

Life just constantly continued, and sometimes slipped between my fingers if I let it. There was something about holding off for so long before enjoying something that made you almost drunk on it. Embarrassingly, my sleep schedule faltered a bit, with how often I'd wake up to a horny female literally sliding me into her. Or had too much restless energy and just pulled Exia or Yimir over to me and started to eat them out while *they* slept, until they woke with a groan and begged me to fuck them. And that was just the times during the *night*.

It took almost two weeks for us to finally... relax a little. Very little. Enough to actually get my act together and start sleeping properly again. That was kind of a must once I took my advanced placement tests, yet again, and showed the city school that I was far beyond the scientific base classes. Which once more put my only class as geology. I just didn't have much passion for rocks, admittedly.

But really, I liked the schedule. I liked keeping my life neat and orderly if I could. Master had just stepped aside and apparently let us burn ourselves out and get the sex out of our system. He hadn't done much more than give me a passing nod or small talk. Exir and Niva were practically adapted to the city from the moment they arrived of course, and helped the three, well, four, of us get up to speed. Mom was neutral about the entire ordeal, more focused on making sure I got established with the local school, then Academy for advanced surgical testing. That. That required my focus!

Well, most of my focus. I gave a smile, sitting in the elevated benches, watching the floor of the indoor gym. It was mostly stone, but had sections of sand floor, built into official sparring areas. Exir wore just a pair of shorts while holding the practice shield and spear, and flicked into a spinning slam, clashing with one of the honor guards.

I honestly didn't know how he did it. Apparently, they'd been watching him fend off the guy in the hallway for me, from the other end of the hall. Guess the 'alpha male' behavior really was popular with some females. Or... I guess they could legit be telling the truth and simply want to train him up even further. He'd already almost graduated from basic barrier guard training, but now they were pushing for him to take the next step and become an honor guard. He said yes, for some reason, and now the twin females were sparring with him down below. Zira and Ziri. Both personal guards to Princess Nara.

Or 'Nara', I suppose, as she insisted. She sat next to me now, eagerly watching Exir fight too, while occasionally grilling me for details on my cousin. She also had brought her 'maid', Feeari, along, which was just a polite explanation to give the reporters, I gathered. They were very, very much lovers. At this point, I was just cooperating, if only to see where this was going to go and how Exir would react. "Eee, he's so *strong*! I never realized how *big* a male could get when they're abnormal!" She squirmed next to me, grinning, and I chuckled, relaxing with Yimir sitting on the bench below me, reclining so her head was resting between my legs. I gently massaged her at the same time, and I suspected she wasn't watching much of the action, given her eyes were closed and she looked half asleep. But I loved *that* expression too, from her.

"Yup. Basically, just flip the physical attributes of a male and female." Nara snickered at that, as did the Illan on her lap.

"Other than the boobs." Feeari snickered again after, and I rolled my eyes. Everything was sexual with her. To the point where I suspected she was an undiagnosed nymphomaniac, in all seriousness. Nara

enabled her hard. If Exir wanted to tackle... *that*, it was his choice. Though he seemed busy with the twins at the moment.

I'd never actually seen Exir *lose* a sparring match, but then again, they weren't really sparring so much as training him. It was interesting to watch. They'd knock him flying, cause him to fall to the sand, trip him, and generally do any number of things that would normally quantify as winning, but they'd just help him up after, then talk about what they just did. He seemed... earnest and very interested in learning, at the same time.

Exia and Mom were in the other sand square, doing... something. I didn't pay them much heed, given if I did, I quickly ended up with motion sickness. As far as I guessed, Mom was running her through 'burst training' as Exia called it, for Flickerpaw. Activate it for a split second, accomplish what you want to accomplish, then deactivate it in order to conserve energy. It apparently trained both her vita pool, and her precision control over the actual on and off state of the technique.

It just looked like a bunch of flickering lightning and slight afterimages of Exia and Mom to me, that made me get a headache by just looking at it. So, more power to them! Pretty sure it affected everyone that way though, because *nobody* was watching them anymore. The last maid to try it had stumbled off holding her stomach a good fifteen minutes ago.

"You two look amazingly similar. I know you're cousins, but you could seriously be twins almost. I think it's the facial structure..." Now Nara was looking me over instead, curiosity brimming in her expression. It was a little awkward when I'd first talked to her again, but she apologized profusely and explained she'd all but fled to her room and screamed into her pillow for a good ten minutes after that. I could... relate to that. I think we've all had moments of regret so vivid that we literally wanted to die in order to get out of the situation we found ourselves in.

Past that, she was a reasonable person to talk to. She took her role as future Queen quite seriously and treated it like a job, more or less. I could respect that, and her mother promoted the behavior. Those were *her* notes I saw her taking the day we first met, turns out. She's got four notebooks full of what she's written so far. She was smart, but other than her slight interest in magic, we didn't have a huge amount in common.

I chuckled and nodded. "We get that a lot. And I mean, we basically grew up together like brothers, so I guess we might as well be twins. We're the same age even."

Yimir's turn to grin, looking up at me by just tilting her head back. Which of course let her nudge right up against my groin again. "From what Niva says, they're both pretty similar in bed, too! Mmm, that is to say, amazing." She shot me a wink, voice almost a cooing chirp, and I huffed at that. I wasn't *that* good! Definitely better than when we started, but... Exia was helping me out with 'stamina training', after all. She'd basically just take me entirely, all the way inside of her, right from the start. Our knots normally took a bit to start to swell up, and that wedged it inside of her immediately.

Then, she just relaxed, and we typically did something else. I'd stay buried in her pussy, with her locked down on my knot and unable to move at all, just feeling her clench and pulse occasionally around me. And we'd see how long I could last before orgasming. Fun times! I never quite realized how kinky my little sister was before I started having sex with her.

Feeari squirmed on Nara's lap, then huffed. "Come on, Nara! We totally should!"

The princess blushed lightly, but shook her head. "Give him space, Feeari. He's not going anywhere, after all..." So, they *were* planning on approaching Exir! This should be entertaining at the very least. I wonder how he'd react to being hit on by a princess.

Yimir perked at that and glanced over at them before coughing lightly. "Might uh, want to talk to Niva first. She's definitely his First already, even though they're not old enough to officially form a pack."

The Illan frowned at that, but Nara smiled and nodded instead. "I was going to ask first, actually. They did seem... really close. But it's probably a moot point, as Mom's not gonna let me get serious with any male, anyway. That gets... complicated when it comes to being the crown princess..." Ah, right. Royal succession and legality issues. The best spice to add to a romance!

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize it was like that." I could express sympathy, anyway.

Nara relaxed a little, smiling to me at that, then nodding. "It's fine really. Thank you, though. You're very kind, Exes. And it's not really *that* bad. She's totally fine with me just having sex without strings attached. Mmm, maybe I'll even ask him eventually to give me a no-strings-attached kit. He's clearly got some *strong* essence patterns..." And I almost inhaled my tongue. Oh, this just kept getting better and better! Now I *had* to see what he was going to do!

Huffing at that, Yimir rolled her eyes, however. "Oh please. You shouldn't discredit Exes either. Huge brains make for good essence patterns too!" And now it was getting worse again... I flushed again at that and glared down at her grinning expression, even as Nara perked and lightly blushed herself, glancing back over at me again.

"I... Uh, I hadn't thought about that. Mmm, filing it away for consideration later." Ack! She grinned, watching me squirm at that before glaring at her too. I didn't care if she was a princess at this point. She was a giant brat, too! Of course, my glare actually seemed to make her *happier*, and Feeari raised an eyebrow up at her when she laughed outright.

She paused mid-laugh, however, and I perked, following her suddenly curious gaze, to the other side of me and all the way down level with the gym floor. The doors had opened down on that end, and to my surprise, Master Chronak stepped inside. He didn't pay much attention to the fighting, and instead swept his gaze over the raised benches, until he settled directly on me. Well, that probably meant I was being summoned.

I gave a nudge to Yimir, who perked, then nodded to me, standing up as I did. "I think Master wants something. It was nice talking with you though, Nara. Feeari." Might as well say goodbye now, just in case this turned into something that would take a while. Master just paused, crossing his arms and watching me as I stood, seemingly not in much of a rush. A bit unlike him really. Despite his clearly advancing age, if he really wanted something badly, he would have stormed up the stairs and blasted me off the side of the benches with levitation.

"Ah, of course, Exes! Stay safe." Nara gave me a smile and nod as I turned and left.

Of course, that didn't stop me from hearing the parting suggestions from Feeari, who didn't wait nearly long enough for us to be out of earshot. Probably intentionally. "Why don't we just have sex with *both*

of them? Ooo, maybe at the same time! Think they'd be-" She faded at that point, and Yimir started snickering, even as I rolled my eyes.

Yimir, now walking to my right, snickered at that. "That one really likes sex. Though uh, I guess we don't have room to talk."

"Not even slightly..."

She slid a paw into mine as we leveled out at the bottom of the gym, and just relaxed against me as we approached where Master stood. He seemed overly... calm even. It was strange and rare to see him with an expression other than vague irritation. "Exes. Yimir. I'm sorry, but... could I speak with him alone?" Oh?

"Not about the mage ritual then...?" I asked. It was me he wanted to talk to, and not Yimir...

He shook his head, however. "No, this is about you becoming the Grandmaster Alchemist." Oh. I had been... expecting more of an explanation. "Until you make a final decision, there's simply protocol to adhere to, and that includes secrecy..." Oh...

I glanced to Yimir, but she smiled and shook her head. "It's fine, Exes. I'll just stay here and watch... uh... Exir. Yeah..." Heh. The saner of the two choices.

Pausing at that, Master Chronak slowly nodded. "There are some things that are only for you to hear. Afterwards, you'll be able to return. This shouldn't take all day." Ah, so only *part* of the day.

Sighing, I just nodded. Admittedly, I wouldn't mind a chance to talk to him about it. I mean, seriously, he didn't even *tell* me that I was technically being trained for the position. Yimir gave my paw another squeeze, and I relaxed a little, smiling back towards her, until she leaned in and gave me a softer peck on the muzzle. Heh. I felt a little heat in my cheeks, but grinned and nodded. Okay, hard to stay grumpy when she did that.

Master managed to get through it all with just a slight eye roll. I was impressed! "Right. Let's go then. My room..." Right...

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I raised an eyebrow walking into Master's room. I didn't honestly know what I was expecting, though I couldn't say I was entirely surprised. He'd moved a lot of furniture around, piling some in the corner while apparently making room for other things. He had an alchemy workbench set up, which explained the acrid scent to the air. Either that or he'd gone through at least a bag of smokeweed since arriving here. Also likely. Further, he kept the lights surprisingly dim, which didn't add much to the dreary, light sprinkle outside. The bed wasn't made, there was water on the floor, and I saw carpet stains under the workbench already. I suspected the queen would be... unhappy over all of this. Or maybe she just wrote it off as a natural expense of hosting him. Wait, where had he even gotten the alchemy workbench *from*?! Surely, she hadn't just agreed to haul one in here for him. The palace had an alchemy lab to use...

He chuckled lightly, watching me glance into the bathroom next and note he'd ripped apart one of the toilets, hooking up tubing to the water intakes and was siphoning that into a homemade pumping system he'd also hauled into the room. The sad thing was, the only thing I saw of his actual luggage

anywhere was that single suitcase he'd brought with him when we first fled the tribe. It was sitting, partly open, on the bed.

"Don't trust their lab here. Had some things I needed to make though. The whelp queen can pay for it later..." He padded across the room and hopped up on the edge of the workbench, sitting against the wall next to it and looking out the glass doors to the balcony for a moment. His right paw gestured to the actual chair in front of the bench afterwards, and I nodded to him, following him over.

Rotating the chair around, I sat down in it, looking up at Master, even as he pulled his pipe out of a pocket and wiped it down on his sleeve before pushing some green powder into it. His lower left paw slid forward at the same time, pushing the door to the balcony open a crack, before he flicked his finger and thumb in a snapping motion, the pipe lighting with a small burst of magic.

I watched him idly, unbothered by the smell at this point. He reeked of it, even when not smoking. But I was an alchemist. I knew what numbroot smelled like, even if he put it in with typical smokeweed. Was I to fault him for feeling his apparent age and taking the edge off? He exhaled a puff of smoke out through the crack in the door, then gave a couple dry coughs before looking my way again. "I... wanted to start off by saying I was sorry."

I blinked once, and stared at him blankly for a moment. What? I... No other way to start the conversation could have floored me more than that. His thumb rubbed his pipe for a moment, and he looked pensive before nodding again. "I obviously didn't tell you my intentions, or how serious they were. Maybe I just wanted you to live a normal kithood? Maybe I was afraid you'd run away if I told you? Well, for that I apologize. I kept you a secret from almost everyone for a very long time. But... not knowing at the same time wasn't fair to you, especially when I taught you like you knew exactly what you were getting into."

I wasn't sure what had gotten into him. I don't think I'd ever seen him apologetic or regretful for a single thing the entire time I'd known him. He just wasn't one to look back at things like that. Or give a fuck in the first place. It left me more with an unnerved feeling of dread than anything. He took another puff from his pipe before exhaling and staring back out at the sky again. "But now I guess it doesn't matter. You know now what my intentions are. All that's left is to ask you for your own." My own intentions? He didn't give me a chance to ask, however. "Being the Grandmaster Alchemist is perhaps one of the most important roles in Aion. We serve everyone; not just the Inaga, or their queen. We have absolutely unique capabilities to further the scientific, magical, and alchemical fields of society as a whole." I picked 'unique' out of there almost instantly, and frowned. His eyes flicked to me, and a slight smile played at his muzzle before he nodded to me.

I had to ask at this point. As a *scientist* first and foremost, there was some times where I just had to adhere to my own curiosity. "You said *unique*. I'm pretty sure what I... no, what anyone knows about True Alchemy could be summed up as a glorified tourist pamphlet. Knowledge that *only* the Grandmaster Alchemist has access to. That 'further the scientific, magical, and alchemical fields', as you said." He gave a dry chuckle at that, and I exhaled sharply.

"You have to realize; most people probably think that's complete bullshit. Just some elitist propaganda to justify the position. But... Everything I've encountered since moving here to the capital speaks otherwise. The queen of our nation is *legit concerned* with you, and now... me. This isn't just

grandstanding..." I gestured around at his slightly destroyed room. He was right. I suspected she *would* just eat the damage costs. Without even being concerned. She'd valued our safety enough to pull us all here with no strings attached to finish out our educations. On top of that, I was *sure* that I knew alchemy. It's what I'd been studying for almost a decade now. There were *rules*. Some things simply could *not* be done.

Things that they said were True Alchemy, for example. "What *is* True Alchemy, Master? At least give me... an *idea*. It's responsible for the essence patches. In-utero cascading effect predictive alchemical modification to baseline genetic essence code isn't... You can't *do* that. But that's what it's doing. You can't just change someone's essence code, but it does. And most people don't even *think* about that. It's just... a common, day to day concept."

He just listened as I gave a frustrated growl after. "Our communication network is True Alchemy. Lossless instant communication over great distances, via a magical tether broadcast through lenses. Everyone just accepts that without even minding the math involved is complete bullshit. You can't make a lossless magical spell or enchantment like that. There should be transmission time! Hugely prohibitive energy costs! But people just hear 'True Alchemy', and just nod and accept it!"

His slight smirk just made me even more frustrated! I gave an annoyed chitter his way again, and he barked out a laugh instead, then of course devolved into a fit of coughing. Sighing, I sank back against the back of the chair again, idly watching as he lowered his pipe once more. "No, I had the same questions too when my master was preparing me to learn True Alchemy. To become the Grandmaster Alchemist. I was waiting for the parlor tricks to come out. They were obviously forging the numbers, or using some other gimmicks, right?" My ears flicked lightly, and I nodded. He... understood at least.

He dusted a bit of ash off his robe and sighed again however. But... there was something to it, wasn't there? It wasn't just parlor tricks. There was something... fundamental that I was missing. My ears perked up, watching his paw move over his robe, through a suddenly soft glow showing through the fabric. What was... that? It was orange in color, which was the color of Master's mana. Was he using a spell?

"There are... things about our world that most people don't realize. It's like living all your life in a tiny little pond, being happy and content, and not even realizing it was a fishbowl instead, floating in a vast, dark ocean." I frowned. For a moment, he just stared at the glow with an almost... haunted look on his face.

He shook his head after, however. "But just telling you would be pointless. Smoke and mirrors, right? Words are cheap? But... no, words are everything, depending on how you use them. Or at least, an immensely valuable means of expressing ourselves." My eyebrow lifted at his seemingly rambling, until he held his pipe up, examining it in the dim light. Hmm?

His mouth opened. There was... It hurt. A blank in my ears, with some twisted warbling through my head. I winced, but it was gone just as fast. What... the fuck was that?! He glanced back to me, then pointed to the pipe again. "That means pipe." Huh? He whispered again, and I shuddered, feeling nauseous as that empty nothing rippled through me again. My ears flattened down, and I closed my eyes, at least until he spoke again. "Freeform Static Apply, translated, roughly." My ears raised again, and I looked back to him, just as he let go of the pipe and lowered his paw again. I frowned.

That was... The pipe was still in midair, exactly where he'd let it go. There wasn't any stir to my mana. I detected no magic at all as it just hung there in midair. The glow from Master's chest seemed brighter now however, and he reached out again and shifted the pipe over to me instead. My mind... refused to process it properly. I took the pipe easily out of the air and looked it over. The... smokeweed was still within it but even if I turned it upside down, it didn't move. There were embers and a flicker of flame in it, literally just... like it was frozen in time! There weren't any wires, smoke or mirrors. I let the pipe go again, and it just hung there in midair.

Master spoke again, and I only shivered this time, growing used to the sickening, blank sensation of the strange words he was using. Wait, that was... He gestured to the pipe again with that. "Pipe, again. Recognize it?" I nodded, and he smirked. Uh... "Here's a long chain, with apply and explode."

Apply and...? He started talking, and my eyes widened a fraction of a second later. "W-Wait!" The flickering ember on the pipe suddenly... bloomed outwards. There was a blistering smash of heat, and the shockwave of the air pressure as I screamed, the pipe exploding against my fur and hurling me back against the wall right behind the workbench! The sickening crunch of impact resounded through my head, and everything... blanked again.

My eyes widened, with me stuck against the wall, mid-scream. I could see burnt strands of my fur frozen in the air in front of my vision, as well as bits and pieces of the wall drifting past me, stuck hanging in midair. The bloom of flames almost looked pretty, tearing the desk apart and sending fragments of the chair I'd been in scattering across the room in a haze of smoke. Blood drifted now too, as I saw more than one wood shard stabbing into my muzzle. But there was... nothing. The brief burst of pain was done and over, and now I was just... stuck here, at about a fifteen-degree angle, in the middle of breaking every bone in my body against the wall.

Master stepped over a particularly shattered portion of the desk, and stood on one of the still floating pieces instead, looking over the expanse of flames towards me again. He gave a chuckle, then walked around the explosion like it was just another decoration in his room, stepping on little bits of the desk until he got up next to where I was, and sat down on a metal bar impaling the wall. I think it used to be a part of the chair?

"There's... things going on behind the skin of our Realm, Exes. An ugly light that punches through everything in existence, that nobody can see. At the core of things, our entire understanding of magic and alchemy functions based on it. Layers, you see. It doesn't do things above and beyond magic or alchemy. Magic and alchemy are instead watered down, pale imitations. Like the shitty tribe mudwater that they passed off as beer..." His muzzle scrunched at that, and he looked disgusted for a moment. I couldn't exactly answer him, stuck frozen against the wall like this in the middle of screaming. Not that that really helped solidify any of the absurdity of this in my head about now!

Master shook his head again, then sighed. "The words are considered 'Demonic'. Of course, you can speak them, or more should I say, mispronounce them all you want, as most scholars do. They won't have a lick of power without certain other prerequisites. But make no mistake, the Demons were just the first in Aion to use the words. They're far older than that. And at their core, they can make fundamental changes to reality itself. You asked what True Alchemy is. And now you know."

He spoke again, in a haze of static through my head. "Rewind. Fundamentally, anyway." I kind of gathered that, as my agony started flowing in reverse instead. Master just sat on the metal strut, riding the explosion backwards alongside my slightly crispy body, until he simply stepped off at floor level, as it had the courtesy to form itself back into a coherent chair. I gave a shudder as I could move again, reality seemingly whining for a second before snapping back into place, with the completely intact pipe falling innocently to the ground after with a light clatter, no longer bringing about a miniature detonation inside Master's room.

He sighed, giving a low wheeze as he picked the pipe up again and dusted it off, then lamented the spilled smokeweed. "Ah well. There's a price for everything." The glow on his chest had subsided, and I took that to mean that the fucked-up things he was doing to physics were also stopped for the moment. All I could do was stare at him in shock, however. What... What was that?! How?! I wasn't even mad he blew me up! I just wanted to know how!

He sat down on the edge of his bed instead, refilling his pipe for a moment before lighting it again with a flick of mana. "If I'd known it would get you to shut up, I'd have shown you years ago..." I blinked once at his grumbling, not even really fully registering it this time. He was...? "You asked a question. It was easier to show you the answer, though. More believable to see it with your own eyes. True Alchemy is a language. A language that interacts with something deeper in existence than what you're used to experiencing. It brings forth a piece of that. An energy, from behind the skin, or barrier, of the world. Our Realm. Now, that energy doesn't necessarily get along with reality. And in that moment; that scuffle if you will, you can take advantage of our reality's momentary distraction, and make changes, using the words."

That... made...sense...? I think? It was as if he suddenly revealed we were all actually plant people and living on the moon, which was made out of Keld Cream Cheese, but his new explanation of how things really worked made sense. His overly whimsical, possibly sadistic introduction of it to me probably didn't help my comprehension much of course, but...

I looked down at the pipe as he brought it up and took another draw from it. Okay, so he made it float, then explode, then made it so it reversed itself entirely without harm. And me too. I knew I'd been horribly injured there, possibly fatally, but he'd... not only froze me in that state, but rewound me to the point where nothing had even happened to me, seemingly. I *felt* fine. I wasn't bleeding.

He just rested there, apparently fine with letting my mind whirl at a thousand thoughts a second. A language. Demonic, but what he claimed was how it was actually supposed to be used. The Demons were supposed to be amazing at magic, alchemy, and everything above he'd mentioned. "This... This language is what they used? To accomplish everything they did?"

He nodded succinctly to that, before puffing out another cloud of smoke towards the still cracked open door. "In a roundabout fashion, yes. There's a few caveats there, but in general, yes. They of course spoke the language too. But without the power behind the words. Maybe because it made them sound ominous and mysterious, or maybe just so it was harder for us 'lesser' species to try to figure out what they were saying." He shrugged there, rubbing his pipe with his thumb again before dropping another bomb on me.



“That’s why we Inaga were elevated in the first place. Why they elevated anything at all at first, even. We were engineered, and then trained, to use the words in their full power, for the Demons. Those collars, that also run on True Alchemy, that we use as a slave penial system these days? The Demons created them for a bit more sinister purpose. To control *us* once they taught us how to use the words.” He knew... specifically why we were...? Wait...

I frowned, eyes losing focus again for a second as my thoughts spun. Why would they...? “Why do that? Why would they need to elevate *us* as a species to use the words for them? They... That doesn’t make sense.”

Of course, he’d obviously been anticipating the question, and nodded before relaxing and exhaling another haze of smoke. “Yeah, it does seem a bit obfuscating. Why create a new species specifically engineered to use these words of extreme power that could manipulate reality itself, when you could just use them yourself, right?” Well, when he put it like that... Of course.

“There’s side effects to using the words...?” I looked back up at him with that, and he smiled again, giving another dry coughing chuckle.

“Damn close. That’s why I was so unsure about teaching ya to begin with! Hah!” Eh? I raised a skeptical eyebrow to him, and he smirked again. “You’re too smart, Exes.” Uh... “No, that ain’t a compliment. You’re so smart you’re fucking suspicious as all get out. Almost to the point that it’s unnatural. Maybe past the point... And only about specific things! Can’t even blame some sort of weird mental defect, because you’re perfectly fine otherwise!”

The topic shift sent me for a loop, but it didn’t take me long to recover and send a slightly offended eye twitch his way. “Wait, the fuck? You’re ‘suspicious’ of me? For what? Of what?!”

He shook his head though, still looking amused. “I used to be. But literally everything about you checks out. And at this point, I’ve already made up my mind to offer you True Alchemy. It’s up to you to decide if you want to pursue it, however. As I said before, everything has its price.” Price. Right, he avoided answering my statement about side effects.

I was a little beyond paranoid at this point though. I gave myself a pass however, as it wasn’t every day I was told about fundamental new layers of reality, if he was telling me the truth. “After everything you just told me, I have a choice to just walk away?” He gave a nod, however.

“Yup. There *are* select few people in Aion who already know about this secret. The queen, for example. Most top-level rulers know, as they’ll be who you’d be dealing with directly. I do most of my communications via Queen Morrigan, actually, of the Keld. Smart cookie, that one.” Uh... well duh. She was an Archmage, and a personal master of magic. “As for you... even if you turn down the offer at this point, you’re skilled enough to basically be able to find a position anywhere, doing anything magic or alchemy related. I was planning on putting you in contact with Morrigan either way.” Huh.

I exhaled quietly, finally calming down a little, it felt like. This was... The conversation had swerved back to topics more grounded in reality as I knew it, at least. “I assume then that there’s more to consider than just job stress levels and responsibility? That ‘price’ bit?”

He gave another brief nod before gently putting out his pipe and setting it next to him on the bed. “Yup. Everything has a price, like I said. If you want to learn and use True Alchemy, this is yours.” With that,

he started unhooking the clasps of his robe, and sliding it open in the front. Oh fuck! Wait, what the fuck was he...?! I didn't think I wanted to... My thoughts froze however as he opened the front of his robes and I saw his chest.

It looked like... scar tissue. Like he'd decided to put a large, magical enchantment array onto his chest, but instead of doing the sensible thing and just tattooing it or something, he gouged it jaggedly into his flesh with a cleaver. But... that definitely wasn't an enchantment array. The outer warding circle looked... vaguely normal, minus that it was in a language I had no idea as to how to read. I took a slightly educated shot in the dark at guessing the written form of Demonic. The actual runes and shapes inside it however... they were *moving*. Every few seconds, they seemed to just... flicker, and change shapes and positions.

Worse, he was entirely furless. I now realized his face and paws, visibly exposed, had been extremely carefully maintained. His body under the robes, not so much. Little clumps of fur stuck out here and there, ashen white like the rest, but most of his body was just skin and bone, with dark and veiny blotches here and there. Long lines that looked like they were stitched shut still were readily apparent over various parts of his torso, as well as what I could only assume was bits of metal fused into his naval area, in a series of disks. Implant augmentation?

Between his legs was smooth and splotchy, entirely missing any sort of genitals at all apart from a tube sticking out of the front of his pelvis, and a lot of scar tissue. There was little fat or muscle on him at all, and he looked remarkably more mummified than he did alive, with no explanation how he actually *was* still alive, let alone able to move about as readily as he did, with a surprising amount of strength. And he just gave *me* shit about being unnatural?!

Still, he managed a wry chuckle, letting the rest of his cowl down and just draping the robe behind him on the bed. "Your face when I started taking my robes off was priceless. Ah... simple pleasures. But no. Everything has a price, Exes." I couldn't help but scrunch my muzzle, looking him over. He had a few other bits of clearly mechanical augmentation, as well as a visible rune of power on his side, looking like it was Elven. The constantly shifting rune array in the circle on his chest gave an eerie tone to the 'walking dead' look he otherwise sported, and now I could only *guess* at the means he took to keep himself alive through all that. The only fur he had, consistently, were on his paws, face, and ears. Probably intentionally to keep up appearances. But that didn't really clearly convey what the price *was*.

"What exactly... is that circle array? What's it doing to you...?" That seemed the most likely culprit that I could note.

He nodded as I looked it over again, and leaned back, propping on his arms behind him to give me a better look. "This is called a Keyhole. Sometimes just Key for short. The Demons created them thousands of years ago. There used to be quite a few, but as far as we know, this is the only surviving one. We've passed it from host to host, as carefully as we could, for over two thousand years now. *This* is what lets you use the power behind the words. It makes True Alchemy function." Oh. So, the Demons would carve it into Inaga then. And if it caused... all this... I could sort of see why they didn't want to put it on themselves.

"How does it... function? Or is that a bit beyond me at the moment?" Suddenly, I wasn't *nearly* as confident in my knowledge and skills anymore.

To my surprise, Master gave a softer smile at that. "Being humbled is never a bad thing, Exes. I said there was a lot you didn't know still. But don't doubt the skills you do have. If you accept, you'll be able to master these new abilities in no time, I suspect." That... actually made me feel a little better, and I breathed out, settling back in the chair again. He looked down at his own chest after before slowly shaking his head.

"Unfortunately, a lot of words the Demons used have been lost. We have a... largely incomplete catalogue of True Alchemy words these days. But they're sufficient to make many things in Aion tick on a daily basis. That said, I don't fully know." Comforting. "What I do know is that the circle on the outside contains the effect. The effect is like a permanent enchantment. And that to initiate it, it requires a sufficient amount of both mana and vita, depending on how potent the effect is you're striving for." Wait, *vita*?!

My eyes widened as they snapped back up to him with that. "Vita?! That thing uses your life force to activate?!" Yeah, we could regenerate it, and yeah, warriors and guards had techniques that used vita too, but the body had... innate safeguards and limitations built into use in that respect. Off gut instinct, and by just taking a glance at Master, I suspected that the Key didn't exactly respect those limitations.

He chuckled again, then gave another dry cough, that suddenly sounded significantly more dire. "It does. It's normally a small amount, but obviously, don't overdo it. The Demons weren't particularly worried about our safety. There's no safeguards in place on it. You *can* kill yourself using it. Which would be disastrous, given the thing collapses and destroys itself if you do die before transferring it to a new host." Oh. Well fuck.

"Related to why we only have one now?" He laughed again at that, then shrugged.

"Probably. Fuck if I know. I think we've only had one for at least a thousand years now. We got *really* careful with keeping track of it. Probably why the whelp queen pissed a fit when I up and disappeared on her. Of course, she probably heard about it from the other rulers too when I did. Not that I wasn't in contact with Morrigan the whole time anyway." I snorted at that, trying not to smirk, and he just grinned.

"Regardless, I don't know if it's a problem with this one, or if they all have it, but it has a bit of a leakage issue." My eyebrow lifted again. Leakage of *what*? I didn't have to ask, thankfully. "Once you get it, on average, you have about twenty-five years, give or take. I've done... quite a few things to extend that as you can see, but I'm... reaching my limit. Gut feeling. I'll be thirty-nine this year."

I'm really glad I wasn't drinking something, as it probably would have ended up all over the floor. Not that... you really would have noticed at this point. Thirty-nine?! He looked like he was two breaths away from keeling over! Inaga typically had a life expectancy of around a hundred and sixty to a hundred and seventy! I looked him up and down again, shock slowly settling in to a creeping sense of despair instead. He... He was training me to take over for him. To give the Key to *me* instead.

He watched my ears slowly lower before nodding, and pulling his robe back on. "Yeah, it's a bitch. The price that we have to pay in order to have access to True Alchemy is... high. It'll cost a good chunk of your lifespan. I... had my doubts when you suddenly found two females who wanted to be in a pack with you but..." Oh...

“I had to offer it anyway. To be honest, I have no idea how long I have left. These runes of power, a gift from the Elves, are quite potent. But it’s not like they have an expiration date on them. If it comes down to it... we’ll need to transfer it temporarily to someone else just for safekeeping until a new Grandmaster Alchemist is trained up, however long that takes. We’ve done it before. Calien already told me there’s two other potentials in the running if you turn it down, but I don’t know if I’d have enough time to train them myself. Plus, after you get the Key pulled... Tends to accelerate things.” He explained everything rather idly after, binding his robe again before padding across the room and over to the clothing armoire. I really wasn’t surprised at all that he’d re-ordered all the shelves inside and stuffed it full of bottles of alcohol. Actually, I couldn’t really fault him for *any* vices at this point. Fuck.

I just quietly watched him as he poured two glasses of dark liquid, then hobbled back over to where I was. I took the one he offered, then watched as he sat down on the edge of the workbench again. “You obviously don’t have to decide now. But until you do, don’t... mention the Key, or anything about this to just anyone, obviously. Keep it to your pack and Umani, if you would. Oh, and maybe your slightly dumber twin there, whats-his-name.” That I rolled my eyes to, and he grinned. Right. I guess I had a lot to think about now.

He lifted his glass up, however, afterwards. “Here. To how much life fucking sucks.” Well, *that* I could certainly relate to. I clinked the glass off his, then just downed it at the same time he did after. At this point, I think I could probably do with a bit of destressing, actually...