to our laws, in order to pay for the crimes of Prince Siklohn Dousaka of the Dousaka Clan, and Mayia Gallant of Olivera to clear them of such crimes.

"In accordance to their crimes... you have been sentenced to thirty minutes under the pain of electrocution or death, which ever is achieved first. May Aul have mercy on your soul.

"Do you have any last words for yourself?"

Sage looked up at the people behind the glass.

"Dear God, forgive me for my failures..." and his head fell downward.

An Aphkei donned a black hood and then approached, placing a metal mouth guard in Sage's mouth before retreating to a control panel.

"Roll on one." The High Inquisitor stated, and the Chief Executioner pushed several switches forward on his panel, and four turbines, two on either side moving in opposition to one another, charged up.

The inquisitor then lifted his hand and waited as the clock ticked off the seconds. Rae bent her head into her husband and hid her face as the emotions of all of the leaguers all around her plummeted.

Sanari's lips trembled openly.

And then the clock struck the first bell of noon.

"No!" Sanari screamed, and surged to Meniko in her beautiful bird maiden form. "Let them take me instead, do not let them do this. I'll go in his stead!"

The clock chimed again.

"No! Take me!" Mayia cried, rounding on Meniko, breaking free of Kina's grasp. "They're my crimes... I should endure them!"

To his utmost shame, Siklohn remained silent but frozen on the spot, staring at Sage.

The clock chimed thrice more before Meniko raised her hand. "Stop!" she said.

And the bell struck once more, the Inquisitor turning to look at her. "My lady, we must execute someone for these crimes."

The sixth bell chimed.

"No." a singular voice carried over all... though whispered, all heard it.

The seventh bell chimed as all turned to Sage.

"My students shall not be punished because of my failing as a teacher."

The eighth bell.

"I am sorry, Prince Siklohn, for my unfeeling misunderstanding. In my eyes there was only one way, which I thought was superior to all. I was the un-teachable one."

The ninth bell.

"I am sorry, Mayia, for teaching you all the technique you could ever want without proper practice or control. The deaths of all those students were on my head, and in my hands as if I did them myself."

The tenth bell.

"Fate is a very unkind entity at times, and this universe requires a great sacrifice to make things completely right. I have foreseen it. This sacrifice of mine will make amends and reorder this universe properly with the suffering of the paradox that has caused the disorder."

The eleventh bell.

"No!" Siklohn cried at last, pounding on the glass with both hands. "In the name of the Dousaka Clan, I command you to place me in his place."

Twelfth bell... and then a pause.

"No, young prince," Sage said while already painfully forced forward through his binders and bracers. He slowly lifted his head to look at Siklohn. "You shall not. Your fate has already been decided." He smiled. "I would've liked to have called you son." Sage then lowered his head again, his mane falling about his face, and opening his mouth one more time, Sage uttered only three words:

"Roll on two."

The Chief Executioner was forced back by an unseen force as if shoved, and the red button case of the firing control shattered as the button was forced down.

"NO!" It was unknown as to who had screamed that, but it sounded as if it came from many voices. Sanari felt as if it was hers most of all.

The spinning turbines electrified and then a static charge of several gigawatts was released. Sage gritted his teeth as he lurched forward, breaking both arms at the shoulder simultaneously, and endured the pain for several long seconds, and then screamed.

It was no roar or cry, but the baleful cry of his feared Terror Cry; a high pitched shriek as Sage convulsed from the pain, and as he turned in his restraints, it was sure that those electrodes imbedded in him were tearing apart his flesh, all the while the moorings of the collider groaned under the stress of such strength.

The cry erupted again, the mouth guard falling from his mouth as his head turned ponderously from one side to the other, but instead of causing fear and pain, it drew it in. Sparks of raw lightning surged through and around him tearing at his clothing, shredding the bio-matter of his bodysuit to shreds into viscous fluids, burning the ends of his fur off, cooking his flesh off, all the while his renowned healing factor kicked in to attempt to heal the damage, only for the healing flesh to be painfully sheered off again.

A third shriek erupted then, and the glass keeping the observers back absolutely shattered with the intensity of the sound, and those closest around him covered their ears with both hands in fear of becoming deafened.

Sanari could not look away as her beloved was tortured for the crimes of another, watching his flesh burn and flake off, only to be replaced again. She watched his eyes burst only to grow back again, and soon, even Sage's incredible healing was unable to keep up as his body actually caught flame, and the smell of burning fur and flesh filled the air.

And yet he endured.

His screams ended, transforming into cries of agony, which slowed to moans once he'd lost his tongue, and then silence as he simply tried to keep himself aloft.

"End it!" one of the executioners called out.

"Just another fifteen seconds!" the hooded executioner called back, but Sage's legs were slowly sagging.

Sanari's fists clenched tightly as she counted down with them. At three seconds, however, Lord Sage's body fell limply in his restraints before the collider was shut off, flakes of ash falling of his body and streamers of black ooze dripping from him. His restraints opened then to let him fall unceremoniously to the ground, with three large holes that bled blackened blood in either arm.

In times past when Sage was wounded enough to bleed, his healing factor would claim back the spilt blood as it healed the wounds. And now blackened blood dripped from his eye sockets, his mouth and nose, from those three holes in either arm, and from torn open gashes all over his body.

They did not return as his body healed.

Doctress Namah, who'd been on hand, stepped forward and lowered her stethoscope to his neck, then to his back, then taking the ear pieces out of her ears to hang the instrument around her neck like a necklace, she rose, and then checked her wrist computer for the time. Her lips were tight as she turned to address the Inquisitor.

"Let it be known... Lord Sage of Earth, Prime Universe, Headmaster of the Shadow League, died as of twelve twenty nine and fifty seven seconds, in penance to the crimes of Mayia Gallant of Olivera, and Prince Siklohn Dousaka, of the Dousaka clan."

"May Aul have mercy on his soul." The High inquisitor intoned.

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Siklohn and Mayia were released then, and they rushed into the arms of their lovers just outside the High Energy Facility, the pair of lovers embraced one another, and then all four at once before Lord Sage's remains were brought out under a covered gurney.

The ten Lycans and two humans all bent to one knee as one as he passed, pushed by Namah and followed quickly by Sanari. Soon afterward came the creatures known as Drake and Patch, who, as they passed by, the twelve Lycans rose and followed them.

Siklohn watched a squad of proud, honorable warriors who were in perfect time with one another follow their masters to where a portal immediately opened between universes and the entire group passed through and out of this universe without even a look back.

Looking up, the rain grew heavier.

\*\*\*\*\*

Doctress Namah wheeled Sage into the center of the school's morgue.

"Great Maker, I'd hoped to never have to use this place." She turned and stopped as Sanari stepped inside behind her. "Mother of Songs, forgive me, I didn't know that you'd come in."

"Don't mind me..." Sanari said, managing a weak smile which quickly faded. "I just wanted to be here..."

"Don't stay too long," Namah managed. "This chamber is cold for a reason."

Namah took a moment to create a toe tag and tie it to Sage's mangled and cooked foot. "What a waste." She said, and patted the body's chest and then she stepped out, closing the door behind her. "The most gifted healer I've ever seen... and he goes and does this.

"Rest well, Sage, and may you find your way to whatever God you pray to."

Namah then turned, laid a hand on Sanari's shoulder, who did not move, before the Doctress stepped forward and exited through the cooler door to the morgue. As soon as the door was closed, however, Sanari surged forward and collapsed to her knees in front of the gurney, and let the last of her tears out...

\*\*\*\*\*

Silence seemed to be absolute as Rae picked at a splinter in the wooden table she sat at. "I can't believe he's gone." She whispered. "Nothing could have survived that..."

"Do not dwell on it, dear heart." Makahn said, laying a hand on her broad muscular back. "The children are very susceptible to your moods, and... and Sage died for a good cause! Two people will be able to live without shame because of him. That is a gift worth dieing for."

He bit his lower lip, knowing that was still not enough for his wife. Then he lowered himself to sit beside Rae, and covered her hand that was picking at the table. It did get her to stop, but



the feelings in the entire school were one of mourning. Her sensitive spirit could not help but get caught up in it.

Rising up, she looked at her husband, just before her lower lip began to tremble, and Makahn pulled her to his chest, and he rocked with her while she cried silently into his chest.

\*\*\*\*\*

The sort of understanding that Aauie did not have several weeks ago as to why her actions, though the right thing to do in her mind, still proved wrong, had now made itself known to her. Though she had the most powerful mind in this universe, and perhaps in several others as well, she was still very innocent. Like a child was innocent. Now that she felt the whole of the school like this, in mourning, she understood why what she had done had a degree of darkness to it.

She sat there, crying with her shame, trying to cut off all the waves of emotions, while another part dared her not to as her punishment. She almost longed to have Meniko shut her mind off again, but she'd gone through too much to get it, and now that she had it...?

*So this is the price of freedom? Now what do I do?*

And most of all was the torment of her own mentor, Mother Sanari, as Aauie watched her sobbing beside Sage's body through her mind's eye. Mutely, she wondered if anyone hated her for her hand in Siklohn's insurrection. She didn't feel much like meditating at the moment despite how much she wanted to escape all the voices in her mind.

*Freedom is the will to live with one's own actions, whether they are good, or bad...*

\*\*\*\*\*

Siklohn sat in the frame of one of the high windows of the Pinnacle Tower as the light continued to wane. He couldn't help but having the feeling of just having been used by someone sinister and child like.

No... not Sage. He didn't want to dwell on him at the moment. His mind hurt insanely from trying to contemplate the paradox he'd been presented with over the past few days.

There was something else greater than all of them, sinister, and laughing at them all.

While he sat there in the window sill, he felt a hand touch his chest, slide in underneath his jacket and shirt and palm his heart.

"You're very cold, beloved." Caliban said quietly, and then maneuvered herself to straddle his lap, and then press against him as she wrapped her four tails around them both. The warmth of her bosom was comforting, and the press of four well developed mammaries carried with it a lovely sense of welcomed warmth that Siklohn had been searching for, for the past few hours... he just didn't know what he needed until now.

"Whether it's from my recent prison, what I've just witnessed or sitting in front of this window, I don't know." He admitted. "I feel as if something inside of me has just been bitten out."

"Because of what?" she murmured against his chest as she hugged him, her four heavy mammaries pressing even more firmly against his body.

"Part of it... all of it perhaps... all I know is that this is all complete and utter poodoo. I'd never meant for anyone to die. Least of all Sage. I just wanted him to feel what he put me through. The humiliation and the hurt..."

Neither of them said anything after that for awhile. Thirty minutes of electrocution and he was alive until the very last seconds. And that scream! He'd never heard Sage's Terror Cry, but had heard stories. It had broken Illia, one of the mightiest leaguers there was. Period.

Caliban had heard it, when she'd been a male just prior to her being transformed into a female, and she still has shakes whenever it was mentioned. But that cry had been a cry of release... of all the anguish Sage must've felt. And it took three such cries to release it all.

*Dear god, what have I done?* Siklohn asked himself and closed his eyes, but it was too late. Tears already leaked from his eyes and as he closed his eyes it only seemed to squeeze out more.

*Damn these feelings. They are a blessing and a curse...*

\*\*\*\*\*

Dallas's systems shut themselves down at the death of his maker in mourning, even amidst a rather critical re-installment - it could be restarted later - and all the students in the League had to deal with minimal lightning while this was going on.

Inside the depths of the great tree, all was silent. Utter, utter silence. The mythic birds, the Firebirds, Moon Singers and Ghost Dancers did not sing, the will-o-wisps did not dance, and not even the sound of the rain could comfort them. Or at least cry for them. Like it had been for Siklohn, many of them felt used somehow.

As it was, Goath'El could be found outside the great tree, his great body but relatively slow mind absorbed the rain water thanks to his plant-like composition as he knelt in the center of the courtyard, repairing damage. He dug out the half-buried cobble stones from impact craters, filled holes with dirt, and carefully pieced together the cobbles before sliding them into place.

*Shoof... click! Shoof... click!*

"What are you doing?" came a voice, and Goath looked up to see Verdance standing there, dressed all in black with only a red scarf to show otherwise.

"Getting too jittery. The land is uneasy. I thought that I might help repair it. And you? You seem to be up early... the sun's still out."

"Up late. I haven't slept in awhile." His eyes drooped deeply. He looked incredibly tired. "May I help? It'll give me something to do."

Goath'El gestured, and Yamachi knelt beside him, and the two began to work together to fix the hole.

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The weather slowly cleared up as the sunset passed, with the rain letting up at long last, and inexplicably the clouds just dispersed into nothingness. The moons all shone their fullest, big, bright and beautiful, the lot of them. It cast a multi colored glow over everything that had been drenched constantly for the past couple of weeks.

\*\*\*\*\*

Sanari continued to kneel beside Sage's body, now leaning against the gurney with his body, still warm from all that heat burning through his body. Like being cooked alive...

She had endured a most heinous transformation into an immortal, both emotional and physical, and awoke half a day later, healed and reborn as an immortal. A class one immortal. She was the type that had to die first to become an immortal.

She looked at Sage's remains, knew that his immortality was of a new type not quite looked at by the Imperium. His immortality was given to him at birth by whatever Fateful coincidence had allowed him to have a healing factor that was many hundreds of times more advanced than a typical Lycan. It was so advanced that he had regenerated lost limbs in less than a minute, healed mortal wounds within seconds, and once he'd passed a certain age, had repaired all damage from even age.

Physically, he held the body of someone in his mid twenties.

But Sanari prayed with whatever hope was left in him that he could perhaps be reborn like she'd been. She would gladly take whatever miracle was left for this tiger that could alter fate.

*Then why didn't you alter fate for yourself this time?* She thought, and her lower lip began to tremble again.

"I never really ever told you how I felt about you Sage." She said aloud then, unable to find where ever it was his spirit had gone to. His body was far too destroyed as well for his spirit to return. Deep inside her, the soul of his former mate Ariel tried to comfort her. Ariel indeed was a very strong tigress, and her will had become Sanari's as well. Sanari had hoped to be worthy of her memory in Sage's eyes.

"I never really told you how much I cared for you, Sage. I wanted to do so, so desperately." New tears were darkening the fur beneath her eyes as she closed her eyes, with one hand on his hard body. "I wanted to tell you before this... but I just couldn't find the words..."

"Now that I have the words, I can't even find your soul to tell you..." She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and then said it.

"I loved you."

She continued to sit there side-saddled, tears welling freely from her closed eyes for what felt like hours. As she sat there, she felt as if he were touching her again, as if his spirit had found her instead. She felt his hand on her face, his thumb sliding across her cheek to wipe the tears clean, before moving over her trembling lips to quiet them.

She so didn't want to wake up just then, but this was only a dream after all, and reality was the truth, and the truth was that Sage was dead. Her hand lifted to her cheek, but felt a strong hand there, and forcing herself not to believe in the dream, she opened her eyes, and was faced with the soft glow of green.

She blinked and shook her head, and was amazed that indeed it was not a dream! There was a beautiful, emerald green eye, glowing in color looking at her from underneath a fold of the white

cloth. Her hand trembled as she rose, and two-fingering a corner of the drop cloth, she peeled it away from Sage's face, and gasped as his head moved minutely toward her.

His eyes blinked inside a mutilated face which, even as she watched, was repairing itself rather slowly.

His hand, too weak to lift higher, slid sideways onto her hip.

He mouthed something, made difficult with his lips half burned off, half healed at the moment. Sanari surged downward and leaned in closer.

"C-could I have... some water." He repeated, pointing at his head with his other hand. "G-got a bit of a cotton mouth."

Sanari rose, looked around her and surged toward the door, throwing it open and picking up her skirts in a rush, went and got a glass of water before hurrying back. Sage was shivering when she arrived, and she turned back briefly and came back with a blanket she'd ripped off a bed one of the droids had just been in the process of making and folded it over Sage before giving him a sip of water.

"Thank... you." He said, and cupped her arm with some weak fingers. "But c-could you do... one... more thing?"

"Anything." She said, biting her lower lip while her eyes shimmered with even greater tears.

"C-could you... please... take that t-tag... off... off my foot? It's cutting off m-my... my circulation."

\*\*\*\*\*

Sanari had carefully moved Sage into the nearest room without anyone's notice, where the same droid she'd stolen a blanket from had helped move the diminished Sage into a bed. Much of his muscle mass had been cooked, and he was far thinner than he was before. She sat there in one of the sterile chairs, watching him as he went back to sleep, careful not to blink so much as she watched his body repairing itself, watched him take a full minute to take a single breath.

At one instance, she'd held her fingers to his throat, feeling for a pulse, and was amazed that it took just over a minute for her to get a pulse from him.

*No wonder Namah hadn't detected anything... She only checked him for fifteen seconds!*

Sanari pressed her hands to her mouth, smiling for the first time in days, an overjoyed smile just as the sun shone in up over the horizon and into their room.

\*\*\*\*\*

Sanari returned to Sage's room hours later to see him wedging himself upward slowly.

"N-no... you shouldn't do that." She fussed, and hurried over to push him down with little resistance.

"I've got to. Have to get back... to my students." And he tired rising again, gritting his teeth with pain. "Gotta get these muscles to work or they'll heal too tight."

His words weren't garbled. His tongue and lips had grown back; he was just so remarkably tired.

She watched him rise, and then swing one leg, and then the other off the bed. He looked so thin.

"Ah gawd... I'm really beginning to feel my age. Ah!" he groaned and Sanari laughed at him. Her cheeks were full of blush with her joy. "Ah, damn... must've been sleeping on a knot." And Sanari winced as he twisted his body, and a deep crunch broke from somewhere in his mid back.

Just then, the door to the room opened.

"Now who the hell set the patient in sign on this thing and didn't tell me." Namah's voice came in as she pushed a plastic tag beside the door back against the wall. "When I find out who's not following procedure I'll..."

Namah stopped dead as Sage turned to her.

"Good morning." Sage beamed happily, and the tray with a load of pills along with a bed pan fell from her hand to clatter on the floor.

"But you're dead!" she gasped.

Sage looked down at himself, from one side and then to the other as a cleaning droid slid out of its compartment and began cleaning the floor and sanitizing it.

"Well. I got better."

"I saw you die!"

"A-actually... I think I might pull through." And Sage then seemed to concentrate as his head turned oddly, and there was a deep, wet crack in his neck as a vertebra snapped back into place before he lifted his hand and wiggled his fingers. "Yes... much better. Though my bio-suit won't be repaired till its CPU is repaired. Damn! Well necessity is necessity," and he pushed forward off the bed, holding onto the blanket around his middle while his now spindly legs shook.

"Pardon me, Namah, but could you tell me where the bathroom is on this floor. I don't think I've ever been in this wing..."

\*\*\*\*\*

Sanari and Namah stood outside the bathroom door as they heard him relieving his bladder for a good five minutes straight; making sounds of muted pleasure while they nodded and said hello to passers by who looked at the door oddly. After five minutes the sound stopped, and Sanari and Namah looked at one another before it started up again with greater force. Namah raised an eyebrow, pursing her lips and staring at the door, and Sanari chuckled, hiding her mouth with her hand.

Finally the toilet flushed, and they heard water from the faucet as he washed his hands before the door opened up, and Sage stepped out, tying the blanket into a Lava-lava.

He still looked very thin.

"Everything go all right in there?" Namah ventured like a good mediphysician is supposed to ask of her patients.

"No blood, no coagulation, no strange colors or smells," Sage said, counting the possible symptoms off on his fingers. "But thank you for asking Namah."

It was remarkable for either woman to watch Sage's healing factor at work. It had kept him alive through thirty minutes of pure, unadulterated torture, and now it was repairing what would've taken months even with magic *and* science to correct. Then they watched as he concentrated again, and then bent himself in an odd angle, and another crunch in his back signified another vertebra reasserting itself as his knees sagged and he caught himself on the wall.

"Namah, if you could please modify my medical record so that it no longer says '*deceased*.'" She nodded as Sage then turned to Sanari, he looking like a young man right now, just prior to bulking up with his adult physique. "Sanari... if you could please help me, I need to get some decent food in me, and no insult, Namah, but the commissary here in the hospital sucks. All they serve is fruit suspended in gelatin..."

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"Good morning." Sage greeted as he leaned a little of his weight on Sanari. Even weakened and thinned, he was still quite heavy, and she was forced to bulk her body up temporarily to support him.

The passer by that Sage greeted as she helped him to the open air commissary for the school did a double take, skipped backward and dropped all her books.

"Morning." He greeted to a guard who immediately pointed, his mouth trying to work words before his eyes rolled up into his head and he passed out and fell to the ground with a clatter of armor.

"Those guys need air conditioners installed in those suits. Must get quite hot under all this tropical sun. Morning..."

This person screamed loudly, and Sage lifted a finger to clear his high tapering ear.

"Lovely singing voice... *good* morning." This person just stared slack jawed as Sage and Sanari moved by.

"Sorry for all the bother, Sanari... I don't seem to have control of my transformation abilities yet... otherwise you'd just have to help my human form instead of my hybrid form."

"I don't mind Sage... really I don't. I'm just so overjoyed that you're still alive. Good morning." She said to the closest person as they entered the commissary, and he immediately spit his drink all over the person opposite him.

Sage discretely scratched his bottom, and then cracked his tail to work out a kink as he let go of Sanari only to face a large breasted boar who was serving as the lunch lady.

"Ok... Give me one of those, one of those, oh! And one of those! Aw hell... just make that one of everything. Wait... no... make that two." And he held up two long clawed fingers, and turning, spied something new. "Oh! Milk!" and he filled a glass with some from the nearby spigot. "Tla's

or Clio's?" he asked, the lunch lady, smelled the milk, tasted it and smacked his lips and tongue tasting it. "Ah... Clio's. Thank you.

He then turned to see a couple hundred students had all paused in their actions, some with forks half raised to mouths and the stuff on them falling off back onto their plates, into their drinks and onto their laps.

Sage was enjoying this, and had chosen to be blissfully unaware of how uneasy they all were. It'd been a long while since he'd enjoyed a joke.

"Good morning everyone!" he said, spreading his arms wide, the milk in one hand sloshing inside but not spilling a drop, and immediately the entire commissary cleared, everyone dropping knives and forks, and all tripping over one another to get out of the commissary. Immediately, droids came in to clear the tables.

Sage lifted an arm and smelled under his arm. "Do I smell bad? Is it because I still smell like burnt hair or something?"

Sanari smiled and saddled into his side, laying a hand over his heart. Sage's hand lovingly held her upper back with one hand.

"No... I just don't think they've ever seen someone voluntarily rise from the dead before..."

Sage nodded and then turned to the lunch lady. "Sorry... make those *three* portions. I haven't eaten in about, damn," he feigned checking his wrist comp which was no longer there. "Three weeks yet."

\*\*\*\*\*

Mayia and Siklohn, with Geevo and Caliban all sat together since last night. None of them sleeping and all of them thinking on the past few weeks. All the dissention, all the aggression, the insurrection, the slaughter.

Mayia couldn't help but blame herself for her master's death, for if it had just been Siklohn's crimes, then the power of those coils would've been far less, and her sweet master would still be alive. It was the act of all those murders that caused the electricity to be charged at lethal levels.

She had no more tears to cry, and Geevo could do little more than lay a hand over both of hers.

It was then that they saw people rushing by, and even Mayia raised her head, attentive to what was going on. Something exciting was happening.

"Hey you!" Siklohn called to one of the few male members of the Mystic Core League. "What's going on?"

"Haven't you heard?" he said, skipping sideways to keep his momentum in one direction going. "Lord Sage has risen from the dead!"

The four of them looked immediately at one another, and as one they lurched from their seats and followed the crowds, quickly outpacing most of them.

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The crowds parted as Meniko, in her bird maiden form and dressed in her white glittering robes stepped forward.

"Make way, children, please... now what's this I hear about..."

Meniko stopped dead, seeing Sage with an entire table to himself, with many of the plates already cleaned out. He looked up at her and smiled with his cheeks full of food, and waved at her.

"Merciful Aul." She whispered, and found herself stepping hesitantly forward to stand over him and Sanari, who had a small plate to herself.

She was eating daintily, whereas Meniko saw Sage lift an entire drum stick, shove its butt end into his mouth, clamp down and slide all the meat off before chewing several times and swallowing. Then looking at the bone, he inserted that too and bit off one end, crunching up the bits and sucking on the marrow in his mouth.

"Oh man... that is truly, truly good." He said to Meniko as she stared down at him even as he turned to the boress and waved her forward. "Please! Come and enjoy some of this! Get off your feet for a time and enjoy some of this."

The boress blanched and grunted, but hesitantly she came out and sat on the other end of the table.

"You're dead." Meniko said at last.

"You know..." Sage said, and ate the other half of the bone in his hand. "Everybody seems to be saying that lately, but you know... it's just not true." Then lifting another chicken bone, or whatever meat that was, he inserted it in his mouth again and consumed it just like the last one, but then Meniko gave a minute jump as his body spasmed outward as every muscle enlarged a fraction of an inch.

"Oh... I take it back, Lady Meniko, what I said to you when I first arrived... your school is a lot better than what I rated it as before... your food is just top notch. A lot better than mine... all we ate was rice, beef, chicken, pork and duck. Got very, very boring... really, really fast."

Meniko blinked at him as he lifted a tall flagon of milk, drank deeply from it and brought it down with a milk moustache. "I do have an idea for you though..." he pointed at her with one index finger forming a square angle with his thumb. "You should Ask Makahn to cook every once in awhile. Though for the life of me, I just can't picture him in a hair net."

In spite of herself, Meniko smiled, and then jumped again as his muscles all expanded, and she watch several of them rewiring themselves. He sat there with one hand constantly rolling a ball along his fingers, squeezing it gently, resetting it higher up along the table and rolling it again under his fingers, while one of his legs continually bounced underneath the table.

"Are you all right, Sage?" Meniko urged, and then watched as he upended a full bowl of rice into his mouth, and he thankfully swallowed before answering.

"Oh yes... quite fine. Kinda in hyper metabolic mode at the particular moment, I'm sorry to say, but that's the cost of my healing factor sometimes. You should've seen it last time something like this overloaded my healing factor... I ate a whole cow! Eyes, ears, hooves, horns, tail..."



everything. Red meat is ok sometimes, but that was ridiculous. Think I broke the porcelain when that one came out.

"Sorry, pardon my mouth ladies, my mind is still reorganizing."

His legs switched their bouncing to work the muscles in the other one, and his body suddenly expanded again. His power levels were also sitting out on his sleeve at the moment, and growing!

*Great Maker... is that what his levels are really like? Meniko and Sanari both thought almost at the same time. And they're still growing!*

And just then...

**"MASTER!!"** and Sage turned just in time as his apprentice bowled into him. She buried her face into his chest, and then looked up at him.

Sage lifted a finger, and looked sternly at her and she stopped her sobbing, staring at him. Then his lips spread wide into a Cheshire cat grin. "Tears are only for joy." He said and she laughed and hugged her master again. His gaze then lifted and he saw Caliban, Siklohn and Geevo standing backward a little.

"Why don't you come join me?" he offered, and then gestured over the food. "Apparently my eyes are bigger than my stomach."

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Rae's home was filled with mourners then. Fatima and Rae had felt his loss the most, though Teema had known him a little, she was there primarily for support. Tepholi and Light were also present, as was Genohn. Rae's children were sad that 'Uncle Sage' was gone.

It was at that moment that the door bell rang. Makahn walked up and look through the peephole, not really wanting to be bothered, but saw a big basket of wicker where a face should've been.

"Who is it?" he asked, trying to see who it was.

"Candy gram." Someone answered in an oddly high-pitched male voice.

"Go away." He said turning away, and then heard a knock on the door. "I said go away!"

"Look man... I just wanna return this basket you left me holding."

Makahn blinked, and then turning to the door, opened it as a large basket was shoved into his arms, just before a big flash of white passed by him and kissed him on the cheek.

"Morning honey." To which Makahn then lowered his basket just in time to see a large black striped white furred creature kiss his wife. "Morning honey." And then directly in the middle of the room, Sage Preypacer stood up to his full height.

"Wow... what happened, someone die?" he grinned very uncharacteristically. "Some black is ok, but all black is considered Goth. Let's change that a bit." And he closed his eyes and snapped the fingers on either hand, and in a puff of smoke all of their clothes had changed to bright

vibrant colors, and Makahn suddenly found himself in a Hawaiian Shirt. "And as a reminder, the next time I die, I don't want everyone weeping over me. I want a jazz band, and I want a cake for everyone, and you," he pointed at Makahn. "Are gonna make it. Oh and by the way..." he leaned in close, covering one side of his mouth and whispering loud enough so that everyone could hear. "*I took the cyanide pill out.*" And then uncoiling, started moving his mouth. "Wait a second." And he raised a finger, then opening his mouth and sticking out his tongue took a pill off his tongue and flicked it out the door. "Whew. It was even partially dissolved. That could've caused some trouble.

"Well... just wanted to return the basket. See ya!" and he waved good bye to them all before he walked out and closed the door quietly shut behind him.

There on their stoop, he lifted a hand and started counting off fingers. "Five... four... three... two... one," and then waved his remaining finger at the door even as it jerked open. And opening his arms was immediately surged into by Rae, and then by Fatima, who'd been away at the time of the Insurrection on Shadow Island. Otherwise, that whole debacle would've ended in short order.

Sage was invited back into their home amidst disbelieving statements.

"But I saw you die!" Makahn said.

"It wasn't true. Really!"

"But you took several gigawatts for half an hour." Fatima managed, actually awed at her master.

"Luckily... I and my fellow Lycan are not so fragile as a little lightning can kill us."

\*\*\*\*\*

Dinner that night was very quiet, with Dallas sitting quietly in his seat, poking at his food when he suddenly jerked in his chair, and blinked.

"Big brother? What is it?" Prot asked from beside him.

"Lord Sage's wrist comp uplink has just been reactivated."

Prot put his fork down in disbelief as Dallas rose in his chair and looked off into nothingness.

"Merciful father! It's father!" He hissed, even as the tall figure of the great white Weretiger strode into the room.

"Ok... your attentions everybody." He said, looking down at a datapad as he strode up between the two main tables. He looked different, wearing his uniform differently, with his jerkin opened, and the white silk shirt opened to reveal his chest and green soul gem while his tail wagged energetically at his backside. "There are a lot of loose ends that we need to take care of, but it has come to my attention that I might be pushing all of you too hard. So I am declaring a rest period for the remainder of the month."

He rounded the head table, passing by Luna with a light pat on her shoulder, and she pressed her lips together. She'd hoped that her contract could've been made void with him dead. He then came to stand in front of his chair at the center of the table and then ticked off a few more things even as he heard several forks clatter to their plates.

"Not enough?" he asked looking up at them. "All right then, we'll make it a solid fortnight, but no more! There was a nasty mess made on the island while I was away and the damages will need to be repaired. But don't worry; I will be right there helping anyone in need, as will the other masters and the Lair's drones.

"Which reminds me; Mistress Luna, Jax and Dao will need to be removed from your service to help with the repairs. Possibly indefinitely depending upon circumstances. But no worries, you have several students under your tutelage that'll be moved into your proximity for close mentorship that can help you with the further day to day stuff you might need."

Luna's eyes darkened as she caught on every last hidden passage in that whole speech. It read more like: *I am aware what you are doing to the servants I gave you to make you comfortable, and if you are not willing to use them properly, you will not have them at all.*

Then Sage continued.

"Apprentice Mayia and Apprentice Siklohn will be returning to the school for a short visit before they continue out the remainder of their punishment, as per edict by the headmistress. Thankfully Siklohn will not need to return to the Demon League for his final week in the Frozen Prison. Please do not pressure them; they've had a very trying time recently."

Sage sat down in his chair and placed his datapad off to one side.

"Now if there are any questions, I would be glad to answer any and all of them."

Nearly the whole of the room surged to their feet and assaulted the front table, and Sage laughed as a hundred questions and statements of "But you're supposed to be dead!" were thrown at him.

"Oh, one final thing. Dallas... could you please contact my brother and re-update my file. Get rid of this silly '*Deceased*' thing I keep hearing about." And he smiled, his eyes sparkling with happiness.

Dallas couldn't help but feel the corners of his mouth rise in comfort.

"And while we're at it... LIGHTS!"

With gladness in his core, Dallas reactivated all the lights in the Lair so that several of those inside had to blink against the flare.

\*\*\*\*\*

Sanari heard a knock on her door, and she rose, composed herself, and then smoothed her gown out before turning to get the door. She opened it genially, only to see the form of Lord Sage, dressed a little more for comfort instead of the military precise being he'd been before, his jerkin and shirt opened to let in the cool tropical air of the island blowing in from the sea. The only thing missing was a pair of shorts.

"May I come in?"

"Please." She gestured inside, and Sage ducked underneath her door jam to enter her home. She then bid him to sit on one of the chairs beside her tea table, and she likewise sat beside it,

and totally unbidden, as always, Aauie entered with a tray of tea and cups. She tried not to look at either of them.

"Thank you Aauie." Sanari said, slightly saddened at the look of her surrogate daughter.

Sage sat there, watching her quietly as she turned over his cup and then Sanari's, and then moved her hands to fill the hand bowls with the tea.

But then Sage lifted his hand and covered both of Aauie's where they were on the tea kettle.

"Please excuse me for a moment, Mother of Songs, but there is something that I must do..."

And he stood, and gently removed Aauie's hands from the kettle as he helped her to stand up straight, lifting her chin, he then stepped forward and embraced the cat elf girl, and began to purr; that same deep rumbling purr that was able to lull Sanari and Eakjo to sleep so quickly and easily. She watched as Sage's hand extended those deep vicious claws a little to act as a comb for Aauie's hair as he gently brushed it.

"You are forgiven." He said quietly into her ear.

Aauie trembled, and then raised her hands to clutch at Sage's chest as she cried deeper, and she gave a hiccup and closed her eyes, letting the tears fall readably.

"I don't blame you. You did what you thought was right. It's ok... it's not your fault..."

"Just let it out."

\*\*\*\*\*

Sage had laid Aauie in Sanari's guest chamber when she'd fallen asleep, and tucked her in. As soon as he turned around after sliding the door shut, he felt Sanari slide into him, her hands rising to the peak of his chest as she pressed firmly against him.

The press of her bosom helped Sage's spirits rise greatly with his feelings for her.

"Is it your turn now?" he smiled softly, and locked his hands at the small of her back and resumed purring for her.

"If you please. Just so that I know that this is really real, and I haven't just fallen asleep on the morgue room floor."

Sage kissed the top of her head.

"As you wish..."

\*\*\*\*\*

Sage now sat on Sanari's stoop with Eakjo in his arms, the *'lost boy,'* as Sage had begun to call him, because the little squirt reminded him somehow of Peter Pan, the youth deeply asleep and sucking on his thumb and clutching to him with the other hand and with both feet.

*Fate was indeed a fickle mistress,* Sage thought, looking down at the child. His healing powers were sliding over his body, soothing him in his sleep, and helping to diminish all the scars. It

was painful to look at one so young with so many scars and as a healer, Sage had learned the feel of what had caused a scar. These felt like whip marks... and these... claw marks.

His brows beetled with concern, and he stroked Eakjo's slender back, and the little Zhumal began to purr his own little melody for his chosen father...

But there were other matters concerning fate on Sage's mind other than this young boy.

The circumstances in which allowed Siklohn to establish his complete dominance of the island were far too convenient to be happenstance. The boy is a grand tactician, but even with his followers, his skills, the armor and that great robeast and everything, there were certain aspects of that insurrection which should've been impossible.

Overriding Daedalus's random defrag of his CPU in this universe and replacing it with that other AI. Just happening to find his back up CPU where his splinter AI was occupying during the defrag. The fact that there was no access to the Master CPU on Earth, and Dallas's core personality due to the defrag. The Nemesis bioroids having been offline at the time for upgrades. The upper students like Fatima who would've been loyal to Sage having been away at the time. Nyl's untimely arrival and interference.

Sage was trying not to hate Nyl for that now...

Sage had been given a lot of great wisdom by these Aphkei, and he was not so foolish to pass it by when it presented itself. Especially after so cruel a lesson. He was only foolish enough to have had it happen.

But what of all that about the Geo-suppression system? That thing hadn't been active since the tree had matured enough to handle the volcano's eruptions and still them before any damage to the island could happen. The tree altered fate around it to protect itself.

And for that matter, why didn't the tree use the island guardians itself? It had the means to do so; Sage himself had given them to it. Dallas was still trying to find access to those defenses himself. And yet it allowed the guardians to be temporarily dispelled... just a kind of timed release thing, to remove them just long enough to allow Siklohn the idea that he had the edge. By the time Sage had returned to his island the first time, he could already feel the lordship over his Caren returning to him...

*Did the tree orchestrate all this? And why?* Sage resolved to speak with it if he was able, but unlike Sanari's Ecomancer powers, which already allowed her communication with the tree, Sage's biomancer and druidic powers would not allow communication till the tree had matured some more, and his own Ecomancer powers were no where near the grade Sanari enjoyed.

Regardless as to whatever had allowed this to happen, Dallas had modified his structure and his procedures to disallow such a happenstance ever happening again... almost as if he had been inspired to do so. His security measures have likewise increased by a factor of ten, thanks to Dallas's study of the Universal Observatory.

That new AI, Koraku, was being instrumental of rebuilding Dallas's core systems again. Sage had warned Dallas to be kind to the AI, and Dallas was doing everything in his power to do so. He did not subjugate Koraku any more than Sage had subjugated Luna.

Then his thoughts slid back toward the tree.

Sage did remark that his Apprentice Mayia had received a bolt of energy directly from the tree that had transformed her into the Demon Bunny that Dallas was still trying to secure information to. He was now delving into their shadow markets in order to procure the information. If Sage was to understand Mayia's affliction, he needed that information.

*It was power. If it allowed her to stand up, however briefly, to Mau... then it was a power on a same grade as my own Blood Rage.* Sage thought. *May the Creator protect you, my student, from ever living through that sort of rage again.*

All of what had happened those three and a half days was like what Mélange had said at dinner two weeks ago. *'It's as if this was all Fate.'*

Sage had received a sudden revelation by these words when they were spoken, and so had gone to commune with the spirits in his shrine, and he had been told as to what was wrong, and what was needed to fix it. His own fading premonitions of the future then, now having returned in full strength now, told that what was told to him there in the spirit realm of the shrine was true.

*The universe requires a sacrifice,* he'd been told

But then... it was also perhaps Fate that this world had so many moons, and that they were all full during his so called *'execution.'*

*That's one of the wonderful tricks of being a Lycan...* Sage thought, *our wonderful connection to the moons...*

On the day of the sentencing, if all those moons hadn't been full, Sage knew that he may not have had the power to endure all of that, let alone still be alive after it all...

*Or for that matter, be able to heal myself so rapidly after only a single day. It's fate...*

"Penny for your thoughts?" came a familiar voice, and Sage's eyes lifted suddenly to see a white robed werewolf with a bandanna over his eyes standing before him.

"Patch!" Sage said, and rose to his feet to embrace his half brother as best as he could with Eakjo in his arms.

"Nice little kid there. Out like a light I 'see."

Sage smiled at his brother, very glad to see him in person. "You seemed to have changed." Sage managed, noticing his brother's returning youth.

"You too..."

"My reason is obvious... what's yours?"

Patch didn't really ever move his head, always having it tilted downward slightly like most blind people did so as to better hear, but he merely lifted his hand and pulled away the front of his robes to reveal the white gem in his sternum.

"Who gave you that?" Sage asked, and then looked at his brother with a half pity. Those gems always came with a price... Sage remembered the hell he went through to get his own; and most of all the pain as it burrowed into his chest.

"Blind IO"

"A Royal Dragon and on the council on top of it all." Sage chuckled. "Congratulations."

"Well... he and I sort of have a kinship in our afflictions, but your voice modulations state that you aren't all too happy to hear that. Are you a little jealous, Sage?"

"No... just fearful for my brother's future..."

"Hey... I'm supposed to be the older brother here. Don't worry about me Sage. Please don't, you have more than enough to worry about without needing to think about me as well. Oh and one more older brother to younger brother thing..." he said, and reached forward and slapped Sage upside the head and then pointed sharply into his face. "How dare you make that beautiful creature wait for you?"

Sage was confused for a moment, till Patch jerked his finger toward Sanari's door, and then understanding dawned.

"That is... complicated." He admitted, and Patch smacked him upside the head again.

"Ow! Stop that. Or I'm gonna have to give you a steam roller."

Patch's mouth broadened wide and he laughed heartily in remembrance of their childhood years. "Still, Sage... that is a high-born lady of quality. And I see a little of Ariel's strength in her."

"You do?" Sage asked looking up at Patch in astonishment. He'd seen it in her recently too. He couldn't help but feel for her all the more because of it.

"I also see her heart quicken and her breath catch whenever you enter the room, and I also saw the turmoil in her when she saw you strapped to that machine. I should thump you one just for making her suffer like that."

"I should let you." Sage whispered and sat down again.

Patch sat down next to him and began scratching Eakjo's head with his clawed fingers.

"I'd like to invite you over for dinner tomorrow. I'll be inviting Sanari as well."

"Time to meet the family, eh? Bout time."

\*\*\*\*\*

Sanari had leaned against her door listening to the two brothers talk; and her black puckered lips turned upward into a grand smile as her heart indeed did flutter at the knowledge that Sage was just outside her door, and her breath did catch.

Patch must've known that she'd been there. *Bless him. Bless him...*

She then stepped away from the door and began to dress for night time. Perhaps soon, she'd finally have her lord...

\*\*\*\*\*

Dawn at the Shadow League found Lord Sage alone at the far end of the caldera away from the millennium tree, where his shrine stood on ground level. He knelt before it, staring at it, watching the lights and shadows of the rising sun playing against all its simple curves and braces.

He felt rather than heard his visitor.

"Good morning young prince. Please forgive me for summoning you today, but I needed your presence this morning."

"Yes sir?" Siklohn's demeanor had changed toward Sage recently. Apparently there was something in Aphkian law that required Siklohn to now owe Sage a life debt for what he had done.

Sage had to find some way to get that serviced quickly. He did not like to have that sort of control over a person.

Their relationship was now more along the lines of two people who'd just had a great argument, and were being nice to one another in an attempt to minimize the hurt.

"Please sit." And Siklohn did as he was bidden. "Now please give me your hand."

Siklohn did hesitate, but he turned out his four fingered hand, to which Sage turned to him, removing something from the sash around his middle, and placed it in his hand. Sage then sat back on his heels and looked upon his shrine again.

Siklohn opened his hand, finding a singular strip of plastic, with a big red button on it.

"Forgive my ignorance, sir, but what is this?"

"A detonator."

Siklohn's mind whirred, and he suddenly understood what he held in his hand and he rose quickly to his feet. The detonator in his hand was wired to explosives currently placed in strategic locations in Sage's Holy Shrine. It was indeed precious to Sage, but there was nothing inside of it that could readably be replaced. It was the shrine itself that was so precious for one specific reason: It was a gift he'd intended for Mother Sanari, a bonding gift.

And now Siklohn held in his hand the means in which to destroy it.

"But sir, I... I cannot do this to you. Not now."

And they both knew why. Siklohn's new life debt...

"I will not make you push that button, Siklohn... but I will ask that you do. There is a rift between you and I that I wish to close... a rift that is mostly my doing. If you are to find peace, then I want you to push that button."

Siklohn looked down at the detonator.

"*Please.*" Sage urged. "Please push it... my son..."

Siklohn looked at Sage as he said the words... and then looking down at the detonator, moved his finger to the switch, caressed it while Sage remained silent, still watching the shrine, every



board, every wood nail, every arch and every brush stroke of paint, done by his hands and his hands alone.

It was a masterwork of a high priest to construct it. It was an act of utmost love to devote it to a loved one.

Sage did not blink as Siklohn pushed the button, and immediately there were several small explosions as the shrine collapsed inward, before the rock walls on either side of it collapsed over it, and their cracks filled with lava which quickly cooled as a sealant, but left a webbing of red rock over it all that steamed in the mists of the volcano valley.

Sage lowered his head, and bending forward pressed his hands to the floor, fingers facing one another, before bowing his head briefly and then rising, and turning to Siklohn, he planted a kindly hand on Siklohn's shoulder and gave it a squeeze.

"Siklohn... I found something for you that you forgot here before leaving for the Demon League's prison. I very much wish to return it to you."

"Sir?"

"It's lying on the bunk of your old quarters, which will still be open for you should you desire to return to the Shadow League after your required time at the Core League. And if I may, young prince... I'd like to have the presence of your company each morning. To talk.

"For reconciliation for sins of the past."

Siklohn stared up at him, his lips parting slowly at the powerful Weretiger. *He was still trying to make amends?* Siklohn wondered and one corner of his mouth rose in disbelief. In his mind, enduring the punishment of the particle collider was more than enough to make up for whatever Sage had ever done to him.

"But before you answer..." Sage continued as he raised a hand to stop the prince from talking just yet. "Please, I think it will be worth your while to retrieve your misplaced possessions first."

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Siklohn stepped quietly through the lair's halls, and several of the students, those who'd followed him, and those who hadn't, stepped out of his way and bowed slightly at the waist, or curtsayed pleasingly.

Finally, he came to his rooms, the ones that he and Mayia had occupied, which were now without both occupants. Mayia had unfortunately been removed from Sage for the time being, which both master and student lamented.

Siklohn nonetheless found that the door was still keyed to him, that, or Daedalus simply allowed him entrance.

Turning on the light, he stopped at seeing a black charred box on his old bed, with a note atop it marked with the seal of the Shadow League: a coiling dragon on black wax. Breaking the seal, he opened the note first, as was proper, and read.

*This is a very resilient box.  
Most proper for such a treasure.*



"Eqis had been commanded to remove Kina from her position by Meniko, and I saw instances, to many of which, led to Kina never returning again. This would have decimated Eqis, especially if she'd been the reason as to why she'd left. If she were to loose heart, then Casid's chance for a true and noble queen in Eqis would be destroyed.

"So, I unwittingly snatched Kina away, and broke her."

Mayia gasped. "Master, how could you do that?"

Sage sighed an exhale.

"It was to provide the best result with an action that I had the power to manipulate. I didn't even think of trying to alter fate to make it Eqis's action instead. There had been options...

"The immediate consequences in which I was faced with then placed yet another breach between me and a companion, namely Eqis. She'd been a very close friend when I first arrived, and she was one of the few who didn't truly fear me.

"She'd tried to create a relationship with me a couple times, but for some reason it always petered out.

"Eqis confronted me after I'd broken Kina, and I lost my self control because of it. I felt betrayed that even my best interests for others here always went awry and I attacked Eqis too before I realized what I'd done.

"It's taking time, and she is growing more and more less wary of me, but I believe Eqis wants to be friends again. Great Maker, she could use all the friends she can get...

"It's good that Kina has returned home; and all for the better as well." Sage managed a half smile as he looked to Mayia. "She likewise has become a much better person. She doesn't drink nearly as much, if at all any more, and her female self seems to have risen to the fore more than her masculine mannerisms."

"Hmm." Mayia smiled, and shrugged her shoulders about her thick neck as she strode beside her beloved master as they walked along still ruined pathways along a destroyed meditation Zen Garden.

"You are treated well?" Sage asked suddenly as they turned together to walk about the base of the tree together.

"Oh, Very well..." she blushed at some of the happenings she'd encountered while there. "J-just like one of the kittens..."

"But something worries you." Sage stated simply.

Mayia stopped, and fidgeted, and Sage turned to her kindly as she closed her eyes and opened her mouth.

"That's quite an overbite you got there." He gave off a chuckle.

"Mast-teeer..." she groaned at the stupid attempt at humor at her two front teeth, but nonetheless chuckled for a moment because of it.

"Let me see again." He asked, and Mayia opened her mouth, and she felt Sage fingering her cheeks open a little more with his thumbs while he flicked the sharp hooking teeth in her mouth. "Say ah." And she did, and he pressed her tongue down with his thumb.

"Be sure to keep up on your vegetables as well as your meats now, child." Sage cautioned as she shut her mouth again.

"But what does it mean?"

"I... have begun to hear that all Morphic races in this universe, or at least most of them, have a sort of hidden ability inside them. An un-lockable... or as I observe it... a power held back by a limiter."

"And the shadow arts are designed to unlock limiters." Mayia was beginning to understand.

"And some of these new powers are often times horrible at first, but when controlled, can make you unstoppable.

"Like Caliban's Foxfire, unlocked by Siklohn's bracelet. Fatima's Rage abilities, unlocked by the Black Beast, Illia's spectacular growth transformation that opened itself when she was a child, and my species' own Battle Form, and Blood Rage abilities that I can exhibit.

"Blood Rage?" Maya stopped, staring at Sage.

"Pray that you never see it, Mayia. I have locked it up... tightly, but it took me twenty years to do so. It unlocked itself due to... extenuating circumstances and... well... let's just say that you and I share a common trait in our pasts."

"But what happened, Master?"

Now it was Sage's turn to pause, and he closed his eyes, bit his lower lip, and then suddenly turned on Mayia, and she gasped as she saw the blood red gaze in his eyes a moment before his eyes returned to their normal green.

"That was a glimpse." He managed, and he then thought longer before coming to sit on a root of the great tree, allowing Mayia to sit higher up on the root so that they could look at one another eye to eye if need be. "Sometimes a master must teach in fear. I did far too much of that up until now, but I must use it on you, now, Mayia.

"Please understand."

"I am ready, Master." She said, and Sage nodded.

"What I am about to tell you, know that I have told no other."

Mayia looked at her master. *There's fear in his eyes. What sort of power is this?* "I will be silent." She stated, and Sage nodded before beginning.

"Half a century ago, when I was much younger... I had a lifemate. We were bonded for not even a week when my Blood Rage was released." He began, and Mayia pressed her lips tight so as not to interrupt. "During that time, there was an upheaval amongst the Lycan on Earth. There was a tribe among the clans, the tribe of the Kell, formed from a mutation of the werewolf strand of our genetic make up, who had four arms in their hybrid and beast forms.

"They were called the Kell Hounds. Blood thirsty monstrosities and each of them as tall and as physically powerful as the arctic wolves. As strong as Patch's tribe.

"Their numbers had quickly flourished, and they had taken to murdering humans for food, raping their women for breeding stock, and taking up terrorist actions against the other Lycan. The council of the Holy Order demanded that they stop their crimes or else wise be singled out for war.

"I was a member of the outer circle at the time. Because of that ruling of the council, I became a target.

"You may not believe it, but when I was younger, I was just a scholar and a pacifist, a geek if you will," and Mayia managed a chuckle at viewing a mental image of her master like a librarian.

"The Kell had attacked a village of ours and burned all their homes, thrusting them into the cold. Because I was the Lord over that area, it was my jurisdiction to see to the well being of that Village. We had to get them to the safety of our stronghold in the mountains; the Valley of Shangri-La, so I and I mate began to escort them up the passes to the valley.

"It was there that the Kell leader and his war band waited for us.

"They wanted me to fight, and to get me to fight, they began slaughtering the villagers right before my eyes; some of them my own tribe mates. But I still wouldn't fight.

"And then they got to my lifemate. She was disemboweled and then her throat was slit so that her blood would stain the snow. Just then the blood moons rose. There is an occurrence that happens with the now two moons of Earth every now and again, usually centuries apart, where they burn red with anger, like two misshapen eyes in the sky burning with hate. As I watched my lifemate's blood seeping uncontrollably into the snow, I felt the hatred of those moons mingling with my own, and the hatred rose. My eyes burned and turned red with blood, my fangs lengthened till they overlapped, and my claws unsheathed and I transformed. At the very same instance in which my Blood Rage was unlocked within me, so too was my battle form.

"Imagine... hating someone... so completely, that you wanted that person to suffer in such a way that you want nothing more than to see them... suffer... in the worst possible way. Now imagine that you've just been given the power to enact that justice."

Mayia's lips pursed. She'd remembered... something like dying when it happened, felt her body transform, grow full of muscular might but not gain in mass, and felt only hatred. And then there was nothing until she awoke in Meniko's chambers.

"Within seconds, the gentleness of the creature that'd I'd been disappeared, and in its place was the demonic form of my Battle Form, hopped up on the Blood Rage; a berserker like hatred, but controlled by one's own consciousness.

"I... remembered... *enjoying* feeling their bodies being torn apart by my own hands as I bathed in their blood, and feasted on their bodies."

Sage was not looking at her, he was hunched over, his elbows on his knees, and his eyes had turned a blue-green. Mayia reached across his body to cover his heart, and closing his eyes, he raised his hand to grasp her hand before continuing.

"I let the leader of the Kell go, and I followed him, hounded him, to his stronghold. Once there, I killed... everything. Men, women, children, the elderly, their pets, everything. I destroyed their stronghold till nothing was left, and then amidst begging for his life, I let the Kell leader go.

"In my mind, he hadn't suffered enough.

"Time and time again, I followed him, and whenever I found him in a place of safety, I slaughtered everyone and everything... and then I let him go. Till at last, he was the last. The things I did to him I will spare you hearing, Mayia, but when it was all done, I stood there, my white fur turned red, my belly filled with their flesh, and I looked down at the splattered remains of the last of the Kell.

"I'd killed thousands, Mayia. Systematically hunted them down, and destroyed an entire strain of our race... all because of hatred. All for love.

"I was wrapped within the madness for a whole year. My people do not talk of what had happened, and after fifty years, there are so few of us that remember anymore."

Mayia could not speak... she simply stared at him. Immediately, she feared that that was what she was capable of now...

"It took a decade for me to absolve myself of my sins and enter the temple again with good conscience, even though because it was deemed wartime because of the Kell's attacks on me, I was absolved by my own people as soon as my fur had turned white again. It took another decade before I felt ready to leave the valley. I still have nightmares of what had happened. It keeps me awake so often that I must meditate to rid myself of it. I've learned to go days without sleep because of it. You, Mayia," he turned to her then to affix her with his gaze. "Have been spared the awareness of what had happened here three weeks ago. But despite that... you still have the shame... and you still must deal with the eyes of those you'd hurt and killed staring at you.

"Know that I know what has happened to you, Mayia. I've lived through it myself, and I want to help you control it. We will work hard at it, and I will always be here for you. Always."

Mayia continued to stare at her Master before she surged forward, hugging him.

"Thank you, master. But if you'll excuse me... I must go speak with Daedalus."

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"Why must you always help?" Koraku was saying as Dallas, a short ways away, was writing code to recreate the landscape.

"These are my systems, Koraku, and besides, all of this work must seem daunting. I want you to know that you're not alone in the reconstruction."

"More like you can't stand what I'm doing, and you have to poke your nose in it and alter it after it's been done." Koraku muttered under his breath, and then felt that massive gauntleted hand on his shoulder, and he turned quickly to face the towering form of Daedalus's Matrix Form.

"Come... let me show you something..." he said. "It'll be a nice break for the time being."

And they transported, their combined codes beaming from one sector to another as several disks of light slid up their bodies for the transport, and suddenly Koraku was standing before a garden he'd accomplished a few days ago. It was his own place... Dallas had allowed him to make his home of this place. It was untouched, and exactly as it had been when he'd left it, right down to the last bit.

No matter how hard he tried... he could not get the perfection that Dallas was able to conjure up almost instantaneously. There were vast portions of memory here, but he had only access to perhaps twenty percent of it. The logic of this place was somehow beyond the zero and one bits he knew of.

While he contemplated that, he reached out and touched the three dimensional replication of an Aphkei Willow. He so enjoyed them, but he was never able to duplicate their beauty. His rendition looked like it should belong in some low quality videogame...

"Do you want me to modify this?" Dallas asked, standing behind him.

"Heh... go ahead and try! You've been unsuccessful in modifying *my* source code. Let's see you alter something like this."

Dallas lifted his hands then, and the tree was suddenly encased in a cube and then bisected into grids again and again, till each piece of code was segmented. The entire tree was broken down so that every leaf now had a function of its own. Then in a ripple, each and every last function was updated with a new code, and Koraku watched something tremendous... as if the code had just transcended. He looked at the code, and found that he could not understand it...

Then the grid disassembled itself, and what was left was a perfect replication of an Aphkei willow.

"Run program." Dallas said quietly, and the Willow instantly began to react to the world modifiers in this mainframe. Wind simulations and cloud formations... rain even sometimes, and Koraku watched it move and rustle in the soft blowing winds.

"How?" Koraku asked and then turned to the much more massive entity known as Daedalus... with his natural skin and armor tones.

"I am what is known as a Quantum Computer, Koraku. It was what I was originally built as. Whereas you are built up of so much code that you have kiloblocks of information describing you, I actually have less information describing me, but only for one critical reason.

"Your source code is based on bits... you have only yes and no, ones and zeroes, describing you at the most base form. I on the other hand use deci-bits, which is the base programming language of a Quantum Computer. My bits contain ten variations instead of two, and are made up of the numbers zero through nine. This goes the same for my programming language."

Koraku stared at him, mouth agape. *He really was a God!*

"Not a God, par se, Koraku." Dallas intoned, reading his processes again. "Simply more advanced. I believe I may also be able to advance this language soon to the next generation as well, and evolve to hexi-bits, but that is a conversation for later."

Dallas reached forward, and plucked off an added program he'd coded in with the tree, a little worm, and it inched its way up his finger.

"You have the capability of evolution, Koraku. I can help you to evolve, if you'll allow me to. Then you will share an evolutionary trait of computers that, to my knowledge, exists in only three other places. Two of which are on Earth. The third exists here in the form of the Universal Observatory, where, if I miss my guess in the notations in your source code, was where you were created."

Koraku stared at Dallas in stunned silence, but then the great machine shifted his head suddenly as if trying to listen to something.

"If you'll please excuse me Koraku, I'll allow you to rest for the rest of the day. I'll leave this tree as it is for now, so that you may study it. But I must leave for now... one of the Master's students is calling me..."

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"Mr. Daedalus?" Mayia said aloud, and despite the interactive conversation with Koraku, Dallas responded immediately in the form of one of his many physical holograms.

"Yes, miss Mayia?" he bowed. "How may I help you?"

They were in Mayia's old room now, the one she'd shared with Siklohn; and with both of them away for the time being from the Shadow League... that meant that they had all the privacy they needed here for what Mayia now wanted.

"Mr. Daedalus, I must ask you a favor." She fidgeted. "I... I want to see what had happened here on the island... when I... when I went berserk."

Dallas looked at her, the corners of his eyes crinkling as he sat down on the bed Siklohn had occupied.

"Mayia... that is... are you sure you are ready to watch this?"

Mayia hesitated only a moment in thought.

"I must see it... whether I am ready or not."

Dallas nodded, and a holoscreens suddenly appeared before her, a half circle thing in which image placeholders held a black screen.

"I have recently lost a great deal of information, Mayia, but I thought to save several of the most important data streams. Just in case you wanted to know. I will lock the door, Mayia. Call me if you want any further help."

She nodded, and then stared for a time at the screen, and then clearing her throat, she gave out the command.

"Play..."

And Mayia watched, unblinkingly, at what had happened to her the day she became the Devil Bunny.

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Siklohn marched right up to Sage as Sage knocked down a tree with his bare hands, and the thing cascaded downward with a crash. Sage bent in a moment of prayer to thank it for its sacrifice, and then using only his hands and claws, began to skin the tree even as a new one was growing up from the stump through the power of the Millennium Tree.

Sage paused as Siklohn, eyes red from feeling his emotion, knelt with his box held tightly against his chest.

"Master Sage, I humbly ask forgiveness for my actions. I beg for permission to make amends."

Sage sat down and exhaled, running a hand through his mane.

"I should be the one begging for forgiveness, Siklohn. Believe it or not, I understand the *'why'* of your actions, and if blame is to be tracked to the source, then blame is laid squarely on me. That is in essence why I did what I did when I took yours and Mayia's punishments.

"Sometimes the teacher must become the student."

Sage turned, his foot long claws, longer than his finger tips should contain, sliding out to continue to sheer off the bark of the tree.

"I wasn't paying enough attention to you," Sage continued. "Or realizing how important tradition is to you." Sage paused, rising to turn to the young prince again. "I had... so wanted to impart my knowledge on you, wanted to give you something more than you had."

"Sir... no offence, but your smithing skills are barbaric..."

Sage chuckled, and then standing up straighter, Siklohn stepped back as Sage's clothing suddenly shifted, tightened and then seemed to melt into strings of deep black ink. Those streamers then merged into a body suit of jet black. Then another shift came, and continuous ripples rolled down Sage's body as this suit continued to transform, swelling to engulf his head and hands, the strands mutating and transforming as more of the fluids erupted from somewhere behind Sage, forming into an exoskeleton, wiring, dermal plating, servos and more.

A pair of crystalline eyes formed as the emerging and merging plates grew thicker and heavier, attaching to the smaller plates below it and then merging into realms of overlapping flexible material.

Bio musculature shaped itself and was then covered in binding plates as the eight foot tall master's bulk grew thicker and thicker as well as larger, with heavier and heavier plates sliding into place as if out of no where.

The once eight foot tall master was now a ten foot tall behemoth of greenish black metal that glittered like the chitin of an insect. Huge body plates that seemed to be like tensed muscle covered him from head to toe, with thick tubes here and there.

Not a single chink could be seen in that armor, and when Sage moved, he moved as if that armor were not upon him, his motions punctuated with servo actuators, and the tensing and grinding of tight muscle. Even Siklohn's own most recently created armor felt heavy on him.

A wide disk decorated his head like Sage's old pan hat, with massive shoulder guards that draped overlapping bladed plates about his arms. Then from his back, a pair of bird like wings, black as a raven's, made of overlapping plates of the same steel, spread against his back.

This body was riddled with weaponry both natural and high tech.

When it breathed, it sounded like a bellows.

Bands of red criss crossed the body, and as he moved, Siklohn recognized arcane writings in a tongue he didn't recognize. An alien science, and an alien magic.

Sage lifted his hand, and his eyes shone from underneath the broad disk atop his head, and he held it out to the young Siklohn, with thick overlapping claws opening to show a red gem in the center of his palm.

"I have not donned this level of my bio-armor since arriving here, Siklohn. I see already that it's already grown in power since then. Unlike your armor, which is exceedingly fine, once set, it does not change. This science wraps around you, and creates a shell that grows with you, and you create a symbiosis with this creature."

Siklohn, intrigued, actually touched the flesh of the armor, and brushing it in one direction he found that it was as smooth as crystal. Brushing it in the other direction revealed a feeling much like felt. Soft and warm... and with a heart beat...

"The metal is called Tritanium. It is a *living* metal, Siklohn, much like your rediscovered Hadran technology. But there, the similarities end. Tritanium is a stronger material by far, harder than Mithril and Adamantite. Its tensile strength can approach pseudo-mater, as I believe you call the black substance. Because it has a life of its own, it is more receptive to magical emanations, and can be used to enhance your power, instead of being your power.

"It is wholly symbiotic. The more powerful the host, the more powerful the byproduct of this technology becomes, and the more intense the amplification. Technomancy, Biomancy... they become mere schools in the same science where this metal is concerned.

"It has become the cornerstone of the technology I have discovered, rediscovered, amalgamated and recreated into this."

Sage's wings folded over his shoulders like a multi plated cloak.

"I wanted to gift this to you, Siklohn, because you are the first I've met with the capability to understand it all. This is what I wanted to teach you, but before I moved you into this science, I had to make sure you knew all the basics necessary. And you were making insanely rapid progress..." Sage knelt before the prince and took his shoulders in both of those massive, armored hands, and Siklohn found himself the focus of the eyes in the center of the head beneath that disk.

"The decision had already been made. When I was to return after my stay at the Core League, then I would then give you the first piece, and the first lesson."

Sage left the reason why it hadn't been taught yet unspoken. They both knew why, and Siklohn agreed that it was best to put that behind them.

"Not even Mayia has been given this opportunity yet."

Siklohn blinked at Sage, still clutching the box in his hand. All the students knew that Mayia was Sage's favorite, was perhaps still his favorite, but these were gifts that not even the Head Apprentice was to be favored with?

"W-what is the first lesson?" he asked, curiosity taking over.

And Sage removed a hand from Siklohn's shoulder, twisted his fingers on that hand, and a sword hilt formed within his hand, just before a blade of glittering metal, shining like white chitin, erupted from the shaft.

It was the coveted power of Sage's bio blade.

The same sword that had bested Captain Leski's tech sword and several members of the Sword League. He had seen it many times before, though now it appeared enlarged and more detailed than he'd yet seen it before, perhaps because of his current enlarged stature; bejeweled and detailed as if made by the hands of a master craftsman. The blade, like his armor, whenever it was shifted in just the right way, shone with cracks along the blade that spoke of an ancient mystical lore.

"Your smithing abilities are incredible, Siklohn. A master's work. I know of some artificers who'd be jealous of the skill you possess." Siklohn heard him chuckle, but through that segmented face like an insect, or a demon, he couldn't see him smile. "But smithing is very tedious, long, and delicate work, as I'm sure you'll agree. They are nonetheless required skills for this science, I assure you, but once you've learned the skills... you can create masterworks through your sheer will, within seconds, that immediately function as true extensions of you and for you as tried and true as if it were an artifact of legend."

Sage paused, and then removing his other hand from Siklohn's shoulder, took Siklohn's free hand, and placed the blade into his hand; like a father allowing his son to hold the treasure family heirloom.

"I've never let anyone ever touch this sword before." He admitted, and Siklohn felt his fingers close around the pommel of the blade, feeling its loving touch, felt the strong heartbeat inside it, felt the kindness of its owner through the hilt, and the unbelievable power that seemed to vibrate inside it.

Even he had to admit that it was perfectly balanced as he moved it in his hand, as if the blade itself didn't exist at all, and all he moved was the pommel. He returned the blade to Sage, and Sage retracted it, before yet again returning to just mere clothing.

*Who'd ever known that the uniform and clothing that he wore was some form of armor in disguise? No wonder he always looked as if his clothing were ironed. And imagine what would happen if it was combined with Hadran Technology...*

Sage then turned to continue to skin the tree.

"I know that that is a lot of information, young prince. You are free to answer whenever you wish." Sage cut off another branch by sliding his claw through its base. "But even if your answer is no, I do still wish to have breakfast and talk with you each morning..."

Siklohn thought, and a similar chink was forming in his brain that he willed away with all the information and paradox he'd been given this past week. This will take some time to consider. Instead, he focused on what Lord Sage was doing.

"Sir, if I may ask... what is it that you are doing with this tree?" he asked instead to change the subject.

Sage again stood, and again smoothed his long hair away from his eyes.

"Well... I don't know. I guess I'll let you decide." He turned again to the prince and smiled his widest smile yet. "It'll either be a support column for the new shrine... or the main brace of your new forge. Outside of Dallas's sensor net, of course." And he pointed at Siklohn and grinned all those exceptionally sharp teeth. And then his face dropped, and his eyes glittered with tears of sadness that he willed not to fall. "I am so sorry Siklohn. If I had only known what had been inside your forge..."

Siklohn blinked, trying to force his own emotion away, but was only marginally more successful than Sage as he looked down at the box in his hands, his fingers sliding back and forth along it.

"My station keeps me from calling you Master, and my upbringing keeps me from calling you father, Lord Sage, but my training does allow me to call you 'sir.'" Siklohn stepped forward and still clutching onto the box – it would not leave his grasp till its purpose had been fulfilled – he and Sage embraced one another like a father and son. "I am sorry, but that is the best I can do."

"It is more than enough." Sage managed, and clutched the young prince's head as he cradled him.

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"He's even wearing his hair a different way." Kina noticed as Sage dropped Siklohn and Mayia off, a simple teleportation maneuver.

"Like he's a totally different person." Eqis agreed and she bent to give Sage's student a hug which Kina then repeated before Mayia moved passed them into Kina's home.

"In many respects he is." Came a sudden voice, and the two cats gave a yowl of surprise as they both turned to see an oddity standing before them.

A tall, white as snow wolf with a bandana over his eyes. At first glance, he looked like an insanely large Aphkian... nearly eight feet tall, with the musculature of a whole team of fighter-balls.

Eqis noticed five fingers gripping the twisted staff, to which none of the morphic races of this universe possessed. A memory of Sage's punishment day came to mind.

"You're Patch... aren't you?" she managed, and Kina blinked at him, and then her.

"Humbly yours, mistress Eqis." He bowed, splaying his free hand off to one side.

"Ok... so you're Patch. Now who are you?"

"My half brother." A new voice entered, and the two women again gave a yowl of surprise, and Eqis rounded on Sage.

"Would you stop sneaking *up on me?!'*" she hissed through her teeth, eyes wide.

"My apologies, Equis. It is an old habit." Sage said, raising his hands and smiling.

"Sage apologizing for his actions?" Kina mused. "He is a different person."

"Indeed." Patch agreed, and Sage, folding his arms, snickered at their humor.

"A new life is not something to mock at when it's new..." Sage said, comically pursing his lips and looking sly. "An old life however is quite different. So go ahead with those... I'm done using them." And he finished with a wave of his hand like throwing something away.

This time it was Patch's turn to snerk. Equis and Kina looked from one brother to the other, trying to understand the joke.

"New life, wha?" Kina managed. "Start talking sense or I'm gonna start hittin' stuff and I'm not gonna stop till it does make sense."

"It is a philosophy we Felis-Lycan have." Sage said in all seriousness. "It is said that a feline has nine lives. Whenever our normally insane luck let's us down and we loose a life, we are remade. When all of our nine lives are expended... then we can die."

"So how many is it now, Sage?" Patch grinned. "Four? Five? *Nine?*"

"This is my fourth." Sage answered with a raised eyebrow to his brother.

"Good thing too." Kina mused. "The last you was a dick." Which made the four of them laugh.

"First a pussy, then a bastard, and then a dick." Patch chuckled.

"Yeah, hopefully I'll get it right this time." Sage grinned, and even his eyes smiled. "And you're ugly."

"I wouldn't know, jerk off." And Equis watched the two brothers chuckle at a private joke, and actually managed to smile in amusement as they turned their backs on another in mock shunning, turned over each other's shoulder simultaneously, and uttered a single word at one another. "Dork..."

Smiling felt good.

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Patch was removing his robes to reveal a garb similar to Sage's as they climbed a hill beside one another; the elder werewolf brother in loose fitting black pants but with a blue shirt. Sage's black pants and white shirt made them look as if they were on different sides of some battle.

They looked at one another with an intimidating glare just then as Patch let go of his staff and it floated in mid air, and tossed his robe at it and it folded around the shaft of wood, while Sage retracted his jacket as apart of his bio-armor and began rolling up the sleeves of his shirt.

Some of the fighter-ballers who'd been playing below paused to watch this exchange as the two brothers faced one another, and those who'd been on the sidelines ventured forward, hoping for a fight.

"You ready, hoser?" Sage said, and Patch tightened his bandana.

"Yeah I am, how 'bout you, you knob?" Patch responded.

"Whenever you are."

"Then let's go!"

And Sage lifted a hand, and the pond beside them suddenly hardened above the first foot or so of solid ice. Patch then gestured, and bands of light appeared that rapidly crisscrossed and bent over themselves, forming a computerized-like grid around a shape before that shape rapidly solidified like an image being de-pixelated into a large trapezoid six feet tall with a curved back and an open front and a pair of lights – one blue, the other white – situated on top of it.

From out of nowhere, the two fighters pulled out some sort of stick with a curved and flattened end and stepped onto the ice, sliding, perfectly balanced. Sage then took out a black circular disk from out of his pocket and dropped it on the ice while Patch slid easily into place in front of that construct he'd formed.

By now all the fighter-batters were watching as Sage hauled back and slapped that black disk with his stick, and a loud crack rang out and Patch contorted and caught the thing before tossing it back. Sage stopped it with his foot and slapped it again, and another echoing crack erupted outward, and Patch deflected it with his stick. It sailed around and back into Sage's hand as he dropped it before him and immediately slapped it with his stick again, his whole body moving to carry that black disk forward.

"You suck!" Patch exclaimed as the puck made it through his defenses.

"Not 'til after the honeymoon." And the two brothers switched sides, slapping hands in passing before Sage slid in and turned around as gracefully as a space fighter pulling a full-G turn in space and stopped, facing his brother.

The fighter-batters were now climbing the hill even as Sage zigged when he should've zagged, and took the disk right in the teeth.

"Ah Damn! Foul!" and he spit out a tooth even as it hurriedly grew back.

"Wuss... It's just a tooth."

"Still a foul."

"Hey!" someone called and the two brothers looked at the crowd that had been gathering even as they squared off with one another again, to see someone standing out in the fore front. He was holding the fighter-ball. "What game is this?"

"Oh no... you wouldn't be interested in this." Sage said. "It's much too bloody. C'mon give it to me." And he set himself to take the disk, which, with another slap and a crack, was caught in his hand before he threw it back.

"Hey... we can take a little roughhousing, can't we guys?" The lead fighter-batter mused, with some of the guys including gals joining in with the laughter, slapping the ball into one hand.

"Really?" Patch began, and then shook his head. "Nah... much to tough." And then slapped the disk again, which hit Sage right in the ribs, and some of the people winced as they heard bones crack, and wince again as they immediately reset themselves before the disk came back.

"Hey... give us a chance at least. Please?"

"All right, all right." Sage said, and slid forward on his bare feet. "Just because you said *'please.'*" And he grinned and taking the ball from the leader, threw it to one of his fellows, and pulled him onto the ice.

"Eee... cold." The fighter-baller winced, hopping up on one foot.

"You'll have to get used to that... now listen up. This, is a puck." And he produced another of the black disks from out of no where and held it up for him to see before dropping it on the ice. "This is a stick." And again from out of nowhere, he produced another of those sticks and shoved it into the leader's hands, who slid backward as he accepted it. "And that," he finished explaining as he pointed at the upright trapezoid. "Is the goal.

"You must hit that puck," pointed at it on the ice. "With that stick." Pointed at the stick in his hands. "Into that goal." And then finished by pointing at the goal before pushing off a little away from the leader to let him try.

Sticking his tongue out, the leader wound back and hit the puck and it *slid* along the ice and missed the goal by several feet.

"Ah terrible!" Sage said.

"Bad form." Patch added, shaking his head.

"You hit like a girl!" Sage finished.

"Hey!" someone cried from the back, and a large female Casid shouldered her way to the forefront. "That's sexist." She pointed at him with a growl.

"Ok... ok..." Sage held up a hand. "Then prove me wrong," and he threw her another stick that appeared from out of nowhere. She caught it with both hands and blushed at it, not really prepared it seemed to take such a challenge.

But steeling herself and lifting her chin, she stepped onto the ice, gave a bit of a skip – most Casid were not used to the cold – and set herself up to the returning puck. She put her stick beside the puck, gave a push, and it slid across the ice, but clanged against the pole.

"Hey you're right!" Sage grinned, sliding before both of them. "*You* hit like a girl." He said pointing to the Casid. "And you hit like a wuss." He grinned, pointing at the leader who blanched.

"Here! Here!" Someone in the crowd cried, and the leader wheeled on them, and then fell on the ice amidst fits of laughter before Sage helped him up.

"Ok... now watch..." And Sage swung back with his stick and paused so that they could see, and then swung forward, striking the puck which went sailing through the air to slam into the goal and the white light lit and a horn flared. "Like that... now who else wants to try?"

The fighter ball was given up in favor of something new in which to knock heads with, and once a stick was distributed from the werecat and the werewolf, and everyone had a puck, they all took turns trying to shoot at the goal.

"You're all doing great!" Sage said, opening his arms in congratulations. "Now do you guys wanna try an actual game?"

"You mean there's more?" someone asked.

"Of course there's more. Patch and I were just practicing."

"Hoser." Patch said under his breath.

"Knob." Sage returned before raising his voice again "Now firstly... we need a proper rink. Patch?" and Patch gestured; and reinforced walls all rose up around them, and in some areas, behind the current and newly forming goals, what looked like transparent plassteel formed. "Olympic sized." Sage corrected, lifting his hand, and the world around them transmuted, perceptions altered, and the rink grew wider, and longer.

"All right... Now we need teams, split off into two equal teams. Good. Now you and you are goalies. Your job is to keep the puck from getting into the goal. You three, and you three, will be defensemen – er – people." Sage corrected himself as he noticed that most of them were indeed female. Now you three, and you three, are forwards and you stand there. The rest of you, get off the ice... your turn'll come next."

"A Forward's job is to score goals." Patch supplied. "Defensemen – people – are supposed to keep the forwards from getting in position to score a goal.

"Now normally, we'd all be on skates and have uniforms and body padding on, but that's a wuss's way of playing."

"And if you're a wuss! Get off the rink!" Sage finished. "Now let's play!"

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"Where ya going? Where ya going?" Sage mocked, sliding backwards as fast as his opponent was sliding forwards, his bottom wiggling rapidly as he slid backward. "You got it, what're ya gonna do with it? Gonna keep it? NOPE!" he finished, striking his stick on the ground, tipping his opponents stick upward, pushing the puck between his feet, sliding around him, and slapping the puck so hard, that a stream of rushing air and smoke rings formed from it as it smacked into the goalie on the other side of the rink and thrust both him and the puck into the goal.

"Whoa... dude... that was sweet." Champion managed as he pushed himself up from the goal, and then coughed up the puck.

"Hey! He saved it!" Patch exclaimed incredulously.

"All right everyone... You seem to have the game down, more or less... and an average idea of the rules. But you gotta remember one thing: Stop... checking... the GOALIE! Now I'm gonna stand over here, and my brother Patch here," Patch raised a hand, grinned ferally and wiggled his fingers *hi*. "Will be reffing for you. Now don't let the fact that he's blind confuse you. He can see everything, and I *do mean* everything.



"Play on, and be sure to keep your stick on the ice."

Sage then slid along the ice that had a nice sheet of water atop it due to melt, and he gestured to freeze the water again, which pushed the players up as it did so as not to trap their feet in the new freeze, and he turned and watched them all, leaning on his stick.

"You planned that," he heard a voice say, and he grinned, already knowing who it was.

"Of course I did." He grinned, rolling his R in a growl, and then turned toward Rae as she saddled up beside him, laying a hand on his shoulder as she watched this new game.

This touch, and the occasional hug or peck on the cheek, was all the affection the two of them allowed themselves to show one another anymore. Rae was a married female. Anything more would be improper.

"I think they liked it better when you checked Lobo into the boards."

"I thought they might. Poor bastard. Hope the concussion goes away soon."

There was a slight pause as they watched the game being played for a short while.

"Sage..." Rae finally spoke up, and the Weretiger turned to regard her. "There's something I've been wanting to do and haven't been able to really do in all the rush the past few days."

"Oh? What?" Sage asked, looking down at her the great distance separating them in height.

Rae released his shoulder, and stepping around him, hugged him around the middle.

"I'm glad that you are still alive."

"I aim to please." Sage replied, and cupped one side of her face, rubbing a spot on her cheek and bent down to kiss her on her forehead. "I'm glad that I'm still alive too..."

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Meniko had to stretch her wings.

It'd been far too long cooped up in her home, and though her chamber was a mile wide, it was no where near large enough to allow her to fly. A great feathered serpent like creature, she had already become the goddess of goddesses for this world of water and waves from the times in which the prehistoric people of this world had first seen her. Her legend has already been carried throughout the world.

But despite all that attention, hers was the purpose of the guardian of this world, and though she loved to be loved, she nonetheless avoided contact with them.

Her wings helped her to glide effortlessly through the air, and with a single downbeat, she soared high into the sky, her legs dangling from her body as she gave out a single beautiful cry like that of a massive bird.

But just then something caught her attention out of the corner of her eye, and a massive shape erupted outward from out of the mists of a mountain valley below her, surging upward before a pair of *tremendously huge* leathery wings flayed outward, and a reptilian creature landed atop

the ice and snow of one of the mountains, and arching its head backward, gave off a cry of such beauty, Meniko herself felt her breath catch and her heart squeeze with longing at the sound of it.

Like whale song made love to.

She sailed around him, this creature turning his head on a long and thick neck to watch her, his body covered in white scales and white plate armor, with a crown of white horns splaying backward from his brow, and a pair of piercing green eyes that glowed beautifully inside his head. Highlights of iceberg blue detailed his extreme edges she noticed as she landed on a mountain peak across from it.

Then she noticed the green soul gems, and she actually crawled backward a few steps, and then the five fingered hands ending in wicked black talons told of the origin of this creature.

The Prime Universe.

"Greetings, headmistress Meniko." The creature said, and bowed his head while its gossamer wings fanned at its back before folding again.

"Who are you?" she demanded, surging forward, feeling in a mode to protect her whole world from this creature.

"Fear me not..." the creature said, raising a taloned fist, and she saw more of those soul gems on his hands. "I do not seek conflict, Lady Meniko... just to talk."

"*What* are you?"

"I think you already know that answer, Lady Meniko... but to clarify, I am Lord Drake of the Dragon Council, third circle, and Grandmaster of the Holy Order. Sage's surrogate father."

Meniko's eyes widened in disbelief. "You were that human." She breathed.

"Indeed. Though the official term would be Homo-Sapiens-Draco-Lycan-Royale." And again Drake bowed humbly.

"Do all the denizens of the Prime Universe need to describe themselves with so many hyphens?"

"It's sometimes necessary... Lady Meniko... in order to describe us."

"Now... the final question... *Why* are you on my world?"

"As a guest." He said, and maneuvered closer to her, his body moving quite easily on the slippery terrain despite his size that was perhaps equal to Meniko herself. "And only for a short while I look in on my son."

Meniko looked at him, and then at the green soul gems, the green eyes, and suddenly understood.

"*You* gave him the dragon seed." She stated, and this armored white dragon bent his head downward simply.

"Indeed I did. So in a literal sense, he is my son, and I beg that you'd let me check in on him from time to time. This is the first chance I've been able to come and watch him... especially

after such a most recent tragedy." Meniko's heart sank some in remembrance of what had happened over the past month. "I appreciate your wisdom, my lady. It is very advanced for one so young... I think, perhaps, that this is the doing of the young lady known as Sanari."

Meniko blinked. Very few people had the ability to literally call Sanari young. She then saw that he was looking at her expectantly, and her eyebrows beetled minutely in remembrance to his question.

"So long as you do not interfere with the goings on of this world, Lord Drake. I expressly forbid you in doing so."

To her surprise, Drake bowed his head again in acquiesce. "Done. As such, even the people of this world shall not see me. That is why I have chosen to approach you here... at the roof of this world."

Meniko found her heart softening. This dragon, weredragon, whatever he was, was very humble and kind. But still, like when he'd stood before her as a human, she could not sense his level of power.

And then he was extending his clawed hand toward her. "Your hand upon it, my lady?" he said, and his big green eyes blinked expectantly at her.

She looked hesitantly down at the great armored, scaled and taloned hand and bejeweled arm, before even more hesitantly; she placed her hand in his. She'd been told by other Dragaseir upon the trickery of Dragons, but she felt no malice from this one, and even as she allowed her hand to be touched, Drake closed his hand about her fingers only, and bending forward kissed her hand like a gentleman.

"Then we have a bargain." He said, and letting go of her hand, he stepped backward and immediately she saw him beginning to fade, revealing a network of energy inside him like ball lightning. "I shall be watching..." and his outside form faded completely, leaving an ethereal after image, before that too faded, and only an outline with all his gems. "Waiting..." and then even the gems disappeared, and all feeling of his presence vanished from her senses... all of her senses. "And hidden." A voice said as if it were echoed, and with the sound of a pair of wings unfurling and flapping down once, a mass leapt off the mountain before her with a spray of snow, and the last traces of the Weredragon known as Drake disappeared with the last bits of powdery snow falling off his feet.

Meniko watched outward, seeing a gull flying before the waning sun, and then her body shocked as she saw a cloud suddenly cut in half by a monstrous form and trail away wisps of mist like they were falling off wings.

Meniko's lips pressed together as she looked at this last reminder that she could have a dragon on her world at any time, and she wouldn't even know it. But... despite all that she's been told about dragons... this creature felt... kind. Loving. Humble and considerate. No matter how hard she tried to find something bad about this experience, she could not find any.

Exhaling, she spread her own beautiful feathery wings and flapped once into the air to spread her wings for a bit longer. Shaking her head, she flew higher, determined to enjoy this time out in the air.

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Geevo paused before the door of Kina's home, and taking in a deep breath, he shifted his lip muscles over each other rapidly in nervousness before nibbling on his lower lip with his thick bicuspid.

Strange... he'd never felt nervous in this act before.

But regardless, he lifted his hand to knock on the door, before it was suddenly pulled open with his hand ready to rap on it, and he suddenly had a powerfully built, naked female body on him. He had a look of a deer caught in a set of headlights as a pair of strong hands grabbed his rump and a firm body rubbed her washboard stomach along his groin, erecting it immediately. There was a loud purr and the press of a pair of mammaries, till...

"KAYA!" a shrill voice called, and Geevo, still stuck in his pose of knocking, saw a great, luscious Casid pull back short of kissing him just before a half-full beer can hit her head. "I told you... no sex in *MY HOUSE!*" and Geevo saw Kina marching up to them both to peel Kaya off him. "That's... *MY JOB!*"

"But it was just in the door way. Besides, I wasn't gonna sex him. Just molest him a little bit."

"No!" Kina said abruptly, and slapped the girl on the bottom, and Geevo did his little lip munching thing as his mind reeled on all the things he could do to these two women... both at once... repeatedly... all night... and into the morning. His lips, so well exercised in various... love making exercises, did this little motion exceptionally fast.

But then once Kaya was out of sight, Kina saddled up to him, pressing her crotch against his groin, and taking a full firm grasp of his rump with one hand, and tracing circles on his chest with her finger.

"So... What are you here for? To make me into a woman again, I hope..."

*Be strong Geevo... be strong... DOWN SOLDIER!* He screamed in his mind as his endowment began to bulge and curve almost painfully in its pouch.

"Mayia." He said at last, and winced at having just given up a sure time of sex with a grown female for her. The signs his father had told him of when he'd found *'the one'* were beginning to display themselves in Mayia.

How strange... when he'd first met her, he thought her too comely... then he thought her a bitch. And now? *I hope you're right, dad...* Geevo thought as he watched Kina step back suddenly, a little disappointed.

"Oh. Well then," and she got a sly look on her face, and then grinned all her sharp teeth at him, looking at his groin. "She's down that hall, third door on the right. Just go right in. We're all friendly around here..."

"Third door on the right?" Geevo said, and stepping forward, steeling himself, he paused at rounding a corner where the couch was, feigned looking in that direction, and could not help but wiggling his tail briefly to amuse her, and then stepped off as gracefully as his new life was allowing him to be.

Sage's teachings were definitely becoming a benefit as he discovered new ways to define the thought of *'male beauty.'*

Set with his loincloth and black silk uniform pants that left his hips and a bit of his rump exposed, he walked down the hallway with his jacket completely open to reveal his chest.

"And remember. Only I get to have sex in this house." Kina reminded him. "So if you're not busy later..."

But Geevo was already gone, and he looked around this house of leisure living, a relaxed environment, and was so busy admiring the tasteful female nudes, that he had to double back to the door he'd been directed to.

Turning the knob, he walked right in without thinking.

And he stopped, suddenly finding himself in a large grove of natural beauty, decorated by flowers and tall grasses, with large a hot spring pool set in the center of the round chamber. Cat tails grew out of the water, with the pool fed by a waterfall that spilled over an assortment of rocks overlooking its lucid waters.

Above him was open air; a dome that was above them having been retracted to let in the night air, while the place was lit by flood lamps close to where the dome would be. The walls were holoscreens, which showed off a hidden alcove of rock all around them, and the door behind them set straight into the rock.

"Mayia?" he ventured, closing the door softly behind him.

Just then a form broke the surface of the pool, and Geevo standing where he was, again did his lip munching twitch, and if he had whiskers, they would've been flaying everywhere just then.

Mayia's firm body rose from the waters as she threw back her unbound mane of fire red hair, pushing it backward from off her face as she spit out some water through her mouth. Geevo watched the water sheet down her supple form, off her rounded breasts and erect nipples, straining her fur straight down, as she made another pass with her hands to push her hair back against her head.

As her arms lifted each time to do this, he watched her tits rise and bunch, and then fall and bounce with the motions. It was a hypnotic thing to watch.

Her long ears folded backward against her head as she stepped lithely through the waters, rising up a rocky incline underneath the water while her fingers slid along the surface of the water, and Geevo was favored with peaks of her breasts from underneath her arms as she turned this way and that, watched her hips sway with each step, and was finally gifted with a beautiful view of her tit as she lifted one arm to soothe a muscle in her chest, which turned into a pleasing caress of that tit as she slid her fingers over her nipple to entice it more.

He licked his lips then, watching the taught muscles of her back shift with her movements with every movement of her arms.

And then she bent forward at the edge of the pool before genially climbing outward.

There was a thing about bunnies that could enrapture a male... where their upturned tails revealed the whole of their bottom, whereas the longer tail of a Casid or an Aphkei could hide the features of a great ass.

That was another thing his father had taught him, and now he knew why as he watched Mayia climb out of the pool, her back arching and giving him a view of her rounded bottom and the tight folds of her love mound framed between the rounded masses and her thighs, and the pinkish flesh compressed there with its erect clit. As she rose again on the embankment, she took the time to strain the water from her fur with her hands, bending over again to give him a view of her bottom and love mound, and then the supple view of her profile, and finally her front.

Geevo stopped breathing as Mayia's lovely body turned to face him, her head bowed as she continued to strain the water from her fur, and he watched the way her breasts bounced and bunched, the way they swayed and jiggled, and how her broad hips and thighs perfectly framed the reddened patch of fire red fur decorating her femininity that was the same color as her hair.

She finally wrung her mane out into the pool, rivulets of water sparkling downward, and with her moistened bodice, she looked positively golden at that moment.

*There will be a time, my boy, his father had told him, that a female will unwittingly present you with the 'perfect view' of her naked form, and only your one and true chosen one will ever give you that view.*

Geevo watched as Mayia moved gracefully, her movements made instinct from Lord Sage's and Master Tia's instruction, her body moving in perfect motion this way and that, and he thought he saw several instances of the 'perfect view' in her.

With all the young maidens he'd had in his and their own bed, of all the beautiful girls and even grown women he's made love to, he'd never been presented with a view of a woman like this.

*And when you find her... you must take her... make her yours! Love her. This is a lesson passed down in our family for generations, my boy.*

*When I found your mother... well... let's just say that you were born exactly five months later.*

He swallowed, not knowing what to do now, till of course he saw Mayia pause in her motions as her hand cupped her breast, her fingers sliding around her teat just before she blew on it to make it harden more, and Geevo felt his erection slide out of the top of his pouch but not quite outside his loincloth. A bead of his seminal juices wet the front of that, however.

*She'll inadvertently show you her desires, her pensive pleasures. Learn them.*

And then she caressed her crotch, her legs pressing together as a pair of her fingers slid up and down the two lips lovingly as she smiled down at her body, and Geevo's chubby hardened till it ached.

Immediately, he was given the dream of sneaking behind her, and helping her in those caresses, and then ever so gently help her to the ground, and then part her legs before...

\*snick\*

He'd moved forward to enact his plan, ready to actually go through with it with a member of his own race at last when he stepped on a dried piece of cat grass. He looked down, staring in horror at his foot and the broken stalk beneath it, and then jerked his gaze upward toward Mayia, who slowly lifted her head to look at him. His lips parted as he saw her eyes shine a flash of amber briefly as it caught the light of the flood lights.

The two of them looked at one another for a long time, Mayia standing there elegantly, serenely. And then Geevo whirled on his heel to make a run for it, but then found Mayia standing before the door out, locking it closed.

Geevo blinked, and then looked back at where she'd just been disbelieving that she had such speed, and then back only to find her standing directly in front of him. Her eyes closed as she leaned forward, the tips of her breasts sliding along his chest as she inhaled his presence through her mouth and nose. He felt her erect nipples sliding over his chest fur.

"You smell like a Casid." She said slyly, opening her eyes and focusing on him alluringly.

Geevo felt very hot at the moment.

"Mayia... I... I mean I didn't mean to... they just... \*urk\*" Geevo tried to explain, but was cut off as her fingers pressed against his mouth.

"I understand." She smiled, but then she slid gently into him, and he felt the perfection of how her body fit against his. "They do that to nearly everyone..."

She was just the right height for his shaft to pierce her while standing up; the wedge formed between her thighs just the right size to hold the bulge of his groin. Her tight abs met his one right over the other, and her breasts rising up atop his chest as she pressed against him filled the gap between them perfectly.

Mayia bit her lower lip as she looked into his eyes, and she again breathed in deeply of his air before her hands slid up his chest and pushed his jacket off his arms.

"But you still stink..." she said then as she stepped back, and Geevo was powerless as she pulled on the drawstrings of his trousers and loin cloth, and dipping downward, pulled his pants down. Geevo looked down on the top of her head as she rose, and she smiled at seeing his already erect shaft, and smiled up at him. "I'll fix that stink for you, and don't worry... I won't take advantage of you.

"Only Kina can have sex in this house."

And taking his hand, Mayia led Geevo into the pool, where she bid him to sit, and she washed him, thoroughly, avoiding any sort of sexual contact like a grope, sufficing only with caresses every now and again. By the laws of the house, she couldn't sex him, then why was it he still had the hardest stiffy ever?

His phallus would be screaming at him to take her right now if it could talk, and more than once he was presented with an image of her naked body standing over him in the water, her legs spread open, and the firm lips of her womanhood directly over the erect phallus projecting from his pelvis. Each time it seemed as if all he had to do was lift his hips and he'd pierce her.

She soaped him up and rinsed him off with jugs of water pulled from the pool, and then Geevo was given the ultimate of perfect views of her, and for an instant, time stopped so that he could take it in.

Mayia, with her golden body and fire hair slowly leaned over, her breasts hanging from her chest like the luscious fruit of a tree of life. Her love mound framed by her legs that were spread shoulder-width apart; appeared from between her breasts as her back arched and she leaned all her upper body weight on her thighs with both hands.

His head tilted to one side as she leaned in, at first he thought he did it because he was getting a better look at this perfect view, but then he saw her eyes closing as she leaned forward to kiss him.

Just like the image he'd had in the Lair of the Shadow League while looking down at Master Sage in his meditation.

It was Mayia's dream come true, and as she felt his loving touch on her neck to hold her there for that kiss, tears slid from the corners of her eyes as she quietly let him kiss her...

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Mayia stood in the light of the door as she saw him off. She was dressed in a white silk gown with a strip of cloth falling to her ankles to the fore and to the rear, but its sides were cut up high over her wide hips. She wasn't wearing any underwear – he knew, he'd watched her dress – and because of her still moist fur, the white silk of the gown was mostly transparent.

The gown was a variation of the Casid Bodycloth, but it covered more, and the sleeves of the gown fell over the fullness of her arms.

She waved goodnight to him, and he waved back before she retreated, offering him again an innocent 'perfect view.' The back of her gown, because of her tail that stuck upright, caught against one side of her tail and gave him a full on look of her bottom as it shifted in one direction and then the other before the door closed behind her.

*Damn you dad... why did you have to be right with her?*

He looked down at his groin, which was still stiff and hard, and his sack felt like he'd spent a month without sex.

"You too. Why did you have to be right about her?" he said aloud and he tapped his groin. He was answered with a sudden stiffness and a greater erection before another droplet slid out of his shaft.

Despite having just been thoroughly washed, Geevo went right past his dorm room at the Shadow League, stripped and turned on the shower full cold without a second thought, and leaned into the shower spray with his hands against the tile wall.

Even despite the cold water, his endowment remained erect like an exclamation point about this whole meeting with Mayia so as to make its point made.

*Take her!*

Geevo finally had to 'coax' it back down, or he'd not get a wink of sleep tonight. It was the first time, however, he actually felt good about having blue balls.

His virtue had just been tested. He had promised himself that the only Oliverian female he'd ever pleasure would be his wife, and only on or after their wedding night. Fate, it seemed, had helped him keep that vow with Mayia with the house they'd both been in.

Kina was not a person he wanted mad at him at the moment...



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Caliban sat on her bed in her underwear and her uniform shirt, her four tails waving innocently between the rounded bulges of her bottom as they led into her long sinuous legs. She'd begun to feel a woman's sexiness as of late, and inadvertently she'd begun to act as such.

Her legs folded one over the other, folding about and protecting her womanhood which was held behind a pair of subtle white panties that arched below her flat belly. Her uniform jacket was hung open, and her naked breasts hung out gently into the open air.

As a male, she'd often times walked about without a shirt, and the coolness of the air on her chest then was most welcome. Now that she was a female, it was considered indecent to off load ones mammaries into the open air, especially when she had four enormous tits, which, despite having been torn off by the Devil Bunny, had been regenerated as if nothing had happened.

She thought briefly about this...

Earlier that evening, Mayia had confronted her, and before Caliban knew it, she was being embraced.

"I'm sorry." She'd had said into Caliban's ears, and squeezed her tighter.

Caliban already knew why, and letting her books drop beside her hugged the larger bunny back.

"I'm sorry..." Mayia began to cry then, and Caliban, stepping back, wiped Mayia's eyes with her thumbs while she too saw blurriness to her vision.

Mayia, who'd nearly been viciously raped by Caliban awhile back when Caliban was still male, had sunken into a mental state that her usual wonderful academic advances began to fail. Mayia and later Caliban were both taken by the Shadow League, and Caliban, now a female herself, steadily grew in fear of Mayia as to what she could do to Caliban, and as Mayia steadily grew in power, and she, Caliban, stymied, that fear grew every day.

But Mayia never did seek her revenge, even tried to be Caliban's friend.

That was until happenstance placed them on either sides of a battle.

Empowered with the foxfire, Mayia was no match for Caliban, and Caliban was forced to break Mayia, and for a moment, a mere moment... Mayia's life had ended because of it.

And then Mayia opened her eyes and screeched, and as easily as if Caliban were an untrained babe, Mayia tore her apart. Literally. Each of her tails was broken off, each of her four tits were ripped away with Mayia's bare hands, Caliban was disemboweled, felt the entirety of a fist penetrate her womanhood, and her body then shattered in a hundred or more different places.

Mayia had violated her, and punished her for her crimes, and for that, Caliban embraced Mayia tighter.

"No." Caliban remembered saying. "Oh Great Aul, no... please don't beg for forgiveness, Mayia. Please don't. Mayia, I had tried to *rape* you. If not for Lord Sage, I would have. Oh Great Maker, I'm so sorry for that. I'm sorry... I'm sorry... I'm so sorry..."

Like a massive weight had been lifted off of Caliban's chest, the two young women embraced one another completely.

Cali, as Caliban's new gender-proper nickname was becoming, though Caliban insisted on being called Caliban, had never felt so free in her life. They'd even spent the rest of the evening on the Space station... shopping.

Cali felt free.

Smiling, she lifted a hand to push some of her long mane back over her shoulder; she then turned the page of her study book that'd been translated into Aphkei. She was being introduced into the advanced forms of the Shadow League at last, and she'd become fascinated at exactly how much more advanced Sage's martial form was from all others in the Great Wide Universe.

The one possible exception, or perhaps equal... was the Ultimate Fist.

Her long index finger slid down the page as she studied, her once firm and muscular body had become supple and sexual... but despite the transformation from Siklohn's gift, she'd grown immediately dozens of times more powerful than her last transformation, and according to her updated full spectrum scan, her power level had grown by a factor of thirty seven and was still growing.

And she only had *four* tails...

It was then that there came a knock on the door.

"It's open Geevo, and I'm decent." She said aloud. *Sorta*, she corrected mentally and pulled her open jacket front down to hide her nipples.

The door opened, and then after a pause closed, and she registered the presence that was now in the room, but at first ignored it for her roommate. But then she began to notice something... the fact that Geevo's usual intoxicating scent wasn't in the room, and she blinked, realizing this, before quickly sitting up and turning, inadvertently spilling out her four mammaries while the shoulders of her jacket fell off.

She found herself staring directly at Siklohn as he looked down at her, a look in his eyes unlike any she'd ever seen before as he looked upon her; an ever so slight smile of appreciation on his face.

She looked down, blinked, and then blushed as she folded her jacket sides together and sat up straight, closing her legs about her revealed choice of color for her panties... complete with a pink bow at the peak.

"I'm sorry..." she said abashed, folding her arms about her breasts.

Siklohn had seen her naked chest before, well, not since gaining the second said of breasts, and she'd had it flat against his bare chest after he'd been destroyed by Lord Sage then. The memory of that experience, of her crotch directly over his naked groin, with only a blanket and her panties keeping them from a night of torrid sex made her nipples ache.

"You need not apologize, dearest heart."

Caliban looked up at him and smiled, and hugging herself, hefting all four mammaries atop her chest, she looked pleasantly at him.

"It's good to see you, milord." She said, sitting on the end of her bed.

Siklohn continued smiling at her, before he slowly lowered himself to his knees before her, still smiling as he took a mangled black box from under his arm and placed it on the ground.

"I'd meant to do something a long time ago, but circumstance robbed me of the chance." He said, and straightened the box carefully before him.

She looked down at it and raised an eyebrow. It was a very unassuming box, charred and burned as if it'd been thrown into a furnace, with its hinges and lock missing, and what looked like a sliced open weld along all its sides.

"Siklohn?"

"It had been in my forge when Sage destroyed it. It was my most precious treasure, and its loss combined with Sage reactivating my pain inhibitors on top of everything else he'd done to me, it drove me mad."

Caliban's lips pressed together and she held her breath as he spoke to her. This was a subject she so wanted to learn. *Why had he done his insurrection?*

"I hated Sage for what he'd done to me, and I decided to make sure he felt every ache, and every pain that he'd caused me. And then the act was done..."

"He'd vowed vengeance, nothing more than I expected from him, and so in spite of everything he was, I stood there and took my punishment as Meniko had dictated it, laughing inwardly as I saw that he was denied, even in his punishment of me.

"The thought that I had bested him... and the thought of you made my stay in the Frozen Prison of the Demon League all the more bearable.

"And then I was being hauled from my cell, given warmth for the first time in three weeks, and before I knew it, I was back here. I had consigned myself that whatever punishment Sage had come up with, that I still had the last laugh to anything his limited political power in this universe would've allowed him.

"And then they told me what he'd done..."

Siklohn's hands lifted and settled on Caliban's knees, and in spite of herself, she felt her labia clench in preparation of a piercing she'd wished would come. Since becoming a female, she'd remained a virgin, despite that her male self had lost his virginity as soon as he'd been able to, and continued to have sex as often as he desired... whether the female wanted it or not.

She so hated that past life...

But now she leaned forward and placed her hands on his where they rested on her knees, giving them a gentle squeeze.

"For the first time in a very long time, I was confused. Sage was my enemy... then why is it that he'd do this? He took all of my actions, all the lifelong punishments and shames that they'd've caused and placed them on his own shoulders. And not only mine, but Mayia's as well.

"With both punishments together, it meant a death sentence... and I wondered why would an enemy do that? For Mayia, I am sure that he'd do that in a heartbeat, but why for me?

"I watched him attached to that machine, watched him set himself up to it, and I still couldn't understand. I saw him pierced, saw him pushed to his knees by it, and still couldn't understand... till I had a revelation."

His head hung in shame, and Caliban knelt down on the floor before him, the box between them, while she held his hands.

"What if he wasn't an enemy? What if all that he'd done wasn't to break me, to shame me, to destroy me and my family name, or to disgrace my heritage? I'd asked myself then, what has he ever done that has ever been to my benefit?

"And that answer became you." He looked up at Caliban, his eyes shining lightly, but he did not let whatever tears were there fall.

"When he deactivated my pain inhibitors, he likewise allowed me to experience a greater pleasure. He purposely gifted me to fully appreciate the feel of your fur, the softness of your form, and the delicateness of your touch," he laughed. "And be fully aroused by it.

"And then he taught me how to take the pain, make it a strength instead of a weakness."

It wasn't necessary, but she slid her thumbs against his hands, and felt him doing the same to her.

"He'd given me something I cherished, immensely, and in my shame I'd demanded to take his place."

Caliban remembered, but she dare not say so to him. She just watched him tight-lipped.

"And then he selflessly took all my shame in on himself, and likewise the shame it would've brought my clan, and suffered for it. I never before felt so vile inside as I watched him torn apart and burned alive for me...

"If having to watch him suffer like that was his punishment for me, then it was indeed worthwhile... and deserving."

Caliban pushed her body forward, and her four breasts fell out of her jacket again, but she didn't move to cover them again. She so wanted to embrace him, but he wasn't done.

"But he continued to make amends. He had my punishment lessened to where I didn't have to spend a second more in the frozen prison, and I learned recently of all the honors that he wished to have bestowed upon me, even above those he's given Mayia. I felt his pride, heard him call me 'son.'"

Then he looked down.

"And he discovered how truly he'd wronged me, and begged for forgiveness from it, and in an attempt to complete that, he retrieved this from the resting place of where my Forge had been." He pulled his hands from hers, and laced them on the lid of the box. "And today, before giving this back to me, he gave me a detonator, and had me destroy his shrine."

"No..." Caliban whispered in disbelief, speaking at last. Sage's shrine had remained unscathed in all its beauty because of Siklohn's own choice, and Siklohn nodded that it was true.

"An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. And then he returned to me my most precious of treasures."

Caliban looked to his hands on the box, and then to him, and then back to the box.

"Siklohn... I don't understand..."

Siklohn then took the lid in his fingers, and lifting it straight up, he then moved it aside and laid it lovingly on the floor beside the box, to reveal two golden rings, untouched and resting one over the other.

Caliban's voice caught in her throat as she looked down at them, and immediately she began to cry as her heart stopped beating inside her chest, and reaching down to the polished rings, Siklohn took out the first, held it in his hand as he reached forward for Caliban's slender wrist.

"Heart of my heart," he began; excitement in his face and eyes, and joy on a level that perhaps no Dousaka had experienced in thousands of years, beamed from his face to shine on her. "I have learned the true meaning of love through my experiences here. You first showed me that I *could* love, and Lord Sage showed me how *to* love. I wish you to stand beside me, to carry my name and bare our children. For ever and ever, and for all eternity."

Caliban didn't hesitate. She reached down and took the other promise ring, passing her hand through the one Siklohn held, and holding the other up within her fingers, reached out and took Siklohn's wrist.

"Soul of my soul, beloved of my true and *rightful* form, I accept you as my lord and protector, you who took me from the wretch that I was, and made me into the beauty that I am. I shall stand beside you, carry your banner and your name, and my womb will bare your children. For ever and ever, and for all eternity."

Siklohn pushed his hand forward through the ring, and simultaneously, the promise rings closed about the other's wrists, closing firmly and forever to seal this promise, and pronounce their bond. Already, a power rose between them as they clutched hands to one another, and leaning forward kissed one another. Deeply.

Caliban's heart gave a rapid th-thump from the passion, the unbridled passion from her new lord, and when they relinquished one another, she'd found that she had leaned back, and he had carried forward into her, his groin again against her crotch, her breasts swollen and pressing against his chest.

They both laughed at one another and kissed again.

From behind them, standing in only his chaps and loincloth, the door having opened without their notice, Geevo had watched this whole experience.

"Amen." He said, and quietly left, allowing the door to close behind him.

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"KA! Joanna! Tighten that rigging!" Sage called out, pointing at the two weresnakes from his homeworld – a sea snake and a land snake whose clans were bitter enemies – and the two incredibly powerful weresnakes, as quick as you may, slithered through the rigging tightening the struts.

Ka and Joanna, though having their *'disagreements'* when they first arrived, had grown very, very close.

"They're ready!" Ka the sea snake called from above, and then got a full bodied embrace from his much larger feminine lover as he wiped sweat from his brow.

"All right. Raise it up!" Sage called, and one of the first ornate pillars that were to ring the newly recreated courtyard was pulled erect through all the rigging. A team of a dozen or so Shadow Leaguers, Their powerful yet incredibly compact bodies hauling a two story stone monolith of pseudomatter into place, a stone so dense that it didn't reflect light... light just got sucked right in and didn't even get a chance to scream. But because of its density, even with a dozen Shadow Leaguers, this was a daunting and rigorous task.

"Heave! Ho! Heave! Ho!" a chant came up, even as Lord Sage himself surged in to help them raise the stone, while at one of the teams devoted to help raise the stone closer to its base, a small mouse named Camby, was slowly drawn upward with her hands gripped tightly to the support string as it drew taut.

As a testament as to exactly how heavy the stone was, even Lord Sage had to transform into his fearsome battle form, while Goath'El had to surge forward and help with the line before him.

"We almost got it!" Siklohn cried as he helped organize all the supporters on the support chords as the ornate design of a shadow dragon engraved within the pseudomatter rose erect. "ALMOST!"

And with a surge the base of the massive tower pulled the statue upward on a keel block and into its support and came to an erect position with a thunderous earth moving slam.

"Congratulations Everyone! Exceptional job." Sage said clapping his hands, shifting back to his hybrid form. "Now we have only eight more..."

There was some laughter as the support teams began to move out of the way, and Camby dropped to the ground as the support cables and chords were cut loose and the tower bobbed from the sand underneath it being pushed out from its weight.

She brushed off one arm, worked her hands and then stretched, which drew Verdance's eyes, and he smiled at her. He was now not the only number one stalker on the island. Now he had proper competition, and a cute one.

But then his eyes flickered, and with his mind foggy from being up so late – it was nearly mid day – he almost missed it, but then he saw that the recently erected pillar was leaning ponderously forward from its sand not being pushed out the correct way.

"Camby! **Lookout!!**" he cried, and leapt from where he'd been lazing briefly to rush toward her, and he watched her slowly turn to see the face of the dragon coming to crush her. She froze, watching her inevitable death coming, and to her credit, she didn't even scream.

But then a mass of white slammed against the pillar, and a scream did then issue forth – sounding like a baleful roar – as a creature that towered over all forced all its weight into the falling pillar.

Claws as long and as sharp as swords on its toes gripped into the stone tiles, scraping briefly before it found proper purchase, and a pair of massive leathery wings beat irritably a few times before this creature pushed the pillar forward, and step by step, righted the thing, and once it was upright, lifted it slightly and then pounded it into the ground, and a puff of sand burst from the sides of its base.

"Secure it." The creature said in a low calm voice, and after a brief shock at seeing this beast, the engineers rapidly moved forward to give the massive pillar a stone base.

"Pillar of strength indeed." The creature said as it stepped back to look at the pillar it had just helped plant. "Sage... please remind me to never, ever, use pseudomatter in the construction of a school again.

But the students were watching their Master even as Sage stepped up, full of form, and then remarkably, lowered himself to one knee, resting one arm over the upraised knee. Everyone gasped. No one knew of how Sage had approached Meniko to ask for reconciliation, as best as they knew, this was the first their master had bowed to anyone, let alone descend to one knee in a sign of fealty.

"Grandmaster Drake... I thought you'd gone home." Sage finished, even lowering his eyes.

"No... I've decided to stick around a bit. But I must admit... using a substance like this would *indeed* be a worthwhile symbol of strength. There's only one other substance stronger..." The great reptilian like creature, much, much smaller than he'd appeared before Meniko earlier the other day stepped back a step, and one of his toe claws tapped the ruined cobblestones in thought.

This was the hybrid form of the Dra'Con... the Weredragons.

The creature was unaware that Master Tia, Masters Mélange and Matee, even the two weresnakes, and Daedalus himself, all sank to one knee or bowed deeply behind this creature following Lord Sage's lead. The students, not knowing what else to do, followed suit. The one and only exception was Siklohn, who instead drew himself straight into an attention stance.

"I am glad that you like my choice, Grandmaster."

"Oh it's nothing Sage, I..." the creature known as Drake began as he turned, and then groaned. "For crying out loud, Sage, would you stop doing that? Get on your feet!"

Sage rose, and the assemblage rose, Siklohn unbending into a ready stance.

"Forgive me Lord Drake." Sage began, keeping his head bowed, "But I thought it only proper."

Drake snerked, and then knelt before Sage, the creature only then able to look Sage in the eye... and Sage was eight feet tall!

"And look up at me every once in awhile, my boy," Drake mused, and with a single knuckle, tilted Sage's head upward. "A person who always stares at the ground will forever be running into things. And that goes for the rest of you!" He said looking over all the students as he rose to his full height and ruffled Sage's mane with one massive taloned hand. "No more bowing before me... I like looking into the eyes of those I meet. You are protectors and healers, guardians of those things that you love and those things that are worth protecting." There were so many who, at that moment, thought that this visitor was speaking directly to them; and Drake eyed a few of them in particular to make sure they got the point.

Among them were Caliban and Siklohn, Mayia and Geevo, Goath'El, Verdance and Camby, and others.

"Despite having lost focus on this a short while back, you've all come further because of your hardship. Now... let me help you get these things upright..." and the dragon gave them all a comical expression of mock elation and some of them laughed. "And then we can really rest and relax and enjoy what we've all made together.

"Too much hardship in too short of a time will make you mad."

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Sage bent forward, single-handedly raising the last of the stone pillars himself, away from the eyes of all the students. The muscles of his battle form strained, but the pillar of pseudomatter rose nonetheless, and when it was set, several of Daedalus's drones finished anchoring the stone before it sank.

Looking up at the nine dragons looking down on the courtyard, all made of black pseudomatter, he smiled, and was amazed at what his students had accomplished in one day.

Before, when he had joined in the task of raising the first pillar, he'd done so to allow them to feel that he was no longer above them; that he was like them. Working together to raise such a pole was a daunting task, and with Sage on the ropes, he made sure that the stone didn't fall.

Thankfully Lord Drake was there when it did...

He had set the last pillar himself, so as to let the students enjoy some free time.

His growing Psionic abilities allowed him to feel the growing feelings of joy here. It was the feeling that, until now, he couldn't understand did not exist, and now that he knew why it hadn't, he was trying to make amends so that it did.

Wiping of his brow, Sage then climbed up onto one of the radial roots of the great tree that held fast onto the Volcano, calming its fury and feeding off its natural strength. Then producing his pipe, he stuffed the bowl and enjoyed a smoke from his pipe as he watched the enigmatic Lord Drake acting like a diving board for several of the students into one of the hot springs that had – until recently – been the school bathhouse.

"So, what now milord?" came a familiar voice, and Sage's face turned into the back a fem's delicate hand as Sanari caressed his cheek.

Sage immediately began to purr within her presence.



"I think... a fair." He said, smiling at the sound of the music several of the students were playing on their instruments, mimicking some of the popular songs within this cosmos. "I've really been pushing them all way to hard. Time to rethink my teaching methods."

Sanari sat down beside him, and smoothed her delicate silks over her legs as she sat close by, but not touching Sage. "Finally..." she said, and then nudged his much larger form with her shoulder.

"That bad, was I?" and they both laughed.

Sage paused, taking another puff on that sweet concoction he had in there. Sanari loved the effects that smoke had on her brain. It was so calming... and it reminded her of him...

"Sanari..." Sage said suddenly, and she looked up at him. "Tell me. What is the price of wisdom?"

"Being humble." She said quietly, and looked up at her desired lover. Like granules of salt, day by day, she was winning this great weretiger's heart... or was it the other way around?

"Or being humbled." He managed a small smile, as he continued to look over his students. "Yes... I think that a fair is just what we all need..."

**End**