

Bloodlines

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Rating: R

Chapter One: Future Past

"If you want to help, then do as you are told. Stay out of the way." Kayja Laggi said to Sage.

Can you believe she married her former subordinate, Wrel Soutine? He resigned after his service duty was up to return home to his father temple dojo. Kayja is a very two-faced person. She is publicly and relentlessly military, but in private she is one of the most sensitive people you can imagine.

In truth, Sage would more than likely to want no one but himself to administer unto his mate. He wanted the first hands his children pass into from their mother to be his own.

Sage lowered his brow at Laggi's words, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end in mild annoyance as he focuses his gaze on Laggi through a flock of hair falling before his eyes. Stepping forward, Laggi is forced to back up until the two of them had stepped out of the room, and the door closed softly behind Sage without him lifting a hand.

It was a good thing his eyes remained green... they hadn't received that red tint in the longest time. Not since the episode where Sage went berserk. It was as if all the anger he'd held pent up inside him was burned away during his rampage.

"I will ask that you keep a civil tongue in your mouth, Laggi. You are here because of my mate's desire for a midwife, but your dealings with her shall only be in the case of my absence.

"I've delivered thousands of cubs and babies while you were still a tot, administered unto their mothers for the entire duration of their pregnancy, and as such I will be the one to administer unto her and to deliver my cubs, not you.

"Talk down to me again, and despite my mate's desires, I will eject you and find someone else. If you cannot understand anything else, understand that.

"And from now on, stay out of **MY** way."

The door opens again, and Sage turns his back on her and steps in. The door slides shut in her face as Sage goes to tend to his mate.

Sanari's hands lift to Sage as he approaches her; she dressed in a silk gown to stay cool and little else. Her pleasing form was beautifully displayed through the translucent silk, her belly rounding slightly now.

"Was that necessary?" she whispered as Sage sat beside her, one of his large clawed hands coming to lie on her swollen belly, the other palming her cheek.

"I'm sorry..." he said simply, and looked into her eyes, drawing comfort.

Sanari took his hand on her belly with both of hers. "She means well."

"I know, beloved. I just get... edgy when someone is watching over you... especially when I'm right here. I have not lived on instinct for so long... and it feels strange to have a new instinct rise up for me to master.

"I've grown even more protective of you than before..."

"I didn't think that was possible." She chuckled, and then sighing turned her head away to look at the door.

"Do you wish for me to fetch her?" Sage asked at last.

"No. Not while you are angry at her."

Sage caressed her cheek, and Sanari turned to him, catching his hand and kissing his palm, and received a doting look from her new husband.

"Do that massage for me again? The one with the oils? I try to explain it to Laggi, but she does not do so as well as you."

Sage smiled, glad that he wasn't being '*replaced*.' "As you wish."

Sanari Laid back as Sage undid her gown, opening it up to reveal her perfect bodice, her already full and rounded breasts swelling now with growing milk, before he unhooked her panties. Then reaching for a bottle of oils of his own making, his moistened up his hands, and began to soothe his lifemate; working his oils into her fur and body so that her form stretched properly with her pregnancy.

Sanari fell asleep peacefully while receiving this simple, soothing pleasure.

"Were you expecting congratulations...? Sir?" Luna said with her usual chill, Sage had gotten used to it. Especially when one of her students did something stupid, like anger her. Riot, by far her best pupil, ran off to pick a fight with a galaxy-class fighter and lost. He was nearly killed and forced Luna to violate an extended probation to fetch him. She was not punished but that didn't change much. She was still upset.

"You make it sound as if I had done something foolish. I assure you that that is not the case," Sage tried not to let Luna's venomous emotions effect him but it was hard. Her presence was toxic right now.

"You're doing better," Luna murmured before going on, "Your wife will likely never tell you every detail of her actions unless it is absolutely necessary. I've seen her type: Young house pets who think the world will bend to their will. But she is different. Sanari knows how to play the game to get what she wants or needs... or give what others need."

"Still you bemoan my actions toward Kayja Laggi."

Luna was quiet her ears scanning about, "What do you know of her? What she is doing here?"

'*She's afraid of her?*' Sage thought a moment.

He leaned back a bit to relax his stance and her nerves. "Dallas informs me that she is a brilliant covert agent formerly for the Assembly of Co-allied Worlds and Galaxies. She has never failed a mission and has over two-thousand confirmed kills to her record. The Hiken Registry has scored her fighting ability at near perfection. There is more... But as to your second question, my wife asked her to come as midwife. I imagine she is teaching the girl something..."

"Girl? Your droid is a bumbling toaster to let you believe she is a *'girl.'* She is a grown woman not some super-brat with a sword. Kayja is nearly unbeatable. She has slain many of the most deadly assassins and fighters of the age. They say her greatest challenge was her twin sister, Kuuna. Most want to believe that demon-spawn is dead but no body was recovered so the possibility still remains. She was the personal weapon, pet-killer if you will, of the Senate General, Arkos Grezno for twenty years after serving under now Commodore Mikhael Sarvic in Imperial Intelligence. She is a lethal woman who is likely seeking her next big kill. You would be wise to pretend to abide by her edicts, at the least, and be sure to hide your weaknesses from her, all that you can."

"So you are afraid of her?" Sage stared straight at her. A look of concern for the wolfess fell on his face. He subtly braced to dodge if Luna should lash out at him. He could see her trembling with a mix of anger and fear.

"Her father was a deadly assassin who killed many of my old coven before I killed the rest. I expect Kayja to be no less dangerous."

Sage was silent for a few minutes absorbing what was said. He resumed a normal stance of attention and poise looking at Luna, who still nervously hunted for any sign of the *'fire cat.'*

"Go find your daughter and take the rest of the day to settle yourself. You're dismissed." Sage finished.

Luna said nothing more, melting into the ether like a ghost. The weight of her poisonous aura lifted and he knew she was gone.

Sage hung in the sky just out of immediate sight of Kayja as she trained. He could see, almost two miles away, that her steps were honed with military discipline. It was coldly machine-like to see her move so precisely. A sense of eerie dread fell on him. Nearby were three other Cersile, one golden blonde kitten with a black mane, another tawny with a black mane clearly dressed as some kind of ninja, and a tall silver Amazon like Cersile.

Sage watched the practice with a sense of personal nostalgia. How he had focused so hard to be perfect so early in his life. How he still strives for it. How frequently he is reminded of his shortfalls. His mind drifted until...

"Sage?" Rae suddenly said appearing directly in his face. The Were-dragon lurched back in surprise seeing the pooh floating there in midair. He had not forgotten how fast she was... just how unsettling she could be.

"Rae... Please don't do that," Sage unconsciously patted his chest as if to still his racing hearts.

"Sorry. Wha'cha doin'?" Rae still amazed him at how child-like she could be but that maturity that came from adulthood still showed through making her seem so cute at times, especially when playing with her pups.

"Thinking. Kayja is quite impressive..."

"One sec..." Rae said reaching behind her to catch the dagger thrown at her. To it was a note tied to it. Rae reads it aloud for Sage's benefit. "Stop spying on me and get over here."

"Direct." Sage suppressed a scowl as he glided over to the Fire Cat and her – he assumed – students. Rae followed.

"Lord Sage. Mistress Iksaki. Good Day," Kayja said flatly. "I don't appreciate spies. I used to be one so I know how unsettling they are. What do you want?"

"Good Day, Madam Laggi, Miss Lyn, Miss Kabasi Saurba, Silverwitch." Rae said quickly to stop any free flow of any ill-considered emotion.

"Good Day, Lady Iksaki," The golden kitten, Lyn, actually a young woman now, bowed deeply.

"Good Day, Ma'am," Saurba Kabasi, bowed. She was the only one who didn't look straight at either Rae or Sage.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Mistress Rae Iksaki," Silverwitch rolled off as calmly and precisely as a machine. No small coincidence as Silverwitch is an android.

"Rae." Kayja nodded curtly to the pooch who only smiled in return, "Sage."

"You have good eyes." Sage said firmly but with as little threat as possible.

Kayja barely acknowledged that, "I will carry out the duty given to me by Mother Sanari. Her husband's wishes are irrelevant."

"Come again?" Sage cocked his head.

"Sage, please let it go. There are other ways," Rae said in such a small voice it almost hurt Sage to hear it.

Sage stopped, his wings drooping slightly. "You are right, Rae. I'm sorry for that..." Both of the super-beings flew away with Rae waving good-bye.

"Friendly girl," Kayja said not actually looking at them leave. Then she noted the dagger with a note. It was somewhat hastily tied to it saying: "Kayja, we will have a long talk about this. Sage." Kayja returned the dagger to Saurba dropping the note. As it fell to the ground it incinerated not even leaving ash or smoke.

"Lyn, you will be in charge tonight." Kayja said without emotion before signaling for the girls to bring their sparring match.

When Sage entered in his dragon form, he found Gesiomagatou, the Dragaseir Overgod in his wolf-like form, covered in golden plate scales like a suit of exquisite armor, wearing little more than a fine belt and loincloth. He loomed large over the cat-woman, easily as tall as Sage but lacking wings. There was a sudden sting of jealousy in Sage's heart to see this, but he paused to swallow that venom before doing anything else.

"Beloved." Sanari called to her husband, "This brute has been bombarding me with all manner of questions concerning you and our coming children. Could you help with the answers?" she chuckled.

Rae snickered a bit before looking up at Gesio and feeling her heart race at the sight of him... again. Sage's eyes turned to the pooch for a moment.

'She's drawn to him... but Makahn...' he thought.

Even though the great golden Draco-wolf, had never made an intentional move to claim Rae as his mate, Rae could not help but be enthralled by his presence. Suddenly Rae bowed her head and fled the room without another word.

"I am so sorry Rae..." Gesio whispered.

"It is alright, my friend. Some things cannot be helped." Sanari said; her glib mood muted to the painful fact that Gesio would have to wait a very long time to have Rae.

'Yet another heart bound to Rae...' Sage thought recalling his feelings for the young immortal demigoddess. They had not faded only, matured with his marriage to Sanari. He almost felt a pity for the dragon waiting for his time with Rae to come and yet he was certain to remain aware that Gesio did not try to hasten that time's arrival.

Gesiomagatou looked directly to Sage with a whimsical gaze, "The guise of a dragon seems to fit you very well."

"Thank you..." Sage almost expressed his pride in his accomplishment almost forgetting his humility. After all he was in the presence of a being that could literally erase him – like a stray pencil mark – from existence. But Gesio was nothing but a happy-go-lucky spirit whose manner demanded nothing more than a moment to hear him out. He was simply spoken and sincere... traits that, without a doubt, called Rae's attention and charmed Sanari who stood up to approach her mate.

"Sanari... careful," Sage approached to support her quickly reducing to his lesser-hybrid state to more easily handle her. Sanari seemed so light on her feet to Sage's eyes. But he had seen her belly grow still very little. The new interim CMO, a Dragaseir named Deruimasturoh, who was serving as the CMO after Namah's passing away, had informed Sage that the length of the pregnancy would lead to some emotional complications but her physical condition will not be greatly affected. Still she moved so easily.

Sanari settled in his arms looking up to him, "If you pamper too much, Beloved, I will grow to need you too much. Still I love you so much for it."

Gesio waved a hand and the chambers became a pleasant field as they sat on the hill under a great tree. The rolling hills flowed onward seemingly forever in all directions. The feel of the soft green grass beneath his feet and the color of the wildflowers were real. The dragon-wolf faded from sight to be replaced by the immense winged dragon of golden plate scales and platinum feathers hanging in the sky above the land gently.

"I'm sorry; I just wished to spread my wings. Feel free to do the same some time, Sage." His words echoed like a song on the wind in the telepathy he wielded so well.

"Thank you for the invitation, Interim Headmaster," Sage replied as he looked to his wife and lightly kissed her cheek, "But I will decline for now."

"Very well, I have a few questions to ask. Nothing too personal, I hope. Just trying to understand this phenomenon they call, Sage Preypacer..."

It was hard to dismiss the fact that this Dragaseir was easily the size of an old Earth super carrier and this was not even his true form. Meniko became a being of pure flame like a piece of the sun itself, a living star. Gesio hid the true extent of his power... or was it that he was still learning. The vast golden dragon flapped his wings, all six of them, lazily stirring a stiff breeze and disturbing the scant white clouds above to drizzle prematurely. A faint rainbow drew Sanari's attention but she refrained from swooning or showing more than passive appreciation.

"I suppose that I should be so curious as to ask of your mission in this universe first. The reason for your being here. I know you must have answered this question so many times before and that it may be a tax on your patience but please humor this hungry mind. From where did you come, by what course did you come here, and why? But before you answer just know that this is not a one-way affair. Ask me a question as you feel the need..."

Sage stopped to look at his hands for a few moments. He recalled those tiger claws that tried to be something that they just wouldn't. The stink and stain of all he'd done with them; some deserved most horrible acts... His draconian hands trembled before Sanari took them into her own very tiny hands. He'd not only found a wonderful wife and mate but a soul who could forgive him... and all his sins.

He was steady again before speaking...

"I came to this universe seeking a challenge, for in competition with the greatest does one truly learn how to expand themselves, and usually, it comes from learning from one's own mistakes, though I do try to learn from the mistakes of others.

"This is the sixth universe I've passed through, including my own, and I've defeated and become the champion in each one. Except this one. In this one I share the championship with Rae Iksaki, due to a tie..."

"I remember. It's one of the few instances in this universe's history in which the quandary of both sides losing to each other has ever happened." Gesiomagatou mused, and it brought a chuckle from Sage.

"Due to my bargain with Rae, and since we both lost... I would teach all that I knew to a generation of fighters – The Shadow League – whereas I'd have access to all of this universe's teachings. I've been admittedly upset at times when I found that bargain wasn't being sated, and it took Rae, and sometimes Sanari," he hugged his mate lovingly, running a taloned, five-fingered hand over her belly "To interfere on my behalf in order to gain the instruction I needed.

"Often times, said instruction came with a taste of humility."

Gesiomagatou nodded, but didn't interrupt.

"Sage has the most inquisitive mind I've ever met," Sanari spoke suddenly. "Well... most inquisitive for a being his age. It's like he has the curiosity of a child still."

Sage smiled. "I desire wisdom, intelligence and knowledge, and as I'm sure you are aware, Lord Gesiomagatou, that the more you know, the more power you have. But also the more you know, the more you know you don't know."

"So you seek to learn everything?" Gesiomagatou spoke with a smile, folding his great hands before him and tapping the earth with one large claw.

"No... Just enough."

"And have you achieved that?"

Sage looked down at his five-fingered hand again, and the glittering fire opal-like scales decorating it along with his scantily remaining fur.

"I am a member of an ancient order that begun on my native Earth, in the Prime Universe. The progenitor of the order is unknown, and it is believed that it may have been the dragons of my world, especially since the Dra'Con – the Weredragons – are currently in charge of the order.

"Worthy humans are made into Lycans who join it, worthy Lycans are empowered who excel in it, and those empowered Lycans have the ability to eventually become a member of the Dra'Con. It is thought that the Dra'Con can eventually become Dragons themselves.

"I was born a Lycan, an empowered Lycan, of a particular breed that is so rare, that only the white lion and the white cheetah are rarer. I was born an immortal, of the same caliber that Sanari was reborn as..."

"All the conditions of my birth – the moon sign I was born under, the year of the dragon, everything – and so my parents called me Sage because of them all. Everything pointed at that I'd become the wisest of my race."

"And are you?" Gesiomagatou asked suddenly.

"I can only be called the wisest, sir. I cannot say that I myself am." Sage smiled humorously. "And there are still others whom I call wiser than I."

"Like that enigmatic creature currently running your school? Drake?"

"He is among them.

"But as it were, I advanced over a lifetime to enter into the governing body of my order, into the Aspect of the Sage under the Circle of Sages. It is the position attributed to be the wisest of the wise."

"A being called Sage, standing as The Sage, in an organization of Sages." Gesiomagatou nodded. "Thrice named is nothing to shake a stick at."

"So my master keeps telling me. But I became more spiritual than the Aspect of the Priest, which my brother Patch holds, and I was stronger and had seen more battle experience than the Aspect of the Warrior, which Ursa, a towering Werebear holds.

"She's strong enough to give Illia, Riikoa or Pleeyo a run for her money.

"So my master named me his successor. The first time in a thousand years that someone was chosen to rise up as the next Dra'Con in the circle of Sages. This person..., who stands in the center, is considered as the wisest of the wise...

"I'd received my Dragon Seed, and had passed through all of my master's trials to prove my worth... till only one remained:

"To achieve the Dragon Evolution.

"So I scoured my universe, seeking for the knowledge to unlock my abilities, and passing through one universe and not finding the answer, I moved onto the next, and the next, and so on, till I finally came to this one and learned of Rae Iksaki.

"A single battle with her affected me enough to completely bring out my Dragon's eye." He rubbed the gem in the center of his forehead. "I get headaches occasionally from the thing unlocking more and more of my consciousness. Aauie's been a great help in the training of my psyche.

"And as Fate would have it, my usual bargain with a universe's champion kept me here... And I learned exactly how much I didn't know."

Gesiomagatou was silent for a time. "And now that you have achieved your Dragon Evolution... will you leave the Great Wide Universe?"

Sanari tensed a little, but Sage gave her hand a loving squeeze.

"*The home is where the rump rests,*' pardon the expression. Sanari does not wish to leave, so I shall not either. My place is where she makes herself at home.

"You are a loving soul, Lord Sage." Gesiomagatou stated quietly.

"Thank you. Now, there is something that I would like to ask, Lord Gesiomagatou. I found it... intriguing that the Dragaseir Council had chosen to bring me, a dragon, into their midst, and name me as if I was one of their own. It was a great Honor that I unfortunately had to turn down. And I wonder... why hasn't a being as powerful and learned as Hawthorne been granted such an honor? Aside from the fact that he's a foul-mouthed lecher..."

The vast wings of the great golden dragon seemed to sink a bit as he thought of an answer to the query. It was a good one and one Gesiomagatou gave little thought to. His eyes, both like huge golden pearls glinted majestically. The smile of his pleasant demeanor, utterly disarming in lieu of such a vast and god-like being, at first waned then brightened again like a cloud passing before the sun. Craning his head, atop that thick longish neck, Sage could imagine so many dragonesses being drawn to this '*Dragaseir Adonis,*' as he looked down on Sage before lowering his head to speak.

"The council of Elders is a crafty lot when they choose to be. They knew that you would decline the '*gifi*' as they

would like to call it. In doing so they wanted their... hooks into you... By accepting, you would have allowed near total access to yourself, your order – through you, and everyone around you – most especially Rae Iksaki."

Sage froze a moment at the implications of that all. He had heard the *'legends'* of the three Overgods, Glintrougeftii the Dragon of the Sun, Cliyapi the Dragoness of the Moon, and Eclipse the Archdragon of Destruction. While Glintrougeftii was the archetypal 'good god,' dedicated to the preservation of life, Cliyapi was his polar opposite, steadfastly determined to use and abuse life to her own ends, while the most foul being Eclipse, a being of such unrelenting power and appetite that both Glintrougeftii and Cliyapi both had to end their squabbles and warring against one another to imprison *'the destroyer of all things'* in the same planet across countless dimensions.

Sage raised a hand, and more pronounced was one pointer finger, to ask a question.

"Go on if you are puzzled?"

"Forgive me, but I am more concerned than puzzled. Which planet is Eclipse entombed in?" Sage's expression betrayed his dread of the answer.

"It is the second planet of the Sol Star System. The planet you know of as Venus."

'God, please no...' Sage's eyes showed the fullness of his terror to realize that such a creature existed next to the heart of his home universe. Eclipse eats stars as inexorably as a black hole and can not be stopped once he begins. "Is it also **MY** Venus?"

Gesio looked at Sage dramatically then consolingly and ignored the question, "Having refused their gift, they have a bargaining chip to use in the future. How I do not know nor when..."

Sage, almost pleading, stands even as Sanari tugged on his robes to calm him, "Please tell me..."

"It would change little. Like living at the foot of a volcano that has never erupted in your life. Having the knowledge would only allow you to worry needlessly and concern yourself with things beyond your control. For now you will forget about this... Eclipse is still little more a legend for your amusement." Those last words echoing in Sage's mind to the total occlusion of all other thought.

Suddenly Sage froze. His eyes fixed ahead but not on any one thing. Following Sanari's gentle guidance, the great dragon sat next to his wife. As he did his eyes focused again looking at her and he smiled a moment. His look was one of contemplation, "The Council wanted to control me..."

"...and now like an animal in the wild to be carefully studied and even manipulated, you have been *'tagged.'* I believe the term is. Do not concern yourself too greatly with it. They are my problem more than they are yours."

Sage looked up at Gesio and nodded gratefully. But behind those eyes was a deep seeded drive to confront these Dragaseir. *'Who do they think they are?'*

"You have a family to look after and I think you would like to have the time to spend with them as you provided for Rae. Yes?"

"Thank you, gracious Overgod," Sanari spoke softly bowing her head appreciatively. Sage stood and did the same, but kneeling briefly before standing and sitting along side the cat-woman again. It was clear to Sage something else had happened, that was said, but he could not remember what was said or that it ever even happened. Sanari cradled Sage's hand. It felt rather uneasy in hers.

"As for Hawthorne..." Gesio looked ashamed, "The Council felt that he was of no value. Just a common wrym to be ignored. Not even worth playing as a pawn in some scheme of theirs..."

"That's simply terrible. After all the suffering he's endured... even before Sage had to put him on a leash..." She

was quick to cut off as she looked to Sage with an apologetic glance.

"I... my just reformed soul and I will still felt a good deal of animosity toward to old Dragon," Sage looked away, but never downward, a moment before looking up to Gesiomagatou, "I didn't **NEED** to enthrall Hawthorne... In the end I simply wanted to and could..."

"It sounds as if you have some apologies to dole out." Gesio cocked his head to the side with a grin. He looked toward Sanari, which was barely a gesture for such a vast creature. His head alone must be the size of a foot ball field.

"Still," Sanari hugged Sage's arm for comfort, his other arm and hands coming to her aid, "That old dragon wanted nothing but to be a ruler of his land and all he got was wave after wave of adventurer and slayer seeking to kill him. He bested them all but one and was made to suffer for ten millennia under a mountain. He was dragged out of his hole into a new universe and found true love, I think – Aul knows I don't always understand how even a mere Dragon thinks. How can he stand knowing that he is considered so far beneath his own mate...?"

Gesio grinned fully, careful not to expose his rows of teeth, "You are also a loving soul, Mother Sanari. But do not allow yourself to forget that it is how one views the other that determines love. Menikomenqolui and Hawthorne do not see the difference in their *'ranks,*' only that they care for each other deeply. Where they go from there is up to them."

Sanari looked a bit ashamed for her lapse in judgment; looking upward to her mate. A gentle caress about the shoulders consoled her. Perhaps the changes of pregnancy were starting to affect her, she who was always in control of at least herself. Mood swings and sudden desires to fight, flee, and worse would be her new challengers and for much longer than normal. Sage drew her close, careful not to pressure her belly.

"It would be wise if we discussed your place in the Ring of Dragaseir where, like it or not, you are a part... another time." Gesio's vast form faded from view as did the perfect placid hills, strewn with tall grasses and wild flowers. What came next was a desert mountainscape, not unlike parts of the desert southwest of America. Bits of tough foliage spread about here and there while red-brown rock and sand filled the rest up to the sky that was a clear pure blue.

Sage actually expected to see Indians crest one of the ridges nearby as a few hawks soared overhead. Sanari was seated on a boulder shaded by a conveniently shaped formation of the sandstone. About them were painted and carved symbols and images that Sage did not recognize.

"They're... Casid... Prehistoric... Egas..." Sanari looked amazed not afraid, "There are so few sites like this still to be found on the Casid homeworld. Casid lions were actually smaller then... At most Eqis's size..."

"That's not exactly small," Sage said with a whimsical snort, "So how did they behave back then?"

"Surprisingly docile," Gesio appeared again in his *'Draco-wolf'* form. His ornate belt and fine linen loincloth again were all he wore. "The game was plentiful and they lived for each other not themselves or a small group. This was a time that could have made them a perpetual power in the universe just as The Aphkei is now."

"Why not now? What is their history like?" Sage could feel the spiritual emanations of this place.

As Gesio walked up, a small band from a tribe of sand lions approached. They were utterly nude save a few decorating bits of hide or primitive cloth. They carried or dragged the material for a small camp with them. Several strapping mature males *'There were far more males then,'* Sage thought, *'I know a few lionesses who would give their good eye to see this. But still, why are there more males here.'*

"The Master of Sky and Land is here," Said one of the older males, still quite muscular and ripped but leaned by age. The younger males were solidly built. They spoke their native tongue and dialect, never translated. It was by Gesiomagatou's will that Sage and Sanari could understand them.

Gesio turned to face them directly, "I speak my name, Gesiomagatou, so that I might be your friend. Speak yours if you wish to be our friend."

"This is a very old custom. Rarely practiced. The Hima clan practices it in formal settings. Only one or two will give their names," Sanari whispered in Cersile which sounds almost like singing compared to the harsher more guttural sounds of the Casid tongue, "We should give our names separately and not announce ourselves as mates. However, as I am your mate, you should give your name before I do. Gesio gave his name first and is the de-facto leader now of our group..."

"I see." Sage replied.

"I am Maourit. I have led this hunt for twenty-four seasons... since I was a cub. I seek the Great Queen." said the old lion. His gaze fell on Sanari for an instant. He looked impressed and disappointed at the same time.

'*Great Queen?*' Sage snapped mentally thinking instantly of Equis. Her own fate was to be the Supreme, the ruler of all Casid. It is a role she fears and despises. Sage felt for her thinking about it but felt that she would acquit herself well.

"I am Hohnmurr. I follow my father on this hunt and have done so for ten seasons. Is she the Great Queen?" He was young and strong with tight hard muscles, dense black claws and a shoulder length deep brown mane. He was prime breeding stock as well as any one could see in his very well developed manhood.

Maourit spoke up strongly, "No. She is not. She is too small and weak. The Great Queen is as strong as any lion hundred times over and no lion or tribe can stop her." He looks to Sage and Sanari, "Now speak your names... friends..."

"I am Sage, I come here as a guest of the Master of Sky and Land." Sage did not skip a beat but was still caught up thinking about Equis... and more importantly just when and where they were.

"I am Sanari..."

"A mother to be," Spoke up an older lioness coming forward but not passing by Maourit, "I am Equis, I have seen the face of our Great Queen. Such beautiful green eyes." A moments shock and awe passed over Sage and Sanari. She actually looked like the Equis they knew but far less muscular and older and her eyes were black.

"She can attend to the woman. With your permission," Maourit said, looking straight at Sage. He knew she was his even ignoring their earlier discussion. "You look as if you have some work to do."

Sage looked at Gesio who did not move from looking at Maourit. As custom dictated, the leaders of two or more groups only looked at each other not the group. A show of trust for the other leader and controlling ability over his own group. "I will... allow it..."

Gesio spoke clearly, "We will not allow Sanari out of our sight."

"Very Well," Maourit lowered his head as Equis walked past. Two other, younger, lionesses, Gorri and Hellah, both followed as they surrounded Sanari like willing and happy servants. "There is a fresh river with fish to go well with our meat. We will camp there for the night and rest. Gorri and Hellah will carry Sanari."

"Your robes must be very hot," Gorri started, "They are so fine and beautiful. Do you attend a Stormseeker in their temple?"

"I am one of her teachers." Sanari said with all honesty.

"That is good! The rains have been few this year. If the grass and shrubs do not grow the game will go further

away. This year it took more than two weeks to find the beast we have now," Equis looked back at the huge thunder lizard with disappointment. "And it is much smaller than the one from two years ago. If this keeps up we may starve in a few more years."

"Please teach your Stormseeker to be wise and compassionate," yet another lion, Gun, pleaded, "My father is a medicine man and the herbs he needs do not grow well in the long summers." The young lion looks at Sage with a distrustful eye. The faint echo of his thoughts alarms Sage, *'This 'Sage' must mean to keep Sanari from the Stormseeker so she will be made blind to our plight. We grow weak and unable to hunt for our food... His thunder lizards...'*

Sage pursed his lips in concern as he heard that thought.

"It is true that many of the Stormseekers are in hiding now for the Tar lions?" Another lioness asked as she adjusts the travois for her brothers and sisters.

Gesio looked down, "It is so. The Tar Lions want them dead for some reason I intend to find out why. But for now let's get you all to safer surroundings. Sage lead on with the scouts."

"Of course," Sage said being mindful of his mate, who sang softly a very old Casid song. Her voice was heavenly and the lionesses all did their best to provide a choir, but it was likened to mere mortals singing with an angel. But Sanari still continued sweetly to give joy in their labors.

Sage's hearing was as fine as ever, and though his eyes were forward, his ears were turned backward to be mindful of his mate while he stood atop a hill, covering his fine glowing green eyes as he looked outward over the horizon.

"Do not worry." Came one of the younger lions, Samba by name. "Your mate will be well cared for..."

Sage chuckled, continuing to look out over the grassy plains that seem to cover all of Casid. Very little water larger than a sea. It was a dry planet, only a few grades higher than a desert planet.

"I cannot help it. I know quite well that she can care for herself, but it is... an instinct in me to care for her... Even more now that she grows heavy with cub."

"She is quite beautiful..." another of the cubs said, Sage didn't learn of his voice, but he was quite wiry instead of strong. "Enchanting even."

"Yes, Sage agreed, and only then turned to view the small band of younger femmes and young males following after him. They were watching him with a sort of awe. They've never seen a Dra'Con after all... especially in the presence of the *'Master of Sky and Land.'*

A tall, long bodied creature with an alien looking physical structure, bearing the look of a Stormseeker with his eyes and pelt – what little of it there was left – but likewise armored with draconic scales, plate and sparse body weaponry.

'Wonder how they'd think of me if they saw me in full dragon form?' Sage thought briefly as he turned to the scouts at last "There is a small herd of thunder lizards in that direction." Sage pointed with his hand instead of his finger, to give a definite direction. "Several leagues out... they are... feeding."

In alarm, several of the young scouts surged atop the hill to look in that direction.

"B-but I see nothing..." Samba complained; disappointment on his face.

Sage lifted a hand and tilted the boy's head and helped it to lower. "Patience... Down there, by the great tree... beside

the lake. Wait for it... Wait... There."

Samba gasped. "Yes, I see it! You have good eyes Master Sage. We must alert the hunters! Our party will be well fed if we can even take down one of those!"

"Leave me four scouts then." Sage said simply, and lifting his hand, the scouts watched in wonder as a long shaft of glittering metal slid out of his hand, forming into a lance with a long blade at the end.

They gasped at the magic, but Sage paid it no mind. He needed his lance now instead of his sword. This was a hunt after all...

"Seek the scouts from the top of this hill," Sage said simply, and pointed to four scouts and motioned for them to follow. "They will point to the next, and then to the next, and so on, till they find me. That is how you will bring the hunters to the hunt."

The hunting party crested the hill the scouts had been on, headed by Maourit, and one of the scouts that had went to fetch him pointed sharply, seeing a spear thrust up into the air above the tall plains grasses where two scouts had been left to mark the trail. The hunting party of lions surged forward over the hill, keeping a very rapid pace as they surged into the grasses, covering a few leagues to where the rock broke the sea of grasses, upon which two scouts more scouts stood to mark the trail. When the party arrived, the pair both gestured with their hands in another direction deeper into the grasses, toward the great tree, and they surged forward again, this time with the two scouts joining them.

Then up to the tree, where another pair of the two scouts were perched high up in the tree overlooking the lake, and again, they pointed in a direction around the lake, and they followed, a little more carefully now. It didn't take them long to find an odd sight... A pale white and sparsely white furred creature, perched atop a pole on the edge of the lake, balancing perfectly and as motionless as a lurker, staring off in one particular direction.

When they came upon Sage atop the pole, resting with one foot clenching the top of his pole, the other the middle of the pole and his long tail wrapped around it, they found that the pole was instead his lance, ground in solid rock!

"They are before me." Sage said, speaking in Casid himself... though not as eloquently as he would in Gesio's presence. His computer mind had rapidly translated much of the language he'd observed so far, mostly thanks to the understanding Gesio was affording him – his mind and computer mind putting two and two together – but there were still certain holes in his understanding. "Three adults, seven young. Choose your prey."

Maourit simply pointed and Sage nodded, and rose atop his pole, balancing perfectly with one foot on top of the other.

"The old bull then." Sage said and looking down at Maourit "I will keep watch for you."

Maourit nodded and directed his pryde-mates to the hunt with mere hand signals, and taking knives the size of swords in their mouths, or handling their spears with one hand, they all hunched over and stealthily began moving around the great creature like lions on the savanna stalking a great beast.

Sage watched as they all gathered around the thing, throwing rocks to divert its attention away from them, and Sage smiled as he waved in the wind atop his bio-blade made lance as he watched them move.

Like the T-Rex's of Earth, these creature's attentions were based on movement. And presently, Sage was little more than a tree moving in the wind. Who cares if it wasn't there before?

And Sage watched...

The lions slid about the old bull, most of its herd a ways off, and all the nearby calves too young to do anything to a grown sand lion. But something wasn't quite right here, and as Sage pondered on it, he got a flash of Fate, and saw what was about to happen before it did. Without thinking, Sage tipped forward, pulling his spear out of the rock with his toes as he landed on his hand, his feet lifting the spear up into his other hand before kicking off against the ground.

As one, the Casid Lions all roared, and the Thunder Lizard reacted, spinning on its feet to sweep its tail about in a circle, knocking several of the younger hunters away. Those who were left standing threw their spears, and many of them stuck, others ricocheted off away from its body. The knives did little damage, and finally Maourit was found by the massive creature as he stared up at it.

Maourit held his spear and reset it, throwing the spear at the chest of the beast, aiming for a hollow point in its chest, but missing it.

The creature reared; its mouth of razor sharp teeth opening as it descended on the Casid leader. Maourit didn't even close his eyes as the mouth descended, and for a moment, he saw his death coming. But then the teeth closed, snapping off some strands of his mane, and he blinked, exhaling a long gasp of air he didn't know that he was holding.

And then he saw the creature that'd saved him, and saw the broad, bare muscular back of Master Sage as he held the creature aloft with his spear, his body having engorged suddenly in muscle as he flexed to keep the creature above him with sheer force of his spear.

The Thunder Lizard roared, spraying spittle all over Maourit as Sage pushed his spear in further, twisted one way, twisted the next to disembowel its heart. Sage was drenched in blood as the beast's heart was ruptured, and its life fluids spilt in a dark red all over Sage's body as the beast fell sideways, Sage holding onto his spear as he rolled with the creature to land atop its side. Sage turned to Maourit as he wrenched his spear out of the creature, breathing smoothly while blood formed rivulets from out of his frost white mane.

Sage then threw his blood coated mane backward and smoothed his hair back away from his eyes before hopping down.

The other lions and lionesses gathered around Sage and the fallen beast whereas Sage looked off to the rest of the herd, seeing them regarding their old leader before turning their backs on him and moving on.

Maourit paced his way up to Sage as the former Weretiger turned to regard the Lion, who was to an inch Sage's height. Without a word, Maourit dipped, and with his sword-like knife, cut the beast's chest open, reached in, and tore out its ruined heart with his bare hands. Then taking a huge bite out of it, offered the other half to Sage.

Sage, pausing only to understand what was going on, reached out and took hold of the heart, and took a deep bite out of it as well, and all at once, all the other lions roared while Sage and Maourit clasped forearms with one another.

Sanari was being bathed and cared for by the youngest and eldest of the Casid females – those who were unable to join the hunt as of yet or any longer – when the hunting party returned, she kneeling in the shallows, nude and looking as beautiful as the goddess Aphrodite. Her hands covered her rounding belly as she watched them come into camp joyously, touting their kill, and she waited for her husband to appear, and finally, last of all, he crested the hill, soaked in blood and using his lance like a walking stick.

Sanari was left alone for a moment as the lionesses all surged away to reign in the joy of a successful hunt.

Still nude, she rose to her feet, and strode barefoot out of the river that sparkled and shimmered by the plains inside its bank, even as Sage retracted his spear. He watched her approach.

"Please don't touch me beloved." He said as she drew near, and she paused, confused, but then he continued. "I cannot bare to mar a creature as beautiful as you with the stain of death."

Sanari chuckled and then moving forward, pressed as close as she could against her husband, her enlarged breasts, so perfectly round, and now swelling all the more from her milk, pressed against Sage's chest, and her body was smeared with the hunt of the kill before she began to lick his chest clean of the blood on his body.

"I've been stained long before you were born, beloved," she said, and felt his hands hold her belly as he looked at her. "And this kind of death can be washed off with simple water." And she kissed him, tasting remnants of the beast's blood on his lips.

And while the pryde celebrated, Sage and Sanari had a chance to bathe together, nude and out in the open, where no one cared.

Gesiomagatou watched, with a smile on his face, hoping for times like that in the future... with Rae.

Camp was set up with little difficulty. Gesiomagatou had chosen a very defensible site. The females, those who'd not been tending to Sanari, had returned with quite a few large – some very dangerous looking – fish.

"Freshwater sharks... The size of orca..." Sage grinned with a researcher's excitement. He had seen such creatures before but never quite this large. They only caught the one and had already begun cutting up its meat and bone.

Like certain Natives Indians of Earth with their whale or buffalo, the Casid Lions dissected their hunt animals to use absolutely everything from their bodies ranging from toys, to tools and equipment, and above all... food.

"Fish dries faster than lizard." Eqis said taking the time to sharpen her *'short sword.'* Her strokes were long and even, clearly very well practiced. But her attention seemed locked elsewhere. Her ears scanning for any sign of trouble.

"O' Master of Land and Sky," one of the old lions, Grutvo, knelt down to this god-figure out of simple respect before speaking, "This place is near territory claimed by Tar lions. They are spoiling for war these days. Is it safe to be so near with so much food for them to steal..."

"Over our dead bodies, brother," Maourit growled, "Our tribe needs this food for the lean times of winter. We are the last band to leave and we will be the last to return. Our haul will be the most prized..."

"Besides we have Gesiomagatou and his son here to aid us," a young lioness spoke up admiringly, "ten or a hundred Tar lions could never hope to take more than a smell of our kills from us with them about."

Sage looked away from his lovely mate. Before he could speak a gentle hand from the cat-woman put a dainty finger to his lips. Looking back to her she merely whispered in Cersile, "Don't ruin this for them. It's how their myths and legends are born..."

'So this isn't some elaborate illusion?'

Cutting up the thunder lizard went quickly. Meat was cleaved and packed in the hide of the great beast, and bones sealed in mud to preserve the marrow. The older lions and lionesses gathered around the fire as the younger ones finished their work and guarded the area against raiders.

Maourit, holding out a large chunk of the shark over the fire, looked over at Gesio before speaking, "Would the great Gesiomagatou be so kind as to share a story with us. One to wile away the time and relax these nervous cubs... *please.*"

"A story about the forest lords and their terrible armies..." One young lion said tying a chunk of lizard guts into a neat bundle. The package was remarkably square a testament to the technique of a bold and hearty people. The aspects of all Sage saw reminded him of Native Americans and the Native peoples of Africa. This was more inspiring than to see cultures similar to his own. This is where it all began; not with mysticism and arcane arts but with spear, knife and true grit.

"No... No... One about the lionesses who lived sixteen times. The one with the two black hearts..." A lioness asked.

"About the last Stormseeker..." Eqis said with finality before squabbling broke out among the cubs and youths.

The Draco-wolf smiled warmly scooping up a bit of dust and tossing it into the fire. A puff of smoke blew up but did not rise very far and hung there. The golden cosmic being waved his hands as he began, the smoke taking the form of a face both Sage and Sanari were very familiar with... Clio of Sentholu...

"As I tell you this story I do not know its end for that has yet to pass. In the shadow of the great city, where the great prides rule, there was a tiny village... but the great city casts a greater shadow and so this village was not nearby..."

Sanari leaned against Sage and purred softly, an alien sound to the lions but wonderfully pleasant to hear. She did not stop but did not raise or lower her volume any either.

"The village was dry from a summer without end. Rain had forgotten the land and the grass was the color of sand and thin. Food was meager and strong lions even more so... There in that village was a tigress. A tiny girl with pale fur and bright eyes but sorely despised by her sisters. She was the runt of the litter and abused terribly for it, her sisters never knowing what she was to become..." Gesio started then looked straight in the direction of a sound that Sage missed, and when he continued, it wasn't to continue with the story. "There is another cadre of lions headed this way with spears and shields. They're coming from Tar lion lands. Be ready..."

The golden Draco-wolf melted into the sand disappearing.

Maourit jumped to his feet pointing to everyone, "Get ready! Our pride needs this food and no one gets it but over our dead bodies!" The younger lions and lionesses were the first to take arms, with hunting spears and knives. Many of them were still too young to fight experienced warriors and quaked with overeager tension or numbing fear. Those of fighting age steadied the rest as best they could. The older lionesses, particularly Eqis, gathered around Sanari and a few younger lionesses that were apparently with child as well, to protect them and the food.

"Sage we are going to need every strong fighter to protect this bounty," Grutvo called as Sage took his time coming. He could hear the warriors coming. They weren't trying to hiding their advance.

"They are bold," Sage said quietly. Taking a couple of the younger lions he pointed them to a ledge just out of sight from the entrance to their campsite. A few more were directed to some thick brush. Sage was organizing the defense where he was confident that the more experienced lions and lionesses – a couple of those lionesses sporting better muscle than most of the males and more scars as well – could fight off the invaders.

"Times are hard everywhere. Those fool Tar Backs are killing off the very people who can keep the world from starving." Samba murmured readying his lance, "They're insane they want to kill off every other pride so there'll be no one to fight them for territory."

Sage raised an eyebrow. He'd seen something like that before... But when he'd single-handedly eliminated the entire strain of the Kell Hounds of the were species of humanity, that had been a fit of madness. A madness that his own people forgave being that it was a time of war, but Sage still called that time in his life madness.

Was then systematic elimination of any species considered madness then?

The immensely powerful Draco-tiger looked back to his mate as she tried to calm the young mothers-to-be. They clung to her like cub to a mother. Indeed they were cubs. The powers of reproduction were very limited in these plains at this point in Casid history. In modern Casid, a lioness could give birth well into her forties, but sadly, Sage guessed, that a lioness could not bare cubs beyond their twenties in this day and age.

It grew quiet as the lions and lionesses of the hunting party had taken position to defend their food and their lives. What came next brought awe and rejoice from the hunters. A growl like a great fire being lit rose up and the thundering footsteps of a mighty beast shock the land. The sounds of swords and shields beginning used in a hopeless battle cries of terror and panic rose up. The hunters remained quiet as the sounds of the struggle died down.

Sage dashed ahead, "I'll return."

Sanari comforted the cubs as the elder cats stood ready.

What Sage saw almost did not surprise him. Gesiomagatou stood placidly by as the last of the tar lions were pressed into the sand in burial. Those who stayed to fight were killed while the rest were allowed to escape. The great lumbering beast the weredragon had heard earlier must have been Gesio in a more powerful and terrifying form.

"Go back to the party, Sage, this was just a distraction. The real raid is coming from the other direction!"

Sage ran back as fast as he could to find dozens of tar lion warriors all over the hunters. The young cubs were found easily and several were already slain, their throats torn open with razor sharp claws easily as strong as forged steel. It was little wonder that Casid rarely felt the need to carry weapons. The lionesses roared and swung their spears and knives hoping to bait a foolish raider into their claws and fangs. Sanari had cast a protection spell around herself and the lionesses; it was one Sage almost didn't recognize, but it was a spell that made the protected many times stronger than they were so long as they didn't move beyond the reach of the caster.

Sage wastes no time diving into the battle smashing down the black furred raiders with methodical precision. He noted that their fur was shiny and somewhat shaggy now that he got a good look at them, giving the appearance of beginning coated in tar. Their black eyes pierced into something Sage had seen before. He paused for the first time in ages in the midst of battle.

"Kell..." Sage whispered as one tar lioness leaped into his face claws first. But her claws only scrapped on his face plates like knives of the side of a tank. He slapped her off absently, and she screamed in agony as several of her ribs were crushed. Several more lions attacked Sage and he barely tried to beat them down. They were utter flies to him and his god-like strength and power.

"Sage..." Sanari called pointing to Maourit and the others desperately fending off an advance to capture some of the fish they'd caught. The weredragon immediately leapt upon the attackers.

Without a meaningful effort, the tar lions and a few lionesses lay broken at his feet. Most would recover fully the rest would be cripples for the rest of their lives...

That might turn out to be very short...

"Kill the males and leave the females," Maourit shouted. Those words were understandable but chilling to Sage as he watched the hunters and huntresses inspect every fallen raider and kill the males and females too injured to live with their wounds.

But there was one black lioness who tried to crawl away with all the ribs on one side of her body broken. She

would not survive with one whole side of her body crushed, and looking at her, his mind and computer mind analyzing her, Sage saw a punctured lung, a ruptured ventricle of her heart... intensive internal bleeding from several exploded organs... and yet... she was still trying to survive!

It was the youth Sage had smashed the ribs of during the fight, and taking pity, Sage walked after her waving off the lionesses who were about to pounce on the child who was nearly an adult. She was small for a warrior.

"How old are you, girl?" Sage said firmly as she continued to crawl away before he grabbed her leg and held her down. The lioness screamed in terror as the hunting party gathered ready to strike her dead. Sage waved off the hunters off again and they backed away.

"Let me... go..." She wheezed through damaged lungs. She was dying but still full of fight. Suddenly her eyes turned to Gesio who materialized just behind Sage.

"So, what are you going to do, 'Son'?" Gesio said with fatherly tones.

They were not feigned tones. Apparently... Gesio had been a father once... Maybe he was like Sanari or Menikomenqolui, having taken up lost and forgotten children and raising them.

"She's alone and scared. You have cut all but a few agonizing hours from her life..." Gesio added

Sage smiled with kindness to the girl placing a hand over her chest, "I will spare her and make her my own daughter... With my wife's blessing of course."

"Need you ask my permission to be kind and generous, dear heart?" Sanari said walking over to the child kneeling there as she joined her husband in healing the lioness's wounds.

As the cub was healed she passed out and fell into Sage's other hand. The hunting party all murmured to each other before they all sounded their approval with a jubilant roar, the low continuous roaring that could carry for miles. A new passage in legend had been written that night. Legends shaped these people and legends will point the way.

As a show of great trust Sanari slept with the black lioness' head in her lap and the girl slept no doubt more comfortably than she'd done in years, if ever. Sage and Gesio helped through the night, healing wounds and injuries and packing up the camp to move at first light. Neither dragon slept to keep guard.

"Come morning," Maourit said looking back at Sanari and that girl, "We'll head toward the Blue Mountains. There are several prydies that will covet our meat, so we'll need to fight them off or barter passage with some of it. I'd rather we didn't give up the lizard or Land Walker – the fish will go bad first and worst – so we can't afford to trade the land meat. Best to offer up the fist first for safe passage."

"Very well," Gesio waved a hand over the old lion healing a deep gash in his brow.

"Thank you, O' Master of the Land and Sky."

The trek at dawn was aided by the high rock formations. Great boulders positioned ages ago to mark the way. Over the years, centuries assumeably, smaller boulders were added to the roadway covering this primitive highway with shade while miraculously not providing much useful cover to raiders. The boulders were all very steep sided and worn smooth by sandstorms. Tough desert shrubs and grasses grew between the rocks giving some sparse color the rare flower was spied now and then. No one picked them as such flowers were as prized as a fresh water hole.

It was also the belief that flowers were guides to water. If there was enough water for a plant to flower then there was water for beasts and those who hunted them. Still it was a sobering thought that this planet was so hard and unforgiving. Sage marveled to himself at the gentle grace of Kaya and Clio and understood the forceful strength of

Egis, Kina, and all the grown Casid in the Mystic League.

This was a world that weeded out the weak for the whole of the people...

"Something vexes you, Milord?" Sanari strode in even step despite her growing burden of life. She was slow but not a hindrance. She had given up her sandals miles back and amazed her husband at how tough her pampered feet really were. The sand was not finely ground like beach sand but was small coarse stones that would shred the tender feet of a young cub.

The black lioness was shackled at the insistence of Maourit who had little doubt in the abilities of Sage or Gesio but did not want her to cause trouble or flee. Her name is Kirin, which struck Sage as odd but she was more unusual than was thought when she was able to sing in chorus with Mother Sanari, and a thin ridge like the bud of a horn in her forehead. But in the light of day, Kirin hid her eyes as best she could but the bright light of the sand made it almost impossible for her to even watch the ground to know where to go.

Sanari chose to guide the girl as the other lionesses and lions did not even want to touch her. Even with the blessing of the Gesio's 'son,' Sage, Kirin was not welcome. There was simply too much hurt represented by her presence. Kirin walked like a blind girl in the daylight, her eyes closed shut and hand drawn over her face to further shield her eyes that years of life underground and at night made her weak to bright light.

"Are you sure you will be fine in this heat?" Sanari asked very genially hoping not to upset the cub further.

"I'm very thirsty!" she snapped wanting to run but if a passive swipe from the younger 'Beast Lord' nearly killed her she didn't want to anger either one by running off. She grimly resigned herself to a fate of brutal beatings and rapes as she was taught to expect from her enemies. But Sanari was so patient and kind and the white and black-striped Beast Lord, like a storm cloud passing over a snowy mountain peak, was like 'her' servant or most giving lover. "I..."

"It's alright, child. The heat is a bit much for me as well. But the problem is not the heat, but rather the humidity," Sanari felt the stickiness in the air; like taking a drink with every breath. Sniffing the air, she was inspired, "Husband! I need your help with something..."

Sage seemingly appeared at her side. In Cersile, the two spoke and Sage nodded smiling, "I should have considered that." He admitted.

"Time will give you such wit. It will come without warning and you will not remember what life was like without it." She smiled as Sage leaped over the boulders lining the road like a child over a small pillow, and returning a short while later, he had a hand filled with small stones.

"Water stones?" Egis questioned as the troupe halted to rest in the midday sun in the shade of one of the many towering boulders. For Kirin's sake a sunshade was erected of a tent cloth as Sanari's insistence.

Sanari held out the wet rock as it slowly filled her cupped hand with water, the equivalent of a teaspoon of water every few seconds, "Yes with these we will not need to thirst. They are safe so long as you do not swallow it. I've had people drown having eaten their stone."

"How long will they last?" Maourit sniffed the dripping rock between his fingers.

"As long as there is water nearby." Sage planted his with little explanation into the cheek of his mouth. Several of the young cubs did the same. The elders followed.

"The water is cold like the rivers in the high mountains," an old male smiled with a grateful swallow. It was refreshing and they all took the time to enjoy the steady drink they had.

"It would be wise to put your stones in your water bags so the moisture is not lost. The water stones might also be

valuable trade... More valuable than meat." Maourit immediately put his stone in his large water skin. But a curious look came over him, "This is Stormseeker magic. So how is it that you can make these?"

"Who do you think taught the Stormseekers?" The immortal cat-woman smiled politely. "But it is easy magic to learn. A few such stones could make watering holes last all summer and wet lands for crops. If there are even clouds that do not rain, then these stones will make small amounts of water for drinking and living but the stones will take from each other and not just the air so it is hard to interrupt the natural rain fall... what little there is."

"Can you teach us, Stormseeker Teacher?" The older lions and lionesses asked. "If it's easy to learn, then the elders would be the best choice to be taught. They'd make fewer missteps than the youth."

"I will teach only four of you tonight. Three lionesses and one lion as the women are the maintenance of the home and home is where you can find water. I may seem close-minded, but this is the way of my order." Sanari lowered her head humbly should they wish to refuse.

"Such miracles should be used to make a home not help destroy others," Maourit sloshed his water skin listening to the steady increase of cold water within. "Any army could march for days without stop if they had these in each cheek. No only the lionesses will learn this Storm Magic to help them keep the home. Equis pick the three others to learn. No one younger than sixteen summers."

"Kimag, Myself, Luusta, and Kirin..." Equis said.

"I said no one younger than sixteen summers, Equis." Maourit said concerning Kirin.

"If she is not made useful quickly she will become a burden later. This will make her of use now. I would think that a daughter of a Beast Lord should have some useful skills."

Sage smirked at the shrewdness of this older lioness. She was a good deal like the Equis he knew. Both made little issue of doing the best thing even if it was not what she was told to do. "Do so." He agreed.

Gesio walked up to Kirin, her eyes still closed and covered. In his hands, was a strip of thick black cloth. "Hold still and remove your hand. It's like a blindfold but look through it..." He said tying it about her head over her eyes.

"It's like night but the colors are so bright..." Kirin sniffled a bit. "The color of your fur is really like gold..." Then she turned to Sanari, "You all look so different in daylight..."

"That's a good girl," Gesio stroked her small head and moved on ahead.

Sanari stood up with a slight stumble, and Sage didn't wait to take her up in his arms and carry her in one arm like a great living armchair. Her thin sultry tail wagged slightly with delight. "Kirin this will open up a new life for you. But like with any door, you have to walk through before you can truly benefit by it..."

"Yes, Mother." Kirin said with honest joy as she leapt up over the boulders and spied the wide rocky expanses of the desert. The colors were very different from the grays and mild greens of her night vision. She followed; helping to drag the meat though still not fully accepted she was not shunned.

"By nightfall we will be in friendly territory," Maourit spoke directly to Gesiomagatou, "But they will demand tribute for our passage. With hunting as bad as it is, they may demand half of our meat by weight..."

"Which means all the fish and almost half the lizard and Land Walker," Gesio sighed. "Sanari, my dear would you care if we stopped short and you starting teaching the lionesses how to make water stones now? We'll need the water to offset the toll and keep as much of the meat as we can."

"I would be honored," Sanari looked up to her mate and kissed him sweetly.

About two hours later, they came to a great rock shelter built for large traveling groups. There the hunting party settled to rest and so Sanari could teach the magics needed to make water stones. For now, they would be extremely valuable in this area with a relatively high water table. Though fall would bring the rains at last to this region, the water stones would be invaluable in the dry but cool winter and only marginally moist spring. Those stones would be worth all their meat several times over. Only Sanari could be known to have the knowledge but teaching it now would insure that if the stones they already had were taken or stolen the lionesses could make more.

It took a scant hour to teach the magic, a true testament to the skills that Sanari possessed as a teacher. A large sweating boulder was left behind filling a deep hole with water.

History showed that magic did abound in the world before the Aphkei, but happened for a world that could actually use magic just to survive only to lose it, loathe it, and then suffer so willingly in its absence?

That night the fortress walls of a city stood tall over the hunting party. The gates opened to allow a single figure to come out. He quickly scanned over the party noting the tar lioness prisoner and two beast lords, creatures of legend, and the most beautiful cat he'd ever seen. Still he tried to remain clear-headed.

"I, Goundett, judge of the city Lerorm, asks now: State your business." The old lion, thinned with age, was dressed in a heavy white bodycloth of a city official. His long brown beard and mane stretched down to his waist front and back, while bushy brows obscured his amber eyes that were dimmed with age. The crown of his head was clearly fuzzed in a form of balding but he looked far more intelligent and wise for it.

"I, Maourit, from the Riddicum Nation, seek for my hunting party rest and passage for the night. We bring great and useful magics taught to us by the Mother Sanari who teaches the Stormseekers." Maourit said holding out a wet stone. Shaking it dry, it did not stay so for very long, and soon it was dripping wet again. "I have one in my water bag. Drink."

Goundett took the water skin and sipped the water. With shock and amazement he took a deep drink of the cool clean water. "Did you intend to trade such magic for fare through our land?"

"We cannot part with the meat but sadly we are having some trouble making more stone. Each of our party was granted these gifts from Gesiomagatou and his daughter-in-law, Sanari. But we have not been able to make too many more."

"Bring your party inside and we will discuss this further. My old legs are not as sturdy as they used to be." Goundett said singling for the gates to be opened fully. As they entered, the old lion eyed Kirin, "Do you wish to keep her locked in our stocks for the night?"

"No," Sage said firmly. "I am Sage; it is only as a favor to Maourit that I have allowed her to be shackled. I have claimed her life as my own and named her my daughter. She will remain with us."

"Lord Sage will accompany me to discuss our toll fare. He has saved my life in the hunt and I will have him at my side, Judge," Maourit looked to Sage who nodded. "For now let us set camp within your walls."

"Just the drink of cool water after such a hot day pays for that. Follow me."

Sage looked back to Gesio who was already at Sanari's side, where he was resuming his story about Clio as they set up camp again. He had little to worry about with his *'father,'* for apparently they were to play a part in an elaborate play, so he followed the lions away to discuss trade and maybe ply the price a bit.

Outside there are many sounds for evening activity. Songs sung, and music played... Dance, play, and practice.

Sage's gaze looked about himself as he spied this place of safety for this great pride. Built at the mouth of a mountain pass that was bordered on either side by two twin spires of sheer rock that were both apart of a natural barrier that surrounded the whole of the Blue Mountains. The city walls arched about all the buildings of the city, the buildings a mixture of nomadic tents, semi permanent structures, adobe and straw homes, and even the homes of larger families in the assembled prides here carved right out of the twin spires that hung like a massive shadow above the city.

Between the twin spires were stone walls, and strong looking warriors standing atop them like knights atop a battlement.

Everywhere around him, everywhere he looked, was a representation of every last breed of Casid he'd yet known of... and a few he hadn't. The white breeds, the predominant lions and the smaller mountain lions and lynx's. Tigers, white tigers – he smirked in a sense of humor at his lost feline self as he watched them pass tall and powerful... and naked... close by – Ocelots, and more. The only thing that didn't seem to be represented here were the black breeds. The Black Tiger, the Black Lions or the Black Leopard.

Strange, he thought, looking about him, following Maourit and the Judge Goundett as they began to climb the mountain path upward, on which to either side, a sprawling bazaar had been formed, past the bazaar, and finally began to climb stairs of the eastward rock spire. They climbed till the last vestiges of light from the sun set, and the rising moons cast a bright light onto the world.

Pausing on a step, Sage watched the moons rise, feeling their power infuse him.

This definitely was not an illusion then, he thought. The effect of the moons was something that could not be faked... or if Gesio could... then he was far more powerful than Sage originally thought.

“Oh! These stairs are getting longer every day.” Judge Goundett said as he paused to catch his breath.

Sage looked on to the old lion's arms and back, seeing many battle scars, and a small smile rose upon his features. He respected a warrior race who didn't think that the only honor one could attain is from death in battle. Those scars were a tribute of an old cat who'd earned the privilege of dying in his sleep. To be so great a warrior, that none could bring you down.

“We can rest longer if you wish, Judge.” Maourit said, lifting a hand to hold the judge's elbow.

“No... no cub... I'll be fine. Let us continue.” The judge repeated.

Sage watched the fine warriors he passed tall strapping youths, most of them lions, wearing tough leathers, and carrying bows as tall as they were, or with spears where the tops of said spears had blades the size of swords.

This city was a well protected fortress.

Finally they came to a sculpted portion of the rock tower and stepped inside between two tall warriors and entered into the judge's home. The judge had many daughters; Sage noted... and noted also, did Maourit.

Judge Goundett lay back on a cushion covered in silken blue fabrics before a grand rug. Maourit, tearing his gaze from all the young and beautiful fems, sat directly before the judge, and they began to barter.

Sage descended into one fluid motion and knelt kitty corner to Maourit and listened, listened to the barter as they went round and round, listened to one of the Judge's daughters play a scintillating muse on a harp like instrument, while the other daughters looked pretty, pampering and preening themselves and each other, and all assembled around... around another woman.

Sage looked at her, a very well and beautiful woman who hid the upper part of her face by a blue veil. There was a staff balanced on her shoulder, and her head was bowed while her ears twitched. She was far more mature than any of the younger cats, with breasts well and large, coming from having nursed many a cub. Sage delved that this was the mother, but his gaze focused a little more, and he noticed the way she was acting.

His half brother acted like that... and it was the actions of a blind person.

Without thinking, Sage rose to his feet and strode over to the veritable harem of young women and their mother, and knelt before the nude cat.

“Who’s there?” she said softly... a strong and powerful voice, full of pride.

“A traveler.” Sage greeted. “What is your name, my lady?”

“I am called Nibirii.” She answered.

“That name is very beautiful.” Sage said, and he watched her smile and blush. “But forgive me, my lady, but I see that you wear a veil to cover your eyes. Why does such a beautiful female with such a beautiful name do that?”

The song the young daughter was plucking from her harp ended with a twang, and the silence hung heavy in the air. Sage was aware that all eyes were on him, but he completely disregarded it as he reached up and palmed her face with his huge hand.

“Why does a creature as beautiful as you hide her face?” Sage asked, and thumbed her trembling lips with his thumb.”

“I... have been scarred.” She said quietly, and one of her daughters came to sit beside her. “The scarring has taken away my sight. It is a horrid thing to look at, so I hide the scars from all. Including my husband and children.”

“You have the body of a skilled huntress.” Sage commented, giving a glance over her. “But tell me, what is it that you wish more than anything else?”

The silence deepened, and Sage, looking up at the mother of this pride, not taking his gaze off her, watched as a tear escaped from one eye. But only one eye.

“To look upon my daughters. To see my husband for the first time. To watch a sunrise again...”

Sage rose to his feet, and standing before the sitting fem, lifted his hands and removed her veil, and looked upon the old battle injury. A lion’s claws had racked her across her eyes, to where only one eye remained, and that was milky white with a noticeable scar across the pupil. The other had sealed shut.

Judge Goundett surged to his feet.

“See here, my lord.” He demanded. “I beg of you, please do not taunt her more.”

“Please... give me back my dignity.” Nibirii whispered, turning her face upward as if to look at Sage.

“As you wish.” Sage said, and cradling her head and her beautiful hair lacing through his five fingers, he covered her eyes with one hand and began whispering in an ancient tongue, as of yet unknown in this universe, and the lights in the chamber dimmed as a bright blue glow shone from beneath his fingers. For many long minutes, Sage remained there, cradling her head, feeling the tears from her one eye glance against his fingers as he concentrated.

And then finally, the light subsided and the glow from the lamps and the candles returned. Nibirii was breathing quickly, her large breasts heaving with each breath as she breathed through her mouth.

“Maourit,” Sage said, and several people jumped from the suddenness of his voice in that heavy, heavy silence. “Please go stand by the door. My lord Goundett... could you please come here.”

Goundett practically tripped over his feet as he hurried forward, collapsing to his knees before his mate as he planted his hands on her knees. She took his hands suddenly, and quite fiercely.

“My Lord Goundett...” Sage said quietly. “There is someone who wishes to see you.” And Sage stepped back, and removed his hand covering her eyes.

There was a collective gasp as Nibirii’s face looked as beautiful and as perfect as it’d been long ago, and when she opened her eyes to look upon her mate for the first time. Her eyes were a bright, bright blue. Electric in color... like an arctic wolf’s eyes. They seemed to glow with the same color that Lord Sage’s healing light had been of. Goundett and she both shared tears of happiness as they looked on one another, and she surged forward, feeling his face, began to cry harder, and with a sob surged into her husband and embraced him.

Maourit stood quietly, staring at this miracle before suddenly feeling a hand on his elbow, and turning saw the glowing green eyed gaze of the young beast lord looking at him.

“We should leave.” He said simply, and stepped out the door.

Maourit took one last look at the pryde and their happiness and stepped outside to leave them to themselves.

Maourit did not ask Sage what he’d done. It was perhaps bad luck to ask a god how they work their powers. The lion folded his arms and watched the beast lord, expecting him to do some other miracle or another. Sage instead sat on the edge of the stone walkway here, and from somewhere he’d produced a flute and had begun to play.

The sound of the music was hauntingly beautiful, and for an old hunter like Maourit, whose tears had supposedly dried up long ago, his eyes sparkled with gathering moisture as he listened to the song.

It lasted for another hand’s breadth of the first moon rising in the sky before Lord Sage stopped. By then, he’d attracted a nice compliment of admirers, who hung out of windows, off of poles, and from the two subsequent catwalks above them.

The city was remarkably quiet. That melody could be heard over the whole of the city at this height.

But then there was a presence, and Maourit turned to see the judge approaching. When Maourit turned back to Sage, he found the beast lord already rising to his feet.

“She wishes to look upon your face, my lord.” The Judge said in awe of the great were-dragon in his smaller, sparsely furred and light armored form, which was nothing more than hide, fur, scale and a few plates wrapped around a body of chorded muscle that was alien to practically every species in the multiverse.

“I would be honored.” And Sage moved forward, and was about to enter when Goundett suddenly spoke.

“The whole of my pryde is in your debt, Beast Lord.” Goundett said. “H-how can we ever repay you for your kindness?”

Sage pursed his lips, rubbing them together between two fingers of one hand as he thought and then settling on something, nodded and lifted his head again.

“Maourit and the whole of his pryde are to be allowed free passage in and out of this city as they please. They will supply for themselves, and feed for themselves, and obey your laws while they are here. Give me your word on this, and I shall call your pryde’s debt repaid.”

Goundett surged forward and clasped Sage's massive forearm. "You have my word, my lord. I would've gladly given up far more than just passage for this thing."

"I would have done it for nothing, Judge Goundett. Such is my nature. Your debt to me is repaid."

And with one final nod, Sage entered Goundett's home for the second time, so as to let Nibirii gaze upon her benefactor.

Sage had the privilege of having been among the first people a woman had seen in decades. Nibirii had been blinded since before she'd met her husband, since before she'd had each and every last one of her nineteen cubs. Her four sons were, unfortunately, not present at the moment, but she'd see them soon as well.

Nibirii had cried into his shoulder while she'd embraced him fiercely for his gift, and even several of her daughters had offered themselves up to him as wives. When he told them of Sanari and that he gave himself only to her, they were still very grateful to become concubines.

"I may only love one female," Sage had said graciously. "Besides, these young beauties would be far better served by a much younger male than I."

He had to dismiss himself before the situation grew too much more for him, but Maourit was nonetheless given gifts for his pryde in the form of more food from the Judge's own private holdings, silks and other supplies, and true to his word, the Judge allowed he and his whole pryde to stay in the city for as long as they desired.

So as it was, Sage found himself walking the streets alone, with a large bundle over his shoulder while he followed his twin hearts to his beloved, their psychic connection, forged from two marriage ceremonies of both their peoples, and their insurmountable love for one another, led him straight toward his lifemate and their cubs nestled inside her womb.

As he'd neared ever closer, he slowed as he heard caterwauls and cries, low roars and hisses, and concerned, he stepped immediately into his Assassin's Step, the all but silent footfalls of a master assassin that an exceedingly few individuals were able to detect.

As of yet, Sage knew only Master Rulsty being able to discern his steps in this universe. His half brother Patch was the only one he knew of from his own universe who could.

He paused as he saw several grown lions, mostly female, picking on a smaller black lioness that was still bound behind her back by heavy chord.

Kirin! He gasped, and saw just as a stone was lifted and she was struck hard against the back of her shoulder.

"Tar Back whore!" One of the males roared, and lifted a rock. "You will not see dawn."

His hand descended, and Sage acted.

Within a fraction of a second Sage had set down his cache of gifts for Maourit's pryde, had moved across dozens of meters of space and seemed to appear directly in front of the large lion and caught his wrist; Sage's thumb pressing on the tendons on the inside of the lion's thick arm to keep his fingers from releasing the stone.

Sage's glowing green eyes darkened a little. It was a far greater effort for him to make his eyes turn red anymore.

He looked at this tall lion eye to eye, with Sage's more elegant and slender frame not betraying the true level of physical power this dragon possessed. The lion gasped through his teeth as those incisors gritted from the sharp

pain in his wrist, and he stared at this black striped creature with the long angling ears fanning backward against his head, the great white mane of white fetlocks and the strange bony protrusions sticking out of portions of his body.

Reaching up, Sage removed the rock from the lion's hand before letting him go and taking a step backward to stand before Kirin and her attackers.

"Who are you, stranger, that you protect a Tar Back?" the lion asked as he stepped forward to close the distance.

"She is my surrogate daughter, and as such, I will protect her with my life. Please go... I don't wish to harm you."

"Harm me?!" the lion laughed, and so did his fellows, and the lion rose to his full height, several inches taller than Sage, and flexed all his mighty muscles. "I am the mightiest warrior in the city! I've survived more battle scars than a little whelp like you have. I am strong! Strong! **Strong!**" his last word came out as a bellowing roar that could be heard over the city.

"And apparently a coward." Sage said simply. "All of you against the one of her."

The lead Lion's face transformed into a snarl, and this time he bent forward to growl at Sage.

"You... will regret saying that." And settled lower to pounce.

But his pounce never came, there was a crackling sound, and his ears lifted in confusion before he looked to Sage's hand, and watched the heavy stone that Sage had taken from the lion's hand earlier break beneath his five-fingered grip, his clawed hand tightening harder and harder till the stone was crushed into pebbles and dust, and even water dripped out of it over his hand as he squeezed the moisture out of the rock.

The lion then looked up into Sage's eyes as Sage focused his gaze on that lion, and the lion's tail lowered and he backed away from the gaze.

"Go away." Sage said again, and looking to his friends for support, seeing them backing away, the lion backed also, before all of them turned and ran.

Sage waited until the last of them were gone, and then turning to Kirin's naked form, he lowered himself and finally cut her bonds.

She gave a brief gasp with the release, and placing his hands on her body, Sage healed her from all the aches and pains, all the claw marks and bloody gashes the lions had placed upon her body, and then helped her to rise.

"Are you all right, daughter?" he asked quietly, palming her head

"Please let me go home." She said quietly, her black eye band now up atop her head like a bandanna.

Sage held her head, fingering her lips with his thumbs as he looked into her violet eyes.

"Picture your home in your head, and I will take you home right now." Sage said in all truth. "I will take you home right now."

And he waited, probing her mind for that thought, but though he feared and expected what happened in her head, or rather what didn't happen, he wasn't surprised when no image of a home came there.

"You don't have a home... do you?" he asked, still palming her face, and she closed her eyes, shaking her head. A line of glittering tears arose beneath her eyes, but they did not fall. Sage then turned the smaller fem into his chest and embraced her. "Then I will have to provide one for you..." Sage said, and held her for the longest time.

When they finally left, Sage moved away only long enough to pick up the bundle of gifts for Maourit's pryde and

then escorted her back to where the rest of the pryde was nearby, Kirin falling into a state of mute silence all the way back as she clutched to her father's side.

Sanari, Mother of Songs, High Priestess of The Faith, and Headmistress of the Grace League, had found herself in a truly unique situation. She and her new husband had been thrust thousands of years into the past, to a period of time well before she was born, and on a planet far removed from Wave World, Wave World being the home world of three of the four Mystic Leagues.

Thanks to Gesio, who'd disappeared shortly after they'd entered the city, she and Sage had been picked up by an ancient pride of lions, who appeared to be the direct forbearers of the Eqis they both knew of in their own time.

And now they were in one of the Casid's founding cities, but despite her knowledge of Casid, she did not know which city this was going to become. She feared that this city would someday fall and be destroyed in the thousands of years following this day.

She tried not to dwell on it as she sat back on a bundle of tents the pryde had set aside, she having stripped down to a simple white silken gown and left its front open to gain what little cool air there was in this hot night.

Cersile females were very much like Casid, and looking upon her, she was easily mistaken for a very, very beautiful, if not small, Casid Lioness. But her immortal body and the millennia of years that had attributed themselves to her life, had long since transformed her body into one of perfection.

She lounged quietly underneath the shadow of an awning, awaiting her husband's return as she felt her rounded tummy, now swollen well over the past several months of her pregnancy. Already she was half way through bearing her cubs – kits as Sage kept calling them – and her already well rounded bosoms had swollen more with their growing capacity to create milk, and her secondaries which had begun to but a short while ago, were swelling with determination now. Those second breasts, at least, were still well hidden beneath her primaries, but they were large enough to cup now.

Her throat rumbled softly in a content purr, like a lullaby to sooth her kittens inside her belly; help them to rest, with her eyes shining beautifully through the darkness of the shadows of evening.

Arrayed about her were several of the other young child-bearing children of the pryde. Sanari cared lovingly for them as well, and though of a hard and hearty stock, bearing the life of a new generation was tiring. Sanari smiled down at one of the young fems, combing her short mane with her long fingernails while the cub nestled against Sanari's full breast.

And then Sanari's eyes rose as she saw the visage of her husband approaching, and the shadowy semblance of Kirin in tow.

Sanari blinked, and then looked to where she'd left Kirin earlier, seeing that indeed that she was not where she'd been deposited. Sanari bit her lower lip as Sage deposited their adopted daughter against the ground, and as one of the pryde lionesses hurried upward to offer Sage a meal, he accepted it, and turned immediately to give it to Kirin.

He stroked the girl's soft mane briefly and then rose, deposited a bundle that he was carrying over one shoulder on the supplies for the pryde, and then turning, looking for a place to roost, he spied a conveniently large sized rock for his frame, and un-conjuring his clothing – his bio armor now being a part of him now, he was forced to wear clothes like everyone else – he then turned, and laid down on it.

Sanari moved just a little bit, her lips pursing in the humor of what her husband had just unwittingly done, and looking around her, she saw all the females of the pryde looking at one another at this sight, and an odd quirk had formed in the faces of many of the males as they saw this.

Sanari lay back again, giving her belly a rub again as she waited to see how the Casid here would handle this situation they'd just been placed with. And also to see how her husband would deal with this.

And then, from one of the gatherings of several of the younger female lions, one rose and stripping off her panty-like loin cloth – she wore nothing else – she stepped lithely forward, her steps purposeful as she made a bee-line for Sage.

Sanari watched, her eyes opened and attentive as the fem slowly lowered herself onto Sage's lap, pressing her breasts against his chest, and bending forward to kiss him.

Sage awoke with a start, and seeing who it was, took her by her shoulders and gently lifted her off him. She heard the young fem's desires to mate, heard her husband's shocked but firm refusal to do this act, stating that he had a mate, and sent her on her way.

Twice more this happened, one with a strong huntress, and the third time with even Equis! And to Sanari's pride, Sage turned both of them away. The last time, he made sure that Equis had rejoined the group, and Sanari mused on the look of confusion on his face as he looked at the rest of the pryde staring at him, or at least looking at him out of the corners of their eyes before he shrugged and laid down.

Then Sanari moved the young cub resting on her breast to lie against the tents and their poles, and rising elegantly to her feet, her tail end wagging to and fro rapidly as she looked upon her husband, she stepped forward and approached him.

Her robes framed her bodice like curtains framing an elegant work of art, and the moonlight above glanced off her bosom and her belly, off her mane and her glittering platinum marriage ring against her right wrist.

Pausing as she looked down at her mate, she smiled at her loving protector, looking down on his nude body as he used his sizeable bicep and long forearm as a pillow, watched as his chest moved like a bellows, admired the beautiful crisscrossing lines of his stripes etched across his body. Then looking down, she looked upon his lap, and his unsheathed phallus resting there, and stepping forward, she slid onto that lap.

Sage again awoke, rising swiftly.

“Ah! I thought I said... oh!” and his expression softened. “Beloved, I...”

Sanari stopped any further words from him by pressing a single finger against his lips, her robe falling off her shoulders to catch at the crooks of her arms to show off more of her elegant bodice.

“I know... and I saw... and could not be more proud of you, dear heart.” Her hand began to slide down his chin and then his chest, and was then joined by her other hand as they descended the length of his hard body. “But you find yourself in a predicament, milord... one that you aren't even aware that you are in.” she settled further forward onto his lap, rising her feet to hook on his legs behind her bottom just over his knees.

“You are lying on the Fortuna Stone.” She said, and began to purr, and Sage watched as her bodice arched, and saw her nipples hardening.

“Is that bad?”

“No... not if you're female.” She purred, and her hands finally slid down over his pelvis, and caressed the length of his shaft, hooking two of her fingers on the scar of his circumcision while the other continued to caress.

Sage inhaled deeply, his chest puffing out as his legs opened wider. “Sanari... what are you doing?”

“Making love to you, dear heart.” She purred, smiling warmly as Sage found her maneuvering his tip and pressing it to her sex, and once it was hard enough, it simply thickened upward, and pierced his mate's thighs.

His mouth opened, his senses becoming acute as he smelt his mate's scent as a cloud of pheromones rose up about her, and he looked upon her as she became arrayed in a cacophony of illustrious color similar to an acid trip, the colors coming from his mind's interpretation of his mate's scent.

They glittered about her like multicolored butterflies, and her smile... like pure sunshine.

"What great thing could I've done to deserve this, my sweet goddess?" he asked, smiling up at her, quickly becoming intoxicated by her scent.

"No, nothing great," she smiled down at him as she began to rise and fall onto his erecting shaft as it moved deeper into her body. "Rather, something very noble... and utterly foolish."

Sage blinked up at her, and she pushed him to lie back down on the rock.

"The Fortuna Stone is the place where young female Casid go when they are of age, and when they experience their first heat."

"Oh..." Sage said very low in his throat as his wife continued to pleasure him, understanding dawning on him.

"You've now done several things here today, dear heart... and all of them accidentally." Sanari continued, and her head tossed briefly as Sage's maleness pierced her as deep as it could go... finding *'the spot.'* Sanari bit her lower lip as she looked down at him again. "You, a male, have lain down upon the Fortuna Stone, simply because it was a good place to sleep, but the Casid here see it now as a place where even the males may go to announce that they are of age and willing to accept a mate.

"You've turned away three very capable young maidens, who, though spurned briefly, now understand the purpose of your actions, which was to lure me to you. I can hear them whispering about it even now."

"Truly?" Sage asked, and as he rose to meet his wife, she pushed him back down again.

"No... you must lie down, dear heart." Sanari said, but instead leaned forward to come to him. "This stone is meant to be a pinnacle of their sexuality, and though you abhor doing it, beloved, you must lie still and allow me to please you."

"An odd custom and not very gentlemanly..."

"But for a female, it is the pinnacle of their sexuality. They are entreated by the strongest members of their pride, all who challenge one another to be her mate, and please her so that they have the honor of being the father of her cubs. But now, with us, I am showing myself the strongest of the females here, with the honor – and it is a true honor, milord – to bear your cubs. That, and to prove that I can take your... endowment." She purred, and pressed against him in order to kiss him, and with her swollen belly, and his sunken belly and barreled chest, their bodies fit together perfectly.

Her first few times with this mighty creature had caused an ache in her insides due to his thickness, but in time she'd grown to allow him to fit in her. She began to feel his own rumbling purr as they kissed, a deep-throated thing that massaged the whole of her body, and sounding like an idling engine, combined with a dull rattling sound from somewhere inside him that made his purr mix with a low cackling.

Sage did take her bottom in his hands, helping spread the cheeks open to reduce the compression on her sex so that she could slide deeper onto him, and he continued to hold her there while her silken gown fell over them like a blanket.

She rose again, and Sage's hand caressed her heavy laden breasts, his thumb caressing her teat.

“And there’s more.” She continued to purr, continuing to rock on him. “You’ve shown the greater honor between two mates to them... and to me. Three times you were challenged, and three times you were faithful.”

“It was more than that.” Sage admitted, thinking on the daughters of the judge. “As Maourit will attest to them when he returns from the judge’s home. There is the possibility that the Judge will offer up several of his daughters to this pryde because of what I’d done. I turned their advances down for marriage and even for concubines after you, beloved.”

“What did you do?” she asked, interested as she settled atop him.

“Restored the sight to the judge’s blind lifemate.”

Sanari smiled warmly, and favored her husband with a grind. Sage’s hands snapped to the stone and rent claw marks into it in turn. When he looked up at her again, his purr intensified, and the vibration of his body quivered up his entire length imbedded inside her and massaged her from within.

She leaned forward and embraced him with all her heart, her ears flattening against the backs of her head as her body vibrated from the sounds of pleasure they both made. She felt Sage’s hands cradling her belly, and for a moment, she felt him... restrain himself.

“Beloved... should we even be doing this?” he asked from somewhere close to her neck.

“What is good for the mother is good for the cubs.” She said into his ear. “As a healer, I thought you’d know that, dear heart.” She mused, and pulled her gown up over her shoulders for more privacy as she continued to rock into her lord.

“I do... but...”

“Your protective instincts kicking in again.” She purred louder, and settled deeper onto him, falling half asleep in his arms as he held her and their cubs. She continued her rocking as she settled even deeper into her protector.

“Beloved... you’re exhausted!” Sage whispered as he cradled her. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“Because then you would’ve tried to carry me, dear heart.” She turned her head and kissed his multi-layered and chorded chest for the thought. “I may be pregnant, but I’m not helpless.”

To their credit, and especially Sanari’s, who continued to please her husband for a good long hour before he let his muscle control go and finally let up inside her, he lifted her up into his arms as he deflated, slipped from her and hung, carrying her body coiled about her belly protectively, and soon after rising, he was greeted by Equis who gave a quick curtsy.

“Master Five Talon...” she greeted, and Sage’s long ears folded forward.

“Excuse me?”

“Five Talon, milord. It’s the honor name that the judge has given you. Maourit told us when he returned earlier.” A corner of Sage’s mouth rose as he remarked on that. “But Maourit has created a sleeping nest for you and your pryde. Right over here. And Sage was ushered over to where a veritable place of honor had been created of all the blankets and furs.

His face gained a pained look. “I... I cannot take...” he began in protest, thinking that Maourit should have that nest.

‘Do not turn it down, dear heart,’ Sanari said sleepily into his mind, and Sage looked down at his lifemate. ‘It will insult them.’

Sage exhaled, biting his lower lip with one of his long fangs. "I cannot think not to take this kind offering. I must thank your Master of the Hunt in the morning." Sage laid Sanari down amongst the warm blankets, and standing, turned and strode purposefully to where Kirin lay huddled on the dusty ground. Reaching down, he picked her up in his arms without disturbing her.

It'd grown cold, suddenly, Sage thought, and breathing in deeply, stoked his flame, and his body warmed up greatly with his fire to the point where his surrogate daughter stopped shivering. Sage carried her and laid her down next to his lifemate, and then he himself sat down on the other side of Sanari.

"Not sleeping tonight, Sage?" came a voice, and Sage turned to see Gesio sitting on a stone railing in his golden wolf form, having appeared as if from out of nowhere.

"I've found that I do not need as much sleep as I used to." He lied.

"Still afraid to sleep?"

Sage's eyes closed deeply, glad that the Dragaseir was using a tongue other than Casid to relay this.

"Not as much as I used to be." He admitted, knowing that the Dragaseir was as far beyond Sage, as Sage was beyond a mortal.

"What do you do then, late at night, while your mate sleeps?" Gesio asked.

Sage lowers his hand and brushes his lifemate's cheek, and she lifts her head into his touch, opening her eyes briefly to look at him and as she rolls closer to him, Kirin slides to rest on Sanari's shoulder and hug her side.

"I watch her." Sage said with a pleasant smile. "And take great comfort in admiring her beautiful form, knowing that she is well enough that she can sleep in my presence."

"Do you still think yourself a horrid monster, Lord Sage?"

Sage hung his head, and finally shook it. "The Demon Sage has been laid to rest, *father.*" He smiled. Gesio was yet another of many father figures in his life. Now if only he could find a mother figure somewhere. "The Angel and the Demon have met one last time and finally fused. This universe and all others will no longer have to fear that part of me coming out again."

"Then why do you still fear sleep?"

"Because I still dream, and I still fear that if I close my eyes, I will see all those people being murdered by my own hands."

"Kell, Dragon, Dragaseir, Aphkei, Casid, Human..." Gesio muttered, and Sage's eyes clenched hard as if he'd been stabbed with the name of every species who'd been hurt by his hands. "You feel remorse, Sage. Even decades after the first offence, you are still trying to draw penance for it. Despite that you've been forgiven and even blessed for your crimes."

"Have I?" Sage asked, and suddenly looked up at Gesio, his green emerald eyes shimmering with his contained sorrow.

"Look down, Sage." Gesio stated, and after a moment, Sage did so, only to look into the sleeping faces of his lifemate and adopted daughter. The only way that this might've been complete is if Eakjo were sleeping here as well. "How can you not think that you are blessed? You have a lifemate of exceeding beauty and wisdom who's gentle ways compliment yours. You've earned the love of an immortal goddess, and in doing so, you have given her something that even she didn't think possible:

“Motherhood.

“She’s grown into a greater priestess because of it, her power having grown ten fold now that a new portion of her womanhood has been unlocked. But that power she belittles in the face of something greater:

“Your children.

“No... I think your penance for your crimes is done, Lord Sage, despite what others think. So, my wayward son, I give you a gift for your new understanding.”

Sage looked up at Gesio. “Yes?”

“Sleep.” The Dragaseir said simply, and Sage, despite all his incredible mental defenses, slowly slid sideways until he had lain quietly beside his lifemate and adopted child.

Gesio moved forward and taking Sage’s hand, laid it on Sanari’s swollen belly, while the Cersile priestess turned her head toward her husband instinctively.

“Do not worry, Sage. Tonight... I shall watch over you...”

And settling back, Gesio conjured a pipe, and using a mixture of herbs from a thousand different worlds, began to smoke.

Despite the Dragaseir Gesiomagatou’s insurmountable power in forcing Sage to sleep, the Weredragon was nonetheless the first to awake after only four hours. Opening his eyes as the light of the growing dawn approached, made all the brighter with a binary star lighting this planet, he found himself immediately looking into Sanari’s still sleeping face, and unconsciously he moved his hand over her swollen belly, and simply laid there, looking at her until she herself slowly opened her eyes.

It was like looking into the eyes of a goddess, and as she awoke and favored her sweet lover with a smile, Sage finally felt alive with all that beautiful love that was in her one single heart beating for him. And then Sage felt his massive hand held by her much smaller one, and in greeting to one another... they kissed.

Sanari began to purr for him, her thighs pressing together in remembrance of last night before she rolled into his body, and stopped as they heard a groan from nearby.

Kirin who’d lain close to her new mother and father came instantly awake, her eyes wide as she looked around her in confusion, and she turned around quickly, her chest heaving as she tried to remember where she was.

Sanari reached out, her hand spreading against the base of Kirin’s back, and the young lioness spun around again and stopped suddenly at seeing Sage and Sanari.

“Good morning.” Sage greeted, those kind, gentle eyes echoed by Sanari’s.

Kirin bit her lower lip as she settled down onto all fours, her budding chest compressing behind her triceps.

“Good morning.” She said quietly, and then started as someone roared.

Sage and Sanari rose as one of the young lions in the pride reared back his head, and though it was like he was yawning, it instead came out as an ear-splitting roar that echoed out over the city.

He was soon joined by others in the pride, and then elsewhere in the city, until a great sound uttered from the city

like from a war horn... a simple greeting to the sun that lasted for over a minute.

Sage rose to his feet, and pulled his comparatively diminutive mate up with him; holding her against the chill of the morning, and stoking his fire in his belly again he warmed himself in order to keep her warm. There was moisture in the air, and it would prove to be yet another humid day once the sun had risen fully.

Looking down at the rays of the sunlight, Kirin backed away from the light, her eyes squinting as she watched the light creep closer toward her. Sage watched this and his jaw set, his mind whirring already with a need to find a solution to her plight.

But amidst all his thoughts...

“Good morning, Five Talon!” came a voice, and he turned as Maourit approached, a joyful look on his face as his arms opened wide.

“Preypacer.” Sage smiled at him. “My surname is Preypacer, Master Maourit.”

“Your *‘surname,’* milord?” Maourit asked, tilting his head to one side.

“The name of his pryde.” Another voice explained, and all eyes in the vicinity turned to the speaker, and all bowed – save Sage, Sanari and Kirin – to Gesiomagatou. “He is very loyal to it, Master Maourit, though your name for him is indeed an honor.”

“Ah, so then it is Sage Preypacer of the Five Talon.” Maourit said with understanding. “A powerful name indeed. Come! We have food enough for all, thanks to you, Sage. I cannot appreciate you enough for what you’ve done for my pryde.”

“You should be thanking the Judge and his Pryde, Master Maourit.” Sage said humbly. “I merely helped his mate. It is they who help you.”

“But nonetheless... it was your actions that have allowed us such fortune. My nest is yours... and the greatest portion of our food is yours. Please! Come...”

A great fire had been produced to cook off some of the cured fish. That would rot first, so it had to be consumed first.”

“Heaven forbid I ever teach these people about Lutefisk.” Sage said as he helped Sanari to sit down close to the fire. The gathered Casid watched him with his mate, and were most stunned at how much attention he visited upon just a single female. Already, a dozen very capable young females have already offered themselves to him, and yet he turned them all away... just for her.

“What is that?” Sanari asked; perplexed about what *‘Lutefisk’* would be.

“Fish soaked in lye. There are a people of human on Earth who eat it. The lye acts as a preservative.”

Sanari gave him a stunned look, and Sage was then handed a great palm frond covered in food from the fish. Sage accepted it with a short bow, and immediately began to dish it out for Sanari.

“B-but Lord Sage!” Eqis exclaimed. “That was all for you.”

Sage nodded. “I know. But it is the duty of the Lord of his Pryde to see first that the bellies of the women and the children are filled first, before seeing to his own care. And a woman heavy with child, takes the most attention.” Sage then took the remainder, a rather large portion as it was, and placed it in Kirin’s hands. She looked up into his smiling face, still squinting from the growing light, not believing such generosity. “When my mate and my child have eaten their fill... then I shall have the remainder of our portion.”

Maourit, who'd just finished crunching up his meat and fish bone, stared at Sage with his mouth still full of food. He looked down at his great leaf of fish, swallowed hard, and then quickly passed it to a couple of the young expectant mothers who'd been waiting patiently nearby for their food.

Gesio watched this with a wry smile on his face, and then his ears twitched and he lifted his head as a procession arrived out of the mists, the jingling of bangles and bells on their feet alerting everyone else to their presence.

Several females, and three males, all lions, arrived, each of them carrying something in clay bowls. Sage stood as he recognized Nibirii at the forefront as she knelt first, pro-offering a gift of spice, and then five of her daughters bearing gifts of salt, silks and incense, and finally two very large strapping lions who deposited great wineskins full of water on the ground.

And then, to Sage's surprise, two of the daughters, opened their silken robes, showing off their naked bodies as they knelt among the offerings.

Nibirii stood backward into Judge Goundett's awaiting grasp.

"These are gifts from my pryde to yours. My two youngest daughters have shown their desire to join with your Pryde, Master Maourit... for your gift to us in allowing my mate to see again."

Sage smiled at the glowing look of Nibirii's new eyes, as they shone brighter than anyone else's amongst the gathered Casid. But then he was aware that he'd become the center of attention again, and before he knew it, the two powerful male lions who'd arrived with the Judge and his mate immediately surged forward and lowered themselves to one knee one after the other, either crossing their arms to place their fists against their shoulders.

"Thank you Master Five Talon." The first said.

"Great Master, we thank you for allowing our mother to see again." The second said, and Sage straightened in sudden recognition as this second rose.

It was the second incarnation of an individual in their time. This one bore the face and body... of Sato Hima.

"A moment." Sage said, lifting a hand for the second to pause, and this young, beautiful lion, turned and promptly bowed again. "Please... what is your name?"

"I am called Hima, Beast Lord." The lion answered, and Sage turned just enough to look at Gesio out of the corner of his eye. The Dragaseir smiled back at him.

"Thank you, Hima." Sage said, and the youth bowed away and rejoined his parents and his other sisters. "And thank you, for your generosity, Judge Goundett."

"Great Beast Lord... blessings. Thank you! Thank you for gifting my family so."

"Master Sage," Nibirii said in her fine silks, her hands pressing over her heart beneath her ample bosom. She looked like Bastet, one of the first Lycan immortals, in all her finery. "I will always remember you. You were one of the first I looked upon after decades of darkness. I will always remember you."

"And I you, Lady Nibirii." Sage said, and bowed.

Nibirii then walked forward and touched her two daughters who were staying behind on the small of their backs, and tears came from her eyes as the two young cubs turned to hug their mother's legs, but nonetheless stayed. They remained where they were with all the other offerings, and, Sage noted, lurking a bit away, stood Hima.

"Sage... this... this is an unprecedented gift." Maourit said as he appeared beside Sage, and Sage turned his head to

look at him, one of his high tapering ears moving forward as Sage favored the great lion with a whimsical glance.

“They’re all yours, Maourit.” Sage said simply, and Maourit skipped backward in a double take.

“B-but... I...” he began

“To repay you for allowing us to travel with you, for sharing your food with us, and for helping to protect my mate in my absence. I will ask but only one thing for this.”

“Anything!” Maourit exclaimed.

“That my daughter, Kirin, is never again bound.”

“B-but I... yes Master Sage.” And he bowed.

Sage looked to the young tar back, and smiled at her and gestured for her to join them at meal.

Kirin, looked up toward the sun, but despite her hatred for the light, she slowly did come from her place amidst the shadows to join her new parents at meal. Even under the watchful eye of the return of the Greater Beast Lord Gesiomagatou.

Kirin sat cowering from the light under as much shade as she could muster, Sage looking at her with his mind yet again whirring in thought. Unlike yesterday, there were no clouds in the sky, the day was exceptionally bright, and despite that she was wearing the gift of the sheer black head band over her eyes, it was still too bright for her. Sanari had taken to staying at her side, shielding her eyes from the Casiida’s bright suns.

Casid was several million miles closer in its orbital radius to its suns than Earth was to Sol. It had the nasty trait of making most of the planet’s water airborne, made land water sparse, and covered the whole of the planet in sprawling savanna, desert and mesa. The frozen poles were small, though there were many mountains everywhere, there were few rivers and streams, few watering holes and no bodies of water greater than a sea. To make matters worse, Casid also had several geological hotspots, which caused much tectonic upheaval now and again, which likewise spewed greenhouse gasses up into the atmosphere.

The planet needed a good sized rain forest to make things proper again, and more forests.

But the planet’s condition forced its denizens to adapt. Most of the cats on this world were day creatures... like the lions and tigers. But with creatures like the Tar Backs, whose black pelts absorbed the heat, and so made them adapt to the night, made Kirin’s plight all the worse now that she was forced to exist during the day.

“I must congratulate you on your handling of the situations, Dragon Sage.” Gesio said from nearby, again smoking on his pipe.

Sage had his own pipe now, and he was dressed in his chaps and priestly cloths. Hima hadn’t moved from his spot all day.

“I felt that Maourit had greater use for the new additions to the pryde, and I’ve tasted Spice and Salt before, many of these people never have, and Sanari and myself can conjure silks for ourselves.”

“You have a kind heart – excuse me, *hearts* – Lord Sage. I am glad that you do not let your generosity go to waste.”

Sage nodded. “The youngest of the two new females will enter into a heat in less than twenty four hours. She’ll bear twin sons. Her sister will heat three months later, and she’ll bear a daughter.”

“How do you know this, Sage?” Gesio asked.

“Fate.” Sage answered simply, took a puff from his pipe and exhaled that sweet aroma. “That and I can smell the growing pheromones on the youngest.”

But Sage was still looking toward his mate and daughter.

“And you’re still thinking of Kirin’s fear of the light.” Gesio stated.

“That I am. Too many black silk wrappings will totally blind her. And we can’t have tha...” Sage stopped in mid-sentence, his mind remembering something as he straightened.

“Blindness... *snow blindness!*” he said, and straightening, stamped out his pipe.

“Sage... what have you got in mind?” Gesio asked.

“I was born in the snow, Gesio. Bright light reflecting from the snow has a tendency to overload your optic receptors and cause you to go blind from the brightness. My people learned to adapt to the brightness. Excuse me Gesio, I need to construct something.”

Sage strode immediately over to where the remains of the lizard was being stripped bear, with the huge bones sprawling out into the air.

“Excuse me, Lysandra, but if you’re not using these bones, may I have them?” The young pregnant cub that was curing the meat looked up at Sage and smiled.

“Oh... please Beast Lord. Do as you wish.” She answered, and Sage lowered his hand and with a subtle jerk ripped the whole of the bone out of the meat and walked toward Kirin and Sanari.

Sage knelt before them both, Sanari watching him while he focused his power and seemed to peel off a piece of the great bone as if he were removing putty from off a shape.

“Kirin... I have something that will help with the light.” He said, and lifting his hands, helped remove the eye band, seeing her squint against the painful light, before he placed the section of bone over her eyes and began to suffuse it with power again.

The bone molded and shaped itself to her face and brow ridges, arching over her nose and creating hooks along their sides, while a single broad but exceedingly narrow slit formed along its middle.

“Close your eyes, daughter... this will just take a moment longer.” And when she’d closed her eyes again, Sage removed the thing and retied her black silk bandanna to the sides of the bone, and then tied it to her face.

“Now open your eyes.”

And she did, and looked around, looked at her hands and then stood up.

“Look at all the colors!” she said in awe, touching things as she saw them in new light, actually venturing out into the light now in amazement of what she was seeing.

“Sage?” Sanari said, rising and coming to his side.

Sage merely smiled, seeing their new daughter revel in looking at things.

“Ingenious.” Gesio said suddenly from close by, squatting low so that he was more even with Sage. “What do you

call it?"

"It's a snow visor. A bare slit allows one to see, but keeps the light from the sun or from bouncing off the ground from blinding you. Her eyes are in shadow... but she can still see the light. We used it to see storms approaching while walking on ice flows.

"It's like looking through the arrow slit on a battlement."

"Again, Sage, you have proven yourself here." Gesio smiled.

Sage paused in a moment with the thankfulness from this powerful creature, but then his mind paused with a kink in its machinery, and he looked up at Gesio. A question had just formed in his mind, and Gesio looked down at him, smiling again, and undoubtedly aware of the thought that Sage was thinking.

But the asking of that question would have to wait till later.

Just as Sage had predicted, the youngest of the new arrivals entered into her heat at nightfall, and laying back against the Fortuna Stone, her small body wracked with the pain of her body entering into its first heat, Sage watched as the young males of the pryde fought with one another in order to be the one to father a child through her.

Sanari stood by the girl, keeping a moist rag of leather on the child's head as her small breasts heaved rapidly from hyperventilating. The rage of hormones flowing through her would in a very, very short time, cause her breasts to swell, her body to practically mutate in order to bare children.

Finally, one large male turned out to be the victor, and as they'd watched Sanari do to Sage the night before, this male took the girl gently, pleasing her and cradling her body.

"Their sons will be strong ones." Sage said quietly to no one in general, and Gesio nodded.

Sage noted briefly that Hima was still stationed nearby. He hadn't moved an inch since that morning. And then he noted Kirin, who was now wearing her cherished visor atop her head while she watched the lovemaking with bated breath.

Sage quietly slipped over to her, and sat down on a large stone beside her.

"You look... concerned." Sage said quietly, laying a hand on her shoulder to gain her attention.

"Wha? Oh! It's... it's nothing father." But she hugged herself, massaging her shoulders as her legs pressed together and tucked close to her body.

It hadn't been getting cold yet.

"Yes it is." Sage soothed as Sanari arrived, and placed some water in a hand bowl into their daughter's hands.

She held it, and looked at her reflection in its waters.

"Look at me. Look at everyone else around me! I'm black, they're white, they're beautiful... and I'm... well... look at me." She lowered her hands with the hand bowl, not bothering to drink it. "How am I ever to have a mate? When I finally heat... which of these males here will take me? I'll simply leave the rock in shame."

Sage listened mutely. He didn't know whether or not there were other races that had such problems as the humans had between their different breeds, but the more he listened, the more he figured that indeed there was.

Earth had become a place where interbreeding of the different breeds had made a true black, white, yellow, or even red skinned human exceedingly rare. There were few cultures left that held that sort of ancestry any more on Earth.

But Kirin's words sounded remarkably like the battles between white and black skinned humans during the twentieth century.

"Well, a little sprucing up, and you'll look just as beautiful as they do." Sanari said helpfully, her hand moving into Kirin's unkempt mane and body fur. "I have a few secrets, child that will make you look absolutely beautiful."

Sage smiled, and coming from Sanari, the loveliest creature it'd ever been his pleasure to see, and his complete honor to marry, this was saying a great thing.

"We'll go up into the mountains on the morrow," Sage added. "And we'll find a good secret place to clean you up. And I have a few secrets of my own that I can do for you that will make you just as strong as any other lioness here..."

Hima had been asked early the next morning to show them where a bathing pool might be, and he was surprised that the young tar back that he'd been admiring all night was among those to come with.

Sure, she was a tar back, but her body was supple and strong, and her hips were wide and well rounded to bear sons.

As they climbed up past the bazaar and up the mountain pass, he kept pausing to turn to look at her.

At the place where they wanted to go, the Beast Lord Sage asked Hima to stand guard, and he did so, holding his spear while twitching with the desire to follow, but this family wanted privacy, and he would respect that.

Kirin spent time first with Sage, as he massaged the finer sand into her pelt, scrubbing the grime and dirt out of it while Sanari disrobed and laid a large blanket out beside a hot spring.

It was strange to feel five fingers on her body, but Sage was most gentle with her, and she was surprised when thick clumps of sand were pulled from her as he removed all the impurities from off her body, from off her fur and mane, making her fur very dry, but seeming even more coarse than before. Sage then passed her off to Sanari, who already waited hip deep – her large tummy just above the water – and she and Sage urged Kirin to enter the water.

She was scared of the water almost as much as she did the light, but she finally did enter.

Sanari's touch now cleansed her fur while Sage sat on a rock and played his flute, which had a relaxing addition to her mind while her new mother bathed her. A comb made out of the same bone that father had made her visor from strained gently through her mane and body fur, its fine bristles finding old bugs tangled up in her fur while they pulled odd tangles from within.

There were a few times when she winced as the comb got exceptionally tangled, but Sanari nonetheless removed the gnarl without too much problem.

Once that was done, both Sage and Sanari met with her in the waters, and they washed her with some strange oil that foamed against the water, washing every nook and crevice before she was washed again. She was then brought out of the water and then dried and combed by Sanari again.

She felt a little out of place at the moment, but let them do as they'd promised.

Sanari then taught her how to berry stain her black lips red, helped her apply a salve out of certain plants to her fur

to make it glisten and remain straight.

Sage then produced a bolt of soft blue silk that he wrapped about her head, leaving a shock of her hair out while wrapping the rest about her head and neck. Several of the folds in the front could be pulled up over her mouth in case the dust really began to blow.

And then it was time to return to camp.

Hima sat back against a rock, balancing his spear against his shoulder while he listened for movement. When it finally came, with the sounds of two people's steps, he lifted his head to see three approaching from the hot springs – the Beast Lord was remarkably silent – but then immediately came to his feet as he saw the black furred creature that walked between the Beast Lord and his diminutive lifemate.

That's no tar back! He swallowed as he saw this creature walking elegantly between them, her head and neck wrapped in blue silk.

He looked upon a creature who's fur laid straight and shining in hues of blue and purple, accenting her supple curves while a white mask of bone guarded her eyes. A perfect contrast to her black fur.

Hima's mouth opened in astonishment as the three passed, and in spite of himself, his shaft unsheathed from its pouch behind his loincloth as he looked upon her rounded and naked behind.

"Master Hima," Beast Lord Sage said as he paused, letting the two females move forward. "Are you coming?"

Almost, Hima mused as he looked down at the growing bulge between his legs, feeling the seed in it swell, but answered differently. "Ah, yes. Yes I am." And he hurried forward, taking the lead position as he led them back down the mountain, desiring to look more on that new creature that had become of their hated tar back enemy.

Kirin had been the focus of much attention as they moved right through the Bazaar, many of the Casid doing barter there pausing as they watched her pass.

"Hey... what kind of Tar Back is that?" a denizen of the city said as he and a group of other Casid blocked their path.

Hima took hold of his spear but Sage held his shoulder to keep him back.

"How dare you dishonor her like that?" Sage demanded. "This is no simple Tar Back. Do you not recognize a Shadow Lioness when you see one? Make way sir, so that she may pass."

There was a rapid rise in the voices of the Casid as they moved forward, and Kirin, a little afraid at what was happening, walked forward from urgings from Sanari. But to her surprise, the Casid blocking their way indeed did move out of her way as she passed, as did all others in front of them.

By day's end, the whole of the city had learned of the mysterious Shadow Lioness who now graced their city, and many went to search for a sight of her.

Kirin lay on her belly, smiling softly to herself while Sage knelt beside her, massaging her back and pressing into points onto her body. Her visor was pushed up onto her head, but she wore her blue silks proudly. She could feel a magic working its way into her body as her father pressed his fingers, and sometimes the needle tips of his claws

into her body. She was... changing... she knew it, and could feel the weight in her body sliding and shifting.

There was a growing strength in her navel too, she could feel, and she was blushing as she felt it slide through her. And above all, she no longer felt like an unclean retch, but rather like a beautiful goddess... just like her new mother.

She listened to her mother sing, heard her melodious voice and Kirin drew strength from that too, just like she'd tried to do from Sage's flute. Under her breath she tried to mimic that song.

"We're done for tonight, Kirin. Now I want you to get some sleep, you'll feel a little odd in the morning, but that feeling will pass."

"Yes father." She said happily, and went to their nest to lie down.

Sage noticed Hima watching her all the way to the nest. And then he noticed Gesio.

"An interesting thing you're doing, with your daughter, Sage." He spoke in Cersile, which was the sing-song secret language they were all using when they didn't want to be overheard by the Casid. "I never knew Acupuncture and Acupressure could be used like that."

Sage nodded, and began taking out his pipe. "The brain is a computer, the Chakra are the power plants, and all the plethora of power points, pressure points and puncture points are the controls of the great machine that is one's body.

"The fingers feel heat, and the brain thinks hot, and the body reacts to keep away from the heat.

"Actuating certain pressure and puncture points in a sequence can control the brain to do even greater reactions."

"Like actuating the hormones in her body to make her breasts grow?" Gesio intoned.

"And triggering enzymes to stimulate protein and calcium growth to thicken bones and enlarge muscle mass." Sage added. "Likewise, I've gone so far to actuate power nodes to unlock several of her species hidden traits. She'll be having a growth spurt for awhile, it'll be subtle, but it'll make her very hungry for awhile."

"Food is sparse, Sage. What will she eat?"

"She'll eat my portions."

"Such sacrifice. And what will you eat, Sage?"

"Stones."

Gesio blinked at that. "Stones, Lord Sage?"

"They're high in silicon, nickel, iron and other good minerals for a growing dragon like me." Sage mused, looking at the Dragaseir as he lit his pipe with a snap of his fingers. "My body... has gone through more changes than has been reported Gesio. Bio circuitry, Hadran circuitry, radical mutations, and, most of all, a Boron-Silicate/Carbon-Calcite hybrid endoscopic bone configuration."

"You have metal and ores in your body?" Gesio asked, indeed impressed.

"Along with carbon crystals and calcifications. Pretty standard Draconic make up, really." Sage said with a small smile as he took his first puff on his pipe. "What isn't standard is all the tech and wetware in me. I'm like a Cyborg. Only Lady Evelyn Fireteh of the Dragon Council seems to have more."

“So brick-shitter takes a new terminology with you.”

“Yeah... a literal one.” And the pair of dragons chuckled together. “By the way... *Father,* I’d like to thank you for your gift the other night. I can’t remember sleeping that well... well... aside from the time Sanari first bed me.” He chuckled. “Slept for three solid days afterward she made me so comfortable.” Sage looked to his lifemate where she continued to sing to her navel, her hands massaging her belly. “Great Maker, how did I ever deserve a creature such as that in my life?”

“Like I said, Sage... she’s change from your penance already paid. And if something so precious is change on said payment... I’d say your need for payment is at an end.”

Sage nodded, and continued to puff on his pipe, and they listened sweetly to Sanari’s song.

“Father... there is a question I need to ask.” Sage asked suddenly, and Gesio, having waited for him to ask the question, turned his head to Sage. “I... honestly believe that we are indeed in the past. Is this true?”

“It is.”

Sage nodded, and gauged his next question carefully. “I am considered a powerful Temporal Mage, but even I can only manage to travel no more than fifteen minutes into the past. And yet you’ve managed thousands of years?”

“I have.” Gesio said, and again Sage nodded. “Though it has been hundreds of thousands of years truthfully.”

“I am... fearful to do more than certain things, Gesio. Paradox is foremost on my mind. What happens if we alter events here? What if something we do seriously harms events in this world? What if something we do never allows Equis or Hima to ever exist? What if what we do here never allows Clio to exist?”

Gesio chuckled, and laid a golden clawed hand on Sage’s shoulder. “How you have much to learn about time and space, Sage. You have no fear of your actions here, because they’ve already been done. The reason why your Temporal Mages do not accomplish more, the reason why you cannot travel further backward than fifteen minutes, is because you all fear going farther. Your own minds restrain you.

“So I’ll give you knowledge, Sage, but I’m sure it’ll take some training on your part to allow you to go farther. The reason why you cannot harm anything here is because history is already written. Even the actions of individuals journeying back in time do little more than contribute to the events already set in place once they are written into the time stream. Past events *can* be altered, Paradox does indeed occur, like with your trait of altering fate, but the further into the past you go, the more and more resilient the existing time stream is, and the less probable that the *Butterfly Effect* or Paradox becomes.”

“Then you know what will happen?” Sage asked incredulously.

“I do. Because I witnessed it all happen before. My younger self is elsewhere... already viewing these happenings. I brought the two of you back here, simply because you both and I were meant to be here.” Gesio rose. “But I digress. I am proud at what you are doing, Sage. I would’ve asked you to join the Dragaseir Council just because of how kind and generous you are. Such traits are in short supply, and much can be said if a good portion of all dragons had even a portion of the kindness you generate.

“Goodnight, Sage, and take good care of your new daughter.”

And with that, Gesio faded from memory. Sage turned away from the spot where the Dragaseir had just occupied, and took one long thoughtful puff of his pipe while he listened to his mate’s singing. With a deep and studious exhale, he blew a great puff of white smoke into the air.

Into the Mountains...

"We need to move on to get these stores of meat home," Maourit spoke firmly as the hunting party packed up the last of their belongings. It was, indeed with a heavy heart that the party gathered up their things to prepare to leave.

Passage through the mountains would be a hard march, even without the huge piles of food they needed to get home. But at least the way was littered with areas of shade and there was more water between the mountains. But the terrain is harsh and few dared to stay long. A few roads had been forded through the most passable avenues in the valleys and canyons but even so the march would take more than a few weeks.

Hima, Sage had surmised, was the progenitor of Pryde Hima, one of the most powerful and honorable prydes in Modern Casiida was standing by ready to follow. He really was remarkably handsome and hearty. Sato Hima on the other hand looked like a figure from a romance novel but was still a formidable leader.

This youth looked like a solid and strong warrior.

How the face of a family never really changes, Sage thought as he looked over to Kirin, in her visor, already thinking of ways to make a much prettier and permanent one, as she continued to garner the attention of several young males.

At one point his thinking dwelt upon what might happen if, he was not yet sure if it was wise, she did come home with them. Wave World was a paradise compared to this world and Kirin would be surrounded by people who would adore her.

Onyx lions were still a bane, as fanatical and murderous as any race could dread to produce, but maybe there was hope in this girl as she wrapped up in light wraps to ward against the beating sun.

Gesiomagatou was oddly nowhere to be seen until Sage looked over toward the mountains much further west than they would be traveling. A great golden dragon with six great wings spread, in the diffusion of the heated air and distant fade of thinned dust and atmosphere, he barely seemed to be there. It was a sight few people could hope to see and Sage, by Fate it seemed, was privy to a view most mortals would be brought to their knees to see and long to see once more before the end of their lives.

Sanari leaned against her mate and husband as she spoke softly, "I just spoke with Hohnmurr, Maourit's eldest son. We're headed directly to a sanctuary for Stormseekers. It's a fortress but we should be able to get proper lodging there. It's about five days out..." She noted Sage's lack of focus as he looked toward the mountains almost enthralled. She gave him a quick poke between the scales...

"Yipe!" Sage lurched away looking at Sanari. She always managed to find a sensitive spot, usually by accident. This one sent a shock of cold up his side that settled on his groin heavily. "Sorry... I was just..."

"Now you know why he is revered as he is. His appearance alone inspires." she murred. "You will too one day. I have no doubt..."

"Maybe," Sage stroked her mane thinking of Rae and how she stayed well clear of the glare of *'fame and fortune.'*

Her name was now one of legend and great prestige for her strength and power and what she did with it. It would've been easy for her to become as influential as she is strong but Rae only wanted what strangely most beings in this universe of incomprehensible power desire... a normal life.

Rae only wanted to have a safe home, a family, and a loving husband to lean on. Until just recently she had two, now Makahn, with some deadly serious maneuvering, freed of his obligations to the Power'd League; obligations devised by a jealous Master Serendoe to make Rae miserable more than Makahn, was home and a happy husband and regular teacher in the Mystic League.

If Sage put aside all his power, if that were truly possible, Makahn would be the stronger by a wide margin. As it was Sage could put down roughly ninety four percent of his boundless power and was exactly a match for the steel

and silver furred wolf. At least... that's what he was able to do as a Tiger. As a Dragon... there was a need to recalculate. There was a great deal he was still discovering, and the more he learned, the more powerful he became. Sage was growing, and growing very fast... and that frightened him sometimes.

Sage sighed...

Sage had seen pictures of Makahn's youth and Makahn was as black a pitch as a teen with a shock white belly but as he matures and ages, he is growing lighter and more evenly colored. Sage's heart sank to see Rae's husband age were he would not for Sanari.

Sage got back to work to get the bundles together. It was work that took all afternoon, perfect for moving out at dusk.

Opening the gates, they found that Gesiomagatou already stood waiting for them. He looked ready to go, and taking up a large parcel of supplies with ease, he shouldered it and carried it gleefully. "Sorry to have not been here earlier." He greeted. "You must think me rather lazy..."

"Not at all, Master of the Sky and Land," Grutvo, Maourit's brother, said humbly, "We know that you look over this world and it is a large world to look after."

"All the same, I'm sorry not to be more available to lend more of myself," the Draco-Wolf bowed his head apologetically.

"You lend us your son even as he must tend to his wife with child," Eqis said in practical tones. "One would say you own him the apology more than us."

Gesio smirked at that bit of wisdom and turned to Sage, "She is right, *'son.'* I'm truly sorry to put you through this."

"You owe us no such thing, Gesiomagatou," Sanari smiled, "This has been a most fortunate and inspiring voyage for us. We thank you for this adventure."

Sage bowed his head in humble admission to attest that fact. "Thank you for all you guidance and this opportunity to learn more about you and this noble people, *'father.'* "

"Thank you in return." Gesio smiled looking onward to the mountains even as the sun set behind them. "If we go quickly we can get to the Noruuqii caves by dawn. The low forest there is full of game for the skilled hunter. Breakfast... or lunch... will be on me..."

The moon rose up opposite the mountains and lit the darkened landscape with a somber blue light. Unease fell upon the hunting party as they caught the faintest glimpse of eyes in the dark.

"More tar lions," Gorri murmured, one hand flexing nervous claws the other ready to reach for her knife.

"Friends of yours?" came another youth said to Kirin.

She tried not to look afraid to speak but the truth was written on her face. She feared them all. Being nomadic and without a real home or even home range, she never learned the security of family. Her parents were killed in a raid, many of her relatives and friends died hunting the much more dangerous nocturnal creatures. Raiding was safer but earned the black lions and black leopards poor reputations as marauders and killers.

Sanari looked over at the youth and he looked away not ashamed but simply acting like any young male, stubbornly

headstrong and unwilling to take proper responsibility for such things. Kirin gravitated toward her new 'mother' and stayed at her side even as Sage took up the rear with Gesiomagatou.

"They are afraid of another raid, but the tar lions in this region are far less likely to attack. They have an easier selection of prey to hunt than those near or in the '*reaching grass sea*.'" Gesio spoke in Cersile, it sounded faintly like song to the Casid, drawing some attention by not much.

Sage looked ahead to his wife, only a few months along in her pregnancy, responded, "You would call them that. It's what might be considered a slur..." He thought of Kirin and how she might take being called such to her face by someone as universally revered by the Casid as Gesio before the golden Draco-Wolf spoke.

"It's what they call themselves, Sage. They use that moniker to inspire fear in their rivals. Tar is after all a sticky, stinging, burning hot substance that can hide easily under a thin layer of dust and sand. Tar can capture and kill the mightiest of land beasts like the grip of death itself... But I think black lion fits Kirin best..."

"Shadow lion.." Sage corrected, "Shadow lioness to be more precise."

"The name Onyx Lion will come in a few centuries when it is found that there are '*black cats*' with tremendous wealth and the ability to function in the day... But that is not our concern just now. Kirin is much lovelier than I had thought previously. You and Sanari do good work."

"Thank you," Sage smiled with some deserved pride, more for Kirin than himself or Sanari.

"She has no future here, you know," he said sober and low. "She would've died barely clinging to life from one failed raid or hunt to the next, eaking out in a week what even the poorest sand lion might eat in one meal in the same week."

"I have made her my daughter so it is. I want her to be well..."

"There is a very strong pride in the Mystic League. Their hearts are loving even though some have had extremely poor relations with the Onyx. But how will she deal with them? Sometimes the way to be unfriendly is to be too friendly and you know most females are extremely adept at that."

"Sanari and I can look after that. I can feel a faint potential in her not unlike Kaya's but she may never attain the zeal to pursue it as far as Kaya..."

"As long as she grows to be happy and productive in your home does it matter? Besides, I would think Kaya would appreciate having a friend who can take some of the heat off..."

"Heat?" Sage questioned not catching it.

Kaya, by some design but mostly poor management, had garnered the interest of almost a dozen youth Casid males, some of whom are mighty warriors blessed with unyielding strength... and some like Lufan and Bazil, with *other* great attributes. Kaya was rumored to be one of the most desirable young lionesses alive for her beauty and vitality. Her personality was a huge plus as well. But this made it hard for her being surrounded by all that male-induced chaos. If their attention could at least be diffused...

Sage chuckled lightly at the thoughts that must be running through Gesio's mind, "You old matchmaker... You planned this didn't you?"

Gesio smirked, raising some scales slightly, "Not at all. I only planned your being here not what you would do or how you would affect certain people."

Both were silent for several minutes before the Draco-Wolf spoke again, "I don't wish to infringe on the office of your father, Drake. The notion that you are my son is merely a way to quickly defuse their suspicions about you"

and Sanari. However, I do appreciate your playing along but if you must consider me a father-figure then think of me as an uncle..."

"Do I still have to call you *'father'* while we are here?"

"If only in declining frequency to wean these people off that notion."

"Of course..." Sage answered, smiling as they continued onward

Foul Dreams...

The caves at the foot of those great mountains were deep and seemed to be fresh despite knowledge of them going back millennia. No one actually lived in them and yet it felt like someone or something did. That might be attributed to the fact that it was a regular stopping place for travelers as well as hunting and war parties going hither and yawn.

The brisk late night march got the party to the caves with precious hours left before the dawn. Gesiomagatou had gone to hunt as he promised taking a few of the younger hunters and huntresses with him. Sage remained with his wife as she slept.

Though unfamiliar with Cersile pregnancies, Sage could still clearly see that his beloved wife was not sleeping well. Physically she seemed comfortable but it was her mind, scattered visions coming and going in terrifying waves of chaos and disjointed delirium. It was not madness but it was more than a simple night terror.

"Cersile tend to become a touch unstable towards the end of a pregnancy. Since it rarely lasts more than four calendar months, the madness is never severe... But if she has anything in the duration of a human pregnancy... She could go utterly insane before it's over..." The words of the CMO echoed to Sage. He missed Hyurri and her sterile manner of delivering information. She past away after dinner with the Iksakis. She simply fell asleep as everyone left to do other things and never...

Sage shed a tear for the Doctress while watching over his wife.

She tossed and turned disturbing Kirin from her slumber, who quickly vacated the bedroll as the were-dragon sat down to take up Sanari in his arms, cradling her against his body. His touch seemed to sooth her as she settled somewhat but only enough so as to no longer risk harming the unborn cubs she carried.

"These are not mere night terrors." Sage thought aloud cradling Sanari's head and shoulders as she continued to shake and shutter. Tears ran from her closed eyes and he could feel she wanted to wake, but something prevented her from doing just that.

"I should get help...?" Kirin started but then watched Sage as the tips of his fingers glowed faintly as he touched points about Sanari's flawless face and slender neck.

Kirin watched for a moment and then looked at her own hands that were strengthened and toughened by hard living and fierce fighting. They looked, despite their lack of armor like scale and metal hard claws, far less gentle than the *'Beast Lord's.'* He had a healer's touch... soft and gentle as the wind carrying a dove. She felt so inadequate as Sanari slowly aroused from her nightmares.

"Dearest..." Sanari sounded utterly exhausted as she tried to sit up in her mate's lap.

Sage gently held her down to lay there in her lap, "Rest. I... have trouble reading your thoughts... but I can sense your feelings clearly enough. But this time I could see your dreams... Nightmares really..." He sank feeling a certain guilt for being the one who impregnated her and gave rise to her increasing instability.

"They come and go... But I..." Sanari looked over to Kirin who still glistened like obsidian in the low moonlight

and torch light. "Oh, kitten... I'm sorry I must've wakened you. I... these children are very powerful and they are affecting me rather poorly... I'm sorry..."

Kirin stared at the full belly of the cat-woman and quietly cradled her own flat rippled stomach. One day she would long to have cubs of her own. But right now she looked at her adopted parents and was silent, not sure what to say or do. She still looked tired and even half dozed off before crawling back into bed.

"I should rest elsewhere," Sanari sat up at last. "Poor Kirin..."

"Poor yourself," Sage whispered as Kirin quickly dropped back into her slumber, "These nightmares will get worse..."

Sanari reached over to Sage's cheek cupping a tiny portion of his face, "I will get through this with your help. I've tended to young women who went mad not two weeks in. I can hold out that long at least."

Sage wrapped his massive arms around the comparatively tiny cat-woman and her belly letting his heartbeats reach hers and they quietly dozed off for a light nap before the dawn.

The dawn came rather slowly it seemed, peeking over the mountains. Gesiomagatou stood calmly with the carcass over a large mountain... for the life of Sage he could only call it a massive landlocked crocodile. It was known as a M'kendoht. And was more than fifty feet long, excluding the additional fifty to sixty feet of muscular tail.

Hardly an inch of the beast was not valued. The teeth were used as jewelry. The skin was prized for the fine leather that could be had from it or the nearly claw-proof armor that one could make from the back and face scales... It still amazed Sage that even the relatively small and weak lions of this time still could rend hard stone with their claws. It was little wonder that Casid sword making was still so limited... but fancy gloves and gauntlets to brace the fingers and claws were masterful and easily as beautiful and dangerous as the finest swords of any race he'd ever known.

Sage was still a moment as voices from the rest of the party rose up in awe that such a deadly, and tasty, and valuable beast was their meal. The meat could keep for days without curing and was a favorite of warriors who could obtain this meal. But what amazed them more was the fact that this feast was delivered without so much as a sound.

The great golden beast lord nursed a still, slightly bleeding nostril. He obviously portrayed himself as mortal in flesh alone. Some rare stories spoke of him sacrificing his body to save others only to return a few months later.

"Oh, Master of the Land and Sky" Eqis murmured, a bit out of turn but quite forgivable, "You are too... generous..." She positively swooned over the carcass. Stomachs gurgled as the lionesses started to skin the beast.

"*Father?*" Sage spoke up knowing Gesio's requirement that Sage refer to him less. It was to *'play along'* for now... and to grab the golden Draco-Wolf's attention.

"This is a bit much. Isn't it?" Gesio answered the question before he could ask. Meniko had the same general habit but was much more polite about it.

"Are we preparing a toll of some sort?" Sage asked looking at how carefully the great beast was being carved up. It's skin and hides being used to wrap the meat and so on.

"Indeed, Five Talons," Maourit said respectfully. He eyed Sanari seeing her state of distress as she tried to keep calm. Her emotions were growing steadily more unfocused as the cub or cubs she carried grew. "Is your wife well? She looks troubled... almost ill."

Sage looked to her then back again, "She will be fine. Her lineage is often plagued with difficulty when carrying

young... Please do not concern yourself too greatly with it.”

“If need be, son of Gesiomagatou,” Eqis said warmly approaching only enough to be noticed, “The other lionesses and myself will be ready to help if we can. A woman can feel many rages to remove the child from herself, protect the child from everything, or anything in between. We are no strangers to that.”

“Thank you,” Sage said softly and respectfully, “ I will remember those words if the need should arise.”

The troupe had little trouble moving into the mountain’s canyons. The overhanging rock formations provided much shade and even in the direct sun, it was much cooler, though for Kirin’s poor sake, not much dimmer. She continued at Sanari’s side as she had begun to teach the girl Cersile. It was a way to pass the time and a few of the males and females took close attention to them.

Ahead Hima was scouting. He was swift of foot and graceful as he leaped from one high ledge to the next like a squirrel in the forest.

Surprisingly, they had come to a deep valley filled with green, lush jungle. Few places like this existed anymore on their own on Casiida. The fortunate prydes and nations who had dominion over such lands rarely shared the fact of their existence to protect their holdings.

The band of hunters swooned at the feel of moisture in the air, the smell of dense high foliage and the sound of songbirds – albeit birds the size of eagles.

“This must be a Stormseeker’s lair.” One of the young lions gaped. He and most of the rest seemed to grow limp in this place as if they had entered the most sacred of temples unprepared. One of the lionesses fainted.

It was a defiant show of just how important the Stormseekers were and are to the Casid.

It was an utterly alien place compared to the rest the world. Such freely growing life and the smell of water. Not the muddy muck that countless animals had done everything in besides drink, but clean mountain water. Water so clean it had it’s own name, Ras’friel. A word the troupe whispered as Hima dashed ahead to see if was safe to go on in.

As he returned a pair of tall lean male white lions, dressed in fine robes walked with him. They did not look like fighters. It was common knowledge that the White Lions were scholars and healers. They tamed metal first ages ago and trained the first Stormseekers. Even now they were sought to teach and preserve knowledge. But they too were being hunted by the same forces that sought to wipe out the Stormseekers.

The lionesses in the troupe swooned over the two white lions. They were lean but gorgeous. Most lionesses chose mates for their obvious strength and power but these two had a baring that came from their intellect and maturity. Strangely Hima had the same look about him but was clearly more muscular and golden in color.

“We behold the Master of Land and Sky,” The first taller white lion said with gracious appreciation. His robes were open, revealing the finely honed body of an athlete who lived for sport not conflict. His claws were pale white and not dark brown or black like the lions who lived and died by their claws. They were clearly soft. His pale blue eyes shone with grateful joy. His long mane, nearly knee length, flowed over his shoulders and down about his back and shoulders in gentle waves of ivory and pearl-like sheen.

“The legendary Beast Lord, Gesiomagatou,” The smaller, by about a foot, clearly younger lion said. He was the spitting image of his elder. Perhaps they are brothers. His robes were also open but he appeared a good deal more built and his claws were a warm sepia from use.

Both presented maleness that expounded tremendous virility. The younger lion however wore a fine gold band over

the base of his unsheathed penis. In Casid males, the phallus involuntarily extends during early and mid adolescence and remains so into early adulthood. A young lion may find himself set upon by numerous females, giving him great experience, especially with a willing and experienced female or group of them, and become a prized male not just in battle, where so trained, but also in matters of love and lovemaking.

Sage quietly recalled how Modern Casid, particularly gold lions, were utter gods of sexual virility compared to most species. But he also recalled that Modern Casid Males were outnumbered nearly fourteen to one by their females. Why are there so many females over males in the future?

The two white lions, Sun Lions, so named for the white of their fur shining like sunlight, looked toward Sage and Sanari, even as Kirin hid behind the scaled Draco-Tiger. "Another Beast Lord? He looks like a Stormseeker... after a fashion," The taller spoke as the smaller leaned over to the side spying Kirin.

"A tame soul in a Tar Lion?" the youth said. His voice was educated and kind. There was not sense of fear or malice. "She's very pretty..."

If it were possible to see through her black fur, one might see her blushing as she shied behind her tall father. She'd never given much consideration for her appearance before meeting Sage and Sanari. Still she thought she was rather plain... maybe a little ugly... But maybe... and why did her new 'parents' keep comparing her to a girl named Kaya.

'You are easily as cute and lovely as Kaya,' Sanari would say.

'There's a certain girl who I think might actually be jealous of you,' Sage said to her one night on the road here.

Kirin leaned out from behind Sanari, her gold eyes, usually a mark of a panther, glittered with nervousness.

"Ah I see her now," said the taller white lion, "You're right. She is a beauty. She's too large to be a panthress. Perhaps a Night Lioness?"

"Night Lioness," Sage repeated flatly as to not sound like he was asking. He had after all dubbed Kirin a *'Shadow Lioness,'* perhaps for his love of the word and a lack as to what else to call her... But what they called her did make more sense to him and her fine slick black fur did look like water under moonlight, black and alluring.

'Sun Lions and Night Lions...' He thought to himself. 'Seems to follow a certain ironic logic. Where then, were the other Night Lions in this cruel world?'

"I bring this troupe of hunters from the pryde of Lankius from the northern highlands," Gesiomagatou spoke directly to the white lions, "Speak you names, friends."

"I say truly that I am, Rauss of the Pride Sentholu," The taller lion said.

No wonder Clio is so huge, Sage thought seeing Sanari was smiling at the same revelation.

'Being part lion her lineage developed all the same physical traits, the potential for size, strength, and power... Passed down and distilled into one veritable super-tigress...' Sage considered, rubbing the frill of his goatee. 'My God, what kind of power in the universe are we creating in her? She's already radically more powerful than almost every other student her age throughout the Mystic League and the well of her potential is utterly bottomless...'

"I'm the friend you may call, Gideon, of the pride Sentholu," the smaller one said, "Rauss is my cousin." Sanari smirked at him as she clung onto Sage's arm, but he could feel her unconsciously trying to claw his arm.

Gesio pointed with an open hand to Maourit who, himself, was bedazzled by the splendor of the valley, "This is the leader of this troupe. Twenty four seasons he has led his troupe to bounty..."

“I speak my name as Maourit,” he said. His gaze was fixed on the pair even as the lionesses in the troupe quietly swooned and marveled at the pair and their obvious virile potential.

Hima returned to the side of Gesio and the troupe, “I could stay here... fighting and battle is not for me.”

“No one would blame you,” Grutvo said patting him on the shoulder, “The prydes with armies and resources are fighting more and more. I dread the coming of the day when ‘war’ is said as frequently as ‘hello.’”

Hearing this, Sanari’s eyes watered as intense sorrow, left over from the war against the Aphkei, a war she knew the Casid would fight, welled up in her heart. Normally she’d only give the barest expression of her grief, for the carnage, the loss of life and innocence, the anguish of honorable soldiers fighting without honor, the young willingly throwing themselves at an unbeatable foe for a slim victory... She suddenly buried her head into Sage’s arm and he quickly knelt to attend to her, taking her up in his arms as she started to weep.

“Oh dear,” Rauss said looking to the cat-woman as she quivered in the Draco-Tiger’s arms, “Come with us. I’m sure we can find you suitable camping ground for the brief time you will be with us... but where did the Beast Lord Gesiomagatou... go?” Rauss asked, looking around for Gesio, who seemed to have evaporated between introductions.

“This is my friend and the son of Gesiomagatou. Know that his name is Sage,” Maourit said with some urgency, “We’ll need some place quiet and safe for his wife. The Lady Sanari and his daughter by right, Kirin. Please see to them now. We can wait for your permission to enter.”

“Nonsense.” Rauss looked back as a dozen gold lions, all massive and strapping males with black claws and deep sienna manes jogged up the path, “They will help you with your belongings and see to your safety. We do not let those who wish entry to languish for favor of a few, safe those who would do us harm.”

‘I know bouncers when I see them and just three or four of these...’ Sage started a thought before another struck him. These gold lions were huge, each easily over twelve feet tall and more than a ton of solid might. *‘Precursors to modern gold lions, warriors bred and raised. The curse of the super-soldier...’*

A Lesson of Humility

In his personal garden, the small tiger cub chased a butterfly not aware that Gesio was standing next to him. The cub jumped with shock, causing a roll of thunder, as he looked at the huge foreleg of the Draco-Wolf.

“Master Gesio?” the cub snarled not liking to be frightened, “Don’t do that or I’ll give no rain to your precious...” the cub was met with cold wolfen eyes. Eyes his people would learn to fear and loathe in the future. Eyes the cub respected if nothing else.

“Loro, your gifts are not playthings for your amusement,” Gesio said clearly, “They are not for you alone to choose whether or not to dole them out when needed. There are so few of your kind now...”

“Master...” Loro murmured, “I just meant...”

“I know what you meant,” the golden Beast Lord moaned, looking down on the tiger cub, “You’re hopelessly spoiled. Thank Bast your two sisters are the keepers of this paradise and they are more powerful than you are.”

“But they are gone...”

“They have left to look in on those they are trying to help. After they mastered their powers I gave them the drink of my blood to grant them the power of a warrior Dragaseir, power they will grant their children to protect as they are protecting. But you... I will not grant you anything until you show me that you can be trusted with your powers.”

“I’m not some stupid cub you can threaten. I am a rare and powerful Stormseeker,” Loro bellowed as greatly as his six year old lungs would allow, “I can drown this whole valley or dry it like a cave slug in the desert. I can...”

Gesiomagatou raised his fist as to reel it for a backhand punch. A punch that could crack a planet. “...feel the back of my hand if you dare any such thing!”

Loro jumped back in fear, eyes wide and body tightly curled and quivering. “...no... don’t...”

Gesio stopped looking at himself and drooping his head, entering a new form as a lion truly to be called ‘gold.’ His body of firm but gentle might was sheathed in fur of gold as he knelt down to Loro who still cringed.

“I won’t. I’m sorry to become angry with you,” Gesio scooped the white tiger up in a fatherly embrace, “I wish they hadn’t killed your mother. She did such a good job with Niria and Laikei that...” He cried for the tiger he loved, a being that reminded him so much of Rae, boundless love and strength. She was invincible but she had one weakness, she could die. She surrendered her life so her son would have one. He was just born but he was deathly ill and Gesio was away unawares of the situation or else he’d have healed the cub himself...

Gesio was a terrible father and knew it... He could never hope to match her skill with children but he loved them so much that he could stop trying...

“Dad..?” Loro murmured.

A meek young white tiger with pale stripes, apparently the defining mark of a Stormseeker is a white tiger with black stripes or a white lion with a black mane, knelt nearby. She said nothing her full bosom hung firmly with her youth and the milk she gave to nurse cubs. She had no mate and no cubs of her own yet but then, young females often helped nurse cubs.

Gesio looked up, “Yes, Euna-la?”

“Will your guests be staying?”

“All of them. Until they are ready to go. They have supplies for the lean times they need to get home so they won’t stay long... and yes, I knew of Sanari. She will improve for a time... I need to see her.”

He stood up resuming his Draco-Solf form, gently holding his son’s hand and walking on past Euna-la. He personally kept few servants, but his daughters, Niria and Laikei, tried to maintain a reliable cast of helpers. Even with their now boundless strength and energy they still exhausted eventually but they did their best to aid other Stormseekers hidden away here and there. Gesio didn’t question it as long as the servants were treated well.

“Euna-la?” Gesio leaned down putting a finger on her shoulder, “Go home for today. I’m home and I can see to my guests. Thank you.”

“Thank you, master,” the tigress never looked at him, as was her station, as she left.

In the pavilion, just below the main palace, built and sculpted into the rock face ages before, Sage had laid Sanari on a soft bed of fur pelts as Kirin had run off the get water and some food. Sage soothed his lifemate into a light sleep just as Kirin had returned with food and water... and Gesio accompanied by Loro...

Lord Sage looked down into the sleeping face of his lifemate of only a few months, seeing her troubled brows twitch and clench as Sage’s fingers gently began to undo her clothing, revealing a still developing mother’s body.

Loro held his breath as he saw this new creature and the beautiful female he tended to, and in his mind, he marveled at these strange beings.

Gesio saw Sage perform a perfect art in which even he was envious of. Sage was a healer... that one idea defined Sage at the deepest portion of his core being. He protected to keep people from the harm in which he'd learned to repair. He'd forgotten more about medical science that others have learned in their entire lives. His magical healing might was likewise unparalleled... even by the Dragaseir Gods.

As a healer, he was an administering angel. It was when he was a guardian that he became a devil.

"Father... who is this?" Loro asked, pointing at the massive creature that held a body mass unseen on this world.

"This is... my son... Loro. By Right." Gesio responded.

Sage's five-fingered hands lifted and began to massage his mate's brow, occasionally pressing her forehead with one of the needle sharp talons on the ends of his fingers. His other hand then lowered to her rounded belly... the fingers softly petting her belly briefly. Gesio then heard Sage whispering while he sat, and the Dragaseir felt the alien magic of Sage's homeworld flowing, mixing with his learned magic of this universe, the pair enforcing themselves into a still even greater magic.

The jungle began to change then, and trees moved, plants grew, with creepers and trailers flowing about them, and Loro climbed higher atop his father's arm as he watched the trees moving.

Palm fronds overlapped over them, vines coiling and trailing while Sage continued to whisper, and Sanari was lifted up off the ground by gathering vines; the leaves wrapping and folding themselves beneath her as she was tilted at an angle, everything moving beneath her so as to make her as comfortable as possible.

Sanari relaxed with a soft smile crossing her features, and with a subtle sigh, her breasts heaved, and when she settled, a trickle of milk slid out of one teat, which Sage wiped away with a thumb and sucked upon.

"You seem troubled Sage." Gesio stated softly.

"I am troubled because my mate is." He said quietly, massaging her brow and her belly independently. "I've yet to meet a stronger willed woman than she, but this is a very trying condition of hers. I fear that her body may reject the cubs inside her womb." He paused and stroked Sanari's brow. "Her body is deficient in certain foods... her milk isn't developing right. I'll have to get some Mother's Tea into her soon."

"Mother's tea?" Gesio repeated.

"A concoction of powdered herbs. It helps develop the enzymes and hormones in a woman's body to induce lactation, and likewise sweetens the milk which encourages the cub to suckle more. I'm concerned that her secondaries aren't developing yet. They should be a handful by now..."

Sanari's chest heaved again in a sigh, and she began to purr softly in contentment.

"She seems to be better because of your efforts, Sage. And you should worry less. A handful for you is a bucket full for some."

Sage snickered in humor and nodded, "Now I know why Sanari wanted a midwife so much..." he sighed. "I must apologize to Laggi when we return." Sage's brows beetled for a moment, and then he took a deep breath, and Loro, amazed, saw Sage's breath come out of his body as if he were breathing while surrounded in deep cold. When Sage lowered his head, it was to breathe on his mate's body, and he blew a cool vapory breath all along her bodice. This was yet another of Sage's many breath weapons... this one an ice breath at the lowest level.

"I would like to stay here for a time, milord." Sage spoke softly. "Sanari doesn't wish to depend upon me too much, but this time I must insist." He caressed Sanari's brow with a thumb, and in true warrior style, rose to his clawed feet without using his hands by rocking forward and then rising while he rocked backward.

At that moment, Kirin returned, and Loro gave a yelp of surprise as Kirin walked by them with a pitcher of water.

“Father! That is a Tar Lion!” he hissed, and Sage turned her glowing eyes on Loro, and the kitten gave another yelp of surprise as Sage accepted the pitcher from Kirin.

“Hush, Loro.” Gesio said, pulling the kitten off his shoulder and placing him on the ground, and then addressed Sage and his new daughter. “I’ll speak with Maourit, Sage. Our next step to travel deeper into the mountains, and it is best if all are in the best of health.

“But I know that Maourit cannot wait long, Sage.”

Sage looked up at the white capped mountains where the pass was leading toward the Stormseeker Stronghold. He loved the snow... but Sanari was pregnant, troubled, and without adequate snow gear.

He then lowered his gaze to his mate, and there was a pang in his twin hearts that ached.

“I must thank you, milord.”

“Thankfulness is unnecessary, Sage.” The massive Dragaseir spoke. “Tend to your wife’s wellbeing. I shall return later.”

Loro remained as the great golden Draco-Wolf walked away, staying back in the shadows while he watched these strangers in his home tend to one female so.

His surroundings were continually changing, with the ground becoming soft sands, and a nest of sorts forming from the vines and leaves. He was curious as to who these strangers were as he stood naked in the corner.

“If she is hot, I can make it rain.” Loro spoke suddenly.

Sage did not answer, and Kirin merely looked at him sternly.

“I *said* I can make it rain.” Loro repeated.

Sage turned finally, but only to lie down beside his mate while she purred, Kirin sprinkling water on her brow and fanning her with a large leaf.

“What do you think of that?” Loro grinned, puffing out his little chest. “I can make it rain!”

“So?” Sage answered finally, smiling. “...So can I. What makes you so special that you can make it rain?” Sage’s grin broadened. “I can make it snow in the middle of a desert. I can put a chill in the air that would freeze a lake, summon tornados and hurricanes, and shatter mountains with lightning. Can you do that?”

“Well... um... yeah! Sure I can.” He puffed out his chest again.

“Sure you can.” Sage mused, and Kirin chuckled.

“Shut up... you tar whore!” Loro shouted, and was immediately struck in the forehead by a small stone.

His brain ceased working, and his eyes blinked rapidly several times as he fell backward onto his rump. When he looked up, he saw Sage’s hand extended after having just flicked the rock at him.

“It is difficult for little boys to learn manners,” Sage spoke, soothing Sanari from almost having woken up, and she

settled against his hard body, using his bicep as a pillow, purring louder now as her tongue licked the soft velvety dragon hide of his chest. “I suggest that in the future you understand two things when around me. I do not like loud noises, so you will keep your voice down... especially around my mate as she tries to sleep. Secondly, you are not old enough to curse, nor wise enough to know when it is appropriate.

“My daughter is not a Tar Lion. Apologize to her for insulting her as such.”

“I am a Stormseeker!” Loro bellowed back as he rose to his feet. “I am powerful, I do not apologize to... *urk!”

A second rock struck Loro right in the middle of the forehead again, and he collapsed to the ground yet again, looking dizzy.

“I’m not giving you the choice not to.” Sage warned as the cub began to get his wits about him. “And you are not a Stormseeker yet, child. You only have the potential to be one. Now apologize to my daughter before I ask her to take you over her knee and swat your behind until it burns red even through your fur.”

Loro stubbornly got to his feet, took a deep breath and held it before shaking his head, folding his arms across his chest.

“Suit yourself.”

Sage continued petting his mate, massaging her belly in order to help it to stretch, smiling at this child knowingly while Kirin busied herself with keeping her new mother’s forehead cool.

Loro’s cheeks puffed, and his eyes flittered as his mind – deprived of air – began to malfunction. Then it began to bob, and his knees sank and he fell to his hands and knees, confused as to why that trick didn’t work like usual. *Even Father Gesio fell for this trick!* He thought. He tried it again, and again he drove himself to his knees.

“Are you done yet?” Sage mused. Loro didn’t answer. “Good. Now apologize.”

“No! I will never apologize to a Tar Witch!” he screamed and then tried to run for it, but vines leapt across all the remaining holes in this new shelter, barring his escape to whatever hole he wanted to, and panicking, not getting his way, he turned to his tormentor, and saw the five-fingered hand positioned there, just before...

Loro was being picked up off the ground, his forehead aching now from yet another rock having hit him unerringly in the same spot again.

Kirin sat him roughly on the ground before Sage as he recovered from his daze, and then she took up her position behind Sanari again.

“Rule number three: spoiled children do not get their way with me. Good children get everything from me. Now what is it you wish to say to Kirin?”

Loro finally lowered his head and mumbled something.

“Again... so that she can hear you.” Sage stated.

“I’m... *sorry*... that I called you a witch.” He managed.

“Good.” Sage smiled genuinely. “You have done something good, Loro.” This creature stated, and Loro blinked up at him, wondering how he already knew his name. “Doing good has rewards. What is it that you would like?”

“I want to leave.” He said through gritted teeth.

“Now you’ve gone to being a bad boy again.” Sage said, and Loro covered his forehead to ward off another rock.

“But, you can still get what you want. Ask nicely.”

“I would... like to leave, if I may... sir.”

“Now that wasn’t so bad, Loro.” Sage Smiled again. “Now, think and see what you have learned here. Being bad has bad rewards, but being good has good rewards. If you were good in the first place, then you would’ve gotten what you wanted sooner.”

Loro glared at him. But despite all his boyish spoiled anger, something in the back of his mind was trying to tell him that this Beast Lord was right.

He ignored it.

Instead he got to his feet and walked off.

“I have a question if I may ask it, young lord.” Sage said just as Loro reached the archway formed by all the crisscrossing vines creating the living shelter. “Why did you stay behind? Was there something else you wanted?”

Loro stopped; he did want to know something...

He turned. “Are you a Stormseeker too?” he asked with genuine politeness.

“No. I am not.” He answered, and went back to caressing his mate.

“Who are you?” he stepped further into the shelter, and he noticed that the tar back was removing the ivory mask from off her face, showing off a pair of beautiful golden eyes. “Are you a great warrior?”

He looked excited.

“War does not make one great, young lord. I am a humble guardian. I protect those who are unable to.”

One of Sage’s high-tapering ears flicked, and an earring there glittered briefly in the dim light.

“And you, young lord. Though you are not a Stormseeker yet, is that what you wish to be?”

“More than anything!”

“Then perhaps I can teach you a few things before I leave. But not today.”

“B-but why?!” Loro demanded, and Sanari stirred at the raised voice. Thankfully, instead of pinging him in the forehead with another Rock, Sage lifted his finger to his lips, and made a gentle shushing noise. “But why?” he repeated, softer now.

“Because, young Lord... there is a lesson in which you must learn, and for a prideful young cub, it will be a very difficult lesson to learn. But master it, and you will have greater power because of it.”

“And what is that?” he asks excitedly, hoping to have something his sisters did not.

“Patience.” The Beast Lord spoke simply. “When dealing with a force of nature, young lord, you must be very patient. If you are not... then there is the simple possibility that the force you seek to control... will destroy you.”

Kirin stepped out of the shadowy shelter near night fall, leaving her visor off in favor of the dim light. Her black pelt rippled in the soft moist breezes as she stepped lithely forward, feeling a strange new power residing

somewhere in her navel... something that her new father was cultivating in her.

She could feel him kneading that power into her muscles and her bones each night his fingers fell upon her body, and in the week in which they'd been traveling, her breasts had swelled, her muscles had thickened, and she could've sworn that she'd grown taller...

And above all... there was something tingling behind her forehead, and she rubbed the knob there to press the tingling away.

For the first time in her life... she felt beautiful; and she was desirous to maintain that beauty.

...Which meant bathing.

The Sun Lions had directed her politely to a place where she might bathe in privacy.

Strange... a week ago, she'd sought the blood of the white cats, and now that she was among such a high concentration of them, and her evils returned with kindness and love... she felt so dirty.

Tar Back Witch...

Father was so good to make Loro apologize, but it nonetheless reminded her of her past, and she wanted to bathe for how dirty she felt from it.

She hugged herself, her breasts rising up over her arms as she ducked into a nook in the rocks, and found a hot spring nestled away from sight. Thankfully... no one else was there... or so she thought.

A lone lion watched her from his place of seclusion in the rocks above her as she slid into the waters to waist deep, the waters lapping at her broad hips, watching her breasts bob as she removed the hair stays to keep her mane up, before dipping herself and emerging in a surge. With her fur wet, her reddened nipples stuck out, and in the cool air, they hardened as her flesh prickled.

Her watcher couldn't help but feel the erection steeling between his legs, and he had to straddle the rock he was lying against as it grew and peak over it to watch her.

He watched her hands move pleasingly over her bodice, her claws drawing out the dust and dirt from the road, massaging it out of the folds of her hide and fur. He imagined, dared to actually, of his own hands sliding that way over her flesh as he kissed her nipples.

As she climbed out of the pool, his erection laying bare against the rock as he felt his member throb and pulsate in desire, he watched her bottom move while her tail lifted, the tail and her cheeks framing her twin labia, and the lion groaned as he felt his woody stiffen. And then she lay down on the rocks around the spring, sunning herself in the waning sun, covering her eyes, but in the meantime displaying the form and beauty of her sexuality.

A bead of seed welled at the head of his erection and pressed into his loincloth, and he imagined leaning over her, bending over her and...

There was a crack and a break, and the Lion's eyes grew very wide as the rock he was leaning against dislodged, fell over and chucked him out into mid air.

He managed a very brief roar of surprise before slapping against the water of the spring, and then slowly sinking in.

When he emerged, gasping for air and shaking his mane free of water, his green eyes came face to face with Kirin's gold.

"Hima?" she said quietly, and Hima managed a frightened little chuckle at having been discovered like this.

Kirin looked to Hima, and then down to the raging erection still sticking out of the water with his loincloth draping over it. Hima followed her gaze and then immediately descended into the water to hide it, covering his erection with both hands while only his head remained over the waters.

“I can explain.” He managed, his cheeks really turning red, his blush showing through even his fur.

“Will you favor me with the truth at least.” She mused, and slid forward to dip her slender feet and long calves into the water.

Was it him, or did she purposefully sit with her legs open just wide enough for him to look right into that reddened strip of pleasuring... Hima shook his head sharply to clear it as another bead of his seed escaped him.

“Well, I’d never been out here before so I wanted to do a bit of exploring, and then I saw you.... And... well... I...”

He looked down in his shame, but because he was so low in the water in the first place, he got a face full of water which he spluttered from.

When he looked up again, it was to peer right into the well rounded and muscled abdomen of Kirin’s black belly. She had slid up to him, while he was looking down. He swallowed hard, and looking down, saw the distorted image of her sex just under the water before he felt her hands draw him up to full height.

He still stood with a hard-on uncomfortably projecting out of the water with a bit of leather folding over it. Kirin stayed back a bit from him and it, but nonetheless smiled at him.

“And you saw me taking a bath.” She finished.

In spite of herself, she smiled at him, and reached across the distance between them to touch her claws and finger tips against his hard body, etched beautifully with all that tremendous muscle.

She bit her lower lip and then retracted her hands.

“I’m sorry, Master Hima... please don’t take offence for me touching you.” She mewed softly.

“Offence? Why?” and he moved closer, thankfully he drew limp... but was still uncomfortably stiff.

“I am an unclean thing.” She said and turned her back on him. “I will dirty your beauty.”

“Dirty me? How?” Hima asked incredulously, feeling rather confused at the moment. He chuckled at his own bewilderment.

Kirin turned around and flung her arms open. “Look at me! What am I?”

Hima had a dumb look on his face, and at the moment he was thinking with the wrong head... but, as luck would have it, that head wasn’t totally dumb and was bent on coupling with her.

“Beautiful.” He said and closed the distance again, looking down at her as he towered over her supple and strong body, feeling her breasts press against his ribs. “Desirous... lovely... A black lotus... an art piece made of Obsidian.” His hands lifted to her shoulders as he stood over her. “I want to be with you.” He said, “But only if you will allow me. I refuse to take you like a lesser female like the others take their mates and their harems.”

“T-take me?!” she gulped and pushed away. He let her move away. “B-but I’m not even in heat!”

“It doesn’t matter! You’ve enraptured me... you’ve stolen my heart and I don’t care that it’s missing. I want to be with you... I want to love you.”

Hima was perhaps one of the first Casid males to try poetry on a female and succeed, for as she found her backside pressing against the rocks surrounding the pool at her bottom, leaning backward, she felt her heart do a sort of... b-bump.

“But I d-don’t know you. I...” she stopped, looking at those eyes of his, and feeling her heart leap in her chest as she looked into those pale green eyes, like the greenery a leaf shows toward the sun.

She suddenly realized that she’d touched him again, and saw her hand pressing against his chest, felt his strong heart beating beneath her hand.

He smiled at her, and she felt his much larger clawed hand, claws the color of ebony, cover hers.

“Then let me teach you about me.” He whispered. “For I want to learn everything about you.”

The sun set at that moment, and Hima blinked and then gasped as this female he sought suddenly transformed. Her dark pelt, which reflected deep blues and vibrant purples, suddenly stopped reflecting the light at all, and she became a solid shadow.

But not all was in shadow... her sexuality was aroused, and her reddened nipples stood on end, her sex having swollen and folded open to reveal a vibrant red from an erecting clit. Her teeth were a pearly white, and sharp, and most stunning of all... were her eyes.

These eyes reflected all the ambient light they could take, as if all the light that had been reflected by her pelt were now reflected solely from her eyes.

“Great Maker.” Hima whispered, seeing this creature as she stared back at him, her chest heaving heavily while she felt her sexuality arousing till her nipples ached.

“Ngh!” she groaned as her loins clenched, and afraid, she clamored out of the pool and dashed away.

Hima tried to follow but wound up falling back into the pool, and when he got back up, she’d disappeared into the night, the night refusing to cough up its child of shadows.

“Damn it!” he roared, hammering his fists into the rock before him, cracking the stone with twin radial fractures. “Come back...” he whispered then.

Sage stepped into the makeshift den he’d created where Sanari slept. His wings had been long been cramped folded as they were against his back, and he’d unfolded and extended them in order to work out the kinks.

He needed exercise, hadn’t flown in nearly a week, but as long as Sanari was troubled as she was, he would not venture far from her side.

At least she was sleeping well now.

Sage looked down at her with a half smile against his face, his wings folding about his shoulders like a cloak.

With a soft exhale, he knelt solidly, his wings dragging along the ground before he sat cross legged, his remarkably long tail wrapping around his bottom and feet, and lifting his hand from within the folds of his leathery wings, removed a book from his belt pouch which flopped open in his great hand.

The pages of the book were exceptionally thin – nearly like tissue paper – but the enchantments upon the book made this tome unbreakable, indestructible. It could very well fall into a volcano or be thrown into a star and not be

destroyed. Such were the enchantments that the blood of saints from Sage's homeworld has etched in red glyphs on the book's cover. It was a precious thing to him... being that it held the entirety of the holy written word of his world.

The Book of Faith from the Dragon, the Book of Oberon from the Fae, the Book of the Tree from the Elf, as well as the Testaments, the Koran, the Torah, the Book of Mormon and a dozen others... of the humans.

It was an amazement to the Dragon, Fae and Elf that the humans had written so many books...

It was a tome... and the writing was small... each book was written in their original languages, to preserve their purity, the words written in Mystic, Fae, Sylph Hebrew, Arabic and more. Sage was studying the Book of Faith... trying to learn the Holy Lore of Dragonkind.

This lore, this holy power, was the only lore that all dragons shared openly and freely, and unlike all other lore – the Powers of the Dragons – this lore required faith and purity of heart in order to enact.

There were healing arts there that he did not yet possess, and he labored to study them.

Other cultures throughout the multiverse forbid the defacing of a book of their faith, often times on the penalty of death; even upon a copy. Sage smiled as he remembered his lifemate's reaction when she saw him highlighting and writing in the margins of this book of his.

She almost ripped him a new one, and wouldn't give him the book back till he explained the entirety of his faith, which took days of doing nothing but that, and even then, she handing the book back seemed to be like pulling her hair out at the roots.

He looked over to his mate, and lifting a taloned hand lowered it onto her belly where he began to caress her swollen stomach with the tips of his fingers and thumb. He was not surprised as, even in sleep, she moved both her hands to take hold of his.

Within a short while... she was purring.

"What'cha doin'?" came a soft voice and Sage sat up to see Loro standing there... the nude Casid boy at least showing some manners now.

That was fast, Sage thought, smiling. Willing to wait, but not willing to wait for more than a few hours it seems.

"Studying scripture." He spoke softly in return, smiling at the boy.

"Looks like you're reading a book."

"Of a sort." Sage said, still smiling fatherly at the boy. "Tell me... can you read and write?"

"S-sure! I read all the time!" Loro beamed.

Sage lifted his hand to rub his chin, smiling at the boy while the ribbon in his holy book moved to mark his space seemingly by itself, though directed through Sage's mental powers, and the book closed through the use of that same power. He then gestured and glittering silvery letters appeared off to one side of him in mid-air.

"Tell me if you can read this." He spoke softly, and Loro turned to watch the glittering letters appear before him.

Sage's knack for language made itself apparent as the letters appeared in ancient Casid. Hopefully he didn't go too far back. Archeology was a hobby of his, and it was one of the reasons he had such an unparalleled knowledge of medical science and healing magic.

Delving so deep into ancient cultures always unraveled some of its secrets, but being here, actually seeing the writings and writing them in his own hand, close lots and lots of holes to better his understanding.

“I... I don’t want to.” Loro said and turned his back on Sage.

“Really? Then perhaps a challenge to you then, young lord: If you read it, then I will give you a treat.”

At hearing the word *‘treat,’* Loro immediately held out his hand beaming, but Sage waved his finger before him. “Ah-ah... Not till you do this task for me Loro.”

Loro pouts, and then turns to the glyphs and squints at them, then screwing up one eye as he scrunches his nose; he then begins to mouth out the syllables.

“D-do... DO! Do un... unto... do unto others... a-as.... As! Do unto others as... um... Do unto other as y-you! As you... would have... would... have... them.... Do unto you!” He beamed and then spoke it together. “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you!”

“And do you?” Sage asked, and Loro turned and blinked at him in confusion at the suddenness of his words.

“Do you do unto others as you would have them do unto you?”

“Sure!” Loro beamed.

“So they yell at you, throw tantrums around you when they don’t get their way and say that they know everything about something but in truth, know nothing about it?” Sage’s green eyes bored into Loro’s; holding him there as assuredly as a cobra would hold his prey.

Loro swallowed. “Th-they don’t do that to me?”

“Then why do you do it to them?”

“I-I...” Loro began, but couldn’t finish it.

“That must be frightfully upsetting for everyone... The fact that they care so much for you, and show you so much love and adoration and you return that love so poorly.” Sage’s head turned to one side quizzically. “What would your mother say? She loved you so much... she gave her life for you.”

Loro felt weak, and he collapsed to his knees, crying. “Mama?” he mewed, biting on his lower lip.

It was then that Sage felt movement underneath his hand holding Sanari. It wasn’t one of his cubs kicking... they were still too undeveloped for that... rather, it was Sanari rising. He looked to her, seeing her faintly shining eyes as she slid forward and knelt before the child, and picking him up, held him to her breast.

“Mama!” Loro suddenly bawled, and Sanari, as loving a soul as there ever was, cradled the cub in her arms. Sage reached forward and covered the back of the boy’s head, and opening his wings, wrapped both Sanari and Loro within his grasp.

“Shh...” Sanari whispered into his ear as she began to purr softly while Sage petted his mane. “Don’t cry... it’s ok.”

“Yes it is, Loro. You’ve learned a great thing today, young lord.” Sage said, as Sanari stood him on her lap and Loro hung off her neck. “I want you to use what you’ve learned tonight, and I promise you, if you do, then your powers will grow great.”

Loro sniffed turning to look at Sage, wiping his tears off on his thin arm.

Sanari cradled him while Sage reached into his satchel and produced something like a uncooked lump of bread and blew the lowest grade of his fiery breath on it briefly, and it suddenly cooked a little and began to steam with warmth before he placed it in Loro's small hands and untainted claws.

"Wh-what is it?" he asked, looking at it, sniffing back the last of his tears while Sanari smiled motherly at him.

"This is your treat, Loro. You've been a very good boy. It's called Sweet Bread. Take a bite; I'm sure you'll like it." And he winked and Sanari, whose body shook once in humor as she smiled at the cub.

To look into Loro's eyes as he took a bite of the pale-tasting bread was like to watch the sun rising as the inside of the bread – a simple sugar mixture and sesame seeds – he gobbled it up, and then burped.

"Excuse me." He said, and Sage opened his wings wide and then swept them back to fold against his back tightly so that they merely made him look like he had a very heavily muscled back. "M-may I have some more?" he asked.

Sage chuckled, and produced another and blew on it again. "Just one more... but then it's off to bed for you. Now when you are given something sweet, it is best for you to savor it, Loro. Take your time... it will last longer."

Sage chuckled with Sanari as Loro nibbled slowly at this one.

Gesio, the Dragaseir God, wept at seeing Sage deal with Loro. Sage was a good father. It was a fact that the Dragaseir God – a being of uttermost power in the cosmos – envied from the Draco-Tiger.

Sage had been raising Eakjo like a son, and had practically adopted the whole of his school. Sanari was likewise a beautiful goddess in her own right, who, in her own way, had done with her own school what Sage had done with his. She was the mother figure for so many.

The twin lives growing in Sanari's womb would have absolutely no worries with those two as their parents. There was much love in that great family...

Gesio thanked the Preypacers for what they'd done for his son as he stepped away so silently that not even Lord Sage took notice of it.

Sanari stretched, awake now and rested at long last before her hands settled about her belly. She mentally thanked her husband's tender touches and the blessings of his knowledge of medicine and healing. Sage smiled, hearing her thoughts as he watched her openly now that Loro had gone home, remarking on her feminine bodice, her breasts, her bottom... her perfect form, with the rounded curve in her belly that held their cubs... or kitlings... or whatever it might become.

What do you get when you cross a Cersile and a Dra'Con? Sage thought, and standing, strode directly into her back, cradling her belly as gently as he could possibly manage, his fingers brushing against her recently out-turned belly button.

His arms and his hands were massive, and the only form in which he truly was *'the right size'* for her, was his human form. But he and she had learned to love one another with his lesser hybrid form, being that he'd spent over a year locked only in that one form. It was during that time that Sanari had finally broken through all his defenses and fears, and found the fragile, fearful Sage locked inside him, and taught him to love her.

She'd grown to love that hybrid form the most... it was her favorite. It was also the only one of two forms that could actually allow him to mate with her. Two of the remaining five would split her in half, and the final one would consume the whole of her in his being.

“Beautiful.” He said quietly into her hooded ear, nuzzling her mane as she leaned against him; her arms resting on his – his hands twice the size of hers, his arms five times the thickness – while her fingers caressed the contours of his armored hands and partially scaled forearms.

“Handsome.” She mewed in return, and then turned to look up at him, leaning into him and allowing him the full feel of her breasts and belly against his body.

Sage was so stricken with this creature he’d earned the love of, that he puffed up in pride in knowing that he was hers. She was so wise, so beautiful, so... so fragile. Like a work of art, and inside of her laid much precious things. Her will was indomitable, her wisdom was ancient, and... her budding motherhood... was a thing of pride for her.

Though Sage ached internally for the pain he’d caused her in making her pregnant, she utterly loved the fact that she was carrying his children, and she wore it proudly in the way she’d changed the way of wearing her robes so that her belly could be seen by all.

He was so happy at looking at her, holding her, feeling her against him, that he hadn’t noticed that she’d untied several of the drawstrings about his waist and hips and unbuckled his belt before she was pushing his trousers down. This she did by leaning into him, and running her soft hands along his backside and grabbing hold there, grinning up at him.

“S-Sanari! What are you doing?” he gasped and made a grab for his clothes, but Sanari moved quickly to hold his hands.

“I want to go for a walk with you, milord. But you are a bit overdressed... and I can hear some of the Casid talking as to why you wear trousers all the time.

“They joke that you are hiding the fact that you are *smaller* than they are.” She winked and purred, fingering his naked cluster briefly, cupping it, rubbing her chest against his as she rose further up to him and embraced him.

“Sanari, I *am* smaller than they are. Have you looked at them lately? That young Sun Lion stud we met earlier practically has a third leg!”

“Stop belittling yourself...” she purred, and turned to pull him along with her. “You’re thicker than most of them.” Sage absolutely blushed at her words. “Masculinity and femininity are celebrated here, Sage. You should enjoy yourself! You might actually impress them, and if you haven’t noticed, you also have a third leg there too.”

“Yeah... but not past the knee...” he muttered, and let Sanari drag him forward.

Sage had a pained look on his face, and was rather uncomfortable with his unit hanging out like that, but before he knew it Sanari had already brought them outside his hastily formed shelter and they were walking amongst the general populace of lions and lionesses, as well as a few Stormseekers.

Sage mumbled something when he saw that young Sun Lion again, now with half a dozen young females around him.

Sanari giggled and stopping him, moved into his side, straddling his leg seductively, rubbing her sex against the fur on the outside of his leg, and sliding her fingers along the inside of his leg, arousing him till he unsheathed completely, and before he knew it, Sage was out in the open, and then was suddenly fully aware that he was naked before hundreds of Casid who were well known for their sexual prowess.

But these Casid waved hello to them as if all was normal, and Sanari hugged his thick arm possessively as she led him along the sands of the jungle.

Other females, Like Equis, and even some who already had mates, indeed did notice him. Sage found it difficult to

turn down offers of some of the younger cats to be apart of his pryde.

“Hnnn...” Sanari sighed once they’d passed the general populace and were by themselves again, and after awhile, Sage completely forgot that he was naked.

Is one truly naked when everyone else around you is as well? Sage thought, smiling at his lifemate affectionately. Now he knew what it was like to be in a nudist colony. He looked down at his mate and grinned sheepishly. *She’s showing me off*, he thought, and in spite of himself, to return her earlier favor, he groped her bottom.

She hugged his side affectionately, showing him off, but also showing signs that he was hers, and everyone else best back off.

Sage’s tail whipped at his backside as he looked down at his mate, and then wrapped that tail about her hip, knuckling her thigh with the hand on the arm she clung to, the other hand reaching across himself to caress her small hands.

They were such an unlikely pair... with Sanari seeming frail in comparison to even the smallest of the adult Casid females, but Sage knew as to how strong Sanari *could* be. She simply chose not to be.

Sage stopped being nervous about being nude... his wife, after all, had abandoned most of her clothing days ago, and only hours upon arriving on Casid’s past in the first place, she’d opened her robes to reveal her nude bodice in all its perfection.

They were so engrossed in each other’s company as they walked forward, that they didn’t even notice that they were subconsciously walking across water, and several of the gathered Casid rose to their feet at the sight of the pair as they stepped down onto the pool, walked diagonally across it, and then stepped back up off it... their feet making ripples in the water with each step.

A Casid, wishing to test if the magic was still at work, hopped down and sank right past his head into the deep end, leaving a mass of bubbles before a couple of his fellows helped him up.

This went beyond the two lovers field of knowledge... they simply walked with one another, enjoying each other’s company.

With either of them being the headmaster and headmistress of their own school... this whole experience that Gesio had brought them on was like the honeymoon neither of them had time to have.

They would be dammed if they didn’t take time to enjoy it...

Not of Darkness, Not of Day

Kirin collapsed beside a rock, gasping for air.

Her body ached with want to have that young lion take her for hours on end, but her mind feared the raping the Tar Lions kept threatening her with if she ever disobeyed them. It was that same fear that had brought her on the raiding party to attack the lions and the two beast lords in the first place.

Now Sage and Sanari have adopted her, and her life had now changed.

It was then that she looked down at her pelt, and gasped, trying to back away from the sight in surprise. Her pelt, in the darkness, had made her darker than the darkness!

The only points on her body that weren’t a shadowy black were her nipples, her teeth, her eyes, and the narrow strip where the two folds of her sex met.

H-how did this happen? Is this what father meant by Shadow Lion?!

“Well... well... well...” someone slurred. “Look at what we have here?” someone drawled, and looking up shocked, she saw a small pride of lions strolling up to her. “Missing your *parents’* little girl?” the leader asked, a young lion with his phallus un-slung and a ring encircling his penis right at its base.

“Doesn’t look like it to me, Samba...” another drawled. “Monsters like her aren’t born... they just coagulate and congeal from the collective shit-holes of others of her kind.”

There was laughter, and Kirin shrank back, her gold eyes dilating.

“Please... go away.” She mewed weakly.

It was the fear taking over. She was normally a vicious, strong individual, but the fear, the fear of being raped was taking over... making her thoughts disjointed.

“Why?” Yet another spoke, one of the massive lions who protected the Stormseekers here. “So you can go back to the other Tar Backs and inform them where we are? So that they can murder more Stormseekers, rape our females, and kill our warriors? I’ll tell you what, you little whore... why don’t we just rape you, shred your pelt right off your body, and stake you up on a pig-pole, just to serve as a warning to all Tar Lions who’d consider doing what you do.

“I’m not a Tar Lion!” she roared, getting bodily to her feet and snarling.

“Ok, ok... Tar Lioness!” Samba corrected for his friend. “Now... I think...” he breathed in deeply, and with a spasm, that mighty phallus of his jerked alive and began to thicken and then rise, I shall have first go at this tight little thing.” He seethed, and arched his back, that penis of his erecting high and powerful, the ring at its base trapping all the blood upward so that it would stay erect for hours yet.

He reached forward, took hold of one of Kirin’s shoulders, and she turned toward his grasp, and then he touched her face.

“Don’t worry.” Samba said. “Unlike your Tar Lion friends... I’ll be gentle.” And he knotted a fist in her mane and jerked her head backward painfully. “I won’t eviscerate your body like they did to my *sister* as they raped her for thirteen hours right before my eyes!”

Kirin saw his white teeth, felt the thought of him piercing her, taking her virginity, and a low growl rose up in her throat, the growl of a cornered cat, and when cornered, the only remaining instinct was Fight or Flight.

Kirin chose Fight.

Her claws rose and she bat at his head, raking four long marks into the side of Samba’s face and, remarkably, knocking him to the ground. With disbelief, she looked at her hand, not believing she’d just knocked down at fully grown lion.

But then there was more growling from a dozen or so throats, and though she’d knocked down Samba, she’d failed to knock him out, and as he rose, he rabbit-punched her in the gut, bending her over double before he knotted his fist in her mane again and pulled her off the ground by it.

“On second thought... I think I’ll have to make you pay for that Tar Witch. You shall pay for the crimes of your people... nice and sl-“ *Wham!*

Kirin’s eyes widened solidly as she saw a pair of fists rap the forearm of the hand holding her, the fingers numbing till they let go of her, and then there was a beautiful yellow body before her, grabbing Samba’s head, and rolling it one direction and then the next along a pair of powerful arms, Samba was lifted off the ground and thrown over her

head to come crashing hard against a tree, rattling it before Samba fell down to the ground.

She leaned back against the rock she'd paused against, and saw remarkably, Hima squatting before her, facing down the remaining lions, some having more than twice his mass.

"If you wish to take her, you must go through me first." He growled low.

For a few moments there was a stand-off between him and the other lions, and then there was an explosion of motion as six lions charged for Hima.

Kirin gasped in empathic pain as Hima was picked up and carried backward, but unlike these barely adult lions, Hima was several years older, and had much experience as a trained warrior, and threw two of the other lions off him before biting down on the head of a third, and with a twist of his body, threw that lion backward off him.

Hima then began to attack the others, but one of the gold lions, the huge and powerful protectors of this hideaway way station leapt forward, thrusting the whole of his body against Hima so that he bounced off him, and then thrust his fist downward into Hima's temple.

Kirin screamed as Hima was thrown to the ground, and as he rose, groping for purchase as his head swam, the gold lion made a kick to Hima's mid-section, lifting him off the ground, flipping him once over himself, and surging forward, took hold of Hima's mane, and changing his fist so that one knuckle protruded forward, aimed it for Hima's temple again.

With a roar, the gold lion made to crack Hima's skull open and again Kirin screamed and covered her face... and then there was silence. After many long, agonizing seconds, Kirin jerked her hands from her face to see the gold lion struggling against a hand sticking out of the shadows, a white hand.

Just then the rising moons slid over the trees, and the shadows lessened to reveal the powerful body of her new father, with her mother clutching gently to his side.

Sage stared at the gold as the others Hima had thrown away weakly crawled to their feet, and the gold opened his hand holding Hima's head as Sage released his grasp of the thick arm.

Kirin was afraid as her father stepped fully from the shadows, the white of his fur glowing as if lit by the moons, the black of his stripes refusing to reflect the light like the whole of her own pelt did.

"Stay out of this Beast Lord," One of the others spoke. "This is justice!"

"Hmm..." Sage mused, pursing his lips, and suddenly there was a gentle hand on Kirin's shoulder, and jerking her head, Kirin saw Sanari standing beside her, and Kirin surged into Sanari's arms, not caring how she'd just moved so quickly especially in her condition. "Is it justice for seven to attack one? Is it justice to inflict your own retribution without the word of a judge on the matter? Is it justice to inflict said retribution by raping said person?"

Sage said it so quietly, flexing his fingers briefly to reveal long claws briefly that could sheer open a blast door or shred solid bedrock. "Her justice has already been pronounced by Fate, and she has been entrusted into my lifemate's and my own care. You are not ones in a position to remove her from that care.

"I give you this one chance, you will leave and furthermore leave her be. Now Go!" and he jerked his head in a direction for them to follow.

One of the youngest of the lions surged forward. "No! All Tar Lions are alike! All must die! C'mon! We can take him! Look, he's only half our size!"

Which was a misjudgment on that lion's part.

Sage may look lithe and elongated, but he had thousands more muscle fibers for every one of theirs coursing through his body. If he weren't '*compressed*' as the technique termed it, to push that mass into a smaller space, he'd be over twenty feet tall and rippling with so much muscle that names would have to be made for his tertiary muscle sets that they would be so huge and visible.

It was this same Lion that attacked Sage, and Sage lazily lifted a clawed hand and closed it around the cub's extending fist. Sage's hand and arm didn't even move with the impact of the cub's punch.

Sage possessed five fingers on each hand, having one more finger than those of all other individuals in this universe he faced. His grip was solid, his hand wide enough to engulf the hand of the cub and hold it tight. He then closed his fingers a little more, using his claws to hook into the flesh but not break it, and then forced the cub downward.

The cub yowled as his free hand tried to scratch Sage's arm apart, his young, sharp claws doing little more than to scrape across the surface of hide and scale alike, not even breaking the skin. The others around them could hear the groans and cracking knuckles in the cub's hand as Sage held the cub there.

"I have little patience for rapists." Sage said. "One of my other daughters was raped, and it nearly broke my heart." Sanari knew that he was speaking of Mayia. "Touch my daughter again, and I'll geld the lot of you with my bare hands... I won't care who did it." Sage's grip tightened and another loud crack erupted from the cub's fist as another knuckle cracked in a poor way. "Anyone who attempts to harm her shall have every last harm he inflicts visited back onto them a hundred fold."

Sage released the cub's hand and he collapsed to the ground, whimpering as his fingers uncoiled lightly, his fingers popping every now and again.

"Now go." He said simply, staring down the largest of them, and one by one they slinked off, two picking up Samba as they went.

Hima was trying to push himself up, and Kirin, seeing him trying weakly to rise, thrust herself to his side and began to help him up. Her breasts wobbled slightly, a new and nice feeling to feel as Hima moved his mane backward with one hand, and then winced as there was a cracking sound coming from his side.

Sage stepped in and pressed his hand momentarily against his side and then removed it, and a blue palm print remained in his fur before it faded away, but even before it disappeared, Hima stared in wonder at the newly healed rib that, a moment ago, had been broken.

He lifted his gaze to Sage and gaped in amazement.

"Thank you Hima." Sage smiled as Kirin then surged into her father's side. "You will be the proud progenitor of a great and beautiful pride on Casiida. I charge you to pass down your traits to future generations."

"Th-thank you Master Five Talon." Hima said, and looking to Kirin, lifted a hand to touch her, but thought better of it. Instead he lifted that hand to his head and passed his fingers through his mane.

"We will be retiring for the night, Hima..." he smiled, even as Sanari moved into his other side. "I suggest you get some rest and take care of that eye."

Hima swallowed hard and nodded, and then stood right where he was as Sage took Kirin away. He stood there, swallowing hard, his manhood erecting a little in his desire for the lord and lady's daughter. But then he saw something wondrous.

He saw Kirin look back at him... and smile.

Kirin lay on her belly amidst a nest of furs while her new mother lay back upon still more furs that were supported by vines and other plant life. Sanari was smiling at Kirin while Kirin rested her chin on her arms, her breasts pushing out under her arms while her new father massaged her again.

Tonight, she just couldn't feel pleased at how her father was helping to sculpt her body. She could feel some odd changes happening inside her, and she knew that she'd get very, very hungry soon because of them, but this day had been... irksome.

She sighed while Sage – now re-clothed in a pair of chaps and a loincloth – continued to help her body to grow.

“What's wrong, kitten?” Sage asked while he knuckled her back with his five strong fingers, poking at key points on her back with his fingers.

How could he not know? She wondered, and rolled over to look at him incredulously.

She was nude, and looking more and more attractive as the days went by, but Sage's love for his wife was absolute... and he devoted it all to Sanari. He was pleased that she was becoming attractive, but not in that sort of way.

“Father... I was almost *raped!* How should I feel?”

“Relieved.” Sanari answered for her husband, and with difficulty, rose to her feet.

She was wearing a translucent white robe that left her growing breasts and belly open. Sage lifted a hand to caress her stomach as she came to stand beside him.

“We know full well what happens to a maiden who is taken forcibly.” Sage spoke then. “I've watched it happen far too many times. I would not wish that sort of experience on anyone.”

Kirin was feeling the changes filtering through her body, and then once again lay down, and Sage began to work her muscles and poke her with his claws. This time, Sanari knelt down beside her, and began combing her mane with a comb made of bone.

“Sometimes I wish that you both weren't doing this to me...” she bit her lower lip, but the pair of them didn't stop.

“I know,” Sanari whispered musically to her, and her delicate hands helped Kirin do things to her fur and body that were remarkable. “We can stop if you want us to daughter.”

“It will take time,” Sage added. “But if you wish to return to what you were before... we can do that as well.”

Kirin remarked on what her life had been like with the Tar Lions, and closed her eyes tightly.

“No.” she said at last, closing her eyes tightly to stop the welling tears and trying to force the old memories from her mind. “I do not ever wish to be like that again.”

“We are glad...” Sanari purred, and then together, her new mother and father helped her to kneel, and Sanari, smaller than Kirin, prompted the cub to lean into her mother's beautiful, sexual body, and Kirin listened to that alien sounding purr as her father began to caress her sides, massage the muscles there, exciting change. “You are honest with yourself, Kirin... you know what you want. So tell us... honestly... what is it that you want?”

Kirin opened her eyes, pressing her blackened lips together.

In the soft blue glow of Sage's magic glowing spheres around the shelter, and from a solitary fire in the center of the living chamber, Kirin's body was no longer one of shadow... but rather a gloriously beautiful black that reflected deep colors of blue and purple. The spheres and fire gave light, but was not bright enough to blind Kirin like the

sun did.

“I want to be strong enough where no one could ever take me without my permission again.” She whispered, and embraced her mother as her back arched for her father. “I want to be as beautiful as my new mother... and as strong as my new father.”

She exhaled, and heard Sage speak only three words.

“As you wish.”

Rain was falling... falling softly from above.

Kirin lay in her furs, her body breathing softly while strange things began to happen to her. Her observer, Hima, watched her, not even realizing that muscle groups were folding themselves outward, not knowing that her breasts were swelling and firming up. All he knew was the stiffness hanging between his legs, his desire to have her but the foremost requirement of his honor not to take her.

That would lessen her.

But her body was growing... transforming unlike few Casid in this time period possessed, and her muscles were firming. An unknown, and rather subtle art was taking place right now... Sage had used it on a select few of his students in order to help them to realize their dreams. He'd activated cell growth, hormonal development, his constant kneading helping to tear muscles and helping them to develop, and through his magic, he'd been increasing the general gravity around them all at nights so that she developed more muscle while sleeping.

The Powered League taught him that trick.

How else was she able to paw a grown male lion to the ground in a single blow?

Hima saw that she was strong... and was aroused more by that strength. A thickening tail, broadening muscular thighs, climbing and separating biceps, and those breasts!

He swallowed and looked away, not wanting to have these darker desires for her, and when he opened his eyes, he felt his heart and breathing stop as he came face to face with Sage of the Five Talon.

Sage's high-tapering ears were pinned back; his glowing eyes and the gems in his body glowing in the dim light as a subtle green.

Hima shrank back from him, especially after seeing how easily he'd defeated a gold lion.

“You like her.” Sage stated softly, not bothering to ask whether or not it was true.

Hima nodded.

“You... love her.” He stated again, and after more thought, again, Hima nodded. “What will you do to have her?”

Hima drew himself up to a stand, actually standing taller than Sage. “Anything that she wishes.” He answered, and Sage nodded.

Sage looked over to where his daughter moved into a more comfortable position, her body slowly broadening centimeters over several hours and then back to Hima.

“Then prove it.” Sage said simply, and Hima... staring at the Beast Lord, simply nodded, turned and strode off.

Sage returned to his family, striding out of the rain, strangely, not even wet. He then knelt beside his sleeping daughter, and pushing a flock of her hair out of her eyes to look on her sleeping face, he then moved his hand to her chest and poked her several times just above either of her breasts, and then lowered his hand to her sex, and poked her there with his claws several times more before rising to return to his wife.

Behind him, Kirin began reacting to the newest set of commands to her brain, her body releasing a mass of hormonal chemicals into her body... and a second puberty began. Sage did not watch as her thighs spread, her clit erecting between swelling labia, her areola swelling, her nipples standing on end.

By morning, her hips will have widened, her breasts enlarged, and her sexuality heightened. It will heighten her desires for a mate... and perhaps... that will be enough for her to go to Hima.

He ignored her pheromones in the air as he knelt behind his mate, and gently moved Sanari's head to lie in his lap while his great paws began to massage her neck and temples, helping her to relax away from the tensions of her growing pregnancy.

"You seem to have things well in hand, Sage." Came a voice, and a massive gold lion stepped out of the rain, also not shining with moisture.

"Good evening, Gesio." Sage spoke, not bothering to turn to look at the Dragaseir God as he attended to his wife. It wasn't an insult to the Dragaseir, but rather such an honor for his wife that he'd ignore such a being so.

The language he used, however, was not Cersile this time. It was Draconic. The only other individual who'd possibly know that language was Gesio himself. It was an ancient, ancient language... sounding like a combination between whale song and a cat's purr, and requires Psionic emissions in order to convey properly.

As Sage surmised, Gesio was indeed aware of the language, but use of the language would keep even Sanari from knowing what they spoke of if she awoke, and more importantly... its melody would help her to sleep.

"She does realize all the honor you are giving her, Sage. She loves you all the more for it. Your relationship with her is yet... another thing that I envy of you Sage. Your shared love is... unbreakable. It defies even my power."

Sage was silent as he cupped his mate's forehead and massaged her brows.

"It will be centuries before Rae is ready to give herself as wholly as that to you, old friend." Sage said quietly and calmly, and Gesio blinked.

"H-how did you know?" Gesio asked, and moved around Sanari to squat opposite Sage. Sage still did not look up at him. "I'm quite sure that you can't even read my surface thoughts."

"Your body language gives you away father, and... I saw it in a Fate Vision."

"Sage... I thought I told you that you can stop calling me that."

Sage smiled, and looked up at Gesio ever so briefly, before looking back down at guarding Sanari from her night terrors.

"I... don't really mind, Gesio. You've... been very kind to me. You are one of the few who have not immediately seen me as a monster, to which I am very grateful for. Though you are not my birth father, and though you don't fill even Drake's role as a biological father... I think, if I could claim a God Father," Sage snorted at the thought of Gesiomagatou being his God Father. He was a god, after all, and was definitely old enough to be a father. "I would wish it to be you."

Gesio sat backward, and with Sage's touches, Sanari mewed, and then sighed, turning in his lap as her legs pressed

together and one folded over the other.

Gesio smiled, watching Sage work.

“D-do I make her happy?” Gesio asked at last. He sounded very concerned.

“You do.” Sage answered simply. “Though it will take thousands of years for her to fully forget Makahn. You must watch her carefully, and be there when she is alone after his death. Though her mind may forget her husband, her heart will never forget Makahn... though... it is possible for you to hold an equal place in her heart.”

Sage sighed, and again thought of what it would be like for time to pass, knowing you could not escape the pain of knowing a loved one who has already passed away. Rae... would have to bare the ache of outliving her husband, her children, her grandchildren... Sage himself had already watched a few of those he loved pass away while he himself did not age.

Perhaps... Ariel passing so early in their life together was because he truly was meant for Sanari...

“I can wait. I will wait.” Gesio said, and watched as Sanari sighed again, arching her back and he smiled at her as her body became incensed. “She is dreaming of you.” He finished with a grin.

Sage smiled. “I know.” And then his smile faded. “But it is better than the dreams she’s been having.” He bent low and kissed her forehead, and another sigh escaped from her.

Off to one side of him, Kirin gave off an identical sigh as she was having a different wet dream of her own. Sage decided not to pry into those dreams.

“Another sleepless night for you, Sage?” Gesio asked.

“Please... please don’t put me asleep, father.” Sage said, and again looked up at the Dragaseir God and pleaded with his eyes. “Her rest is more important than my own.

Gesio’s gaze softened and he shook his head.

“You are... a machine, Sage. All right... I won’t.”

“Thank you, and despite popular belief... I am only thirty-eight percent machine.”

Gesiomagatou chuckled, and then paused, seeing Sage work as Sanari gave a shudder and a moan. “No...” she moaned again, and he watched Sage work frantically to reverse this dream. Sanari steadily passed off into comfort again.

It was a combination of acupressure and acupuncture, mingled with psychic emanations, but Sage was successful in removing that night terror.

“How much do you really know of Sanari?” Gesio asked Sage.

“Enough to know what sort of terror visits her in the dead of the night, to know why she hides from them, and why she’d studied so hard to be a high priestess.”

“You do?” Gesio asked, sounding very interested now. Sanari’s past was an enigma she shared with no one.

“When I was still collared and sealed,” Sage began. “I’d begun to develop a close... very close... relationship with her, to where I spent the night in her quarters, or she in mine. We had a door between our quarters, hidden behind a tapestry.

“One night, after being with her, and watching her pass off into slumber, I remained awake, watching over her. Looking for something to pass the time, I looked to her library and found a particularly thick tome. It was one of twenty seven tomes of exact thickness and coloring... all white with gold inlay, and magically protected against decay.

“I’d thought... that they were the different holy books of your universe, and interested in how religion passed itself in this universe, I opened one, and began to read.

“I discovered very soon, that instead of a holy book, it was instead Sanari’s diary. The first of twenty seven volumes.

“I went to her as soon as she awoke and begged for her forgiveness for invading her privacy. She... smiled at me, and I sat there as she brought the tome to me again, and bid me to read.”

“She let you read her diary?” Gesio asked, and Sage nodded.

“Seventy two hours, six minutes and twenty two seconds later, according to my internal chronometer, I’d read through all twenty seven tomes. Dear God, Gesio...” and Sage looked up at the Dragaseir God. “In comparison to her life... what I’ve done in mine is paltry in comparison to what she’s done and seeks to atone for.”

Sage remained very quiet as he looked down at Sanari, his face full of love and pain for her.

“She... she is so strong.” He whispered, almost in tears. “Stronger perhaps than I can ever hope to be; and far braver.” Instead of massaging her head, face and neck, Sage now caressed her face, and her dreams again returned to her sweet lover. “She was strong enough to stand against me when I tried to kill Meniko in my madness. She willingly took my pain along with hers, and dared to love me.”

Tears now did streak down Sage’s white furred and black striped face. Sage then bent low and kissed her lips, smoothing out her neck.

“I am such a coward. I’m so weak...” he trembled when he arose.

“And wise enough to realize it.” Gesio finished, and then rose to his feet. “She thinks you far wiser than she, and she draws from your power for protection. She considers you her savior, and clings to you.

“She loves the sound of your hearts pumping in your chest, loves feeling you hold her. She thinks herself a silly old fool for not going to you sooner and proud... prouder than anything she’d ever taken pride in before, in the fact that it is your children that she bears.

“I will not put you to sleep, Sage... but you should sleep with her. Your presence, so close to her... would do far more than whatever it is you’re doing now.”

Sage was quiet, considering, and then sighing he unfolded his wings and then moved toward Sanari, rubbing her belly now. Gesio, smiling, turned and moved toward the dark sheet of rain falling outside this shelter.

“Gesio... thank you... for your wisdom for this old, stubborn tiger.” Sage said as he lay against Sanari, folding one of his wings over her as he embraced her and settled against her tit.

“And thank you... Sage... for what you did for Loro...”

Gesio then stepped out into the rain and disappeared as if he never was.

Kirin awoke slowly, murring softly with the feeling in her body, and as she rose, she reveled in the feeling of her

breasts jostling against her chest, and looking down she cupped the swollen pocket of flesh between her legs, and then spied the fully erect nipples standing off her full breasts.

Her bosom wasn't as large as her mother's... but at least they had some heft and tilt to them now.

But then her mind caught on what had awoken her in the first place, and following her nose, she turned and saw a whole roast boar on the fire.

"Hmm." She licked her lips, smelling the fat cooking in the fire and rose to her feet to move over to it.

Mother was resting on father's lap, sipping at a cup of something held in both her hands. She was leaning against Sage's chest, purring loudly while one of her father's wings folded over Sanari's back for warmth, the other hanging off the opposing shoulder Sanari sat from.

"This tea has an odd taste, but it warms me so well, Sage." She herself murred, and nuzzled his chest. "I may have to make this tea my favorite!" she mewed.

"Tea?" Kirin stretched, hefting her large breasts higher atop her chest as she did, revealing a much stronger body from last night. "May I have some?"

From the shadows a ways off, Hima watched Kirin stretch, and swallowed, hoping that she'd accept his gift, and agonized as she walked right past the boar.

Sanari smiled. "I'm drinking it for its medicinal value, Kirin." The cat-woman said softly. "Your father believes that my body isn't developing into motherhood as well as it should. This tea is supposed to improve the way my breasts lactate.

"But I think it's a hidden agenda of his to get my all my breasts to grow larger. He does take pleasure in a well-endowed woman." Sanari hid her smile behind the rim of her cup while Sage gave her a pained look.

"Beloved... I..." he began, but Sanari nuzzled with him.

"I am only jesting, beloved. I know you mean well." And she purred into his ear, licking his cheek. She looked down at her chest, knowing that Sage's first wife of only a weeks was incredibly endowed. When Sanari absorbed Ariel's soul into her own, her body did change a little at that time. One of which was a slightly increased bust.

Kirin stood there, thighs together, hands held before her thighs while she watched her new parents' interaction, wishing for that exact relationship with a strong and capable male of her own. Her tail wagged from one side to the next in a long graceful arch, favoring Hima with that beautifully sight of her now well-rounded rear.

At that moment, Kirin suddenly took another whiff and turned toward the cooking meat, and bending down took a deeper whiff of it.

YES! Hima thought, moving forward for a better look.

Sniff "This smells so good father. This must be the choicest boar around. You must've hunted all night for it.

"I'd like to say that I did so, Kirin, but I didn't." Sage replied, now cupping his mate's engorged breast jokingly, and then licking her cheek back as she giggled toward his affection.

"Mother?" Kirin asked, turning around confused.

"Not I child." She replied, and took another sip of her tea.

"I do believe that that young warrior Hima brought them." Sage smiled. "He'd said that the boar was meant for

you.”

Hima had said no such thing, but he did hunt the boar for her, and he smiled at Sage’s help, and his claws gripped the tree he was leaning against.

“For me?” Kirin blinked, turning to look at her new father incredulously.

“Indeed. Quite a nice gentleman. Stands up for you when seven full grown lions attacked you, and now he brings gifts. I think he has an interest in you, daughter.”

Kirin looked to the meat, biting her lower lip as her stomach suddenly sank.

“I... I can’t accept this.” Kirin said at last and rose to her feet. “I... I... no... I cannot. Mother... Father... especially you father, you haven’t eaten in days. Why don’t you take it?”

NO! Hima screamed inwardly, and he noticed strangely that Sanari and Sage both winced and looked directly at him with that mental scream of his, and he ducked behind the tree he was hiding behind. Looking down at his hand, he saw a chunk of the tree he’d ripped out of the trunk and threw it at the ground before running that hand through his mane.

They can hear my thoughts?! He thought dumbfounded.

“I’ll go catch my own breakfast. I’ll be back later this afternoon.” Kirin said, and she rose and walked off into the lightly sprinkling rain.

Hima watched her walking off, and then turned to look around the other side of the tree to watch her move. Why did she have to have that maddening sway to her hips with every step? Again, he ran his hand through his mane, and tapped the trunk with his free hand that had tightened into a fist. Then he smiled. *You’re not going to get rid of me that easily, girl...*

Gesio strode into the quietness of the denser foliage, where a shelter like the one Sage had formed on the outskirts of the forest had been formed, but this one was far more cavernous.

Soft beds of moss, a fire pit surrounded by fire scorched rocks, and the walls made of trees growing immediately side by side.

This was a Stormseeker temple.

The rain from outside, even if torrential, wouldn’t get into this stand of trees, and even if a hurricane were blowing outside, the air inside this temple would be dead and still.

Raging storms were how the Stormseekers had protected themselves thus far.

Entering into the chamber, however, he found a peculiar sight: Loro lying on the ground, reading a book.

The boy cub was intently viewing it, his tongue sticking out of one corner of his mouth as he mentally made out the words.

“He’s been at it for twelve hours straight, Oh Master of Earth and Sky.” A soft, genteel voice spoke at his side, and turning briefly he saw Euna-La standing there with head bowed. “He came in late last night and asked for something to read. The only thing we had was the Book of the Casid. He hasn’t stopped reading since.”

“I am surprised the Sun Lions of Pride Sentholu have let that book out of their sight.”

Euna-la giggled. "They haven't master. They look in on him every five minutes to ensure that he doesn't start tearing the pages out. But... this has been a very relaxing day for us, Master. Usually Loro is tearing around, being very proud. He's been very quiet for so long..."

"Let him read, and if the Sun Lions get nervous, tell them I will grant them a new book if Loro wishes this one, but I will try to get their heirloom back."

And Gesio strode forward, and sat down beside Loro and stroked his bare back. Loro was so engrossed that he didn't even acknowledge the motion

"Are you ok, Loro?" Gesio asked after a short while. Never before had the Dragaseir felt so much noise in the cub's mind. He was thinking so extremely fast.

"Huh?" he asked, tilting his head toward Gesio, but then moved it right back as he continued to read.

Gesio lowered his hand and covered Loro's, and the cub turned at last to his father.

"Master? What does this mean here?" and he fingered a passage.

Gesio lowered his gaze and read the tiny words:

'And so will come a time when the black shall turn against the white, and tear asunder the life thread of the Casid, and drive them into near death.'

'More than twenty turns of the century shall pass, and a new white maiden shall arise, and drive the sea of black back, and return life to the Casid.'

Gesio knew what that meant, for in his own time, it was taking place.

"You are too young to know the meanings of these words, Loro." Gesio answered with a smile. "I'm glad that you are reading. I am sure Gideon and Rauss will take pleasure that you are reading their book too.

"I can give you one of your own if you wish."

Loro jumped up. "Yes father. Please I would very much like that. When may I have one? Gideon has been coming in every five minutes and asking when they could have their book back. Master Sage has said I would learn much of my powers if I read, and so I want to read that book through!"

Gesio stared at Loro as he stood there, so full of fervor.

In reply, Gesio lifted his hand, snapped his fingers, and an exact copy of the book Loro was reading, right down to the blood-stained fingerprints on the Book of Kay, and handed it to Loro. Loro took up the book and hugged it to him excitedly. "Thank you master! Thank you, thank you, thank you!

"Euna-La!" he shouted excitedly. "Could you please tell Master Gideon that he can have his book back? I will be back in the lair." And he raced off.

"Please? Thank you? Who is this Master Sage who teaches Loro such manners when any of us or even you cannot, master?"

"He's a strict disciplinarian who demands bitter obedience, but who gives you loving care at the same time." Gesio smiles. "He is also like a son to me."

"We must gift this blessed child for doing us such a favor master! What can we do?"

“Sage is not a being who likes to be thanked, Euna-La.” Gesio said, taking up the Sentholu book and rising to his feet, towering over his young attendant. “But he will thank you for any aide that you may give to his family. His wife is pregnant, and needs comfort, and his child... she is a tamed Tar Back.”

“A-a Tar Back, master?”

“You are not to call her that under any circumstances. She is becoming... something different. Her name is Kirin. Her mother, Sage’s lifemate, is called Sanari. You will know them all when you see them.”

“Their care shall be attended to, master. I shall see to it immediately.”

Gesio nodded, and held the cherished book of the Casid in his hands. Soon... very soon... this book, all except but one, will disappear from the face of Casid, and Loro... would possess the one and only remaining one.

His future was important to Casid. Almost as important as the descendant of pride Sentholu who’d arise as a tigress instead of a lioness thanks to her mother.

The future of Clio... and Loro the Prophet... would eventually become a legend.

Over the next several days, Kirin awoke to find new gifts left for her: such as a blanket of fine fur covering her body on a cold night, several hares uncooked and unprepared for her and her alone. One night she found that her mask had been etched and the etchings dyed with a soft blue color to match the silken clothing and scarves that the Stormseekers were gifting her new mother and father, many of which they gave to her.

Sage had stated that she was developing quite the dowry.

Additionally, she was feeling her body constantly changing, and felt a growing urge between her thighs that was growing harder and harder to fight. It wasn’t her heat... she’d had one of those before, and had hid from the other Tar Lions as it spent itself in her, this was something different.

She’d grown subtly since being here, her chest rounded, her breasts full and ample, and her hips widening and perfect for child-bearing. Her thighs were thick as were her forearms and biceps, and her neck was no longer slender. She was growing into a young capable lioness, and combined with her blue silks and the white bone attire her father had been constructing for her, and someone – Hima apparently – was dyeing and etching later, she was transforming into a veritable prize.

Many of the lions, even some of the Sun Lions were looking upon her with interest.

And against her brow, she could feel a growing pressure there, and it was growing so heated that she’d go to the springs and float in the water for hours just to relieve the ache.

There was a strange new power developing in her, and there were new abilities rising in her.

The first was her ability to transform into living shadow once the sun set. Having drunk tea with her mother each morning, she likewise had begun to lactate too, and a Stormseeker name Euna-La, had enlisted her in caring for the cubs.

It was such a wonderful feeling to have a young cub in your arms, nursing from your tit, and finding rest in your arms, she thought to herself as she rocked one of the cubs. She desired a cub of her own then...

Euna-La was rapidly becoming a very close friend.

Kirin was growing desirous for a strong, handsome lifemate now...

Then on the seventh day since arriving in the valley, she'd gone to bathe again in the late evening, disrobing from her silks and clothing, disengaging her full and rounded breasts, and slid into the waters to bathe.

Her mother had been teasing her fur along the edges of her arms and the outsides of her calves to all lie long like fetlocks, and these fetlocks streamed water off of them while more water trickled between her breasts and down her washboard stomach as she bathed.

Just then, she turned... and saw someone standing at the edge of the pool.

She saw Hima.

"Why do you pursue me?" she asked, turning away from him and covering her swollen breasts. "Why do I interest you so?"

Hima was quiet. He was so graceful, so beautiful and so strong. Her sexuality aroused just thinking of him.

"I've been stricken." He whispered. "I'm sick with want, and I know that you are the cure." He settled down into a squat on the edge of the pool. "I've lost care for all other things. I can't sleep, and I can't eat. I want to love you... I... I want to please you. Raise you up, make you my mate. There's only one thing that you can do to help me with this sickness, dearest maiden."

"W-what is that?" she asked, turning back to him.

"Say *'yes!'*" his voice sounded pained, and Kirin stared at him unblinkingly, feeling an ache in her heart now at the same time as in her chest and loins.

She bit her lip and turned to walk out of the waters away from him, and Hima watched the sway of her hips, the drag of her tail as she ascended a stone ramp and exited the water, the chill in the air hardening her nipples and erecting her clit; swelling her sex.

"And what would you do if I did say yes? Would you use me, abuse me, and then throw me away?"

Hima rose as she came to stand before him.

"No! Never! I would rather kill myself than lessen such a beauty such as you."

"Then prove it." She said, trembling the whole over. "Kiss me."

Kirin stood there, her body darkening as the light lessened, and her gold eyes, luminescent it seemed, stared at Hima's hard, ropy body. She waited there, breathing heavily, giving him a stern look.

But then Hima stepped forward, and he touched her face, her eyes looked to either of his hands and back to him, felt the caress of his fingers as he drew nearer, and her features softened with his touch, loosing the look of anger and annoyance.

Then she felt his broad chest pressing against her breasts, her breasts flattening as he drew nearer, and she tasted his breath, shared it with him, his groin conforming to the valley between her legs, before he then moved forward and kissed her.

Kirin stood there, her eyes slowly closing even as the sun faded fully from view, throwing her body into shadow as her blackened lips tasted that sweet lover's embrace.

Hima's intention was apparent... she felt it inside him as she felt his heart beating, and before she realized what she

was doing her hands moved of their own accord and slid upward between his arms to lay flatly against his chest.

When he broke away, she followed him forward to continue the kiss.

When she opened her eyes, her eyelids fluttering open, this wayward warrior, who'd followed her since the city before the mountains, nuzzled her mouth and nose, kissing her again briefly and smiled at her.

This close, she looked directly into his eyes, saw the individual facets of his green eyes as he stared into her golden ones.

"I... dearly hope that that would prove my intentions to you, daughter of the night." Hima whispered, holding onto her strong shoulders.

Kirin, stepped back, and turning her head, her mane bunching over one shoulder, she lifted her hands and collected one of Hima's hands from her shoulder, she then held that hand and led him a ways. Up into the rocks, to the very place where Hima had first spied on her bathing, she then turned and taking his other hand, she knelt before him, and as she lay back, pulled him down to her.

She wasn't smiling; her look was rather somber as she stared up at him, remaining quiet as she lay upon her back, arms rising to lay beside her head placatingly. Hima looked down at her, vaguely aware of her thighs spreading open like the wings of a butterfly, her breasts flattening against her chest a little as she simply laid there and breathed.

Her breasts swelled briefly with every intake of breath, and for a moment, Hima didn't know what to do in the sight of this opportunity. But then he descended, his lips parting as he kissed her again.

Kirin's fingers found the band of his loin cloth and untied it, leaving the lion above her naked, and his manhood now unsheathing into her awaiting hands. She tasted again the desirous passion of his kiss, knowing it full well, loving it... loving him as her fingers helped him to erect.

Her hips rolled, and she paused, holding the lengthening sword with both hands, positioning it, her heartbeat quickening as she felt his second head press against her sex.

There was an instant in which fear gripped her, and she considered throwing him off of her. For an instant, she was met with the decision not to go through with this. But then he kissed her again, his strong hand lifting to massage her breast, and with a sigh, she instead guided his erection inside of her; and with a soft moan of pleasure, she instinctively rolled her hips.

Her hips began to rock as he stirred her with his erecting phallus, and their passions rose. With a gasp Kirin hugged her new lover, and gritting her teeth as he slid deeper into her, as his head descended to her bosom, she felt as if her loins had just lit on fire. She burned, and ached, and Hima began to suck from her tit, drawing out some of the milk her breasts had begun to develop from the tea father had made for mother.

She came with excitement, rolling her hips in order to allow him easier entry, and the back and forth movement between them intensified before he began to stir her again.

She groaned again and released him, allowing him to rise, sucking off her tit a little more before he lifted his head... his long mane flowing about his face to obscure his features as he and she looked at one another... his hips sliding forward to meet with hers.

"Love you..." he whispered once they'd withdrawn.

Kirin closed her eyes and began to cry... covering her face as she felt a mixture of pleasure and utter happiness.

This was one of her dreams made true...

“Love me... love you.” She mused happily and rose up to him, he kneeling while she sat on his lap, their love juices leaking from within her.

Most of the night... was spent exploring this new love.

Sage stood with Sanari resting on a rock nearby.

Kirin was dressed in her blue silks and blue stained white ivory jewelry. She looked like a princess.

Hima was just before her, head bowed, and wearing the best of the clothing he'd brought with him: simple chaps, a loincloth and a vest... with a necklace of long beads around his neck.

Sage was dressed quite similarly, but without the vest, and Sanari was in only a soft white robe... closed now to hide her swelling womanhood. Her secondaries were starting to come in, in earnest, thanks to Sage's tea, and she sat there massaging her swollen belly as she watched the proceedings.

“Please speak of your intentions again, Hima.” Sage spoke evenly, his eyes and gems flaring a brilliant green in the early light.

“I wish to take your daughter for wife, oh Great Lord of the Night and Day.” He said, and bowed lower, still not looking at Sage.

“Enough of that *'oh Lord'* stuff, Hima. I am no God.”

“As you wish, Master Five Talon.” Hima replied, and Sage nodded, and began to walk around Hima, smelling his new daughter's pheromones all over Hima's body... their scents mingling on both of them to become almost the same scent.

Hima was trying not to shake with his fear, knowing that Sage could smell this scent. Sage smiled at the back of his head, seeing the young warrior's ears flattened, could feel the air trembling with how tense he was.

“And what makes you think that I'd give such permission *after* you deflowered my daughter?” Sage asked with only the hint of a growl.

“F-father...!” Kirin began to beg for her lover, but Sage lifted a hand toward her and she quieted.

“Your answer, Master Hima?” Sage prompted.

“I... desired your daughter, Master. I desired her since seeing her emerge from the pool of her rebirth in the city. I was... captivated by such beauty, and could think of nothing else. It was because of her that I followed, Master Five Talon.

“L-last night... she and I... loved one another. I will not hide that fact, master, but we gave into our passions before I was able to stop it.”

“So you are to blame?” Sage asked.

“Father no! I also wished it!” Kirin gasped, and rushed to Sage and grasped his arm, her breasts cleaving to either side of its thickness. “Do not punish him. I love him!”

Sage did not look at Kirin, but did nonetheless lift a comforting hand to one of hers and gave her fingers a squeeze away from Hima's view. Kirin looked down at this gesture, and wondered what Sage was up to.

But then Sage explained.

“I remember being your age, Hima. So full of passion, so desirous of the fairer sex, that my every thought dwelt on pleasing a woman. How can I believe that your intent is true regarding my daughter?”

“Ask anything of me, Master... and I shall do.”

Sage stepped back, and Kirin let go of him. “Look at me then, Hima. Meet my gaze.”

Hima swallowed noticeably and then lifted his own green-eyed stare to meet Sage’s darker and glowing green eyes. But then his gaze snapped away from Sage’s unblinking stare as Sage twisted one arm so the back of his hand faced Hima, his arm flexing, and the small blade jutting out of his arm just below his elbow suddenly lengthened into a blade like the fore-claw of a Thunder Lizard.

Hima’s gaze snapped back at Sage, and he began to breathe heavily.

“If you are to prove your love for Kirin... then you will not move.” Sage said, and watched Hima’s pupils dilate.

Sage then roared his terror cry, a voice as of yet unheard of on this world, as he lunged forward, twisting his arm in a raking motion and then jabbed it forward with the tip guiding his way. Hima’s eyes watered as he watched the hooking blade coming straight for his eye.

He did not flinch against Sage’s cry, did not blink as he saw the blade coming for him in such a killing move, but nonetheless did begin to hyperventilate as he watched that blade tip stop a hair’s breadth from his pupil.

Sage paused, his stance planted, that blade humming with the motion it’d just been subjected to, his free hand palming his fist for more power. Sage held it there, staring at the young warrior from over the ridge of his forearm, and with a wry quirk of his mouth, retracted the blade back into his arm with a snap and lowered his arms calmly to his sides.

“If she wishes to have you... then she is yours.” He said simply with a smile, and Kirin moved so fast to embrace him it defied even Sage’s supernatural speed in that instant.

He smiled warmly as he stepped back, and felt a hand covering his heart stone from around his side, and looking down, saw Sanari’s fingers closing about the gem imbedded in his chest, which could be quite sensitive when Sage wished it to be.

“What was that all about?” Sanari purred once they were out of earshot.

“A father’s requirement.” Sage mused, and waved off the gold lion warriors who showed up from the sound of Sage’s terror cry. “On my world, it’s like polishing a shotgun in front of your daughter’s dates. Only the most stalwart of gentlemen, who desire your daughter for her presence and not her body, would remain under such duress.”

“Such wisdom.” Sanari mewed as the gold lions began to move off.

“I’m sure it exists everywhere a father has a daughter to look after.” Sage said. “And...” he continued, turning to his wife, helping to open her robe and sliding his hands about her belly, which seemed to have grown a full inch since coming here. “Chances are... I’ll have to do it again.”

“Our sweet guardian.” Sanari mused and embraced Sage. “No one could wish for a greater father than you, Sage.”

Bad Omens

Kirin and Hima were married in the Stormseeker temple that afternoon.

The pair of them found solace with one another in the privacy of the nearby woods, finding their own secret place where they slept and made love with one another throughout the night.

Shortly after their marriage, however, Sanari had grown weak, and had left with Sage for support, and by the time they'd returned to their shelter, Sage was carrying his lifemate in his arms, and had laid her down amidst the nest he'd made for her. The vines closed around the entrances to the shelter as Sanari closed her eyes, laying back and wrapping her arms protectively around her belly.

Her thighs pressed together as Sage lowered himself beside her, and taking a deep breath inward, stoked his flame, and his very body became warm; nearly hot to the touch. Spreading his wings, he wrapped himself about Sanari as she began to shiver, one of his hands checking her brows, her chest and her belly, and Sanari groaned.

"How long have you been feeling like this?" he whispered, and his hand spread over her stomach. She grabbed hold of one or two of his fingers with each hand.

"Too long." She groaned, and tried to compress in on herself, bringing her legs up closer to her body. "Ah!" she cried aloud and instantly Sage's eyes watered with fear as he bit his lower lip.

"I feared as much..." he bit his lower lip a bit harder as he rose backward, his wings flaring to fill the whole of the chamber, and right from the ground pillars of stone rose upward, with strips on the stone suddenly liquefying and collecting into crystal spheres which then burned hot. The chamber heated rapidly, the plant life on the edges around the pillars beginning to wilt.

Sage began to work, settling his lifemate gently so that she was as comfortable as possible, and then remarkably, his hands phased right into her body, and she felt him working inside her. But in particular, mother, father and twin cubs became one for a brief time, and Sage's indomitable healing factor flowed into them all.

A baby... a cub or kitling, whatever the lives currently inside Sanari's womb would be called... was classified by every medical profession as a parasite while it was inside the mother. It drew from the mother without returning anything but wastes to the mother.

Sage siphoned off all those wastes, purifying the water, cleansing Sanari's blood of dangerous hormones. He searched out all the chemicals in Sanari's body that were causing harm, finding the ones that caused her night terrors, removed the ones causing her aches and pains.

In the case with their children, whom mother and father found were both very afraid... calmed as their father held them in a literal sense. Sage wept as he felt their barely developed fingers coiling about the tips of his claws.

Sanari was weeping as she felt that through Sage.

Sage finally withdrew his hands, Sanari's belly remaining soft and pliable as he now began to massage and caress her and not baring a moment longer, bent low and kissed his wife, pausing in the healing process.

"Beautiful." Sanari sighed. She was strong enough only to open only a single eye at the moment, and only briefly.

'You're exhausted...' Sage said into her mind, and she merely nodded. *'Then sleep,'* he whispered, and pressed a spot on her forehead. Sanari immediately slipped away into a relaxing, dreamless sleep.

"Rest, dearest heart." And Sage continued; his magics, powerful healing magics, purified her body of all the poisons in it. Once her blood was cleansed, Sage then began to wrap her up in the furs they'd been gifted with, closing them tightly around her, keeping her body warm.

At long last he rose, looking down at her, his wings folding about his shoulders as he looked at her, finally at rest.

He closed his eyes, turned and strode for one of the entrances... the vines falling down and dragging away from the entrance as he exited. He then collapsed to his knees, and turned his face skyward.

“Vas.” He whispered, and the atmosphere changed, the temperature dropping rapidly several degrees, moisture rising in the air until...

It began in a sprinkle, but soon began to fall straight down in a windless rain. The droplets hissed against Sage’s body as he exhaled black smoke that dissipated into the air. And then silently, in his own head... he began to pray for his wife and children.

Sanari remained asleep in her nest far into the following morning. Sage hadn’t moved in all that time, and guarded the entrance to their shelter with head bowed and wings folded about him like a great cloak. His great hands remained open on his lap, and at the moment, he was far, far too weak.

Rain fell steadily onto him... hissing occasionally as he breathed out white smoke now and again. Those who passed him honestly could not bring it upon themselves to bother him.

Gesio came to stand before him in his gold lion guise, and Sage slowly lifted his gaze to the Dragaseir God, Rain splattered against Sage’s face freely now, coursing over his body unlike before. He was growing stronger very rapidly, but he still did not have the strength to form a rain shield at the moment. The chill rain was welcome at the moment...

The two stared at each other for a time, and finally... slowly... Sage smiled up at Gesio, and remained smiling as he lowered his head again.

Gesio smiled again, and lowered a hand to the top of Sage’s black-stripped mane, silently congratulating him on what he and his wife had accomplished last night in freeing her from the night terrors, at least for a time.

Gesio walked off, allowing them both their peace.

He later found Loro in another of the smaller shelters, on a small rock with the Book of the Casid on a larger rock before him. The cub was reading faster now, and was midway through the thick book now, his finger marking his place. The cub’s eyes were wild with his fervor.

“You seem preoccupied, Loro.” Gesio commented, and the cub jumped as he turned, subconsciously hissing before he saw that it was his papa.

“Y-you scared me.” He gasped. “*Please* stop doing that!”

“I’m sorry, Loro.” Gesio said as he squatted before the cub. “You are enjoying your present?”

“Yes father!” Loro said and turned immediately back to it. There... is a lot I don’t really understand yet father, but there is so much in here... so many stories!”

Gesio ran his fingers through Loro’s short mane as the cub returned to his study.

“I find... strange new things. I see directions on how Gideon does a lot of the stuff he does... including those things he does with girls.” Loro stuck his tongue out. “Ick... why would I ever want to do that?”

“Someday you might not mind it, Loro.” Gesio mused.

“There’s a lot in here that tells me how to be a Stormseeker too!” Loro paused in his reading and turned toward Gesio. “Do you think I can ever make it snow like Sage can?”

“With practice maybe.” The Dragaseir god smiles.

“Papa? If Sage is your son... does that make him and me brothers?”

“I...” Gesio began, and then smiled. “I guess it does.”

“I always wanted a brother...” Loro said softly then. “C-can I go and see him again? He said that he’d teach me something about my powers before he left.”

Gesio’s hooded ears folded downward. “I... don’t think that is good to do right now, Loro. His... His mate had grown very sick last night. He used his powers to help her, and is very tired.”

“Oh.” Loro said disappointed and lowered his own ears in disappointment. “Later perhaps?” and his ears rose hopefully.

“We will be leaving soon deeper into the mountains. If he is still here tomorrow... then I think he’d be glad to meet with you again.”

“I’m glad. Thank you again father for this gift, father. I’ll cherish it always.”

Gesio chuckled as Loro hugged him as best he could, and then watched his surrogate son as he bent back to his study, his black lips moving as he sounded out the words in his head, and the Dragaseir lifted a hand to the top of his scraggly mane and gave it a soft brush.

If only you knew what you are to do in the future, my little Prophet.

Kirin rose to her feet, her loins aching from her new husband’s interaction inside her. He was a very powerful lover, and made her dizzy with his kiss.

Night was falling as she stood, pressing her legs together, and smiling as her hands spread over her ample thighs. She’d transformed again... even while ensconced within her lovers arms. Her father’s magics were making her stronger, while her mother’s were making her far more beautiful. Somewhere inside her bodice, she could feel those powers mixing to create something unique within her.

She so loved her new life. A new mother and father, a husband who adored her, strength and beauty...

She stepped forward, her body glistening from her sweat having decorated her fur, her breasts bouncing with her every step, her nipples sticking out and moist still from her lover drawing milk from her breasts.

Her body was a thing of shadow, like a hole in space with an event-horizon of deep purple. She was becoming a unique being here on Casid, and her powers were growing. They were growing fast.

She could feel the throbbing in her forehead like before, a tingling as if something were trying to thrust its way forward, and she came to stand before the rising moons at the edge of the grove she and her lover had claimed as their own. Her hands rose to a pair of trees as she leaned her weight against them, the trees framing her lovely bodice.

Her loins ached, and her nipples ached as well, and she swallowed, knowing something was coming now, and stood there waiting for it to come.

She could feel something around her changing... felt it empowering her as she looked up at the moons, with child moon swinging before mother moon as they rose. She stood there, not blinking as those moons rose; both full, both

luminous, and child moon now creating a shadow on mother moon.

She felt her heart quicken, and her hands grasped tightly into the trees she hung off of till her claws dug deep into the wood, and she drew strength from the earth. She watched the moons, her breath gasping now, her breasts heaving as a cold sweat grew on her, and she saw the moons swing upward, one right over the other, and a celestial eye formed from the twin moons, and in a flash of light that lasted for only a second, the two moons became one blazing white one, and cast a beam of light directly into Kirin's heart.

She tried to scream as the beam struck her, thrusting into her body with all the pain of a spear imbedding its way into her still-beating heart, splitting it in two, and then the moment was over, and the moon became two as they continued to rise nonchalantly.

Kirin's body absorbed that magic of her world, and gritting her teeth, she felt her teeth lengthen, felt the power sliding through her veins, merging with her muscles, and hardening her body, forcing it to bulge outward on every dimension by several inches. Her breasts bulged and firmed atop her chest, the pocket of her femininity swelling outward, her clit lengthening while her teats thickened and lengthened against her chest.

The wash of power spread to her toes and fingertips, lengthening her claws and opening her eyes she gasped, her teeth shining brilliant white while her eyes shone like a storeroom of golden treasure.

She gasped as the power suddenly flooded upward toward her brow, and the bulge in her forehead swelled, pushing upward, till something bony protruded and broke open her fur and flesh with a splatter of blood.

That protrusion elongated, spiraling outward, twisting itself into a silvery horn that was the same color as the combined moon.

She collapsed to her hands and knees, gasping for breath as her horn glistened with her blood against her forehead before that blood retracted back into her skull, and the horn swelled to seal the wound. Then her eyes opened again, and she rose, feeling a new awareness flooding into her, and lifting a hand, she passed it over one of the trees she'd wounded... and biting her lip, feeling its pain, she rose and covered the wounds, and healed the plants.

The planet talked to her now... she could hear the life force directly around her, and they told her something frightening, and she looked off toward the entrance of the valley they were now in.

"They're here." She whispered, and turning on her heel, went to go rouse her husband.

Sage's eyes snapped open as he was beset with a myriad of images. Here in the past, he'd thought that Fate was unable to find him, but it seems, even here, that the Lord of Fate could still find and toy with him.

Sage's jaw set as he rose slowly as he was visited by several futures simultaneously, and turning his head, saw his mate still resting soundly.

This fate will be difficult to manipulate, he thought. "Yes Maourit?" he spoke as an individual arose from the edge of the clearing surrounding Sage's shelter.

Maourit paused, wondering how Sage knew that he was there.

"I... I am sorry to bother you Five Talon, but we have a problem."

"The Tar lions have found us." Sage said, and Maourit's eyes widened in wonder at how Sage knew this already as Sage then turned to the leader of the hunt. "They are a hundred and twenty strong, and armed for battle."

"Yes, but how did you..." Maourit began as Equis ran in beside him.

“Egis,” Sage began, nodding at her. “Right on time. Egis, I have a task for you. You must collect all of the Stormseekers and bring them to this shelter immediately. Do not question or some will die. Go now.”

Egis didn't say a single word, simply swallowed hard and did.

“Maourit, you are a very proud male, but I must ask you to swallow your pride and do something very special for me.”

“Y-yes my lord?”

“You are not to fight.”

“B-but...”

“You will not fight or you will not survive this night, and your pride still needs you. You have less than an hour to do this next task. All females who still bare young are to be rounded up in this shelter. Hima will join you. Kirin will join me. My lifemate will be there to protect you when she wakes.

“Now go... do not question, or more lives will be lost.”

“Y-yes Five talon. But what will you do?”

“I must again become a monster, Maourit. I must become a monster in order to save as many people as possible. Now go... quickly.”

Maourit's lips pressed together, and Sage watched him go. Once he was gone, Sage lowered himself and bent to one knee, folding his hands over his risen knee as he bent in prayer. After he was done, Sage rose to his feet, and... changed.

Not a demon, not an angel... something... in between, took the place of the gentle creature that was Lord Sage...

There was only a single opening, and a single exit to this valley on the opposing side, and both of those openings were well hidden and difficult to find. How in Casid's name that the Tar Lions found it was unknown... but they had prepared for this massacre, carrying torches and armed and armored, under the leadership of Dekan Bloodfang.

It was he who was Casid's first Warlord... and it was he who began the purging of the Stormseekers.

His war party was arrayed about him as he ascended a rock, and lifting his gauntleted fist into the air, he roared, and over a hundred warriors surged into the forest, burning, pillaging, raping the unfortunates both male and female, and Bloodfang grinned at the massacre ensuing on his enemies and his prey.

He was unaware, however, of the Gods and Goddesses waiting for his warriors below...

The first of the oily black furred marauders surged forward into the valley quickly bringing down and killing the sun lions and raping their wives and daughters. The rock lions that lived there were not spared either. The green grasses mossy trees were stained red with blood and burned black with fire...

In the commotion, it proved unavoidable that many were slain. They were strong warriors, those who chose to live here but they no longer seemed to have the will for battle.

"Peace makes them weak!" roared one very large black lion as he raised his axe to cleave one hapless young boy. His massive muscles strained as he was about to put all his might into one needlessly powerful blow. "Squirm, maggot!"

The boy blindly scoured and reached for his mother who was dead now, his father desperately fighting to reach his son.

"Caur! NO!" his father railed just as fortified claws grabbed him from the side and pulled his side out like ribs off a roast, exposing his beating heart as blood poured out of his body like an overturned bucket. The white lion fell, face down, still reaching for his son with a few marauders laughing at his failure.

"...daddy..." the cub murmured, burying his head in his arms waiting for the end.

A sudden sound of slashing claws and the unexpectedly long wait brought the cub's head up to see two incredibly tall, fit, and ripped, white, deeply black striped-tigresses standing over him. The two mistresses of the valley, Niria and Laikei, had arrived. They barely acknowledged the cub as they moved to find more of the attackers.

"Great Ladies of the Storm..." the cub cried in rejoice as they dashed away faster than the cheetahs of legend, before they were driven into hiding. But the cub's rejoice died as he looked about at the death and the remains of his father and the memory of his mother being dragged off to her death. The cub again buried his face in sorrow bawling madly.

More of the murderous horde found their way into the citadel of the valley. Largely unopposed because of the concentration of protecting the people, had entered this sacred place. A veritable throne room lined in tall pillars dwarfed by tall thick trees. The space was ornate but empty, well detailed with tapestries and fine metalwork; it would remind any Aphkian of their own world and finery. But all this was lost in to time and neglect.

Dekan expected to find huddled masses at least one or two Stormseekers to maim and torture. But what they found stunned them all...

What stood before them was a massive armored white and black striped creature with five-fingered hands outstretched mumbling strangely as bit by bit a great sword formed with remarkable speed within his hands. Wide feathered wings filled the space about him as his long whip-like tail lashed. Two, four, no six eyes glowed red as he continued mumbling...

"What are you, then?" Dekan snarled flexing his fortified, gauntleted, claws.

He was utterly fearless as he walked forward briskly readying his hand to strike. This creature looked like a Beast Lord but did not quite feel like one. It would be until later that Sage learned that Casid had no real sense of angels and demons until much later. If they had, then Dekan might have been more concerned.

This creature stood more than four feet taller and was substantially more muscular than the black lion. The other lions quickly followed and surrounded this creature.

"Kill it and it don't matter much," one of the huge lions growled raising an ugly, cruel looking, spiked mace. Old blood and fresh colored it like the grip of death.

Dekan smirked, "Be my guest. I'm hornier more than anything else right now. I'm looking for Euna-la anyway. I let her escape me once. Not twice."

As Dekan walked away, the others attacked this monster... their weapons and claws bounced away without even touching him. They tried again as the sword continued to form, now nearing its completion, its length greater than

any of them were tall! The mumbling slowly rose to a chanting, almost Gregorian, as his muscles swelled with even more might, unyielding might... Strength that extinguished a whole race once before and could easily erase these few souls.

"Gahkso..." the Beast Lord said coldly, his voice coming in a gravely and chilling voice that grated on their souls, the very sound of which struck fear... the voice naming names slowly... cruelly... like the tolling of a great funeral bell... In any culture, that was, at the very least, very unnerving.

"Huh? How's it know my name?"

Still more names rolls through the air like low thunder, "Juuts... Ormno... Makehs..."

"I don't like this... Kill it hurry!" One of them called out stopping Dekan in his tracks forcing him to look back.

"Dimmon, Gemroh, Rots... Cuvvo... Dekan..." More names, some were those he had butchered already, though the Black lions there, in that room, did not know it.

The leader, marred with deep red scars, returned diving his hand straight at its face, "Shut up! No one announces our deaths!" his claws were stopped and thrown back by a massive forearm guard that unfolded and stopped his blow as if it were a baby tapping at him.

"I am Lord Sage. Left hand of the Creator, right hand of the Dark One. You are doomed..." Sage's arms sealed around the sword as he stepped forward. "On my way here I slew many of your comrades using little more than my claws and bare hands. They barely bled enough to color my hide..."

"We'll bathe in yours!" Dekan readied himself...

"Sister... Such death..." One of the tigresses muttered witnessing the broken and crushed bodies of so many tar lions... Some young boys, likely forced to fight, though led on by the prospect of a relatively safe raid. Many were cleaved in two like grain shoots before a reaper. None were cut from behind, their own medical training told them, but still they died in such disarray... They were surrounded?

Footprints about told the story, huge footprints like... "Father?" uttered Laikei, her thick, black, butt-length mane was tied at waist-level, with heavy bangs covering most of her face like a veil. "This is not his way..."

"Smashing his foes into soil is more his speed," Niria, who was clearly more muscular and posed smaller, *'more athletic'* breasts than her sister, with a short cut, barely shoulder length, white mane, stroked the forehead of one tar lion boy, before closing his terrified eyes.

Smashing a foe out of sight, or into soil, left little or no trace of the horror. Though explained like a fairy tale, Niria and Laikei both learned of the Aphkians, called to them by the story teller as the *'ice lords'*, and how they ground up their foes to fill in holes left by battles. It also prevented the gruesome spectacle of looking into the eyes of young lions and lionesses who died so fast, some so hard...

Examining the wounds, mostly clean sheering cuts meant to not only cleave a body but also scatter that body, Niria spoke grimly, "This was done with a sword. A bigger weapon than any I have seen."

"No one here has such a weapon or else we would've destroyed it," Laikei suppressed tears, even if the Black Lions were their mortal foes it was not beyond them to mourn them. "Who would've done this?"

"No one we know. Listen..." Niria whispered as her ears scanned about for any source of sound to point in a direction. If the battle were still raging, there should be sounds of conflict and fighting. Nothing but the distant warble of songbirds as if calling an "all clear".

"Poor Loro..." Laikei, too, was scanning for sound, "He must be scared out of his wits."

"It would serve the little brat right," Niria started toward to citadel, "He gives father nothing but grief. I wouldn't blame him if he just left and never came back till he was grown."

"Don't say such things, sister. Loro just needs more attention than father can give him. All these invaders would have been vanquished outside this retreat if Father were here. He can't be in one place for long... Maybe we should consider..."

"We travel and do father's work so he can stay home with Loro. If he is constantly away then he must have a good reason," Niria groaned a moment then looked in another direction, "Listen... There... It sounds like it's coming from Jinka."

The two tigresses dash off again as several massive bolts of lightning rain down on the bodies searing them to ash. Rain followed washing the stench out of their and the blood into the soil...

"How could those butcher's have found us..?" They dashed through the woods, often holding their breaths to ward off the stink of dead flesh, lightning raining down on the corpses incinerating them, until they came to a plant-fortified fortress...

"That's Jinka Pavilion... Isn't it?" Niria looked puzzled as several gold lions emerged from ambush points. "This is Jinka, right? What happened here?"

"Master Five Talons remade this place with Master Gesiomagatou's permission... When the marauders came, Five Talons ordered us to gather everyone we could here for protection and not to get caught up in the fighting." an old lion said firmly.

"Who are you?" Niria said firmly and Laikei peeked in through the vines and other foliage that barricaded the pavilion.

"Loro's inside. He looks okay. So is everyone from the palace and most of the others. They look good, as well." Laikei turned back.

"I am Maourit, a friend who is passing through with my troupe of hunters to delivery food for our hunt... The Master of Land and Sky brought us here..."

"They followed you here..." Laikei interrupted, "But who is doing all this killing?"

"Master Five Talons," Spoke a gold lion.

He was nearly as tall as the tigresses but much broader even so, he was not one hundredth as strong. A Dragaseir's blood does that to a body. She and her sister were certifiable goddesses. No one dared challenge them but they tried to be as open and approachable as possible... But *'every rose has it's thorns.'*

"I heard that name said in a city we saved," Niria said looking away. All the attackers were dead. Many of the survivors wandered into view. Some carrying crying children and wounded. "Father adopted someone new. Another Beast Lord with a very expecting wife."

"We'll be back." the two tigresses said in unison and left without another moment's thought.

Slowly some of those huddled in the pavilion emerged. They made room for the wounded and the frightened.

The immense gold lions stood guard over them, clearing the area for more space. To treat wounds to move and just to settle down. Being piled into a 'bomb shelter' at the last moment does not make for happy huddlers.

"If even one Tar Back shows their mangy hide dragging itself by a bloody stump, everyone gets back inside," Roared one lion as a smaller sun lioness, just a young girl, limped by, holding a bloody doll. Looking down he saw that she was holding it to a deep wound in her side. He scooped her up and ran to the pavilion, "She's dying on her feet. Someone help her!" The girl smiled to him as she grew cold in his arms...

Do you remember why Gold lions became so violent and so spiteful?

They used to be loyal soldiers and protectors. They were bred for battle but trained for peace by the white lions because they grew weary of the black lions. It was fear that made them necessary, hope that made them dangerous. Pain and loss. Seeing one small white cub die in his mighty arms... Arms meant to shield her from harm, claws meant to slay violators and fiends alike. Do you know who they blame for the way they are?

The answer will not surprise you as much as you may imagine...

Where You Stand, Where You Fall

Dekan raised himself over Sage's body as the Beast Lord staggered to his feet. The other black lions had fallen, several slain by Dekan himself for 'weakness.' The Draco-tiger's wounds healed visibly before the eyes but this Black Lion was something more than the others. His strength was greater than what Sage could've expected; he did not wound, tire, or weaken. This was not a Casid...

With a voice like a cursed demon Sage spoke, "What the hell are you?"

Dekan smiled as he flexed his claws, "What does it matter when we are all doomed. The Void beckons..."

The Void?

Sage's mind reeled with crisis. He'd been warned of this nigh omnipotent force bent on the total annihilation of everything everywhere. Whole universes were consumed. Even his own universe was not safe. The tendrils of this force, like the coming of nightfall, were already being felt. Many great and powerful beings had gone missing in the wake of this presence. The stuff of nightmares...

This universe, the Great Wide Universe, is safe for now. In Rae's time a girl named Elizabeth M'roln, aided with a cadre of unique and amazing friends turned away the Void for now. Rae Iksaki was sadly a part of one of their schemes which thankfully failed... She only mentioned it once before being overcome with grief and shame...

"So this is were it began..." Sage grit his teeth in English, a wholly alien language to the black as pitch lion.

Dekan ran at Sage as he looked straight at the lion slowly raising his sword as claws aimed for him to sheer over his head, "You see... your death!!!" With a fierce leap at the Draco-tiger, the lion flew at Sage. The sounds of air being sliced by the blades on the heavy gauntlets, the customary hum of the sword Sage carried, the echo of Dekan's roar, the groan of breathing, sounds that all stopped as Dekan froze, utterly, in time...

"I give you this, young titan," an armored gold Cersile Lion, standing an obvious eight feet tall in fine gold and platinum plate, walked between the two warriors. A tiny, actually shrunken with age, figure with a white head of hair, very receded hairline, and red robes, adorned in gold decoration, followed before eyeing the two tigresses entering the chambers. "You are bold. Your fate is to die here today on the end of Dekan's claws."

The tiny old figure, tracking intently, lecherously toward the two nude goddesses, "Such beauty and perfection in two at once in the same place." Looking back at Sage as he shameless gropes Niria's bugling calf, "Dekan's legend

grows when learned it is that a Beast Lord he slew. His followers, emboldened, will be and attack ever more cruel and zealous. Ooo...firm."

The gold Draco-wolf, Gesiomagatou, stepped forward, wedging his leg between Niria and the old lecher, "Old One, do not ogle my daughters with your hands. Speak fondly of them if you wish but never grope them..."

"So selfish are we," the Old One said stepping away mindful of the father guarding his cubs, "Watched them we have as tiny cubs, as young girls, to grown maidens now..."

"Enough of that for now, my perverted teacher." The lion spoke coolly, "I am Lord Rhodin, leader of the Principle Guardians of Creation. You may stand; I've chosen to end your battle for you... this time."

Sage did so after looking to Gesio for an instant. He needed no permission but it scared him to fight against someone with nigh absolute power to destroy. Even the Black Beast didn't frighten him so. But Dekan...

The Draco-tiger rested his blade at his side speaking with some protest, "I have just begun to fight this fiend..."

"What he has started can not be undone with even our combined power and wisdom, Sage," Gesio lowered his head shedding a tear at what all his children will endure knowing their fates and futures. "Only time will allow this to pass. My... daughters would've tried to defeat Dekan after you had fallen and would be themselves maimed, raped, and slain. In this time, I am tending to the cheetahs that are fled into the deeper deserts. Without me they would die out within mere days. But I steered away the land sharks, as you would call them, left them freshly killed game and water..." He paused nearly crying, "Thank you for saving my girls, godson..." Gesio knelt down gazing into the eyes of his daughters, seeing their courage, innocence, zeal, compassion, hope, and dread, and wept... He could not save them just like he couldn't save his wife...

Rhodin drew his own war-blade, a massive burning gold and blood ruby-covered blade, lavishing from point to pommel in baroque details that a small army of craftsmen would need decades to finish, "With the last bit of your power and immortality, your body wasting in the grip of the Void, you saved both girls, bequeathing your gems to them, four to Laikei and three to Niria, who both grow into draco-tigers in the passage of time... Step back, please."

Sage did so feeling the heat from the blade like standing too close to a bonfire, even several yards away. He looked to his own weapon and it seemed hopelessly less than a toy in comparison even despite the fullness of Sage's own power radiating through his blade like a lancelet of the sun's core. Like a holy relic given by God himself, the sword was both majestic and dread in the same light. With what was but a lazy swing, the sword passed through Dekan, as if he weren't there. But with time frozen, he did not die; however, it was set to happen.

"Step back to where you were, we do not need Niria and Laikei seeing you well away from him as he incinerates," Rhodin walked out of the way as he unhanding his sword and it seemed to float or fly to its rest at his back just above and behind the great back-shield that framed this more-than-a-demi-god with the golden vestige of the sun.

"Gesio..." the Old One murmured snapping the Draco-wolf out of his fugue. He moved out of the way of his daughters.

"I should have been here..."

A black form seemed to melt out of the dim light of the citadel. A great form of a cape and black chrome mask with a great peering... piercing eye on each shoulder, appeared.

"All things return to the Void," The figure said. Sage found himself trembling instinctively like a small child looking over the edge of a cliff to a certain death.

"You have failed here as well, Master Masq," Rhodin said dismissively, "You have at last failed at everything you set out in this universe. Leave it be..."

"Time is eternally our ally, not yours Rhodin. The days Elizabeth has purchased for this universe are limited, and even then our influence endures as the masters of this universe will turn on it as raise death and destruction not to be seen in greater proportion until we are finally ready to take back everything." Masq spoke calmly, the eyes that are his shoulders stared at Sage, causing him to tremble more even to lose grasp of this sword. It did not fall as the Old One held it in place with his own great power.

"Be gone, old foe." Rhodin pressed his voice to authority drawing the eyes' attention.

"We will meet again, old foe," Masq said fading into nothing.

A moment of quiet punctuated the exchange until the Old One spoke up, "Speed now, Gesio, my friend. The cheetahs..."

"By Fang!" Gesio snapped completely out of his daze, "Two of them are about to give birth and there is no food for hours around them..." The Draco-wolf vanished like a breath of air. Sage looked at this Dekan again and shuddered then forced it to stop...

"Young titan," Rhodin said with a consoling sigh, "You will not be ready to face the Void for some time yet. You no longer have the innocence of a child that will shield you and allow you to look beyond this world into the Void's so you may understand it and fight it. Even so you are chosen by design for this fight..."

"I know..." Sage responded absent-mindedly feeling overwhelmed. His mind swimming with questions as a fog of amnesia filled it, clouding details, but not whole facts.

"Mmmm," the old one rounded the tigresses to ogle their butts, "What you do not... You are... for yours... not yet..."

"Come again?" Sage said just as a cloud of ash splashed against him. Sage choked and wheezed on the ashes that had been his certain death just a few moments before, and even now, he was having difficulty remembering how he'd defeated his foe. In his disorientation and discomfort, he did not see the two tigresses ready to attack him. Sage nearly fell to his knees choking until Laikei started patting him on the back.

"Go on. Clear those lungs..."

"What are you doing, Sister? He might be an enemy!" Niria stood dumbfounded and then frustrated that her sister was being so kind to this stranger.

"He has five fingers. I think he's that *'Five Talons'* guy we were told about. Besides that was Dekan he just torched. He can't be that bad..."

"No... *choke*...no ...Not now..." Sage muttered remembering the young faces of those he'd butchered before settling out of his *'killer state,'* the Remarkably powerful battle form he'd become.

His hearts were heavy to end so many young lives without giving them a fighting chance to flee. But he knew, but didn't dare tell these two young mistresses, that if even one escaped the next attack would've been far worse. Hundreds maybe thousands would have destroyed everything.

"I am Sage Preypacer," Sage finished and coughed one more time, his voice changing into a softer, more musical tone. "A friend and by your father's wish, your brother," Sage said with humility and calm, without a hint of ego. He'd chosen to be a godson to Gesiomagatou and so he was; which made these girls his sisters.

"Brother..?" they both shot in unison. Strange that they aren't twins yet behaved like it.

Sage arrived as the last of the dead was buried. Sanari had observed as Gideon, with Rauss' assistance gave rites to

the fallen without care that they were attacker or attacked. All life is held sacred by the Prydes that lived there in the valley.

"You!" screamed a great gold lion grasping Sage by the throat, squeezing hard before Sage instantly excited a reflexive palm-strike blowing back the lion, crushing his ribs... He forced himself to his feet but collapsed. Other lions surrounded their fallen comrade. But before any could refuse Sanari, she was there at his side healing him herself.

"Why?" Sanari whispered gently, "why did you attack my husband?" She feared the answer but needed to hear it.

"The little girl died in my arms because of your sloppy travel habits. Those butchers found this place and..." His eye's squinted with rage and tormented sorrow, "If it takes a thousand years or more, Beast Lord, I'll..." a sudden touch to the back of his head and the great lion passed out asleep.

"He needs rest..." Sanari breathed. She'd seen such carnage before, when the Aphkian Empire came to exterminate her people. To call it a war would insult the word and its meaning. It was genocide, pure and simple. She held so many young kittens as they blindly reached for a parent long dead or begged to die now so the pain would stop or... She leaned over the head of the lion, a veritable giant to her, as she wept into his mane.

Sage stood frozen in shock and doubt as Niria and Laikei walked past him.

Niria stopped at his side, "Dekan is dead. When word gets out, those tar backs will at least slow down long enough to figure out exactly what to do and start doing it."

The Void wants us to destroy ourselves so it only has to destroy what's left, Sage thought to himself. The faint memories, like a dream slipped further into oblivion. His chest was tight with worry, sick with fear, and it was all he could do not to let it show just now.

Loro leaped into Laikei's arms, with strength that held him like a newborn cub, as she gave him a warm hug, "Sister! I missed you..." He trembled a bit before sobbing, "I'm sorry I'm such a lousy brother..."

"...wuh... No, Loro," She smiled kissing his cheek. She wanted to say more before Loro just started talking.

"I'm always rude. I always have tantrums for no reason. I make father sad," Loro sobbed more trying not to cry, at least until he was done speaking, "I'm not fit to be a Stormseeker..."

"You don't get to make that decision, cub," Maourit interrupted drawing eyes to him, "The weight and worth of your character does. No one can make that decision about you. You can't even make that choice for yourself. You'll be a Stormseeker or you won't. That comes from always trying to live in the right way and always working to be better. I wanted to be a warrior but I never got there. I became a hunter, close but not there. I don't regret it because I worked at it and lived in the way that led me here to the side of Gesiomagatou, his son with his wife, and the two fine young ladies and very young lord of this valley... You have a future to live up to, cub. You'll see. Just live up to being better tomorrow than you are today."

Loro sniffled a bit before burying his face in his sister's ample bosom crying. He was scared for himself and frightened that he might be a failure before he'd even had a real chance to try.

"Niria, I'm taking Loro to Ruuppa Pavilion to sleep. I'll be there if you need me. Euna-la," Laikei called sweetly.

"Yes, mistress," This pale tigress rushed up and bowed eagerly, "What do you wish of me?"

"Come with us. I know your past with Dekan and today should be the happiest day of your life. Five Talons slew him..."

The white tigress, her tail bobbed by Dekan to humiliate her, turned to Sage, her eyes filling with joyous tears. She

bowed then dropped to her knees and dropped her head down to the dirt, almost groveling, "Thank you. Thank you... thank you... Great Lord of Night and Day... I..."

Sage barely waited another second to lift her up off the ground. He was not shamed but after what she must've gone through, cowing down to him was the last thing he wanted of this young lady. "Stand up."

"He plagued my steps, good lord," I was hunted for his sport and raped when caught. He'd let me go to hunt me again slaying the poor people I'd come across making me a plague on those who might have helped me. I..." She dove into his chest, ignoring the thick tough chest plate, but as she pressed against them, found their feeling remarkably soft... as if all the hard steel were covered by a layer of felt cloth. "Thank you..." She wept. "...thank you..."

The other gold lions put a light cloth on Sanari to ward off insects. They thought that perhaps she wept for the horrible things her husband had done. None of them were mind readers and Sanari was too lost in her sorrow to tell them she felt for the lion and did not leave his side sleeping there into the dawn...

Ways That They Go...

Sunlight immediately pushed Kirin into the shadows, her eyes felt so unused, even now, to it as the last remnants of the last night's battle were tended to. The land screamed with agony as trees bemoaned their wounds from raked claws and having incredibly strong lions smash through them. Each tree was resolute, but they ached like an old soldier nursing an old scar over a tender spot. It drove her to slight madness trying to ignore it even following her into sleep. But her new mother was teaching how to filter out the 'voices,' but still, it scared her to hear and feel it all.

She wanted to hide her horn as well, not sure what to make of it. It came to her as if in a dream, a painful dream, and now she started to worry. First came the strength manifest in very obvious gains in muscle and size. She could curl a bicep that would compare very well with her husband's. Next came the wild desires that drove her to Hima. Those did not scare her except that she didn't feel in any control of them. Like being a passenger in her own body. Now this horn and the strange voices and feelings that came with it. Powers she didn't understand and surely began to fear if not loathe.

Hima lurked about, searching for her. She could hide in the slimmest of shades, as her life in darkness taught her well. But he was a superlative hunter and warrior, his senses found her easily and he stared straight at her even through, despite a feline's ability to need only a fraction of the light a human needs to see, he couldn't really see her at all. The foliage hid her well.

"Come out, please," Hima's eyes scanned about trying to make sure she didn't move away, "...please... no one will harm you. No one blames you for last night. In fact so many owe you their lives for warning them..."

"I..." she muttered as she turned her head slightly. The light reflecting off a source, maybe Hima's eyes, glinted off her horn. It was a spiraled spike but was still growing thick and more elaborate, becoming branched like an antler, but blunt. "What am I?"

"My beautiful wife... please... Don't hide from me..." Hima dropped to one knee holding out his hand. The corners of his eyes pinched to hold back tears. Maybe he was afraid of her or her father or... himself...

As if the shadows themselves were reaching out to him, Kirin extended her hand to his. She looked in amazement as his hand seemed to glow in the morning light, made to glow softly about them from reflecting off of morning dew, found nowhere but in this and other such places in this mostly arid world. He gently gripped her hand and let her emerge of her own accord.

Slowly she stepped out, nude as the day she was born. Not even a bit of the jewelry that her father had made for her and her now husband had remade for her. She squinted, her eyes in the light at first, but she felt nothing. She could see... or so she thought. Suddenly she hissed and shut tightly her eyes and covered them with her hands.

“The visor my father gave me... I need it...” She shot as Hima frantically searched the area for it. Tears ran down her face as she realized she may never be able to see him in the day unaided.

Hima found it in her bath bundle and gave it to her, “Here...” His voice betrayed his heartbreak. With all the wonderful and miraculous changes she was going through, punctuated by the horn, she still had little tolerance for daylight.

As his wife put the visor on, he wrapped his arms around her holding her as she fell into him sobbing.

“I hate this... I want to see you in the daylight... I...” Kirin silenced herself as she just took in his smell. His musk was all she needed to calm down. In truth, she was more afraid that those black lions would force her to join them. Terrified was more like it.

Hima didn’t move as he heard a rustling of leaves. His ears turned to the sound and he breathed softly, “Your father is here, Kirin...”

She looked up to the Draco-tiger, dressed only in a loincloth and chaps, “Father?” Despite the hard scale and features, and her own unfamiliarity with his face, she could see his concern.

He’d just watched that lion he’d nearly accidentally crippled sit with Sanari as she ate with him, trying to defuse his anger toward her husband. Inwardly, Sage wondered how often his lifemate had to do that for him with others. He watched the difficulty his mate had. It had been hard. Casid can be incredibly, almost insanely, passionate. This lion, Roi, was no different. He seemed enamored by his wife but she did her best not to lead him on.

“I’m sorry,” Roi had said bowing his head, “I think I could love you... I fear your husband but my anger waters that like cheap wine. Forgive me...” Roi left her. Maourit had agreed to have him on as a guard... well that and Eqs had his eye as well.

“Father?” Kirin said again as Hima let her go to him, “Are you okay?”

His mind reeled at him, *You know what will happen to her! Tell her she’s going to die! You can’t beat Fate! You know that you can’t let her just die!*

“Kirin we aren’t going with Maourit and his troupe... We’re headed north in a few days...” His voice was full of hesitation and worry. He knew of her horn but not that it had changed. She was beautiful and he didn’t want to lose that. Gesio had lost so much in his life, a wife, nearly lost two daughters, his confidence as a father... Sage didn’t want to join that club, he didn’t know what he’d do. If say Eakjo, a young impetuous Oggremaren Zhumal boy and his adopted son, had died of one of his little misadventures...

I know. I’m scared, too, his mind thought to him in a self-contained conversation.

I’ll protect her as best I can... Even against Fate...

Gesiomagatou returned, his head low with guilt.

No one blamed him for being away. It was a vast world that he looked after largely alone. Even with his daughters, there was still so much and so many to guide and protect. The valley was hidden and well defended for a purpose... Still seeing the carnage, smelling the death and blood. The moans of mourning survivors. It drove him into deep despair.

He should’ve stayed. At least this time he did not wipe Sage’s memory of the intermission in his battle with Dekan. Sage had saved his daughters at the cost of his life in another timeline, that timeline now closed thanks to Lord

Rhodin, but if he'd been there, if he'd not been able to prevent the cheetahs from being overused as assassins and maligned out of society, they would be about now. Now they were refugees from every land in Casiida.

The Draco-wolf wandered past Sanari ignoring her entirely even after a few emphatic "good morning" calls from her. His gaze was fixed straight ahead as he made his way to the only clearing in the valley not connected by a well defined path.

In that clearing, there was a stone mausoleum amongst the small necropolis. It was the resting place of his wife, Gungaya. Stepping lightly, he slowly approached the tomb and knelt there with his head down.

Sanari had followed him and saw his great spirit lift out of his body, a sight like the plume of a volcano eruption filling the sky. Only a shamaness could see this with any degree of clarity. Sanari could see this as plainly as anyone else could see Gesio's body in deep meditation there before her. She said nothing as she witnessed a massively muscular tigress materialize atop the tomb.

"Gungaya..." Gesio, his spirit was in the form of the gold lion, his mane and beard long and thick but black as obsidian. "I'm lost. I cannot see my way any more..."

"You see too many ways before you, my love," Gungaya cupped his face with hands that looked even more powerful than Eriruka's, the vice-headmistress of the Mystic League, a great lioness genetically engineered to be an engine of biological force and might beyond parallel in Casid history. That is, until Eqis... the one she knows so well...

He wept as she drew him in, holding him. "I want you back with me so badly... To hold you, love you..." Gesio whispered.

"...to give you the cubs you so dearly deserve," Gungaya murred, "I will never stop loving you but please don't torture yourself over me... Don't try to change history to get me back. You could lose what little you have now... My cubs love you as their father and want you to be happy. So do I. Please..."

"I will find some way to bring you back. I must. I can and I will," Gesio continued to weep.

"You deserve to be selfish once in a while. You give so much to so many but you've done enough, my hard working husband. Give the cheetahs a world of their own and let these people fend for themselves. I'm dead and you are immortal. Let these people sort it out for themselves..."

"Countless millions will die. Even before the Aphkei arrive not fifteen hundred years from now. I have to make the world ready or they will suffer for generations after... I have seen the most likely outcome of the extinction of all life on Casiida. I'm the guardian of this world and I am failing..."

Sanari was stunned to learn this as she continued to watch...

"The Age of the Beast Lords are over, beloved," Gungaya transformed into a beast lord as well, her armored body was still sensual but built up for battle and strength like Gesio's. "They've leaned on us for far too long. It's time for us to go. Please... Don't try to hold this world up alone. Once there was a whole race that freely protected this world... They've all died out save but a few of us war-gauges to take up this challenge. It worked for a few millennia but no more. You are the first war-gauge to become an Overgod, do not spend your innumerable days in misery. One day I will reincarnate. But I will not return to you. I will not remember you... But I will love you forever..."

Gesio broke down as her form faded away...

His body convulsed as both body and soul cried out and his spirit returned to the flesh and he dropped his head against the tomb clawing at the structure reinforcing deep grooves in the stone.

Sanari wept for him as well and prayed for him and Rae that his wait was not one second longer than needed...

A week had passed since the attack. Life was getting back to normal but time was growing short for the hunters to return home with their bounty, preserved by the white lions, to cut some urgency out of their journey.

Kirin leaned on her husband as they sat watching the exchange between Maourit and Sage.

Sage had assumed his massive Battle Form, which dwarfed each and every last lion in the valley. For his own mind, he'd held this form since the attack... just in the prospect of another following. The larger, more powerful and venerable, Beast Lord seemed more apologetic and even meek to the old hunter but he had several of the gigantic gold lions and lionesses, many had eyed the females in the group, to replace their guardians.

"You need not concern yourself so much," Maourit put a forgiving hand on the Beast Lord's massive upper arm as the shoulder was just a bit out of reach. "We have seven new protectors who will give my pride many strong cubs. Next year's hunts will be all the easier with such help."

"I understand... I just wish I didn't feel I had to stay..."

"Nonsense!" Equis blurted out shooing away her new admirer long enough to speak.

"You have a wife who needs to rest well. Her cubs will be huge and that will weigh on her. She doesn't need to be traveling without cause. Plus that sweet little black lioness needs you to guide her. You've obviously been conditioning her body..."

"You knew?" Sage tilted his head in acknowledgment.

"Young lions and lionesses need to have their bodies conditioned if they are to ever get as big and powerful as my champion here..." The great lion, with a bright red mane, wrapped himself around her nuzzling her, "I'm going to end up having cubs of my own before we get home..." She laughed heartily

"I'll see to it, for sure," He murred giving a playful grope to her midsection as if anticipating the new cubs.

...my champion here... those words stuck with him as he looked over at Kirin. Their technique prepares the body to train, but what I've been doing actually excites her body to grow without training. I should be careful not to spoil her...

"No more of your worries, Sage," Maourit growled humorously, "We leave after nightfall. The passage beyond should be safe. But for now I'm told that our busy hosts are preparing a feast to send us off on full bellies. Frankly, I'd rather not impose anymore than we already have but I may not see this place again so... Good memories all around!"

Joyous calls rang out. The sound of it shook Gesiomagatou out of his depression just as Niria arrived to see Sanari watching her father. She could feel her influence, a warming glow that warded off the worst emotions. It puffed up her chest a bit to feel her heart lighten.

"Father..." Niria sat next to him feeling the claw marks in the stone. She leaned on him, kissing his arm. "We are having a feast to send off Maourit and his hunting party. You keep coming back here ever since that battle. Don't worry so... Loro won't want to see you like this. Laikei would be heart-torn to have you so sad... It's not doing me much good either. Please, Lady Sanari needs to be with her husband but she can't if she's keeping you for losing all hope..."

Looking back at Sanari, as heavy as she was with child, sat quietly, almost meditating, as both the Draco-wolf and the tigress looked at the proof of his depression. She was clearly exhausted and that too was Gesio's fault. But this was something he could do something about.

A light warm rain started to fall as he and his daughter stood up. Gesio extended his wings like an umbrella over them all as he scooped up Sanari, who was purring quietly.

The Last Dance

The suns were up but the thick rain clouds hid much of their light enough that Kirin could safely remove her visor and look on Hima with her loving eyes. It was a romantic scene to have the newly-wed couple simply stare into each other's eyes.

Eqis, with '*champion*' in tow, leaned into the couple smiling, "You gonna do something or just stare at each other all day?"

Kirin's ears dropped sharply as Hima blushed. So drawn into each other that these two passionate creatures never grew '*hard*' for the other until now, as Hima unsheathed and Kirin's clit swelled a bit. They both leaned into each other and kissed deeply.

The rain continued to fall lightly, barely a drizzle now...

Gideon and Rauss had gathered the musicians and they began to play. The other white lions, cubs, adults and elders, all gathered. Rock, or Bronze and Sand, or Gold Lions also approached and gathered some readily pairing up for the dancing the music invited.

"Not a stitch of clothing to be had by any," Sanari, mused having realized that she hadn't worn more than few baubles for more than a couple weeks now. She'd almost forgotten about any inhibitions she had until now but she felt no shame of it. She enjoyed feeling the sun on her breasts and her belly. The warming of her face in the light felt all over. She smiled at Sage who, for the life of himself just couldn't get himself to be totally nude for more than a day off and on again. Still he wore a light loincloth and chaps over his proportionately small but comparatively huge phallus.

For the occasion, he'd shrunk down into the softer lesser hybrid form, the one of mostly fur and soft hide and light scale and plating. The one Sanari liked to rub up against.

"You are almost as bad as Geevo I think sometimes," Sage chuckled as she constantly scanned every male about her as she pressed against him, her four breasts mashing against his soft hide, her teats and clit hardening slightly. She let that teenager she once was have her day, a day that a harsh youth spent fighting and killing robbed her of.

"Sorry, dearest," she mewed giving a sudden and firm grope of her husband's maleness instantly exciting a '*medium-firm*' woody out of him so that it fully unsheathed and thickened. "Just taking a moment to feel young again..."

"...and so how is it to feel young again?" Sage asked as he took in a sharp intake of breath to her touches and puffed his chest out.

At eight feet, he was a massive guardian to the perfect and small beauty that Sanari was.

"I don't recall. When I was Kirin's age I was fighting Imperial Rangers for my life. I would've given my soul to have one day like this in the midst of all that. Sometimes I think I might've..."

“You got it back... or grew a new one, love,” Sage hugged her lightly as to not upset the belly of his wife, though his groin was now pressing firmly against her crotch.

The pregnancy was a long one. Even normal Cersile pregnancies would've been over by now at just three or four months. But his own analysis and that of other doctors said she was in for a go six to eight months with cubs much larger than is normal for a Cersile.

Hard to imagine that someone like Kayja, a Cersile woman of great ability, was a kitten barely all of one handful when born... Sage thought looking at and feeling just a little guilty to put Sanari, willing as she is, through this.

Rauss, the younger of two white lions that greeted the hunters, as well as Sage and his family, to the valley approached Kirin and Hima but looked at Kirin first before speaking to Hima, “I wish to ask you for something, good sir...” Rauss was much smaller than Hima but when they arrived Kirin was about his size. Now she was clearly a few inches taller.

“Ask for what?” Hima looked puzzled then a touch worried.

“I wanted to ask if you would be giving enough to allow me the honor of having a dance with your wife. Nothing more than one dance. If she refuses then it is done but...”

“Why not just ask her yourself then,” Hima said flatly but politely.

“Manners.” Rauss, being much smaller and sensing his disapproval, backed down slightly, “I did not want to seem as to be coming between...”

“You know what my answer is already,” Hima said firmly but, again, politely, “I love her but if she wishes to grace you with her...” Kirin held his hand firmly but warmly, a subtle request to stay calm.

“I must humbly refuse, Rauss. I'm sorry...” the black lioness gave a discreet curtsy, closing her eyes and looking away as to end the subject and move on.

The young white lion bowed his head to the rejection and walked away. It was not the first time that he'd been rejected by the target of his infatuation. He was drawn to her when they first arrived, knowing no reason to disdain a black lioness. He lived, it seemed, in the shadow of his older brother, Gideon, and seemed much less desirable for it. He was young. Strong, as any white lion his age would be, just coming to the potential of his virility, and so handsome... but lonely. Desperately lonely. It was like the world was ignoring him.

Conversations abound about him that he could take part in, but no one even leaned an ear to anything he had to say. Eventually Kirin, in the midst of a dance with Hima, saw him sitting alone on the edge of this party, face buried in his paws as if to hold the tears of desperate loneliness in.

“Husband,” Kirin stopped in mid-step looking back at the youth, “I... want to dance with him just this once... Please...”

“Why?” Hima saw it too and his heart ached.

Not that he needed an answer but he simply cared to know more like how she could feel for him. Besides it was a certain envy that nagged at him over Rauss being a white lion. He should have a small harem already, but there he was without so much as a chatting partner. Many times, Hima had been excluded from the activities of his brothers. He would be ignored or altogether rejected from their company. He didn't want to visit that on another.

“I can give him the one thing that would make this day bright for him,” she started toward him, “...My company...”

“I know... I was just upset. I had no idea he was so alone here... Go on... Until he is happy so long as he minds himself...”

“Thank you...”

Off watching with his wife in his lap, Sage witnessed the exchange and smiled proudly, “Kirin truly has a good heart as does Hima. They will be happy together. I also think I understand Sato a bit better now...”

“Are you going to try to defy Fate, dearest?” Sanari gave him a soft love bite on the cheek followed by a sweet little lick as if she drew blood. She really did have a hedonistic side that showed when they made the children she carries now and in little bits and pieces during this lovers’ adventure.

“From what you’ve told me... I couldn’t. Gesio... godfather... has been trying for longer than there has been a human civilization... I would have no hope. He even has time on his side implicitly to no avail. No. I can only hope that she can live long and well...” Sage’s voice trailed as he saw, or thought he saw, a ghostly white Aphkian with pale milky green eyes. She looked at him and as a dancer passed across his field of view, she disappeared.

“Dear heart?”

“I thought I saw something...”

“Hallucinations are not like you...”

“I’m not...” there she was again. Naked as a blue jay looking down on him as he sat. Sanari looked straight at her and did not see. Her body was tight and beautiful; the Aphkian notion of feminine perfection and it was an easy match for Sanari’s. Looking up to her eyes, they were cold and harsh, infinitely more so than Luna’s, but had a subtle, nearly escapable aura of love in them. She was the absolute epitome of a purely logical, emotionally controlled, and entirely empirical Aphkian. They do not lie.

“You will have a great family with many you will sire and bring to your hearth. You will see,” She said as she turned away, “One more thing. Luna... Do not let her die. Do not let her face Kayja’s wrath alone.” She walked away into the crowd and disappeared.

Who was that? Sage thought looking to his wife and smiled warmer than he had in days, “Hope. I was just given hope...”

“By whom?” Sanari purred feeling his hearts beat in joy, strong and elevated like long brisk steps. She nuzzled his chest longingly. How she wished to have him in her again but that would have to wait until after the cubs were born.

“A solid white wolffess with pale green eyes. An ‘empirical’...”

Rauss positively beamed as he danced lightly, gracefully, if nervously, in Kirin’s company. His heart swooned that he, for once, had the opportunity to be the attention of a beautiful female that he hoped, if nothing else, would think well enough of him to keep his company for a time.

Being so young he had his thoughts. Thoughts he knew better than to give voice. He wanted to take a female... Not this one. He smelled her scent and wanted to enjoy it from only arm’s reach. As they stepped gracefully he breathed heavily.

“Are you okay?” Kirin wanted to give this cub a soft lick on the cheek to make this his best first experience possible. It was clear he was much younger than his size implied. Loro was only a bit over six or seven years old, Rauss couldn’t be more than ten or eleven. Just a cub but one who so dearly wanted to be like his older brother,

Gideon. To be admired, adored, to have his pick of almost any female he saw...

“Do I look too young to you?” Rauss stopped in mid-step blushing looking at the black maiden in he gold eyes his own quivering sky blue eyes. Truthfully he looked like he was at least two years older. His penis hanging was another sign of his adolescence, to show he was ready to start seeking a mate.

Casid had few taboos of such young and able males having at least one lovemate. It made for good practice and often such relationships stayed for life. One’s first or second lovemate becoming their first lifemate.

Kirin leaned forward, “You will make a most beautiful lion... when you grow up some more.” She moved to his side smoothly to give him that so desired *‘love-lick.’* The young deep pink-red phallus lurched a bit as he backed away letting his pubescent nerves dictate that he was not really ready for her. “I’m sorry... Did I...”

Rauss cowed down to her before running away into the woods...

Is he scared of her? Hima asked himself seeing the same question on Kirin’s face. Just as he saw a couple of girls, roughly Rauss’ age follow him maybe a bit timidly. Gideon, who’d stopped his celebrating to enjoy his brother’s triumph, as it were, stood up ready to go to him. The eyes of concern and brotherly love tracked the girls following his brother. He then followed shrugging off three nubile lionesses who desired him for clearly only sex. No doubt that was what he had in mind for them but Rauss came before his pleasure.

“So close... Just one kiss...” Sanari sighed as Sage watched them. “Do you want to...?”

“Yes...” Sage sounded a bit ashamed to want to look after the boy who had just had his first real dance with not a girl but a young woman... After all, Kirin seemed maybe a little upset by this. Not angry, just concerned.

Sage’s gaze softened, the corners of his wizened eyes pinching slightly.

“Could you excuse me?” Sage said at last, “I want to go speak with Rauss.

“I knew you would. Don’t worry, beloved, I’ll be quite safe here.”

Sage smiled, and bending forward, kissed Sanari on the forehead, a soft and delicate thing, his draconic features overlaying his feline ones making him seem to be such an exotic form in that eight foot tall hybrid-form of his.

Rauss was, in a word, embarrassed as he raced into a stand of trees, his body glistening from the rain that had become a warm mist now. He hid in the trees as his brother Gideon hurried by, looking for him, and Rauss hid, wishing that he could remain alone for now. He grit his teeth, feeling his self control waning, and blood was pumping into his phallus, changing its color to red, forcing it to thicken.

Finally, Gideon stepped by, and Rauss exhaled a gasp of relief.

“Anything on your mind, young lion?”

The voice came right at his ear, and Rauss turned on his heel with a gasp and backed away from a tree that was, until a second ago, vacant of the person hanging his five-fingered hands on the overhanging branches.

Rauss’s mouth began to work stupidly at seeing Kirin’s adoptive father, and thereby Gesio’s granddaughter, looking down at him with a gentle expression on his face.

“I...” he managed, but no more words seemed to come out.

“Hm. Left that much of an impression on your mind did she?” Sage moved a hand and gestured, and a large rock rose out of the ground, large enough for himself and Rauss to sit upon. “Please... give me some company.”

Rauss swallowed, not knowing what the Beast Lord desired, hoping that he wasn't seeking retribution for trying to dance with his daughter, but he sat nonetheless while the Beast Lord packed a pipe and lit it with a flick of his fingers to enjoy a smoke.

Smells like incense, Rauss thought as the smoke wafted from that long pipe.

“It sort of is, Rauss. I'd offer you a smoke, but I don't believe your brother would enjoy that.”

He... he read my mind!

“Indeed.” Sage smiled, and then turned to the lion. “I would like to congratulate you on your candor, Rauss. It must've taken some grit to ask the wife of another male to dance with you. You are very brave.”

Rauss swallowed. “I... I wanted only a dance with her.”

“And secretly desired other things...” Sage added, and Rauss stopped breathing.

Sage chuckled and took another puff on his pipe. “You need not feel bad about that Rauss. We all have our desires. I was much like you when I was younger.”

“Y-you were?” Rauss blinked incredulously

“Yes. I...” Sage swallowed, and then concentrated on the embers of the mélange of herbs in his pipe. “My parents were murdered when I was very young. Buried alive. It was my mother's strength that kept me alive. She propped herself up on the last cross beam, trapping herself under it, but left enough room for me to survive within.

“Another family adopted me, and I gained a brother in that family. His name is Patch,” Sage smiled warmly at the image of his half-brother, the blind arctic werewolf with the black patch of fur over his right eye. “He was constantly looking after me, and when I was younger, I was truly, truly shy around the fairer sex. I was born with remarkable size and strength, just like you, and like you, was considered sacred by my clan.”

“‘*Clan*,’ master Five Talon?” Rauss repeated, and Sage smiled.

“Similar to a pride, but there were many prides, packs, and families in it. If I tried, just a little, I could've had whatever female I wanted... though we weren't as open with our sexuality as you are here.” Sage puffed on his pipe and leaned forward, bending over himself to flex the overlapping spines on his back so that they flared like a fringe. There was a wan little smile when he continued. “Sanari, admittedly, is not my first wife, Rauss.”

“You have another wife elsewhere already?” Rauss asked, and in the man-cub's mind, Sage saw the young male's impression of Sage's virility rise gallantly.

“Had.” Sage corrected. “I believe in taking only one wife, Rauss. The act of polygamy is not really celebrated by my clan. Her name was Ariel, and she was the prettiest female around. Glorious femininity, gentleness and a grace none could possibly duplicate. It was said that she was the reincarnation of an ancient goddess.”

“It must've been like love at first sight!” Rauss beamed, and Sage chuckled again.

“In all respects, Rauss... she hated my guts at first.”

“But how did she become your wife?”

“Females of my pryde, Rauss, undergo a truly spectacular heat. You’ve undoubtedly seen a female go into her heat near you; our females experience a heat that is orders of magnitude greater.

“Some, loose their minds to the heat, and seek out specific males in which to become the father of their cubs.

“Where we lived was within a great valley, similar to this one, and Ariel, nude as the day she was born, her body transforming rapidly to ready itself for the burden of pregnancy, had bypassed dozens of strong, capable males that I had thought more capable than I, slipped into my window high atop a cliff – she climbed forty feet to my home – and pleased me in the night.

“She was scandalized when she awoke in my bed with me the next day, and ran away.”

“Then what happened?” Rauss asked, enraptured by such a story.

“In the valley, I was the chief healer. She had no choice but to come to me for me to administer onto her, and help her to delve into her motherhood. She was timid when she came to me then, and I gave her help. She repaid me by telling me that she really had loved me. She always had. She... just had difficulty trying to express it, and had fears that I’d try to use her as a trophy.

“A beautiful woman should never be regarded as a trophy or a prize, Rauss. They are precious gifts from the Creator, sent as comforters, and lifemates. Treat them with respect, for it is they who will bare you your children.

“But, in Ariel’s case, in less than a month, before her pregnancy began to show, she and I were married.”

“Where is she now?” Rauss asked.

“That...” Sage’s jaw worked, and he couldn’t get himself to relive such a painful memory. “...Is a story for another time, Rauss. But I was the type of person where, if it weren’t for a female seeking me out, I would not have ever been married.” He snickered in humor at the concept, “If Sanari hadn’t dared to love me, I would not have such a precious creature in my life.

“The point of why I’m telling you this, Rauss, is that you are a fine, strapping young lad! You’re bigger for your age, and in every respect.” Sage looked out of the corner of his eye at the length of the man-cubs un-slung shaft, and mentally comparing himself to the cub’s endowment before continuing.

“You should seek out a gentle female for yourself, Rauss.”

Rauss hung his head. “But who would want me, Master Sage? I am... well...” Rauss shrugged.

“Not your brother.” Sage smiled. “That is the first thing that you need to solidify into your brain, Rauss. When I realized that I wasn’t like my half-brother, and stopped trying to live up to him and instead made my own name, my life became far more enjoyable.”

Rauss smiled.

“Now, Rauss, I wish to offer you a challenge. I want you to go back into that pavilion, and allow my daughter to give you the thing you ran away from.” Rauss blinked at him. “Then, I want you to find a young maiden amongst those still in the hall with us.”

“But... but I can’t...”

“Sure you can.” Sage smiled. “And I have some information for you. There was a young maiden eyeing you, Rauss. And I’ll give you a hint. In a few hours, several of the couples will filter out of the pavilion to enjoy each other’s company in private. She will be one of the few who doesn’t have a partner for the night, because she has saved herself in hopes that you’d notice her.”

Rauss's expression was quite comical as he stared at Sage with his eyes wide and his lips pursed.

"And now for some advice..." Sage paused. "You are much like me, Rauss, and allow me to tell you that acting the gentleman and reacting to them will bring the right kind of female to you. And in the end... you won't have to fear bedding a young maiden.

"She will bed you."

Rauss hurried off while Sage stepped out of the stand after him, still smoking and explained to Gideon that he'd helped Rauss. The pair of them entered just in time for them to see Kirin give Rauss a gentle lick on the cheek after another dance.

"Good for him." Gideon said, just as a pair of females slid in to either side of him, pawing at his chest and nuzzling him. This time he didn't ignore them.

Sage stepped inside, and looking down the length of his body, shrugged, and removed his loincloth but kept his chaps on, taking a deep breath and trying to be brave amidst all this foreplay.

Settling down beside Sanari, she immediately reached over his thigh and caressed his inner thigh, knuckling the mass of his unsheathed phallus as she purred.

"How'd it go?" she asked, settling in closer to his scaled side, and now sliding her claws against the unnatural number of abdominals – twelve sets of abs and four sets of lats – that lined his middle from his ribs to his pelvis.

A dragon's belly, after all, had all those ridges.

"I gave him a little pep-talk. His brother will speak with him a little later, but Gideon has to ditch his dates for a moment or two before he does." And he reached across himself to cup her belly.

Sanari, smiling as his great hand palmed the front of her rounding belly, purred louder as she felt that soft, gentle touch of his taloned fingers sliding across her fur and flesh like a dove's wings against the air.

It was still an amazement to her that a creature so great and massive, who could spit worlds with a simple aimed flick of his finger – could be so gentle. And though it'd been a couple weeks since they'd last coupled on the Fortuna Stone, and despite his willingness if she wanted to, she still felt lax about having him again, but her loins were beginning to ache with all this foreplay going on about her, and her teats had hardened intensely.

The musicians came to an end in their playing, Sage and Sanari cuddling, both of them lacing a hand into the other's hand and covering her belly together while they listened.

All the instruments were rather archaic... save one: A stringed instrument having a dozen strings to it, a long stalk, and a base about the size of a lute. Sage didn't know the name given to that instrument, but the person who played it played it like one would a harp, with his fingers plucking the strings above and below him to get chords and sounds that were truly inspiring, sounding like a guitar more than a harp.

The evening was starting to wind down, and this one Casid, wearing a long, leather wrapping about his waist like an Aphkei Terre, slung his instrument against his back, and like the other musicians, began to leave the pavilion for rest... some of them taking up partners for the night.

As the musician walked by, however...

"Excuse me, Reil," Sanari spoke aloud suddenly, and the Casid white lion stopped and then bowed.

“I know not how you know my name, gentle mother,” He smiled as he rose. “But you seem to know the name of everyone in the valley, and that pleases this simple musician. What do you wish of me?” he bowed again

“Your music is so soothing, and my cubs don’t kick as much when I hear your music. I was wondering if you would be so willing to play us one more song before you retire.”

“Your wish is my desire, my lady, but I must confess... my instrument is one used to give a background to others. And I do not have someone who I can provide a melody for.” He said, turning to his band mates who were all but gone now, and those who were left behind had chosen bedmates for themselves.

“If I may be so forward, master Reil, I like the sound of your instrument. But if you wish for a partner, my husband will provide the background melody for you...”

Sage turned his head to his mate as her hand lifted to palm his hard chest. He sighed and rubbed her belly again.

“As... as you wish, my lady.” Reil said, and sitting back on the table before Sanari, he un-slung his instrument, made a double check that it was still in-tune, strummed the lower chords once and then raised his head to her. “What song do you wish?”

“You choose. Something soft.” She smiled as Sage rose, and lifting his hand, those who were watching this exchange watched in wonder as tendrils coiled out of his hand, wrapping around themselves into a long flute that was made up of three intertwining pipes.

A flute with three voices; an instrument with no name, save for that of a short melody, for words would defile the beauty of the instrument...

What very few knew, however, was that this instrument, was the peaceful, gentle side of Lord Sage’s unbelievably powerful bio-blade. Sanari had seen that since his bio-blade had grown so powerful, and Sage’s heart had known more sorrow since he’d first played it for her, the power of this instrument had grown a thousand fold.

Sage had said that the reason for that was Sanari herself. She was his muse.

Sage sat beside the young lion, but at a step below him to give the proper notice for Reil and his instrument, and the lion lowered his hand to the base of the instrument, and began to move his large hand back and forth along the strings, moving ever upward, setting a song, and a pace, using his claws as the picks.

Sage smiled, seeing the hands of a master in this young lion... with claws as white and clear as the day he was born. He smiled, now knowing his wife’s motive in getting this lion to play. He needed confidence in the power of his chosen instrument.

For a full song, Sage sat there with his flute, respecting this young Casid’s skill, and when it ended, he noticed that there was a great gathering of young males and females, mostly doting females, who listened to his skill.

“I am sorry,” Sage said. “Your skill is quite masterful; I am trying to learn it. Could you please play again? I think I can get it perfectly with one more.”

“I...” and he looked at Sanari, and she nodded with that smile of hers, *a smile that was like having the warmth of the sun on your face.*

“Please master Reil!” one young gold lioness said, her muscles flexing as she leaned forward, tipping her breasts for him to see.

“Yes please!” said another young lioness, this one a smaller, more fragile white tiger. Her breasts were pert, but her hips were wide and sensual and her bottom rounded. Her tail was already lifting instinctively.

Reil smiled, and again played, and when he finished, there was much applauding

“Thank you Reil.” Sage said, and Sanari leaned back, rubbing her belly as she knew what was about to come. “I believe that is all I need. You set the tune, and I will set the melody.”

“Certainly, Master Five Talon,” Reil said, and one more song began to play.

But then Sage lifted his flute to his lips, and began with one resonating note.

The instrument had three pipes coiling about it, which with proper lip and finger control, could be played simultaneously. Sage began with a simple low note, with the shorter, thicker tube, and the sound that it gave off created a background for the harp-like guitar that deadened all other sounds in the chamber.

Reil’s eyes widened in surprise as he turned to see this five-fingered creature playing such a thing, and as he noticed himself slipping, moved back to his instrument and played just short of making a mistake and sounding a discord.

Sage’s melody shifted to the next pipe, a steady rise and fall in notes as the Dra’Con played with his eyes completely shut. As Sage’s melody grew more complex, Reil forced himself to improve his song, moving along with the melody, holding his breath sometimes and calling for hope so as not to shame such an instrument.

And then he did a double take toward Sage as a third, higher pitched twittering flute sounded, and without missing a beat, his hands began to rise rapidly, masterfully along the length of his twelve strings, till he was plucking high atop the instrument. And then his other hand moved to begin to set another tune with his other hand lower in the strings.

Sage countered by playing two of his flute’s voices simultaneously, the resonance sound long and smooth, filling the air with a song when, combined with Reil’s own strings, created a magic as powerful as the Pied Piper.

The general foreplay of the lovers in the room stopped at the insistence of such a sound, the music, drawing tears from some, even some of the powerful gold lions, as the music touched at something deep in their souls.

Champion, with Eqis situated near him, was weeping as he listened to that music, not believing that a murderous creature like Sage... could create something so beautiful.

What kind of a man can kill so relentlessly, know and cause such evil as that, while at the same time possess something so beautiful?

Sage’s hands moved his pipe forward and backward in order to use the different voices of the flute, his lip and tongue moving in ways that has helped him be such a vibrant lover to his lifemate, Sanari.

And then while Reil stepped up his playing one more time by spreading his hands along the strings, deepening the melody, Sage likewise stepped up to the challenge, and while playing his melody on the low and mid voices, twittered in time with Reil’s music in accompaniment with the high-pitched twittering of the narrow long flute.

Reil’s fingers began to downplay the music and Sage followed, lessening his song, removing voices, and he ended with the same note he began with as Reil ended with a single chord that hummed in the air.

Reil looked at Sage, unbelieving at the song, and there were people crying about him.

“You have a powerful instrument there, Master Reil.” Sage said. “You should never downplay it. Set the tune, not the melody. I rarely have competition for this flute of mine,” and Sage retracted it back into his hand. “...And I consider it an honor to have played with you.

“But a question, what is the name of that instrument?”

“N-name?” Reil asked, watching Sage as the Draco-tiger rose. “It... has no name, Master Sage of the Five Talon.”

Sage smiled at him. “Neither does mine. You have a sacred instrument there, Reil. To name such a thing would be sacrilege of the divine inspiration gifted onto the person who originally created it.”

“But... but I’ve been seeking to name it. For many moons I’ve sought a name to call it.”

Sage smiled, and turned to Sanari and laid a hand on her knee, and recalled his experience with her when she asked him what the name of his instrument was.

“My flute’s name is not a name of words, Reil. It is a short melody. Perhaps... you can come up with something similar. Now... I must retire with my lifemate, but in the meantime, Master Reil... I think you have some admirers here...”

Reil looked at the mainly female audience he now had, and many of them begged him to continue.

“Please... please! Another song, Master Reil.” The young tigress with the wide hips asked, moving closer to him than all the others, leaning onto his knee while Sage helped Sanari down from her roost on a stone platform.

Reil had an admirer that stayed with him throughout the night, the young Stormseeker, asking him to play song after song, and while Sage and Sanari went for a private walk with one another in the woods, they could always hear his songs in the main pavilion. Later, as they were returning to the shelter, they saw Reil, with his instrument slung on his back, and his admirer pressing against his side, using him as her guide as they walked, while her long, slender, four-fingered hand began to coax his phallus to unsheathe and then erect.

Sage smiled at the image as he held Sanari, imagining that the two of them wouldn’t be able to wait to get back to one of the shelters, and instead collapsed with one another right in the bushes.

Sage got a brief moment of fate as Reil stood behind this maiden, his hands massaging her bodice fondling her breasts as if he were playing her like his instrument.

Everywhere around them they could hear the sounds of pleasure being made, and the air was filled with pheromones, both male and female, even in the sprinkling warm night rain.

Sage’s manhood unsheathed idly as he began to look at his wife longingly, and Sanari was beginning to feel more of her earlier desires panging in her loins. They’ve never gone so long without pleasing one another before last week, and she was still hungry.

Sanari sighed, her labia compressing about her erect clit, her nipples erecting, and Sage, always being the gentleman around Sanari, guided her over to a sculpted rock so that she could sit down.

Once he was beside her, she leaned into him, laying her arm and hand on his thick thigh, and purred. She gave a brief moan as a little of her milk trickled from one of her primaries in her arousal.

Sanari wanted to not stress her body, and have her large mate enter her in her condition, and Sage, though he knew that until her third trimester, or at least her sixth month, that was unnecessary. Sanari, however, was insisting, and he respected her wishes; he loved her too much not to, and he made it blatantly apparent that her wishes came before his own.

But smelling his lifemate’s pheromones blazon about her, he felt his manhood stiffen, and he pressed it between his finely muscled legs to save her the temptation. But who knew how long that would last?

At that moment, however, Rauss stepped outward, standing despondently for a moment, but then turned and smiled, lifting his hand to someone just out of sight, and Sage nudged Sanari and she opened her eyes to watch.

A beautifully attractive young tigress, a slender, beautiful creature, who's white fur was brilliantly white and pristine, slid into Rauss. Her small size was slightly less than Rauss, and her bust was well developed for one so young.

She straddled him, kissing him and then licking his cheek, and as her head turned to receive a nuzzling from the young lion, Sage and Sanari both blinked at the purple-eyed young woman Rauss was cradling.

"Clio." They both said as one.

"And she's in heat." Sanari added.

"Or just starting to be." Sage chuckled. "It seems we now know where Clio's ancestry beings. I wasn't sure if it would be Gideon or Rauss."

Sanari chuckled, and lowered her gaze to Sage's lap, her fingers caressing his thigh, tracing the individual striations and muscles, while out of the corner of her eye, and right in the direct view of Sage's, the maiden who looked like Clio surged forward, carrying Rauss into the bushes, and the two of them collapsed to the ground. The last they saw of them was Clio rising, hefting her rounded bosom and arching her back, and bending low, began her lover's dance with him.

"Clio has good forbearers." Sage commented, and then suddenly took in a deep breath as Sanari's fingers found the base of his penis where it met his pelvis, and Sage instinctively pushed out his chest as she coaxed his legs open to slide her long fingers against that circumcised erection.

"S-Sanari?" he managed through his teeth as his gaze lowered to her hand caressing and cajoling him. "A-are you sure you want to do this?"

Sanari's fingers stiffened as he said this, reminded of what she'd so fervently told him, and she moved them to Sage's abs.

"No." she sighed, and then hugged her husband, but her gaze was still on that thing between his legs before she shut her eyes, and sighed. "No I don't." she said, a little disappointment in her voice.

The sound of someone roaring in pleasure somewhere in the forest didn't help her thoughts either, and when she stood up, her tail was still lifted, her back arched. Sage rose to stand with her, because seeing her sex compressed between the cheeks of her bottom just beneath her raised tail was giving him ideas he wanted to fight for her sake, and as it was, his phallic region wasn't really hanging anymore. He lifted his hand, and tensed his fingers short of grabbing that bottom, and instead lifted his hand to her shoulders.

At her side, however, he was able to look down upon her, hoping to view her swollen belly, but was only able to view her swollen mammaries, and he stiffened some more.

He murred, and did something he hadn't had to do for what felt like ages, and taking control of his body, he grew limp again, and forced his hand to move to her belly. She held his hand with both of hers and smiled dotingly at him; standing with tail still raised and her thighs pressed together.

"Sage... I'm cold." She said, and leaned in closer to him. "Could you bed me? I mean... put me to bed? I'm tired..."

"As you wish." Sage mused, and picking her up in his arms, cradled her slender body comfortably around her belly, which she held lovingly as she let her large mate carry her, and she rested against him as he carried her to their shelter.

The pillars with their crystals lit as they entered, warming the living shelter from the inside with a gentle air, and Sage lowered Sanari into their nest, and from within his satchel resting beside their things, he pulled out a series of vials, uncorked the first, poured some of its contents into his hands, washing his hands with them, and then began to massage her.

It was a process that he'd begun with her shortly after impregnating her. It was a fundamental process that Sanari enjoyed every second of.

It began with the first vial... a liquid that burned with its own heat that worked out the kinks in all her muscles, and made her pliable. Sage began to massage all this into her body, beginning with her labia so as to make it looser, able to expand in the future to deliver her babies. Then he moved to her belly, massaging it to help it to stretch around her growing burden. And then he moved to her breasts, being that in this stage of her pregnancy, when she'd have one or two cubs already, those would be changing the most.

If it were a normal Cersile pregnancy, she'd be cradling two cubs to her chest by now. But now, with her womb still full, her breasts – both primaries and secondaries – were producing milk and continuing to develop for that purpose.

He paid particular attention to her chest for that reason, and also because of that reason, Sanari was experiencing most of her aches in her chest, loosening the nipples, the areola, helping them to stretch along with her belly and eliminate the possibility of a stretch mark.

He then soothed her aching body, bending low occasionally to kiss her.

Hips, thighs, knees and toes, neck muscles, ribs and buttocks, back and arms.

Sanari sprawled outward, sweating now as Sage then delivered a conditioning oil in the same process, the oil a substance that would further allow her flesh to expand without stretching.

A final solution washed the excess fluids off while at the same time softening her flesh, and brightening her fur, this last process done with brushes and combs. The final process made her relaxed, and vibrant.

As usual, Sanari lay there, purring loudly as she simply breathed, letting her husband work upon her; her breasts steadily swelling and contracting with each breath, her body vibrating from her purring

Sage's kisses grew ever the more passionate as he worked on her body, helping her to work sore muscles, leaning into her, purring himself, with that odd double-heart of his vibrating his body like a diesel engine combined with a low rolling thunder.

But by the time it came to the brushes and combs, Sanari slowly opened her eyes, feeling her husband's hand pausing upon her breast, and a smile crossed her face as she looked upon his gentle, handsome features that were glowing in the firelight it seemed as he held himself over her.

He was attracted by the breast, loved the feel of them, especially hers, and his hand seemed to be caught in the massaging motion he'd last had. Long strands of her mane fell along her face as she lay there, enjoying his touch on her womanhood as he inadvertently squeezed out more of her milk. Looking at him, she could feel her nipples hardening, feel the weight of his phallus lying over her bodice as it stiffened, and subconsciously, her thighs spread further open.

“B-beloved... I... d-do you think we should?” she asked.

This time it was her place to remind him. Sage didn't answer at first, merely lifted his hand so that he could suck the cream off his thumb, and then lower a hand to move a flock of her hair away from her eyes with the tip of a claw.

“I know.” He managed, his erection stiffening – hard – as he rose up off her body, as his hand lowered to her face before he fingered her lips with his thumb. “I... I’m sorry for putting you into this, beloved.” He managed, and looked down at her chest again, wanting to cup it again, and his erection stiffened harder as the head flared. “I know you ache for love... and though the body is willing, the spirit isn’t.” he mused on that thought and lowered his eyes. “Funny, usually it’s the other way around.”

“Ngh... b-beloved,” she exhaled a sigh and arched her back a bit, and then opening her eyes, moved both her hands to cradle his face in her hands. “Please... I beg of you, I cannot bare it if you continue blaming yourself for this... this blessed gift I bare. I bare it proudly... I bare it lovingly... I bare... ngh... I bare it with love.” Her body arched again, and her loins swelled and parted before clenching tightly, her clit erecting harder than ever. “I... I love you.” And she hauled herself up to him, hugging him fiercely. “It pains me to see you so unhappy.”

“I’m... I’m unhappy because you feel pain beloved.” He said, palming the whole of her face with one hand.

“Bless your hearts.” She chuckled, her fingers sliding over his Heart Stone. “But I’m fine. Really I am.”

Sage cradled her, crying a little as his erection was trapped between them. He kissed her forehead. “But you’re in pain. You ache all the time. You want love, your soul quakes for it and I...”

Sanari lifted her chin and silenced him with a kiss. When she drew back, it was to pull him down to her before finally breaking her kiss with him. Sage looked down at her as she settled higher up onto her bedding, Sage holding himself above her as she then took his hand and settled it onto her breast again. Sage developed a pained look on his face as he anguished at taking pleasure in the feel of her tit. But he nonetheless began to massage it, unable to help himself before bending to kiss her nipple and withdraw again. He pressed his head against her bosom, holding her belly with his other hand while her hands then slid to cover his Heart Stone again and feel the double tapping of his hearts.

“I want you to love me then, beloved.”

“A-are you certain?”

“Yes.” She whispered, and bent her head forward to nuzzle him. “I... I can’t take it anymore beloved. I... I need you.”

Sage stared at her unblinkingly for a moment and then looking away, he blinked, focusing upon his hand holding her tit still, and slid his thumb gently against it, and looking at her again, he smiled and bent low to kiss her again. He withdrew and kissed her yet again, kneeling between her thighs, nuzzling her nose with his.

They shared each other’s breath for a moment or two before Sage leaned back, massaged her swollen belly one last time, leveled his manhood for her womanhood, and slid ever so gently into her.

Never before in their shared life with one another had they been so delicate with one another... so slow. Caresses became touches, and the brunt of the lovemaking was dedicated with their mouths as they kissed one another over their faces, necks and torsos... Sanari getting the brunt of that.

But the movement between them, of the act of coupling, became a very beautiful thing.

Their cubs actually rested quietly in Sanari’s womb, just above the point that had led to them being conceived, Sage’s hands massaging her belly and their cubs almost as often as he caressed and cajoled her breasts.

This would become the last time the couple would love one another before their cubs would be born... Sanari coming very close to the end of her second two-month term. Both knew that Sanari’s pregnancy would be longer than the five to six month term for her species, and from this point, it would perhaps be three, or four, or more months more before she was ready to give birth.

As it was... the couple enjoyed this love making as if it were to be their last decent meal for a very, very long time...

Kirin lay on her back, arching her body while her beloved husband continued to please her. She didn't roar or shriek out in her pleasure, clutching to her mate's chest while her loins ached with his erection piercing her.

A bed of plants had grown to support her back without her even wishing it, and hers and her mate's love juices were leaking from within her as she groaned softly, thrusting upward while her mate suckled from her tit.

She could feel herself growing stronger now, even without father's influence on her, her body was still marginally growing in strength, and she was beginning to blame it on her sexual interactions with her mate.

She smiled at him, rocking her hips as she set her feet about his waist while Hima sucked her tits dry.

She... felt that for some reason that this would not last, and because of that feeling, she was trying her hardest to love every last moment she had with him. She hoped... hoped that it would be his child that she would be able to bear before whatever force it was that separated them took her from him.

She closed her eyes, squeezing some tears from her eyes as she thrust into him again, getting a burst of his seed into her as his fingers ran along her contoured ribs.

I will always protect you, dear heart, she thought, groaning again, and then whimpering as he probed her particularly deep. I... I will do all that I can to keep you.

I love you...

Second Wave

The valley was peaceful all that night, with the cries and roars of elation and pleasure dying out sometime after moon fall.

Sage and Sanari continued to love one another well after that, and Sage, unfolding his leathery wings in this form, wrapped them both inside them and cuddled Sanari's side to keep her and their cubs warm during the night.

Kirin... however, remained awake, staring at the greater moon passing before her while her mate slept close to her side, his head tucked in between the crook of her tit, shoulder and bicep. In sleep he hugged her tighter and kissed the side of her furry tit. She felt barely alive as she watched that moon creek above her, her fear of losing her beloved Hima seeming to be growing in her mind.

Then she felt it, and her fingers flexed against the ground as it crept up from the soil to touch her finger tips. She looked over at her hand, lifted it off the ground, and then pressed her fingertips against the earth again.

The earth... trembling?

She looked to Hima, and delicately, as softly as she could, she slid from beneath him, and laid him to be more comfortable. Her body a living shadow now in the darkness, she slunk off to follow the path of the trembling.

Kirin had followed her new senses up the valley to the entrance, snuck out of the protection of the mountain ring, and made her way about in the rocks, hiding as best she could. She followed sounds now, and finally crawling like

a wraith onto an outcropping of rock, laying awkwardly to stay within the natural shadows against a cluster of rocks, she looked down on the horror that lay below.

There was a whole camp in the narrow box valley that laid beside the one she and her family resided within. The camp was a mass of armored Tar Lions, hardened by constant fighting and battle. Even as she watched, she saw two particularly massive Tar Lions fighting each other totally naked, tearing great rents in each other's fur, adding to each other's scars as they vied for dominance.

Dekan's Army.

She'd heard of it. They came taking – not asking for but taking – '*volunteers*' from her old pride to join his army. Dekan was a shrewd bastard, and even after his death, he'd made a way for his own vengeance should he not return. Kirin knew not when they would attack, but knowing the legend of Dekan that her new father had finally killed, they wouldn't wait for long. Perhaps sunrise...

Great Maker it'd already been a week. Perhaps it'd taken this long for his army to assemble and come here... but whatever the reason as to why they'd waited half a fortnight, it was an attack that would soon be coming with an army that large.

She continued to scan, finding one of their own females being ravaged, and elsewhere still, she saw a Stormseeker, chained to a hitching post, weary and beaten. It was this Stormseeker that got Kirin's attention. The poor, frail young female was beaten and battered, her back a bloody mess of claw marks old and new... and some even fresh. She seemed to be a thing that they raped constantly.

In a former life... Kirin would've laughed at her and thrown stones at her, but now...

She felt unclean for being anything like these barbarians. She looked back toward the Valley of the Stormseekers then up at the endless sky, now absent of the bright moons of Casiida. Both had already set, which meant that morning was coming soon. Then she looked to the Stormseeker again, and took a deep breath.

I have a few hours. I must try to save her, and then perhaps warn the valley somehow.

She crawled forward. Now she knew why the earth trembled. When that crew raged the valley, then the black fertile soil of the valley would stain red with the blood of the Stormseekers there.

Kirin slunk past her former breed, hiding even right before their eyes at times.

"Did you see something?" she'd hear often enough, but she was particularly adept at being silent and motionless.

Sand in torches to extinguish them cut down the light more wherever she needed to go. Till finally, she knelt before the Stormseeker strapped with her wrists bound to a wooden crossbeam above her head. Kirin lifted a hand, and felt her breath, and breathed a sigh of relief that the young fem was still alive.

Kirin chanced a look around her, and then cut the fem's bonds, throwing her easily over her shoulder and slinking off on one arm and both her legs against the ground. Kirin managed only a moment of amazement that the Stormseeker's body felt so light, she was sure that this young fem would weigh her down incredibly, but she supported her weight as if it were nothing!

Stepping forward lithely, her breasts swaying as she moved speedily, she looked down, and gasped, seeing the land passing by beneath her feet so rapidly. But then she looked up, saw a Tar Lion as he emerged from a tent, and scrambling for his horn to blow the alarm, Kirin dashed forward, idly reached up, grabbed his throat, and tore it out as she was hurrying by.

She tossed his Adam's Apple away as she leapt and soared amazingly high up into the air, hearing her ward moan with pain as she lurched up over the lower section of the mountain leading to the pass to the central valley.

Father! Grandfather! Mother! Anyone, if you can hear me...HELP! Kirin cried inside her mind, and leapt over the ridge and down into the valley.

Sage awoke with a start.

Lifting a hand, he began to rub his temples at the dream he'd just had. A tide of darkness, welling up out of a narrow mouth, opening wide to consume all in its path, with the gravy of its meal being living blood.

He'd not ever had a dream that was so... disturbing in all his life, and him being nearly a century old, that was saying much. He looked down at Sanari, seeing her so sated as she laid back, her breasts full and round, her secondaries swelling beautifully. Her milk even had tasted just right... sweet. Their cubs would be well cared for in her loving arms.

He wrapped her up in some furs and then rose to his feet, going for a short walk while his wings folded about him like a cloak, and his long tail waived lizard-like at his backside.

He stopped, just outside the shelter, feeling... something odd.

It was how he felt just before a particularly powerful fate vision took him, and steeling himself, exhaling long and deep, he waited for it to come. But while he waited... there was the sound of moving trees, and a subtle foot fall, and he turned to see Gesiomagatou standing there at the edge of the clearing.

"Hello Sage, and good morning my son." He smiled softly.

He looked sad, Sage thought. But then while he thought that, other questions rose in his mind, and Sage turned, not caring about his nudity at the moment – Gesio was nude too, after all – and took a breath to ask the questions that had been milling in his mind since last week.

"Gesio... father," Sage prompted. "There are some things that concern me, father."

"There are." Gesio responded, his words a statement instead of a question, and he stood there quietly, waiting for Sage to ask.

"Dekan... H-how... how did I die?"

Gesio stared at Sage unblinkingly for a moment. Then his jaw set, and he lifted his hand, and suddenly the world transformed around them so that it appeared like the sanctuary temple.

On the one hand was Sage in his armored half-dragon form, an twelve foot monstrosity that knew no natural physical equal, with an overwhelming level of power that superseded even Rae Iksaki's bottomless well at the moment. Even his current form superseded that power, but she and Makahn, and a scant few others retained a greater natural strength than he did.

Dekan was scrawny in comparison, a mere nine foot tall tar lion, barely armored, and armed only with his claws. Both individuals were frozen in the moment in which Gesio and those other strangers had interfered... Sage's sword swinging to cleave Dekan in half, Dekan's claws sprawled outward.

Laikei and Niria were held off to one side, both amidst attacking Dekan.

And then time moved forward, slowly so that Sage could see, and he walked around the image as Sage's sword swung overextended, and by chance, Dekan's impressively sharp claws found the edges of Sage's Heart Stone... the birthstone of his Dragon Seed, and ultimately the progenitor of all his other powers. But the Heart Stone had a functional use to it other than increasing its bearer's power. It was also the hardest point of a dragon, there to hold up the ribcage against all that incredible muscle. Without it, the chest region would collapse from its own strength, even despite dragon bones holding it up.

Sage watched as Dekan's claws pinched the gem, the claws sliding beneath all Sage's armor as a well of darkness came around his hand, his hand sinking unbidden into the image of Sage's body. Clenching his fingers into a fist then as Dekan landed on Sage's body, Dekan wrenched the gem outward, kicked Sage and was done with him, Sage's Soul Gem clutched in his hand. His motion and laughter were silenced as he landed in Laikei and Niria's arms to which he was wrung apart; his body crushed in their arms.

Sage's massive body fell to the ground, and that was where the image halted.

"You died very bravely, Sage." Gesio said as Sage squatted down beside his body, looking into the gaping hole in the image's chest. "My... daughters, caught and maimed Dekan, but he turned on them and broke them. Without your Heart Stone, you nonetheless forced yourself to rise and with the last of your strength, ran The Void's body straight through with your sword of light. Even as you were dying, you blessed my daughters with your own body, and gave them your soul gems. They grew... powerful, creatures of legend, new Beast Lords. You died with much honor and nobility... and with much overconfidence. Even the greatest of individuals have weak points. You above all should know that.

"Dekan has been imbued with the power of The Void. He used that power to cause chaos, mayhem and ultimately destruction. The Void is a power that must be respected, or it will destroy you. Someday, you will learn to recognize its agents better."

"I am still getting used to this body," Sage responded, rubbing the green gem against his chest. "I am now aware of a particular weakness of mine. I will have to modify myself to lessen and hopefully remove that weakness.

"I had wondered how a creature like me, with enough armor to render me impervious in some areas and as strong as a dreadnaught in others, with the ten sources at my command, and the technological weaponry of an entire flight of mecha... was felled by one lone warrior."

"That is the nature and the power of The Void, Sage. It is all-powerful and chaotic. Its minions are granted great power to destroy. Even would-be titans like you."

"Why did you let me see that whole thing, Gesio? Why did you let me meet Rhodin, the Old One and Masq?"

"I didn't." Gesio said, and Sage turned to him in question. "It's a measure of how powerful you've grown, Sage. When we stopped time, some instinctive reaction in you allowed you to move in that stopped flow of time. And when I and even Rhodin tried blanking your mind, we found it... difficult... to do so, and we were only marginally successful at it.

"They weren't kidding when they said your mental defenses were strong.

"You saw too much before it was your time, Sage. And once you've seen the Face of the Void – Master Masq – you cannot ever forget, no matter the power of the person trying to seal the image from your mind. And when you see them, see the agents of The Void, they see you."

"What do I do?" Sage asked then, bowing his head.

"For now... continue on in your life." Gesio said, and stepped over to Sage to lay a heavy hand on his shoulder. Masq's appearance in your life has not changed much in the order of things. You've reached the level of a Cosmic Being Sage... and Rae is close at your heels, though, admittedly, we thought she would beat you to this point."

“We?”

“There are others who battle The Void Sage... The individuals in whom you saw are the Old One, reputed to be nearly as old as your Draco and Leviathan, and Lord Rhodin... the sun lion in whom you met. He’s been watching you in particular for a very, very long time.”

“I regret having to take credit for his act of destroying Dekan, Gesio. His opinion of me is favorable, I hope?”

“It is. He respects honorable men, Sage. And you have much honor in his eyes. You are merely too innocent.

Sage snorted twin gouts of smoke from his dragon fire through his nostrils. “I... I wish I could take this knowledge from you Sage. I wish I could protect you from this for at least a little longer.”

Sage lowered his head and smiled, his ears falling to mark his sadness however. “I... have some training to do, it appears. We humans have an old saying. When stumbling around in the dark... beware that you don’t awaken the sleeping giant. Sometimes we are the giant... and sometimes the giant gets us.”

Gesio smiled and his hand gripped Sage’s firm shoulder again, but then, inexplicably, Sage blinked and his eyes went distant, and his body tensed as he opened his mouth in the disbelief of something. It was for but a moment before he shook his head as if to clear it.

“What’s the matter?” Gesio asked.

Sage paused, and then began to walk off, his wings unfolding.

“I... am blessed and cursed with being able to see the paths Fate sets before us. I can choose those paths, and at times bargain a new one. For every coin toss, all believe that there is only heads and tails, but occasionally, if you throw a coin enough times, it will eventually land on its edge.” Sage paused at the forest’s edge even as storm clouds began to form along the edge of the valley

“Gesio... I charge you with the protection of my mate for an hour. Do not leave her side, father. It is the only way you will survive this day.”

Gesio blinked, and watched as Sage bent, picked up a pebble, took aim and flicked it into the forest.

“Loro will find his way to you within the shelter, looking for me. I want you to pick him up and hold him as soon as he comes in. Do not let him go.”

“Sage? I am confused, and that’s a big thing for me. What’s going on?”

“I had a Fate Vision. I was waiting for it when you arrived.”

“What did you see?”

“A tide of black, and wherever it touched, the world burned. I saw it rise up and consume all of you. Including you, father.”

“And what were you doing?”

“My fate dreams never include me, Gesio. Hence is the fate – both blessing and curse – of a Wild Card. I am the unknown in all visions of the future. If I appear in a vision, then the future becomes uncertain. Most are unaware of that fact. Which is why I’ve lived this long.”

With that Sage turned and strode into the forest.

The Butterfly Effect was another favored tool of Fate.

By something so simple being done, great actions can eventually be garnered from it. The pebble in which Sage had flicked into the wood startled an insect, which jumped and landed on a stone. This stone turned and suddenly the insect was gone as the amphibian playing prone to lure its prey in gulped it down. It leapt out of its bog and landed on a real stone, and belched as it ate. Just then, one of the song birds the size of eagles swooped down, snatched up the amphibian in its great claws, soared to a branch and ate it.

As it became sated, it began to sing, and the place where it had begun to sing was directly above where the young Stormseeker, Loro slept.

He awoke with a start, blinking tired eyes before he stretched and rose to his feet, picking up his beloved book and rubbing at the back of his head, suddenly remembered that Sage had been promising him that he'd teach him something new today, and gleefully hurried off to his shelter in hopes that he was up early.

There, he was picked up by Gesio, who told him Sage was gone for a time, but if he was a good boy and waited, that Sage would show him something spectacular today.

Loro only knew of one thing on how to be a good boy now, and opening his book, he began to read.

Outside the shelter... it began to rain.

Kirin rushed headlong down the slope as thunder rolled above her. Part of the valley was being coated in rain now.

She couldn't believe on how vividly her mind saw everything around her. She was actually running straight down the mountain face – and at full tilt no less – leaping off of rocks and hurtling outward, and on top of that she held another being over one shoulder.

She could still hear the Stormseeker she carried making moans of discomfort, and Kirin lifted her other hand to help support her weight as she finally leapt off the face, landed on the grassy slope beneath the rock slope, and raced downward into the bowl of the valley.

Father... please be near, father... she thought, prayed even.

But what she did find was Laikei and Niria as they labored to cover some of the last of the bodies in the early morning. She raced right up to them.

“Laikei! Niria!” she panted. “Please help!”

“Kirin?” Niria prompted, “Great Aul, what happened?” and she rushed forward to take the Stormseeker off the Black Lion.

“An army! An army of Tar Lions is making preparations to storm the valley! I rescued this one from their camp.”

“Ngh!” the young fem groaned as the sisters knelt and began to heal her.

“It's Miki!” Laikei said. “She was carried off by the tar lions during the raid...”

“An army?” Niria repeated as Laikei bent to take over the healing. “Do you know when they'll attack?”

“N-no... but I...” Kirin began, and she stopped, her pupils dilating as she heard a horn, and the sisters also stopped as that horn was answered by others.

Rain was beginning to fall as black storm clouds rolled in, thrusting up over the mountains as they ringed the valley, blocking out the rising sun.

There was the sound of rolling thunder then, and from the mouth of the valley entrance, as the clouds blocked off all light from the twin suns of Casiida, throwing the world into shadow and darkness, a throng of warriors a thousand strong bellowed out of the valley entrance. They were all warriors of a heathen nature, tall and massive, battle hardened with armor and reinforcing gauntlets for their claws. A general raucous arose from the legion, a roaring sound from many voices from all the warriors of Dekan’s Army.

At the far front of it all strode a tall and vicious looking creature, and gesturing toward his warriors, they all began to roar louder.

“Merciful heavens, no!” Laikei whispered.

“L’lewador!” Niria finished.

L’lewador was Dekan’s lieutenant. It was always this creature that was at the forefront of all of Dekan’s murderous destruction. Rivers of blood were left behind wherever this creature went.

Kirin growled, and lifted her fists, protecting the young Stormseeker she’d saved as she stared at them, and above them the world thickened.

Then L’lewador thrust his hand forward, and with a tumultuous cry, the throng of warriors surged forward like a nightmare flood of darkness. Beneath the four female’s feet and bodies, the earth trembled more than it had done when Dekan attacked, and they could see rocks and pebbles bouncing and skipping along the ground from the feet of those massive warriors.

“To the death.” Niria said, and took her sister’s hand. “To the death!” Laikei repeated, drawing herself up.

Kirin screamed at the throng, an echoing cry that did little to stop the great surging mass, and the sisters suddenly began to glow as Kirin’s hands rose, and though she didn’t know how she’d done it, rocks about her thrust themselves up out of the ground, and she threw her arms forward and all those stones flung themselves into the throng, bowling over dozens of the intruders while the twins shot at the army with explosions of repeating lightning strikes, but even their combined effort did little to stem the flood.

Kirin brought up more stones, larger stones and flung them, and the twins caused more lightning strikes to pick off the leaders, trying to kill L’lewador, but to no avail. The stampede was so great that their legs and bodies trembled from the impact tremors, and as one, seeing their death as they bared fangs and un-slung claws, they roared at the onslaught... and strangely, remarkably... the massive tide thundered to a halt.

Blinking, the three young females stared in disbelief that that had worked, but after a moment or two, they saw the army’s attention was lifted to above them. Just as they realized this, there came a light behind them with the brightness of the sun, illuminating the darkness, and turning, they had to squint from the burning light. But within the light, they saw an image, saw a bulbous form as it swelled, and then unfolded, and two sweeping, feathered wings of celestial light flared backward.

The white of his body burned with its light, the black so black that they were holes in space. There were other colors of green, blue and red, but they were few, and as all watched this shining creature, its wings folded forward, engulfed the creature, and it suddenly swelled, and when the wings unfolded wider than before, they revealed something that no individual in this universe had yet seen in this time.

A Dragon.

This transformation had given it a longer neck, a longer body and a more bulbous girth all around. It was different than a Dragaseir, covered in armor, with four arms arrayed along its sides – two of which gripped the rock of the mountain it was on, and the other two grasping around empty air as the pommel of a sword rapidly coiled into being from within its mighty hands – and a whip-like tail as long as its body coiling beneath it. A blade of blazing light, a blade of living lightning formed from the great pommel of the recently formed blade, burning plasma that sizzled and cracked against the rain as the beast transferred the weapon to one hand.

Different than the one the smaller version had held a week ago, this one was like the creature was holding a star that was as long as its own body, with a radial disk about its hand, and spikes around this disk to make it look like a star.

And while they all watched, it became even more majestic, with its armored feathered wings suddenly cracking open along their ends, and disgorging long ethereal feathers along the lowest edge of the wings, while the back unfolded and two more smaller wings – like the wings of a dragon fly – uncoiling and energizing outward.

The creature waved its primary wings forward and backward, the things with their ethereal feathers engulfing the air with each wing beat as it brought its sword arm to its side, splaying a spike of lightning as a weapon as it spoke. Those primary wings were gossamer, the ethereal portion sweeping over the rocks of the mountain while the solid tops of the wings fanned open and closed with each sweep. Those wings framed the Dragon with a weight that was ten times the weight of the body supporting them

And when it spoke, all in the valley heard it.

“This world calls you liars.” It said, its voice reverberating off the solid rock walls, and the valley shook with the might of its power as it leveled its clawed hand at the army. “The Earth forsakes you, the Skies despise you, and the world calls you defilers. The Day despises you, the Night hates you, and this world calls you Betrayers.”

“Father.” Kirin breathed, recognizing the voice that spoke in her heart, her ears, and her mind. It calmed her, it loved her, and looking to her aunts by right, she saw they were feeling likewise.

“Know you now,” Sage called then, his wings still flaring forward and backward, many times the size of his body. “That your reign of chaos and destruction ends here this day, and the sins of the abomination Dekan die with you, for the world shall now call you... **DEAD!**”

And the Beast Dragon flung his sword forward while still within its hand to point it at the army, and the heavens split open in bolts of lightning flew over the dragon’s shoulder, each lightning strike ten times wider than even the largest lightning bolt ever seen even by the eyes of Stormseekers, and where they struck, the splash of the strike shattered bodies, incinerated those nearby, and electrocuted those a dozen yards around the strikes. Each strike exploded the ground it struck, throwing bodies everywhere.

Hundreds of strikes hammered at the army, the lightning rolling forward within its cloud bank to catch those who were running away now in horror... screaming.

Sage then planted himself, and the green Gems all over his body that had been burning white up until now, now burned green, his horns flaring as he opened his mouth, his lower jaw unhinging while twin mandibles flared open, and inside his mouth light flooded inward, gathering into a ball of force while greenish-blue lightning crackled about his jaw.

His secondary wings opened wider, lightning cascading up and down their lengths, and the white light turned red.

And then there was a click in the air, and time slowed... all sound ceased, and from amidst the carnage of his fallen comrades, L’lewador rose, and looked at the Dragon, felt the hair all over his body stand on end despite being wet.

His eyes dilated, even as Sage breathed outward, seeming to scream as that ball of red light in his mouth exploded outward, becoming a beam that quickly grew wider than the whole of the dragon’s body.

L'lewardor was incinerated within an instant. There was no ash as that beam cut through those trying to escape the valley, burning a hole in the pass clear through to the box valley beyond.

To the Stormseekers and Lions watching this single attack, they saw the resulting explosion in the box-canyon beside the valley, and felt the shockwave roiling through the ground to shudder through their legs to vibrate their hearts, just before a shockwave lanced through the valley, blowing a line of trees down which likewise knocked the three young female Casid down with it. Kirin bent her body low as she fell to cover Miki's body from harm.

When the fusillade ended, Lord Sage leapt off the cliff and flew above them, his great wings beating downward as he soared over the valley, and though his body was smaller than Gesio's, his wingspan at that moment was of equal size. Finding the last remains of survivors in the valley, and breathing out a short gout of fire on them, incinerated them instantly into ash.

Kirin, Laikei and Niria rose to their feet as this angelic creature turned along the edge of the valley, wings that were truly massive in comparison to its powerful body, curved as it traced along the edge of the valley and then rose above it. The creature sang outward then, a beautiful series of short notes that were the cross between a whale singing, and an orchestra of string instruments all in perfect pitch.

It drove the three women to tears.

Sage made one more pass, and then made to land at the mouth of the valley.

All around the now greatly widened mouth of the valley was a blast radius of charred black. Sage had shrunk down to a more manageable size, his wings returning to their former glory and folding tight against his back.

At the back of his head was a pair of crystalline disks that moved independently of one another, literally giving him eyes in the back of his head. Behind him he saw the destruction, the scorched earth, the destruction he'd caused, and the shattered bodies all around him. Before him he saw the gaping hole, and beyond the hole was still a raging fire as even the rock burned. The rain was falling harder now, but it wasn't enough to cool burning, molten rock.

And with the gaping hole, the cold winds of the mountains would soon blow freely into this warm place.

This was the price to pay to spare the lives of all those who were in the valley. If a single one of these Tar Lions of Dekan's Army escaped... then the secret of the Stormseekers would be known, and a greater army yet would come to destroy every last one of them.

Thousands died... so that millions more might live.

Sage was tired... he'd just bargained the fate of so many lives... and Fate had demanded a hefty toll in doing so, both from him, and from the lives strewn about him, but regardless... the coin, had landed on its edge. But despite his fatigue, Sage's hands lifted and clenched, and groaning with all his might, the Earth trembled, and the mountains over the pass cascaded inward into the new gaping hole, and with a cry he thrust them crashing down over the hole to seal the valley inward again before he collapsed to his hands and knees, all his many eyes closing as he breathed.

"Father! Father!!" came a familiar voice, and Kirin ran up the slope to him, followed quickly by Laikei, Niria and a young female Stormseeker cradled in their arms. Kirin threw herself onto her father, sobbing with her thanks while the two Stormseekers stared at the Dragon in expressions of awe.

Sage transformed then into a form they'd recognized – the smallish for them, eight foot armored tiger with five fingers – looking very sorry, very tired, and very sad.

He turned and sat down, naked as a jaybird as he rested his arms on his knees and bent his head.

“Vas.” He whispered, and the rains intensified, the rains hissing off his body and hot skin.

Aftermath

Sage could be found after mid day, quite by himself as he bent low covering the bodies of those he'd killed in black soil.

Every grave he made, he folded what complete bodies he could into peaceful eternal slumber, doing so reverently, and after folding the earth over them, planted a single seed, and with a gesture, a sapling rose up over their grave.

“From the Earth we are born, to the Earth we return.” He spoke over each grave. “The Earth despised you, but in rest it forgives you. Give back the life you have all taken.”

And then he'd move onto the next one.

The suns shone through the thinned clouds, the blackness having dispersed around mid day, and by this time, Sanari, his beloved lifemate, found him, her body in a blanket of cured leather, that covered her head and wrapped around her body and swollen tummy.

She watched her husband for a moment before throwing back her makeshift robe, and with her body being warmed by the falling rain, carefully knelt and began to help, only to find her hands caught within his.

“You're doing it again.” She smiled, and turned her hands to hold onto his. “You're not letting anyone else help you.” She spoke softly, comfortingly, and then looked up into his glowing green eyes.

“You should be resting.” He said quietly, so weak that he could lift his head to meet her gaze, and she could see the pain in his eyes. She knew he was thinking again of the Kell, thinking again of his most recent rampage, and her fingers closed tighter about his.

“I'm done resting. I'm now helping.”

And without another word, she moved slowly, and carefully, and with just as much reverence as her husband used, helped bury the dead.

There were only a couple hundred bodies instead of a thousand. Too many bodies had simply disintegrated, shattered, liquefied or vaporized.

Sage found, strangely, that there were others who slowly trickled in to help him, and he smiled in thanks to each of them in turn.

“Th-thank you. Thank you.” He said, as each of them smiled at him, not beamingly, there was some wariness in their smiles at what they'd seen him do.

Kirin was the first to join her mother, Hima helping her before Sanari came to plant a seed in the grave they'd just finished and helped it to grow to a sapling.

Sage's new sisters were next to join, and right with them came Loro, with a backpack slung to his back in which held the Book of the Casid. He came with Gesio, and Gesio, with his great hands, helped do the most.

Maourit, Eqis, Champion and the rest of their company, who'd planned on leaving last night – but were... delayed... by the feast, and again this morning by the sight of Lord Sage taking up his true Dragon Form – showed up to help as well. Sage heard so many questions burning in the minds around him, but the mouths of those thinking those questions were all remarkably silent.

Then, standing before them all, all those who'd come to help, Sage bent low, folding his hands together, pressing them to the ridge of his nose before he bent at the waist for a moment in prayer. His actions were... strange to the Casid, but Gesio, Laikei and Niria, and Loro all bowed their heads in respect. Kirin saw her mother doing as such as well, and likewise bowed her head for as long as Sage remained as such.

"Well... what now?" a voice said, and Sage turned to see Maourit stepping forward. "Lord Five Talon... we... we appreciate what you have done, but... but that pass is a lifeline, great one. With out it open... many will suffer."

Sage opened his mouth, about to speak, but Gesio stepped forward to his 'Son' and gripped Sage's shoulder.

"Sage had a design in which he would create a safe passage, even through the rock, Maourit." Gesio said. "He is very weak right now from what he's done for us... for all of us. From the westward passage, a living gateway will be created for you to pass. Journey onward, Maourit, and fear not for the return trip. The pass will be open."

"I..." Maourit began, but deflated and smiled before bowing his head. "Our thanks, Master Five Talon. We shall leave immediately... before anything else happens."

Sage watched them go... surrounded by his immediate family, and taking a deep breath, turned toward the former pass leading into the valley, and lifted his hands, to which he felt two pairs of hands, one pair from Gesio himself, the other from Sanari, pull his arms down.

"Rest." They both said at once, and Lord Sage collapsed into a sleep that would last for a day.

Sage bent low, wearing robes again, and now with a freshly made pan hat out of reeds and leathers as he bent low over the young female his daughter had saved, his five-fingered hand pressing to the woman's belly. He'd... taken too long healing her, and as Sanari, dressed in her new leathers as she petted her belly watched her husband; she began to feel the pang of concern in his heart.

The two lovers – Sage and Sanari – had solidified a connection between one another. It was a powerful one... coming from dual ceremonies of marriage between husband and wife from both their peoples. They knew each other's hearts, and each other's minds, and thought between the two of them was almost constantly shared, as if they were one mind.

Sanari was quiet as she felt her husband shut her out of that connection.

Finally Sage's hand withdrew, his hands folding into his robes as he rose; his long whip-like tail lashing briefly.

"She's pregnant." He said quietly in Casid, so that all could hear. "The Father is a Tar Lion... to that I'm certain. The bond between Earth and Sky in this progeny is absolute."

With his words, all of Sage's defenses dropped, and Sanari felt his concern, so much so it almost made her weep with the feel of it. Stepping forward, she slipped a hand beneath his robe, through an opened hole all along his side as if to touch the small of his back, but beneath that robe, her fingers squeezed around the narrow strip of Sage's back fur lining his spine.

"B-but that means... a bonding between a Tar Lion and a Stormseeker?" Kirin asked, and Hima squeezed her shoulder. "What will that do?"

"I see a child," a new voice spoke, and Gesio suddenly materialized out of nothingness. "I see a child growing into a man, with black shod fur, and a mane of white."

The gathered individuals watched the girl scrunch on herself, her claws seeming to knot in her belly fur.

“Perhaps we should modify her memories.” Sage suggested.

“Modify them?!” Laikei gasped. “To what end do you wish to...”

“To keep her from harming the child.” Sanari said, looking down at the child bearing child that was Miki, and stepping forward, away from her husband, took care as she knelt due to her own burden, and began to slide her fingers through the short mane of the young Stormseeker. “Hatred is a powerful thing, and the hatred of the Tar Lions, could propose this girl to tear her womb open in order to disgorge the child she bears.”

“B-but... but what happens after you modify her memory and she finds out that she’s pregnant? Will she try to murder the baby?” Niria spoke genially.

Miki turned; looking up to Sanari’s smiling face, tears in her eyes as she held her belly.

“Society dictates the actions of an individual. There is a war between Tar Lion and Stormseeker of the sort in which I’d hoped to never see again in my lifetime. Great Maker, as if Earth itself wasn’t blood scarred enough to have genocide cast across her face, Casiida also has to bear such things.”

“Every great society either effects or is affected by that word, Sage. Every society...” Gesio said, and there was the sound like that of a tree falling as he took a step forward. How will the child be respected by this world? Not of the Earth, not of the Sky, not black, not white, not welcome by either race.”

“Society is reformed by the actions of an individual.” Sage said then, looking up at the Dragaseir.

“But that brings us back to this individual, Sage. The manner of her conception came in violence. The manner of her child breeds hatred. It... It would be best to modify her memories.” He said, and squatted down. “We cannot have...” Gesio stopped as his hand rose, and was suddenly seized by the comparatively tiny hands of Miki.

“Please... please don’t take my memories away, Great One.” She whispered.

“Why?” he asked, the others remaining remarkably silent all of a sudden. Sanari began to hum softly as she continued to comb the girl’s hair with her claws.

“I bear life. It... is not how I’d hoped to bear it, but all life is precious. My child... will know no want from me.”

Gesio lowered his hand to the top of Miki’s head, Sanari withdrawing her hand, and the great hand cupped the much smaller fem’s crown.

“So be it.” He exhaled through his nose and then rose.

Sage looked down to her, and was the next to come into view, his dark green eyes focusing on her. “But, she mustn’t stay here.” Sage said, and now he got the looks of all those gathered around. “You mustn’t stay here, Miki. You will accompany us into the mountains, where we will deposit you within the midst of the Stormseeker City that lies deeper into the mountains. This way station is not safe for your child.”

“Sage... are you sure?” Gesio asked, looking on his new son.

“Fate demands it, Father.” Sage continued to stare, transfixed upon this young woman. In order for an individual to be born in the far future, a woman of stripes and the powers of the elements in her power, her ancestors must be aligned.” Sage lifted his head and looked to Gesio now, fixing the great Dragaseir. “Time is a loop, as you have said, and no matter what your designs were, Father, Fate directs our actions now. As such Loro must also accompany us. If these two individuals do not reach the Stormseeker city... then Fate’s Scythe – Paradox – will lop off our portion of the time stream.

“Without a past, there is no future, and if this past disintegrates... then all will return to The Void. And to push The Void off Casid in our age, Gesio, Clio of Pryde Sentholu, and Prophet... must arise along with the Red... and the Black Queens of Casiida...”

Snow and Ice

Maourit and his band had left two days prior, and were well on their way to the opposite side of the mountains, back to their own pryde lands, and the dry savannah beyond. Sage stood quite at the ready beside Sanari, who was now dressed warmly despite the moisture and humidity in this valley. The magic of many Stormseekers had helped create this valley, and helped to heat it, but a few hundred yards past the mouth of the valley on the opposite end all was cold.

Yesterday, Sage had created a doorway through the sealed mountain pass. It was a gateway that opened a hole after one spoke the word “Friend” in Casid, but would open safely only if the person who desired to enter the valley meant no harm therein.

Those who passed through that gateway and the passageway beyond, which was narrow enough only for one large Casid to pass through, and did mean to cause harm and mayhem, would be slaughtered in the most malicious of ways by the guardians Sage likewise set there.

Sanari had aided him by coaxing the spirits of this valley to look after it, and those who entered. This place would become a paradise in a few hundred years, and a place of secrecy when the Aphkei came, to protect those who sought peace from their tormentors.

Sage’s mind tried to stretch into the future, to try and find what would become of these people, but his abilities in Scrying were no where near as potent as the Fate Visions he got periodically.

How strange that he seemed to be getting the Fate Visions in remarkable clarity and number as of late.

He looked down at his beloved lifemate as she sat in her furs and leathers, carrying her own weight in the form of a roll of leather filled with foodstuffs and bedding furs, and slung over one shoulder. Sage smiled as he saw the way the strap cleaved her breasts one from the other, and thinking a moment, he removed his cloak and draped it over her shoulders, his great hands squeezing her shoulders as he stood behind her.

“You’ll be needing this.” He said quietly, now standing in only a thin white robe and loose trousers now.

“But what of you, beloved?” she mused, rubbing her cheek against his fingers. “Donate any more of your clothing to me, and you’ll be walking up the slopes naked.”

“I am at home in the snow.” He said, and knelt behind her to embrace her, his hands going to engulf her belly. “And unlike you... I have a fire burning in my chest.” He chuckled and continued to rub her belly, slipping his hands beneath the hem of her leather blouse, and stopped, feeling something new, and he rubbed her belly button. “Hey... when did you turn to an outtie?”

He tweaked her belly button, which had recently pushed outward from the pressure of the cubs in her belly. She was growing quickly with two lives growing within her, and she hugged his arms about her belly and leaned against him.

“I don’t know... I guess I didn’t notice.” She laughed.

“Well then, let’s see what else we have here then,” and Sage’s hand lifted to her tit, now made fat with her growing milk. Her nipples were constantly erect, and her areola swollen. “Growing firm quite nicely... Any pain?” he asked, and Sanari shook her head, biting her lower lip as Sage’s gentle touch lowered to her secondaries, which

were growing fatter every day, soon... they'd be just as thick and full as her primaries... and just right for nursing her two cubs.

She held dreams about holding them in her arms, and feeling them suckling from her tits. She'd been dreaming of that day since she'd learned that Sage had succeeded in impregnating her.

"I thought we weren't going to couple anymore till the cubs are born." She mewed, pressing her thighs together as Sage's hand unconsciously began to grope instead of feel and caress.

"That still doesn't mean I can't pleasure you now and again." He chuckled, but nonetheless removed his hand, and Sanari again saw him suck some of her milk that had leaked out from off his thumb.

"If you want to nurse from me, all you need do is ask, beloved." She purred, and turned to lean back against the rock, inviting him to do just that as she picked pleasingly at the hem of her leathers compressing her breasts together.

Sage held onto her belly with both hands and leaned in to kiss her.

"A healer's priority." He said. "Checking to see if your milk is developing in richness."

"And how is it?" she asked, smiling warmly even as he bent his head to kiss the roof of her bosom that was still displayed out in the open, or at least till she covered it up when they started climbing.

"You've developed a rich and sweet cream." He chuckled, and hefting one of her tits, kissed the furry top of it again.

"All thanks to your tea." She mused, purring still as she began to slide her fingers through his long mane.

Unconsciously she'd leaned backward, her legs flaring open and both husband and wife laughed as she cradled his head, her sex swelling in intimate desire. Sage settled into her, rubbing his head between her breasts a little more, and took the moment of solitude with his wife while they waited for the others, allowing himself to be lolled by her heart beat and purring.

It was such a strong, loving heartbeat.

There was peace between mother, father and cubs for a time. They were a family, and though he'd never voiced it, a loving wife and children were what Sage had sought more so than anything in his life. Time and time again, he'd been denied that pleasure... till Sanari's loving, saving graces...

"Have you been having any more night terrors?" Sage asked suddenly, and his fingers pressed a little against her belly.

"No... thanks to whatever you did while you were inside me." She purred.

"Now..." He lifted his head to look at her. "If you get tired, even the least bit tired when we start climbing..."

"I'll let you carry me." She sighed, nuzzled him, which he returned before kissing her.

Just then there was the sound of approaching foot steps, and the pair of them withdrew enough for them to smile at one another, and before rising, Sage secured his cloak more firmly about Sanari's subtle frame, and then rose, even as Kirin, Hima, Miki and Loro arrived.

Hima seemed to be carrying most of the supplies in a massive rolled up satchel on his back and Kirin carried enough for the rest of the supplies. The only burden Loro carried was his book strapped against his back, and the only burden Miki carried, was the still developing cub within her womb and a simple roll against her back.

They were all dressed in warm leathers and furs, Kirin adorned once again in her face mask while she held tightly onto Hima's hand. Other than from a distance on the mountains, neither of them had ever seen snow. This trek would be harsh.

"Is that all you're wearing father?" Kirin asked as they arrived, and Sage chuckled.

"It was said that when I was born, my mother had gone into labor right in the middle of a snow bank, and when I passed from her body, I landed right in the snow and didn't even cry."

"You were probably too cold to cry, Sage." Came another voice, and they turned to see Gesio standing there. Sage saw him undressed for the winter passes, and Sage's smile faded.

"You're not coming with us." Sage stated.

"No. I have... pressing matters that I must attend to with the cheetahs out in the desert, and my time is short. I must see to them."

"All right '*Gandalf*,'" Sage muttered. "I'm sure we hobbits will find our way."

"Who?" Gesio asked, his eyebrows rising.

"A character from a book from Earth. I think you can identify with him. I'll get Dallas to produce a copy of the book for you when we return."

Gesio chuckled. "So be it. The city you seek is well hidden, Sage, and is found in a valley to the north of us. Keep heading for the highest mountain here... and you'll find it."

Sage nodded, and then turned to help Sanari to rise.

"We will try for speed, Father. I'm sure you'll find us somewhere." And with a chuckle, he led the way forward.

Wind blew at them hard, and at the forefront, Sage blazoned a way for them all by cutting a trail in the snow. Sanari was carrying Loro as they fought against the wind, the ice and snow, and Sage turned to them to see them struggling. He'd tied them all to him by ropes in case any of them got lost. Loro and Sanari were directly behind them, Kirin was attempting to help Miki along, and Hima was acting as the anchor at the far reaches behind. Sage was wholly unbothered by the blazing cold winds, the pounding snow that collected on any edge of his body facing the wind while his mane whipped about him. He'd even taken off his robe and given it to Miki to wear for more warmth, now having only his loose fitting trousers and priestly aprons and loincloths left.

Looking at them, he tried to remember that he'd been born and raised for more than half his life in these conditions, the rest of them, his lifemate included, was not.

He trudged backward to Sanari, blowing firmly on his hand, heating it up with his draconic breath, and lifting her leathers to get to her belly, pressed his hand against her stomach and massaged it. Replacing the shirt he then raised a hand to Loro's forehead that'd passed out against her body. Then moving to Miki, he repeated what he'd done for Sanari, blowing on his hand, checking her belly, and then checked the heads of Kirin and Hima.

He then looked around him, switching his vision to infrared, and spied no suitable shelters anywhere nearby.

Without speaking he gathered everyone around him, pressing Sanari and Miki closest to his body, he then breathed in deeply – stoking his fire – and instinctively the two women pressed as close as they could to him. His hands rose, his fingers moving into the gesture form of spell-casting, and he began to spell weave.

Above his head he made a spell circle, detailed it rapidly with his finger tips, and touched its center, and it exploded above their heads outward, and then slapped down to the ground. Four, more smaller circles did he make, which all grew outward and connected to the larger circle at the four corners. Then a shield rose from the outermost edges of the circles, rising upward to dome over their heads, and with a snap as the dome completed itself and the roaring of the wind stopped.

The base of the chamber lowered suddenly, and with Sage stoking his fire deeper, the heat within the chamber, and the four smaller antechambers connected to it all began to heat, to the point where his companions were beginning to pant and tug at clothing.

“Back away.” He said, and they did so, and lowering toward the ground, he cast a ball of flame that settled there close to the ground, and was likewise surrounded by a shield that let out only heat and light to where it wouldn’t burn or blind.

“We rest here for tonight.” Sage said, lowering his pack.

“But why?” Hima asked panting.

“Because Miki’s belly is cold, my mate’s is getting there, young Loro has passed out, and your forehead is freezing.” Sage smiled at Hima. “Mountain air is deadly to those unprepared for it, especially those who dwell in the warmth for most of their lives.”

Sanari squatted low, un-slinging her satchel with one hand, and pulling out a fur blanket to lay Loro down on it. Out of the corner of his eye, Sage watched his beloved undress Loro, as if putting their own cub to bed.

“Hima, unpack all the furs and blankets, we’ll use the leathers for bedding.” Sage said, and began disassembling his own pack, opening up his own large fur blanket, prompting Miki to lay down on it. “Kirin,” he said, and his daughter blinked at him as she pushed her visor up onto her brow but squinted in the light. It had indeed worked very well to help her see in the snow, just as Sage had explained it to her when he’d first made it for her. “I need to see to Miki and her cub’s health. If you could prepare a meal, I want everyone to eat their fill.”

“Yes father.” She said, and moved straight to Hima, covering his hand, moving very close to his side as she helped him un-sling their packs, she looking for the food, he making bedding round about the fireball in the center of the chamber.

Sage peeled Miki out of her clothing as she laid back on the fur pelts, she being close to sleep, enjoying the warmth as Sage’s gentle touches as he smoothed her labia with his fingers, slid his touch over her smooth belly, and squeezed each of her breasts before he checked her forehead.

To an untrained eye, one would’ve thought this Draco-tiger had just felt this much younger woman up, and in the presence of his own wife. Sage’s mind was detached however as he did this, as he had to be. He’d done this to hundreds of females, many of them multiple times, across multiple pregnancies. A female’s body changed as it delved into motherhood, and even the early stages were precious, and under a skilled healer’s hands, the potency of a woman’s motherhood could be enhanced a hundred fold.

Sage was doing this to his wife as well on an almost nightly occurrence, and her jealousy would last only so long as he did it to her next.

She didn’t watch as he then used his oils on her, massaging the warmth back into her body as she passed off into sleep, getting an unheard of treat from this God of Light and Darkness. Pressure and puncture points were pressed to stimulate mammary development, to loosen the vaginal muscles, to stem harmful hormones and encourage the beneficial ones. By morning, this fem’s breasts will have enlarged a full cup size.

Sage did not eat that night as he let all other's have their fill. It was a small meal, even if Miki and Loro didn't eat because they were sleeping, but he'd make sure that they did when they awoke. Lowering his gaze to the stones around him, Sage found a nice stone, inserted it into his mouth, sucked off all the iron filled dirt and then chewed.

Hmm... Mica, he thought, and laid back, making sure to ground the rock in his mouth into powder before swallowing.

One of the many changes that had occurred to him since his evolution into a dragon was the ability to digest complex minerals and likewise gain nutrition from it. This was a natural draconic ability that they'd had for millions of years, but now that he had this Hadran Metal-DNA technology integrating itself into his body systems and Biomancer technology, his need for minerals in his diet was larger.

Instead of eating a cow's worth of meat each day, he supplemented his usual diet with stones and certain rocks. His favorites were those heavy in iron, and mica had a sweet taste to it.

Taking a deep breath, he stoked his internal furnace, where in normal dragons there was a bladder like an extra stomach in their chests, close to their hearts, in which a fireball was stoked and ready to be breathed outward. In Sage's case, the power output of that bladder approached atomic levels at its highest capability in this form. In his full Dragon form, it did reach atomic fire level.

But the furnace had special benefits as well.

It came in real handy on a cold night... that, and it was a wonderful attractor for his beloved Lifemate.

Sanari slid onto him, a bit of food in her hand which she slipped passed his lips as she lay against him. She smiled, enjoying his warmth as Sage unfolded his wings, leaning backward with his head resting on one thick arm while feeling his mate grow comfortable against him; her lower half and belly turned on its side, and her chest and head flat against him. He always enjoyed the presence of her body, clothed, nude or otherwise – especially nude – as she held onto him, listening to his twin hearts. And being a cat, she was attracted to warm things... and Sage's body could become very warm to her.

Sage folded them both within his great gossamer wings, using the heavy leather like a blanket while she nuzzled into what little fur there was against his chest, her hands grasping onto the thicker tufts at his sides. Though what his chest lacked in fur, it possessed in dragon hide, which had a consistency like soft felt to it.

Her purring was hypnotic, vibrating her whole body as she readied herself for sleep, laying more onto her side so that she didn't sleep on her belly, but nonetheless allowed her generous bosom to flatten against her husband's chest.

Sage smiled as he felt her love through their bond.

Looking to one side, he saw Loro nestled in one of the four antechambers off the main one; he'd balled into himself, hugging his book while he sucked his thumb, his tail covering his nose.

Strange, Sage thought. *How did this spoiled little brat ever grow up into the venerable and well-respected Prophet?*

“That is, in essence, Sage... one of the many effects you've had on this world.”

The thought in his mind was quite sudden, and when he looked back to the center of the chamber, Gesiomagatou was there in his Golden Lion guise.

Sage considered that there may be a reason why the Gold Lions of future Casid were so strong. Perhaps there was something of this Dragaseir in them.

'I see that you've returned father.' He mused, not really moving anything other than his eyes while he cradled his mate, stroking her belly beneath his wings.

'I want to thank you for what you've done for my son, Sage.' He said. *'I haven't been able to aptly satisfy his needs before.'*

'You shouldn't thank me, father. I did what I did because he was an annoying little brat.' Sage responded with a wry smile on his face.

'Nonetheless, he idolizes you now. You're his hero. Especially after seeing you as the so-called "God of Light and Shadows" on the cliff face.'

'About that.' Sage began, his expression becoming pained. *'I...'*

'I have already seen to it that your likeness and your affects in this timeline do not become recorded. That will not, nonetheless, stop their verbal history... and I'm afraid you'll become a legend regardless.'

'Five-Talon of the Stormseekers.' Gesio gestures grandly, splaying his clawed hand.

"Bugger." Sage thought and lay back more, and Sanari balled about her womb against him, tucking her legs up close to her body as her purring intensified.

Gesio looked back to Miki now, as she slept, and reaching over he palmed her head.

"The strands are coming together at last." He said aloud then. "All the ends are being woven into a single string, which will weave the tapestry of the future. Our time here grows short, Sage. Your and Sanari's tasks are nearly done, and then you can return home, and then you can see how your actions in the past have affected the future." He lay down beside Miki to help keep her warm. "And if all goes well, if my gambit pays off... then the soul of someone who is... who is very special to me... will find rest within a host of my choosing, and like they've become inside Sanari – two women in whom you've loved dearly in one vessel – the same... mayhap, will become of my chosen one."

Sage stared at him, and could think of only one person that was brought up by his words:

Rae...

After a short cat nap, Sanari rose from off of Sage, and he obligingly spread his wings to allow her to rise. She was sweating from how close she was to his warmth, and looking down at him, seeing him, feeling the bulge of his manhood between her legs, she began to purr anew, bent down to kiss him and then rose again.

She looked sensual, with her belly rounded, filled with their cubs, her four breasts hanging heavily from her chest, fat with milk now. The foursome were beginning to grow sparse on fur now, having a velvety feel to them.

She watched lovingly as her husband lifted his five-fingered hand to the side of her face, cupping it, and she turned her head to kiss his palm and the gem imbedded directly in the center of it.

That gem was a power enhancer... just like all the other gems on his body, these being connected to the Do Gems on the backs of either of his hands. The Do Gems were two more of his Soul Stones that made him into a full-blooded dragon.

"Enjoy your nap?" he asked, and slid his fingers down the side of her neck, and then slid his hand between her primaries, massaging the inside of her velvety breast as it swayed distended from her chest.

“Very much so. And so did our cubs. They slept so soundly inside me.” She lowered her head, and closing her eyes and smiling, she rubbed her belly, feeling her husband cajole her tit. “But now that I’m awake, I want something from you, dear heart.”

“Anything.” He purred for her in return, and she felt her body ache with longing again at the sound of that tantalizing purr of his.

“I want another of your massages.” She purred, and lifted her hand to turn his to cover her tit.

“Better than the one I gave Miki? Dearest, are you jealous?”

“Not so long as I get one that’s better.” She purred in return, and pushed forward, pressing her breasts against his chest as she kissed him, a peck before she withdrew. “And take your time too.”

She caressed a spot between his pectoral ridges, and then gave off a small giggle as Sage caught her by the waist, turned with her and bent forward to kiss her again; his wings collapsing against his back, folding so tight that it looked like his back had simply gained in a lot of muscle. From his things to his side, he removed his bottles, and with Sanari lying backward, she felt her husband’s hands on her.

She still remembered the first time he’d done this for her... more than five years ago, he’d shown her the kind of pleasure she’d given him all the times she’d bathed and anointed him. His fingers repeated the whole process, touching off pressure points to relax her, puncture points to numb pain, teasing her flesh to stretch further to allow her belly to expand better.

He began at her labia, and the twin folds of her womanhood swelled into his touch, her clit erecting. He then moved to her belly, and then to her breasts, his hands kneading all four of them in turn, getting her teats to harden till they ached. She sighed as her thighs opened, and he worked on those next, teasing that liquid heat from his bottle into her body.

Her muscles relaxed, the last of the cold from the pass was being forced out of her, and she was feeling more and more relaxed by the second.

She opened her eyes, still purring as he lowered himself to suck some of the excess milk from her breasts, ridding her of that ache, and she purred as she felt his firm groin against her sex, and desired him in her again.

He would not please her that way again till after the cubs were born, so she dared not even to ask.

Sage then began to brush her, and then comb her, and helping her up to a kneeling position, began to repeat the whole process again on her back, till at last she could feel his hard body against her back again, his hands settling on her belly, and she felt ready to sleep again. She heard a brief rustling and groaning, a moment before the three-fingered hands on the ends of his wings grasped at her shoulders, and he took to kissing her neck and nuzzling her cheek.

“Hmm... better.” She purred softly now, holding his hands that were holding her.

“I’d hoped so... I could not bare it if you were ever angry with me, beloved.”

She fell asleep against him, and it was a simple matter for him to turn with her and lay backward, holding her on top of himself as he lay back himself. Again his wings folded around her like a blanket while she allowed herself to be caressed to sleep.

“Sweet dreams, dear heart.” He whispered, and then nuzzled her cheek one last time.

Sage could think of only on how peaceful she looked, and found his own eyes closing lazily. When he opened them again, he and she were amidst a golden paradise, their bodies luminous, and their forms naked.

This was their private meeting place, and when he arrived, he found Sanari, looking lovelier than her physical shell was able to show, resting naked amidst some tall grasses, beside a great tree growing by a beautiful mountain lake. On the blanket beside her were the semblances of their cubs, asleep and dreaming.

She lifted her finger to quiet him as he approached. He squatted down before her, his great hand able to lie over both their cubs at once to feel them breathing. When he looked at Sanari again, he found her sliding her hand between his legs to coax him. Smiling at her, he leaned forward, kissed her again, and she and he lay down amidst the grasses beneath a golden sun to make love with one another... softly, gently... taking their time.

It was a good dream.

Kirin lay backward with her husband sliding in above her, and she rolled her hips as he pressed his erect member into her body before lowering himself to kiss her... supporting his weight on one arm while he cajoled her tit with his free hand.

They'd both been cold, and snuggling had led to kissing, kissing to nuzzling, nuzzling led to petting and then to caressing, and finally to her sitting before him, her legs spreading open as her strong fingers began to handle his manhood into a steely erection.

This moment was the inevitability of she and he being relatively alone together.

A shadowy screen, like a veil, had fallen before their little dome that they'd retired to, and now Kirin, praying as hard as she could for the first time in her life, prayed that she'd heat at long last, and bare him a son.

A son would connect them; a son would keep them together. She made love to him as hard as she could; trying with all her might to force that genetic imperative upon herself. She began crying when she didn't feel it taking itself upon her.

It was then that Hima drew back, his erection still sheathed in her body while he saw the look in her face, saw the tears, and his motions slowed as he lifted a hand to her face and slid away some of the tears with his thumb. Kirin blinked at him, biting on her lower lip.

"Kirin... beloved, what's wrong?"

"You must give me a son." She groaned, and rocked her hips fiercely into his. "It's the only way!"

Hima paused, and then slid out of her, and she gasped as he released her and sat back, his erection still projecting upward as he folded his legs, planting his hands on his knees. Kirin rolled to a sitting position, gasping.

"No! Don't stop!" she rolled forward, reaching for his manhood but he seized her hands in both of his and held her touch away. "What are you doing?! We must! We must... must have a son." She sobbed, and when she failed she growled, and pushed fiercely into him, trying to force him, but he simply caught her, holding her as she thrashed, and then quieted, clutching into the fur at his sides, her claws drawing blood as she sobbed into his chest. "I must have your child... it must be tonight."

"Why?" Hima begged, the pain in his voice apparent, and then Kirin felt his hands holding her face, and he drew her up so that he could stare into her gold-hewed eyes. "Beloved... what is all this?" he demanded. "Why are you acting this way?"

Kirin stared at him, stared at him for a good long minute before new tears rolled out of the corners of her eyes, and she wrenched her face away from him, fell back kneeling, holding herself fiercely, biting her lip as she scrunched in on herself. That lip trembled fiercely.

“F-forgive me, forgive me dear heart...” she shivered and Hima crawled on all fours around her to grasp her shoulders and nuzzle her cheek. Kirin’s fattened breasts hung from her chest as she clutched her belly.

“Kirin... please... Why are you like this?”

Kirin turned to him and hugged him so fiercely that it squeezed some of the breath from his chest.

“I feel... I feel something tugging at me, tugging me away from you. I feel it demanding me to follow it, but it would mean to take me from you dearest. I don’t want to go! I... I want to stay here, with you, forever, and I feel that if I provide you with a son... if I can become pregnant, then that force will leave me be and allow me to stay here with you.”

A couple weeks ago, Hima would have thought that all this talk would’ve been ludicrous emotional banter from a female. But in the past two weeks, he’d seen the workings of gods and goddesses, and such a knowledge has gifted him in a belief that all things are possible.

His wife, his new bride, in and of herself was a special creature. A Tar Lioness turned Shadow Lioness as Lord Sage put it, or a Night Lioness as the White Lions referred to her as. Either was perfectly defining of the creature that Kirin had transformed into: a strong, powerful maiden of sensual suppleness, a prize in which to have her and her alone as a wife would fulfill a Lion like him instead of a whole harem of females like all the others. But then there was this horn atop her head, the thing coiling and steadily growing longer as the days passed. She radiated with a new power because of that thing... and it boiled inside her.

Because of that special transformation she’d gone through, Hima began to fear that indeed there was some force that would happen along and steal her from him. A pained look crossed his face then and he looked at her as she turned her sorrowful eyes onto him. In it was the look of a woman who loved him so thoroughly, that it pained her to cause a whole-body ache that was making her tremble.

It made him move her backward and lay her down on all the furs and blankets, open her arms beside her head to reveal her swollen and ample breasts and then move her thighs open. He then knelt between her thighs and inserted himself into her body again, massaging her sex with his fingers as he stroked her, trying to recall everything he’d ever learned about coupling to give her, her wish.

It was an honor that there was a woman who so desired to bare your child. With an equal fierceness now, he returned her desire, trying to make what, nonetheless, would prove to be futile...

Loro awoke to the smell of something sweet in the air, and smacking his lips, he rose with several blankets falling off his body. He didn’t know where he was at the moment, or how he’d gotten here, but he smelled something sweet, and something warm, and like any young boy anywhere in the multiverse, he was rather attracted to sweets.

He followed his nose, finding that it was coming through a shade of black, and lifting a hand, he tested the shade, finding that his hand would pass right through it. Crawling through, he found himself in the company of all his companions, and gave a cry of happiness as he saw Gesio sitting there across from Sage.

“Papa! You’re back” he cried, and scurried forward to hug his father’s huge arm.

“That I am. Did you rest well, Loro?”

“Oh yes... but I don’t remember falling asleep.”

“You were growing tired,” another voice said, and he turned to see Sanari kneeling before a small pot in which something bubbled. She was adding herbs and spices to it, and from the smell, Loro surmised that that was where

the sweet smell was coming from. “You walked hard and long, Loro... you journeyed far. I finally picked you up though... you were practically dead on your feet, and wrapped you up inside my cloak. You were as frozen as an icicle.”

“I remember now. We were in the crossing to the secret city.”

“That’s right.” Sage mused, remaining very close to his pregnant wife, close enough to maintain constant contact with her by laying a hand on her back as he lazed there.

Miki and Kirin were sitting close side by side, and Hima was putting all the furs into their bundles.

“When do we leave then?” Loro asked, his mouth watering from the smell.

“Let’s check then,” Sage began, and snapping his fingers, the dome suddenly turned transparent, allowing them to see a rising morning of a snow covered wonderland. “Snow’s pretty deep.” He mused, seeing how a snowdrift had pushed itself half the way up the dome, and sticking his hand through the shield he waved it about for a moment. “...And cold. You’ll all need more protection if we go out there again.”

“Quit teasing, Sage.” Sanari mused, and then tasted the meal she was making by raising a spoon of it to her lips. “You’re dying to go rolling around in the snow and throw snowballs, aren’t you?”

“To a degree,” he smiled boyishly.

Sanari smiled back at him, and then opened up the food satchel beside her, and took out seven round loafs of bread, and removing the top portion of each, forming a bowl out of what remained, she dipped a ladle into the pot and deposited a healthy helping of a very thick substance into the bowl and handed them off one by one to everyone.

First Miki, then Loro, then to Kirin and Hima, with the largest bowls going to Gesio and Sage, and Sage looked down at it with a strange look on his face.

“What’s the matter, Sage?” Gesio asked as Sage held the bread bowl and its thick meaty stew. “Don’t you like your wife’s own cooking?” he joked.

“He loves it.” Sanari was saying as she settled next to him. “He’s thinking of me again.” She teased, laying against his side and licking his nipple with the tip of her tongue in a cat kiss

“But...” he said, and looking at her, there was a pained look on his face.

“Eat it or wear it, Sage.” She said, and patted his thick thigh. “You have barely eaten more than two bites of any real food in two weeks, beloved. And what I have is more than enough for me and our children. Eat. I could hear your stomach growling late at night, and you can’t survive by eating rocks all the time. It’s for a balanced diet.”

Sage bit his lower lip and then lifting his hand, broke off an edge of the bowl, scooped up some of the thick stew inside, and ate. The sound of satisfaction in his moan of pleasure was enough to let everyone else eat as well.

It was a matter as to how well Sage had been starving himself for the benefit of his wife and children – he sacrificed himself freely, and without a second thought for her and his cubs – in how he was the one who finished off what everyone else could not.

The stew wouldn’t keep, so it’d need to go into someone’s belly...

As it was, later that morning when Sage dropped the domes – wearing nothing more than a pair of pants and his loincloths and aprons, that he felt much more full of energy than he had in days. Immortals still needed to eat, and despite that Sage could indeed digest minerals, nonetheless, the largest percent of his body was still biological, and *‘real food,’* as Sanari put it, was what he needed most of all.

Mountain Stalkers

Gesio had provided more clothing for the pass, in the form of hats, scarves and fingerless gloves to allow their claws out. Kirin looked right beautiful in her blue outer clothing covered by her white ivory.

Sage and Gesiomagatou headed everyone up, trudging easily through the snow which melted before them almost immediately to allow the others to walk on albeit soggy ground, but ground nonetheless.

Eventually, they came to a natural box canyon by passing through a stand of trees, that was free of the snow, and remarkably, as they passed into it, they suddenly moved into warm air, enough where it became uncomfortable to remove their snow gear.

“I don’t get it,” Miki pondered as she opened her winter clothes. “Why is it so warm here?”

Sage lifted his hand to feel the air between his fingers, feeling the magic here, but he and Sanari knew what it was before Gesio was able to explain it.

“This is a sanctuary.” He said, standing readily as Sage was, wearing very little clothing other than his belt and loincloth. “Stormseeker powers add to it, but there is a wall of air that keeps the wind out, and the powers of your ancestors have made this place warm.

Sage stepped over to one of the smooth walls and passed his hand before a section of it, and several arcane glyphs suddenly shone, the glyphs surrounded by lines, and the lines moving about the circular clearing in a constant motion.

The glyphs had been stained on the walls using blood... Stormseeker blood. His lips pressed together tightly as he blinked once, his second eyelids sliding over his eyes briefly as he looked about him.

Sanari was breathing in deeply, feeling the euphoric feeling she received whenever there was a remarkable spiritual presence in an area. There were many spirits here, and Sanari opened her eyes, purring, smiling as invisible hands opened her robes, blankets and furs to strip her naked, and with a mental click, Sage found himself looking at the spirits who were trying to soothe her, one particular maiden pressing herself to her belly and laughing.

Sanari was always a focus to spirits. They always loved her...

“We will spend the night here.” Gesio said, noting the recesses here leading into deep caves. “This is the second way station, and though I am wondering why Maxis and his shop isn’t here, I’m sure he returned to the city in the meantime.

“I will be leaving you all again for a time...”

“Papa! No.” Loro cried, surging forward to grip at his leg fur. “Don’t leave me again.”

Gesio knelt, and cupped the boy Casid’s face in both his hands, his hands so large that he did so using only the inside edge of his hands.

“Sage is here, Loro. He and Hima will protect you, I trust them, but I must go. There are other Stormseekers in this world in which I look over, and they need my help too. Someday, they’ll need your help. Please understand.”

Loro brought himself up, sniffed, but then hugged his surrogate father.

“I miss you already.” He said, and then let his hands slide against his father as Gesio rose.

“I’ll try to return in the morning again, to bring you all to the next leg, but if I’m not back by sunrise, Sage, I want you to lead them in that direction.” And he pointed to a stand of trees opposing the ones they’d just come through.

Sage nodded, and Gesio stepped out through the entrance trees and disappeared,

“Well then... Hima... we need to get something to feed all these people.” Sage mused.

“Can I come?” Loro asked excitedly. He’d never been on a hunt.

Hima, amidst opening his mouth to object, was instead overridden by Sage’s voice.

“Actually, Loro, I have a special task I want you to do. There are three very beautiful females here who need protection.” Sage knelt before the young Casid “I’d like you to do that for me. They hear that you are very brave, and a powerful Stormseeker, and would like your guardianship.”

“They do?” and he looked to Sanari who was kneeling now, being pampered by the spirits, to Kirin who’s physical prowess was as good as any male, and Miki who was known to be an accomplished Stormseeker. “But...” he began but stopped as Sage continued to smile at him. “Ok.” and he lowered his head, again denied being able to go onto the hunt.

“Thank you. We should return within the hour. Let’s go Hima, we need something large to feed all these mouths unless you want bread and preserved meat tonight.”

Night had fallen, and the men had yet to return. Kirin sat in the middle of the clearing on a pallet of her furs, staring at the fire, her hand absentmindedly massaging her tight abs, which had solidified into a firm ten-pack.

She had great muscles, firm and etched shoulders, a great mane and fetlocks on the outer edges of her arms and legs, two full and ripened breasts that hung on her chest punctuated by reddened teats, wide hips, and strong legs. With the sun having set, her body was thrown into shadow again, her fur so black that it was darker than the night. Between her legs were two folds of her femininity, which had grown strong partly from what her father had been doing to her and partly from the nightly coupling she had with Hima. And to top her image off was a singular silvery horn atop her forehead, having grown a good foot now, with three glittering edges spiraling up from the base of her skull to its tip.

She could feel a greater power stewing inside her, just behind her temples, within her chest, between her hips. Something inside her was fueling further and further change, making her stronger and stronger day by day, but she knew not what. Her father had ceased to give her his body-altering massages, and her mother didn’t need to tell her how to be beautiful anymore. She was just sort of... doing it.

She had all this power, and yet... and yet she was powerless against whatever force it was that wanted to take her away from her beloved.

Hima and she had tried all last night to try and have a baby, but despite how erotic, despite how passionate it had been, the change in her body had failed to happen.

Lifting her eyes, she looked to Miki, becoming suddenly extremely jealous of that girl as she sat beside her mother, speaking of cubs. It didn’t feel right for Kirin to be joining them, so she sat apart on the other side of the fire. When she had time, she’d talk to her parents and see if there was something in their knowledge that could perhaps give her a heat... perhaps allow her... to...

Her thoughts broke off as she looked around her, feeling a malevolent presence nearby, and she slowly got to her feet. She stepped forward, looking around and feeling with her heart. There was a cave here in which Loro sat before studying his book.

As she stood there, she suddenly felt a cruel wind blow from it.

“Kirin.” Sanari spoke, and Miki stopped talking as she noticed Kirin’s and Sanari’s tensions.

“I feel it too mother.” She said, and opening her hands allowed her long ebony claws to slide out. “Loro! Loro!” she hissed, trying to get his attention. “Loro, come here quickly.”

Loro looked up at her, his eyes pinching in confusion. “Why?” he asked.

“Don’t ask! Just come here quickly!”

Loro rolled his eyes, and closed his book before standing, wearing nothing but his winter trousers now, but as he stood, he stopped in mid-motion, feeling the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. And then he turned slowly, and stopped, looking into the darkness of the cave behind him even as he felt the cold presence.

The darkness was as unyielding as Kirin’s pelt, and as he stood there, breathing heavily, he brought his book up to him protectively, even as a pair of deep, red eyes appeared from within the darkness. Then a shadow moved. The only way he could see it was because the body it was attached to was darker than the darkness around it.

Just then, the shadow lurched outward with a roar, and Loro was knocked back, the Book of the Casid flying from his hands to go skittering into the fire.

“No!” he cried for the book, but then looked up as a massive creature stood over him, so strong that a solid hump of muscle rose between its shoulders, pushing its head forward.

It reared onto its hind feet, and projecting its head forward, bellowed a roar as it opened its mouth, showing a maw full of razor sharp fangs, and claws a foot long clicked briefly as they spread along the digits of its paws. Loro looked up at it as it looked down at him, and it had a brief look of pleasure before Loro saw its body falling, its clawed paws aiming for his head to crush the life out of him. Loro tried to roll away but was trapped between its hind legs.

Kirin was there then, grappling with the creature, and she shrieked, her muscles straining, veins popping as she wrestled with the creature, her arms straining as she lifted it up.

“Run Loro!” she screamed even as Sanari and Miki were getting up, Miki helping Sanari move while Sanari opened her hand and a long wooden staff grew from out of nowhere.

Loro scrambled from underfoot, dodging the moving foot falls of Kirin and the creature before he rolled outward, and then remembering his discarded book, ran on all fours for it, wrenching it out of the fire.

He didn’t have time to check it as he hugged it to him again, and with one large paw, Kirin was slapped aside, and the creature turned sideways, saw him, and growled low, seeing a quick meal. Loro backed up, looking for help, and then back at the creature.

I mustn’t run away. I must be brave, I must be strong!

He lifted his hand and pointed at the creature and screamed. “**GO AWAY!**” and from out of a clear night sky, a solid bolt of lightning came down and struck the creature with a thunderclap that reverberated through the box canyon they were in.

The creature staggered, shook its head, and then roared at the thing that had stung him, and began trundling forward. Loro backed away, his eyes dilating.

“**RUN LORO!!!**” he heard Kirin say, but Loro’s jaw set.

“GO AWAY!!” Loro cried, and his voice echoed loudly, and another bolt, stronger than the first struck the creature and knocked it backward. It shook its head, looked back at him and roared. **“AWAY!!”** he called again, and a stronger bolt still cut the creature all along one flank. The creature fell down, forced itself up on wobbling legs, and then reared onto its hind feet again and roared again. **“I Said... AWAY!”**

Loro’s voice echoed loudly, like thunder, his fur rose up on end and gained a quality as if it were energized with electrical light, and waving as if immersed in water. His small hand pulled back and lanced forward, his four fingers splaying, and from a cloudless, mountaintop sky, a bolt of lightning that glowed blue erupted out of the heavens, this one ten times the thickness as the first.

Loro held out his hand, forcing the power, sinking to his knees as the creature roared in pain, squealing like a stuck Bristle Pig as it was electrocuted by blazing hot electricity and plasma. Loro sank to his knees, continuing the constant barrage of blazing lightning, the whole of the small canyon radiating with his and the lightning’s light.

Then with a screech the creature collapsed to the ground, shuddered to a stop and expired. Loro continued shocking it for as long as he was able to before lowering his arm, panting. His fur laid flat again as the creature laid there, the light in its reddened eyes going out, and as he knelt there gasping, he suddenly felt arms around him and jerked round to see who it was, his wide eyes seeing Sanari embracing him with her rounded belly pressing against his back and her four full and engorged breasts pressing about his head, neck and shoulders.

It was... and odd, yet desirable feeling the press of a woman’s breast...

“It’s ok. It’s ok... it’s dead. You saved us Loro!”

“What in Casiida is it?!” Kirin asked as she rose to her feet.

Miki approached, nude and still beautiful, and thankfully unscathed. “A Rock Bear. Mean devils, and pound per pound far stronger than even a gold lion.” She turned to Kirin and smiled. “But very tasty...”

Sage and Hima returned later, either of them with a bundle of small animals held in one hand for each person, and when they entered, both stopped, seeing the monumental carcass now blazing over the cooking fire.

Upon seeing this creature, Sage immediately handed his bundle to Hima – a slightly smaller bundle at that – and surged for Sanari, checking her if she was ok. Hima, however, was far calmer as he listened to Sanari’s statements that she was fine.

He stepped next to his wife, all the hares held in one hand now, and she smiled at him as he fingered the wound on her temple, which she’d stopped from bleeding.

“Quite the bump.” He smiled, and Kirin held his hand to her face. “Who got the Rock Bear?”

“Loro did, actually.”

“Loro?” Sage asked, still holding onto his lifemate. “Where is he?”

“Sleeping, over there.” Sanari answered, and pointed them toward where Miki laid against the wall with her sleeping furs, Loro on her lap with his untouched Book of Casid in his hands.

Apparently, as a part of its creation, Gesio had likewise had made the book impervious to damage.

Sage relinquished his mate to go over to Loro, and smiling palmed the sleeping cub’s face.

“Such strength in one so young.” He smiled. “You’re almost Clio’s age when she came into her power.” He smiled.

“Clio? But she’s just a regular Stormseeker.” Miki said, and Sage smiled again.

“A different Clio.” He chuckled, and scratched Loro beneath the chin briefly, and he made a sound of pleasure that was practically a purr before Sage rose. “He needs to be congratulated. For his first hunt, that is truly a trophy to have. If the Stormseekers have a manhood ceremony, I will have to tell his father that he’d definitely earned it this time.” He then turned, finding that his daughter had settled herself into Hima’s lap. “Hima... give me those hares, I’ll skin them. The first of the bear will need to be saved for Loro. He deserves the first of that kill.”

Sage took the opportunity when he was beside Hima to pick up all the bundles in order to palm the side of Kirin’s head. When his hand left, there was the brief glow of a five-fingered hand print that slowly faded away, but the wound was nonetheless healed. Taking all the spoils of their hunt, Sage set himself to the skinning and cooking their meat. Sanari set herself to preparing the skins that he discarded.

Sage didn’t sleep all night, and Sanari, having received much rest as of late, kept him company for most of it. One of the changes of becoming a dragon was that he required so little sleep anymore. It allowed him the pleasure of watching his mate rest.

He laid her down on their skins after having stripped her of the last of her clothing, and Sanari turned toward him, laying on her chest and side, her ample breasts peaking out beneath her arms and ribs while her belly lied gently against the ground. He smiled at her and covered her with several blankets.

“You really see to her comfort before yours. That is an admirable quality for a husband.” A voice said then.

Sage turned his head only slightly before stopping. In this form he didn’t have the eyes in the back of his head, but there was an exceedingly few number of people who could sneak up on him without his knowing.

“It is my duty to protect her, Gesio.” Sage said, and palmed his wife’s head. “I... she helped me to identify myself. I carried so many different masks, so many different jobs – Warrior, Priest, Sage – I switched masks so often that I didn’t quite know who I was or what I was trying to do. It literally drove me mad. When people asked me what I was, I’d given them a different answer in every case.

“And then Sanari helped me to choose one, a role that was none of the others. I was a guardian, and at the same moment in which I learned that, she became my protectorate.”

“I sometimes wonder what could have happened to my life, Sage, had I ever thought like you do. You protect others with very little thought of your own life, even those you’ve never met.”

“But you do that as well, father.” Sage said, and turned and rose to face the Dragaseir.

“In a manner of speaking. I had... failed to protect many times in my life, and I thought little of it at those times. And then I failed to protect when it meant something to me. Now she is gone from my life.”

“Fate has a tendency to do that to people as a punishment.” Sage commented, and continued to pet his wife’s mane.

Gesio looked down at Sage, seeing the deep, gouging spiritual scar that was ever so slowly healing. It was a patch that joined his demon and his angel together as one continuous whole. But the wound that had caused that, happened when he too... had failed to protect someone that mattered to him.

“I come to this time line in order to be with her spirit at least,” Gesio said. “But soon, very soon, she will go away even in this time, and I will loose her completely.

“Sanari, does not fear that happening with you as her mate. She does not fear death so long as you are alive.”

Sage bowed his head.

“And as long as she is alive, I do not need to fear, for I know my savior still lives. For what this sweet, beautiful creature has done for me, I shall move the cosmos if she wishes it.”

“A very devoted husband and you’ve already proven yourself to be a devout father as well. I hope to someday introduce you both as Mother Sanari... and Father Sage.”

Come morning, Loro got a wonderful gift from being the first to sample his kill. Gesio promised to declare him as a man as soon as they got to the city.

“Not only did you protect three incredibly beautiful females, Loro, and their cubs, but you also killed yourself a vicious beast and provided your pryde with enough food to make the crossing.” Gesio said as soon as the cub had awoken. “You’re a bit young, but I think it’s time for you to be called an adult.

“You’ve grown much in so short a time, Loro, why do you think this is so?”

Loro looked down at the book in his lap. It had become most precious to him.

“I am learning things from this book, father. I can feel my powers growing the more I understand it. That and Lord Sage has showed me much wisdom.”

He enjoyed his meal before anyone else had some. Sage even had some of it, once everyone else had their fill at least.

Afterwards, they discovered what happened to the way station guardian, Maxis. Deep in the cave, where the Rock Bear had made its home, they found the remains of Maxis’s shop, as well as what was left of Maxis.

His was a violent death, and Sanari was kind enough to send him to the great beyond before his spirit had a chance to fester here. But the remains of Maxis’s shop gave them some additional stores to their food supplies, including some spice to make their meals better at night.

They spent one more day here, at this place, curing and preparing the bear and placing it into in satchels of leather once it’d been cured. It was surprising on how quickly it cooked and cured, but it was thought that Gesio had a hand in that matter.

Rising early the following morning, packing away all their stores and all their food stuffs, with the fur of the great black Rock Bear adorning Loro like a cloak, and new fur-lined moccasins for everyone save Gesio and Sage made from the hare skins of Sage’s and Hima’s hunt, made walking in the snow much easier.

For days they continued up and then down the mountain slope, sleeping in caves along the way, or underneath Sage’s magical shelter, not encountering much else along the way. Kirin and Hima made love on a nightly basis, but still Kirin could not heat. Gesiomagatou slipped away only twice more and returned just as silently in the morning, and was there on the last day to guide them toward the Valley of the Stormseekers.

For millennia, as the Stormseekers became a larger and larger target for the Tar Lion’s hunt, the valley had gathered more and more of the Stormseeker ilk who desired a secret place to live in peace. In order to get to it, there was a hidden alcove in the rock, which, in this case, they had to dig through some snow in order to get into an antechamber.

Illusion hid this place further inside the alcove, and Gesio directed them on where to step to avoid the traps. Sage was walking forward ahead of them, his feet carrying him over the traps without even breaking his stride.

Finally, the short tunnel they were traveling through opened up, and it opened into a warm place, just like the first way station. Sage stood up, holding onto his wife before him as he looked about him, immediately reminded of the Shangri-La mountain valley with only the sight of a Millennium tree keeping the picture from being complete.

White fluffy clouds moved over head, and his powers felt a volcanic activity flowing around this mountain as if it were a lee stone thrown into a stream of destructive forces. All around it frigid winds blew, and likewise, all around it, mountains were building higher and higher to protect it from the outside. There were twin rivers of lava running just beneath the surface in some areas, heating the ground and creating numerous hot springs.

It was a tropical place, surrounded by towering trees that were – in a word – ancient. The valley was a bowl, in which the grasses, mosses and trees climbed as high up onto the mountains as they could.

In the very center of this place was a great walled city built against the far wall of the mountains, and all around them on the mountain cliffs were holes for windows and porches... as well as battlements.

There was a feeling of peace here, not as intense as it was in Shangri-La, but it was nonetheless there.

“I’ve only heard,” Hima said. “I’ve never seen, and what I’ve heard isn’t enough to describe what I’m seeing now...”

Looking out over this hidden valley, where immediately around it was nearly impassible frozen wastes and further from that was desert, lay a vision of nature’s beauty and perfection. The power of two Beast Lords – one a true cosmic being and one growing closer to being one – still couldn’t make the journey quickly. One could blame their companions and charges, but one could still as easily blame the placement of this retreat.

Gesiomagatou seemed, if subdued, very pleased to be here. In his steps it was clear to a seasoned observer of behavior that all was well but he still had concerns. Loro rode on his shoulders, still a short cub, to see the world much as his father does as a tall and strong lion. Loro was to be named an adult today but somehow he just wanted to be a cub with his father a while longer.

“I rarely hide the fact that the cheetahs still exist,” Gesio said lightly with an air of personal *‘horn blowing,’* “The band I aided across the desert has made it to the keep of another family of Stormseekers. They will be safe and cared for. They had six cubs on the way each strong and quick and speedy for new ones. They can crawl quite freely only a few hours after birth...”

“I wish I could meet them,” Loro smiled recalling stories of lathe and lean cheetah girls who could come like a dream and go twice as fast.

Cheetahs are by nature timid but if cornered were wily and fierce combatants. That’s why so many prydes enlisted them as assassins and sent them on suicidal missions.

The Cheetahs refused to continue their servitude and fled as quickly as they were able. Many were hunted and slain for deserting their masters others were only stripped of all their belongings and pushed away... Others met worse fates than death or isolation... One day they’d return... They’d have to... To so many, as servants, friends, colleagues, and even lovers... but never slaves even at the hands of the Tar Lions... they were missed and hearts ached to even mention the cheetahs.

“Someday you will...”

Miki smiled as she chimed in her two cents worth, “Know a cheetah by their black tear trails, and slender frames...”

“Quite right, Miki,” Gesio smiled back at her. He looked a barely discernable moment at her belly and knowing, as

all Overgods did, the past, present, and future all at once. Only the future kept changing but the more immediate future was more reliable and guided their steps better... But Gesio's eye was on a future he had no assurance on and yet wagered his heart on. One where Rae Iksaki was his loving wife for the rest of time.

Glancing at Miki's belly, he saw the future of her son and their descendants. A small clan of proud warriors and cruel tacticians against the Aphkian Empire. As a class of elite '*super soldiers*,' they fought for the safety of their homeworld – of all Prydes – and in that they prevailed...

“Know these '*Wraith Lions*' by their ebon glass fur and snow white manes,” He could hear a wolfish general utter at a mission briefing. It would have made Miki's heart swoon to hear such a deadly and cruel foe speak so respectfully of her descendants. How it would have pleased that fiend who raped her as well...

The wolves never set foot on Casiida, making them one of the few races that achieved such a feat. But it came with a price.

The wraith lions split over the spoils, those who wanted them and those who only wanted to just go home and raise their babies and love their wives. But many saw that they could stand against the wolves and prevail and wanted to use that to surge forward into the universe. Those that went on to conquer and destroy were the Onyx. Those who remained were called Opal for their manes, and the only clan to have females with long manes in the future.

The wraith lions will help decide the fate of the Casid as a whole. Their final conflict will shape the black lions as a whole... But I cannot see that yet... Even the rise of the Red Queen does little to clarify this end. Life still has it's surprises for me... Gesio thought to himself...

And then Gesio turned to look at Sage.

There was a reason why the Dragaseir feared Lord Sage so much. In such remarkably rare situations, they encountered individuals who did not cause echoes in the future. They were unknowns in the ebb and flow of the rivers of time. All prior individuals the Dragaseir had met with, only affected small areas, and in all prior cases, their influences didn't pass beyond that of the world they were upon.

Lord Sage, however, did that on a Multiuniversal scale.

All the best laid plans came crumbling down at his simple presence. A foreseen happenstance suddenly disintegrates as he enters the picture. But then again, oddly enough, there are instances in Scrying where he did appear. In such cases he accomplished something that no matter what a Dragaseir did... even an Overgod... they couldn't change that point in time.

There was a reason, however, Gesio had brought this '*Wild Card*' with him into the past.

As a Weretiger, Gesio had not recognized him. But the moment Sage became a Dragon, Gesio saw his past suddenly rise before him in the form of the Beast Lord who claimed to be his son in the past. And now the circle of time in the past was nearly complete...

“Gesiomagatou?” Sanari whispered as he strolled absentmindedly through a great stone archway of pillars and lintel carved of igneous stones into fine shapes and detail befitting an ancient civilization and yet to see this it was all freshly done within the last few years.

The great golden lion stopped suddenly and looked back at the comparatively tiny cat-woman. He lifted his son off his back and put him down gently.

“Did you know that there are black lions living here?”

Sage, Sanari, Hima and Kirin all froze at that thought a moment. It was like they had somehow wandered into the nest of the enemy. Sage himself felt almost ill having the weight of killing so many Tar lions; many were unwilling

youths who begged for their lives before the end, never wanting to fight... never wanting to kill... or die...

"...no! Please I have a little sister who needs me..." One tar lion boy tried to scramble away bleeding out of the stump left from a 'near miss' taking off his leg.

"I don't want to die," One cried holding up hand of white, soft, claws to shield himself in vein.

"Mother! What did I do wrong?" one boy screamed as Sage took his head. Tears flooded out of his eyes. "Help me!"

Tears wrung from the corners of his eyes as he shuttered in anguish. So much youth slain. So many of them never dreamed of killing a day in their lives. So much innocence... He had damned yet another generation of tar lions to suffer...

"I would like to meet them," Sage whispered trying not to let his voice crack. Sanari leaned on his arm caressing his hand to comfort him, but his sins stabbed at him grievously buckling his knees.

Somehow he missed the group of young black lion cubs males and females greeting Loro. The females did not waste a second wrapping him in their arms made strong by hard labor at farming so young. They kissed him and held him close exciting a deep blush visible through his fur.

"Children!" called a lean young black lioness, all of Miki's age. She was dressed in the familiar white body-cloth that Sage and Sanari were well acquainted with from their own experiences at home in the Mystic League. It was not secured at her sides and hung sideways revealing her tight body of firm muscles with light scars from hard work. Her claws were delicate and white, she never fought a day in her life. Her eyes were gentle as she called the cubs off Loro who sported what had to be his first real woody in his life with a runny bead of cum dripping to the ground.

Sanari chuckled a bit with Gesio then the rest following. The boys had remained respectfully at a distance... Most of them, as a few walked up and rubbed Sanari's belly like a good luck charm. Actually it was the other way around. Children rubbing a pregnant belly were like the children asking the babies to come out and play. The cubs gave a satisfying stir in her belly causing her to purr, a pleasant surprise to the boys who all tried to return the sound. Only a couple got it right... for a few seconds.

"I'm so sorry," The black lioness said bowed at the waist, hands in a *'fig leaf'* pose over her temptingly deep snatch. "The children were just allowed to end their work for today. They can be so playful especially to new guests. Once the girls pawed some poor boys unconscious..." She stifled a chuckle but it only incited Gesio and Sage to laugh themselves.

Sage let his laughter die as he quickly swallowed his glee and bowed to the young lady, "Young mistress... I must meet with your elders amongst the Black Lions now. It is very important to me that I do..."

"Gerra..." Gesio murmured catching the lioness off guard causing a very deep involuntary bow.

"Forgive me..." she said with almost painful sincerity, "I am Gerra of the pryde Ritsuo."

The cubs all bowed as their names were given as well. All were well-mannered and happy children.

Gerra looked to them and bid them leave to play. A few of the cubs, boys and girls, hung around. The lioness looked to Sage again and saw the urgency in his eyes as he looked to her almost pleading, with his expression, to be taken to her elders.

"Of course," she said with a bow again, "Please follow me..." As she turned to lead the way, two lines of armored gold lions came and formed a blockade to their passage.

“That cannot be. ‘The Master of Land and Sky’ and this other Beast Lord are not to go any further without permission,” said their leader a very well appointed soldier with claws as black as pitch, in full body armor.

“By whose order?” Gesio demanded, “After all these years you think to deny me passage. I all but built this place...”

“...but this place is mine.” Came a new voice of a lioness of incomparable beauty.

The Gold lions looked straight ahead to avoid being distracted by their mistress. Her fur was silver. Not merely in color but in truth was silver and shone brilliantly with a white chest and belly leading down to a very pleasing cleft of her femininity. Details of her sleek solid and powerful frame that spoke of intense ability but soft and subtle charms. Her mane flowed like black water to the ground and amazingly gathered no dirt or leaves from the trail. Her face, tastefully framed with exquisite jewelry, was punctuated by two black eyes that gave off no shine.

Her body, her features, her naked presentation, all crafted and perfected for what had to be centuries, made Mother Sanari seem rather plain in even Sage’s empirical comparison of this fem and his lifemate. But his heart was tied to her and nothing could change that but he could not help but fall for this obvious trap as he grew erect before her.

A siren, Sage thought to himself before seeing Gesio, completely unmoved by this lioness, stare at her almost in fear.

Sensing Sage about to speak, Gesio shot a fierce glare at his god son, “Do not speak to her. Never speak to her until she speaks to you first. Do you understand me?”

Sage was shaken to see this. Gesio had always been passive, even in battle, but this time he was on edge ready to strike first if need be.

“Father...”

“Father?” the lioness heckled cruelly, “This thing is what you adopted, Gesiomagatou? Such a waste of flesh.” She looked over to Sanari and smirked with even more venom.

Sage was about to call the lioness’ attention but Gesio smashed Sage in the mouth before he could say a word.

“What are you doing?” Sage staggered back from Gesio stunned ready to go to blows with his new godfather. The abilities that Gesio kept to himself were far beyond the reach of Sage or any creature he knew of and if this lioness could scare Gesio then Sage felt it wise to be wary as well.

“Sage...” Sanari lowered her voice almost in reverence, “That is someone you do not want to give any excuses to do anything to. Please, remain silent.”

“Mother Sanari... The last time we crossed paths you were skinning young soldiers to wear their pelts,” the silver lioness smirked coldly, “I must say that was a far cry from you baring cubs. I’m sure they’ll be just as bloodthirsty as you were and you mate *is*. How many was it that day we met? Tell me.”

Sanari looked away trying not to say a word but fear wrenched her words as she cried choking on the words, “three... thousand... at least...”

“...and many of them begged to live. They were young, sincere, trained never to lie or hide intent. When they said they didn’t want to kill, that they were in fact trying to gather up straggling troops to send home... you butchered them anyway... No one ever knew that you did it all by yourself. Such a shameful use of your immortality...”

Sage trembled with rage as this lioness continued to drill Sanari with one awful truth after another. Things she remembered and left out of her diary. Memories she did not want to see but dared not forget.

“They couldn’t kill you but you gladly murdered them.”

Sanari fell to her knees hands buried in her face as one more memory was dragged to the surface after another breaking her heart and will a little more each time.

Kirin looked over to Hima who stood by silently. She wanted to help her mother but seeing the signs that it was pointless, she only began to cry for her mother.

Miki was frozen as she fell to her knees knowing just who was tormenting Sanari.

Loro on the other hand growled, at first to himself, then aloud, speaking before Gesio could stop him, “Leave her alone!”

The silver lioness tilted her gaze to the cub and smiled, “Cute...”

“Loro...” Gesio murmured terrified for his son.

The silver lioness murred as she strode over to the cub shoving Sanari’s head down before doing so, “I knew your mother... I was there when you were born. So tiny. Barely a handful. Now look at you...” She gave the cub a very inappropriate kiss mouth to mouth while molesting him before everyone. Loro tried to push away without success, until Gesio pulled him free.

“Papa...” Loro looked shocked but not even really upset. She was gorgeous at least. At least he was born into a society where sexuality came on very early. But still Loro was too young.

Gesio looked at the lioness but before he could speak, Sage walked over to the lioness and slapped her... hard. The crack of bone and the spill of blood came with it and a thunderous crack.

The lioness was thrown to the ground easily but she rose again like nothing happened and slapped Sage back, breaking his neck, causing him to fall limp to the ground. She leaned over lifting her tail as she bent at her tight waist until she was face to face with Sage as he slowly healed, far slower than he should be.

“I have a sad future for you to suffer through. You’ll hurt so many before I’m done with you. You’ll scream for mercy before it’s over...” She kissed him deeply slipping him a tongue that slid all the way to his gut before returning, “But that’s all the mercy you’ll get.”

She stood up and looked toward Loro again then Gesio, “It’s good you haven’t forgotten you are still nothing to me. Still you have a very brave little boy there. I hope that he has a good life. I wish I’d been the one to take him first though.”

She walked through the blockade, groping one male’s masculine cluster exciting a full erection causing him to wince with painful pleasure. “Let them by. I just wanted to say *‘hello.’*”

The blockade reformed into two lines of lions before they followed their mistress away.

“Loro...” Gesio held his son, again made to feel totally helpless when a loved one was in danger.

“Who was that?” Kirin said helping Sanari, along with Miki and Hima, to right Sage as his broken neck finally began to heal normally again.

Without the unseen force keeping his immeasurable healing factor down, his head rolled forward, tensed, and with a couple of deep-throated wet cracks, reset it selves with all his vertebrae coalescing together.

He shook his head and slapped its side as the conversation continued around him.

“The Mother of the Moons, Seer of All Things, Cliyapi...” Gesio murmured tearfully, “She has plagued me since my birth. She was the one who pushed me to become what I am today but when I saw what she really was... I sided with the Father of the Sun, Glintrougeftii. But I have felt as if I’ve been on the losing side ever since...”

Sage finally sat up on his own, “Don’t blame yourself. She’ll get hers.”

“My love, do not be so foolish,” Sanari said firmly but consolingly, “After more than eighty million years, I doubt her final reward is coming anytime soon. More powerful beings than you million times over have tried to bring her down. I... please do not pursue her... Red...Remember Red?”

Red is, or at least his spirit is, the guardian of Sanari’s Central Shrine in the Mystic League. He’d been a warrior sent to bring down Sanari and the other *‘Plague Cats,’* as her group of murdering fighters led by Mother Matrix was known as. He’d finally beaten her and was set to kill her but instead fell in love with her and brought her out of the darkness that consumed her. He too was an immortal and lived long to heal her. But when they were confronted by Cliyapi, Red resisted and was made mortal for his defiance. He died in battle forsaking his mortal life to become a ghost at Sanari’s side. They’d been lovers and now he was her eternal protector. Often Sage’s steps were guided by the ghost to her aid.

“I... won’t...” Sage sighed holding Sanari and Kirin.

“All this and we still haven’t gotten a room,” Hima moaned getting a sardonic laugh from Sage and Loro, though Gesio was the most disturbed by all this to even take full notice.

The remainder of the walk to the citadel was a quiet one. Even Loro had become quiet despite this should be a very joyous time for him and everyone else. Sanari leaned soothingly on Sage’s arm as he looked on with deepening concern for Gesiomagatou.

This being of nigh omnipotence, a creature of grand and awesome majesty, brought to total humiliation and subordination by what was clearly not a mere lioness. She was something horrible and never to be crossed and yet Sage did cross her and was cursed. It felt like nothing more than a merely idle threat, but somewhere in his mind, Sage knew differently.

He was doomed to suffer this curse.

“Beloved,” Sanari murred softly, the weight of her cubs slowed her pace as she began at last to succumb to fatigue. Sage turned his every impulse to her as he slowed his pace for her and took her up to carry her. “Thank you... but this is not what I desired, my love... Gesiomagatou seems withdrawn... Even more than usual. This has been more a trial for him than a pleasure for us.”

Sage looked back to the golden Beast Lord, in his Draco-wolf form, seeing him sulk to himself as he gently led his son, cradling the back of his head, careful not to push or overtly direct the cub’s steps. Sage dared not breathe his concern too loudly but, “Why are we here? I’m sure he saw all this coming...”

Gesio stopped smoothly after a full step turning back. In his telepathy the old Overgod merely said, *‘That which is worth having is worth suffering for.’* He sent to them both telepathically, and then aloud he said, “These are the proudest years of my life thus far and yet they are my most painful as well. I lost my wife, whom I would gladly say I still obsess over, my children are left to fend for themselves far too often without their father...”

”Papa...” Loro held on to the great scaled hand firmly, “Did the silver lioness take mama away?”

The words froze Gesio cold as his slowly turned his gaze down at the cub. He might be right but he wouldn’t dare

say it aloud to the cub. He was far too young and still too headstrong to be trusted with that small fragment of knowledge.

“I don’t know,” Gesiomagatou murmured straining to hold back tears. Cliyapi had her way of engineering events to achieve the desired results. Nothing has ever escaped her traps. Not even the mightiest of beings. Rae herself was actually driven to grow stronger by this dragoness beyond Menikomenqolui’s ability to instruct by the constant steering of her life.

Gesio had hoped that Lord Sage would’ve been a sufficiently strong enough weight to throw her plans off. So far... Sage’s actions were doing little more than ensuring their current future.

Was even a Wild Card to weak for her wiles?

The Citadel loomed majestically in the near center of the valley in its deep lake moat; which was dotted with dozens of quartz statues of rulers and Stormseekers long gone now. Many stood a good thirty feet tall, adorned in finery. Some were shrouded in gantries as they were being tended to. Heavy tapestry vestments and appropriately sized jewelry were being replaced or cleaned.

The pathway for the last mile to the first gate house was paved in fine quartz bricks that shone brilliantly under the light of day. The tall, thick trees rivaled some of those found in the great forests of the universe, some towering like redwoods. Along the way, Gesio slowed his pace as if completely lost in thought. It was not the first time he’d done this, but he was *‘not there’* much more often than usual as of late.

As the Headmaster of the Mystic League, he was unflappable. No one could trick or confuse him and he was often days or weeks ahead of everyone. Even Sage stopped trying to play various games of wit or intelligence with the Overgod as he was frightfully outmatched. It simply was not fair sport anymore.

Upon reaching the first gatehouse, a grand structure made for defense that could block the long stonework bridge crossing the dugout lake-moat, the party stopped short and marveled at its size. Each gatehouse was a miniature barracks were warriors trained and rested... and most of all, guarded the way. Several armored lions politely barred the way, getting Gesiomagatou’s attention.

A slight glance and an acknowledging snort from the Draco-wolf and the guards moved aside. This was repeated three more times before reaching the main gates of the citadel. It should really be called a castle but “no one may rule from that seat within” or so went the legend. It was reserved for the *‘All-Stormer,’* a being of absolute myth. Supposed both male and female with the strength and wisdom of ages and unnaturally beautiful to the point of causing near madness in the unworthy.

“Form here,” Gesio uttered softly taking his son’s hand gently, “We part ways until later... perhaps tomorrow. Enjoy the hospitality to be had here. Loro and I... need to talk about a few things.”

“Yes, papa...” Loro said warmly, not sure what it was they were going to discuss but clearly it was important.

Sage looked toward Kirin and Hima as they both observed the statues. The Draco-tiger could envision seeing Equis, Kina, maybe Kaya – she was still so young – and Clio among those there. He turned his gaze out to the statues as well, seeing something strange and looked down to his wife.

“One of those statues out their looks almost exactly like you.” Sage told her as he sounded almost incredulous.

But how could that be? If he missed his guess, His Sanari wouldn’t even be born yet, and when she did become birthed, Sanari soon would become not of sound mind. Likewise, the Cersile homeworld was countless light years away from Casiida. In another universe in fact... and doing very cruel things. Surely nothing to be noteworthy enough to have her image hewn up before all to see.

“That I would have to see but my eyes are not quite as good as yours, my love,” Sanari leaned against him, rubbing her full belly gently. She’d been on her feet all day and despite her previous life as a warrior, then a killer, then a priestess, the cat-woman was not a being of unending physical strength and desperately needed to rest. Despite her earlier protest of not allowing her husband to carry her, she nonetheless rested in his strong capable arms, and was already half asleep there.

Just then the silver lioness appeared, completely undetected by Sage until she spoke, “Go on inside and take her to bed. Servants will see to your needs...”

Sage snapped about to stare straight at her. The lioness only smirked confidently and made it very clear that Sage was only marginally less frightening than a limp noodle. He recalled Gesiomagatou’s warning not to speak to her until she addressed him first and only nodded quietly.

“I’d say something about impregnating her, Sage but the duration of this gestation and the for unfortunate size will make for a very good torture... and the best part is she’s going through it willingly,”

“Please,” Sanari muttered weakly through the fatigue and partial exhaustion, “Do not do this. I love him and these cubs... I would...”

The lioness reached over and gently rubbed Sanari’s cheek as she melted into the mighty feminine paw nearly as fully as if it’d been Sage’s hand touching her. “I finished with you ages ago. You will get almost everything you deserve but will suffer more than you deserve in order to get it. Atonement as it were...”

“Please...” Sanari murmured as if in love with this lioness.

It wrung Sage’s soul to see, let alone to hear this. His anger boiled to think that this lioness, Cliyapi would toy with his lifemate’s mind and feelings so and he spoke, completely forgetting his mind in order to tell her off... Or rather tried to. His mouth moved and his lungs worked but no sound came forth. The lioness looked at him smiling with cool indifference.

“It seems Gesio still has his hand on you cub,” she whispered to Sage drawing up close. “You really are not all that interesting to me. Individuals seldom are. You can take some measure of relief that I will not level my punishment on you for some time, so enjoy your new life with this lovely creature and care for these cubs she carries for there will be a time when she will refuse to care for them even try to kill them.... But wait...” She turns back to Sanari taking up her hands, gone soft and delicate from centuries of peace and luxury, “Don’t let her take up that terrible spear of hers. Or else the whole woman you love will come to light and she is a cruel and wicked butcher...”

Why is she telling me this? No one can touch her spear without being driven mad. Even I can barely stand a touch on its grip. Sage’s mind echoed as the silver lioness looked back at him with an eerie chiding grin. I guess I’ll have to figure it out for myself.

The lioness released the cat-woman giving her a gentle lick on the cheek. Walking past Sage she seemed to cease to be just as fluidly as she came to be, leaving them both to themselves.

Sanari shuddered and slipped and fell from Sage’s stunned grasp to her knees, holding her belly tightly in tears. She had for millennia held fast to the sanctity of life and to be told that she will want her children dead... She was too afraid or otherwise incensed to cry as Sage knelt down next to her and held her.

“We will destroy your spear when we return.” Sage consoled her as best he could, “You were very detailed in the descriptions of how you sealed your rage and ‘venom’ in it. We can find a way to seal it forever...”

Sanari only sobbed.

“Mother,” Kirin knelt down next to them with Hima standing over them as if guarding. Worried was more like it.

“What she said,” Hima’s brow took on a deeply thoughtful look, “About Lady Sanari being made to suffer greatly to have any joy in her life. Kirin...”

The black lioness looked up at her husband as if he were seeking to protect her from the wrath of all their gods put together. Again came a wash of emotion that drove her to fear losing Hima.

“I don’t want to lose you,” Kirin spoke weakly unsure of her feelings but clear that she loved Hima more and more with every day. But that intangible fear gripped her and sickened her with doubt and dread.

“Nor do I... But I feel you were meant for something... I’m not sure what... but something else. A Beast Lord doesn’t make you his daughter simply because he wishes it... Does he?”

Sage pulled Sanari closer to him almost ignoring them, “I love her as my child. Know that and be it enough to comfort yourself.” Sage rose to his feet carrying Sanari into the citadel while she held her belly tightly and continued to sob frightened sobs, where several servants surrounded them guiding them in.

Kirin watched as Hima took her hand. A hand that felt as strong as his own. Thickened muscles and firmer breasts marked her as something great... as if the horn wasn’t enough. That horn had stopped growing longer but was actually becoming harder and more lustrous. Still... Hima never seemed to notice it as his gaze was always drawn to those two golden pools in her obsidian face.

Hima looked out at a few of the statues in the lake moat and appeared to have little on his mind until he spoke, “What are we going to do? We both fear losing the other and yet here we are in the shadow of gods who have full say in our futures and we have none...”

“You can’t believe that...” Kirin clung to her brooding husband, burying her head in his shoulder.

“Your new father is a violent war god. No matter what he has said or done... he has butchered hundreds without a moments pause... No... I... it is not true. You father mourns the death he has brought down... But we are so powerless in all of this... Cliyapi could destroy us all. She was the one who dried up the Great sea. Gesiomagatou seems to be lost in doubt and fear... This world is falling apart.”

“My father...”

Hima took firm hold of Kirin’s face with gentle but sincere intent, “I will keep this world alive. On my own or with help but this world will not die. Kirin, I want you with me. The work will be crushing and take generations but I am certain it can be done. Please say you will...”

Kirin still felt that nagging fear holding her but it seemed more understandable. She could stay with him and fight this fight to save the world. Would her father refuse her? He could and she could hardly resist. But she dared, “I’ll stay with you as long as I live...”

“I will never abandon you,” Hima drew her face to his as they kissed on the bridge.

Gesiomagatou and Loro entered the inner chambers where several young white lions and white tigers practiced their combat skills. Deceptively lazy claw strokes that could cleave a boulder like thin paper were being mastered by those who would need such destructive skills to secure their survival.

“Beast Lord,” Called one young white tigress as she ran uninhibited to him, naked as a jaybird, her four large, full breasts against such a lean but solid frame, sloshed heavily as she ran to him, “Oh, master! You’ve returned!”

“Been nursing again I see, Atari” Gesio said wryly with a thin smile cupping one of the huge breasts in his hand.

To no one's surprise, that one mammary orb filled his own enormous hand. She enjoyed having four full and easily over-sized tits. The fact that they did not weigh down on her at all was another thing.

"Six more cubs were born while you were away so I helped out. They were all sooo hungry. But I gave them sooo much and I still think that the best is still un-reached." Atari murred as she leaned over Loro, her great bosom hanging down seductively, swaying smoothly and heavily.

Loro found himself looking at those breasts instead of her face, and he felt the stiffness in his groin returning.

"You're so hung up on your breasts, cub," Gesio lightened up looking about at the other students as the patriarchal Stormseeker, a great black striped, white tiger whose frame was absolutely mounted two, three, or possibly even *four* times over with muscles, entered the chamber; a light webbing of veins throbbing with unmatched might and power.

"Bastard." The Stormseeker growled, "What do you want with my daughter now you pervert?"

"Me?" Gesio lurched back comically, Loro becoming a bit confused, "You have me confused with that old dried fruit, Tyr. She's the one with plans for me."

"Maybe marrying her off to your son." The great tiger, the size of the Beast Lord himself, smirked at his tiny daughter as she looked over at the dumbfounded Loro as he could only see those four large tits swaying there hypnotically.

"Sounds good if the boy can at least remember her name," the Draco-wolf laughed followed by Tyr as well.

Atari, being a bit older and much taller, knelt down and simply buried the cub in her breasts kissing him, "Please say yes."

"B...but why?" Loro finally managed to say, feeling his penis unsheathing and erecting upward along her smooth belly. The feeling of it tracing along the crevice of her belly fur only enhanced the feelings raging in his loins.

"We're betrothed!" she smiled and kissed him again. "Promised to each other so father can remain master of this school after your father defeated him in battle.

"It'd be nice if you said you'd take me, though" Atari murred kissing him more.

"Atari..." Loro said, muffled by the breasts of the more than eager tigress.

Tyr put a loving hand on her head just as she started to press the little tiger cub further into her chest, "Loro is, I think, too young to understand the answer even if you let him speak it."

Atari let Loro up from the depth of her bosom and he gasped as if having been submerged under water all that time. Looking about Loro finally stared at his father with a mixed expression of arousal, uncertainty, and bashful amusement. A thin trickle of blood slipped from one nostril and he sniffed it up.

Gesiomagatou smirked for the first time in what seemed days, though clearly not so, and turned to Tyr, "We can leave these two alone for now. We need to talk, old friend."

"Of course," The giant tiger said low but pleasantly. The two left Atari and Loro and the tigress continued to snuggle the little cub.

Kirin and Hima walked in the forest nearby the Citadel. Children played with barely a care and the elders watched over them with warmly reminiscent eyes. Younger adults and older children worked, trained, and practiced their

trades, arts, and skills as a civilization at peace... a far cry from the world beyond where chaos and war seemed to abound in ever increasing proportions.

As they happened by a small flower bed of brightly bloomed and fragrant blossoms, Hima knelt down to pick a single white flower and he put it in Kirin's trimmed mane. She looked into his eyes about to thank him and she froze.

Visions came to her, like memories, or dreams. A beautiful realm by a vast sea of water. Lush green forests and rolling hills or high thick green grass dotted with tropical flowers and glittering butterflies. On the hill was Hima... but larger and even stronger looking surrounded by a harem of even stronger lionesses; the lead of the lionesses was a massive and beautifully maned lioness with cinnamon fur and a wily gleam in her eyes.

Her heart raced to see this vision as she seemed to fly about and past him to another part of this realm and a beauty of a young lioness, wearing the most scant of white trim and garments, laying restfully on a rock by the same sea...

She's so beautiful... perfect... Who is she? Kirin thought shaking herself out of the light trance that came and past as a heartbeat.

"Hima..." Kirin fell into him draping her arms about his shoulders, "I so desire to have your child and bare you so many sons and daughters..."

"It will happen when it happens, Kirin," Hima was calm as she pressed into him, "But something troubles me more than your father and this helplessness I feel..."

Kirin pulled back before nuzzling him comfortingly, "What?" This was uncharacteristically bold of her to ask but she could not help but ask and he did not hesitate to answer.

"I have had dreams," Hima looked down and away depressed, "Dark dreams of a grim future of war and slaughter. I saw the face of an invincible enemy who took everything we had... even our hope... I saw the death of our people under the heels of armored boots..."

"My dreams show me hope after death," Kirin spoke firmly seeing her husband quake in the face of the horror he had seen. Dream or not, it shook his desire to save the world from itself. After all, what hope is there if one saves the world only to see it destroyed? "Please... don't give up..." Her thoughts fell on that stronger vision of Hima, proud and majestic standing in paradise...

Hiding Place

Sage changed the cooling cloth on Sanari's forehead. The soak used for he cloth was a mix of soothing salts and herbs lolling her into pleasant sleep.

His heart sank thinking of what Cliyapi had said to him. Knowing full well that the dragoness had cursed him and was somehow punishing Gesiomagatou and Sanari. He could not relieve the heavy weight of uncertainty he felt over his new... curse.

"Why didn't she just wish me a long and interesting life?" Sage mumbled dejectedly half imagining Sanari's response, *because that would be too easy*, my love. As his mind drifted so it came to a point of sleep and he began to dream...

Waves rolled over the beach as he stood up to see the remains of a great city. The sky was a wasted red and black with lightning rolling across it. The smell of death was everywhere as he gathered himself. He felt no weight in his steps and no strength in his limbs. It was as if he were floating.

The city was a sprawling megatropolis. The skeletons of buildings and towers, some nearly a mile tall, wailed in the wind, filling the air with the call of haunting spirits. As Sage walked through it he saw the aftermath of war... catastrophic and apocalyptic war. The bodies of slaughtered humans and dragons littered the streets, hung pinned to the buildings, and worse. None were alive...

This place can't be...

"This is your fault!" Screamed a tiny human boy who, inexplicably, ran from out of an alleyway. He threw stones at Sage.

He dearly wanted to ask what had happened but the words never came.

"Like you don't know," Sanari stood there beside him holding her spear, an ancient relic that glinted as if new, her light orange fur faded to a dull deathly grey as her red-orange mane turned shock white. Her pink robes, printed with lovely flowers, transformed into black robes marked with icons of death and sufferings. "You did it to your own people."

Did what?

"You made the wolves come for your pitiful people..."

The boy spoke again crying as an Imperial Shocktrooper, fully clad in heavy powered armor, held him skewered on the end of his bayonet, "They saw you as a rogue threat and when they couldn't make you behave or leave they destroyed your people."

I would have stopped them. I would have given them what they wanted...

Sanari, or at least her evil self, laughed heartily a few moments, "Liar. You do whatever you care to simply because you can. You claim to be so great and mighty and yet you are just the same as that puny runt left to die under a falling hut. You would have fought them for sure, but not to save these useless creatures..."

The boy reached out for help bleeding a river over the bayonet, "Make it stop. Make the hurting stop... I don't want to... die..."

Don't call them useless! They are among the greatest creatures in any universe.

"Says who? You? By what standard? Look around you, you blind fool," Sanari glared at him venomously, eyes Sage prayed never to see from her, "Look at yourself and *your* kind. You have greater strength, power, and potential. You and yours heal like water cut with a knife and live many times longer. These creatures are hopeless prey animals destined for the slaughter. You pin so much of your hope on them that these minor aggravations become a sad liability for you, your order and the whole of your civilization..."

What you have to say means nothing to me. You aren't real. The Sanari I know, Mother Sanari, Mother of Songs, My wife and mother to my children, has as much faith in humans as I do.

"You'll never learn, dearest. You touched the spear. I am as real to you as I am to her. Even if she dies I will be here to plague you to the end of your days. You will long for mortality."

These are just illusions you pieced together from the back of my mind. Nothing more...

"These are the things fate has shown you that you haven't told anyone." The evil Sanari looked up then pointed to a great burning rock falling from the sky. "You know this will happen as well. It isn't enough that the Imperium kill every human, dragon, and all else they see on this world ... they are going to kill this planet. You are the offensive fellow so much so they are quite willing to eliminate a whole planet maybe the whole star system..."

They do not have that kind of power! Sage quaked seeing this happen.

“Idiot. What do you really know about the Imperium? The Assembly? That little girl, Rae, you are still so enamored with? Daedalus can only tell what he learns and he learns only what he is allowed to learn which is nothing. Thousands of years ago, the Aphkei wrapped their arms around as much of the universe as they could and held it with crushing force...”

They lost it all...

“Double idiot! All the territories that make up the Imperial Union are the same territories that the Old Empire was once made upon. They are willing to surrender their sovereignty to end centuries of intergalactic war. The Aphkei gained a stable and compliant dominion simply by letting it suffer under its own stupidity a while. You, too, will suffer and when it is done you will be compliant to one of us... Me or your wife...”

Sage opens his eyes with a start and looked to Sanari, warmly hued and purring softly. He looked to her stroking her mane. The cloth was dried out so he re-wet it, replacing it on her brow. Absently, he rubbed her belly feeling a small kick. His mind was torn between the darkness and the light of the very woman he so loved. It was not a pleasant tear. This *'evil'* Sanari was just as seductive as the *'good'* Sanari is.

Looking down to her he said nothing trying to make full sense of his dream...

Tyr and Gesiomagatou settled about a low table where a fine lunch was being served. Fresh meats and cheeses fit the pallet neatly as the two spoke like old friends long separated.

“Loro is staying here?” Tyr raised an eyebrow to the Beast Lord. “I heard talking that the last of the Beast Lords were leaving this world. Simply too few of them to hold together this world...”

“More like there is nothing more we can do.” Gesio sighed sniffing the fine soft cheese before taking a slow bite, letting it savoringly melt on his tongue.

“Just giving up is more like it.” the great tiger groaned sipping his wine.

“My last act before leaving is to hide all the Stormseeker sanctuaries. This one will be the only one with any thing to mark its place. Consider them shelters against the storms to come. Someday in the future the sun will shine on these cities again and at that time, everyone will come and no one will attack.”

“I trust you, friend. I will teach your son all we have to offer him. He will miss you dearly and I fear I will be a poor substitute for your guiding hands.”

“He will be fine, I trust you. Now when is the rest of the meal coming? I’ll miss your wives’ cooking.”

The Missing Artifacts

Kirin lay asleep on her husband’s lap as he looked out thinking of the future. He did not move as so not disturb her. He’d seen many beautiful lionesses, panthresses, tigresses, leopardesses, and those of the smaller cats but none seemed close to the gentle grace and innocence of Kirin. Her claws were not very dark though at her age they should be almost black. She was not a violent girl. She was firmly muscled but not hard, she was an athlete, not a warrior. She did not live to do harm.

Hima sighed stroking her head and the soft short mane there. The slight smell of perfume caught his attention as he turned slowly, again so as not to disturb his wife, only to see the silver lioness, Cliyapi, smirking at him wickedly.

“Please...” Hima started his expression fearful, if not for what she could do but for what her guards might do if this was her personal resting spot.

“Don’t be afraid, cub,” the lioness leaned in kissing him deeply, a long serpent’s tongue lashing down his throat nearly causing him to gag. The tongue retracted as she spoke again, “Brave. I like that. You’re to be rewarded...”

“I have my reward here,” he said humbly trying not to fear as instructed but the silver lioness radiated fearsome energies that made every living thing around her tremble in fear. “Please don’t take her from me...”

The lioness crawled slinkily around to Kirin, gently rolling her fingers into the lionesses soft cunt, licking seductively. “Ah... no child yet. Good.”

Kirin moaned in ecstasy as the lioness continued to probe her. The black lioness murred rubbing her head in Hima’s lap but her husband was both too fearful and too disturbed to work up any form of an erection.

Cliyapi dipped her head between Kirin’s legs lapping at the girls crotch, “So sweet. She could bare you many children... But no.”

Hima looked at her as his wife continued to be mindlessly stimulated and could say nothing.

“The reward you desire is not to last for you,” Cliyapi sat up. “She is too perfect for you alone to claim as yours. She’ll become the sole domain of you family, the one you’ll make to hold this world together. When your tasks are done, Kirin will be returned to your family. She will give up a son and daughter. Twins who will be paragons of your species in mind, body, and soul. They will love without hesitation or condition and they will be nearly invincible... and you will be their father. I am not evil despite what you may imagine of me. But your time with her is short. Enjoy it.”

Hima watched her stand and walk away. Her form was too perfect as well but made that way to seduce not to love. But as she rounded a stand of trees out of sight, Kirin awoke to find a thick hard erection immediately pushing into her mouth. As wave of incredible lust for his wife tore through him as they made love right there. Low roars and growls of two big cats *‘getting busy’* filled the air as they bathed in the blessing of a most enigmatic deity.

“My *true* self?” Sanari cringed thinking back at the time Sage had touched her spear. It was her fault. She told him to, in order to experience what she’d done with the spear. Sage almost immediately vomited from the force and sheer evil she’d done. But neither ever thought that Sage would become the carrier of her darker self. The plague cat that murdered and killed without cessation or mercy for centuries. Hundreds of Imperial soldiers, their families, not all were Aphkei, met their cruel end by that spear as her fighting skills and powers grew with every death.

If Sanari had never stopped killing, she might’ve been the one to destroy his homeworld that day she helped save it instead.

Sage could barely look at Sanari, his eyes betraying the extent of the evil swirling in his brain. Just the knowledge of it frightened him. Yet it was a part of the woman he loved. He did not resist as she pulled him to her bosom, “I feared this might happen. She’ll try to convince you that there is no hope, and when she does then you will see that there is no other way but to fight and destroy everything you see and know.”

“We have to get her out.” Sage said pulling back to look his wife eye to eyes, but Sanari did not return the gaze. “I cannot leave her in my head like this. I just exorcized one demon. I can’t do it again... and this one is more powerful and insidious...”

“I know. But I cannot touch my spear again or I will be host to her again and I would not hesitate to rampage again. Just like Cliyapi said. I live completely apart from my evil but I cannot abandon nor destroy it or die myself. I will need to consult others to help with this when we return.”

Activity abounded around the sanctuary, early before dawn. Crops were gathered and herd animals put to there barns. The Casid hurried to gather and secure all their belongings. The giant gold lions worked hardest, sealing gates, moving enormous boulders, some many times larger than they were, a testament to their unyielding strength. The air was electric as the news flowed from one set of lips to the next...

“The Lord of Land and Sky is going to hide the sanctuaries under the earth to protect us. We’ll have to grow our crops amongst the wild plants to hide them from hunting eyes. A few small huts for the herders will be made above and maybe small towns will spring up over time but we are never to tell of these places... We are hidden like the suns behind high clouds. One day the clouds will clear and we will shine over the land again...”

In one form or another, the word spread as young and old, weak and strong prepared. Overhead, the great golden dragon flew surveying for the work to be done.

Sage and Sanari watched below taking awe at the workings of the past. All the Casid culture and art, hidden and protected. The Aphkei once found one of the hidden cities, but the group that found it wasn’t coming as conquerors, but as scholars, curious and giving. Sadly only two of the explorers survived being attacked by Onyx Lions. But the two who survived shared their findings with the prydes that would hear them and soon that city was found again.

Loro sat looking very dejected even depressed holding onto his now favorite book of Casid wisdom and lore. He knew the world he knew and was just beginning to understand was going to change. Would it still be a place that his book would still apply or would it be as useless as white claws against metal armor.

Atari, Tyr’s more than willing daughter and Loro’s betrothed, was away for now helping prepare for the world to ‘end.’ End, as it had been termed, soon become something else. She still put the tiger cub on edge being a few years older and being of that age that the tigress came into heat several times a year. For this reason alone Master Tyr put his daughter into chastity by betrothing her to the son of his ally and friend, Gesiomagatou.

Niria and Laikei both arrived to check on their little brother and spend some dearly desired time with their father. The tigresses seethed with the vast power granted to them by imbibing the dragon’s blood. They quickly found Loro sitting, for the most part alone, lost in thought.

“Loro...” Laikei murred singingly, but he did not move. She sat next to her little brother and gathered him into her, but he didn’t respond. “What’s wrong?”

Loro did not look away from... whatever it was he was staring at when he slowly, deliberately answered, “The world is going to change... Isn’t it?”

“What?” Niria questioned in her usual firm way, acting more like a brother than a sister but she sat next to her brother gently laying a hand on his knee. The soft pads of her paws soothed him and grabbed his attention at the same time, getting a small jerk of attention.

“I can imagine the world ruled by those killers and creeps. It’ll be a miserable place... I wanted to tell Atari I’d marry her when I was a little older but I could only imagine her being sad and scared. The deserts are getting bigger like Dad says and... There are so many lions... angry violent lions...” Loro looked at Laikei and for the first time in ages actually looked his busty sister in the face, not the chest.”

"I'm not worried," Niria said with machismo, "We're stronger than lions, even if there are more of them than tigers we will never be wiped out. Tigers are too strong for that."

"The sanctuaries are for all those who want to live in peace. Each sanctuary has or will have a guardian, a fighter of unbeatable strength and skill like Master Tyr is here," Laikei stroked Loro's mane softly, "We came back from a valley with a cheetah as a guardian. He was so beautiful and kind. The guardians are like the rulers of the sanctuaries and they set the example. They all know, because of our father, that they must be good, strong leaders or else the world really will end."

"Laikei and I will be headed out to our new sanctuaries to rule." Niria held out her arm and with a single black claw, as deep and shining as volcanic glass, slid it over the palm of her hand, drawing blood. "We asked father what would happen if we shared our blood with you after drinking his..."

Loro looked at Niria then the bleeding slash in her fore arm.

Laikei murred, "You won't have the same powers we do, but you will definitely be immortal... or nearly immortal I can't really recall what Father said."

"But why doesn't he just let me drink..." Loro began, wondering why father didn't just let him drink from his own blood.

"Because you are not ready for the full extent of power you would get. You are a Full Stormseeker and have the power over the weather. But that's like saying you are a little stronger than most kids. But after the dragon's blood..."

"You'd be thousands of times stronger." Laikei said, "But father is leaving us to be with the other Beast Lords..."

Niria rubbed Loro's back soothingly, "He won't be here for you to drink... But we don't want to watch our little brother grow old and die. We want our little brat brother to be a big strong tiger and if never a god, then a very wise sage."

"Niria?" Laikei smiled under her long thick bangs, "You actually said something nice to Loro without being told to?"

Niria looked at her brother, "I can't picture having a long life without him. Plus... I love him. Don't you?"

Laikei held her little brother tightly, "I never call him a *'brat.'*"

Overhead, Gesiomagatou saw and, through the miracle of his being, heard the whole exchange. A single tear drew out of an eye then blew away in the winds of flight. He descended becoming invisible to prevent frightening too many people. His heart was heavy and he did have one last thing to give his son.

"Papa?" Loro said looking back as Gesio landed in his Draco-wolf form.

The enormous gilded form sat down on a stone bench as the tiger cub ran over to his father. He wanted to bring to words his most ardent desire but couldn't as he was put on his father's lap. The thick, armor-plate, scales softened and split in to hairs and fur as the enormous Draco-wolf transformed into the golden lion; his mane flowing down to and across the ground. He kissed his son's forehead.

"I love you, son," Gesio hugged his son deeply, infusing him with an incredible strength and vitality. Gesio cupped one hand as he cut it with a claw from its other and it pooled quickly with blood. "In the last few weeks you have grown into a Casid to be proud of by any and all standards. You still have much to learn but you have earned this... drink your fill..."

Loro looked up at his father, a veritable god, giving him the power to be the same. "I swear I will never be a brat

again.” Loro lowered his mouth into the blood and began to lap it up at first cringing from the taste of lion’s blood, then as if having thirsted for days for water lapping and sucking up the blood.

Loro, feeling a sense of shame for drinking so greedily, pulled away from his father’s hand. Not even the color of the deep red blood remained on his face or his father’s hand. The cub sat back a moment to feel the blood’s energy course through his body...

Already, Loro’s body seemed to change as muscle, skin and bone were saturated and mutated by the blood. Just as Niria and Laikei became goddess of the hunt and beauty respectively, so too would Loro change. His lean boyish body filled out slightly into a miniature version of and young adult’s body. His muscles gained definition and his mane quickly sprouted out long to the floor. He looked down at his manhood to feel it there for what seemed like the first time as it immediately unsheathed. It was as if he’d suddenly aged a year.

“It was your wish to be more grown up,” Gesiomagatou said letting his son stand on his own. Loro was a few inches taller but not more muscular. He was not a god of might or combat or violence. In fact, his features and shape were like that of an athletic scholar and, if his sisters had anything to say about it, *future* lover. “For everyone, the result will be different.” Gesio explained. “Your children will be born with many of the physical traits you will gain over time but they will be mortal... Unless they drink some of your blood.”

“Papa...” Loro still sounded like a small cub, “Will I... we... ever see you again.”

Laikei and Niria approached to better hear the answer to that question.

“I... can only say,” Gesio paused for a moment feeling like several minutes, “Someday. Very soon.”

“Papa...” all three cubs gathered on their father holding him tightly. With his own great arms and feathered wings, wrapped them tight in a mutual embrace.

Sticks and Carrots

As the busy crowds of lions, tigers, leopards, and more worked almost like ants to record, measure, and secure supplies and artifacts, Hima and his wife, Kirin, lay on a soft awning. Hima was a ranger by trade and was now a soldier on standby. He doubted he’d be needed but found himself not idled, at least mentally.

His mind was already working on how to make his goal to save the world a reality. He was already very well versed in the political and social workings of his world and it would not be hard for him to foresee his challenges and plan for them well in advance. He loved Kirin and planned hard for her future comforts. Thoughts of forging a strong and stable empire raced through his mind but no matter how he tried to slant things it would only end in war or grizzly assassination.

There would be no empire... at least not overtly...

They had just made love most fiercely and Kirin was quite tired. But the silver lioness had touched her first so maybe she was carrying a blessing... or curse. But why Hima? Why was he so instantly aroused... and so completely? At any rate, they were happy to have made such exhaustive and satisfying love. Kirin leaned closely to her husband as she drew into slumber.

Oh, how I would wish and pray for her to bare my sons and daughters. To be the Mother Maker of our house. To have her till the end of our days... But if what Cliyapi says comes to pass...

She is my treasure, my universe, my reason... She is precious to me... forever.

Even after I go to dust I will never stop loving her. As much as I fear and maybe even detest Master Five Talon, I owe him beyond all measure for allowing me to have her and be hers.

Kirin... From this day on, all I do is in your name. I swear and pledge my sons and daughters that my house will forever strive to be worthy of the love I have for you... or else we all shall go into the wastes and not return. - The first entry into the book of Hima started by Hima Prime, Father Maker of Hima.

The crowds had thinned to a bare few people still working to finish their part of the work. Kirin had never slept in the open so soundly even with Hima or her adopted father, Sage, and mother, Sanari, nearby. Hima wished he could attribute it to her being more comfortable with him but he was never given to such wishful thinking. Ever a lion of certainty he leaned up a bit to Kirin to check her.

If anything making love is what made a lion and lioness less sleepy. But Kirin was cold and weak. Her firm muscles softened, her pulse was slow and weak. Hima shook Kirin desperate to wake her...

"No..." Hima's voice cracked not wanting to lose her, "Not like this! Not so soon! Don't take her! Not Yet!!" He hurriedly tried to wake her. Shaking firmly but gently did not work. sharp shouts in the ear didn't even flinch her, the seductive stimulations of foreplay got nothing as well.

Scooping her up, he runs to the citadel to find a healer never seeing the small serpent slithering back under the brush.

In the healer's chambers, a warm-hued stonemason hall filled with scrolls and ingredients for potions and medicines, Hima stood by anxious and powerless as a lioness, a journeyman healer, Kora of Noslapfio, examined the black-hued Night Lioness.

"I wish my father were here, he has a better eye for this," Kora complained more to herself as she carefully examined Kirin, inch by inch, "I'm sure that she can't be ill. Tar-backs..."

"Mind what you say about my wife!" Hima snapped ready to slap her, but respect for a healer and need of her skills stayed his hand, "She is a Night Lioness... or just call her..."

Kora almost ignored Hima as she found it. Four patterned holes in her calf. "Snake bite. I knew Night Lions didn't get ill until old age. They have a unique ability to *'power'* through most ailments... But this..." Kora sniffed the wound and licked it lightly.

"Sleeping lash..." Kora turned solemnly to Hima as he fell back.

The Sleeping Lash is one of the most feared snakes in the mountains of Casid. Once when the forests and jungles were lush and extended into what is now the seas of sand, Sleeping Lashes were not as nearly as dangerous but as the green shrank so did they, but their venom grew to near absolute power. If bitten the victim falls asleep and only the strongest ever wake up. Those who survive find themselves able to function with far less sleep and are immune to most poisons... Only about a hundred known cases spread over thirty years and over three hundred thousand bites have survived. "I'm sorry but there is nothing that can be done for her..."

"There has to be something. I'll get her father or Lord Gesiomagatou. There has to be a way..." Hima said running from the chambers without further delay.

I will not let you die. Everything in this world has it's counter. I have to find it before it's too late... - Father Maker of Hima.

Sage and Sanari stood in shock to see Kirin lying so still. Hima had barely moved from her side and Kora explained the situation to them. Sage had quickly garnered the recognition as a healer and miracle worker after a fashion. But

this would require medicine not magic or healing.

The Draco-tiger quickly went to work without another word to make some kind of... any kind of antidote. But in his heart he already knew that there was little he could hope to do with the archaic tools that were around. Sanari, well versed in healing and medicine herself, strained through all her knowledge of herbalism and such, her knowledge far outstripping even Sage in this area to help their adopted daughter. Kora was still, moving slowly to her collection of venoms to aid in their efforts.

“These should help but I cannot be sure. Sleeping Lash venom is hard to get and only a fresh sample can be used to make an anti-toxin.” Kora said meekly, dismayed to have to watch someone so adored slip away... again.

Sanari was quick to take the venom and sniff it lightly, “It seems very much like Sepha Spice.” She was quick to taste it lightly as well. It was a hemotoxin so she had no fear of its effects when ingested.

“This stuff is literally liquid Sepha Spice,” Sanari winced as she spoke with some shock, “Casid are nearly as allergic to Sepha as Aphkei.”

Sepha Spice was once a common and popular spice of the Cersile Ferrelline until the Aphkei acme. During the Aphkei-Cerslan War, Aphkians were felled with simple food dishes, died of extreme hemorrhagic reactions. A horrible way to die. But it was practically the only weapon her people had against the radically advanced weapons of the Aphkei. But their medicine saved them and they quickly wiped out all but a few strains of far less effective and tasty, to the Cersile, Sepha. Still some samples of real Sepha still exist but no one dares cultivate it. It was declared one of the most dangerous substances in the universe. Anyone found with it was killed summarily and the samples confirmed and destroyed.

These Sleeping Lashes were never used against the Aphkei when they will come after the Casid. They never knew and the outcome would have been far worse for the Casid... They might've been rendered extinct.

“That doesn't help much. Sepha is a powerful sleeping agent to Casid,” Sage quickly stirred together what turned out to be a powerful stimulant. Too powerful, it would blow out Kirin's young heart. He threw it into a fire and ran a hand through his mane before planting his hand on his new daughter's sternum, and attempted his arcane knowledge to this, to hold onto her long enough till something could be done. The soft blue glow on Kirin's bodice told that he was pushing himself in order to hold onto her, but her own metabolism was working against him.

She was dying...

As Sage and Sanari labored almost frantically, the reality of their daughter dying only just after finding happiness just starting to set in, the tall lean, unrealistically beautiful and sexy silver furred lioness strolled in and sat down watching the proceedings. She was alone, without even a single member of her entourage. She smirked watching this. Then as if she knew exactly all it took to grab his attention, she flicked a ring-laden ear with a soft jingle, and Sage turned to face her.

“You'll fail,” Cliyapi watched dismissively. Sage paused a moment torn between his desire to save Kirin and tear this lioness apart. “I simply refuse to allow you this little victory.”

“Monster!” Sage snapped turning to her his claws glinted ready to strike her, “You call yourself some kind of goddess and you would play such cruel fates on these people. If you mean to kill her, then just do it! Stop plaguing her and us with these torments!”

With a passive wave, not seeming at all interested, throwing Sage to his knees with a hard crash, before looking down at him. To his credit, his power to save Kirin didn't wane, and his hand remained intact with her skin. “Everything that happens to those you love is not about you. Gesiomagatou made promises and so have I.”

Sage gritted his teeth in pain as his knees ground into the rocky floor. His vast strength should have made the floor feel like soft sand but it really hurt. The agony drained him till he could barely hold his head up. It was then the

lioness reached in with a gentle hand lifting his face.

“That armor does not agree with you,” She murred nuzzling his cheek much like his wife would, who stood by frozen knowing just what Cliyapi was. It was something she couldn’t share with Sage yet. “It will all be as it is best meant to be. Let her go. It’s part of her journey, young Hima’s journey, and the resurrection of Casid glory.”

As he stood up, Sage’s mind calmed. The urgency of Kirin’s demise left him. His anger toward so many things was soothed, but as he lifted his hand from his daughter, that didn’t stop him from shedding tears over her. Sanari quickly came to his side as she watched as the lioness sashayed away. Several young males stopped and stared at the lioness and followed her away as she lured them to her parlor... no doubt for her enjoyment.

Kora finally spoke, her awe of that lioness passing, “Kirin will not feel any pain, besides the bite. Those that woke up say they felt nothing but deep sleep...”

Sage looked down at Sanari as she hung on his shoulder, “I... Kirin is in no pain,” His hearts were lighter now, as much as a parent could be as he felt that he was about to lose a child he barely knew. It was a mortal tragedy perpetrated by gods far greater than himself. “I saw her memories. I couldn’t quite reach her mind but she simply believes she became tired and feel asleep in Hima’s arms... She was not afraid... She was happy.”

Hima was largely ignored as he stayed with Kirin, his head lying on her bed. He wept to himself, having lost his wife as he stroked the back of her hand, watching her die and feeling her pulse slow and weaken to nothing. He scorned Cliyapi, though he was well aware that she was doing something that went well beyond the scope of one person’s life. Still why did it have to be her? Why did this have to happen to him?

Kora sat next to Hima and took his hand to comfort him. He looked at the hand with a certain trepidation as he tried to accept her comfort.

Mother Sanari leaned on her husband as they prayed quietly. Sanari stroked her pregnant belly and invited her husband to do the same. But Sage, who lamented Kirin’s plight and, like Hima, scorned Cliyapi for it.

“How can anyone be so...” Sage simmered as Sanari put his hand over her belly. A slight kick of the cubs within stopped his looming rant. He looked at her and her belly and his face immediately became very somber. It was just so perfect. Her beauty and the coming of their children, all in the Shadow of the loss of their newest child. Yet Sanari was not overly concerned.

“Faith, dear heart, faith...” She said holding on to him.

Looking to his mate, his form shimmered slightly, and the excess of armor plates he’d been wearing and the scale all softened and became mostly fur, but still his belly of furless dragon hide remained. His form softened as he leaned on his wife lightly, and she turned into his bare chest, rubbing close to his warmth, pressing close into the felt like consistency of his hide.

The armor of his dragon form truly did not suit him. More so now as of late.

It was strong but it was not soft and even with the gentlest care, he could not hold his wife with the fullest care and adoration she truly deserved. And so he slid into his Lesser Hybrid form... one step above human, and the closest he could come anymore to his old weretiger self.

He smiled and kissed her lightly as he settled to pray more sincerely for Kirin... cursing himself for his selfishness to feed his anger for someone he could do nothing to over his love for his daughter.

The land around the sanctuary groaned and heaved as Gesiomagatou raised his great wings and arms to transform the land, sealing old entrances and forming new ones the inhabitants of the sanctuaries would have to find on their

own over time. As the last of the preparations were finished by the valley's inhabitants, the great golden dragon surveyed his work and continued his own preparations.

It had been nearly a week since Kirin had been bitten and had been pronounced dead only but a day before now. Sage and Hima led the burial procession to the garden cemetery, while Sage could hide his grief for the sake of ceremony, he watched Hima lovingly carry on as if putting her to bed without a tear of labored movement. He had accepted it... More like he'd something to look forward to. That wasn't to say that Hima was not saddened by the passing of his wife, but he was not broken by it.

"When I lay you to rest, I know I will not see you again. But if I am told the truth, and I myself will never really know this, one of my descendants will have you to hold and love again. I never imagined that I could love anyone so much in such a short passing of time. I will always keep your memory and my sons will tell their sons and they will tell theirs until you return to the bosom of my family... the family that I will build and do everything we can hope to in order to make this world one you would long to live in." - An entry accompanying the ancient funeral of Kirin, Father Maker of Hima.

Looking over at Hima... and his new wife, Kora of Noslapfio. They were already so close and Sage could already feel that he had impregnated her. It drilled a deep pain in his heart to think that Hima had forgotten his daughter so quickly. Kora looked so much like the Kina they knew in their own time...

After the funeral, Sage looked to Sanari for some guidance. He was the lead of this pair but even he had to admit that she was the wiser and more experienced in many areas he would still need centuries or more to become as even comparably versed.

"It does not seem right at all," Sage lowered his head to think more clearly. "It's like he never knew her... never wed her... never made love to her... How can anyone just ignore Kirin so easily?"

"Who said it was easy for him," Sanari drew him to her. Her belly was much fuller than before their adventure started months before. The progression of her pregnancy would be the only indication of the passage of time given that they are both immortal. Sage found new value in his lesser hybrid form and, as Sanari showed him, it was her favorite.

It was the one she'd learned to love.

As he wrapped himself about her like a warm blanket, with huge muscles, he sighed trying not to be so personally offended, "He never could've gotten along with me. I'll always be a being of horrific violence to him. I don't blame him for wanting some distance from me..."

"Selfish," Sanari murmured lightly caressing his fur and licking his bare chest, "Do you know the genealogy of the Prydes of Hima and Noslapfio?"

Sage only breathed his answer, "...no..." He had little insight into the Prydes of Casid or the Aphkian Clans. Such things were confusing. Like trying to follow one fish in a school of millions. It was not something to be ashamed of, after all, he couldn't possibly believe he could do it all himself...

"The Pryde of Hima was born the instant he took Kora as his new wife. He'll have seven more wives after her. I recall a great deal of their family history because I was granted a reading of the Book of Hima. It surprised me because I had no real connection to warrant such.. Until now. There are few references to us. Which is typical when writing about Beast Lords and *The Teachers*..."

"Teachers?" Sage cocked his head slightly.

"It's something that came later. I need to review my tomes but I think I came here... back here... no.. just here, roughly fifteen hundred years from now. I'll be about eight hundred and just starting to make up for my sins and crimes." She started snuggling a bit closer for his protection against her past.

“I was here with a large missionary group of priests and priestesses. We tried so hard to relieve the suffering the Aphkei leveled on the Casid. So many mothers crying for their daughters slaughtered on Aphkian bayonets and blasters. Daughters crying for lost sisters and brothers. Fathers lamenting such losses... One rock lioness was still a child and she was holding her belly. She'd lost her cubs that she was still carrying in a battle she was fleeing. She'd been punished by her father who was in turn killed by her sisters for sending her into battle in the first place...”

“Time and again, I have always been amazed and horrified at just how unstoppable the Aphkei really are.” Sanari lowered her voice knowing that such knowledge would be like a doomsday prophecy to these people already in the throes of a major change in their lives and culture.

Sage stroked her head to remind her and keep her from such dire memories, “About the Hima and Noslapfio?”

Sanari stopped and smiled whimsically, “Both Prydes will be and always have been very close after this day. The Noslapfio pryde fade from the warrior path to pursue peace and knowledge, while the Hima grow to become a sort of shadow government operating out in the open. Both gain tremendous power and have extensively observed the genealogies of thousands of prydes. They predicted Roari, a great Casid hero, and his resurrection... Champion, Equis and the Hima named her their champion as Supreme, and are looking for Kirin's return.”

Sage looked back toward the cemetery as Hima sat next to his first wife's grave with Kora at his side. He did miss her already. He did want her back... Sage wanted his daughter back.

“Don't feel badly about it, my love,” Sanari purred softly, “If Kirin had not died, something more important to the lives of these people would not have happened. Hope would not have been born for their future.”

Thinking of just how hopeless Casiida becomes, the lose of a few people may not be the worst thing even if it was Kirin.

“Love never dies. I know that. In my old age, surrounded by my beautiful great-granddaughters and handsome great-grandsons, I can only think of Kirin. My dying thoughts will be of her even as my wives continue to adore me and I them. I will build an empire to save this world and she will see a world of our dreams, green, cool, and at peace...”- Last entry of the Father Maker of Hima.

Gesiomagatou closed his hands while hanging in the sky. As if a great cataclysm had just happened, the lands around the planet shifted and transformed. Quakes worldwide shook the lands as crater rims rose to the sky, valleys closed off and canyons sealed. New mountains rose into impassible barriers that would be unchallenged for centuries. Whole mountain ranges sank into the desert creating seas of sand more formidable than the natural deserts before them.

“When the rains can fall again, these barriers will lose their power.” Gesio said to himself, but being miles above the planet no one heard him.

“One should hope,” Cliyapi, a great silver dragoness appeared next to him. “For the love of one lioness, you are risking the life of a whole species. Not your greatest maneuver...”

“I have hedged my bets with the love of a girl,” Gesio did not look at her. He hated and feared her but there was respect there. She was teaching him a few things like how to use time, “That, and I know I have won this little fight with you...”

“Kirin is free to do with as you wish then and Gungaya's soul will be allowed to fully resurrect in Rae in time... You realized that I had massively miscalculated just how powerful she will become.” Cliyapi flew about into Gesio view. “She loves you and when the time comes, she will know and nothing you can do will change that. Now stop

torturing yourself and find someone to keep your lonely heart until then...”

She flew away into the vastness of space streaking away into the infinity to become one of the stars. Gesio had actually won one against her and she never once said or gave any indication she'd foul things up... Did she have a Casid lover she wanted to see again? Did she turn the Casid into reincarnating beings for that very reason? Either way, it didn't matter, the future of these people and the universe was more secure now.

“They're the only one's who can really stand up to the Aphkei. I just hope I haven't doomed the Aphkei while saving the Casid...”

On the ground, Sage held Sanari in his Draco-tiger form to protect her as the planet shifted form and contour. He saw the people huddle in their homes and away from the cliffs and ravines. A few minor landslides occurred but the foliage along the sides of the crater stopped anything severe.

“Dear God,” Sage uttered, sensing the whole world changing, the very nature of the land shifted and moved, “Gesiomagatou... He did all of this?”

“Destruction is easy. Creation is the providence of gods,” Sanari uttered over the terrific sound of the world's transfiguration, “Gesio must have been planning this for ages...”

“He really must be a god...” Sage felt himself tremble at the idea.

He was not the “One” supreme deity that even the Dragaseir acknowledged. Sage knew he had great power, he stood firm against Rae, an acknowledged goddess of strength and power, but even he had trouble imagining someone this powerful. Powerful enough to bend a planet to his will... Oh sure, Sage could destroy a planet as could Rae, and either of them could do so with little effort... but to remake or even create a planet... was something else entirely.

Sanari's reaction to it all was much less pronounced but she was still in the grip of primal fear, not for herself but for her unborn children. It was something only the most ignorant or arrogant could fail to express. Sanari was neither one.

As the last tremors pass, Sage finally actually looked about to take in all the changes. It was like it was always that way. The rock formations, in all actuality, were all of a few moments old, formed in a few minutes but looked eons old. As a strange extra, there was a great terrace overlooking the valley, perfect for building a city. Sage could not imagine anything quite so incredible and well done... especially so quickly. There were a few injuries, the careless or just curious... *What is it with curiosity and cats anyway?* He thought.

As night fell on the altered world, Gesio stood, in his Draco-wolf form, next to the pair, “Not quite the savagery you expected is it?”

Sage, in his Draco-tiger form, sat with Sanari in his lap as they had been observing the changes going on the horizon. The mountains looked entirely different as the clouds adjusted to the new wind patterns they dictated. The deserts looked even more forbidding. Countless souls might perish trying to cross that. The ancient stone covered roads might've been destroyed, eliminating precious shade and shelter.

“I might've done things differently,” Sage said with a note of disapproval. “But admittedly, I do not have your view of things.”

Sanari jabbed him in a soft spot under all that armoring scale, he having assumed his Half-Dragon form so as to better protect her and their children, and he looked down at her as she spoke, “Don't be so judgmental. He has his reasons for being so dramatic.”

Gesio sat next to them, “This day will clearly mark a new era for the Casid. Like your ‘*Great Flood of Noah*’... It will give the sun lions and the white tigers and many other of the sun caste prydes time to make proper lives for themselves...”

He breathed deeply a moment looking back at them as they started to make sense of their new world, “The Casid are a strong race. One of the strongest. They have a potential to rival or match the Aphkei easily. But while the Aphkei found peace enough not to give into self-predation, the Casid will war with each other seeking only strength, losing knowledge and power as a people that will make them weak. These things must come to pass for the Casid to realize their potential.”

“So it is done?” Sanari murred sweetly as Gesio stood up fading into his true form of a vast golden dragon miles long and wide. She wanted to get home before her condition got too much further along. That and she was starting to miss her students.

Gesio smiled at them. He finally had what he was after and secured the future. He still had to visit his son, Loro, in the future, but that will wait just a little longer...

“It still feels like we have so much left to do here,” Sage stood up with his wife now in his arms.

Gesio looked at Sage, “Time, Sage. Warping it, bending and traveling through it are the most exciting parts of being a temporal mage. But being an Immortal gives you an option that dwarfs all that...”

“Waiting...” Sage spoke like a student, having just been all but given the answer to a question and realizing it.

Nodding affirmatively, Gesio rears triumphantly, “Now, let us all go home.”

The great dragon, the white Beast Lord and the beautiful teacher, all faded away...

Something... Someone New....

Standing on her balcony, Sage and Sanari stand a bit disoriented, and still Casid nude... It was nightfall and they were rather tired, especially Mother Sanari...

“Bed seems like a good idea,” Sanari mewed noting Eakjo sleeping on her bed waiting for his adopted parents. Even if she wasn’t bathed yet she dearly wanted to sleep. It could wait till morning.

“I will be there shortly,” Sage said softly just an urgent rapping on the chamber doors echoed softly if most insistently. “Who..?”

He opened the door to reveal worried Yusuma and Tla, Sanari’s top students as they quick look in then up to Sage.

Yusuma bowed quickest as Tla was delayed by her oversized bosom, “There is a strange young lioness in the temple courtyard and she is fighting with everyone who gets near her. We can’t talk to her, our translators don’t recognize the dialect and it is very thick.”

Tla, her gold eyes actually scared, seeing Sage totally naked before her. She was not at all comfortable with grown males of any species yet, after her terrible youth with males before, passed around and abused as a sex toy for the fault of having very rare pink fur and “udder-ly” excessive breasts. “W-we can m-make out a single word-d of any of it...” She tried not to look but like a horrible accident on the side of the road, she couldn’t look away from Sage’s manhood.

Yusuma, having been raised in a culture free of nudity taboos, caught it and covered Tla’s eyes, “Lord Sage. Tla can see *everything*.”

Sage looked down and blushed instantly. "My apologies. I forgot." He said and snapped his fingers, and his magic went about creating finely cut and stylized clothing, forming into his familiar garments. Having been totally free of clothing for so long he had forgotten to cover himself. "Sorry." He apologized again. "Please show me."

"Mother Sanari?" Tla asked looking past the door and Sage.

"She is turning in for the night, Tla go and inform her." Sage said as Yusuma led him away. His reptilian tail expressing a certain degree of embarrassment.

Where am I? What are these creatures? I've died and gone to some hell... Someone please help me!

The black lioness flailed madly at anyone who came near her. Her claws were still rather soft but sharp enough to cut flesh like knives. Her eyes almost blind with tears in terror...

Helseg, a young Cenuffii Aphkian, was the one who volunteered to handle the intruder. His mastery of the staff and his use of advanced gadgetry made him uniquely qualified amongst the other Grace League members to deal with this wild lioness. As she slashed with her claws, he blocked with a heavy shield clothe duster before taking a swing at her legs. After several hard hits, the black lioness couldn't run very well or jump at all without stumbling.

She was wholly afraid as a new stranger spoke up in a language she did not understand. That made little difference that she was a gold lioness... with a mane, a mark of heightened violent power as she looked down on the lioness flashing her monstrous black claws. She looked like a killer and the comparatively tiny black lioness tried to run away.

"I got her," this new lioness said taking hold of the lioness nearly crushing her shoulders. The little lioness screamed in pain as she tried to move but to her it was like being held by a statue. She was helpless in her grip. Where she was once easily strong enough to fell a large gold male in one solid punch she was a babe in the hands of such a lioness.

"Kina, You're hurting her!" One of the young priests called out seeing the lioness crying. They were afraid of Kina, but not for her violent disposition, but more for her lack of self-control. She'd been sober for a while now, not even taking more than a glass of wine every other day and she was still not used to being clear headed...

"Hurting! Hurting Me!" the black lioness screamed as she squirmed trying to escape. Kina pressed her down to her knees trying to subdue her, but her hands were well out of place to cast a sleep spell.

"I wouldn't need to if you'd just stop fighting me," Kina tried to lighten her grip only to have the Lioness try again to escape.

"Kirin?!" Sage said incredulously ready to dive in on Kina and break her neck, "Kina let her go!" He stayed put clenching a fist at his side sensing Kina was just trying to stop Kirin's fighting...

"Father!" Kirin shouted looking to him with terrified and pleading eyes. Sage was quick to leap down to the courtyard to stand over Kina. He Took hold of Kina's wrists and with a crushing pressure, causing bones to pop but not break, Kina snap her arms open with the motion to let go of Kirin, who scrambled out of Kina's grasp and to Sage's side.

"Kina did not even register the pain as she only glared at him, "You could've broken my wrists... Wait did she just call you 'daddy'?"

"No, Kina, " Sage uttered taking up the naked lioness in his arms as she shivered. "She called me *'father'*... She is very frail in comparison to you, Kina. You could've seriously harmed her."

Sage turned to take her up stairs to Sanari's chambers to find her standing there, wearing her pink and flower lace nightgown on, her hand resting on Tla's shoulder for support, the two women now with Eakjo in tow.

"Mother?" Kirin looked to her and started up the stairs. The little Zhumal jumped into the way and hissed at Kirin, baring his fangs at her, even at his young age, his fangs were far superior to any Casid Kirin's age.

"Eakjo... please she's your sister now," Sanari said weakly. The weight of her pregnancy finally getting to her. Eakjo returned to his mother as Sage rushed on up the stairs to his wife...

"You need rest," Sage whispered as to not worry the other students.

"I do. But I had to see," She looked up to her adopted daughter, "Kirin, please come with us." Her use of Casid language was flawless and calming to the young black lioness. The glib tongue she used put Sage's own still developing use of the ancient language to shame. They all left though Tla stayed behind. She was almost as tired as Mother Sanari seemed at that moment.

"Daughter?" Kina stood confused. Then with a single sighing breath she just turned to leave, "I'll apologize in the morning. Someone remind me to ask how lil' miss Onyx happened by then, too."

Within the chambers of Sanari's temple home, Sanari lay in her bed with Eakjo guarding her, glaring at the stranger. She seemed harmless enough but after watching her attack his friends, the cleric students and young priests, the little predator was not willing to take a chance... yet.

"It's okay, Eakjo. Please she won't harm me," Sanari whispered but Eakjo only so slowly moved away jumping up on Sage's shoulder still peering at Kirin.

"Mother... Father..." Kirin was calmer now but still wary as the little Zhumal stared at her. Sage gently reached up to rub the boy's shoulder and side to settle him. It was hard as Eakjo's instincts were so strong now that he was just starting to enter puberty at the ripe old age of five. "Where is this place? It doesn't feel like the sanctuary... and those people they look so different..."

"That will keep until morning. I'm sure there are more than a few questions to be answered," Sage sat next to Kirin holding her warmly, Eakjo shifting to keep Sage between him and her held onto his body and shirt by fingers and toes. She was scared and would no doubt have trouble sleeping... Unlike Sanari who, despite all that was happening about her, succumbed to her need for sleep. Eakjo quickly jumping down and curling up with his mother. His eyes still fixed on Kirin.

"What is he?" Kirin said wryly. She found him cute but more than a little scary.

"He is Eakjo. An Oggremaren Zhumal. There are hundreds of new peoples for you to become aware of, daughter. Eakjo was an orphan like you until he found his way into our lives. He's just very intent on protecting his mother right now..." Sage waved his hand lightly at Eakjo and he started to doze off. A gentle sleeping spell, not unlike what Rae uses with her own children when needed. "Don't fret though he'll warm up to you."

"I hope so. He is kind of cute..." Kirin smirked... that look faded as she stopped a moment thinking, "Is Hima here, too?" A knock came to the chamber doors. A common Bioroid answered...

Sage and Kirin walked into the main receiving chamber to see Sato Hima, the splitting image of the original Hima, but much taller and more muscular but no less beautiful a male... Sato's grooming was quite a bit better.

"I was summoned here at this time." Sato said with a graceful warmth that melted Kirin's heart, not that he was trying to but he'd almost always had that effect on felis-type females. He noted Kirin and something in his mind started to spin, he recognized her... but from where?

“Husband?” Kirin stepped tentatively toward him over the warmly colored, mirror-like, marble floor. Those steps became a jog as the young lioness, her eyes wet with tears, buried her face into his chest. Instinctively, as he might with anyone who needed it, he closed his arms about her in a consoling embrace. But there was more to the lioness than just wanting to be held by him.

Something electric and tangible passed between them, and Sato gasped at the feel of it.

Sato could feel it, *Father-Maker! Is she the one we have been waiting for?*

He stared at Sage incredulously, “Lord Sage, please explain. How can this be?”

End of the Line

Sato was a man in whom Sage respected. He was an honorable man who cared about his people. His family was vast, a plethora of individuals who brought what little order to Casiida as there was now. He was the member of the family who pushed the original task of his ancestor forward... while his elder Brother kept the family in its place of authority and influence.

Sage was quiet, his steps like that of a ninja as he stepped up the stairs of his shared home with his beloved lifemate, Sanari.

Someone was playing with him. He knew that to be true... if Gesiomagatou had brought Kirin with them, then he would've announced it by now... lest he had a reason not to. No... Sage thought he knew who was doing this.

He looked in on Kirin as she slept placid in her bed; truly a perfect specimen of her breed and species, with a supple ample body Sanari and he had helped build a basis upon, in which she would grow strong, and wise.

The Black Queen.

He had to put her to sleep, and he had to finally send Sato on his way, his brows screwed up and a certain kink in his brain that made it very, very difficult for him to walk in a straight line.

Sage's people did not believe in reincarnation, or to a finer point, reincarnation from God's will. Reincarnation could only be achieved by the influence of a powerful being. This... perhaps... was one such instance.

He'd witnessed the beginning of the circle, and now he was witnessing its closure.

What he felt bad about, however... was Kirin.

No one should endure what that poor maiden is about to feel...

Hima had been taken from her, and Sato – a taller, stronger, wiser, more beautiful Hima – was presented to her, but Sato did not return her affections, he did not embrace her in more than a comforting manner. Sage could feel his hearts breaking as he watched Kirin break right before his eyes.

Sage finally put her to bed, and had to use a sleep spell so that she'd get the right amount of sleep before he went to go lock up. Entering his shared room with Sanari, he paused, looking in upon her, and he stood, contemplating the last few months he'd experienced with her on ancient Casiida.

His shirt melted away as he walked up to her, crawling into bed beside her, he looked down into her lovely face, framed by a voluminous mane of unbound hair... and she looked at ease. He crawled in beside her, careful of Eakjo, pulling the covers over his legs, just before he slid a hand over her belly.

You are cursed...

You shall try to kill your own babies...

Sage closed his eyes and finally let the tears fall from the last few days he'd experienced. He lay down beside his lifemate, pulled himself to her as she slid into his chest, and she nuzzled the velvety soft feel of his dual-layered chest and belly, drawing comfort from him.

Sage closed his eyes and hoped that he'd have a good night's sleep to deal with all this in the morning...

Kirin did not dream that night, and when she awoke of her own accord, she awoke in a strange room.

The last thing that she remembered ever doing was making love to Hima. Making mad passionate love, harder than they'd ever done so before... and she'd hoped all through it, that she'd at last conceive a child.

But it was all for naught.

Nonetheless, she did find solace with him, and she'd rested against him, and fell asleep. Then she felt something sing inside her leg, and then she closed her eyes. The next thing she remembered was opening her eyes, standing up, upon this strange world, surrounded by strange people who didn't speak her language.

To say that she was afraid at that moment was an understatement...

Now, again, she awoke in a strange place, this time with blankets over her body. Her bright golden eyes shone instantly through the darkness as she sat bolt upright in the bed.

In the darkness of the chamber she was in, she was a thing of uttermost black, with the only exception being those shining eyes. Even her horn disappeared into the darkness now.

"H-Hima?!" she gasped, looking around for him, reaching to her side to feel for him and finding that her husband was not there. She threw the blankets away to reveal her pleasingly nude body, but now she was wearing... things.

Her sex was covered by an angling thing that wrapped over her hips, and her bosom was hidden by a light blue translucent body wrap that was cut at the collar to reveal her sternum and the inner sides of her full breasts, as well as the eight additional nipples lining her belly and ribs.

"Hima!" she gasped and surged to her feet, finding herself blocked by a strange wooden panel. She tried the handle but it would not open, her fingers fumbled about it, trying to understand it, and when she could not, she punched through it, tears streaming from her eyes before she ripped apart what she'd soon know as a door.

She climbed outward and paused, gasping in the environment that she found herself within.

It was a Stormseeker garden... that's what it was, but she'd never seen such a thing inside an enclosed chamber! Water ran down the walls in streams, there was a pool with fish beneath suspended and arching walkways, and a large central garden with all sorts of beautiful greenery... and above all was the presence of two truly remarkable birds, either of them of identical plumage, but the coloring differed one from the other.

One was green; the other was blue, with the blue nesting and the green watching her placidly.

The green opened his beak and issued off a sound... but all the birds she ever knew always chirped or screeched... this one sang! It was a melodious song, having multiple levels of voice to it that calmed her mind and made her relax.

She rubbed her forehead, and collapsed backward against the wall she'd just exited.

"Hima..." she whimpered, and tears ran down her cheeks, wetting her fur.

She remembered how he did not hold her like she remembered; she remembered how he did not return her kiss, as if he'd never seen her before. And how did he get so tall?! Or so muscular? He was stronger than any *ten* gold lions!

"I can assume... you do not like it here." A voice said, and she lifted her head with a jerk to see her father approaching from another of the many portals off this chamber.

That strange creature... the Zhumal Eakjo, was balancing on one shoulder, and father was wearing clothes! He wore his loincloths like before, but now he wore more... sashes and black and white robes; and his mane was pulled back and tied off at the end.

He was also in his softer form... a smaller form that was the size of a Gold Lion, with his form slender but built up in ways no Casid ever had.

"F-father... where am I?"

Sage bit his lower lip as he lifted a hand to the head of the great beautiful green bird and rubbed its head. The bird gave a soft song of pleasure before he lowered his touch to the other, and that nesting bird gave a similar song, only lighter, more feminine. Sage looked lost in thought for a moment.

"Kirin... the how and why of your arrival here is beyond me... though I do suspect certain malicious intent. There is a creature that enjoys causing drama for her own amusement. For good or ill, I do not know, but I truly, truly wish that she had spared you..."

"Father... what are you talking about?"

Eakjo growled at her as Sage walked away from the birds and approached her.

"First... I want you to know that you do not stand on the world of Casiida any longer." Kirin mouthed unspoken words for a moment, and her pupils dilated fiercely. "You stand upon a whole different world, Kirin."

"B-but... I..." Kirin ran a hand through her mane, trying to think. "F-father... please make sense."

Eakjo crawled up on top of Sage's head, and hopped off onto a tree as he approached and took her face in her hands.

"You have been taken from your place of warmth and love, and placed into a world, though nonetheless beautiful, offers up to you one of the cruelest tests I have ever seen constructed for a person." There was sadness in his voice, she saw, and he was trying to smile for her. "I am truly, glad to see you again, daughter... but..."

"Wait, what do you mean '*again?*'" Kirin interrupted suddenly stepping back. "Father... I was... I was asleep with Hima... and when I awoke I was wherever here is."

"Because I watched you die." Sage said simply.

Kirin fell backward and onto her rump, tears springing from her eyes, and Sage bent down and pulled her into his embrace, kissing her forehead and the hugging her to him.

"I died?" she choked.

"By an asp's bite. I tried working all my knowledge both practical and mystic to save you... but I just didn't have the tools, or the implements. I didn't have the herbs or chemicals, and I couldn't focus on what was causing the

damage in your blood. It was like a natural bane for your kind... and such things require very specific cures tailored to the subject.

“I was forced to stand by, and watch you slowly die.” He cupped her face and wiped the tears away with his thumbs. “And worst of all, I watched Hima, watch you die...”

“H-Hima?!” she choked again. “W-what happened to my husband, father. What happened to my dearest heart?! He acts as if he doesn’t recognize me!”

Sage closed his eyes and bowed his head, and his lips suddenly drew very tight. Kirin knew that he was holding back something that would break her. But nonetheless...

“Father... Please... *tell me!* What happened to my Hima?!”

“Your Hima... is dead, Kirin.” Sage said, opening his eyes and looking at her. His eyes were sparkling with tears he would not let fall.

“B-but...” she began, turning her head to look for him. She was about to tell him that she touched Hima. That she embraced him last night. If so, then he died while she slept! She was about to demand upon what had killed him so that she could go and revenge him. But Sage continued.

“Not only have you been taken from your world, Kirin... but you have also been taken from your time and placed into another.”

This by no small account irked her. She wanted him to make *sense!* “Father...” she agonized with him.

“You’ve been asleep.” He explained again. “And while you’ve been asleep, you have not aged a single moment. But... everyone else around you has continued to age. Thousands of seasons have passed since you went to sleep, Kirin.

“The Hima that you knew... has long since turned to dust.”

“n-no...” she murmured. “**N-NOOOOooooooooo...o.....o.... .. .!!!**” she screamed, and Sage embraced her again, pulled her down when she rose up on her knees. He embraced her fiercely, held her as the tears erupted from her eyes. “Father... take me back! Take me back! Take me back!”

“I can’t.” he choked now. “Kirin... I do not have such power...”

“No! You can do anything! I’ve seen you fell an army single-handedly! I saw you bring new life to a person... why! Why can’t you take me back.”

This time, Sage did allow himself to cry, and a single stream of tears squeezed out of his eyes. “I don’t have the knowledge. I... I cannot... I cannot take you back.”

“Hima...” she whimpered and clutched to Sage.

Eakjo hung from the tree branches, wondering about this girl. Father cradled her like he did him sometimes. Perhaps this was a new sister... she was grown and so strong, but why was she so sad?

Why did she being sad make papa sad? He wondered, and crawling down from his tree, he sat on one of the posts of the railings.

“But... but then who was that person I embraced last night?”

Sage drew back and looked at her. “Despite that Hima mourned you so deeply, he took another wife, and several

others, as I understand it. As battles waged on, and mothers and their children suddenly found themselves without their fathers, Hima took many of them in. He fathered dozens of children, was the progenitor for hundreds of grandchildren and great grand children, and his family line has now become the largest and the strongest on all of Casiida.

“He devoted all that he was, to you. All his actions were for you, Kirin, and the nobility in his line is ancient and unbroken because of it.

“Sato – in whom you embraced last night – is the second eldest of the Hima Clan. He is the direct descendant, from father to son, father to son, of your Hima. But in him is where the line broke. He was the second born son, and it was he who has become the Hima remade.”

Sage paused as Kirin settled back, and Sage’s large bat-wing like ears flipped suddenly, and he turned to see Sanari emerging from their bed chambers. She was wearing a great flowing white linen robe that hung over her whole body from her shoulders. She was nude beneath that, her bare feet and ankles showing, and though that robe covered the whole of her body, it still folded elegantly about the objects of her womanhood or her pregnancy as her long four-fingered hands massaged her great rounded belly.

She approached daintily and stopped beside Eakjo, being very silent.

Sage then turned toward Kirin as she knelt there... her tears seeming to run out, but only because it felt to him that she no longer had tears left to cry.

“My Hima’s dead, I am on a different world, and in a different time. A man who looks exactly like my Hima is right there for me to hold and touch, but he does not recognize me.

“How worse can this become?”

Sage fell, unbelievably silent.

Kirin lifted her head to him, and Sanari stepped forward, her tail curling about her ankles as she stood behind her husband, Eakjo hopping onto her back and wrapping himself about her narrow shoulders.

“Sato Hima, is taking a wife, Kirin... even as we speak, he is bonding with a new wife... and several others.

“Much has happened to your world, Kirin, and now males are exceedingly rare. Sato, as he takes a wife, takes to wife all of her female lovers as well. It is hoped that the species can perpetuate itself, Kirin, but with every generation, the number of males to the number of females decrease.

“T-then... if he can take multiple wives... can he not take me?”

“No, Kirin... he cannot.” Sanari spoke now, giving her husband’s sagging shoulders a comforting squeeze.

“Sato cannot have any more wives than his older brother does. With this marriage, I’m afraid there is no room for you.”

The tears that Sage had thought that Kirin had no more of, again began to spill.

“Great Maker... this *is* a hell!” she cried. “What evil have I done that required me to deserve this? Mother... Father... what must I do? What must I do to remove myself from this hell... please... if you cannot take me home, then at least take me away. I don’t want to be here. Take me away...” she cried, sobbing, and Sage pulled her into his arms again.

Sanari, due to the weight of her burden, she knelt – with extreme difficulty – and joined in on the embrace.

Eakjo left his mama's back, confused as to what was happening. He had learned what love was between a male and a female from his mama and papa. Sanari and Sage openly loved one another with hugs and kisses and other gestures.

He pondered then, that this maiden had a someone who she shared such a bond with... and then lost.

He shared a bond similar to that with many people... and lost them. He wanted them so much that he was finding replacements, and these replacements were fulfilling those desires better than the originals did in some cases.

A certain pang in his heart arrived, and turning, he scampered off, escaped through a window, and rushed along, until he climbed inside another window and paused.

Nana slept there in the wee hours of the morning. Desiring her comforting and strong arms, he crawled down the window, along the floor, crawled up under her covers and laid directly beside her. Pinning his ears against his head, he found one of her full and rounded tits and began to suckle.

Tla – Eakjo's Nana – awoke with the sensation of someone nursing and looking down at the small boyish Zhumal, paused for a moment, but then settled down and embraced the little orphan to her. He'd not nursed in months, and she knew that she shouldn't be encouraging this... but she... really loved the little guy. Hugging him to her warm, pink body, letting him sleep on a piece of her pillow, she listened to this little Zhumal purr as he half-slept half-nursed, from her.

He was the only one who ever got the enjoyment of getting his fill from her...

Sage bent downward and kissed his lifemate, Sanari, as she lay in bed, massaging her belly, nuzzling her face while she slept, and with his hand on her belly, he felt one of their kitlings kick.

He smiled down at her swollen belly beneath her body cloth, and rising he tucked her more solidly inside all her blankets and pillows to help her to keep warm and comfortable, and she sighed, turning on her side slightly. Sage then brushed her face, and her mouth and nose followed his touch and she made a slight whimper as he left.

"Sleep well, dearest heart." He whispered, and left her in her slumber, closing the door behind him. He moved to check in on Kirin, and found her asleep as well.

He wished that he could do more for her, but... just like he and Sanari were brought to Ancient Casiida, Kirin... had to be brought from ancient Casiida... to here.

Serendipity was far to convenient. Someone was meddling in their lives. He hadn't decided yet as to whether or not he liked it... that decision would be left up to when he found out who was meddling...

All for the greater good Sage. You know that this is for the greater good... he told himself

Without Kirin's death, Hima would've never have made his solemn vow. Without his solemn vow, Casiida would've never had the protection, or the preparation, to face the Aphkei invasion.

Without that... Casiida would've fallen and the Aphkei would now rule them, or worse, destroyed them.

Sage stepped outside into the sunlight, went straight toward the tool shed, and removing a broom, he began to sweep.

He'd done this task for Sanari ever since coming into her care. He did it every morning, even when she told him that he didn't need to anymore. It was a simple task, it helped keep him humble, and he did it without a second thought.

He kept the pathways clean, and every time he did it, he felt that he was showing his love and devotion for his lifemate.

After finishing sweeping all the pathways, and there was a good mile or so of them strewn through the shrine and garden, he placed his broom back where it came from, and then went to open the doors to the shrine.

He paused, and nodded at the after image of Red, which told Sage that Sanari's eternal companion and guardian was there, and Sage remarked that he was finding it remarkable that he was able to see Red more and more lately.

Red appeared for a moment to nod back at him, and Sage, standing there for a moment, felt newfound respect for Red. Red... had been the man who'd earned Sanari's love for the first time.

Sage swallowed, realizing that he shared yet another thing with his beloved.

Both of us have lost loved ones before it was time... he thought to himself, and then began to unbar the gates to the shrine, opening it up, and pulling the gates open, and stopped, finding himself staring at the image of Prophet.

Prophet was closely tied to the Hima Clan, has been for a long, long time. He was also closely tied to the Sentholu Pryde... always had been. Sage's powerful mind worked as he stood there in the early morning, and seeing Prophet standing there, several pieces of a very, very vast puzzle... suddenly fit together.

The stripes were wider, but they were in the right place, the eyes were the same but changed into the eyes of an ancient from countless generations of experiences, the facial features were older, more defined, and his body was stolid and strong in its athletic appearance.

Sage had always wondered how Prophet knew things before they happened, he always wondered how to develop the ability to see things before they happened far better than even he himself had, and with his current experiences colored, again, a piece of the puzzle fit itself.

"Hello cub." Sage greeted Prophet... the one once known as Loro.

Blessed with the gift of a Dragaseir Overgod Grade, and with his powers and abilities along with his immortality, Loro also gained the Dragaseir Overgod ability of being able to recall the entirety of one's life... past, present... and future.

"Hello Beast Lord. So... finally... we have come full circle."

Sage stepped forward and Prophet was already opening his arms so that they could embrace one another.

"You don't know how hard it was for me not to just run up to you and embrace you, milord, when I first saw your change into a dragon."

Sage smiled. "At least, perhaps, you are another person in whom I can talk to Lor – er – Prophet, who doesn't run away from me.

"Still have your book?" Sage smiled kindly and the pair of them began to walk side by side.

"It lies in a safe place, milord. I find myself... excited. After having painstakingly horded or destroyed all copies of the Holy Book of the Casid, I find myself wholeheartedly ecstatic when I was able to scribe a new copy for young Clio. These are exciting times, milord. I am happy that I am able to view them..."

"No regrets, Prophet?" Sage asked, and Prophet shook his head.

"None. But then... I have time to prepare for the worst of whatever happens."

“Have you... had any children, Prophet.” Sage asked quietly... and Prophet slowed, and then sighed.

“My wife... has been dead for a long... long time, Lord Sage.” Prophet said. “Atari had only one child from me... though she had milk enough for armies.” Prophet smiled and then sighed, deflating. “Its interesting how fate takes control of certain things in your life, Lord Sage. Despite all that I’ve seen, I am yet amazed at how often times even the best laid plans diverge to accomplish some as of yet unknown thing...”

“Chile, a young girl, nursed from her mother well into adulthood. It was a bonding experience between mother and daughter that, as I am aware, still holds true in their family today.

“I’ve had no son, Sage... but my daughter, and my daughter’s daughter, and my daughter’s daughter’s daughter... and so on... joined with a rather small, but very loving pryde that has been made up of mostly females for eons. It is an old pryde, as old as the Hima clan for that matter, but this pryde is only destined for greatness now, in this day and age.”

Sage stopped, and blinked at him. Again... another piece of the puzzle fit into place.

“Clio’s your descendant.” Sage said as something clicked in his mind. It didn’t feel like his own logical arrival at the fact, but was rather a flash of Fate.

“As are her sisters.” Prophet stated, and then turned. “Pryde Sentholu is now without any direct male heirs, Sage. I have only daughters now.”

“Is that a regret?” Sage smiled.

“No.” Prophet said softly. “It is a longing. I can never regret my children, Lord Sage. You are about to know the pride of being a father, Beast Lord...” Prophet chuckled. “It’s a truly wonderful feeling.”

“Yes... being a parent *is* a truly wondrous thing.” A new voice said, and both turned immediately to see a familiar figure.

Sage’s eyes squinted, and he heart Prophet’s hand tighten on his staff, but he made no more movement toward or away from this individual.

Cliyapi.

She was as Sage had last seen her, but now she wore black robes that did little to hide her pert breasts and perfect body. Sage willed himself not to be pleased by this sight, though unsuccessfully.

He straightened, and stood beside Prophet, and said nothing.

“Sage.” She remarked, petting a young lion that was clutching at her robes. Other than a loincloth, he was completely naked. Even the rock she sat upon seemed to have come from nowhere with her. “I am truly shocked. No quip? No statement of how unjust I’ve been?”

“No.” he said, realized that he was glaring at her, and then lowered his eyes.

When stomping around in the dark, be sure not to wake the dragon, he thought.

“So I am a dragon now, is it?” She said as she rose. The pink flesh of ten teats and one clitoris seemed apparent beneath all her translucent black robes that were cut to be revealing. “That old human adage does contain wisdom, Sage... you learn quite quickly.”

Prophet’s hand tightened its grip even more, but he stepped back and bowed his head obediently as Cliyapi

approached.

“You are resisting me.” Cliyapi said as Sage looked away. “Why? Do I not please you?”

“It is because you please me that I look away.” Sage said solemnly.

“Ah... respect for Sanari. Such devotion, such loyalty.” Cliyapi stated. “Such devotion and loyalty is not worthy of a murderer like her. But then again... you yourself are a murderer too, Sage.” She smiled maliciously. “Devotion... Loyalty... I’d like to call those human traits, but you, in so many ways, Sage... are the exception to the rule, and though you do have these traits... most of your Aul Forsaken race... does not.”

And then she was before him, and without pause, she spread open her robes to reveal her now enlarged, perfect breasts, which, with Sage’s eyes lowered from her, placed them directly in his line of vision. Sage closed his eyes and looked the other way, clenching his fists, trying to resist, trying his hardest, with all the power he had.

“You are still resisting!” she said. “That is delectable! Most stop resisting me by now, Sage. Gesiomagatou stopped resisting me after only mere seconds, but then he has far greater sense than you. And yet... here you are.” She groped his groin, and all the blood in his body suddenly pumped into that point, and he felt his groin swell, his erection standing almost instantly on end from the electric touch in her fingers. Sage did not move as Cliyapi pushed herself against him, rubbing against his chest, her vaginal mound creaming as she pushed it over the bulge in his pants and pulled open his shirt to kiss his chest, to feel that velvety chest and his six nipples.

“Hmm... no wonder Sanari loves this form of yours the most. You’re so soft and lickable!” and her tongue slid outward, and with one swoop she pushed her tongue downward, straight to his abdominals, up about his neck, and then retracted it, licking her teeth and lips before opening her eyes.

Sage’s fists tightened till they ground one another, his eyes and his teeth clenched in his effort not to allow himself to succumb to her. It was a failing attempt.

Cliyapi moved around him, touching his rear, fingering his strong back as he stood there with his arms trapped by his white silk shirt, and hugging him from behind she groped his groin, but this time slid a hand down to caress his tip and shaft.

“Such an odd belief you humans have, Sage... to mutilate such a perfect, beautiful thing as your penis with a circumcision.” She mused and slid her fingers around it.

Sage concentrated on not creaming for her before she withdrew her hands.

Cliyapi then finished her trek around him, and then frowned.

“You’re still resisting...” she breathed. “Look upon me!” she commanded, and Sage’s eyes opened of their own accord as he looked upon this sexual creature. “Does this body please you, Sage?”

“I-it does.” He spoke, meaning to remain silent.

Cliyapi turned with a flourish of her robes, sat on her rock and then laid back upon it, arraying herself to spread her legs open, her black fur becoming accented by the pink track of her labia spreading open and her clit hardening; the thing standing on end like the tongue of a vicious maw.

“Then why do you not make love to it.” She said, and the Lion who was with her bent to kiss her hand, and she opened her fingers to allow him to suck on those fingers and kiss her palm.

Sage’s jaw clenched so tightly that it ground together, but he took a halting step forward, and then another, his body working against his mind, the two pushing and shoving, and though Sage’s will was strong, it was nothing in comparison to the pull his body had to this creature.

He leaned over her, pressing his groin into her crotch, his five-fingered hand spread, and Cliyapi looked into his face, seeing the struggle, and seeing him begin to weep.

“What forever is the matter, Sage?” she teased, and taking his hand pushed it over her breast and he closed his eyes tightly.

“Please... don’t make me do this.” He said.

“Make you? I’m not making you do anything. It is your own desires that is making you do this, your own weak will that is causing you to fondle me now, and... and... ha...” she blushed, and looked to Sage’s hand as it caressed and cajoled her breast gently, massaging it, forcing her teat to harden, and then to lactate.

“Then please... don’t allow me to do this? He corrected himself, his hand caressing her breast and gently squeezing her nipple.

“Hmmm...” she mused. “You certainly know how to handle a tit, Sage. Such a wonder, especially since the only sexual release you’ve had for more than eighty years of your pathetic life is with your right hand. But... hnnn...” she breathed through her nose, as milk actually began to leak from her tit. “But you definitely do know how to handle a tit.”

“Please...” he gasped, his hand trembling now as he began to rub against her.

“Oh very well...” she said, and as if a massive hand had released him, Sage practically fell backward.

He opened his eyes and looked at her as she extended her tongue and licked her tit free, just before inserting that mass of woman flesh into her mouth and sucked more off.

“You are a devoted husband, Sage.” She said and snapped her fingers, and the young lion leapt up, scurried before her, and reaching beneath his loincloth inserted himself into her and began to pound into her. “Gently my pet... gently.” She then turned to Sage. “Such devotion should be rewarded, despite it is being given to someone so undeserving. I will delay my curse on you a little longer, Sage... and... I will be merciful to your children.”

“M-merciful? H-how?”

“By letting you feel this.” She smiled, and Sage suddenly became aware of a block on his rapport with Sanari as it was lifted, and Cliyapi chuckled as she left with her Casid lover and the rock she came on.

“By the two moons...” Sage breathed, and he saw Sanari... saw her with a knife, cutting at herself, slicing at her breasts, her belly, her neck and wrists...

But this wasn’t a glimpse of fate... this was happening now...

Sanari had awoken, and found a long stiletto like knife that she used to open up envelopes. She knelt on the floor at that moment, and began to experiment. She sliced at her robes here, and then sliced at her robes there, cutting them open to reveal her naked body.

She slashed at her tit to see if that would open up more, but instead blinked as she saw a red slash rise up against her beautiful breast.

She slashed her arms, slashed her legs, switching hands, cutting more crimson slashes in her body, her mind muted from some chemical induced mental state brought on by her pregnancy.

She then looked down at her belly, and began cutting at that, hearing cries inside her head from some place, but they were largely ignored. She felt that the cries were coming from inside her! She lifted her hands and joined them before her with the knife.

Biting her lower lip, biting it hard enough to make it bleed on her teeth, she arched her back to plunge the knife into her belly to let the voices out. The madness was taking her, her eyes were wild, and she thought of nothing as to what that would cause. She tensed, about to do it...

Just then the door busted open, thrown off its hinges, and a stranger rushed inside, and casting out an arm and opening its hand, the knife in her hands was relinquished and flew across the air and settled into this stranger's hand. He then spun and threw it, and it imbedded into the hilt into the door frame.

She hissed at the stranger, and reaching down with her claws extended, she fastened her hands into her belly button and began to pull it apart to disgorge the voices, but the stranger was there again.

Sanari hissed and growled, and turned claw at him, but her claws slid easily and harmlessly over his body, even though they shredded his clothes. She opened her mouth and bit him right on the neck, and this stranger held out her hands as she gummed his Adam's apple, her jaw closing as hard as it could, but was unable to break his throat or even puncture his larynx.

"Dearest heart... please forgive me." Sage said, and with a singer finger poke to her forehead, her eyes fluttered, and she fell unconscious.

Sage picked Sanari up and in a moment of concentration arrived instantly elsewhere, appearing in the hospital a couple miles away, and Sage laid Sanari immediately down onto a medical bed, securing her hands and feet and tearing her robes apart. Focusing his will, all of it, every last ounce of power that he had, he set himself into healing.

There was an art that Sage developed at that very moment. A Technomancer art, which came from simultaneously healing a body, using the tools of science, and blending the science and magic together in his arts to repair the damage his lifemate had done to herself. He knew not if it existed elsewhere, but Fate granted him the inspiration to put his existing knowledge together to use it.

He worked frantically, and every now and again, as he looked down at Sanari, he found himself kneeling in the snow, watching Ariel die...

Not again... Oh Dear God... not again!

Sage walked out of the recovery chamber in where Sanari laid to rest, holding his hands open as he mentally opened doors, stepping to a cleaning room and stepped over to the water.

He looked down at his hands as if in shock, flexing them open and closed a little at a time, and as he stepped over to the wash basin, the door suddenly opened.

"Lord Sage... what's this I hear of you commandeering resources from important research projects without my authorization?" A woman named Hidika asked, folding her arms beneath her bosom.

She was the new CMO, newly appointed in Sage's absence, the grand daughter of Namah.

"I needed them." He said still in shock, and Hidika turned her head to one side as Sage leaned over the basin, and with a gesture turned the water on.

“You needed them.” Hidika repeated. “Lord Sage... this is my hospital, and I thought you and my grandmother had an agreement that you’d cooperate with the staff more. You’ve ruined multiple research projects that have taken weeks to cultivate! Those projects are what keep us alive here, Sage... they are what allow the school to have purpose enough so that the Empire continues to feed us credits!”

Sage remained quiet, and looked at his hands, flexing his fingers, seeing them tremble. “I needed them.” He repeated, the last word choking itself inside his throat as he said it.

Like her grandmother, Hidika was an exceptional psionic, but she couldn’t make sense of his sporadic mental state. He was in horrible shock.

“Sage... if it were for a good reason, I would understand, but those projects...”

But she didn’t have time to explain what those projects meant as Sage’s hands snapped to the edges of the wash basin before he ripped it off its moorings and sent the basin flying across the room to shatter against a wall.

“I needed them!” he shouted at her, and Hidika felt herself grow dizzy from the psychic wave of emotion that came from him at that instant.

She shook her head from it as he turned, water spraying on him from the busted water pipe as he collapsed to his knees, and then sat back, lifting a hand to his face. He then began to cry, a sobbing cry that shuddered with every breath that he took.

Hidika tilted her head and stepping quickly back to the door, she flicked the light switch and gasped.

Sage’s body had palm prints of blood on it, and his hands were drenched in scarlet.

“Computer deactivate water flow to this chamber.” Hidika said, and there was a chime in the air as the water spray lessened and began to drain in the floor drains. Panels in the floor opened as Hidika stepped over to Sage, and several cleaning bots began to move out and start cleaning. “Computer, delay repair for one hour.” She said, there was another chime and the bots stopped what they were doing and returned to their slots.

Sage continued to sob, and looking up at her, holding his hands together and holding them out, he looked up at her, as if to ask her *‘Why?’*

“Sage... who’s blood is that?” she asked.

Sage closed his eyes, squeezing out more of his tears that streamed along his cheeks. Lowering his head he folded his bloodied hands up close to his face, and Hidika saw him trembling.

“S-Sanari’s. It’s Sanari’s blood.” He said.

Hidika’s jaw opened, and she moved forward to him, kneeling before him. Having read his file, having known what he’s already gone through, she feared him losing his mind again, but in the mixture of emotions... shame was nowhere in it. Evil was nowhere in it. Strangely... there was also relief.

“What happened?” she breathed, taking a towel and washing his hands off.

“S-Sanari began to mutilate herself. S-she awoke, picked up a knife and just... she just... started cutting herself.” Sage looked up at her, his face slack with grief and worry. “I-I tried to find you, I wanted your help... I needed the resources to heal her... I was so... I was so afraid of losing her...” he said while Hidika washed his hands clean; an arduous task, being that blood stains.

“Forget the damned projects.” She said. “I’m sorry I berated you for them, Sage, those projects be damned.” And

then she surged forward and embraced him, felt him trembling.

“S-she is all right.” Sage whispered at last. “Our babies... I am not sure... I will have to monitor them... but... but why did this happen? What have I done that everyone I ever love must die through violence around me? Why is it that the more I care about a person, the more I hurt them?”

“Sage...” she said and then moved back and took his face in her small hands to force him to look at her. “Sage... this isn’t your fault. This isn’t Sanari’s fault either. The chemicals running through her body from her pregnancy are causing this.”

“And who impregnated her?!” he gasped.

Hidika had nothing to say to that for a moment. “Do you regret that she’s carrying your children, Sage?” Hidika asked. Sage answered by closing his eyes and shaking his head. “Does she regret it?” again he shook his head.

“I know that she wanted your babies for a very, very long time, Sage. This... is just something her species does. You must watch her closer now. For a human you may be watching her intensely, but a Cersile Male is rarely more than ten steps away from his mate while she is pregnant. You must be closer to her now more than anything.”

Sage nodded.

“What do I do?” he asked.

“First of all... we make sure that your kitlings are all right.”

Sanari opened her eyes to the confines of a dim room. She felt so very, very weak, and her ears twitched as she picked up the sounds of medical monitors beeping in tune to her heart beating.

She tried to move, but found that her legs and her arms were bound, and she made a brief nasal moan in her exertion.

“S-Sage...?” she groaned, and immediately she felt pressure that had been on her belly leave as Sage moved into her view.

“Hi.” He greeted, smiling warmly for her.

She remarked how distraught he seemed, and how relieved he was as the moment flooded over her like a hammer.

“I can’t move my arms or legs.” She whispered to him. “I want to feel our babies. I want to touch your face.” She said.

Sage looked up, and moved to relinquish a couple of clasps holding her arms above her head, and she moved her hands to his face, and was surprised to see tears coming from the eyes of his smiling face.

“Great Aul, what has happened?” she asked.

“It’s nothing... how are you feeling?” he asked.

Sanari noticed that his lips were trembling, and looking into his eyes... *He’s lying. He’s lying to protect me*, she thought. She felt his face, tried to move her feet, and felt that they were held down in clasps like her hands had been.

Something had happened.

“Sage...” she admonished, and he bent his head downward while she fingered his lips, and his tears began to drip onto her blankets. “Sage... what has happened?”

“I... I don’t understand what could’ve prompted it. I’ve never in my life encountered a species that would... that would attempt to rip one’s young out of their own womb.”

Sanari watched as Sage looked at her, his eyes shimmering, and it took her a moment or two to realize what it was he was saying, and then her eyes opened wide, her pupils dilating nearly shut, and her mouth opened to give off a horrid gasp.

Her eyes sparkled, and then she began to weep, and in the next moment her hands went to her belly, felt that it was indeed still rounded and bulging, that her children still were inside her.

“Thank Aul.” She wept, and Sage buried his head into her chest, one of his hands covering one of hers on her belly while she folded his head to her chest with the other. “Merciful Aul...” she trembled, and heard her husband give off a shuddering sob, and both their hands tightened over the blanket over her belly.

Merciful Aul. Blessed Creator. They prayed as one.

Sanari began to pray, pray for thanks that her husband was such a doctor and a healer. She’d heard of some Cersile who’d ripped themselves open, disemboweling themselves to spill out their unborn fetuses in the madness, and Sanari had been dealing with the madness longer than any known Cersile in history. Sage’s cleansing of her blood kept her sanity... but they hadn’t cleansed her in over a month.

Sanari was released long after even Hidika gave her ok. Sage, as over-protective as he was before, but now was insanely so. Though Sanari didn’t actually ‘see’ the individuals watching over her when she wasn’t in her husband’s presence, she knew that they were there.

And it was a ‘they,’ simply because no one individual, but multiple individuals, were assigned to watch her.

Secretively, Sage had made it known to a select few people what had happened to Sanari, and Sanari found herself being invited to tea or to luncheons, being escorted from there to there, and so on. And this was when Sage himself wasn’t watching over her.

He’d practically become her shadow.

Their psychic rapport was constantly open now, as well. Sanari felt, comforted, in having her husband always close to her in one way or another. It made her feel... safe. And if she was safe, so too were her cubs. And in light as to what had nearly happened to their kitlings... Especially when she’d tried to repeat it several more times over the following three days from the first instance while she was in the hospital.

But Sage was always there. He hadn’t slept for nearly a week by that point.

Sanari stood now, in the shade of her cherry trees while Eakjo tried his best to braid Sanari’s hair. He had to start over a couple times, but he nonetheless eventually got it.

Looking up, she suddenly saw Kirin approaching, looking scared and alone.

She was totally naked, and in comparison to all the robed students, who were giving her a rather wide berth, she blatantly stood out. A powerhouse of physical aptitude, a nigh goddess of beauty, and blessed with golden eyes and a silvery horn that was gaining sparkling grooves that formed edges to the spiraling horn.

Sanari rose to her feet, a little slowly. The burden of twins was great. Eakjo hopped up onto her shoulder and growled, but made no advances or retreats at the moment.

“Oh...” Sanari asked and opened her hand to reach for her staff, but found it floating into her grasp by one of the spirits in the garden trying to help her. “Thank you,” she nodded to the spirit, and then addressed Kirin. “Kirin,” Sanari continued in ancient Casid then. “What’s wrong?”

“M-mother!” she cried and rushed to her, and embraced Sanari solidly. “I am in hell mother. Better to be dead than to be here.”

“Shh... quiet yourself cub.” Sanari answered her. “Why do you say that you are in hell? Especially in such a beautiful place. You live and breathe, that is a thing to be thankful for. And if you are in hell, then your father and I are here to endure it with you. Surely you are not alone...”

“But I *am* alone!” Kirin sobbed. “Especially when the person who counts has been dead for thousands of seasons! And to make matters worse, there is a man here who is like him in every way, from his face to the color of his fur to his demeanor... only his height and physique differ. Even if he did want me, he cannot have me due to these, these... Oh what is the word?!”

“Laws.” Sanari said, and sat back down and took to rubbing her belly which was out in the open.

As a Cersile, she was ready to have these babies. Her breasts were full of milk that needed to be siphoned, her belly was swollen to where her belly button stuck out, and by all accounts and purposes, she should’ve already have given birth. But they were also dragons, and they weren’t ready to be born yet...

It allowed Sanari to experience the beauty of her pregnancy a little longer, but standing in one place for very long made her want to sit down.

Kirin sat upon the other stone bench across from her.

“What am I to do?” she asked, tears welling from her eyes and streaking against her face.

Sanari looked at her new daughter, paused for a moment, and then rose long enough for her to move beside her Daughter, Eakjo hopping off to hide on Sanari’s other side as Sanari reached over and slid a hand beneath her daughter’s well-endowed breasts to cover her heart.

Sanari then pulled Kirin closer to her.

“I know not how you came to be here, Kirin.” Sanari spoke softly, kissing her daughter’s forehead as she trembled.

Eakjo looked up at them, and wondered... *Mama... had done that for me once*, he thought. *I was scared and she picked me up and soothed me just like that...*

Does that mean... that she... this... this Kirin... is scared too?

He bit his lower lip and clutched to Sanari’s robes, watching this exchange.

“I wish that I could blow you a kiss and make it all better. I wish that I could end this nightmare of yours with a word, but the laws are in place to provide and protect all and contain order. Without them, we’d...”

“Be slathering beasts roaring and clawing at one another for scraps of food.” Kirin finished.

Her eyes went distant as she remembered the chaos of her tribe. How the strongest got fed first, and the weakest and the invalid died from starvation. That was the one thing in which she could remember of being in a greater hell... where she was forced to be a scavenger just to satisfy her own needs. That... was perhaps an even greater

hell than this... but only just.

Her new mother and father had been the implements in which to raise her from one hell, give her paradise for a time, before she went to another only slightly more hospitable hell. This place was beautiful, it was a paradise... but without her Hima...

Kirin closed her eyes and wiped them on Sanari's robes.

"Mother... can you take me back home?" she whispered... a far cry and a long shot.

"No... I cannot child." Sanari mewed, her ears flattening against her head.

Kirin lowered herself, curled into a ball and rested her head in Sanari's lap.

"I had hoped that you could." Kirin said as she embraced herself.

Eakjo... began to feel for this young woman... the ache was so intense that even he could feel it.

Kina heard a knock on her door and rolled out off her couch and ran a hand through her mane. "Oh..." she groaned, and turning her head and looked at the bottle of Dragon Wine that Drake had challenged her with, picked it up, and dropped it in the wastepaper basket.

"Oh man... and now I'm so hung over that my brain is knocking inside my head."

The knocking repeated, and she clenched her eyes tightly.

"No... not m' brain... damn door." She got to her feet and stumbled sideways, caught herself by hopping on her failing leg, and forced herself to stand taller. She then walked forward and slumped against the door, not believing that a shot glass of that stuff was giving her the affects of a full night of binging.

It was almost enough for her to swear off alcohol completely. Almost. At least for a week. This was such a bad hangover she didn't even know where to rate it she couldn't think.

Slumping against the door, she exhaled heavily, and vowed that Dragon Wine was officially off her list of things to imbibe.

"J-just a moment." She spoke softly, and then fumbled for the door handle, unlocked it, and then pulled it open. "Oh... not you... and why in Aul's name did The Creator ever design the sun so bright?" She said squinted at Sage.

Then she noticed that Sage's eyes lowered to her chest for a fraction of a second, and Kina dropped her head to see that her fat mammaries were naked and hanging outward, and the only thing keeping her from being totally naked were a pair of sexy cut off black linen shorts that suggested as much as they revealed. The fly was undone too, and if Sage were so bold, he could look right down at her flower.

Kina then looked back up at him and shook her long mane of hair, which was as long and sometimes held more voluminous as most male lions.

"So what do you want?"

"To apologize... for your hand." He said timidly. "I'm sorry I hurt you... but I truly wished for you to stop harming my new daughter."

"Your daughter?" Kina smirked, and one of her eyes twitched and she lifted a hand to her eye to stop it. "Hm... she

doesn't look a thing like you." Kina stepped back and wobbled. "Oh... remind me to kill your father the next time I see him."

Sage managed a slight smile.

"What did he give you?"

Kina lifted an arm and pointed at the waste paper basket, shaking her hand and choked back some vomit. "It's in the basket." She said. "See for yourself."

Sage nodded and entered, went to the basket as she watched him pass, and there was a mild ache in her heart as she watched him do so. A time, long ago, she had had a major crush on him. He was so strong, so virile... such a gentleman. It actually had her seeking to be more feminine to earn his desires.

But then she found that he didn't drink due to his religious beliefs. The first downfall. Then she found out that he never even saw her as a romantic conquest. Eqis had a greater chance in his eye than she did. He had a thing for Rae, but it was finally the calm and demure Mother Sanari who won his heart. The second downfall.

But finally, he'd come to her one day, and all but destroyed her, and discharged her from the school.

She closed the door, breathing in his passing sent. It held so much of Sanari in it. It shamed her to desire him so, even now. Humans had an odd requirement of marrying only one other individual. Polygamy was illegal in their culture and had been for many thousands of years on their homeworld. She still liked being with males and females, and he'd never allow her to seek another mate if she'd been married to him, or bonded as he calls it.

She moved forward and stumbled into one of the couches as he pulled out the wine, tasted it, by wiping some of the fluid off the lip with a finger and wiping it on his tongue and then sniffed the bottle.

Kina had been crushed when the man she desired had broken her so thoroughly and sent her on her way, and for a short while she lived alone, she lived in sadness and sorrow to where the knife pricked her breast more than once to commit suicide amidst one of her many drunken stupors.

But she got over him. Mostly.

And then when she came back, she found out why he'd beaten her within an inch of her life and expelled her. Eqis had been the one in whom Meniko had commanded to depose her from her position.

Hindsight is always twenty/twenty, and in his quiet ways, to save Eqis the agony of having to do such a dastardly thing to her uttermost friend, and to put things right with Kina herself, in more ways than one, Sage took the responsibility himself.

He was protecting Eqis, he was helping her, and her heart trembled in remembrance of it.

"Dragini." He said. "It's a rare plant found only in hidden places on earth, that when brewed correctly is actually strong enough to give a dragon a buzz. To other beings, the effect is varied. For humans, it's like a strong punch. For Aphkei it's a hallucinogen. For Casid... well... I'm sure you understand what it does to a Casid."

He turned as she put her feet up on her table and slid a hand down her opened pants to cup her crotch. He looked at her for a moment, even as her motions began to suggest that she was fingering herself.

"That won't get rid of the hangover." He said.

"Says you..." She managed a wry smile and then winced as another throbbing in her head returned. "All I have to do is get my blood pumping, and since you are unwilling to drop your pants and bone me... I have to do it the personal way. Sex always gets rid of a hangover for me."

She closed her eyes, simply breathing, before her other hand was picked up, and she watched Sage rubbing the back of her hand.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Helping. And thanks... for not hurting my daughter too much.”

His five fingered hand moved so quickly, tipping points on her palm with his sharp pointed claws that all she felt was a brief numbness in her hand, and her headache faded away from memory, leaving her thinking clear.

Sage bent himself and kissed her hand before replacing it on the back of her couch.

“If you will forgive me, I must leave again, Kina. I must check in on Sanari. I hope that you can perhaps forgive me someday... for the things that I’ve done to you. I am... sorry... for hurting you so much.

He turned to leave, and Kina pulled her hand out of her pants, licked her fingers clean and then hurried to him. He stopped and turned to her. She then pushed forward and embraced him, finally getting what she’d wanted so long ago, feeling it subdued out of his respect for another female, but she nonetheless felt herself in his arms.

She felt his strength, and knew that in his presence she didn’t have to be strong. She felt feminine.

“This is my thanks.” She says, and then pulled back, and before she knew it she’d bent forward and kissed him.

This, he didn’t return at all. As it should be.

“Are you sure you don’t want to... to...” and her shorts fell off her to her feet, and Sage looked down at her swelling vaginal mound and sighed.

“I’m sure. Find a good mate, Kina. And don’t be afraid to wear a dress every now and again.” He smiled. “A woman can still be strong and still be feminine.” He then tipped his head and opening the front door walked out of her home.

Kina began to finger herself again.

“Oh man... the hang over is gone, but now I need sex!” she murred, and then went stalking for someone to have sex with.

Cliyapi smiled down at the little dragon that had found its way into her web. The Dragon known as Lord Sage Preypacer.

Oh he was so fun to play with. He struggled harder than all the others, still struggled despite that he’d felt her sting and tasted her venom and still denied her. Or at least managed an *attempt* to deny her.

She lay amongst absolute nothingness, her massive dragoness body spanning across multiple universes in this form.

Lord Sage was truly a massive creature in his ultimate form, but was barely larger than something to fit in the palm of her hand given the differences in their power. Cliyapi took ultimate pleasure watching his spirit self buffeted by her claws, watched him climbing over her fingers before she then held him by the wings pinned behind his back and laughed at him.

“What are you going to do now?” she said, her voice echoing about her amidst the woes he found himself in at the moment. “You’re helpless.” And she shook him.

She chuckled at him, let him scurry away and then grabbing him by the tail, she pulled him back to her, opened her maw and unfolded her tongue, and made like she was about to swallow him.

“Cliyapi.” A voice said and echoed throughout everything around her.

She gasped and let go of Sage, and he flew away as she turned immediately around. She saw the faces of her tormentors, the individuals who locked her completely from the Prime Universe.

“You.” Her voice dripped acidly and she reached out and snatched Sage back and clasped him in her fingers, caging him between her palms and her claws as she stared at the massive – even to her, even in this form – forms of Draco and Leviathan.

Leviathan was serpentine; Draco was massive and bulbous with a tail nearly as thick as his mate’s whole body and wings that were utterly gossamer and seemed to span the whole of the multiverse. Leviathan was a stunning blue and white, Draco a deep red and black.

“Child,” Leviathan said. “Why do you torment him so?”

“I am not your child!” Cliyapi growled. “What sort of parent would deprive their child of nourishment?!”

“The sort of parent who saw thousands of their other children die because you needed to feed.” Draco stated, his voice echoing and booming. “There is other nourishment, Cliyapi, which you can partake in that is more filling and you’d still hold your place in the universe.”

“You’re wrong! I would be greatly diminished, and I would be less of a challenge to be overthrown.”

“Not if you were to forge an alliance with Glint.” Draco said. “Your old husband still loves you, Cliyapi. With him, you and he could forge an even greater power than which you have now.”

Cliyapi whirled on the two Dragon Gods... the eldest living entities... period. Even one of them was as far removed from her as she was from the fluttering dragon in the cage of her claws. She lowered her eyes to Sage as he tried to break her massive clawed hands.

“My husband is a fool.” Cliyapi said. “He doesn’t reach out and take power when it is given to him. I outgrew him ages ago. I need no one else.”

“And yet... you still lament leaving him.” Leviathan said, and Cliyapi immediately turned around, her tears spraying from her eyes.

“Why do you torment me? Why do you starve me?” she cried.

“You are our daughter, Cliyapi...” Leviathan said. “I am the mother of your mother’s, mother’s mother.”

“And I am the Father of your Father’s, Father’s father, Cliyapi.” Draco admonished and the pair of them flowed about her. “You may not wish to believe it, but you are our child. We still have faith in you... even if we had to lock you in your room and send you to bed without your supper...”

“You think me some kind of child?” Cliyapi laughed cynically, and then returned her eyes to Sage as he attempted to squeeze through her fingers.

“Why do you torment him so?” Leviathan asked her earlier question again.

“He is my plaything now. And by your own decree I am to stay out of the dealings of the Prime Universe, never to return or to feel an even greater punishment than before,” Even Cliyapi shuddered. “So does your presence here

mean that you are now to meddle in the dealings of my universe as well?"

"We were meddling in the dealings of your universe before you were ever hatched, Cliyapi." Draco said. "We meddle even now, but not in meager ways in which you consider grand. No... we will not interfere in this, we are merely curious."

"He is my plaything now. He defied me, he defied even me, and now I am going to show him how weak and feeble he is. He has been the thorn of *my* children for too long. I thought it best to trump him down." She chuckled, and then closed her hands about him. "You can't have him back."

"We cannot take back something that was never yours in the first place." Leviathan said, and Cliyapi's eyes widened. "But we cannot take him, because he isn't ours either."

Cliyapi... was confused. She hadn't been confused for so very, very long that she had forgotten what it felt like, and she was forced at the moment to relearn the feeling.

"What do you mean?" she asked slowly.

"Sage and the individuals in whom you play with like toys, are currently the favorites of a power even greater than us." Draco spoke, and the two of them moved about her, Leviathan's silken body sliding against Cliyapi's and for a moment she felt the wonderful feeling of being a babe in her mother's arms, but the feeling passed as soon as Leviathan moved away.

"Make sense, damn you!" she groaned.

"There are powers, elemental powers that are greater than even us, Cliyapi." Draco Explained. "The most subtle of them, is Fate. He has charged us with maintaining balance in this multiverse. And your current plaything... is His favorite."

"Oh come off it! You mean to tell me that there is an actual consciousness behind *Fate*?"

"Yes." Leviathan explained. "As is there consciousnesses behind Light, Darkness and similar elemental forces. Surely... you are aware of the terrible consciousness that is The Void."

Cliyapi looked down at her hands where Sage struggled to get free.

"So... he is going to force me too?"

"He forces no one." Draco Supplied. "You may do anything you wish to Sage so long as he meets a certain point in time. You may curse him, you may toy with him, and you may do anything you wish to him, provided you do not interfere with his purpose. Which even you, will find terribly difficult to do. Even impossible."

"We are here to warn you, Cliyapi." Leviathan said. "He, Sanari, Meniko, and most especially Rae... all have Fate's hand pointing them to a specific point. The closer to that point they become, the more that their choices will become limited, and the more that your influence over them will fade. Once that point has been achieved... then they are free game till their next point is to be achieved. And you'll be free to play with them all you want."

"Good." Cliyapi said, and held Sage again with his wings pinned behind his back. After a moment, she turned and saw that the mother and father of all dragon kind were still there. "Now what?" she asked.

"Nothing. Just a wonder." Draco said as he took his mate's hand. "Just wondering what will happen to you when you find these *individuals* collectively defying you. Your own actions shall dictate your rise or downfall, Cliyapi. It is Karma.

"You have shown him that his body is stronger than his will... and so he shall make his will greater than his body.

And he will learn, Cliyapi, on how you were punished by us, and cast out of the Prime Universe some day.

“And perhaps, someday, it will be him holding you with your wings pinned behind your back as he shakes you as a rattle. Just as a warning... Karma... is Fate’s Mate... and she is angry at you for the things that you have done...” Leviathan and Draco faded away, leaving Cliyapi alone in her *‘room.’*

She took Sage in both hands, and for a moment considered wringing the life from him and consume his soul. It would feed her for an age.

But then she felt something... a hand that was poised as if to swat her like a bug, and she released him. Sage’s soul fluttered away and the hand of doom moved away.

He fluttered about her, looking for a way to escape and she watched him. She needed to watch and be wary now if she were to achieve her ultimate goal. She had to be careful... should she ever manage to consume Eclipse’s soul... then she would be more powerful than Draco and Leviathan. She would be the ultimate force in the universe, but lately, she has found that the locks on his cage have become more and more numerous. The most recent ones were all encompassing, and baffled even her.

Her schemes have just become more difficult that was all. She would overcome this... she would show everyone! She was the power... and she was unwilling to share it.

“Don’t bet on it.” One final voice echoed in her mind and the presence faded away immediately.

Cliyapi was shaken, for the voice she’d just heard was not Draco’s or even Leviathan’s, but it was male’s voice, and his power, left even the Gods of all Dragonkind combined in the dust.

This must’ve been... Fate...

<fin>