

Okay, I was a little nervous. When the queen said it was a ritual, I was expecting a... normal magical ritual. Done usually carefully, with the help of a mage, and in a magical lab or library, or some other quiet place. This...

We were in the basement of the hospital now, having been escorted here via honor guard and hover wagon. People and the automated trams had to clear the way or be paused on the street as we made our way through. There was a lot of staring, whispers, and shocked looks... but no confusion. They'd seen this happen before. They knew what was happening, it felt like. It didn't matter that we had cloth draped over the sealed life support chamber that Master was in. They knew who it was, and could probably guess what had happened.

All eyes had been on me, from the overly protective honor guards, to the civilians who showed a broad range of reactions, between envious to sad. I guess while they didn't know the particulars, it was pretty obvious when we went through a Grandmaster Alchemist every twenty-five years that *something* was up. Especially when I looked at the statistics, and almost a third of them have to do the transition with the prior Grandmaster incapacitated in some regard.

We went in through the back of the hospital, with the guards rolling Master's bed behind me. The queen had suggested that Mom, Exir, Exia, and Yimir *not* be present. It would have been ominous had I already not been assuming the worst about how this was going to go and feel. I was getting some sort of constantly changing, eldritch circle transferred into my chest from someone else. Already, it was breaking most magical norms, and we hadn't even started yet! Fun!

Now, we were in a vault. They sealed it from the inside when we went in, and I could *feel* the magic humming through the walls, blocking out literally everything outside of this room. We were entirely isolated now. 'Calien', as she insisted, and Nara were here, as well as a medical mage and three nurses. That told me something right there. Zira and Ziri guarded the inside door. There was also a support mage, looking over the ancient looking magical ritual papers. Clearly, they weren't the original documentation, and might not even have been the original transcribed work, but they looked quite old regardless.

The device in front of me, however, was far older. Unlike the pale white room around us, with clinical, clean tiling everywhere, this thing was carved from what seemed to be a single block of stone. It was clean and obviously washed, but the rock was almost obsidian black. It was basically a large stone tablet, with the face of it covered in glowing red runes, within a Contract Seal. Now *that* terrified me, given they were typically used for summoning and binding familiars. That is, *living entities*. Based on the brackets around the circle, I suspected I was going to be strapped to the front of the tablet and bound, spread wide with each limb. The brackets themselves at least looked modernized, and nicely cushioned anyway. What I didn't particularly find comfort in was the fact that there was a dark brown, almost black 'stain' down the front of the tablet, that clearly wasn't able to be scrubbed off.

Behind the tablet was a mechanical alchemy engine, with what appeared to be slots for more modern mana batteries to be socketed in, probably to power the magic in the tablet. It also served as an anchor to the tablet, obviously, being riveted right to the back of the stone slab, and it itself riveted into the floor. The only thing I could honestly say for certain is that this wouldn't *kill* me. Hopefully.

I was naked now, having slid the robe off that they'd given me when we got down here, at the two nurses' instructions. I probably would have been more embarrassed, given one was a cute Inaga female, and the other a cute Illan female. But 'horny' didn't translate well through 'terrified'. I gave a little shiver as they both focused on carefully shaving the fur off my chest with a straight blade and creams. At least, the Inaga did. The Illan was a tad less professional about it all, and kept tracing her eyes up and down me, with a little smile on her muzzle. Tch.

Still, they were extremely careful with me, making sure I had a comfortable chair, some water, and that the blade didn't cut me, while everyone else prepared for the rest of the ritual. Practically every conceivable medical supply and equipment seemed to be on paw, and the medical mage was busy taking a tally of all of the supplies while going over things with Calien. Nara was taking notes of course as she switched between watching her mother and me. I imagine she'd have to do this eventually too. But I'd be gone at that point so... Her mother would probably oversee removing the Keyhole from *me* in the future too.

I gave a shiver as the Inaga female finished the last pass with the razor, then nodded. The Illan moved up with her scrubber after, and finished washing the remaining cream off my now bare chest. It was... so weird to see my chest completely shaved, with nothing but pale skin showing. I looked like an Elf! "Shaving is complete. We're going to clean him now," the Inaga reported. Oh boy. They directed me to stand, of course.

Between the two of them, they managed 'careful' and 'enthusiastic' at the same time. I'm pretty sure the Illan just did a double pass of my sheath and balls because she wanted to, but I just rested there as they washed me down with cleansing agents. Antibacterial alcohol was pretty standard before surgeries, which led me to take a few guesses at how this was going to turn out. Nara's note taking dwindled a bit after they switched out, and she watched them wash me with avid interest instead. Ugh.

Soon, I was smelling faintly of medical alcohol from every centimeter of my fur, and both females stepped away from me, giving me room, and probably to recover their noses from the burning sensation. At least, *my* nose was burning at this point. Calien looked to me, then nodded. "We're about ready to begin. Final checklists ready?"

"Mana batteries and backups are all accounted for and fully charged. I've finished the ritual preparations." The male Inaga support mage gave her a nod after, then slid Master's bed into the circle he'd finished preparing on the floor.

"Medical supplies and team are accounted for and ready to go!" A female Jakatar medical mage, surprisingly. She was easily the tallest person in the room. They were normally further north than Larid, where the temperatures were cooler overall. Her long, floppy ears perked and she nodded enthusiastically to the queen, giving a grin as her little puff ball tail wiggled furiously behind her. Well, someone was eager.

Calien nodded without turning to her, eyes still locked on me instead. "Are you ready then, Exes? There's no going back once we start."

I gave a softer chuckle at that. "If you're asking if I need a bathroom break, I'm fine. I assumed we were at the point of no return hours ago..." I walked up to the tablet as I spoke, looking it over rather

apprehensively. The spacing on the restraint brackets, and size of the tablet itself, indicated it was definitely for Inaga. Which means way back when, it was probably made by a Demon.

She smirked, then nodded to me. "I'm... glad. I know this is a lot, and that you didn't have much choice. But I'm also going to make sure everyone knows you're a hero." My cheeks heated a bit at that, but she turned and nodded to the two nurses instead.

It didn't take them terribly long to help me get up against the tablet and lock me in. With my lower paws almost as far apart as my arms, I felt exceedingly vulnerable, and slightly embarrassed as I realized I was entirely visible, in every regard, to everyone in the room. Balls hanging under me included. I wonder if the Demons made this for humiliation as much as utility.

The padding lightly clamped down to each side of my head, and soon I could barely move a muscle. All I could do was watch as the support mage slowly lowered a device from the ceiling, down towards Master's bed. He was still just resting peacefully there, eyes closed. I... All I could do was stare at him as the device above him locked into place and started to glow. He was about to pass on now, and it all felt so... final.

"Extractor is ready. Initiate the charge." The support mage glanced past me to the right at that, which was probably where one or both of the nurses had gone. The entire tablet started to shiver a second later, as I heard the alchemy machine hum to life behind me.

The glow from the runes around me flared up, and slow, expansive arcs of red energy danced slowly out over my body. The outer ring lit up as well, and I gave a jolt, suddenly feeling like something just slammed a dozen or more 'hooks' through my inner mana pool. Well, that was... unpleasant. This was... what being inside of a Contract Seal felt like, then?

"Seal is activated. Extractor charged. Ready to initiate ritual." The support mage called that out to nobody in particular, until he looked to Calien after.

She exhaled, looking... apprehensive, until she gave him a nod. I... doubted this was her first time seeing this. Nara on the other hand, looked downright anxious. All eyes settled onto the support mage as he flicked several more switches at his control panel, then... lowered the face visor over his cowl? Admittedly, I'd been curious as to why he was wearing a full medical environmental suit.

"Extractor started. Disengaging primary warding circle on the Grandmaster Keyhole..."

My eyes flicked back to Master, then widened as a flare of red light shot down from the device over him and blasted right into his chest. It pulsed, then pulled back, and I suddenly saw the outer 'ring' of the ever-shifting array pull... 'upwards', into the air. A second later, it was like something snapped, and the Key pulsed upwards, flares of blood red energy drifting up towards the extractor. Wasn't it supposed to be orange...?

Then things started to get... weird. My... perspective was shifting. I frowned as my depth of field suddenly started to twist forward. It looked like Master's bed was slowly shifting closer to me... like the distance between the bed and tablet was starting to... melt together and shrink. Master's body gave a jerk, moving limply on the bed as more energy pulled from his chest, and those flickering, changing runes sped up, floating into the air over him now in an almost cloud of Demonic writing.

The circle around me pulsed a moment later, and I shuddered again, gasping but suddenly not getting any air. I tasted ozone suddenly around me, and the room dimmed as I was pulled closer to the red swarm. "Warding Circle deactivated. Ritual Contract seal connected. Beginning junction with..." His voice was increasingly distant and mute, until it vanished altogether as I was pulled right up against the now twisting and writhing mass of moving shapes. They didn't so much as float out of Master now, as haul themselves up and out of him, lines of energy lacing over and grabbing the bed like tendrils!

My vision darkened around the edges, and I gasped, unable to inhale as I started to choke, my eyes feeling pressure behind them. I was... It felt like I was in a void, with no oxygen around me at all as I spasmed against the brackets! I could see the veins swell along the bridge of my nose, angrily turning red as my air dwindled. Blackness. There was nothing now but me, Master seemingly floating there, and that glowing red mass.

For a second, everything grew colder around us, until the energy shook, wailing into the air like a wounded animal, and something more... solid started to pull from Master's chest. The darkness warped around me, and I thrashed against the bindings, mind screaming for air, even as a black mass, with glowing red veins, started to try to push its way up and out of Master's chest. Long tentacles slid up and out to each side of the glowing ring, then downwards, trying to push against his shoulders and stomach and haul more of itself out into the cold. Was this... real? Was this really happening?! I screamed, but no sound came out as the flare from the extractor shifted slowly into a blood red spotlight shining down over all of us.

The black mass thrashed twice, in an explosion of blood and gore, and it literally tore itself free from his chest, flinging his body limply off into the darkness below! Master! Fuck! Wet hot blood hit my right cheek and splattered down my chest as the black mass slowly turned around, with the cloud of energy dragging it upwards. Its energy tentacles seemed to keep it anchored in the air, while its real ones started slowly reaching towards me. Deep in the center of its mass, a crack of red light formed, and then I saw teeth as a maw slowly opened up on it. Oh... Oh Gods...

I didn't know if this was part of the ritual, or if it had all gone wrong at this point. The spotlight from above stretched out over me, becoming a blood red moon hanging way in the sky. The air grew even colder now, and I shivered in a mixture of terror and freezing. The clean, polished hospital vault was gone. What was...? A light pink flake drifted down and landed on my muzzle. Is that...? More started to lightly fall from the sky around me. Not pink. That was the moon's color hitting them. White! Snow. Was this snow? Now I was strapped to a snow-capped, jagged rock coming out of the ground. The snow was uneven and ruptured, with long, frozen tubes and shapes all around us. Now it didn't look like the black mass was floating free anymore, so much as it was just rising out of the snow, like an iceberg from the water. Was it just the tip too, in that case?

My breath caught. I could breathe again, even if every inhale felt like ice was forming in my lungs. The glowing red veins extended down into the snow under it, even as the mass swelled and expanded. Some of the frozen 'tubes' started to move too, and my eyes widened, as they cracked ice off of themselves. This... whole area was... But it only got worse. The snow started to shift and slide as the creature moved, raising more of its mass upwards towards me. That had the unfortunate side effect of uncovering those broken shapes around the larger tubes.

Corpses. In-between the tentacles now tasting at the air, and chunks of ice and snow, were hundreds of frozen corpses. They were all Inaga, staring with empty eyes and expressions of terror, in various positions of writhing in pain and horror. Their chests were... ruptured or missing in some cases, still laying discarded where they fell. How many of us had... this thing devoured? The wind picked up and chilled me to the bone, everything starting to feel numb as I heard... a whispering on the wind. Softer moans. A distant, shrill scream of pain. Was that...? The creature's maw twisted, not in any normal way, but extending parts of itself out into mandibles and twisting tendrils of teeth. Enough of it had risen out of the mass below that it could extend itself towards me now, and suddenly lashed out with a heavy tentacle!

I screamed, actually making a shrill noise this time, but jerked to a stop as the thick appendage slammed right into the center of my chest! My eyes widened, vision drifting downwards as I watched it slowly grind into me, with the crack and crunching noise of my ribs and spine getting crushed under its powerful muscles. Blood spilled out from my chest, and my body gave an involuntary jerk again now, a rich copper taste rushing up into my mouth.

I choked on it, coughing as the hot, red fluid splattered out of my muzzle and across the top of the tentacle. The creature writhed, almost pleased by my agony, as smaller mouths opened up along where the splash had hit, lapping at the blood, before the main stalk ground forward again. My eyes rolled back, and I think I might have lost control of my bladder as my body spasmed again, and there was another wet crunching noise from my chest. It was... worming around inside of me now, split into dozens of smaller tentacles that dug in and tore.

The creature gave a low growl, pushing at me a few more times, but seemingly not able to get enough of itself into me. Instead, smaller tentacles dove forward along the larger one, and I writhed, feeling them tearing into my chest and starting to just rip me open instead, trying to widen the chest wound! Blood flew everywhere, and it rammed into me again and again, using clawed tentacles to tear my chest apart as I sobbed there. This was... That was it then. Did I... fail somehow?

I couldn't move anymore, everything going dark and numb as my vision started to fade, only able to see it slamming into my chest with renewed vigor. My arms hung limp at my side, and I looked past the tentacle, to several more frozen bodies below me too, reaching upwards towards the sky with stiff arms. Discarded. We were all discarded after we were used up. Master was down there somewhere now, rotting. Now I'd probably join him...

Everything snapped forward however, as a sharp, echoing 'click' resounded from me. It was amazingly loud, bouncing off the snow and ice of the black... valley we were in. The tentacle impaling me froze, like something had grabbed it and forced the creature to stop tearing into me over and over. The red, glowing runes still floating around the main body of the creature flared with light, then pulsed as the main tentacle slowly started to... rotate in my chest. What...? The glow changed, slowly oozing from me like blood, as the veins in the mass shifted to a blue color instead.

The twisted entity froze, then instead tried to tug free of me with several yanks backwards. It wasn't budging, with it slowly being rotated inside of me in short, even bursts, like the ticking of a clock. Instead, the mass of black and red tendrils twisted, then seemed to scream almost as it began shifting blue too, the slow expanse of the color shift having touched its main body! I jerked again, then suddenly

gasped as it felt like my burning lungs turned back on! There was a pulling sensation, and the creature was yanked forwards instead, its tentacle starting to be drawn into my chest!

The hole in chest was a mass of gore at this point. My ribs showed through the red mass, but with a metallic sheen to them, and glowing blue runes I couldn't identify. They 'shifted' then, rotating as if my chest was now some mechanical device, and locked around the tentacle in a circular fashion, sinking it further into me with another clicking noise. It finally settled, keeping the creature bound to me with its own limb, even as strength returned to my arms and legs.

The moon far above shifted to blue instead, changing the entire tone of the area. The main bulk of the monster trembled in the light, and then was gone a split second later, in a haze of snow that drifted by my vision. Just the stalk of the tentacle was left, as my 'ribs' started to twist again and pull it too into my chest. I... felt Master grin a moment later. I felt him. I knew it was him. I saw his image in my head, and he was grinning at me, before he gave a curt nod, his paw touching his forehead, then giving a light, two fingered salute my way, before he turned and slowly walked away into the snow and darkness.

Master. Chronak. There was a third click, and my bindings snapped open, dropping me down onto the now smooth, empty snowfield below. I almost gave a startled yelp, but caught myself with ease, feeling... lighter now, and stronger than I'd ever been. My eyes widened, and I stayed on the ground however, staring at my arms in front of me. Limbs like bone, but in metallic, curving bows and beams, and rotating mechanics and gears between. Blue light flowed through like veins, and my right paw clenched slowly, scythe-like claws flexing as I held it up in front of me, staring in shock. The world around me started to fade to black a moment later. What was this... sensation? The moon slowly faded into the darkness above, letting blackness sink down all around me until there was nothing left.

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My eyes slowly opened. I felt heavy again, and knew instantly the sensation of being on a pretty potent numbroot dosage. Master... No, Chronak. I don't know how he managed being like this all the time. Though, I suppose it was better to be heavy and numb than in agony with your body rotting from the inside out.

I could move again, and I felt warm on top of that with a blanket over me. This was... My eyes drifted about, and I recognized it as a hospital room of some sorts. But with an actual full bed, medical equipment, cabinets, and even a sink. This was... one of the hospital rooms in Laridia then. They'd probably simply moved me upstairs. I was... alive then. The ritual hadn't... killed me after all. It felt like it had tried damn hard, though. Or was that just normal for it? I now had first paw experience, at least, for why the general notion was that Demons had been assholes.

The door cracked open a moment later, and a nurse entered, being escorted by an honor guard. I didn't recognize the guard, but the nurse was the Inaga from below, in the vault. Though, the guard was watching *her*, not me. Regardless, the Inaga female perked as she saw my eyes open, then gave a softer smile. "Ah, Grandmaster! You're awake now. You've been out for a couple of hours. I'll let the queen know!" I blinked slowly as she called me 'Grandmaster'. The female honor guard stayed in the room after the nurse left, but I didn't pay her much attention, instead sliding the sheets down and off my chest.



My fur was growing back. They must have applied regrowth tonic to me already. It was just a light brown and blonde fuzz at the moment, but if they had, it would be normal again in a few hours. More importantly however... There was a ring on my entire chest, finely carved into my skin as if with a surgical blade and almost unnoticeable. At least, if the inside of the shifting array wasn't always moving. Focusing, I pushed a little bit of my mana into it, and felt it... 'rotate' inside of my chest, starting to glow with a blue, inner light. The lines were... clean and neat, compared to the jagged and messy scar gashes Master had. Maybe they slowly decay and get worse over time? That would make sense.

All I could do was stare at it however. The Keyhole was... in me now. It was done. I had it for my entire life, until it killed me. I could feel it moving in my chest if I focused on it. It wasn't... a rune array at all. It was something alive, almost. Or at least aware. It wasn't a circle. I suddenly understood why it was called a Keyhole. A hole. I felt it in my chest, like behind me, empty nothingness expanded, that I could just reach into the hole and pull some of that 'nothing' back out. The Aether...

I gave a start, jerking and looking upwards as the door opened again. Calien entered this time, with the nurse in-tow. She smiled to me, and exhaled softly before sitting down in the chair next to the bed. "You're okay. That was... not like when I watched Chronak get his circle. I'm glad you're alright."

I frowned at that. How differently had my experiences been from what actually happened? I didn't know what was a dream or reality from my memories of the event, I suddenly realized. Had I... hallucinated all that? "What... happened exactly. I don't trust my... memory of it."

She sighed, then sat up again and nodded, ears raising. "Well, normally the extractor lifts the Keyhole off the old Grandmaster's chest, then rotates and extends it into the new Grandmaster. The process is... ugly, as it's created using cuts and scarring as far as I can tell. That's why we had medical on standby. You... lost quite a bit of blood."

My eyes flicked to the left, and indeed, I saw several empty blood bags still hanging on the IV stand. Direct transfusion instead of a blood regeneration potion? I must have lost enough to have it threaten my life. Damn! Calien nodded as she watched me look at them. "Yours was... different. After we extracted the Keyhole, it seemed almost... attracted to you. It tore itself out of the extractor's containment field like it was alive, and we thought it was attacking you at first, somehow!" That sounds... actually it sounded a little too close for comfort to what I'd experienced.

She gave a shiver, looking shaken for a moment before sighing. "I don't think that's ever happened before, as far as I know. Maybe it happened to queens before me but... The support mage tried to up the power to the extractor to pull it back into control, but it tore the entire thing from the ceiling, then just... burrowed into your chest."

I... honestly didn't know what to think about any of that. It sounded... gruesome to say the least. Her descriptions were obviously... politely censored. But I seemed completely fine now. I looked down at my chest again, then traced a finger over one of the fine lines in my skin. I could... barely even feel it. The queen watched for a long moment before shaking her head. "That's also the cleanest scarring I've ever seen. I wish we had someone to consult about all of this, but... we barely understand how the tablet and extractor even *work*. It's not like they came with instructions, with all the Demons dead and gone. Oh... speaking of instructions..." Hmm?

She dug into her side bag before sliding out an old-looking book of sorts. It was bound in leather, and had chains sealing it together on a slide clasp. Overall, it was about standard size, and looked to be maybe seventy pages or so thick. "This was Chronak's. It was on top of his suitcase in his room, with a note stating it, and the suitcase, are yours now. I... didn't open it, or the suitcase."

The book felt heavy to me as she placed it into my paws. It smelled like pipeweed, and my ears lowered a little. Tch. I suppose he was... gone now. "He's...?"

Her expression softened, and she gave a little nod. "He didn't survive the ritual. Which is... pretty normal. Final arrangements will be made for when you're recovered. I... wanted to give you a chance to go to his farewell. I think he'd like that." Right... I nodded, hugging the book to my chest instead. Master's farewell.

Calien gave me a softer smile, then gentle nod. "Thank you. Again, Exes. But... we can talk more about things after you rest up and recover. For now, I think there's a lot of anxious people who want to see you. I'll let them know you're good for visiting?" She tilted her head at the question, and I relaxed a little and nodded, eager to see friends and family again.

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Master. My paws rested on the finely engraved stone lip; the basin below me having a raised edge to it. Master Chronak rested within, a soft sheet draped over his entire form and onto the wood he lay on top of. It was similar to our tribal pyres, just fancier with carved stone lowered into the ground. We were up on the mountain bluff now, with the chilly night air around us. Open sky above danced with stars, and the temple to the Sky Father and Earth Mother was off to the right.

The large, stone platform was smoothly carved from the rock cliffs above the city, with decorative pillars marking the edges, along the railing. It was hundreds of meters wide, and almost twice as long, but *filled* almost to bursting with people who'd gathered under the warm lantern light coming from the columns. All sorts of species, from the smallest Illan to Gar towering over the crowd... They'd all come to honor Master during his farewell. I stood in front of the pyre, paws resting on the stone lip until I turned around and looked out at the crowd, feeling exceptionally small.

It felt weird to be dressed like I was. The white tunic and shorts I wore were covered in a silky blue robe, with long sleeves that draped down over my paws. A silver sash was tied around my waist, keeping the robe closed, while silver woven cords tied it loosely at the chest. The hood was lowered, hanging off my back, but still completing the look I suppose. The royal tailors had made it for me especially, in colors they claimed complimented me. It was traditional garb of the Grandmaster Alchemist, but it didn't really feel like that was *me*.

The entire crowd was in whites, on the other paw. The color of purity and birth. Because a farewell was also a hello, for the person moving to the Great Beyond and welcomed there by family and loved ones. According to the temples, Grandmasters were given a hero's welcome there, above and beyond the norm, and part of me wanted to smile, imagining my grumpy-ass master just hissing at them as they tried to celebrate.

Right in the front row, I could easily see Mom, Exia, and Yimir. Exir was on the other side of my mother, with Niva standing next to him. They looked solemn as they watched the proceedings, and I tried to stay



focused on what was going on. My thoughts were moving quickly though. Too much had happened too quickly, and I had never really had a chance to just stop and absorb it all.

The priestess continued speaking, standing on the raised platform to my left now. A soft green glow came from her throat, matching the green from the top of every pillar over the crowd, and I heard her words resounding through the entire area. "And so it comes to pass. The torch passed from one Grandmaster to the next, as it has time and time before this. We gather here to honor not only the farewell of Grandmaster Chronak, but to welcome Grandmaster Exes. May he bring the light of reason, and the power of the True Alchemy to us all, to banish the darkness." She smiled to her right as she did, looking right to me, and I gave her a gentle nod.

My role was simple, really. But it was still something... new. To me, at least. I'd had a day of downtime in the hospital, but I'd kept busy, going over what Master had left me, and the rite that Calien had dropped off for his farewell. This rite though, was only for the Grandmaster's role during the ceremony, and probably for good reason, given it had Demonic writing included.

Just as I'd studied yesterday, the words formed in my mind, and I pushed them into my chest, letting my mana activate again. They were simple really. Parlor tricks, as Master would have called them. But I was pretty limited in my current training, obviously. Target, Wood, Ignite. My arms extended towards the pyre, and I felt the Key in my chest turn, activating even as the tendrils crawled through me. Power.

It was like touching a star. My eyes widened a little, even as I watched the energy flow into my palms. The hole through my soul came alive, and behind me, an ocean of pure energy. Like the heart of a star flaring forth and into my fingertips. My arms slid to each side, in two gentle arcs, and lances of flame erupted through the wood under Master, flaring up into a blaze as the oils caught fire. It was magic, but not at the same time.

Target Meta, Fire, Stasis, Freeflow. I stepped backwards, strands of the fire still connected to my palms and flowing harmlessly around me like ribbons, even as I turned back to the crowd. They weren't even there though, in my mind. This wasn't for them. I... was doing it for Master. Memories flashed through my mind of thousands of times he patiently taught me. Laughed as I got frustrated and flailed over something. Grabbed me and hauled me out of the way as my potion exploded. Let me sit next to him watching the sunset as he explained what was up in the sky to make it blue.

Two rotations, then I raised my arms, coils of fire ribbons extending upwards and off of me, into the sky. Target Meta, Fire, Burst. A lesser version of explode. The ribbons around me fired off like shooting stars, blasting into the sky before exploding in colorful light above. Several also danced like lightning over the crowd, igniting the tops of each stone pillar, where wood and oil had been prepared.

Master's last flame lit up the entire night sky, and bathed the crowd in golden light as each pillar blazed to life. Gasps of awe danced up, and I heard the cheering of a few children here and there. Finally... Target Area Meta, Fire, Explode. That one took a bit out of me, and I immediately felt a little fatigued. But that was... the last one. Paws still extended into the sky, the pulses and bursts became brilliant flashes of light, expanding in every direction in golden hues. It crackled and popped like fireworks; a new sun's worth of light dancing across the night sky far above. Power. Even briefly, I *made* a star instead.

Cheering, and the priestess smiled to me, large ears lifting upwards as she raised her head to watch the golden flames above. It felt like most of Larid was bathed in the warm glow now, and I let my arms lower to my sides again as I watched the light above, with little flickers and embers falling from the air around me. It was all I could do for him now. Carry the torch, as the priestess had said. His pyre behind me continued to release streams of burning flame, in a constant spray of fireworks high above for as long as it was lit. Of course, each burst also carried his ash upwards, into the highest winds above our planet. I turned slightly, looking over my shoulder again at the blazing flames, now consuming him entirely. He deserved more, but he'd paid his price to Aion. Now, at least, he'd get his chance to rest and be treated like a real hero.

My True Alchemy fireworks lasted for a good ten minutes, as the last closing beat of the ceremony itself. It was a simple rite, with the words spoken ahead of time, as usual. Farewells could be sad, but they also included a lot of alcohol, and telling stories about those passing on from Aion. Overall, it was a time to get together and share memories, and celebrate those who were leaving us to go to the Great Beyond. The crowds were free to step out of their rows then, and mingle about, and the priestess walked up to me, smiling.

"You did very well, Grandmaster. Chronak would have been proud. Thank you for being here to see him off. I told them we should wait another day but..." I gently shook my head, giving her my own smile in return.

"No, it's fine. I'm... feeling a lot better. I don't think another day in the hospital would have done much. It's more... I've got a lot to think about, and am looking forward to things slowing down again eventually."

She gave a giggle to that and nodded. "Sometimes that's how things are. But you'll get your break soon enough. I imagine there will be all manner of people wanting to talk to you of course, but that can wait for another day. Speaking of resting, however..."

A bit of an excited glint danced in her green eyes, and I stiffened. Right, she was a priestess of the Earth Mother. Each God had a sort of portfolio they oversaw, and their devout tended to more or less do the same, thematically. Well, the Earth Mother was big on family, agriculture, and fertility. "Now, now. You know it's simply tradition to offer. There are several interested females, tonight alone. Plus, Estrus is coming up, and passing on such potent essence is one of our sacred duties!" Aaaaahhhh! I felt the heat flare up into my cheeks. I'd anticipated... something along these veins, but was it really *tradition* to basically proposition me with females?!

Thankfully, I was rescued. And by rescued, I mean pounced from the side and spun with until I lost my balance and we both fell over sideways. Exia was exceptionally flexible though, innuendo intended, and simply rotated, gently catching us and snuggling me against her as I came down on top of her with a soft thud. Uh... Yimir smirked down at us as she too came up, then glanced to the priestess instead. "No need, Priestess. He's got females already! And we definitely, definitely plan on making sure his essence gets passed on in the future!" Tch. I shot the impishly grinning female a pouting glare, but she just winked to me as the priestess snickered.

“I had heard that was the case. But again, it’s tradition. Obviously, you’re well taken care of, however!” She didn’t seem disappointed, at least. If anything, I think she’d already known the answer before even offering it to me. Though, did that mean...?

My whiskers wiggled. “Did Master accept this ‘tradition’ then? I mean, he didn’t have a pack, but I never actually asked if he had any... kits running around.” I frowned to myself after, now curious how much else I didn’t know about his life.

Calien had been in the front row as well, and slowly approached, with Nara and Fearri trailing behind her. For a moment, she looked quietly past us to the blazing pyre, before gently shaking her head. “No. Chronak didn’t have any children. For reasons you probably understand, he was rather against forming personal connections.” Ah. That was...

Exir grinned, coming up to my right instead, with Niva hanging off his arm. He helped both Exia and I up, before grinning to Calien. “Yeah, but did he accept the females? That’s the *real* question!” Exir! Niva snickered at that, and to my surprise, Calien looked startled. Wait, was she... It almost looked like there was a pink tint to her cheeks as she looked away from us, then coughed into her paw.

“Ah, in a manner of speaking, yes, he was no stranger to females...” she admitted. Wait...

Mom gave a snort to that, sliding up next to Niva before giving both Exia and I a soft hug. Still, she rolled her eyes after, though. “He was no stranger to them in the village, either, flirting almost ceaselessly with quite a few of our females. Successfully more often than not, too. Of course, that was when he was younger...” Okay, wow. There was a lot I didn’t know about Master... and perhaps a lot I didn’t *want* to know. Though I suppose there was nothing really wrong with any of that. I guess my main issue was the yet vivid image in my mind of him without his robes on, which was clashing *horribly* with the image of him flirting.

The priestess snickered, then shook her head. “There’s nothing wrong with celebrating life and love. Tonight’s for remembering him, so it’s fitting. I imagine they’re having a similar party right now in the Great Beyond, welcoming him with open arms.” Well, I suppose that was better than being punched in the face, as he’d be with Mom’s greeting...

The silky robes were pretty, but they didn’t insulate very well. I was happy for Exia and Yimir snuggling against me as we rested at one of the benches afterwards, in the warm glow of the flames I’d created. The pillars would stay lit all night now, as a tribute to him until daybreak. There were quite a few honor guards lingering around nearby, including Zira and Ziri resting against the wall behind where Nara sat, with Fearri in her lap. Calien sat next to her, and Exir on the other side of her with Niva next to him.

Mom sat on our side of the bench instead, and we had quite a bit of still steaming food now in front of us, just dropped off by one of the temple servants. Exir watched as male Inaga sorted the food out, before looking up and over it to me instead. “I wish you’d told me about all of this. This is... huge. I knew you were going to be the next Grandmaster, but...”

Mom shook her head to my right. “It happened quite quickly, like we said, Exir. Nobody knew how long Chronak had left.”

He sighed and nodded, ears lowering a little at the same time mine did. “I’m sorry, Exir. Things did kind of happen fast, and we were on a tight timer...” I watched as the temple servant finished distributing

the food, then slipped away again after a little bow. Calien nodded, paws sliding together as a light purple shimmer came over the entire area around us. I felt it forming, and relaxed as her magic settled in, creating a translucent barrier of quiet around us. Nobody would be able to make out what we were saying, now.

With that in place, I repeated the story of exactly what had happened, this time for Exir and Niva's benefit. Chronak's rune failure, making the rushed choice to accept it after learning what it was about, how it related to the essence patches, and now me being the new Grandmaster. Of course, it entailed telling them about True Alchemy, but... It wasn't like they didn't potentially have the clearance anyway, given Niva was aiming to be a council member, and now it looked like Exir was going to be an honor guard. One of the personal royal guards of Laridia. I wonder what his parents thought about that. They were here in the city, right? I should visit with him soon...

It didn't take long to go over everything, with everyone listening quietly as I spoke. I noticed their eyes slipping to my chest as I told them about the Keyhole, and I slid my tunic up and robe to the side slightly. Just enough to show them the flickering, shifting runes anyway. By the end, he was slowly shaking his head, ears flattened down. "Fuck... Twenty-five years...?"

I nodded slowly. "Unless I can figure out what makes this thing tick and fix it..." I tapped my chest again, and felt it tap me back from inside, causing me to shiver. Thanks, eldritch entity locked inside me. The maw flashed in my head again, and I smashed it out like one dropped an adobe ceramic slab on top of a sand mite. Nope. Noooooope. Celebration.

The queen also nodded in agreement. "You'll have plenty of time to do just that. But first, I have to request that you look at the patches. The first thing that must be done is to fix them for every species, and put a stop to the stillbirths, and birth defects." That I could definitely agree with, and nodded her way, causing her to relax a little. True, she couldn't order me. But this was the whole reason we rushed to get the Key to me.

"I'll start pouring over Master's notes and the journal he left me tomorrow. Hopefully it won't take me long to fully figure out, or at least grasp the basics on how to use this thing. After, I already planned on the first thing I did being fix the essence patches." She relaxed fully at that and outright smiled finally.

"I'm glad. Hopefully we can start producing fixed, new essence formulas as early as next year this way. All the information on the existing formulas is stored in the palace, and I'll get you immediate access to it. They might even help you figure out more about how the Key works." True. Comparing notes of actually working examples of something usually helped immensely in figuring out how to reproduce that something. Well, with a bit of flexibility put into 'working', there. But still, it should be helpful.

My thoughts were interrupted by Exia nuzzling under my chin, against my neck. "You're resting tonight though, Bro. You're not recovered yet from getting the Keyhole." Mmm, right.

"And take lots of breaks even after you recover..." Yimir grabbed my other arm, and I flushed as they both grinned and pressed into me.

To my surprise, Niva pouted, however. "I need to try to get another female for you, Exir! It is a little lonely with just us, don't you think?" His concern over the Key was apparently derailed by this turn of events, and he flushed as well, ears flicking as he looked over at her instead.

“I mean, I’m happy with just you, Niva. It doesn’t...” She bumped his nose though, still grinning.

“Relax. But I am being serious. I should start inquiring around...” She pondered to herself, even as he gave a huff, looking defeated instead for a moment. Oh boy. Calien gave a chuckle again, watching them curiously.

“Admittedly, I’m more than a little interested in how our instincts actually function when not being altered. Plus, it helps when I’m trying to come up with new laws, and alter things to try to bring about more male rights, if I know what people actually want from said laws...” That was true. I figured Calien was a ‘Larid’ female, so she might not have the same instincts as say, Niva. Or Exia. And I was pretty certain Yimir. Okay, so maybe the patches had enough holes in them to constitute a kitchen strainer now... There *were* starting to be a whole lot of ‘abnormal’ Inaga these days.

Mom was the first to remind us that there was food, by grabbing some of her own and starting to eat. Still, she looked up to Calien after her first bite, then gave a nudge of her head. “Have you considered reaching out to the Jungle Inaga? We have our own rules and governance, and if you asked them to share those ideas with you, it might help you make more informed decisions about Larid’s current laws.” That was... Huh. Calien looked surprised for a moment, then slowly shifted to contemplative.

“I... yes, that would... work. Though relations have been atrocious for over a thousand years with them. Our own fault of course, but... I’m not sure they’d be willing to even speak with me.” Right. They probably got a little offended somewhere around the point where they were all declared heretical freaks of nature.

Mom nodded to that, then gave a little sigh. “I mean, I can’t fault them for that. I’ve been away for a long time now, but I was thinking of connecting with them again myself. I want to speak with my Master again. If you’d like, I can explain what’s going on and try to put in a good word for you...”

The queen smiled and nodded to that, finally grabbing food for herself. “That would be very good, yes. Thank you, Umani. I think... hopefully things will be finally looking up...” I could only hope that was the case. The girls slid food forward for all three of us, and I took a sniff of the grilled meats, steamed veggies, and rich bread, before giving a little shiver. Looking up or not, I couldn’t complain about the food at the capital. Still, my mind drifted back to the work the future held, and I gave a little sigh. Master had been right, I suspected. I think I just found the tip of another iceberg that needed exploring. And this one was a doozy...