

My thoughts were particularly heavy by the time I left Master's apartment. Slow and sluggish, like I was thinking through a mud filter. It might have been the alcohol, but I'd only had two glasses. Though, Master's stuff was strong enough to peel layers off my throat, I was pretty sure. He'd certainly got his coin's worth laughing hysterically at me after I'd almost coughed a lung up from our toast.

Still, we talked for a while. It was what, an hour later now? I rested against the outside of Master's door and leaned heavily against the wall. Fuck. Master had laid down to rest now. Just that 'little bit' of True Alchemy had exhausted him. He went through a ton of crushed numbroot in his pipe just to keep the pain at bay, it turns out. Yeah, he was just taking it raw and smoking it. He was careful with the dose, but I was still surprised he was even conscious after taking a hit of that.

No, I was surprised he was still *alive*. He let me do a medical scan on him and... fuck. He thought he didn't have much time left, and by all accounts on my part, that time should have been in the negatives at this point. The only reason his heart and lungs were still functioning was the fact that there was an Elven rune of power bound right to them. His muscles were animated using threads of magic, like a fucking puppet. It was the only way he could still move around. Hence why he was so strong, yet looked mostly dead. And why I never really saw him eating anything. A liquid diet was all his digestive system could handle at this point. I tried reverse estimating his odds based on the effects I'd seen, but there were too many variables. I gave him *maybe* two weeks.

I knew the score now, anyway. But then again, he called *me* a variable too. It was strange, hearing him tell me that I was possibly the smartest and fastest learning Inaga that he'd ever seen. He just stated it like it was a fact. My first instinct was to deny it, but he... actually pointed out more abnormal things about it. And now I was questioning *myself*. Some things had always come naturally to me. I could do advanced math and calculations in my head in seconds. I had oddly specific eidetic memory for scientific things, like formulas and recipes. Magic came to me naturally, though I wouldn't call myself the most talented there. The spells I did learn though, I cast easily without trouble remembering how. There were no noticeable mutations in me other than the leg and spine. I had no side effects someone with eidetic memory would normally have. My biological readings were completely normal. As far as he could tell, there was no 'reason' for me to be the way I am. But the way he said that...

True Alchemy. It was the *tool* we used to manipulate the energy on the other side of the veil, or barrier. The skin of the world, as Master called it. But it was just the *tool*. The energy, and the space it existed in, was called Aether energy, and The Aether, respectively. Just a name of convenience. Aether came from an old word we had that the Demons had used for 'void'. The Great Beyond, our afterlife, was literally within the Aether. We had necromancers capable of proving that much, and priests and priestesses capable of speaking to the four Gods out there.

But it all represented an unknown. One that I'd never really paid much attention to prior. Spirits and Gods already in the Great Beyond, or the Aether, communicated using only flashes of imagery and understanding, pieced together to form more complicated messages and meanings. The Gods themselves had a long-deciphered sort of pictographic code they communicated with, that was translatable by their followers. But... there were so many unknowns. Things we simply didn't understand and that we were discovering every day. What exactly *was* this place where the spirits of the dead went? And what were the *Gods* we were actually talking to, that spoke back?

Master thought that if I did accept the Keyhole... that I'd possibly become the greatest Grandmaster Alchemist ever in the history of Aion. He thought I'd do amazing and great things. Even, maybe, find a way to counteract the problems the Keyhole produced for its host. But that was a big if. He seemed convinced I was some... abnormality in existence. A fluke of rare essence patterns lining up just right to produce something amazing. The only thing he could tell me is that I had a 'strange' reading when it came to his detection efforts using True Alchemy. But he himself was too weak at this point to do an in-depth investigation of it. While using True Alchemy didn't accelerate the overall loss of lifespan, his limit for actively usable vita had dropped considerably over the years, as his health failed. Now, he could barely use True Alchemy anymore. According to him, his little demonstration had just been a tiny 'drop' of power.

My thoughts swirled. But I wasn't so out of it that I didn't hear the light clicking of her heel wedges along the tile of the hallway. I never really understood heeled paw-wear. Didn't we already have enough surface area on our paws? Why extend it backwards artificially, then extend the wedge up the entire back of the 'foot' surface? It was weird, as far as fashion went. Well, no, fashion was already pretty weird.

Queen Calien stopped all of a couple meters from me in the hallway. My eyes flicked to the right, looking at her, but she just watched me for a moment. I felt tired, and I didn't really even have the energy to greet her. "Mmm." She made a light humming noise, tilting her head for a second as if deliberating on something, before nodding. "Well, I was going to do a check in with Grandmaster Chronak. But now... do you have a moment, Exes?" A check in?

I forced myself to push off the wall and stand again properly with a little clack of my leg brace before giving her a nod. "I... sure." She nodded, then turned to head back the way we came. Well, this was just getting... better and better.

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So, the palace has a fully functional elevator system on both stairwells. That explains how Kada got the huge racks of clothing up and down the stairs. He didn't. It also made me kind of want to strangle Nara for not telling me about this on day one. The door to the elevator is literally *right next to the fucking stairwell!*

Now I was in what I presumed was the queen's office. It was surprisingly humble, but well furnished, with a comm system, computational enchantment array, and a whole lot of paperwork. It also had a nice couch and chair cluster with a tea table, which we were using at the moment. Her on the couch, and me sideways on the chair, resting my back against one armrest, with my legs dangling over the other. Fuck the rules!

The queen just finished pouring us some tea, then sat down before straightening out her skirt and giving a little sigh to herself. "I had a talk with Grandmaster Chronak earlier today. I found him surprisingly pensive. He didn't even insult me once during the entire conversation, in fact. He seemed... okay, as far as his health went, so I figured something was on his mind." That explained the checkup, I suppose.

She swished her tea about for a moment before shaking her head. "Still, I worry for his health, for reasons. Though seeing you when you came out of his apartment... I suspect you know what those reasons are now, yes?"

I looked over at her for a moment before nodding. He already had name dropped her as one of the ones who knew about everything, so there wasn't really a point to lying. "You're worried about the Keyhole he hosts."

She closed her eyes for a moment, before her muzzle ever so lightly pursed. "I won't lie that I was, but I also value his health, as a person. We don't see eye to eye anymore, but... we actually used to be friends, a long, long time ago. Back when my mother was still ruling." Huh. She spaced out for a moment before slowly shaking her head and looking back up at me. "You're... a medical mage, Exes. Chronak's not, obviously. Did you... see what he looked like under the robes? I was hoping for your professional opinion..."

I looked down at the tea cup for a moment before finally reaching down and taking it with my right paw, then cupping it with both against my chest, feeling the warmth there. "It's not pretty, that's for sure. But he let me do a medical scan on him for... the same reason. He wanted to know how long he... had left." She nodded at that, but I slowly shook my head. "By all accounts, he should be dead already. The only thing keeping him alive are the Elven runes of power hooked into his vital organs. I don't... know Elven magic, so I couldn't figure out how much power they had left. It felt like not a lot, and I tried to get a feel for how fast they were losing it compared to how much they had but it's... a rough estimate at best. I give it... maybe two weeks until they fail. After that, I don't think any medical techniques, enchantments, or machines in existence could save him..." There wasn't a lot we could do for total organ failure.

She listened with her eyes closed, with the only movement being her right paw twitching against the armrest, scratching into the surface of it with her neatly trimmed claws. It was the first outward sign of stress I'd ever seen in her. "That's... less time than I'd hoped. Did he tell you everything? He said that you were... effectively done with your training for everything precluding the transfer. That all that was left was learning the... words and how to use them."

I nodded. He'd said the same to me. "Yeah. He told me to think on it. Said that I could tell my pack and closest family. But... yeah. He told me about all the downsides." Clench. Her middle claw dug into the fabric, and she snapped out of it enough to withdraw it and rub her paw pad uneasily with the other paw.

Her eyes opened at that and looked into mine for a moment, before I turned and took a sip of tea. It was... really tasty. I didn't think it was... as good as our tribe had, but... Maybe I was just missing the tribe again, and the simpler days. "I... have a... large request of you, Exes. Could you hear me out?" I looked back to her with that and hesitated. She stared right into my eyes still, and I could tell she was outright uneasy. Given how much... practice she had controlling herself, I didn't want to think about the storm undoubtedly raging through her mind right now to show so many clues.

Well, what was the harm in hearing her out? Probably a lot, but fuck it. I nodded to her, and she exhaled, returning it before setting her cup back down on the plate. "As you know, things are turbulent

here in the capital. All over Larid, actually. Yours isn't the first tribe reporting trouble, though the others were about gender issues and male rights." Right...

I nodded, biting back the first witty retort anyway. The bombing attack had kind of clued me in about their being possibly some unhappy people here. "Well, it's getting worse. The more... abnormal citizens there are, the more unlikely it keeps sounding as we tell everyone that this is something natural happening. There's already theories and speculation, all the way up to some pretty wild conspiracy theories. Some are... dangerously close to the truth of the matter. If that got out... well, you don't need me to tell you what would happen."

"Probably civil war, and a lot of Inaga dying..." I stared into my tea as I speculated, but her wince in my peripheral vision told me she'd already concluded that.

"Well, as you should already know, that's the furthest from what I want as possible. I suggested... alternatives to Grandmaster Chronak years ago. That's what caused our split and him leaving the capital. The alternative I suggested was to... slow down the rate in which Inaga were becoming abnormal. To spread out our cultural shift to... a hundred, even a hundred and fifty years. Instead of the predicted... ten to fifteen we have left before the patches cease working on *anyone*." Ah.

"Dampen the culture shock and give more time for everyone to adapt, and accept that this is a natural phenomenon, then."

Her ears perked up at that and she nodded rapidly. "Exactly! I'm glad you... understand. That would allow us to get through this crisis while hopefully averting a war, and needless bloodshed." And her public execution, alongside Nara, probably.

I looked back over at her, but she exhaled and slowly shook her head. "At least, that's what I'd hoped. Your Master thought the idea itself was sound, but didn't trust us to follow through with it, especially after he was gone. He thought we'd just reverse it after we got him to stop the crisis. He left before I could convince him otherwise, and now..." She sagged slightly, lowering her eyes to her own cup as her ears dropped a little. "Now I'm afraid it's too late. Not only do we have more and more abnormals being born, but there are other defects starting to crop up in the patches that weren't there before. And not just for Inaga. They haven't been updated in two decades, going on three now. Birth defects and stillbirths have seen... an extremely sharp incline in the past year alone. We need to do something, and fast, to turn this around."

I downed the remaining half of my tea in one shot, then shivered. It went down sweet, then left a lightly bitter aftertaste. Reminded me of a lot of things really. I set it back down on the plate after, and Queen Calien immediately leaned forward and refilled it, before taking her own cup up again and drinking a little herself. But she didn't need to finish her explanation, really.

"So, you think the window of opportunity to fix the essence patch formulas is closing fast. Too fast for you to train up someone else to the point where they could take the Keyhole from... whomever you temporarily give it to, and fix the patches. You want me to become the next Grandmaster Alchemist instead, as fast as possible." I looked back over at her fully as I took my guess, and for a second, she looked surprised, before sagging again.

Her ears lowered once more, to about halfway, before she nodded. "All of Larid... maybe even Aion... is in a bad bind. Even if Grandmaster Chronak turned around today and wanted to help fix the patches... Honestly, I don't think he has the strength to do it anymore. This is why I wanted you to come here, to the capital with me." She'd been planning this for a while then. My expression softened a little at that, and I sighed. I figured hearing her out would bring problems.

She watched me carefully, even as I just stared blankly at her. Finally, I just rubbed my temples and gave a sigh myself. "If I take the Keyhole, I'm dead by age thirty-seven, give or take. You're... asking me to give up four fifths of my life. Even knowing that... I might have a pack in the future." It wasn't really a question. She knew what she was asking me to do. She still winced as I said it, though.

It took her a moment, but she gathered herself again and slowly nodded. "I... am, yes. I'm asking you to take the Keyhole and give up four fifths of your lifespan. Even... knowing you have mates, and will probably have kits of your own." For a second, I just stared at her. Wow. Well... at least she had the proverbial balls to admit it outright. "But... you're pretty much our only chance at preventing a civil war, with a bit of luck. And a lot of hardship and possible deaths of all of Aion. You'd be saving countless lives, and everyone would owe you a... great debt. I'm willing to give you anything I possibly can, Exes."

Did she... even have anything that I wanted? I... wanted my life, with my mates. My ears lowered and I turned my head away again, staring into my lap. Master was right, though. There's *always* a price. That was the only universal rule. Even the seemingly miraculous True Alchemy wasn't free. Not free at all. And... if Aion was to continue having access to it in the near future... At least, near enough to matter and prevent a whole lot of pain and suffering, I was the one who had to pay that price.

Because Master had refused to update the patches for twenty years, and now couldn't. In fact, he trained me this whole time knowing that he'd be passing this on to me, along with the problems he created himself. Maybe he couldn't have predicted the sordid state things would be in at this point, or the fact that I'd be *forced* to if I literally didn't want every future death to either war or birth defects on my paws. If I turned her down... there was always a price. And it would be paid by others instead.

Fuck. The situation was utterly and completely fucked. I gave a little shiver, swallowing lightly as I felt my eyes get watery. I didn't... want to die. I didn't want to give up most of my life. All I wanted was to just... be happy with my mates and see what fun and adventures life would have for us. I didn't want... I shivered again, feeling wetness slide down my cheeks now. I wasn't even out of primary school yet. Why did I have to be the one to save everyone?! I was twelve!

I... just didn't know anymore. I don't know what she was expecting, but it probably wasn't that I'd start crying pathetically like a loser. She just stared at me looking horrified, like it was the most disgusting sight in the world. I couldn't imagine she was horrified for any other fucking reason, as she'd just asked a twelve-year-old to accept a death sentence. Fuck her, fuck this place, and fuck this world...

Slowly, I sat up, feeling more heat leaking down my cheeks, even as I tried to wipe my eyes with the sleeve of my tunic. This... There was nothing for it. I was just one person. One tiny, pathetic Inaga male. Was I worth everyone who'd die if I said no? She knew I wasn't. I knew I wasn't. What fucking choice did I even have?! My paws clenched as I just gave up wiping my eyes, looking down at the table. I couldn't even look up at her anymore...

"I... I'll need to go tell my family and mates... Then I'll go let Master know I'm ready." Might as well just get this over with then. Tick, tock. We were all on borrowed time now. I didn't see her expression, but both of her paws clenched against her legs. She just stayed frozen there and quiet, so I turned and walked away. I didn't... even want people to look at me like this.

At least I managed to gently close her office door again before dropping to all fours and breaking into a lopsided run, muzzle scrunching as I held back from sobbing outright.

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Pretend to be a mature adult. Be all snarky and cool, and have sex with girls. Learn advanced things and get praise for how smart I was. The world needed saving; run and fucking hide like a little kit, sobbing pathetically on the library balcony. Sounded about right. It's what I was. A pathetic little kit. I sat with my knees crushed to my chest, and both arms wrapped around my legs, using my knees to muffle my crying. I just wanted to go home to the tribe. I just wanted to play games with the other kits. Enjoy a frozen shake and play in the sand with my little sister. Remember how amazing Dad was and tell her all sorts of stories about him. But... that was years ago now.

My breath caught as I shook there, choking out another sob into my legs. I didn't want to die. I didn't want any of this. I wanted to just run away. But I couldn't. What was the fucking point of any of this? Why had I tried so hard? I should have just stayed away from Exia and Yimir entirely. Maybe I should just... break things off and let them move on to someone who'd see more than a fifth of their life. Someone who could be there with them. Grow old with them after raising kits.

My nose was a mess, even as I shuddered again. I felt it leaking all over my shorts and I didn't even fucking care. A light rain came down on the overhang above, with the sky seemingly sympathizing with my plight, at least. How... was I even going to tell everyone? My mom especially... Fuck. What do you even... say?! I just slumped over on my side and curled up there on the stone floor, not caring about it being wet in spots from the rain. I stared into the gray skyline as the sun started to set, everything sinking from dreary into black now. I just... Slowly I let myself empty, blanking my mind as my body finally stilled. There was no choice. Thanks to someone else's decisions, I was fucked. My entire life, I always felt that I was the one that had to support people. Everyone else was playing while I studied. And studied. And studied more. Everyone was having fun, falling in love, exploring with sex. For most of my life, I thought that was something I'd never have. I was forced to be the responsible one and learn and prepare while everyone else lived their lives and got to be kits. It's funny, really.

I'd been right all along. Now it was my responsibility to die, so everyone else could be happy and healthy and safe. To be alone and miserable, working to help everyone with True Alchemy, for the rest of my short, sad life. That's what I had been born to do. It was decided for me for as long as I could remember. Had Mom even known when she called Master to the tribe to test me? Did she know what she was dooming me to?

It didn't matter. I could run a thousand 'what-ifs' through my mind. But it wouldn't change the 'now'. I could be selfish and possibly cause thousands to die, or I could just accept my fate and commit the rest of my short life to helping others. Given I didn't want to be responsible for thousands of deaths, there wasn't a choice there. Even if I wasn't killing them myself, I may as well have been if I didn't act. That was that.

I stared blankly ahead, shivering as the tears slowed at least, pooling under me and joining the dampness from the rain. There was a certain... calmness in the finality of the decision. Knowing exactly what was in store in the future, and accepting it was... cathartic to some degree. I mean, everyone died eventually, right? There was always a price, and if I could pay it for all of Aion, that was just what had to be done.

Yet again, the comm unit in my coat pocket went nuts, vibrating and shaking against the fabric. I'd taken it off my wrist after the fourth alert. I just... wanted to be alone for a while. Well, no, I didn't want anyone to see me sobbing pathetically like a little kit, more like. Always pretend to be an adult. Never let them see you cry. I sat up slowly again, ear flicking as a rogue leaf stuck to my fur, then drifted off in the wind. Almost fall. When it got colder and really rainy. Our last Estrus period of the year would be coming up soon, in a couple of weeks. Heh. Maybe it was merciful for me to breaking up with my mates before that. Not for them, but for me anyway. If I thought the last couple of weeks had contained a lot of sex...

I wiped at my eyes again, though it wasn't as effective with how soaked and snot-covered my sleeves were. I'd have to wash my face and change before I... faced anyone. My left paw pulled the comm unit out and I stared at it. Four missed contacts. Two were from the queen. One from Yimir, and the most recent from my mom. She left a message too. Tch.

"The queen just came by and was asking if we'd seen you. Is everything okay? Where are you? Yimir thought you were with Chronak, but he's not responding either."

I read the message twice before sighing. Why was the queen looking for me *now*?! I already agreed to her fucking request. Wasn't that enough for her? A part of me quietly realized suddenly why Master always seemed to hate everything. I'd probably be the same way in twenty years or so. Shakily, I stood, wincing as my stiff left leg complained about my posture for the past... Actually, I had no idea how long I'd been up here throwing a tantrum and feeling sorry for myself. Tch, and I was less than two years away from being an 'adult'. I certainly didn't feel like it.

I slipped the comm band around my right wrist again and dusted myself off to the best of my abilities. Tch. Might as well just get this over with. Hey, Mom. Sorry, but it turns out I'm going to be dead in twenty-five years. I didn't mean to put you through all that misery about caring about me and raising me and what not, not to mention probably risking your life to spit me out of your body. So, how's this weather?!

I chuckled weakly to myself, then sighed before heading back into the library. At least it was already on the third floor, and there weren't any fucking stairs between here and my room. I should have watched more carefully when the queen was operating the elevator...

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Well, this was far from ideal. Fuck my life. Yimir was in the room when I unlocked the door and came back in. She'd just been reading on the bed with her comm sitting next to her, but perked and looked up as the door opened. With me wandering in with dirty, matted fur, especially on my cheeks, and covered in snot. Wonderful.

“Exes! You’re...” Her eyes looked up and down me for a moment before she flinched and hopped up onto all fours. “Ah! Are you okay?! Oh Gods, what’s wrong?!” I should have just closed the door again and tried to run. It’s what I felt like. But I just sighed and shut it behind me instead, then held my paws up as she slid up at top speed, standing as she got close enough to me.

She was naked, which I guess was a perk when she grabbed me into a hug almost immediately. She’d only have to wash the snot out of her *fur* this way. “Yimir, I’m... I need to wash and change. You’re getting messy...”

“I don’t care. Please, Exes, talk to me...” She slid her head back a little, looking into my sore, stinging eyes while looking worried. I hesitated, but she brushed her paw up and lightly wiped at my cheeks, causing me to sigh and just give up, sinking a bit into her embrace.

“Just... a really bad day. I needed some alone time. And... we need to talk...” She frowned at that, then nodded.

There was a pause, then she scrunched her muzzle slightly. “Is this about whatever Master Chronak wanted? What did he even want with you?!” Her tone shifted surprisingly hostile, and she held me tighter, sliding my muzzle to her neck instead. She smelled nice...

I rested into her, just letting myself have a small moment of enjoying the closeness. I wished I could stay here forever, just hugging her. “It’s... complicated. I need to talk to everyone though, not just you. I... I’m going to wash up in the shower. Could you contact Mom and Exia?”

She swallowed, but nodded, helping me over towards the shower at least as she did. “I... Alright. I can wait until they get here. Knowing them, it won’t take long anyway. I’ll get you a change of clothes too, and put something on.” It was nice having her just take care of everything, and I nodded, dropping down into the basin of the tub before starting to peel off my disgusting clothes. Yimir started furiously typing on her communicator as I did, even as I turned the shower on.

I knew I didn’t have very long. If Mom was concerned, she could probably be here in literally seconds with Flickerpaw, with Exia shortly following. Yimir slipped into a tunic herself, then brought me one afterwards as I rinsed my face and lightly rubbed my eyes. They hurt from crying so much, and I didn’t even want to *look* in a mirror right now. It probably looked like I had some sort of infection in them at this point.

Yimir stayed close after coming back with clothes and a towel. She helped me dry off after I was done rinsing, sneaking nuzzles in between the towel swipes, and I shivered, letting her snuggle me again after a long moment. Then we heard the door open, and she just slid the towel down and wrapped it around my waist instead. Eh, it would do.

Exia had a key and of course just let herself in, with Mom in tow. “Exes! Are you okay? You never came back after Master Chronak-“ Exia paused upon seeing us, and Yimir rapidly shook her head to the two of them while holding me to her chest. Bleh. I should be more presentable, but Yimir was soft and warm. I at least rotated around to face them, letting her hug me from behind instead.

Mom frowned, stepping past Exia and just taking over immediately. “Exes, you’ve been crying. Please, tell me what’s wrong. What did Chronak talk to you about?” Her tone brimmed with concern, but also



had a sharp edge to it. I could feel anger almost from her, even as she slipped up and hugged me from the front instead. Mom...

I let her lead me over to the bed and slide me onto it, with Yimir and Exia darting up behind me almost immediately. "Shh, it's okay, Exes. Take your time..." Her tone shifted after she got me here, and she rubbed my paws until I slid forward and just pressed my face up against her collarbone. Mom's smells were... I relaxed a little, feeling calmer with her right here. I didn't deserve any of this... Not with what I had to tell them. But I was being selfish again and just enjoying it, even as I felt Yimir hug me from behind again, and Exia nuzzle into my neck.

There was nothing else for it. I started off by telling them about the Keyhole. The grand secret of True Alchemy. Then I told them about Master Chronak and the queen both wanting me to be the next host and why, and ended it on the actual price that the Keyhole demanded from its hosts. It wasn't a matter of saving the best for last, so much as saving what would more than likely cause the most disruption until everything had been said.

I was right. For again, today. Mom sat there, looking absolutely shocked. I couldn't see Yimir, but Exia slowly held her paws up to her muzzle before starting to shake her head. "N-No... No, big brother! Fuck that! Don't take it!"

I winced at that, but... knew it was coming. "Sis... I can't... I can't be responsible for possibly thousands of deaths if I just run away... I couldn't live with myself if I did that. There are already people being born with birth defects, or... being born dead..."

Mom growled, snapping everyone's attention back to her in an instant. "No, Exes. You're *not* responsible for that. If anything, Chronak is for not updating the patches in *almost thirty years*. I'm not going to let *you* pay for his mistakes." A blazing fury was in her eyes now, with her fur bristling up, especially over her scruff now, glints of her clenched teeth shining through her lips.

"Mom... even if it is his fault, it doesn't change..." I tried to start.

She was standing again, however. "Mom! Don't-" Exia started to shout. But she was shouting to an afterimage, as our door slammed open in a burst of golden energy. Oh... fuck... All three of us dove off the bed to run after her, Exia flickering off into a blast of gold herself. For Yimir and I, we slid to the door just in time to see Mom at Chronak's instead, gold energy crackling off her as she pounded on it again.

"Wake up, Bastard! We need to talk. *Now!*" she all but screamed at the top of her lungs. I winced, and Exia grabbed her right arm, holding her paw and trying to tug her from the door.

"Mom, stop! T-This isn't... We have to just talk about..." Several servants were sent scurrying at this point, with a few others looking concerned at the display that was going on. Frowning, Zira and Ziri even came from the direction of Nara's room, watching Mom with an air of extreme caution now.

There wasn't any answer. We technically didn't even know if he was still *in* there. It had been *hours*, and it wasn't like anyone really kept track of what he did during the day. Maybe if I messaged his comms, he'd talk to me of all people... I opened my muzzle to suggest it when Mom gave out a seething, shrill, pissed off sounding scream, and brought her leg up. Shit!

The twin guards widened their eyes and lifted their shields, even as Yimir and I ducked for cover around the side of our doorframe as Mom put a glowing, golden paw right into the front of Chronak's door! The entire building shook as the explosion resounded through the hallway in an echo. I'm pretty sure I heard every window in his room shatter, and Exia dove for cover as wood and stone shrapnel flew every which way into the air. They literally *burned* away from Mom as she stomped into his room, ignoring the sudden blaring alarm from everywhere and red lights going off in the hallway. Or... Or that. I'm sure the bomb sirens and immediate lockdown would also get his attention, wherever he was.

Zira stared with one eye squinted, looking slightly horrified at the damage to the wall around the now empty doorframe, with pieces of the stonework now crumbling down in a huge half-circle. Ziri just sighed and rubbed a paw over her forehead, however. She pulled her comm out after and immediately started a call, even as Yimir and I rushed into the hallway again. Good thing, as a metal blast door closed over our room a second later. At least, when Mom obliterated the wall, it looks like she destroyed the upper blast shield mechanism too. We both ducked down to help Exia up, who looked a little rattled, even as she turned to look into the room instead. Uh...

The remains of the door were sizzling on the carpet, with little flicks of flame coming off it. Mom stood in front of his bed, off to the other side of the room however, eyes wide instead as she just stared. Uh... "E-Exes... Exes!" she shouted suddenly, looking over and perking as she saw I was already in the room. Uh oh.

Exia helped me run over, and we saw that Master Chronak was indeed still in bed. And definitely didn't wake up from all that. Fuck! I fell down onto his mattress next to him, magic activating as I did. I formed two scanners, one in each paw, and the first slid to his neck, feeling for a pulse and planting it right where one should be. The second touched his chest... and scrambled the scanner instantly. Uh... well fuck. The magic just came apart when I did, and I opened his robe, seeing the Keyhole still there and present. Ah!

He was alive still! The neck scanner gave me back vital signs, but they were absolutely atrocious. I pulled his robe off, then checked his side and back, only to realize the lower Elven rune had failed. Shit! It was tied into his digestive system. The entire digestive system. I attached the main scanner to his back instead, avoiding plugging it onto the Key itself this time, and started pulling in more information as I brought up illusionary screens to display it.

Forty-six beats a minute for his heart. Ten breaths a minute. His bloodstream was pulling in only sixteen percent oxygen. Respiration was okay, but... His body temperature was too low, and a feel of his forehead told me he was clammy. This seemed more like shock. Or... My scanner shifted lower, into his abdomen, and I winced. Organ failure of a kidney and large intestines. There was infection all over the place and starting to get into his bloodstream. He was going into septic shock!

"Fuck, it's septic shock. Someone, go get my kit from my room! I know I have antibiotics in it!" Exia nodded and was gone literally in the blink of an eye, and I started weaving magic as fast as I could.

My enchantment slipped into his back, hitting his lungs and heart as I started feeding them more energy, and bolstering the remaining Elven rune. That at least upped his heart rate and steadied his breathing, even as Exia flickered back into the room and set my entire kit down next to me on the bed.

Queen Calien had made it into the room by the time I'd unpacked the kit and fed the strongest possible dose of antibiotics into the deep needle. I guess Ziri reported what was actually going on, as I just realized that I didn't hear the alarms in the hallway anymore... "Shit! What happened?!"

"One of the runes supporting him failed while he was asleep at some point. He slipped into septic shock from multiple organ failures in his abdomen. Administering a large dose of site-based antibiotics, then I'm going to set him up with an IV for more, and to get nutrients into his bloodstream. Can you have someone bring up medical equipment?" I quickly explained.

The queen nodded, moving fast and immediately pulling out her own comm. Well, this day just kept getting better and better. Maybe if I hadn't fucking sobbed to myself for hours, this wouldn't have happened! My paw clenched, even as I pushed the long needle into his stomach. Damn it!

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Something, something, when it rains, it starts bludgeoning everyone with hoopball-sized hail. I rested tiredly against the mostly wrecked wall of Master's room, feeling more than a little fatigued now as I peeled the bloody gloves off my paws. It was... a bad time. It had to be past supper time now. Three hours of magical surgery. Plainly speaking, a lot of his insides were now outside, having already suffered from some pretty extreme tissue death and being nothing more than a generator for infection at this point. With the failure of the lower rune, the micro-blood-flow had halted to his kidneys, liver, intestinal tract, and stomach. Now, he could live without a kidney, a portion of the liver, his stomach, and the large intestines, but... everything else was kind of bad. Now he lay there on a blood filtration machine, hooked up to several intravenous injection systems for nutrients and antibiotics, and with a mana generator system powering the only remaining rune keeping him alive. My estimate of a few weeks had apparently been... a little on the generous side.

Exia and Yimir rested against the wall to either side of me, just quietly snuggled against both shoulders. Mom stood by the now raised medical bed that Master was on, expression blank as she looked down at him thinking who knows what. The queen had her arms crossed over her chest, and was also staring blankly towards Master, reclining up against the opposite wall from us, near the shattered windows. Her eyes drifted to me after, watching as I tossed the gloves into the biohazard bucket.

"What's... the prognosis now?" she finally asked.

I gave a tired shrug. "There's no real precedent for this. If we keep him on the life support, liquid nutrients, and keep powering the rune with mana... I give him a few days. His heart and lungs took a huge shock from this. They're... I don't think they're going to last him much longer than that, even with being artificially powered. I could try regenerative tonics and treatments, but we can't use those until the infection is entirely removed. It would just cause it to spiral out of control and kill him instead. About his only hope at this point would be full heart and lung transplants but..." I hesitated, then just shook my head. "I don't even know if he's going to wake up again. When your blood oxygen level drops that much, for who knows how long..."

Queen Calien's paws clenched at that, and she closed her eyes again. "This... Damn it! There's really no choice. If the Keyhole is still in him when he dies, it's lost forever. Aion... needs True Alchemy. I'm going to... see if I can contact the Laridia Academy. There was a professor there who offered to

temporarily host the Key if... this happened.” Temporarily host the Key? But removing the Key would *kill* them, by the sounds of what Master said.

It took an extreme amount of willpower to even push myself to my legs again, shakily standing. The queen’s eyes snapped to my own, but I was just looking at Master, sleeping peacefully. I hobbled over, resting my arms against his bed, even as I heard the girls standing up behind me now. Master. He’d taught me personally for a good chunk of my life. He’d... faced the same looming black cloud of mortality that I’d seen on the horizon, but still... I remembered our toast just this afternoon, and gave a tired half-laugh, a little smile playing at my muzzle.

“Exes...?” Mom turned to me, looking uneasy and searching my expression.

“We just shared a toast this afternoon about how much life sucked. He always told me... there’s *always* a price. And he’s... right. There’s a price, and tonight, guaranteed, someone is going to pay it. If a professor takes the Keyhole, they’re dead as soon as they give it to whomever gets trained eventually. If I take the Keyhole, I won’t live to see my fortieth year, more than likely. Master... is already paying his price.” The queen stood, expression blank again as she let her eyes lower to Master Chronak as well. There was no choice. I knew that already.

I shook my head, reaching out and touching the Key on his chest. It shivered and twitched under my paw, feeling both alien and malicious at the same time. Frantic now. Like it could detect time was running out and wanted to tear itself off of his chest. “If nobody takes the Key, it vanishes with Master’s life. Tonight. Tomorrow. I don’t know when. Not long, though, without serious intervention. Then, Aion’s permanently deprived of True Alchemy. A *lot* of people will die, and things will get very, very bad, very, very fast...”

Mom slowly shook her head. “Exes... no. You... can’t...” Her own eyes started to get watery, and I was forced to look away from her. Tch.

Yimir grabbed my right paw, and I tensed, while Exia slid hers around my left arm. “Exes... What about... us?” Yimir asked, trying to catch my stare from the right. But... Exia actually moved my arm, and suddenly turned me to the side. My eyes widened as they met with hers at point blank range, and one of her paws slid up to the side of my face.

“Big brother... I support you no matter what you choose. I don’t... like you being forced like this but... Don’t you even fucking *dare* ask me to find someone else! Don’t... Even dare! I’m your mate for life. You’re stuck with me!” Her declaration caught me off guard, with my widened eyes shivering a little. She was...

Yimir’s arms slid around my waist though, and I felt her chin rest on my right shoulder. “Me too, Exes. I... know that’s what you were planning on doing. Your eyes... I could see it. But it doesn’t matter if we only have twenty-five years. It’ll be the most amazing thing ever...” I couldn’t manage to swallow the stiffness in my throat as my eyes got watery again. These two...

Slowly, I nodded, letting them sandwich me between them. “Stubborn... F-Fine. Heh, guess I don’t get any say in that either.” In truth... I was happy they both wanted to stick with me. She was right. I was going to ask them to find someone else. This... Gods, this sucked.

“Master... said that he thought I had an actual chance of figuring out things with the Keyhole, and finding a way to counteract what it does to you. He said that he thought I’d be the best Grandmaster Alchemist Aion has ever seen, and accomplish amazing things...” I sighed, and Mom looked down, her own tears sliding down her cheeks, before she slowly nodded.

It took her a moment, but she sighed and looked back up to me. “He’s right. You actually... freaked him out when you first took your aptitude tests. I always knew you were smart but he seemed to think you were unnaturally so. Someone that shouldn’t exist. I punched him when he said it of course but...” Heh. She smiled a little, looking back down to him before shaking her head. “Bastard. This is still his fault but... there’s no sense in staying angry with him *now*. I’ll just have to punch him in the face again when I see him next.” I had no doubt she’d do exactly that, too. But she surprised me. “I don’t agree with any of this. None of it is fair. But... I also support your choice. You’re my son, and I’ll always be here for you.”

Shivering, I smiled to her and nodded. It was... all I could have hoped for, anyway. I looked back to the queen after. She... stared down at Master, her paws clenched to both sides of his bed. Her expression was hard to read, until she closed her eyes and gave a shiver, looking remarkably like someone had just walked up and punched her in the stomach. For a moment, she seemed downright vulnerable, and I frowned. “I knew that... I’d have to deal with this in my time as queen. I knew I’d have to... condemn someone, just to keep this... *thing* in existence.” She looked disgusted at it for a moment, warping and twisting on his chest. “But it didn’t prepare me in the slightest for having to give it to a twelve-year-old. I... Exes, I stand by my promise. I’ll give you anything you want or need. Anything I can do to help... fix this or make things better for you...”

We locked eyes for a long moment before I exhaled slowly, and simply nodded, sealing my own fate. She hesitated, before returning my nod and leaning off the bed again. “I... I’ll go make preparations...” And now the price was mine.